

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Hasty Retreat *Season 3, Episode 6*

by:

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Darla Johnson walked quickly down the short hallway and pushed open the back door. The instant she stepped outside she paused to inhale the cool, fresh night air. It was nearly two in the morning, now. She liked the peace and quiet that came with working the night shift. That was about all she liked. Once she had climbed onto the rough, ancient, wooden picnic table that had been permanently cemented into the ground to give employees a make-shift break area, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her tip money. One hundred, twenty-three dollars and change. Not bad. Another two weeks, three tops, and she could finally get her transmission repaired. Then, she'd gladly give notice to Joe and her life could return to normal.

Her daughter would be happy. No more fending for herself on the nights Darla was scheduled to work the bar. Darla thought it was good for Mandy—being on her own now and again. It was good for a fourteen-year-old girl to learn to cook for herself. But, she always felt guilty the moment she stepped out the door. Three more weeks and she'd be back to one job, a nine-to-five office position where her most difficult customer was a root canal. Thank heavens for small favors. She hated dealing with the drunks, hated the crude remarks, hated pretty much everything about this part-time gig. But, she needed the money. She needed her car; and, waitressing for Joe was the only job within walking distance she could find.

She sighed, tucked her cash into her wallet and began to switch her working shoes for her walking shoes. At least she had the morning off. Dr. Curtis Morgan was going out of town to some dentist conference; so, he was shutting down the office — with pay — for an early weekend. She loved her job, loved the people she worked for, loved everything about her day job — except the pay. It was decent, but just didn't provide quite enough to cover unexpected emergencies... like a new transmission. At least she had great benefits. She got free dental, so did her daughter, and the medical wasn't bad either. Plus, she had twelve whole days each year of paid vacation time. Now that Mandy was getting older, the only real time they spent together was their annual road trips. Just another reason she desperately needed her car repaired.

With a sigh, she pushed off the table and started the long walk home.

Donald Bentley was still fuming as he took another swig of whiskey. Pesky do-gooders. The bartender had cut him off over an hour ago. Why couldn't people mind their own business and let him drink in peace? He shifted, trying to get comfortable behind the wheel of the ancient Chevy. Just another thing that irritated him. Instead of sitting inside, in a comfortable booth, pushing the memories from his mind, he was out here alone, drinking in the cab of his truck. He tipped back the bottle and greedily gulped the last drops of amber liquid. With a grunt, he tossed the empty bottle on the floorboard of the passenger area and cranked the engine. He had a long drive home. If the local bar owners in his home town hadn't banned him from coming near their fine 'establishments,' he wouldn't have to travel close to fifteen miles just to get a damn drink.

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They thought they were helping, but he thought they were just interfering where they weren't invited.

Donald watched the last vehicle pull from the parking area, shifted into gear, and began the long journey home. He leaned forward and squinted as he gradually increased his speed. "Somebody got fired," he laughed. "Some incompetent public servant that couldn't even draw a straight line down the highway." His truck swerved and crossed the median several times as he continued happily on his way. He had drifted halfway into the opposite lane when an approaching vehicle's headlights startled him. He swerved, barely avoided a collision, and bounced off the pavement onto the shoulder of the roadway. The corner of the truck struck something, he had no idea what — probably a rock—before he managed to get the large vehicle back in the proper lane. His heart was racing, but he was laughing, enjoying the adventure and the adrenaline rush as he bounced along.

He pulled into his driveway, shut down the truck, and stumbled through the front door. Donald barely made it to the couch before he passed out, fully clothed and wreaking from too much booze.

"Logan," Paige was frantically trying to save the young woman's life. "See if I have a package of coagulant in that pack. We have to stop the bleeding or she's not going to make it."

Deputy Logan Reed ripped open the medical bag and began desperately searching for the small package of powdery substance that might save this woman's life. "Where's medical?" he asked in frustration. "They should have arrived already."

"They were up the canyon," Paige shifted to put additional pressure on the woman's torso. She was sure there was extensive internal damage and just hoped the ambulance would arrive soon.

"Got it," Logan said in triumph as he ripped open the package and began dumping the fine powder onto the bleeding wound. "Here's a pad." Logan handed a second package to Paige.

Paige ripped the packaging off the medical pad that was also soaked in the same kind of clotting substance and once again put pressure on the wound. She thought it was helping but couldn't be sure. "Get that neck brace on her now. I can hear the sirens in the background. Help is almost here." She looked down at the weak woman who was drifting in and out of consciousness. "You hold on just a little longer, keep fighting. You got this far, don't give up now."

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Logan had the neck brace on and was starting to stand when two paramedics rushed over with a stretcher.

“We’ll take it from here,” one of the men handed Paige a package of wet towelettes. “You look like you could use that.”

“I think I need a whole case of those things,” Paige said as she took the offered package and began wiping the blood from her hands. “Logan will follow you to the hospital. I need to remain here to process the scene. Take care of our girl, she’s a fighter.”

“Will do,” they lifted the patient onto the stretcher, attached an oxygen mask; and, within minutes, had her loaded into the back of the ambulance and on her way to the nearest hospital—siren’s blaring.

Paige turned to Logan. “Good job, with any luck we saved her life. Now you head to the hospital while I look for evidence that will catch the creep that did this.”

“How could someone just run over that woman and leave her there, dying?” Logan asked softly.

“He’s callous and selfish,” Paige glanced around. “And we’re going to catch him and put him away for a very long time. Get going. And, keep me updated on her condition.”

Paige watched as Logan turned and headed back to his vehicle. His shoulders were slumped, head bent, and when he climbed inside, she saw the despair and the anger written all over his face. Paige pushed it aside and got to work. If Reed wanted to be a cop, he’d have to learn to deal with senseless and infuriating situations like the one they were dealing with tonight. It was just part of the job. He’d have to learn not to internalize it if he wanted to make this job a career.

Paige was tired. It took her twice as long as normal to process the scene on her hit-and-run. And, after all that time, she still wasn’t sure she’d collected all the evidence, or even discovered everything there was to discover. How did these guys work in the dark night after night? It was just one reason she hated working the graveyard shift. Another was trying to stay awake when she would normally be sleeping. She’d already guzzled four cups of coffee and she still had three hours to go. Duncan Havilland was going to owe her big time for this. He’d practically begged her to switch shifts, so he could race in some ‘epic’ competition out in Tooele. Dean had also qualified to compete; so, the department was shorthanded. She was willing to do her part, but she would definitely think twice before she agreed to another all-nighter. She did her best to

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stifle a yawn as she stepped through the automatic sliding doors of the hospital and surveyed the area for her partner.

Logan was standing in front of a large window. His gaze was glassy, and Paige knew he wasn't really looking outside. He was deep in thought and clearly distraught. Paige was worried, Logan was taking this case more personal than he should. You had to step back, erect a barrier, and focus on the work. Otherwise, the job would eat you alive. Just another thing the rookie would have to learn the hard way. "Any updates?" she asked, moving in to stand next to him.

Logan's head jerked up and it took him several seconds to pull the emotions inside and register Paige's question. "Uh, she's in surgery. Prognosis isn't good. There was a lot of internal damage, but the doctor said what we did — to stop the bleeding — it probably saved her life. If she lives, and that's doubtful."

"You okay?" Paige put a hand on his shoulder in comfort.

"I'm fine," Logan shrugged her off. "It's just... I was okay. Mad, you know, but dealing. I decided to do some checking, try to track down the family just in case. She has a fourteen-year-old daughter. Our victim is a single mother just struggling to survive. She was working part-time at the bar, full-time at some dentist's office. I talked to the neighbor. She drove Mandy, the daughter, over immediately. Mandy was inconsolable. She's back there," Logan pointed the doors that led to the private emergency rooms. "She broke down, had a panic attack, and the staff decided to admit her, too. The neighbor said mom was on a tight budget and when her tranny went out, she asked Joe at the bar to bring her on just until she could raise the money to fix her car. She was walking home from her latest shift, near as I can tell, when some dirtbag just ran over her and left."

"You've been busy," Paige observed. Maybe Logan would make it in this profession. He had pushed his emotions aside to be a cop tonight. He was doing the job, it was costing him, but he was doing the job.

"I needed something to do while I waited, and it just seemed..."

"Important?" Paige nodded. "I was also worried about her condition and contacting next of kin before they lost her; but, it wasn't something I could do out on the scene. Thanks for taking care of it. I know dealing with a distraught kid couldn't have been easy."

Logan shrugged again. "How about you? Get anything we can use to track the driver?"

"Not much," Paige said in frustration. "Broken headlight, but it could fit about a hundred models. I want to go back out, when it's light outside, see if I can see anything else. I think we've done all we can tonight. Take a break, I'll sit here a while."

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“Naw,” Logan dismissed the offer. “I got this. You go do what you do. If we catch the bad guy, it will be a result of your mad evidence skills.”

“I...” she stopped when a man in scrubs approached them.

“Are you waiting on Ms. Johnson?”

“Yeah,” Logan nodded. “How is she?”

“Alive, for now,” the man said cautiously. “I’m Dr. Brad Jones.”

“Are you the surgeon that worked on her?” Paige asked.

“I am,” Jones sighed. “There was extensive damage. We almost lost her more than once. I’m told the two of you were responsible for saving her life.”

“We did what we do,” Paige dismissed that. “What are her chances, doc?”

“Not great, I’m afraid. We were able to stabilize her, and she is no longer bleeding internally; but, it’s going to be touch and go for the next few days. I’m told her daughter was also admitted. Was she involved in the crash as well?”

“No,” Paige shook her head.

“She had a break-down when she heard her mom may not make it,” Logan provided. “She’s been given a sedative and they’re watching her overnight, I think.”

“I should know that,” Jones nodded. “I apologize, I didn’t stop to get the details. The nurse said the cops wanted an update immediately.”

“We appreciate it,” Paige told him. She pulled out a business card and passed it to the surgeon. “Can you let me know if anything changes?”

“I’ll make sure you’re notified,” Jones slid the card into his pocket. “Other than the daughter, does she have family I need to speak to?”

“I was able to contact her mother,” Logan advised. “Darla’s parents will be flying in tomorrow. They live in Florida. I’m guessing they will want an update as soon as they arrive.”

“Very well,” Dr. Jones started to turn. “I’m serious, it was essential that you stop the bleeding immediately, while you were still on scene. Otherwise, that poor woman would have bled out. As it is, she lost a lot of blood; but, the two of you saved that woman’s life. If it wasn’t for your actions, she wouldn’t have a chance.” Then, he turned and disappeared behind a swinging double door.

“Now what?” Logan asked.

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“Now, we head back to the office and do our reports. There’s nothing more we can do here tonight. In the morning, I’ll get Gage to help me go over the scene again. I also want to talk to Jericho about doing a press release. I’m beginning to think the only way we’re going to solve this one is if we can locate a witness.”

“Alright,” Logan said glumly. “I’ll meet you back at the office.”

“Feel free to take the scenic route,” Paige offered. “Give yourself a minute to regroup. You did good tonight, Logan. No matter what happens, remember that. We did all we could.”

“You think she won’t make it,” Logan decided.

“I’m preparing myself for the worst and you should, too. It will take a miracle for her to pull through this and her kid, and her parents, will need answers. It’s our job to get them.”

They split off when they reached the parking lot. Paige settled behind the wheel of her vehicle and waited while Logan pulled onto the highway. She sat there for several minutes before she rubbed her hands over her face, started the engine, and headed back to Manti.

Paige’s face was still hidden by a large blanket and her pillow. She moaned out loud as she reached over to shut off the annoying alarm that was blaring next to her bed. She knew if she didn’t get up, she’d drop back into a deep sleep, but she needed a minute. It took more effort than it should have to climb from the bed and zombie walk into the shower. She was pretty sure drinking the amount of coffee she’d consumed the previous evening couldn’t be good for her. But, it was the only way she managed to make it through the night without falling asleep at the wheel. Once she was showered and dressed, she — once again—filled a thermos with coffee and headed back to work.

The moment she stepped into the building, Jericho called her into his office. She moved slowly into the masculine space and settled into one of his visitor chairs.

“I got your message,” Jericho began. “I’ve arranged for a press conference just outside at thirteen hundred hours. Can you be ready by then?”

“Me?” Paige swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat. “I thought you would do it.”

“I’ll be there,” Walters assured her. “But, this is your case. The reporters will have questions. You decide which to answer and what the department isn’t prepared to comment on. I trust you to get the information you need out there without compromising your investigation.”

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“But...”

“It’s better coming from you, Paige,” Jericho said sternly. “Now that we have that settled, how is Reed handling things?”

“Okay,” Paige hesitated. She didn’t know exactly what to tell their boss about their newest edition to the force. “It was a bad one... touch and go there on the side of the road, and the paramedics had to respond from up the canyon; so, it took a while. We did our best, but it may not be good enough. The first one is always the most difficult, but he’s holding. I thought I’d take Gage back out to the scene with me this morning and then stop in at the hospital and try to get an update. Darla’s parents should have arrived by now and they may have questions as well.”

“Take Gage to the scene,” Jericho decided. “I’ll head over to the hospital, deal with the family, and see what the staff will tell me. Then, we’ll meet back here at noon to go over anything new. Don’t stress too much over the press conference. I’ll step in and save you if things get off topic. We want to encourage the public to come forward. Play up the single mother angle, the daughter is distraught and counting on mom, the poor victim is still hanging on by a thread, she’s fighting to pull through but she needs the community’s support.”

Paige stood and rolled her eyes. “I’m not good at all that mushy stuff and you know it. I’m just going to relay the facts and ask for help. You can step in and tug at the heartstrings when I’m done if you want.”

“We’ll see,” Jericho answered as she was leaving. “We’ll see,” he said again as he pulled out a large file and began reading through reports and depositions. A killer he’d put away over a decade ago was up for parole and he wanted to refresh his memory, brush up on the details, before he attended the parole hearing. As far as he was concerned, the man should rot in a cage for another few decades before they even considered setting him free. At least the prisoner was being housed in Gunnison. With this new case, it would be impossible to drive all the way to Salt Lake for the hearing.

Donald woke and slowly forced his legs over the side of the couch and pushed his body into a sitting position. He knew he had to stop this nonsense. Knew it wasn’t helping, but he didn’t know what would. He brushed his large hands over his face, then lowered them in disgust. They smelled like stale whiskey and sweat. With a deep sigh, he gripped the front of the couch and stood. His head pounded from the effort and he slowly, cautiously, made his way to the shower. It took nearly an hour before he felt human again. He threw together a ham sandwich and absently grabbed a bag of chips before heading back into the living room, determined to relax

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and calm his aching heart... and his stomach. He settled into his favorite chair, grabbed the remote, flicked on the large screen television, and immediately lost his appetite.

Don set the plate of untouched food aside, increased the volume, leaned forward, and watched as a female deputy relayed the details of a hit-and-run that occurred during the early hours of the morning. Bile began to churn in his stomach and made its way up his throat. He rushed to the bathroom and choked back a sob, realizing what he had done. It took nearly twenty-minutes inside the tiny room before he could straighten and make his way back to the living room. He snatched up the uneaten sandwich, tossed the contents into the trash, and headed for his truck.

One look and he knew. He was the one that put that poor woman in the hospital. It was his fault she was fighting for her life and her daughter might become an orphan. He could be responsible for the pain and grief her parents might face over the loss of a child. Despair threatened to incapacitate him. He pulled open the passenger door of his truck and spotted the empty bottle. Panic set in and his entire body began to shake with fear... and regret. He grabbed the glass container and shoved it to the bottom of his trash can. Within minutes, he had the vehicle hidden in the back barn. As he stood staring at the broken headlight and dented bumper, an idea came to him. It would take him all day, but he'd just switch them out. He'd take the damaged parts off and destroy them, then replacing them with parts from the old Chevy parked out back. He pushed the overwhelming feeling of guilt aside and got to work.

Paige stepped into the office, moved to her desk, and frowned. There was a large stack of papers neatly positioned on the corner of her workspace. She glanced up at Margie in question. "What's this?"

"Tip line," Margie shrugged. "It was slow last night so Susie spent her time transcribing the tips that came in on your hit-and-run. She said something about you owing her a steak dinner at Dirks."

Paige picked up the stack and started to skim through the typed notes. "Looks like that's the least I owe her. It's going to take forever to track every one of these down." She dropped into her chair and turned the page. "Seriously!" Paige glanced up when Gage walked in. "This woman is sure the man I'm looking for must be her ex-husband. Why? Because he's a jerk and that sounds like something he would do."

Margie smiled. "Most of them left a number. I can help you call them back if you want, just compile a list of follow-up questions you want me to ask."

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“Naw,” Paige sighed, “but, thanks. I think this is something I should do myself. If anyone asks, I’ll be right here on the phone until I turn fifty. It will probably take that long to sort through this mess.”

Jericho stepped from his office. “Give some to Logan. I want Reed involved in this. It’s good training for him. I can also call in Lovato if you get overwhelmed. I warned you a press conference was going to bring in hundreds of bad leads. You said it was worth it if you got one good one, remember?”

“Don’t remind me,” Paige grumbled. “If Lo’s not busy, I could use him. This is going to take forever. I’ll get with Logan when he comes on duty. If it’s slow tonight, maybe he can start doing follow-ups as well.”

Jericho nodded and closed the door to his office. “I probably won’t make it back before closing time. Margie, you know how to reach me if there’s an emergency.”

“I do,” Margie frowned. “Good luck.”

Paige watched her boss as he exited the front door. “What’s he need luck for?” she asked. “I thought he was headed to the prison on some parole hearing.”

“He is,” Margie opened her email and started going through new messages. “But, they said that monster has been an ideal prisoner and they want to release him back into the community. If that man has been rehabilitated, I’m a thousand-pound rhinoceros.”

Paige smiled. “Don’t sugarcoat it on my account, tell me what you really think.”

Margie grunted in disgust. “He’s a conman and he’s playing that board, the warden, and the guards. He’s not a changed man. He’s just playing the game, so he can get released early. Jericho will do his best to prove that to the committee. And, that’s why he needs luck. Because once they’ve made up their minds, it’s nearly impossible to change them.”

“Guess my day’s going to be better than his then,” Paige picked up the phone and made her first call. It was nearly an hour later when Mike Lovato entered through the backdoor and made a beeline to Paige’s desk.

“Grab a stack,” she whispered, covering the mouthpiece so her current ‘tipster’ wouldn’t hear. She rolled her eyes and sighed. “I’m just hoping there’s something in here that will help.”

Lovato snatched up a stack of papers and headed for his own desk. He knew how many crazies came out when you asked for help. But, not all of them were dead ends. Sure, you got the typical ex-wives or ex-husbands trying to pin the crime on their biggest nemesis. Then, you got the people who truly wanted to help, but they were just flat out wrong. Finally, you had the

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solid leads that you could follow. It was going to take time, but he was sure somewhere in this stack was at least one solid lead and he was just the man to find it.

“Paige,” Lovato called out. “Let’s take a break and run these down. If we work too long on the phones, we’ll miss something important.”

“What do you have?” Paige frowned. “None of the ones I’ve gone through seem solid. How did you get two?”

“I’ve done this before,” he shrugged and moved to her desk. “They may be nothing, but we should check them out. Plus, like I said, it helps to take a break from the tedium and chase some of these down. Clears your head a bit. And, while we’re out and about, you can buy me lunch.”

“I could do that,” Paige agreed. She was thankful for the help and, with all his flaws, Mike Lovato was a good cop and a good investigator. “You want anything, Margie?”

“Naw, I’m good,” Margie glanced up. “I brought my lunch today.”

The two deputies climbed into Paige’s unit. Within minutes they were making their way up a long driveway. Paige shut down the engine and took a minute to look around. “Looks like a nice, cozy place.”

Mike swung the door open and climbed out. “Looks can be deceiving. Caller said the husband was a drunk, spends most nights at Joe’s place... what was the name of that bar?”

“The Wooden Nickel,” Paige said, joining him in front of her truck. “Where’s his truck?”

“Repair shop?” Mike asked, hopefully.

“I doubt we’ll get that lucky on the first shot. Let’s go talk to the little misses,” Paige motioned forward.

Mike looked at her in surprise. “I think I might be rubbing off on you.”

“Man, I hope not,” Paige grinned. “What’s the name again?”

Mike glanced down at his notes. “Palmer.”

Paige reached out to ring the bell, but the door flung open before she had a chance to press the button.

“Can I help you?” asked a petite, nervous woman.

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“I hope so,” Paige was watching the woman carefully. “Did you hear about the woman that was hit on the side of the road? The hit-and-run accident, here in Manti?”

“I heard,” the woman swallowed hard. “It was over by the Nickel, right?”

“That’s right,” Mike replied. He wanted to see how she reacted to a man. The woman that called this in said Craig Palmer liked to use his wife as a punching bag after he got home from a night at the bar. The woman took a step back but didn’t reply. “I understand your husband drives a large truck. Is he home?”

“Uh,” panic showed on the woman’s face as she tried to come up with an answer. “He’s not here.”

“Can you tell us where he is?” Paige questioned.

Just then a large Ford pickup truck turned off the main highway and sped up the drive. The man inside slammed on the brakes just behind where Paige had parked, nearly ramming into the back bumper. He jumped from the truck and practically stomped to the door. “What are the police doing here?” he demanded of his wife.

“I uh,” the woman stammered.

“We’re looking for you,” Lovato moved to stand in front of the man, blocking his view so he couldn’t see his wife. “You got a minute?”

The man didn’t answer. He just stood there, glaring.

“You have somewhere private just you and I could go and have a word alone?” Mike pressed.

“We can go around back,” Craig Palmer decided. “Back porch should work.”

The two men disappeared around the back, leaving Paige to work on getting answers from the terrified woman.

“Look,” Paige tried to sound sympathetic. “We haven’t been here, as far as I could see, on a call I mean.”

“Wh...what?” the woman turned white as a sheet.

“It’s obvious to me that man abuses you,” Paige decided to be direct. “That’s not the reason we are here. I would encourage you to seek help, for the abuse. There are shelters, women’s clinics, support groups...”

“I’m not abused,” the woman protested.

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“What’s your name?” Paige shifted gears.

“Tiffany,” the woman said softly.

“Okay, Tiffany,” Paige pulled out a business card. “If there ever comes a time when you want to talk, give me a call. That’s all I’m going to say on the subject. But, just know, if I do get called out here; that man is going to jail.”

“But...”

“If you don’t want help, I can’t force it on you,” Paige said disappointed, but not surprised. “Let’s talk about your husband. I’m told he spends a lot of time at the bar, The Wooden Nickel.”

“Some,” Tiffany admitted.

Paige just looked at her.

“Okay,” Tiffany sighed. “He’s out there almost every night. But, he didn’t hurt that woman. He got home early that night. The guys had to work on some project the next day. He doesn’t like to drink alone, so he came home early that night.”

“You’re sure,” Paige pressed.

“Positive,” Tiffany said, relieved. “I even commented on it when we saw the news report. Said, good thing you came home early that night. If someone was driving crazy like that he could have hit you.”

“Alright,” Paige frowned. She couldn’t tell if Tiffany was telling the truth or if she’d manufactured an alibi on the fly. In her experience, women like Tiffany were seasoned story tellers. Had to be. They were always coming up with reasons for the bruises. She pointed to her card, “keep that. Call me anytime.”

Tiffany folded the card and slid it into her pocket.

Paige handed her another card. “If your husband asks, give him this one. You keep that one hidden for later.”

Tiffany frowned but took the card.

Paige moved from the porch and went to stand in front of her truck to wait for Lovato. It was less than five minutes later when Mike and Craig Palmer rounded the corner, headed her way. They looked pretty casual and Mike had cooled down significantly. Hopefully, they hadn’t just caused that poor woman trouble.

“If you can think of anything else,” Mike addressed Craig. “You have my card. Just give me a call. Or, call Paige. I’m sure she gave her info to your wife. You two have a nice day and

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I really appreciate the help on this.” He reached out and shook the man’s hand before making his way to the passenger side of the truck.

Once Paige was headed back down the highway, she glanced at Mike. He was frowning. “What’s eating you?”

Lovato ran his hand through his hair. “You have no idea how much I wanted to cuff that guy and throw him in the back seat, headed for jail. But, I couldn’t. That woman is never going to cooperate with the police and we didn’t have cause.”

“Not today anyway,” Paige agreed. “I told her if I ever got a call at her house, her husband was spending the night in jail. I’m not sure if that helped or hurt. When I started to talk about options, she shut me down immediately. We can only help those that want helping.”

“Doesn’t mean I’ve gotta like it,” Mike grumbled. “Craig Palmer is a regular at Joe’s place. He says he left early on the night in question. Said his friends,” he glanced down at his notes, “Peter and Martin Sullivan — they’re brothers — had to cut out early. He claims they had a side project the following day.”

“Matches Tiffany’s story,” Paige considered. “Could be they already coordinated. You know, he comes in and tells her he ran over some woman on his way home and here’s what they’re gonna say if anyone asks.”

“I got a good look at the truck,” Mike shook his head. “He’s not our guy. That truck is his baby. If the thing had recently been damaged, he’d be in the garage working on it as we speak.”

“Okay,” Paige sighed. “I agree. That couple is messed up, but he’s not our driver.”

“He did tell me something that might lead to something,” Mike shifted in the seat trying to get comfortable. The next address was on the other side of town. “Craig said there was an old guy at the bar that night, said he was drinking like there was no tomorrow. It got so bad, the bartender cut him off early. Craig said it had to be early because he left at around a quarter to one and the guy was escorted out well before he decided to head home.”

“That’s what he calls early?” Paige scoffed.

“For him,” Mike shrugged. “Normally, he stays until closing. He said it’s not unusual for him and his buddies to be forced out, so Joe can close things down at two. His friends left around midnight. He stuck for a while, then bolted. I asked for a name or a description but all he had was old.”

“Wow,” Paige shot her friend a sideways glance. “That’s informative.”

“The guy’s a self-centered dirtbag that beats on his wife,” Mike reminded her. “You think he’s going to pay attention to some old man that had a few too many at a local bar?”

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“I guess not,” Paige turned off the highway and made her way down a secondary road to their next contact. “But how does that help us? I mean, if the guy left before Craig did, he can’t be our guy. We’re looking for someone that left after closing.”

“We’re looking for someone that left the parking lot after closing,” Mike countered. “In my experience, if a drunk is cut off and ejected, he usually has access to his own stash somewhere. Usually, the passenger seat of his own vehicle. He could have gone to the parking lot and opened his own tap until the place closed down and he realized he would have to leave or get caught.”

“Makes sense,” Paige nodded. “My experience dealing with drunks and bars is pretty limited. We don’t handle much of that in the FBI and here in Manti...”

“Yeah,” Mike agreed. “It’s pretty tame here. Nothing like Salt Lake and the trouble that gets stirred up once the party gets started.”

“Exactly,” Paige turned into a short driveway and waited for Mike to fill her in on their next contact.

It was nearly two hours later when Paige settled back in at her desk. The second lead didn’t pan out, either. The man in question had a concrete alibi. He had just returned from a business trip in Denver and had the plane tickets to prove it. He had only arrived back in Manti an hour before she and Mike showed up on his doorstep. He said he did frequent Joe’s bar but didn’t remember an old man that liked to drink too much. The duo left after the man practically slammed the door in their faces. Paige kept her word and stopped for lunch — her treat. Now they were back in the office and Paige spotted a new stack of papers on her desk.

“Thought I should keep up on them,” Margie explained. “The mailbox was full, and the calls just keep flowing in.”

“Wonderful,” Paige sighed, picked up the phone, and made her next call.

“Hello,” Dax answered hesitantly. He didn’t recognize the number on the display.

“Dax? It’s Vato,” came a male voice. Either the man was whispering; or, he had a bad connection.

“Vato,” Dax answered flatly.

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“First,” Vato told him. “I want to thank you for saving my sister. I... well, I couldn’t do it myself without landing in a heap of trouble and there’s no way Thor could have handled that mission on his own.”

“Is that the reason for your call, Vato?”

“No,” Vato sighed. “I guess Thor was right, this thing has come between us. If I survive, which is unlikely, I hope we can sit down and work this out.”

“I heard you,” Dax informed him. “I know you were working with that sadistic terrorist, Nassar. I’m pretty sure that’s something we can’t work out. You betrayed your country, you betrayed your oath, and you betrayed me. You were giving him pointers on how to break me. Did you honestly think I wouldn’t know?”

“I know you heard me,” Vato paused. “I could tell the phone was on speaker.”

There was silence on the other end for longer than there should have been. Dax was starting to wonder if the line had been disconnected when he heard Vato’s voice again.

“Look,” Vato whispered. “I’m in danger here and I can’t get into this. I thought, well I thought after all we’ve been through, you would understand. I’d never cross you, Dax. I wouldn’t work with Nassar unless I didn’t have a choice and I would never give him tips on how to break you. Seriously, I told him to capture someone you loved. I said that was the only thing that would get you to cooperate. We both know that would just piss you off. I was talking about me. Trying to tell you why I was involved. They had Camille and they threatened to kill her if I didn’t help them. We both know she’d be dead if I resisted. I needed you to understand, and I was trying to give the guys time to find you. If you heard that part, you also heard me tell him not to kill you. You heard me order him to wait or I would come after him. I hoped... well, I hoped I could stall long enough for Hawk and the others to rescue you.”

“Why didn’t you just tell Thor where I was?” Dax pressed.

“I didn’t know,” Vato said, clearly exasperated. “If I did, I would have told Thor immediately. They wouldn’t share that kind of information with me. I haven’t been as cooperative as they hoped. Even with Camille in captivity. I have a line I won’t cross, not even to save my sister. They didn’t count on that. My loyalty is to you, always has been. And, you should know, I would never betray my country. If I discovered anything that would have helped, I would have passed that on to the team. Hold on.”

There was another long silence. When Vato came back on the line, there was panic in his voice.

“I don’t have much time,” Vato warned. “I’m not supposed to be on this phone. You guys need to know Reynolds isn’t the only one that’s dirty. My leader, Major Hastings, is working

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with Reynolds and someone else. Someone high up... the guy has rank. At first, I thought it was General Nathan Porter. I overheard a conversation about their guy in Washington that was paving the way for some mission they have planned. Porter fit the description. Thor has since convinced me I was wrong. But, there is someone in Washington with connections and power. He's working with Reynolds to orchestrate missions and to cover up anything that goes awry. I'm doing my best to get more, but Hastings sent me on a solo op earlier today. It was an ambush, I barely made it out without getting dead. My time is running short and I don't think I'm going to make it out of this alive. I need you to know what I know, everything I know."

Dax's mind was racing. It was all starting to make sense, even Vato's involvement.

"There's a guy," Vato continued. "It was the reason I was sent here in the first place. He was originally your contact, Scorpion. I was pulled in because someone thought Scorpion would trust me. They wanted to use me to get to him since I was on your team. He didn't take the bait. It only took a couple mission for him to cut off all contact with us — all of us, including me. Hastings was distorting the Intel and using American convoys to go after the wrong villages. I'm not sure what they are up to, but the last information Scorpion provided included something about bad drones. I didn't pass that on, didn't know who I could trust; but, two nights later, one of our drones misfired and took out our own Humvee."

"Nassar killed Scorpion," Dax provided. "He came here, to Manti, to give the information to me personally. There is a problem with the drones. Avoid them, Vato. Do not go near them; and, if you see one, take cover. If Hastings wants you dead, he may just use one of the drones, a local contact and a low tech transmitter — one that would never be traced back to him — to do it. Watch your back, Porter is working on a way to bring you home early. He's getting resistance from Bratton, but I think we can at least orchestrate a transfer. Don't get dead."

Vato laughed. "I'm doing my best and for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"We'll talk about it when you get home," Dax decided. "Is there any chance you can keep in touch? Can you try to work this Hastings guy, generate Intel and turn it against him? If they think you're working with them, it might buy you some time."

"I'll see what I can do," Vato agreed. "It's difficult, though. They have me at a FOB in Fallujah and he's working out of Baghdad. And, even if I did get anything, my calls are restricted. They don't want me to have contact with the outside world. I'll find a way. I'll get anything I find to you. Somehow, I'll get you everything I can."

After Dax disconnected, he just sat there thinking. He was still sitting there when Hawk stepped into the house, arms full of takeout. "I thought... what happened?"

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“Vato called,” Dax admitted. “Once the rest of the guys get here, we need to talk. But first, I need to make a call. If we’re lucky, Nathan can get Vato out of the viper pit until we can bring him back home.”

“Sounds like it was some phone call,” Hawk observed.

“It was.” Dax stepped onto the back porch and pulled out a second cell phone, the throwaway he always used to contact Porter. He settled into a chair and pressed the button to speed dial his favorite General.

“Porter,” Nathan said in greeting. “Tell me there’s not more trouble. I’m still working on that transfer to get your team member turned traitor, not really a traitor—maybe—home safely.”

Dax shook his head. “That’s why I’m calling. He just phoned me. Somehow, he found a way, but his current leader, Major Hastings, sent him on a one-man mission to hell earlier today. He’s running out of time and I was thinking, while you’re working on an evacuation plan, maybe he could get transferred in country somewhere. He says Major Hastings is dirty. He’s positive the man is working for Reynolds. There’s no doubt and he has proof. He’s going to work on his end, see if he can determine if there are others, but we need to get him out from under Hastings command. The ambush failed today, but we both know he’ll just send Vato on another death run tomorrow.”

“I’ll talk to Harris,” Porter decided. “See how fast he can put through the orders.”

“If you have such a great contact in Secretary Harris,” Dax said in frustration. “Why the delay on the orders to return home? Who’s in charge over there, anyway? I was under the impression Bratton worked for the Secretary, not the other way around.”

“It’s complicated,” Nathan was also frustrated. “But, bottom line, Harris is worried if he pushes too hard, Bratton will realize he’s onto Reynolds and his underlings. Until Harris knows how deep Bratton’s involvement is, he can’t risk it. If we tip our hand, it will set us back and we may not stop this group before they do something that can’t be undone.”

“So,” Dax said slowly. “Vato is expendable.”

“Not to me he isn’t,” Porter disagreed. “I’m convinced he knows more than he can relay over the phone. And, this recent attempt on his life confirms that. He may not even know he knows. I want him home where we can debrief him just as much as you do. Trust me, I’m doing everything in my power to help your friend.” Porter paused. “Just so I’m clear, he is still a friend?”

“At the moment,” Dax decided. “If anything changes, I’ll be sure to let you know.” He disconnected with Porter and made his way back into the house to brief his men. He’d have to go through it again later, when Paige got home; but, he thought that might be more productive,

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anyway. She was more open when they talked one-on-one. She could always make him think, had a different perspective than most people he knew, and she had a way of forcing him to consider possibilities he otherwise never would have thought of. If she wasn't too tired after such a long shift, he'd run it by her. Otherwise, he'd wait and discuss it over breakfast. He stepped into the living room, spotted the team, and began to relay the new information.

Paige stumbled into the house, dropped her gear on the couch and headed for the kitchen. She was starving. The only thing she'd had all day was lunch and a ton of coffee; good thing Lo insisted on a big meal. Otherwise, she would have swung by the drive-through and grabbed a burger. She heard a noise behind her, swung around, and relaxed when she spotted Dax in the doorway.

"Long day," he observed. "I saved you some takeout from Dirks. Hawk didn't want to cook, and we had a lot to go over."

"Something new?" Paige asked absently as she pulled out a covered plate that had to contain her dinner.

"It can wait," Dax decided. "Tell me about your day."

Paige shoved the plate into the microwave, retrieved a bottle of wine from the fridge and settled in to recap her long, seemingly unproductive, day.

Dax watched, dumbfounded, as Paige practically inhaled her dinner. He was amazed she could eat that fast without choking. "So, what's next?" he asked when she finished the rundown, obviously frustrated she didn't have a solid lead to follow.

"Track down more tips, I guess," she shrugged then frowned when her phone started to ring. She glanced at the display, swallowed and answered. "Hello, Logan."

"Paige," Logan greeted. "I'm sorry to bother you at home, but our victim is awake. Darla's neighbor just called, said Darla woke up. She's pretty groggy and in a lot of pain, but I'm heading over, and I thought... well, if you're not busy..."

"Wait for me," Paige decided. "I'll be leaving here in five minutes. We don't want to bother her too long. We're going to have a very short window so wait for me to get there before you go in."

"Okay," Logan agreed. "I'll be in the waiting area, where you found me last night."

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“Gotta go,” Paige jumped to her feet. “Thanks for the meal. Don’t wait up, I shouldn’t be long at the hospital, but I want to drop by the bar on my way back and see if the owner’s available. And, maybe the bartender that kicked the old guy out.”

“What if I drive?”

“Police business,” she told him as she slipped her duty belt back on.

“What if you take five minutes to change,” Dax pushed. “I’ll drive you to the hospital and I’ll stay out of your way. Then, we can drop into the bar where we will enter separately. I can have a beer and silently observe the patrons while you grill the owner and track down the bartender. I’ll get you a different perspective that way, and you’ll get further out of uniform. Trust me on this, I know what I’m talking about.”

Paige hesitated, but in the end, she agreed. Mostly because she realized he was right. Going into a bar in uniform, was a recipe for disaster. She wanted answers and scaring or intimidating all the patrons was not the way to get them. She rushed upstairs, changed into jeans and a casual tee, and was at the front door in less than three minutes. Dax was waiting for her in the living room. The moment she hit the first stair, he was on his feet and following her out the front door.

The following day, Paige was sitting at her desk, tired, grumpy and frustrated. Darla didn’t have anything that would help. She was walking home one minute, the next she was hit from behind, on the ground, fighting for her life. She didn’t see the vehicle coming, didn’t even know if it was a car or a truck that hit her.

The bar owner, Joe, wasn’t a lot of help, either. He remembered the old man. Said it was the first time he’d come in. Didn’t ask for ID, didn’t need it. The guy looked like he was at least seventy and obviously old enough to drink. Scotty had cut him off at the limit, offered to call a cab, but the guy refused. Claimed he walked to the bar and he’d just head back home and sleep it off. It was busy that night; so, once Scotty escorted him to the door, he was back behind the bar dealing with customers. End of story. There wasn’t even a credit card receipt she could follow, the man paid for his libations with cash. Paige glanced up when Lovato arrived. She realized he didn’t have anything new when he said a quick hello and settled in behind his desk.

“Hey, Margie,” Paige called across the room.

“You got something?” Mike glanced up.

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“Maybe,” Paige focused on Margie. “Can you run old Chevy trucks for me? Pull anything registered in the area, Gunnison, Laurel Bluffs and Sanpete for now.”

“What’s up?” Mike asked.

“Caller said she was driving home from visiting her parents in Vegas and decided to drive straight through rather than lay over for the night. She can’t be positive on the exact time but, she’s sure it was after two. An old Chevy pickup suddenly crossed the median and nearly hit her. Said she didn’t get a plate because she was focused on not getting hit. By the time she calmed down enough to feel safe, the truck was too far away. Looked like a single male driver in the cab, but she couldn’t be sure.”

“Can’t be that many old Chev’s, right?” Lovato said sarcastically. “I mean it’s not like we’re in farm country or anything.”

“It’s a lead,” Paige insisted. “Margie?”

“I’m on it,” Margie assured her. They all looked up when Jericho entered the office.

“How’d the hearing go?” Paige asked, hesitantly.

“Good,” Jericho moved to sit in one of her chairs. “How’s the search coming?”

“Good? As in, you won and the murdering SOB is going to stay in prison for another fifty years?”

Jericho grinned. “I wish. Good meaning the murdering SOB’s parole was denied and he’s not eligible for another ten years.”

“I guess that’s better than the alternative,” Lovato moved to join them.

“The search has uncovered a man that beats his wife, a man that probably has a drinking problem but was in Denver at the time of the incident, a victim that didn’t see anything, and a bartender that knows the guy was old but couldn’t describe him if his life depended on it. Joe, the bar owner said he might recognize the man, but he didn’t know him, had never seen him before, and didn’t ask for any type of identification.”

“I think I’ve missed something,” Jericho said, confused. “Who is the old guy?”

Paige and Lovato walked him through everything they had, concluding with Margie’s search of Chevy trucks.

“I’d like to see the list when it’s completed,” Jericho stood. “Now, I have a few phone calls to make. The family members on my victim couldn’t make the trip this time. I need to let them know their mother’s killer will remain behind bars for at least ten more years.”

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“That many?” Paige asked when Margie handed her the printout.

“You didn’t say how old,” Margie shrugged. “Narrow it down and I can eliminate some of those trucks on the list.”

“It’s okay,” Paige decided. “The lady said it was a light color, not black or dark blue. She was pretty sure she could rule out green as well. I’ll see what I can do to narrow it down myself. Thanks for this, I appreciate it.”

Jericho stepped out of his office just after five and spotted Paige. “Leave it,” he ordered. “It can wait for morning. You look like you haven’t slept in days.”

“Working graves does that to me,” Paige admitted. “It takes at least a week before I can catch up and get back to normal.”

“What are you working on?”

“Narrowing Margie’s collection of possible trucks,” Paige handed him her revised list. “I’ve eliminated all dark colored vehicles, but that still leaves twenty-three trucks I will need to track down in person.”

Jericho spotted Donald Bentley’s name on the list and frowned. “I’d like to accompany you if you decide to speak with Donald.”

Paige accepted the list he was passing back over and scanned the names for a Donald. Halfway down, she spotted Donald Bentley. “I’m sure I will,” Paige decided. “He lives in Gunnison. The vehicle was traveling in that direction when it struck Darla in the back. He’s not at the top of my suspect list; but, the age is right for the mysterious elderly gentleman that was ejected that night. Could be nothing, but...”

“But you have to check,” Jericho nodded. “And I’d like to be there when you do.”

“Because?” Paige frowned.

“Because he’s an old friend,” Jericho provided. “We can head out tomorrow afternoon. That should give you enough time to investigate the top suspects on that list. Meet me here at fourteen hundred, I’ll drive.”

Paige was still frowning as Jericho headed out the back door.

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“What’s the status?” Jericho asked when Paige stepped into his office the following afternoon.

“I found a couple of possibles,” Paige dropped into his chair. “Dick Crenshaw doesn’t have an alibi and I can put him at Joe’s bar on the night in question. If you ask me, he’s evading because he went home with some bar fly and he doesn’t want his wife to know — Not because he ran over Darla Johnson. I looked at his truck and it doesn’t look like he’s had any work done on it lately.”

“Anyone else?” Jericho was hoping Paige would find their suspect and it wouldn’t be necessary to bother Don.

“I’m still working on a guy named Benny Twohill,” Paige glanced at her notes. “He’s a real winner. Claims his truck wasn’t running on the night in question. And, looking at that hunk of junk, it’s possible. He has the thing up on blocks and has clearly been working on it for days. The question is when it got that way — before or after Darla was injured. I’m not sure there’s an inch of that truck that hasn’t sustained damage of some kind or other. Plus, he’s shifty and evaded most of my questions. That definitely put him on my radar; but, neither headlight was broken, and the front bumper had plenty of dents, but they looked old to me.”

“Doesn’t mean the lights weren’t replaced,” Jericho decided. “But, the shifty attitude could just mean he’s dirty, not necessarily that he’s your driver.”

“I agree,” Paige set down her pad. “I still don’t have anything concrete. Those two are still on my list, but they’ve dropped down significantly.”

“Then,” Jericho stood. “I guess it’s time to head to Gunnison.”

Once they were on the highway heading toward the Bentley home, Paige shifted and focused on Jericho. “Tell me what it is about this guy that makes you feel like you need to protect him — from me.”

Jericho started to deny it; then, sighed and focused on the road ahead of them. “I’ve known Donald Bentley for a long time. He never lived in Manti, but he was a big supporter of our city. Huge supporter to law enforcement. He lives comfortably in Gunnison because that’s where his wife grew up and she loved it there. He met Molly in college. They both graduated with a bachelor’s in business of some sort or other. They were married shortly afterwards. Don went on to get his MBA, moved to Molly’s hometown, and opened up a feed and garden store. He and Molly had one child, Charity. She was their pride and joy. Grew up to work in her dad’s store, which had expanded into farm equipment and implements. She took over when he decided to retire. The business expanded even further under Charity’s leadership. She never married, I guess she was married to the business.”

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“What happened?” Paige asked. It didn’t escape her notice that Jericho was talking about Charity in past tense, not present.

“Don and Molly seemed to have a wonderful life,” Jericho continued. “They celebrated their fiftieth anniversary last year. Their marriage was strong; and you could see, even after all that time, they were still madly in love with each other. As a gift, Charity purchased an all expense paid trip to New York, sort of a mother-daughter getaway thing. Donald was thrilled and didn’t mind being left home alone. Molly and Charity didn’t see each other often and Molly had always wanted to take a girl’s trip to the Big Apple to shop and visit all the famous sites. Donald has knee trouble and couldn’t keep up with his girl’s, anyway. As an added bonus, Charity gave her father a week’s rental at his favorite fishing resort. Donald said goodbye one day, checked into a cabin on the lake the next, and two days later, he was informed that both his wife and his daughter had been murdered in New York. Some horrific mugging gone wrong.”

Paige remained silent, wondering if Jericho had a soft spot for the man because of what happened to her mother — the love of his life.

“Anyway,” Jericho pushed aside the melancholy and the empathy he was feeling for Donald. “I just want to be here when you speak to him. Having a deputy, in uniform, show up on his doorstep might...”

“Might take him back to the night his family was killed,” Paige realized. “I understand.”

They pulled into the driveway of a well-kept family home. Paige glanced around but didn’t see an old pickup truck. She wondered why the man kept something so outdated when he could clearly afford a new one. She followed her boss to the front steps and waited a few feet back while two friends said hello.

“Don,” Jericho sobered. “This is Deputy Paige Carter and we’re here on official business.”

“Come in,” Donald said, trying to hide his nervousness. *Why did it have to be Jericho that showed up on his doorstep?* He knew he deserved to be behind bars, but he wasn’t sure he could handle being cuffed and thrown into the back of a police car by Jericho Walters. “Have a seat. Would you like anything to drink?”

“No, thank you,” Paige held up a hand. “I just have a few questions, Donald. I’m working on a hit-and-run case and I’m speaking with everyone that owns an older model Chevrolet pickup truck. The DMV records show that you own a model like the one I am looking for.”

“I do own a Chevy,” he glanced at Jericho, unable to look the friendly officer in the eye. “You know that, Jericho. It’s the one I used to transport feed.”

“Can we look at it, Don?” Jericho asked softly.

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“Oh,” Don feigned surprise to hide his panic. He just hoped he removed all the evidence the day before. “Sure, it’s in the barn. We can go out through here.” He led the group through a small sitting room, into an open, spacious living area, and out a large French door. They crossed a back patio and made their way across the back lawn to a large barn. Don opened the door, stepped inside, and flipped on the overhead lights. The truck was sitting in the center aisle. Empty stables ran down one side of the building, a tack room and a hay loft on the other.

Paige moved forward to study the vehicle. It had both headlights and neither one looked new. There was no way this truck was involved in the incident. Both headlights on this truck were oxidized, not new and shiny. The truck looked clean, like it had been washed recently but Paige couldn’t see any indication the bumper had been damaged. “Thank you for your time,” she said, glancing at Jericho for direction.

“Have you ever been to The Wooden Nickel, in Manti, Don?” Jericho asked.

“I don’t think so,” Don lied.

“So,” Jericho pressed. “If I were to show your picture around to the staff, nobody would recognize you?”

“I don’t think so,” Don hoped Jericho was bluffing.

Jericho studied his old friend for a long time before he nodded, turned and walked outside. “I appreciate your time, Don. Don’t be a stranger.”

Paige and Jericho rode back to Manti, to the police station, in complete silence. Paige didn’t know what was wrong, but she knew Jericho was upset. Clearly, he believed Don was their suspect. But why? Jericho pulled into his parking spot, shut down the car and just sat there. Finally, Paige couldn’t stand it any longer. “You think he did it?”

“I know he did,” Jericho sighed. “And, I know you have to go after him. But, I can’t be involved.”

“Because of my mom?” Paige asked.

Jericho studied Paige for several long seconds before he answered. “I understand what Don is dealing with. I lived it, nearly destroyed my own life with booze. His misery pushed him to make a bad decision, one that will destroy the rest of his life. A life that has already been destroyed, probably beyond repair. I can’t be a part of this Paige, I just can’t.”

“His house didn’t look like the home of an alcoholic,” Paige began. “I mean, I remember crazy Netty Simmons. Her house had empty bottles, half-empty bottles, and dirty glasses everywhere. She also wreaked first thing in the morning, like she drank so much booze it oozed from her pours. Donald Bentley is not an alcoholic. So, how can you be so sure he did this?”

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“He’s not an alcoholic, Paige,” Jericho said softly. “He’s self-medicating. The night that girl was hit; that was the one-year anniversary of the murder. His wife and his daughter died that very night one-year earlier. I know you understand how devastating death is. Your mother was murdered, and it was hard on you. But...”

“But he lost the love of his life,” Paige nodded. “And his only daughter. Did you ever? Drink on the anniversary of mom’s death, I mean?”

“Did I?” Jericho laughed. “Paige, I still do. It’s the one and only night I allow myself to use alcohol to numb the pain. I know it won’t help. I know all it does is delay the inevitable. Yet...”

“I’m sorry,” Paige focused out the front windshield. “And, I’m sorry for Donald Bentley.”

“But you have to do the job,” Jericho said softly. “I just don’t have to help you. I can’t.”

“Sometimes,” Paige decided. “The job sucks.”

Jericho smiled. “Yes,” he agreed. “Sometimes it does.”

“Can I ask you something?” Paige hesitated. “How can you be sure? I looked at the truck. The headlights aren’t broken. They haven’t been replaced.”

“Yes,” Jericho sighed. “They have. One of them, anyway. He took the headlight off another truck, an earlier year, and put it on his truck.”

Paige frowned. “How could you tell?”

“They are nearly the same,” Jericho turned to study his deputy. “Nearly. But the design is slightly different. I know, because I used to own that model. One night, I took a corner too fast and hit a road marker. You know, those metal poles with the reflectors on them. I cracked my headlight and when I replaced it, I bought the wrong one. It bothered me until the day I sold the thing. I’m surprised you didn’t notice.”

“I wasn’t looking for that,” Paige admitted. “I was just looking for a broken light or a new replacement. If I had longer, I’m sure I would have seen the difference, eventually. But, how are we going to prove it was him? I mean, there was nothing at the residence that would point to him. I doubt a different, old headlight is going to be enough probably cause for a warrant to seize the truck. You might believe it was him, but I’m no closer to closing this case than I was an hour ago.”

“Paige,” Jericho scolded. “Stop looking for excuses and do your job. I know you don’t want to arrest Donald any more than I want you to. But, you must get justice for that poor woman. She was nearly killed because he decided to drink and drive.”

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“Can I ask you one more question?” Paige said softly.

“Go ahead,” Jericho hoped it was one he could answer.

“Did you ever drink and drive?” she was looking out the side window but turned to face her boss. “When it was really bad, did you ever head over to a bar, get smashed, and drive home?”

“No,” Jericho said immediately. “I guess I have Chaya to thank for that. I may have. I didn’t care about anything, not even the fact it would have cost me the job, not back then — in the beginning. If you remember, Chaya didn’t want anyone to know about us. We kept our relationship a secret. I loved your mother more than I’ve ever loved anyone in this world. But, she insisted we had to keep things just between us. When she was killed, it nearly killed me. I didn’t know how to cope. I drank every night, but I had to hide it. I knew, if anyone spotted me, they’d realize Chaya and I were closer than we had let on. I got up every morning, went to work, did the job, and went home and drank myself into a stupor. Then, I got up and did it all again.”

“How long did it last?” Paige asked, wishing she’d been here to help somehow but knowing that even if she’d stayed, she was just a kid. She wouldn’t have been able to help this man deal with his loss.

“Too long,” Jericho said in dismissal. “It’s not a part of my life that I’m proud of. I think I’d like to leave it at that.”

“Okay,” Paige agreed. “On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“From now on,” Paige said softly, “on the anniversary, we spend it together. And, you don’t drink more than one glass of wine or two beers. We’ll go fishing, or have a BBQ with Dax and the guys, or do whatever you want. But, we do it together and we do it sober.”

Jericho studied Paige for a long time before he answered. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and nodded. “It’s a deal.”

It was ten o’clock the following morning when Donald Bentley stepped through the door of the Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office. It was cool inside, and the décor was old but inviting somehow. He glanced around, spotted Deputy Carter and made his way to her desk.

“Mr. Bentley,” Paige said in surprise. “How can I help you?”

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“I’m here to make a statement,” he said, settling into her visitor’s chair. “I’m hoping we can do this without Jericho. It’s just too hard to look an old friend in the eye and confess to something so... horrible.”

Paige glanced at Margie, saw the woman understood and escorted Donald to the conference room.

The instant the door was shut, Margie rushed into Jericho’s office. She told him what she had overheard and hesitantly relayed Donald’s request that Jericho not be present during the interview.

“Can you do me a favor, Marge?” Jericho asked.

“Anything,” Margie agreed.

“Can you call your son? Ask him if he can represent Donald. The stubborn fool will refuse, but maybe he could take this one on pro-bono.”

“Consider it done,” Margie told him. Five minutes later, she was standing on the outside of the conference room, knocking.

“Come in,” Paige called. She hadn’t gotten into the specifics of the case yet. Donald had just finished providing his personal information for the record.

“Donald’s attorney is on his way over,” Margie informed Paige. “He asked that you discontinue any questioning until he arrives.”

“I didn’t hire an attorney,” Donald objected. “He’ll just get in the way of me doing the right thing. My Molly would be so disappointed in me right now. I need to do the right thing. That poor woman. And it’s all my fault.”

“Don’t say another word,” Riley Gonzales interrupted as he stepped into the room. “Can I have just a few minutes with my client, Deputy Carter?”

Paige stood and followed Margie out the door. “Is Jericho paying the bill?”

“Nope,” Margie was still looking at the closed door. “Riley agreed to take this one on free of charge. He’s required to handle so many pro-bono cases annually and he thought this was a worthy cause. That man in there needs help, Paige. He does not need to go to prison for his mistake. Sure, it was a horrible, devastating mistake; but, rotting away in a prison cell won’t make things right.”

“I agree,” Paige glanced up and spotted Logan Reed. “Now, you just have to convince him.”

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“I know he wants to throw the book at that man,” Margie said sadly. “Maybe you could talk to him. Help him understand.”

Paige wondered why she was the one that always had to be the voice of reason around here. She motioned to Logan and asked him to join her in the back. Once they stepped into the file area, she leaned against the wall. She started by telling him their suspect was inside the conference room with his attorney.

Logan interrupted. “I want to be there when you present this to the DA. I want that man to pay for what he did. We need to present a united front, insist they hit him as hard as they can, Paige. Stack the deck, throw the book at him, whatever.”

“I disagree,” Paige continued. She told him about Donald Bentley. About his friendship to Jericho. About his wife and daughter and their senseless murder. Then she explained the circumstances of that particular night. “I don’t expect you to understand,” Paige said in conclusion. “But, I do. I know what it’s like to have someone so close to you murdered. I know how helpless you feel. I know how devastating it is. I know what it’s like to hurt so much you can barely breathe through the pain. And, we all deal with it the best we can.”

“But Darla could have died,” Logan argued. “We can’t just give him a pass because he was hurting.”

“I didn’t say we should,” Paige countered. “I’m just saying I won’t push for the max. I won’t throw the book at him and I won’t ask the prosecutor to hammer him with everything he’s got. I won’t do it, Logan. I can’t.”

“Because he’s a friend of the boss?” Logan challenged.

“No,” Paige disagreed. “Because I believe in justice and I don’t believe that would be just. I believe it would be emotional. And, I believe it would be abusing the power and the responsibility we have as police officers. I also believe in mercy and if anyone deserves that, he does. He came to us. He’s here to confess. That has to count for something. Because, to be honest, in my entire career, that has never happened to me. Not like this. Sure, I’ve hammered a confession out of a suspect before; but, I have never had a guy walk in off the street, on his own, and tell me he wants to confess to a crime, that he has to face his punishment — because it’s the right thing to do. Maybe you should take a minute to think about that.” Paige heard her name and turned to head back to the conference room.

“I’ve advised my client he should not speak with you today, but he insists on giving you a statement,” Gonzales was clearly frustrated.

“I’m going to record this,” Paige informed Donald and his attorney. “And, Logan Reed is going to join us.” Paige motioned toward Logan. Once they were all settled inside the conference room Paige began. “First, I’m going to read you your rights.”

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Paige sat silently listening while Donald explained the events of that evening. Jericho was spot on; the man was suffering. It was difficult to listen to his version of the events that night. He hadn't meant to drink, had promised himself he wouldn't, but the pain and the loss was too much. He was forced to drive to Manti because the bars in Gunnison were owned by neighbors that had known him and Molly most of their lives. They cut him off months earlier. Each bar in the area had told him he wasn't welcome in their establishment. He knew they were just trying to help, but it forced him to seek out a bar in Manti instead of staying closer to home. He was able to drink enough at The Wooden Nickel to numb the pain, but not wipe it out completely. When the bartender booted him, when he was cut off, he'd been angry. He sat in the parking lot furious and a little lost for several minutes before he spotted the nearly full bottle of whiskey on the floorboard.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there; but, when the parking lot was nearly empty, he knew it was time to head home. He told them he had only himself to blame. He'd become a man that he didn't recognize any more, a man his wife would be ashamed to know. And, when he realized he'd nearly killed an innocent woman, a single mother with a child that depended on her to survive, he panicked. He'd switched out the damaged parts on his truck and hoped nobody would realize it was him. He said he hadn't slept all night, knew he had to turn himself in, realized he couldn't live with himself if he didn't. He was ready to accept the consequences of his actions. He just had one request. He wanted to speak with the woman he'd harmed. He needed to tell her he was sorry, and he wanted to make arrangements to pay for her hospital bills before he was locked away for his crime.

"I can call and ask her if she's willing to speak with you," Logan offered before he stood and left the room. Listening to the man describe the pain he'd been in, the reason he turned to alcohol that night, had changed Logan's mind. He realized Paige was right. It wasn't his job to arrest, convict, and condemn the guilty. It was his job to find and arrest them. From there, the system would determine the man's fate. Once he spoke with Darla and explained the man's request, he was leaving the rest up to Paige and the attorneys.

"Hello, Darla. It's Deputy Logan Reed..." Logan explained what the man had requested and wasn't a bit surprised when Darla agreed to the meeting. He returned to the conference room to make arrangements with Mr. Gonzales for his client to meet his victim. Paige had already contacted Tolman, who adamantly opposed the request. Paige reminded the local DA, Donald Bentley was not yet under arrest and she had no control over his movements until he was. She handed the phone to Gonzales who made arrangements for his client to surrender the following day.

Just before Paige left the office that day, Darla Johnson called. She insisted they drop all charges against Donald Bentley. When Paige explained why she couldn't do that, Darla asked for the DA's information. Paige rattled off the number, glad the entire mess was behind her. It

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was now James Tolman and Stan Donaldson's problem. They could figure out how to deal with an angry Darla Johnson.

On her way to the car, Paige got another call. This time, it was from Logan. He told her he'd been at the hospital when Donald stopped in to see Darla. His voice softened when he relayed the encounter. Donald Bentley had broken down and cried as he apologized to his victim. He explained the situation and promised the young woman he would pay all her expenses. His accountant had been advised and the arrangements were already in place at the hospital. He couldn't change what he had done, but he assured the weeping mother that he had learned his lesson, and he would never touch alcohol again as long as he lived. They all hoped that was a promise he could keep.

Paige stepped into her house and dropped onto the couch. She remembered thinking, just days ago, that Logan Reed was letting the job get personal. She wondered if he would make it and considered different ways to help him understand why you couldn't let the job get personal. So, how had she allowed this case to affect her so profoundly? Because of Jericho that's how. It was personal, to him and to her. She curled up on the arm of the couch and let herself cry. She wasn't exactly sure why. For Donald? For Darla and her daughter, Mandy? For Jericho and the pain he was forced to suffer alone? Or, for herself? She just wasn't sure.

That's how Dax found her. He understood she needed the release and thought he understood why after speaking with Jericho an hour ago. He also knew part of this was exhaustion and stress. So, he just sat down next to her and silently held her while she dealt with the ghosts of the past.

THE END