

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Toxic Indulgence *Season 3, Episode 7*

by:

Melanie P. Smith

Copyright © 2018 Melanie P. Smith

First Edition, First Impression

No part of this document or the related files may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the Author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. All trademarks are the property of their owners and are acknowledged by the proper use of capitalization throughout.

www.melaniepsmith.com



MPSmith Publishing

Toxic Indulgence



“James Tolman,” Martin Wolfe approached the small group and extended his hand. “I’m glad you could make it.”

“Quite a party you have here,” Tolman shook the man’s hand and glanced around the room. “A Martin Wolfe gathering does generate a crowd.”

Martin laughed. “Human nature, I suppose. Curiosity has always been a great motivator.” He glanced up when a young, attractive woman approached with a fresh tray of expensive champagne; only the best for the estimable Martin Wolfe. The host of the biggest party in the region— an annual event that brought in the wealthiest patrons for miles— accepted the fresh glass, took a few seconds to down half of the bubbly liquid, then continued. “I like my privacy, as you well know; but, once a year I come out of what the kids these days call my safe space and mingle for an evening. It’s good for business; and, now that the vultures are used to the routine, it offers me a modicum of privacy throughout the rest of the year. Something I could never achieve otherwise.” He laughed and took another long sip of the golden liquid. “And, it guarantees this...” he swung his glass through the air in a sweeping motion that took in the entire crowd. “Anyway, it truly is great to see you, James. And, for the record, I’m glad that insufferable opponent of yours dropped out of the race. I didn’t like him. Didn’t know him; but, I did see that interview on the morning show and I have to say, he was even more arrogant than I am... Which is quite an accomplishment, just ask my wife. Unfortunately, I won’t be here next month — business in Athens — so, congratulations on four more years of.. whatever it is you do as Manti’s esteemed District Attorney.”

“Thank you,” Tolman said politely. Wolfe wasn’t wrong, James didn’t know anyone more arrogant and egotistical than the tech giant standing before him. But, the man was also kind and very generous. “I appreciate the support.”

Across the room, a man called Wolfe’s name. “Duty calls,” Wolfe started to turn, stumbled, and began to cough. He pushed the drink he was holding toward Tolman then bent over, trying to find some relief from the excruciating pain that suddenly attacked his stomach. That’s when he felt his throat constricting. He tried to gulp air, tried to get oxygen to his lungs, which now felt like they were on fire; but, failed. In desperation, he glanced up, hoping to find someone that could help. Instead, he stared into the hard, cold eyes of a killer... his killer. Reality hit like a freight train and, in that moment, he knew he was going to die. Panic set in and his body started to shake uncontrollably — from the pain, the fear, and the anger and embarrassment of knowing he’d been fooled. Suddenly, he couldn’t hold his weight any longer. Martin Wolfe fell to the floor with a loud thud as his body began to convulse.

Toxic Indulgence

“Find a doctor,” James yelled. “There has to be one in this crowd.” He began to survey the area, looking for anyone that had medical training and could help. Instead, Tristin Balli forced his way through the gathering crowd and moved in beside Tolman.

“What happened?” Wolfe’s head of security demanded.

“Tristin,” James Tolman grabbed his arm. “We need to lock the place down. Martin’s been poisoned. Nobody leaves, I don’t care who they are or how urgent their excuse. Get your men on it immediately. I’ll call Jericho.”

“Consider it done,” Tristin focused on the best boss he’d ever had as he pulled out a portable walkie and barked orders into the speaker. Once the entire residence was locked down, he turned to update Tolman but couldn’t find him. The man had vanished, completely.

“Miss?” Tolman stepped into the large kitchen and spotted the woman that had handed Martin his last drink. “Can I have a word?”

“I uh...” the nervous woman stammered.

“It’s not really a question,” Tolman pushed. “I need you to step in here.” James gestured down the hallway to an open door that led to an office. As soon as the woman stepped into the room, Tolman motioned to the couch. “Make yourself comfortable. You’ll need to wait in here until the sheriff arrives.”

“I didn’t...”

Tolman shook his head. “Don’t explain it to me. I need you to wait and speak with the police.” He closed the door firmly behind him, set the flute of champagne — the murder weapon— on a small table just outside the door, and stood guard over the evidence and the one person he hoped had the answers he desperately needed.

Paige cursed under her breath as she reached for the ringing phone. “This better be an emergency.”

“Paige, it’s Jericho. Wake up,” he demanded. “I’m on my way to your place, ETA ten minutes.”

Paige sat up, rubbed at her eyes, and glanced at the clock. “It’s after midnight. What’s going on?”

“Tolman called,” Jericho sighed. “Martin Wolfe is dead.”

Toxic Indulgence

“What?” Paige jumped up and made her way to the closet. She snatched up a pair of jeans and a hoodie. “How?” She moved quietly from the bedroom and into the hall, closing the door silently behind her. She didn’t want to wake Dax.

“James thinks someone poisoned him,” Jericho advised. “He’s doing his best to contain the guests, but he needs help — fast.”

“Guests?” Paige frowned as she pulled the shirt over her head. “Oh, that’s right. Tonight was that big shindig of his. He was killed at his own party? That bites.”

“I’m sure he would agree,” Jericho said flatly. “See you in five.” He disconnected without waiting for a reply.

The instant Jericho pulled into the driveway of Martin Wolfe’s elaborate second home, he knew they had a mess on their hands. The entire parking staff had been corralled on the front porch. Two security guards stood at the top of the stairs, waiting for the cops to arrive. The young employees did not look happy.

“How many people were invited to this thing, anyway?” Paige asked, surveying the area... and the large number of cars parked in every vacant spot possible. “I mean, does the fire marshal know? I think the benevolent Mr. Wolfe may have exceeded capacity.”

“Martin Wolfe does whatever he wants... well, did. This is an annual event. The rest of the year he’s practically a recluse. That’s when he’s in town and not crashing at his apartment in Salt Lake. Plus, he spends a lot of his time —spent a lot of his time — traveling the world bringing in new contracts.”

“Yeah,” Paige frowned. “Because a few billion just isn’t enough. I heard the man was a workaholic. And, what does he have to show for it? An early death that’s what. Does Tolman have any idea who was responsible?”

“He didn’t say,” Jericho ascended the stairs and made his way past a dozen angry young kids and their loud, belligerent demands for answers. He stepped into the large home and sighed. The adults weren’t behaving any better than the teens. “I’ll find Tolman. You head that way and touch base with Tristin Balli. James said the head of security was guarding the body. Bridges and Lovato are on their way. They’ll start interviewing the guests. We can follow-up tomorrow if we have to. For now, we just need to make sure we have a complete guest list. Those who were invited and the plus ones. Make sure you get the names of everyone that was here at the time of his death. I also want to know everyone that went near that glass of poison.”

Paige sighed and shoved her way through the large crowd. The guests were clearly horrified and intrigued by the sight of a dead body sprawled on the floor. It always amazed her how morbid humankind could be. One minute these people were mingling, laughing, and joking with a friend. The next they were standing over his dead body— gawking. She moved forward

Toxic Indulgence

and pulled out her badge. “Tristin Balli?” she asked a large man keeping the guests several feet away from the scene.

“Who are you?”

She held her badge higher to make sure he could see it. “Deputy Paige Carter. Can you give me some space and let me get a closer look here? If you’re available, I could really use the help to manage the scene. We need to push this crowd back at least five more feet. Ten would be better.”

“You heard the lady,” Tristin called out. “Move back.”

The crowd began to mumble and complain, but they complied.

Paige thought she’d learned as much as she was going to learn from the body when Benny Parks, the local Medical Examiner, arrived. The instant he reached the body, he crouched and began his own thorough examination of the corpse. Paige waited — impatiently— through the grunts, the hums, and okays for several minutes before she couldn’t take it any longer. “Anything I should know before I leave you to it?”

“What?” Benny glanced up in surprise. “Oh, no... not really,” he straightened. “I assume you found the source of the poison and contained it? I’d like the lab to compare what I get from the body to the possible source to be sure.”

Paige pointed to a small bag that held the empty flute. Next to it was the small container she had used to preserve the remaining champagne. “The District Attorney himself secured that evidence. Once I arrived, he couldn’t hand it over fast enough. Lucky for us he was on scene when it happened. Otherwise, it would probably be splattered all over that fancy marble floor. Anyway, if there’s nothing else... I need to head in and help Jericho with interviews. He’s all yours, Doc.”

“Check in with me tomorrow, make it the afternoon,” Benny acknowledged. “I’m not going to start on the exam until morning. There’s no rush, we know cause of death— it’s pretty obvious.”

Paige focused on the foam that had gathered around Martin’s mouth and nose. “Yeah, we do.” With another long sigh, she turned and made her way through the crowd in search of her boss. Instead, she found James Tolman outside a closed door. “Boss in there?”

“Yeah,” Tolman said soberly. “This cluster is going to turn into a circus before morning.”

“Meaning?” Paige frowned, not sure what he was implying.

“Martin Wolfe dead at his annual charity event... from poison? The national syndicates will go nuts over this. We’re going to be invaded, again. You thought it got crazy when we

Toxic Indulgence

uncovered those bodies? Just wait a day or two... you haven't seen crazy until you've dealt with the death of a celebrity."

"I hadn't thought of that," now Paige was frowning. She had to warn Dax... and the guys. Piper Weber was about to make another appearance in Manti. *Great, as if this nightmare wasn't bad enough.*

"Anyway, that's a worry for another day," Tolman focused on Paige. "Jericho's trying to interview a waitress. She's the one that gave Martin the glass that contained the poison."

"How can you be sure it was that glass of champagne that contained the poison?"

"Because I was talking to him," Tolman barked. "Sorry, it's a legitimate question." He raised his eyebrow at her. "One I would normally ask you. I know because I was standing there having a casual conversation with the man. He was congratulating me on the election since I'm now running unopposed and he was heading to Athens. We were just casually shooting the breeze, for several minutes, when that girl moved in with fresh drinks. Martin snatched one off the tray, drank half of it in nearly one gulp, then continued the conversation. I'm telling you, he was fine before that. It only took a minute... seconds, really. And, I was standing right there!"

Paige realized he blamed himself. She could understand, it would be tough to realize a murder occurred right under your nose and you had no idea it was even happening. But, with poison... there was no way Tolman could have anticipated that. "You couldn't have stopped it," she finally told him. "Nobody could have prevented it. Unless you knew he had that kind of enemy after him... there was nothing you could have done to prevent this."

"Still..."

"Focus on the things you can control," Paige suggested. "Let's catch the person responsible. Then, you can make sure they pay for killing your friend."

Tolman just nodded.

"Now," Paige reached for the door handle. "I'm off to rescue my boss." Paige stepped into the room and took a minute to look around. Jericho was trying to comfort a woman who was near hysterics. He glanced up and gave her what could only be described as a desperate look. She could practically hear him demanding she step in and help. She moved forward and took a seat on the couch next to the woman. "Hi," she said softly. "I'm Paige Carter. What's your name?"

The woman looked up, surprised. She swallowed hard and took a deep breath before she answered. "Sh... Shannon," she sniffled.

"Shannon," Paige said calmly. "Can I get your last name?"

Toxic Indulgence

“Shannon Con...Conley,” she sniffed.

“Great,” Paige smiled. “I can see you are upset,” she began. “There’s no reason to be scared. I’m just here...” she pointed to Jericho. “We’re just here to find out what happened tonight. That man outside is the local District Attorney. He says he was standing with Martin Wolfe when you brought over a tray of fresh drinks.”

“I did, but it wasn’t me.”

“Shannon,” Paige soothed. “I’m not saying you did anything to Mr. Wolfe’s drink. I just need you to walk me through it. Have you been here all night, working? Tell me about that tray of drinks. Did you get them from the kitchen? Did you load them up yourself? How many other people took glasses off that tray before you approached Martin and offered him one? Was there anything different about that particular tray and where you got it? Just walk us through what happened, in as much detail as you can remember.”

“Oh,” Shannon swallowed again. “Okay. I’ve been working here all night. We got here early, before the guests started to arrive, so we could set everything up. The tables, I mean.”

“Okay,” Paige nodded. “Do you remember what time you arrived?”

“Um...” Shannon took a ragged breath but was starting to calm down. “I rode over with Kathy. She picked me up just before six...maybe five-forty-five.”

“Do you know Kathy’s last name?” Jericho asked.

“Uh, yeah. Tippets. Kathy Tippets.”

“You’re doing great,” Paige encouraged. “So, Kathy Tippets picked you up at five-forty-five. What time did you get here, to the Wolfe estate?”

“Just before six,” Shannon said confidently. “We were supposed to be here at six, but we got here a few minutes early.”

“And did you have a staff meeting beforehand or did you just start setting up?” Paige asked.

“We just started in,” Shannon said. “We’ve all done this before. On other jobs. We all knew what had to be done, so we just started doing it. I helped Kathy and Pete carry the food out to the tables and some of the others began to pour out the champagne...into glasses. We wanted them all ready to go, you know. Parties like these, they get pretty hectic at first. The guests like to have a drink or two before they start to loosen up and mingle. Like I said, we’ve done this before, so we knew we’d go through a ton of champagne in the first hour. We like to have it ready so we’re not scrambling so much.”

Toxic Indulgence

“That makes sense,” Jericho encouraged. It was a little annoying that he’d ask the girl a simple question and she’d burst into uncontrollable tears. But, Paige comes in and asks basically the same thing and the girl’s all cooperative and almost chatty. “So, the initial drinks had to be gone by the time Martin took that last glass.”

“Right,” Shannon agreed. “We had used up all the original stock. One of the kids... the one’s parking vehicles outside, came inside for a quick snack and Mrs. Wolfe asked him to grab a couple friends and restock.”

“Do you know where they got the alcohol?” Paige asked. “The stuff they carried in to restock what you guys had already used?”

“Outside somewhere,” Shannon said slowly. “I don’t know where, but they carried the cases in from outside.”

“Okay, so did you guys go back into the kitchen and pour a bunch of new glasses or did you just restock a tray at a time?”

“No,” Shannon shook her head. “We had two of the girls — Tina and Marnie — in the kitchen, pouring while we circulated throughout the room.”

“Do you know if Tina or Marnie filled the glasses you picked up that last time?” Paige asked.

“I don’t think either one of them did,” Shannon told them.

“I don’t understand,” Paige pushed. “Did you refill the tray yourself?”

“No,” Shannon frowned. “When I ran out, I was headed back to the kitchen, but that woman stopped me. She handed me the tray and pointed to Martin Wolfe. She said it looked like he needed a fresh drink and we shouldn’t make him wait or he’d take it out on the company — where I work — and we wouldn’t get the job next year.”

“Do you know who the woman was?” Jericho asked.

“Was it maybe Mrs. Wolfe?” Paige added.

“No,” Shannon shook her head vehemently. “It wasn’t Mrs. Wolfe. I met her first thing... when I got here. I met her because she was out telling us how she wanted us to set up the tables. This lady was younger, but I don’t know her. I just assumed, well I assumed it was a personal assistant or something by the way she was giving orders. Plus, she seemed comfortable. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“You’re doing good,” Paige assured her. “You don’t know her, but can you describe her? What color of hair did she have?”

Toxic Indulgence

“Blonde.”

“Good,” Paige jotted that down. “And you said she was younger. Was she older or younger than me?”

Shannon studied Paige for several seconds. “I think... yeah, I think she was maybe about ten years older than you. I mean, I can’t say for sure but...”

“You’re doing good,” Paige stopped her. “So, Martin Wolfe and his wife are in their late fifties. I’m in my thirties. Would you say this woman was in her mid-forties? Does that sound right?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“What about build?” Jericho asked. “Was she small and lean like Paige here? Or, maybe curvier— like Mrs. Wolfe?”

“She was pretty,” Shannon said without hesitation. “She was wearing an amazing dress, it was dark green, forest green, maybe. And she was taller than me so pretty tall. I’m five-seven and she was an inch or two taller than I am. She wasn’t exactly curvy, but she wasn’t thin either. Just normal, I guess.”

“Similar to your build?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” Shannon said cautiously. “Sort of. I mean she was more... just more.”

“The build was similar, but she showed it off more? Is that what you mean?”

“Exactly,” Shannon relaxed. “Her dress was short. Not indecent, but she wanted to show off her legs. And, it was kind of low cut.”

“You’re really helping us out here,” Paige praised. “Is there anything else you can remember that might help?”

“I think she had a tattoo,” Shannon was pulling a face that made Paige realize she was trying to concentrate. “I couldn’t see it clearly, her dress covered it up. But, when she handed me the tray of drinks, her thin strap fell off her shoulder and right in here...” Shannon pressed her right hand against the left side of her torso right next to the shoulder joint. “She had some kind of tattoo. I’m sorry, I don’t know what the picture was. I think it had wings though. And, a lot of color.”

Paige shot a look at Jericho. Shannon was proving to be a very informative witness.

“Is there any way you can clear something up for me, Shannon?” Jericho asked.

“I’ll try,” Shannon turned to face the sheriff.

Toxic Indulgence

“You said you don’t think Tina or Marnie poured the wine in the glasses. Why do you think someone else did it?”

“There are several reasons,” Shannon paused to consider. “First, I glanced into the kitchen and it was empty. They weren’t in there. I assumed, since the party was nearly over, that Mrs. Wolfe had asked them to start cleaning up or something.”

“You don’t think they could have poured the last of the champagne into glasses before they moved on to something else?” Jericho asked.

“They could have, but I know they didn’t pour those glasses.”

“How?” Paige pressed.

“Because we have to pour all the glasses exactly the same,” Shannon explained. “Stefano, that’s our boss. Stefano insists every single glass has to have exactly the same amount of liquid in it. Presentation, ladies! He’s told us that a million times. We get into trouble if the glasses aren’t uniform. The ones I got from that lady, they weren’t uniform. One had more than the others, but they were all different.”

“Like someone poured more into the glass Martin took?” Jericho asked.

“Yeah,” Shannon nodded. “It’s human nature, I guess. That one had more, it was almost full. The others were maybe halfway full, some a little less, and some a little more. They were all different, but it was obvious the one Mr. Wolfe took was full. It’s sort of unconscious, you know. If you see a glass that’s only half-full, you think...’someone drank part of that one’ and you grab a different one.”

Paige realized that was by design. The killer had set the tray up to look like a normal tray, but also to make sure Martin took the correct flute. “Anything else?”

“Just that they spilled some of the alcohol on the tray and it wasn’t cleaned up,” Shannon told them. “It’s another reason I know Tina and Marnie didn’t do it. They would have cleaned it up instantly. Stefano is very strict about presentation and having it roll around like that would get us fired. I tried to stop and wipe it up, but the lady insisted Martin needed a new drink immediately. She told me to take care of him first, then I could deal with the messy tray.”

“Do you know what happened to the tray,” Paige asked. “After Martin got sick?”

“Um, yeah.” Shannon swallowed hard. “Since all the drinks looked half used, nobody wanted any. I was headed back to the kitchen to combine them, to make them full glasses when Mr. Wolfe...” she swallowed hard again, and her eyes began to water.

“Don’t think about that,” Paige tried to direct her away from the image of a dead Martin Wolfe. “You headed back to the kitchen, then what?”

Toxic Indulgence

“When I realized he was sick just after I gave him that drink, I was afraid I did something wrong. That there was something wrong with the champagne. I took the tray back into the kitchen and put it in the walk-in fridge. I hid it in the back, so nobody would accidentally give it to one of the guests. Then, I locked the fridge.”

Jericho stood. “I’ll go track down Mrs. Wolfe and see if the tray is still back there. I doubt it will have prints and if it does, they will probably be Shannon’s, but it’s worth a shot.”

“Am I in trouble?” Shannon asked.

“No,” Paige assured her. “But, we will need you to come into the station and have your fingerprints taken. If that tray has two sets, we need to rule yours out and focus on the other woman. The woman that gave the tray to you in the first place.”

“Do I have to?” Shannon started to visibly worry.

“Is there a reason you don’t want us to have your prints?” Paige asked.

“No,” Shannon said immediately. “It’s not that. It’s just...I don’t have a car. That’s why I rode with Kathy. It’s hard for me to get around and I can’t ask Kathy to take me. She has a young daughter, it would be too hard for her to make a trip like that.”

“What if we sent a tech out to your house? Would that help?” Paige offered.

“I don’t want to put anyone out,” Shannon added.

“It’s fine,” Paige assured her. “I’ll ask Heidi to stop by sometime tomorrow. Did you give Jericho your contact information?”

“I did,” Shannon remembered. “He has my address and my number.”

“Okay,” Paige stood. “I think that’s everything for now. Heidi will call you tomorrow and schedule a time she can stop by and do the prints. Otherwise, I probably won’t need to contact you again. Here’s my card, you can call me if you remember anything or if you have any questions. I really appreciate your help. That information you gave us was very detailed and very helpful.”

“Sorry about...” she sighed, embarrassed. “Sorry about the hysterical crying earlier. I... well, I realized I was probably the one that killed that kind, friendly man and I thought the sheriff was going to arrest me and put me in jail. I don’t know how I’m going to live with that — knowing I killed someone. I feel so guilty and sad.”

“Shannon,” Paige waited for Shannon to finally look at her. “You did not kill Martin Wolfe. You didn’t.” Paige insisted when Shannon looked like she wanted to argue. “Someone used you as a tool to kill that man. It was not your fault. Please, remember that. You didn’t do

Toxic Indulgence

this. You can feel sad over the loss of a kind man. But, you should not feel guilty. Someone... a sadistic coward, did this. And, I'm going to catch the person responsible and throw them in jail. They will have consequences for their actions and they're going to have plenty of time to regret them."

"Thank you," Shannon said softly. "I'll try to remember that when I start to feel sad and horrified."

"I hope you do," Paige motioned to the door. "You're free to go."

Jericho approached Paige, frowning.

"What now?" she asked immediately.

Jericho motioned to the empty office. "James, please join us."

"Do I need my attorney?" James asked when he saw Jericho's face.

"We have a problem," he closed the door and moved to sit in the same chair he occupied while they interviewed Shannon Conley.

"What's the problem?" Tolman asked, settling into a second leather chair.

Paige settled onto the couch and waited.

"Mrs. Ryenne Wolfe has left the building," Jericho informed them.

"What do you mean she left? I gave strict orders that nobody was to leave the scene. Where's Tristin?"

"I'll go find him," Paige offered.

Paige finally located Tristin Balli on the front porch with the rest of his men. The instant she opened the front door, the group became eerily silent. "Balli? I need a word."

Balli glared at Paige for several seconds without moving. She realized he was trying to play the tough guy in front of his subordinates. Maybe she should have asked. Too late now, she remained in the doorway—waiting. Finally, he pushed off the railing and walked purposefully toward the door.

Once they were inside, he turned and glared at her. She didn't know what he was about to say because they were interrupted.

"You might want to ditch the attitude," Jericho growled from the open doorway of the office. "It's late and I don't have time for a pissing match." He turned and disappeared, expecting the duo to follow.

Toxic Indulgence

Tristin Balli was strutting when he stepped into the office. His steps faltered when he spotted James Tolman. He started to worry when Deputy Carter pulled the door shut. “What is this about?”

“I think I was pretty clear,” Tolman seethed. “I told you to keep everyone inside. I remember, very distinctly, telling you to make sure nobody left the premises for any reason. I know you understood. You acknowledged the request.”

“I did,” Tristin frowned. “We locked the place down completely.”

“Then where is Ryenne Wolfe?”

“She was distraught,” Balli argued. “The crowd was too much for her and seeing her husband lying there like that... well, she asked Bobby, the chauffeur, to take her to the jet. I didn’t see any reason...”

“I can think of about a dozen,” Paige barked. “You just set our investigation back significantly.”

“You can’t think...”

“Doesn’t matter what we think,” Tolman said coolly. “The fact still remains that I told you not to let anyone leave, for any reason; and, you let at least two people, that we know of, leave before the police could question them. You know better, Tristin.”

“I do,” he sighed. “But Ryenne is not a person that takes orders well. She’s usually the one making demands. Plus, she was crying and upset. She was not in any condition to be reasonable, let alone interviewed by the police.”

“That wasn’t your call,” Jericho said, clearly frustrated a prime player in all of this was missing. “You just better hope she didn’t get to the airport and decide she’d rather be in Cabo.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t leave,” Tristin pulled out his phone and made a call. “The jet’s not going anywhere. I’ll give you the hanger information and you can interview her whenever you want. I have to warn you though... tonight’s not a good time. Bobby said she took a valium and said she was going straight to bed.”

“While you’re here,” Paige decided. “Let’s get your interview out of the way.”

By the time they got the interviews concluded, the guests and temporary employees on their way home, and the residence secured, it was nearly seven in the morning.

Toxic Indulgence

“Paige, get some sleep,” Jericho ordered as he pulled into her driveway. “I don’t want to see you for at least six hours.”

“Will you be in the office when I get there?”

“I’m heading home for now,” Jericho admitted. “I’m getting too old to pull an all-nighter. These late night emergencies are harder than they used to be. I need a few hours as well.”

“See you when I see you,” Paige jumped from the car. “Do you know the family?”

“You mean do I know Mrs. Ryenne Wolfe well enough to know if she killed her husband?”

“Yeah,” Paige smiled. “That. See, you’re not that old. Your mind still works.”

Jericho laughed. “I don’t know, Paige. Get some sleep, we’ll talk about it later.”

Paige watched as her boss shifted into reverse and headed home. She turned and took two steps toward her house when she spotted Hawk on the front porch of Dax’s residence. She paused to consider, pivoted and made her way across the lawn that separated the two homes.

“Paige,” Hawk said casually. “Looks like you got an early start.”

“Actually,” Paige climbed the stairs and dropped into one of the patio chairs. “I barely got to bed before I was called out.”

“So, what can I do for you?” Hawk asked wearily.

“You’re going to hear it in an hour or so anyway,” Paige began. “Martin Wolfe was murdered last night.”

“Bummer,” Hawk said flatly. “Who is Martin Wolfe?”

Paige shook her head in disbelief. “You seriously need to expand your horizons. Martin Wolfe is a big shot billionaire tech giant. He’s an international superstar in the electronic industry and he was murdered in his own home, at his own fancy party.”

“Why are you telling me?” Hawk wondered. “It’s a tragedy, but irrelevant to our investigation.”

“Because he’s basically a celebrity,” Paige pushed. When Hawk still didn’t follow she sighed. “Because the media is going to descend like vultures. The national media. Meaning…”

“Meaning Piper Weber is going to stop in for a visit,” Hawk scowled. “You don’t think she’d come here, do you? To the house to bother Dax?”

“She did last time,” Paige stood. “And, it wasn’t pretty. I was just hoping maybe you could help keep her away from Dax. With everything that’s going on, having another encounter with

Toxic Indulgence

the nation's sweetheart — who is anything but — is something he doesn't need right now. I'm going to be busy until we can figure out who did this and arrest them. Too busy to run interference. So, I need a favor. Just intercept her, handle her, whatever."

"That's not a favor for you," Hawk disagreed. "And it would be my pleasure to deal with Ms. Weber. I thought we already had. It's disappointing to hear she paid Dax another visit. I guess this time we'll have to make sure she gets the message loud and clear."

"Thanks," Paige stood. "Now, I need to catch a couple hours before I head back in."

"I'm sure you'll catch the person responsible; but, good luck," Hawk stood. "And, don't worry about us. We've got things covered. You just focus on catching your killer, so we can get rid of the media frenzy as soon as possible. Having a bunch of overzealous busybodies in town will make it harder to keep our mission a secret. We'll have to be extra careful until they leave."

"Understood," Paige bounced down the steps. "And, good luck with Piper, you'll probably need it. That woman is one sneaky, conniving piece of work. It still baffles me that Dax dated her at all."

"I think she was just handy," Hawk shrugged. "He wasn't around enough to see the real Piper under the fake charm. Plus, he didn't care enough to look."

"Awe," Paige teased. "I guess we are becoming friends, after all. It's not necessary, though. Throwing me a bone to make me feel better. I know where I stand with Dax and that woman doesn't threaten me. Not even a little."

"Good," Hawk held back a grin as he watched Paige make her way home. Were they becoming friends? Maybe. If nothing else, he could definitely see why Dax had fallen for his sexy, fearless, intelligent neighbor. He swung open the front door and headed for the kitchen. The rest of the guys needed to know Piper Weber might make an appearance... and they needed to be prepared for the encounter.

Paige stepped through the back door of the office and spotted Jericho impatiently waiting in her visitor's chair. "Thought you were taking a nap."

"I did," Jericho stood. "Let's go."

"Okay," Paige shrugged. "Where are we going?"

"To the airport," Jericho stepped out the front door and approached his vehicle. "I want to talk to Mrs. Wolfe."

Toxic Indulgence

Paige climbed into the passenger's seat and buckled the belt before turning to focus on her boss. "Can I ask you something?"

"Just ask it," Jericho grumbled.

"Maybe you didn't get a long enough nap," Paige surmised by his surly attitude. "I have two questions, actually. First, have we heard anything from the media? Tolman was sure the whole world would descend once they heard the news."

"James will be holding a press conference at fifteen hundred this afternoon."

"James Tolman and the District Attorney's Office is going to take care of it, then?"

Jericho sighed. "For the most part. And, the answer to the question you are not asking — no, you do not have to be there. I'll handle it."

"Good," Paige said in relief. "But, that brings me to the second question. Why are you so involved in this case? Normally, you just have line guys handle things and you keep your finger on it from a distance. You know, you hang out in the background to make sure we don't mess anything up."

"Tolman insisted," Jericho scowled. "Seems I'm the only one he trusts to make sure his friend gets justice."

"Tolman doesn't trust us to handle it?" Paige asked, insulted.

"I think he knows you can handle it," Jericho pondered. "I just think he knows me... has known me longer, and he wants me personally involved. Maybe because he's too personally involved. I agreed to join you while you interview Mrs. Wolfe." He turned to glance at Paige. "You are conducting this interview, not me. I'm just your backup. I'll appease Tolman, to a point, because this is a high-profile case and I can run interference. But, this is your investigation, Paige. Don't back off or wait for permission. Just interrogate the wife and run things the way you would if Gage was here instead of me. I won't get in your way."

"Okay," Paige stared out the windshield. "I don't know this family, but the spouse is always a suspect. Is that okay with you?"

"I said interrogation, not witness statement," Jericho reminded her.

"That's right, you did." They rode in silence the rest of the way to the airport.

Paige glanced up when Jericho brought the vehicle to a stop. "Fancy jet."

"Fancy is easy when you have the kind of money Martin acquired," Jericho climbed from the vehicle and made his way toward the plane. They were stopped just inside the hanger by

Toxic Indulgence

what could only be a private security guard. Jericho remained silent, hoping Paige would step up and deal with the delay.

“I’m Deputy Paige Carter and this is Sheriff Walters,” Paige pulled out her badge. “We need to speak with Mrs. Wolfe.”

“She’s resting,” the guard continued to block their pathway.

“Then she’ll have to stop resting while we conduct our interview. I believe Tristin Balli informed you ahead of time we’d be coming.”

“He did,” the guard still didn’t move. “But Mrs. Wolfe ordered me to decline our request. She said she is not in the right frame of mind to be hassled by the local police.”

“Her frame of mind might change for the worse if we have to take this to the station. I doubt a woman who is used to this kind of luxury would enjoy being transported in the back of a patrol car.”

“You wouldn’t…”

“I will,” Paige said flatly. “Now get out of my way or I’ll arrest you for interfering with an investigation. And, Mrs. Ryenne Wolfe will be discussing the incident in an interview room instead of the overpriced leather couch installed in that jet.”

“I need a minute to ask…”

“It’s not a request,” Paige informed him.

The guard moved away to have a private conversation.

“Give them a little authority and it goes to their head,” Jericho whispered. “You ready for a battle with the self-important Mrs. Wolfe? I doubt she’s going to offer you tea once we finally get inside.”

“I know everyone grieves in their own way, but this… sneaking away last night before we had a chance to talk to her, posting a guard to turn us away today…it all seems more than a little suspicious to me.”

“I agree, she is being difficult. I don’t know her, I’m not sure if I’ve even met her before,” Jericho considered. “But, the feeling I get from the staff is that she’s in charge and you don’t cross her or tell her no. She might just be accustomed to getting her way and I’m sure she’s not in the habit of dealing with us little people.”

“Or,” Paige continued to stare at the private plane. “She’s avoiding us because she’s afraid she might give something away. My gut says there’s more to this than a snobby widow that can’t be bothered with the local cops.”

Toxic Indulgence

“I guess we’ll find out,” Jericho focused on the guard, who was now headed their way.

“Tristin has arranged a meeting,” his tone screamed ‘I just did you a favor.’ “Follow me.”

Paige shook her head but followed. “Even if you offered me all the money in the entire universe, I still couldn’t do that man’s job.”

Jericho grinned. “I’m pretty sure you would be fired on your first day.”

They climbed the stairs and stepped into an excessive display of wealth. Even the screws that held the counters in place were gold plated. Paige’s first thought was how much money this couple spent on a plane and how many needy, suffering children or veterans could be helped by the waste. Sometimes, life just wasn’t fair.

“Sheriff,” Ryenne Wolfe said in greeting. “I don’t appreciate you strong-arming your way into my private space. This plane is my sanctuary. It’s a private oasis I shared with my husband, a place where I could go to escape his death and grieve for a while. You have now ruined that. I hope whatever it is you have to ask me was worth the loss.”

Jericho gave Paige a nudge.

“Can you tell me why you left last night after District Attorney Tolman very specifically directed everyone on scene to remain inside the residence to be interviewed?”

Ryenne Wolfe ignored not only the question but Paige’s existence completely. “Well, did you have a question for me, Sheriff?”

“Yeah, Paige just asked it.”

Ryenne fumed but turned to address the deputy. “I left because it was my husband that died. I was distraught, and I see no reason for this interruption. Martin suffered a severe heart attack and passed away in a very public, very humiliating way. I have no doubt the media is already blasting his photograph all over the internet.”

“Martin did not suffer a heart attack. Why would you say that?” Paige frowned. “He was murdered.”

“Now, you’re just being ridiculous,” Ryenne turned her head away from Paige like a defiant ten-year-old. “Martin was a workaholic. He was never home, always working on that next big project. I told him to slow down, but he wouldn’t listen. He had a heart attack. I warned him this would happen, I never imagined it would happen at the one party he allowed me to throw each year. What people must be saying.”

“Mrs. Wolfe,” Paige ignored the comment. Her gut was telling her this woman was involved. The heart attack excuse was part of the act. “There was a guest, a woman with blonde

Toxic Indulgence

hair, wearing a dark green dress.” Paige saw the recognition and maybe panic in the woman’s eyes before she masked it. If she hadn’t been looking, she would have missed it. “Can you tell me who she was? This woman was comfortable enough in your home that she directed the staff. She gave the catering personnel orders.”

“I have no idea who you are talking about,” Wolfe said defensively. “Staff is never invited to our parties and I don’t have any children. There is simply no one that would direct the hired help, other than me. You must be mistaken.”

“What about a blonde woman in a dark green gown? Do you remember anyone that fits that description?”

Ryenne waved her hand in dismissal. “I have no idea; the party was a plus one. Most of our friends and colleagues came as a couple. Half of those in attendance were women. I have no idea which one was wearing green or who wore purple. Your questions are ridiculous, and I’m done here. Please, leave my plane immediately or I will be forced to contact my lawyer.”

Paige studied the woman for several seconds before she turned and made her way back to the car.

“So?” Jericho asked once they were back on the highway.

“She’s involved,” Paige said confidently. “I’m not sure how, she certainly didn’t pour the champagne into the flute last night. I doubt she even ordered the champagne or bought the poison herself. She has people for that. Carrying out such an unsavory act would be beneath the pompous, arrogant Ryenne Wolfe. But she ordered it done, I’m sure of it.”

“Now you just have to prove it,” Jericho made a left turn before he continued. “I agree, for what it’s worth. That woman orchestrated this whole thing. She’s not grieving the loss of her husband, she’s grieving the loss of her freedom. It’s rather inconvenient for a woman who is used to giving the orders. She’s in charge, people do what she says, she doesn’t sit for an interview with cops that asked all the wrong questions. She’s a manipulator, and we didn’t cooperate. We won’t get another shot at her. She’ll delegate this problem to her attorney.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Paige decided. “I’m done with her anyway... until I arrest her. And, I will arrest that woman. She’s going to find out just how unimportant she truly is. On the bright side, the whole world will know who she is. She’ll be famous. Something she couldn’t accomplish living in Martin’s shadow.”

“Infamous,” Jericho corrected. “So, what’s the next move?”

“I need to talk to Martin’s business associates,” Paige decided. “That means a trip to Salt Lake. But I definitely need to meet with his secretary. While I’m there I’d like to talk to his accountant, his attorney, and the people that weren’t invited to the party but spent a lot of time

Toxic Indulgence

around Martin Wolfe. If he was such a workaholic, his colleagues and his subordinates probably know him better than his wife. There's no time like the present to get started on a new list," Paige was surprised they were already back at the office. She pushed open the door and headed inside.

"Sean," Dax said in answer. "This is a surprise. You usually relay information through Nathan or Paige."

"I've identified the man that killed Brian Stewart," Sean said in greeting. "Our murdered cop. We're tracking the man now. He's just a low-level street thug. He must have had help; this guy could never ambush a cop on his own."

"Interesting, but I'm still unclear on what that has to do with me," Dax settled into his chair, realizing this would be a long call.

"I want Reynolds to pay," Sean said softly.

"Can you trace the street thug back to Reynolds?"

"I have a wire transfer," Sean affirmed. "Fifty thousand from one of Reynolds off-shore accounts into Damian Duffy's savings account two days before the murder. Two days after the murder, Duffy withdrew twenty thousand in cash. My guess, he used the cash to pay his buddies that helped him."

"Fifty is low," Dax considered. "But, Reynolds is strapped for cash. Probably why he utilized a common thug rather than a professional."

"Yeah," Sean agreed. "But, that's going to work in our favor. Once I catch this guy, he'll sing. A pro would never say a word."

"A pro would have left the country the minute the deed was done," Dax added. "So, you just called to let me know?"

"Not exactly," Sean hesitated. "I want Reynolds to pay, for everything. The FBI has picked this up...officially now. It was a murder for hire, on a cop and it involves multiple jurisdictions. Reynolds operates out of Washington, the thug was here in Chicago, and then we have the investigation Stewart was looking into that involved shipping out of New Orleans."

"Are they going after Reynolds on conspiracy to murder?"

"That, amongst other things," Sean answered. "But, there's one other thing and the agents that took over don't see it — or don't care."

Toxic Indulgence

“What?” Dax asked, knowing they had just reached the reason for the call.

“Reynolds just transferred sixty-five thousand from the same off-shore account to another off-shore account.”

“Do you know who?” Dax asked.

“Yeah,” Sean said, concerned. “Major Trent Hastings.”

“Vato?” Dax was now alert. His former colleague was in trouble. It was the only explanation for a transfer to the Major.

“Has to be, doesn’t it?” Sean asked. “I mean, if you look at the big picture, Reynolds needs Vato dead so he can’t testify against him. He’d kill Camille, too — if he could find her.”

“I agree,” Dax sighed. “They have something sinister planned for Vato. Nathan is working on something, to get him to safety, but it’s taking too long and this proves it.”

“The feds are also going after Reynolds for the illegal drone and weapons shipping. They think they have a strong enough case to get a conviction. You need to know, they’re formulating a plan to seize everything. His house, his company, everything. They’re working on an Op plan as we speak.”

“Can they do that?”

“Sure,” Sean said immediately. “Ill-gotten gains. He’s going down and I think he’ll go down hard. But, he’s going to serve his time in a cushy federal prison, not a state-run facility in general population. I think it’s better than he deserves. But, once he’s out of the mix... it’s going to make our job more difficult. We still haven’t discovered who his partner is. And, he has one. I’d stake my life on that. I think whoever it is, works pretty high up in the military.”

“Bratton?”

“I don’t think so,” Sean disagreed. “I know the good general is focused on him, but I don’t think he’s dirty. I’m getting the impression he’s just friends with the wrong people and too stupid to know it.”

“I know Bratton,” Dax admitted. “A little. And, I tend to agree with your assessment. I think Reynolds is using him and Bratton doesn’t even know it.”

“Dax, I’ll pass this on to Nathan, but if Reynolds has already paid Hastings, the job is going down in the next couple of days. It’s a pattern. And, I have no way of knowing what it is that’s going down. I have no way to stop it.”

“I might,” Dax knew he’d have to call Porter. “When are you going to fill in the General?”

Toxic Indulgence

“As soon as I hang up,” Sean said soberly. “I have to, I work for him.”

“I’m not asking you to stall,” Dax said without hesitation. “In fact, I need him to know immediately. I’ll give you twenty then I’m calling him myself. He’s the only one that knows the status on Vato’s extraction. I do know he was able to move our Ranger friend to Al Hillah last night. Hastings no longer has direct control over Vato, but that doesn’t mean he’s safe.”

“I guess that’s good news, anyway. I’ll let you go. Once I have Duffy in custody, I’ll be joining the FBI task force to go after Reynolds. When I have a better idea of what direction the feds are going with this, and when they plan to hit Reynolds, I’ll give you a call.”

“I appreciate it,” Dax disconnected, considering his options. It about killed him, but he waited the full twenty minutes before he dialed Nathan Porter’s burner phone.

“I wasn’t even at that party,” Tessa Whitman, the personal secretary for Martin Wolfe said in irritation. “I don’t see any reason you need to interview me.”

“Now that you mentioned it,” Paige said, undeterred. “Why didn’t you get invited to the party?”

Tessa snorted. “Are you kidding me?”

“Not at all,” Paige pushed. “According to HR, you’ve worked for Mr. Wolfe for twelve years now. I would think, as his personal assistant, he’d extend an invitation for a job well done.”

“Then,” Tessa scowled. “You’d be wrong. Mrs. Wolfe wouldn’t have it. He talked to me—a few years back—Martin told me he wanted to invite me. Thought I deserved a fun night out and he was sure I’d get a kick out the big brouhaha and all. But, Ryenne Wolfe would not tolerate her husband inviting the hired help to the one and only social event she was allowed to throw each year. I wasn’t a member of the *elite*. I’m the hired help.”

“Sounds like that pissed you off,” Paige observed. *But, if that was the case, wouldn’t she poison the misses, not her boss?*

“Not really,” Tessa sighed. “Sure, it would have been cool to go — once. You know, just for kicks to see what the big deal was. And, if I’d let on how much I wanted to see it, Martin would have invited me despite his wife and her snobbish objections. I guess that’s why I didn’t let on. I pretended like I wasn’t interested. They had enough problems as it was, I didn’t want to cause more.”

Toxic Indulgence

“What kind of problems?” Gage asked.

“You think Ryenne did this?” Tessa focused on Paige then the large cop sitting next to her. *Where did she know that guy from?* “Right, the spouse is always a suspect. And, Ryenne might be a good one — if she didn’t have to get her hands dirty. I just can’t see that woman killing her husband. The whole thing would be beneath her. She has people.”

Paige smiled, realizing her initial instinct was correct. The woman Tessa was describing matched the woman Paige had encountered in the multi-million-dollar jet. “Do you have any idea who might have done this, Tessa?”

Tessa hesitated then shook her head. “Not really.”

“Someone who felt slighted or wronged by Martin?” Gage pressed. “Someone he had a falling out with?”

“I don’t think so,” Tessa lowered her eyes to stare at her hands.

“There’s someone,” Paige said softly. “Someone you don’t want to mention. Is it a business colleague, or something more personal?”

Tessa let out a deep sigh. “I guess since he’s dead... well, I guess it’s okay. Martin met someone. He was seeing another woman.”

“He was having an affair?” Paige asked. That could give them another suspect. Or, give the wife motive. “Do you know the name of his mistress?”

“That’s a polite word for his bimbo on the side,” Tessa focused on Paige. “I don’t know her name. I only saw her once. We were out of town on a big account. Martin took me along because he had several meetings scheduled and he needed me to organize the presentations. You know, keep them in order so he didn’t give the wrong pitch to one of the groups. I helped him put it together, so I was the obvious choice.”

“Did you accompany him out of town frequently?” Paige asked.

“No,” Tessa settled back and relaxed a little. “Just now and then. He liked to go alone. Liked the time away. If you’ve met his wife, you can probably understand why. I think he just needed a few days now and again to escape the nagging. Anyway, we had just completed a big presentation in Italy and I went to my room to rest. Then, I decided I was hungry and went down to the in-house restaurant to grab a salad. Martin was having a romantic dinner with a blonde. He didn’t see me, and I never told him I saw him. But, after that, he’d shut the door while he was on the phone sometimes. Other days, he’d leave the office early. Before Italy, he never left early. Usually, he stayed late. He had a side-piece, but I think I’m the only one that knew about it.”

Toxic Indulgence

“Is it possible his wife found out? Gage asked.

“I don’t know how,” Tessa shrugged. “She never came to the office, so she wouldn’t know he left sometimes. She never went on business trips with him. She rarely called here, just now and then when she needed something. And, if he was out, she wouldn’t know he was with his... mistress.” Tessa grinned.

“Can you describe this woman?” Paige asked. “Was she tall, short, thin, curvy, sophisticated or sexier and more seductive?”

“I’d say seductive,” Tessa tried to remember as much as she could about the woman. “The night I saw her, at dinner, she was wearing a low-cut red dress with high-heels. You know those sexy shoes that men love for some reason. They were sitting down, eating, so I don’t know how tall she was. But, she was definitely flirting, coming on strong and he was eating it up.”

“Anything else stick out?” Paige asked.

“Maybe,” Tessa considered. “She came across as high-maintenance. I’m not sure why, but maybe the polished fake nails. Her hair looked like she went to the salon, a lot. And she was wearing all this gaudy jewelry, fake I think. Although, I wouldn’t know if it was real.”

“So, she spent money on herself?” Paige thought she understood.

“Was she Italian?” Gage asked. “Did you ever hear her speak?”

“Once,” Tessa admitted. “She was American. I was turning to leave, and I heard her fake surprise when she talked a little too loud.”

“Did you understand what she was saying?” Paige pushed.

“Yeah,” Tessa rolled her eyes. “She was all flirty and over-exaggerated. She said, ‘Oh, Martin,’ in that high-pitched, fake embarrassed way women do. She was definitely American.”

“Do you think she was there for him?” Gage asked.

Tessa shrugged. “I have no idea. Like I said, it was a secret affair. Martin didn’t even know I knew, so we never talked about it. She could have met him there, or she could have flown in just to see him. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I have one last question,” Paige was sure they wouldn’t get any more from this woman. “Do you know if she had a tattoo?”

“I don’t...” Tessa brightened. “Wait, she did have something. Part of it was showing when she turned. A colorful... something, on the left, right by her inside shoulder. I only saw a flash before she turned back.”

Toxic Indulgence

“Okay,” Paige handed Tessa her card. “If you can think of anything else, please don’t hesitate to call.”

It was nearly eight o’clock at night when the two deputies finally hit the highway, headed back toward Manti. Once the interviews were complete, they were both starving and decided to grab dinner before heading home.

“Now what?” Gage finally asked.

“I’m going to meet up with Tolman in the morning,” Paige decided. “I need a warrant for Martin Wolfe’s financials. Both, his company expenditures and his private accounts.”

“That’s going to take a lot of time to go through,” Gage warned. “Think about what you buy in a month and then times that by about a million. Martin Wolfe was loaded. Can you imagine how many purchases he’d make in a year?”

“I don’t need to go back a year,” Paige disagreed. “Not at first. Trust me, this is my strong point. I did it for years for the FBI. Spreadsheets, ledgers, they’re my friend.”

“Don’t expect me to help with that,” Gage warned. “I’m pretty sure I’m allergic.”

Paige stepped through the front door and was surprised to see Dax waiting. “Is something wrong?”

“Vato,” Dax informed her. “Nathan got him moved, out from under Hastings. But, Sean called. He found evidence that Reynolds paid Hastings sixty-five thousand dollars. He’s formulating a plan to take Vato out while he’s stuck in Iraq and I’m not sure we can stop it.”

“What did Nathan say?” Paige settled onto the couch next to Dax. “Can he help?”

“He thinks it’s nothing to worry about,” Dax said in frustration. “He’s sending Solo over to extract him. So, he thinks the problem is already solved.”

“But, you don’t?”

“I don’t,” Dax sighed. “I know you trust Porter, but I know he’s wrong about this. It took too long to make arrangements for Vato to return to the states. Why? Someone is getting in the way. He only transferred Vato this morning. Again, why? Who keeps putting up roadblocks? Someone who knows Solo is headed in and they want to take Vato out before that happens.”

“Did you tell all of this to Nathan?” Paige asked, conflicted.

Toxic Indulgence

“I tried, but he said I’m just getting jumpy,” Dax grumbled. “Because of what has already happened. He’s sure the plan is going to work and Vato will be back here in no time.”

“What can we do?”

“Something you’re not going to like,” Dax warned.

“Tell me what you have planned,” Paige said, resigned.

“I don’t have a plan,” Dax started. “Not yet. It’s more of an idea that is still formulating. I need to go directly to the source. I need to corner Reynolds and force him to give me the answers I need.”

“Wow,” Paige said in shock. “I don’t even know where to start with that.”

“Just hear me out,” Dax requested. “There was good news today. Sean arrested a man named Duffy that Reynolds hired to kill Carman’s cop. He paid a couple of his buddies to help him. All three of them are in custody and they couldn’t throw Reynolds under the bus fast enough.”

“That is good news,” Paige smiled. “I knew once Nathan got Sean involved, he’d break the case. I’ve never met a better investigator than Sean Wilkens. Not that the locals weren’t devoted. But, Sean has access to systems and information they don’t have. Both as an FBI Agent and as part of Nathan’s committee. And, he tied the killers to Reynolds?”

“Yeah,” Dax nodded. “Follow the money. Sean had access to Reynolds financials. He found a payment of fifty thousand to this Duffy guy. Then, he tracked those funds and Duffy withdrew part of it the next day. Sean figured this Duffy guy paid off his buddies. Sounds like he was right.”

“Can they tie Reynolds in with the murder?”

“Sean said the FBI got involved, took over the case because of all the jurisdictions as well as Reynolds illegal shipping. He’s going down, soon.”

“Okay,” Paige was trying to tie everything together. “And, you want to use that?”

“I do,” Dax said soberly. “Now that Sean finished up the homicide case, he’s going to be working with the task force that is going after Reynolds. He said they’re moving fast. They want to swoop in, arrest him and seize everything. I need to get to him first.”

Paige’s mind was racing. If the feds were going after Reynolds anyway, maybe this would work. “I’ll need to talk to Sean, convince him to call me before he talks to Nathan. One thing that works in our favor, the feds love to plan. They’ll develop the plan, then take a day or two to

Toxic Indulgence

hash it out, walk it through a few times, and get the proper approval. The bureaucratic red tape will cause an even longer delay.”

“Then, you’re in?” Dax asked in surprise. “I thought you’d argue with me on this.”

“I’m conflicted,” Paige admitted. “If Nathan says Vato is safe, I want to believe Vato is safe. But the money, the roadblocks... you also have a point. Let’s make sure.”

Dax smiled. “Sounds like you want to accompany me. I have to warn you, I plan to break into his house and... compel him to talk. You probably shouldn’t be there.”

“We’ll see,” Paige shrugged. “I’m in the middle of a murder investigation of my own. I might not be available to go with you, but I’d like to help you come up with a plan. I know you well enough by now to know, the guys will be there. Even if they’re on the outside, they’ll have our back. Let’s hash this out tonight and we can decide who goes when the time comes.”

Dax just stared at Paige for several seconds.

“What?”

“You... well, after last time I just thought...”

“I’ve been enlightened,” Paige shrugged. “I can’t do everything, and I trust you. I guess having you head out to rescue Zeus without me, helped to give me perspective. Now, can we talk about something else?”

“Sure,” Dax sobered at her tone.

“This case is going to bring in the national media,” Paige said cautiously.

“What you really mean is this case will bring Piper back into our lives,” Dax corrected. “I realized that as soon as I saw the news. Don’t worry about Piper. She won’t get in your way.”

“I’m more worried about her getting in your way,” Paige said honestly. “Especially with all of this going on. Nothing you guys are doing on that committee can raise the attention of a reporter like Piper.”

“We’ll be careful,” Dax promised. “Did you eat?”

“That was quite a subject change,” Paige grinned.

“You’ve had a long day,” Dax shrugged. “We can talk about business tomorrow. Right now I want to take care of my girl.”

“I ate, but I am beat,” Paige stood and held out a hand. “Let’s follow up tomorrow. I need sleep.”

Toxic Indulgence

Two days later, Paige was still scouring through financial data. Her eyes hurt, and the numbers were starting to blur together. She needed a break. “Anyone want lunch? My treat.”

Jericho materialized in his doorway. “If you’re willing to pick up, I’ll buy. Go to Dirk’s. Margie, call in an order ahead of time. We could all use a break. I’m also going to call Tolman and ask if Stan can take some of these and work on them from his desk.

Less than twenty minutes later Paige returned with an armload of food. When she stepped into the office, she realized it was empty. Where did everyone go? “That’s okay,” she called out. “I got it. I don’t need any help.”

Gage stepped from the conference room, then rushed over and took the large box Paige was carrying. He turned and disappeared into the conference room again.

“I thought you were allergic to spreadsheets,” Paige said the moment she stepped into the doorway.

“I am,” Gage said as he took the last lunch container out of the box. “But Dirk’s ribs are like an antihistamine. Once I dump some of this amazing sauce into the mix, I’m good.”

“That’s good to hear,” Jericho snagged a large stack of papers. “It means you can help.” He dropped the stack in front of Gage. “We’ve got a long night ahead of us. There’s something in here, we just need to find it.”

Hawk moved to the door and swung it open. He forced his face to remain neutral when he spotted Piper Weber standing on the front porch.

“Oh,” she said in surprise. “I was looking for...”

“Yes?” Hawk motioned for her to continue. “Please, finish that sentence.”

“What are you doing here?” Piper demanded. This was a complication she didn’t need.

“Funny,” Thor said in the background. “I was about to ask you the same question.”

“I’ll come back,” Piper turned to leave.

“And, we’ll still be here,” Zeus said from behind her. “Might as well take care of this once and for all. Go on in, have a seat.”

Toxic Indulgence

Piper wasn't scared of these guys, not really. She hesitated, weighing her options. Might as well get this over with now. They were clearly here to erect a barrier between her and Dax. She'd let them think they succeeded. "Fine," she pushed past Hawk and settled onto one of the living room chairs. "What do you want?"

"You know what we want," Thor gave her his most menacing stare. "I explained it to you a few years back, in that deserted alley. I was under the impression you got the message. Apparently, I was mistaken."

"I got the message," Piper flipped her hair behind her shoulder in an attempt to appear unfazed. "I just chose to ignore it."

"You always did like to do things the hard way," Zeus settled into one of the other chairs. "But, you see, it wasn't an empty threat. And now, with the bump in your career, you have more to lose."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's actually a promise," Hawk settled onto the couch. "The warning is the same. Unfortunately for you, I'm sure we could find the right reporter to share our story with. With everyone gathered here to report on Martin Wolfe's death, we have plenty to choose from."

"I like Trinity Snow," Jeeves put in. "She's friendlier than the others."

"You are seriously threatening me with Trinity?" Piper brushed that off as ridiculous. "I'd smash her to pieces without even trying."

"You could try," Zeus handed Hawk the file Carmen had compiled. She'd been able to get even more dirt on America's not so sweet, sweetheart.

"What is that?" Piper asked, a little worried.

"Evidence," Hawk flipped open the file. "You see, we did our homework. It's what we do." He passed her a photo and waited for her to respond.

"So, I go to the bank," Piper tried to hand it back to Hawk.

"You go ahead and keep that," Hawk smiled. "It's a copy."

"What would I want that for?"

"Because it's a photo of you at the bank, cleaning out Dax Hamilton's bank account just before you left town, in his car," Hawk provided.

"You could never prove that," Piper was starting to get worried.

Toxic Indulgence

“This here,” Hawk picked up another sheet of paper. “It’s a sworn affidavit from the bank manager verifying the transaction. This one, it’s the bank teller testifying to the same thing.”

“Who cares?” Piper’s voice had gone up an octave. Clearly, she cared.

“I think America might,” Hawk said casually. “I mean, you’ve deemed yourself America’s Sweetheart. I wonder how they would feel if they knew while Dax was off fighting for his country, risking his life to protect all of us back here in the states, you were stealing his car and all his money. Dax is a national hero, and you wiped him out. I think a good number of your fans just might take exception to that.”

“And, I think Trinity just might gain the upper hand if she had all of that…” Jeeves pointed to the file. “People seem to love video these days, pictures, bank statements, affidavits, and well…us.”

“Yeah,” Zeus leaned back. “I know I’m willing to sit down with a pretty little up-and-coming reporter and share what I know, how about you guys?”

“Stop it,” Piper jumped to her feet. “I get it. You want me to leave Dax alone. I’ll do that. But first, I need to speak to him. I need to warn him.”

“About?” Hawk said, unconvinced.

“His neighbor,” Piper said in resignation. She wasn’t going to get to Dax unless she could satisfy his men. “She’s a fraud. It’s the reason I’m here. Everyone else is reporting on the death of Martin Wolfe. I’m doing a story on the cop investigating Martin Wolfe. Did you guys know she messed up a case so severely a murderer went free? It’s the reason she left the FBI. She was about to get fired. She acted so quickly, left Washington and fled out here so fast the local Sheriff didn’t have the information when he decided to hire her. A few weeks later and she’d be unemployed right now. There are rumors she took a bribe, let the killer go on purpose. Paige Carter is a dirty cop and Dax needs to know what a fraud she is.”

The men all exchanged glances, what in the world was this woman up to?

“I’d be careful if I were you,” Dax said from the kitchen doorway. Everyone looked at him in surprise. When had he come in? “Paige isn’t dirty, but I’d bet the farm the person who told you that lie is not only dirty, but he’ll be in a cage soon.”

“Dax,” Piper stood. “I’m not here to cause trouble. I just thought you should know. I hope you haven’t gotten involved with that woman.”

“Why Paige?” Ken asked the group. “I mean, of all of us she’s the lowest threat at the moment.”

Hawk shot him a warning glare.

Toxic Indulgence

“What does that mean?” Piper demanded.

“It means,” Dax made his way across the room and settled into his lounge chair. He hated the fact he still had a slight limp. “You’re playing a dangerous game with some very dangerous people. And, if you air that crap they peddled, you just might go down with them.”

“What happened to you?”

“I fell,” Dax said in dismissal.

“From what?” Piper said, clearly not believing the explanation. “The roof?”

“Close,” Dax just stared at her for several seconds. “But I can see you won’t let this go. Who is your source, Piper?”

“You know I’d never tell you that.”

“And, so does he,” Hawk realized.

“Doesn’t matter,” Dax shrugged. “Consider yourself warned.”

“I won’t back off a story just to save your girlfriend,” Piper was annoyed. Just by his reaction, she realized Dax was involved with the cop. What could he possibly see in Paige Carter? How was it possible he would choose a local cop over her?

“Let me explain how this is going to go down,” Dax informed her. “You, being the stubborn, illogical woman that you are, can run that story. You can go on air and claim that Paige is dirty, that she let a killer go free. Then, the FBI will come out and tell the world the story is incorrect. This will prompt you to dig deeper where you will ultimately learn that your source was using you and the entire thing was a fabrication. By this time, you will be so deep in your story that you will have to dig in your heels, convince the network there is a story there and you’ll push yourself further out on a limb. That’s when I’ll step in. I won’t take this to Trinity Snow. I’ll go to Monica Lake.”

“You hate me that much?” Piper asked softly. Dax knew the history between her and Monica. Her biggest nemesis would jump on the story without hesitation.

“I don’t hate you,” Dax disagreed. “I love Paige. I’ll do whatever it takes to set the record straight. I won’t let you or your anonymous source harm her in any way. And, the evidence these guys have on what you did to me, we’ll use that... in the beginning. Then, I’ll turn over everything I have regarding Frank Thomas.”

“I told you that in confidence,” Piper glared at Dax. He had her, if anyone knew about Frank, her career would be over.

Toxic Indulgence

Dax shrugged. “Go after Paige and everything’s on the table. But, if I were you, I’d start by looking into your source. You just might find the entire thing was fabricated to get Paige out of the way.”

“Why?” Piper asked. “Why would someone want to make up a story like that about a former FBI agent that is now a local cop in a small town?”

“I can’t answer that,” Dax answered.

“You won’t answer that,” Piper corrected.

Dax remained silent, so did the rest of the men.

“Is there anyone I can talk to,” Piper asked. “To verify your story that this was all made up?”

“Sure,” Dax smiled. “Start with General Nathan Porter, retired.”

“Wasn’t that her mentor?” Piper asked. “Surely, he’ll defend and block the instant he knows.”

Hawk laughed. “He’s going to know the instant you leave this house. Be aggressive, Piper. Don’t take no for an answer. You’re a reporter... find the real story.”

Piper turned and walked to the front door. “I have a feeling all of you are setting me up. If I’m right, don’t think a little bad publicity is going to stop me from bringing that woman down. And, the rest of you along with her.”

“Ironic,” Dax contemplated. “That’s exactly the warning I have for you. Run the story, do the bidding of a criminal that is also a traitor to his country, and you just might find your own name and reputation smeared in the process. That’s not a threat, it’s a promise.”

“If Nathan Porter gets involved, you’ll be lucky to escape jail,” Hawk added.

“The truth will come out,” Piper promised before she flung open the door. “And, I’m the one that’s going to find it.”

The group waited several minutes before anyone spoke.

“I’d still like to know, why Paige?” Ken asked. “She’s knee-deep in Wolfe’s murder. She’s not a threat. Why go after her now?”

“Paige is always a threat,” Dax said thoughtfully. “She doesn’t think like we do. At first, I thought Reynolds was behind this. But now, I think it’s his partner. Another military man that doesn’t understand Paige, the way she thinks, or what her next move will be. He can’t outsmart her, can’t get ahead of her analytical mind. He’s a military man. Sean pegged that one. And, he

Toxic Indulgence

needs Paige out of the way. The Martin Wolfe murder has her busy, but not out. I still run things by her at night. This story, it would redirect her attention, keep her busy while they make their next move. And, he miscalculated. He thought feeding it to Piper would create a wedge between me and Paige.”

“Vato?” Hawk asked.

“I think so,” Dax sighed. “We need to finalize the plan. I get the feeling the feds are moving in and the partner may know that. We need Intel. Ken were you able to get the blueprints to all of the Reynolds properties?”

“Yeah,” Ken punched some buttons on his tablet and handed it over to Dax. “I think that is the most likely target. It’s a mountain cabin... resort really. He goes there when he gets stressed.”

“Where is it?” Zeus moved in to get a better look.

“Arizona,” Ken said in answer. “It’s near Humphreys Peak just outside of Flagstaff.”

“Makes sense,” Zeus decided. “With his business out there, he’d need a place to relax nearby.”

“Get that to Sean,” Dax told Ken.

“But...” Jeeves frowned.

“Sean is working with us on this,” Dax assured them. “He’s part of the task force created to bring Reynolds in but we’re on the same team. He’s the one that told me they’re looking for him. They already served a warrant on Reynolds apartment in Washington. That’s what I came over to tell you when I spotted Piper. Cole Reynolds is now a wanted man on the run. I think you’re right — if he’s not at that cabin, he’s on his way there. We need the feds to bring him in. I just want to have a little chat with the guy before they do.”

“Will Sean give us enough warning?” Hawk didn’t like sharing Intel with the feds. They never played well with others.

“He will,” Dax assured them. “They’ll need to get approval and another warrant for the cabin. It’s going to take time. Enough time that we can head out and beat them there. I’ll go in, get what we need and make sure he’s detained. That will give Sean time to find me and take custody of the prisoner while we move on to deal with whatever I get from Reynolds.”

“That means bringing Porter in on the plan,” Hawk mumbled. “What if he shuts us down?”

Toxic Indulgence

“Porter is already in on the plan,” Dax informed them. “He’s on board, as long as we get the timing right. He won’t shut it down. He thinks it’s overkill and unnecessary, but he’ll have our back.”

“Then let’s get started,” Hawk pulled out a map and spread it on the coffee table in front of them. “We have a mission to plan.”

“I think I have something,” Paige sat back to consider.

“What?” Jericho straightened in his chair.

“Ryenne Wolfe religiously went to The Spa at Zermatt every week,” Paige began. “I’ve gone back an entire year, and she had an expensive spa treatment every single Wednesday.”

“Why is that significant?” Margie asked.

“Because three weeks ago, they stopped. No more charges and she doesn’t have a charge at a different resort,” Paige considered. “I don’t know what it means, but I think someone should check it out.”

“Where is it?” Jericho asked.

“Looks like somewhere in Midway,” Paige flipped through her file and settled on another document. “And, I believe she took the company chopper. Fuel receipts show a regular trip on each Wednesday. Midway’s what? A two-hour drive. So, she talked husband dearest into loaning her the helicopter.”

“From the picture we’re getting,” Gage put in. “He would have let her use it. He probably reimbursed the company out of his own funds. Or, he would have if his accountant suggested it.”

Paige flipped through more pages. “He did,” she smiled at Gage. “Good catch. Looks like he wrote a check to his own company each quarter just before the accountant submitted the company taxes.”

“I’ll send Havilland,” Jericho decided. “Dean’s busy, but Duncan will get there nearly as quickly, and he’ll get the answers we need. Won’t be as fast as chopper ride, but I doubt it’s going to take two hours.”

“You didn’t want to go?” Gage whispered so only Paige could hear.

Toxic Indulgence

“No,” Paige gave him a subtle shake of her head. “There’s something I need to do. In fact, I need an hour or so. Can you let Jericho know I’ll be back?”

“Okay,” Gage frowned. “Anything you need help with?”

“No,” Paige stood and pulled out her phone. “But, Nathan’s been calling for the last forty minutes. I need to find out why.”

“Go,” Gage motioned to the door. “I’ll handle things here. It could be important.”

“Where’s she going?” Jericho asked as soon as he disconnected the call.

“Something urgent from Porter,” Gage informed him. “She said she needs an hour.”

Jericho just nodded and got back to work. He was pretty sure he’d discovered a pattern in Martin’s spending as well.

The instant Paige stepped into the house, she knew something was up. All the men were gathered in Dax’s living room, engaged in serious conversation. The conversation stopped abruptly, and the room went eerily silent the moment they saw her. “Porter called.”

“Did he fill you in?” Dax wondered.

“Apparently, not completely.”

Dax took a minute to explain the situation to Paige as well as the plan. The window was short, so they’d have to head out tonight. The Feds were gearing up for a hit the following evening. “I have to go tonight,” Dax explained. “We need time to get to the target and scout it before the feds swam in and force us to leave.”

“I understand,” Paige studied Dax. “What did you leave out? There’s something you’re not telling me.”

Dax sighed, then filled her in on the visit from Piper.

Paige glanced at Hawk then back to Dax. “Reynolds? Was he trying to keep me occupied while they went after Vato? That doesn’t make sense, I’m already occupied.”

“I don’t think it was Reynolds. I think Cole is on the run and not communicating with anyone,” Dax disagreed. “I think it’s his partner. Sean is sure the guy is in the military and that makes sense to me. He has to have rank and probably works out of the Pentagon. He’s blocking

Toxic Indulgence

Nathan's attempts to remove Vato, and he's put something in motion, or he will soon. He needs to take Vato out and he needs you out of the way to do it. Or, Porter, or both."

"If you were in trouble," Zeus provided. "Nathan would be distracted. He'd focus on saving your reputation. If they were quick and careful, they might slip a plan through that would eliminate Vato for good."

"And," Paige said in understanding. "He used Piper Weber to create a wedge between you and me." She was watching Dax.

"I think so," Dax agreed. "He can't read you, doesn't understand the way you think. He needs you completely out of the picture for this to work. I'm not sure why, but there has to be a reason. The timing isn't coincidental."

"Let me think on it," Paige decided. "I don't know why either, but you're right... there has to be a reason. Now, I have an hour, what do you need before you go?"

Dax ran the plan through for her, twice. Paige stopped him several times to offer suggestions and to give insight into the FBI. By the time the hour was up, the group had a better understanding of how the feds would run their op, how long of a delay they could expect before the Calvary rushed in with the warrant, and a perfect way to get a signal to Sean. He would need to know where in the house Dax had cornered their intended target. It was going to be Nathan that relayed that Intel. Once the task force entered the residence, Sean would hook up with Dax, relieve him of their prisoner and notify the team he had apprehend Cole Reynolds.

"Alright," Paige stood. "I need to get back. I'm sure you guys will take off before I get home, so just be careful."

"I'll call you once we arrive," Dax promised. "Now, I'll walk you out."

Once they were on the porch, Dax pulled Paige into his arms. "Are you really okay with the plan?"

"I am," Paige wrapped her arms around his neck. "On one condition."

"What's that?"

"I want you to make that man pay dearly for his actions," Paige locked eyes with Dax. "I want you to scare him. I want you to terrify and intimidate that man so severely, he wets his pants. And, if you can justify it to Nathan, throat punch that traitorous SOB at least one time for me."

"And here I thought you were going to tell me to restrain myself," Dax laughed. "I was sure I was going to get the lecture on process and letting the legal system work. How I shouldn't

Toxic Indulgence

let my emotions get the better of me. Instead, I got a She-Devil out for revenge. I'm not exactly sure how to take that."

"Then just do as I ask and we'll both be happy," she leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss. "I have to get back to work. We're making progress and I can't leave my team hanging much longer."

"You know who did it?"

"I know the wife was involved, but I think maybe she had help from the mistress," Paige confided. "I can't prove it yet, but the description matches. The girlfriend was the one that delivered the poison."

"Why would they work together?" Dax couldn't follow her logic this time. "Wouldn't they hate each other?"

"Probably," Paige shrugged. "Which is why I think they will roll on each other the instant I have enough to arrest them both. But, the why of it? I still haven't figured that out yet."

"You will," Dax assured her. He pulled her in for a longer, deeper kiss. "I have faith in you. Don't worry about us, we've got this."

"I'm still baffled by the fake report they gave Piper. The only reason she ran with it was because she hates me. From before. And, because you turned her down for me."

"I did," Dax ran a hand down her hair. "And, I'd do it all again. Piper is a sore loser, and that's probably part of it. She also wants to get back at me for rejecting her. And, she's always chasing that next great story. The one that will put her in the big league. I'm sure this sounded great professionally and it gave her a chance to get back at both of us on a personal level. Don't worry about Piper. The instant she contacts Porter, he'll shut it down. I have no doubt, every door she knocks on will be locked up airtight. Go catch a killer and forget Piper Weber. Because that's exactly what I plan to do."

"Be careful," Paige took a step back. "I love you. See you when you get back."

"Paige?" Dax said softly. He waited until she stopped and turned back to face him. "I love you, too."

Paige was still smiling as she pulled out of her driveway and headed back to the office. When she pulled into the lot, she took a minute to refocus on the case. She couldn't think about Dax or his mission. She couldn't think of the risk to Dax, his team or Sean. She had work to do. She had a killer to catch... or, two. It took longer than it should have, but she was finally back on track by the time she stepped into the conference room.

"Trouble?" Jericho asked.

Toxic Indulgence

“I hope not,” Paige settled back into her chair. “I’ll fill you in later. I think the worst of it has been diverted but just in case, I’ll speak with you in private, later.”

“Fair enough,” Jericho pushed several sheets over to Paige. “I’ve been working on Martin’s expenditures. I discovered a pattern. I believe he was meeting with his girlfriend nearly every other week on Thursday afternoon.”

“Only every other week?” Paige asked skimming through the documents. “I expected it to be more.”

Jericho started to respond but stopped to answer his ringing phone. “Walters.”

“Hey, boss,” Havilland said in greeting. “I think I have something for you.”

“Let me put you on speaker,” Jericho punched the button then set his phone on the table. “Go ahead.”

“I got lucky,” Havilland explained. “I made it just in time to catch the manager before she left for the day.”

“You’re already in Midway?” Paige asked in surprise.

“Was I supposed to go to Midway?” Havilland said sarcastically.

“What did you find,” Jericho said impatiently.

“Right,” Duncan cleared his throat. “Wendy, that’s the manager, said there was an incident. Ryenne was a regular, but she wanted special treatment and that upset the other guests.”

“What kind of special treatment?” Paige asked.

“That’s the interesting part,” Duncan continued. “Ryenne insisted on having private time in the sauna. She locked the door and wouldn’t let anyone else in, except one Skyller Franks. Ryenne ordered two other women out of the area when they tried to join the duo for a steam session. Ryenne became indignant, said the two of them needed to talk business in private and the women would have to come back later. Well, one of the women was an Eccles. She complained to Wendy, who in turn spoke to Ryenne Wolfe. Ryenne tried to play that ‘do you know who I am’ bit, but Wendy wouldn’t budge. She was more worried about losing the other customers. Ryenne and Ms. Franks left together, both of them visibly angry, and neither one has returned.”

“As in Rice-Eccles Stadium, Eccles?” Jericho asked.

“Yep,” Havilland smiled. “Looks like Ryenne Wolfe took on the wrong woman. I think the other lady was related to John Huntsman somehow. Anyway, the spa didn’t want to lose two of their best customers to accommodate Ryenne Wolfe.”

Toxic Indulgence

“Did they know anything about this Skyllar Franks?” Paige asked. She glanced at Margie, who had retrieved her laptop and was frantically typing on the keyboard.

“No,” Havilland sighed. “Not really. I have the manager scanning through video to see if they still have an image of the woman. She is a blonde, and she’s the right height and build. Wendy thought she was about five-eight, maybe one fifty.”

Paige smiled. “There’s our link.”

“But why would the two of them hook up?” Gage still didn’t understand that part. “They should hate each other. They were both after the same man.”

“No idea,” Duncan said, also perplexed. “Wendy’s waving at me. Maybe she found something. I’ll let you know if I get anything else.”

“Thanks, Duncan,” Jericho answered. “Good work and drive safe on the way back. There’s no reason to rush the return trip.”

“Killjoy,” Duncan said before disconnecting.

“I think I found something,” Margie said once Jericho hung up. “Skyllar Franks has a Utah driver’s license.”

“You got a photo?” Paige moved to stand behind Margie. “Bingo, blonde hair, five-eight, one-fifty and not a hair out of place.”

“Where does she live?” Jericho asked as he studied the photo Margie had put on the big screen.

“Looks like,” Margie scrolled further down the screen. “Park City.”

“See what you can find on Ms. Franks,” Jericho ordered. “Look in court records as well. I doubt someone that polished will have a criminal record, but she may have been sued, or maybe she’s divorced.”

“I’m going to check social media,” Paige decided. “People put everything on there these days. We might hit the jackpot.” Paige left the conference room to retrieve her own laptop. Once she returned, it only took a few minutes to locate Skyllar Franks on Facebook. “I think I found her.”

“Anything useful?” Gage asked, moving closer so he could see the screen.

Paige smiled. “I’d say that’s pretty useful.”

“What did you find?” Jericho demanded.

Toxic Indulgence

“A tattoo,” Gage settled back, grinning. “A very colorful tattoo. One that has a large heart in the center and blue, purple and green wings, right where Shannon said it was.”

“I want to bring her in,” Paige focused on Jericho. “Can we convince Tolman we have enough to bring her in for an interrogation?”

“We don’t need his approval,” Jericho decided. “Pick her up. Once you get a confession, we can book her and let James do the rest.”

“That means a trip to Park City,” Paige warned.

“I’ll call Havilland and divert him,” Jericho decided. “He’s right there and he can enlist the help of the locals to bring her in.” He stood and left the room. “Paige,” he called over his shoulder. “Be in my office in five.”

Paige glanced around the table, not sure what to say.

“We know you can’t talk about it,” Gage finally said. “Just let us know if you need any help.”

“It’s fine,” she assured them. “Just another mission involving Nathan the band of militants. Dax and the guys already left town.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” Margie assured her. Any mission Dax went on these days tended to be dangerous.

“I need to talk to Jericho,” Paige stood and escaped. She stepped into her boss’s office and settled into one of his chairs.

Jericho disconnected and focused on Paige. “Duncan’s on his way to the residence. He’ll notify me when he has Skyllar Franks in custody.”

“Will he bring her back here?”

“Yes,” Jericho settled into his chair. “Now, what are the general and his merry men up to this time?”

“I can’t discuss their mission, not until it’s over,” Paige evaded. “But, that’s not what I needed to talk to you about.” She proceeded to explain the situation with Piper Weber and her threat to go public.

“They must really want you out of the picture,” Jericho decided. “The entire story is a blatant lie. At least with me, they spun the truth into a lie. With you, they fabricated the entire story. How did they think they’d get away with that?”

Toxic Indulgence

“I don’t know,” Paige said in frustration. “I’m not really concerned with that. The only question I’ve been asking myself is why? I’ve been busy with this Martin Wolfe thing. Why now?”

“That is one question,” Jericho shifted. “But I think the more pressing question is what will Piper Weber do now?”

“She’s unpredictable, for sure,” Paige agreed. “I have no idea. She’s already called Nathan. That’s the reason he was trying to reach me. He thought I already knew about the mission that took Dax and the rest out of town. He wanted to talk to me about this nonsense with Piper. He’s already started erecting barriers. I doubt there is anyone in Washington that will even take a meeting with her. But, what if he’s playing right into their hands? What if they want him distracted while they carry out some nefarious scheme? I don’t want to be the reason General Porter is distracted.”

Jericho laughed. “There’s nothing you can do about that, Paige. Nathan sees you as a sort of adopted daughter. He’s going to do everything in his power to protect you. But, that doesn’t mean he’s dropping the ball on this Op the boys went on. General Porter is capable of handling more than one crisis at a time. If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t be in the position he’s in right now. And, he wouldn’t have the power or the respect he is afforded by everyone around him... including the President of the United States. Have a little faith. Everything is going to be fine.”

“I guess I’ve done all I can do,” Paige decided. “If Piper Weber corners you, at least you’ll be prepared. Other than that, it’s out of my control.”

“It’s going to take Havilland at least a couple hours to get back,” Jericho decided. “Go home for the evening. We can wait to interview Ms. Franks until morning. In fact, I think I’ll call Duncan and tell him to watch our suspect this evening but wait until morning to apprehend her. We’ll plan for a nine o’clock interview. I’ll tag you if anything changes.”

“See you in the morning,” Paige slowly left the office and headed home.

Paige was tired and grumpy. She was also worried about Dax. So many things could go wrong on this mission. And she knew, if he didn’t get out in time, the Feds would pick him up and ask questions later. Nathan would eventually get him out of trouble with the Bureau but that would take time. Time, they didn’t have because Vato was in trouble. She stepped into the office and spotted Duncan Havilland. “You get her?”

“Yeah,” Duncan stood. “She’s in the interrogation room. Good luck with that one. She’s a real piece of work. And, I’m starting to think she could be a black widow.”

Toxic Indulgence

“Black widow or preying mantis?” Paige asked.

“Yours is better,” Havi decided. “She would definitely eat her lover if she could.”

“Sounds like she made quite the impression,” Paige dropped her bag onto the desk. “Have you talked to Jericho?”

“He should be here any minute,” Havi said. “He wants you to wait. Apparently, the two of you will be double-timing the fair Miss Franks.”

Paige frowned. It wasn't that she objected to Jericho's participation. She respected the man and his methods. It was just this case, his constant involvement was making her feel like he thought she was incompetent. That thought made her foul mood even worse.

“Stop scowling,” Jericho said in greeting. “It's not about you. Let's get this over with.”

Paige followed her boss into the interrogation room and got her first look at Miss Skyller Franks. She waited several seconds to see if Jericho was going to start the interview. When he didn't, she took the lead. “This interview will be recorded.” Paige moved to the wall and started the camera. She rattled off the date, the case number and identified the participants for the record. “Miss Franks,” Paige focused on the woman who now looked bored. Maybe she had done this before. “It is my understanding that you were read your Miranda Rights prior to being transported. I'd like to remind you of those rights for the record.” Paige read the Miranda Warning verbatim. “Do you understand these rights and obligations?”

“Sure,” Skyller shrugged.

“And are you willing to speak to us today without an attorney present?”

“I'll let you know,” Skyller brushed at her nails.

“I need to know now,” Paige pressed.

“I'll talk to you now,” Skyller sighed. “I'll let you know later if I change my mind.”

“Great,” Paige settled back against the chair. “Can you tell me how you first met Ryenne Wolfe?”

“Who?” Skyller pretended she didn't recognize the name.

Paige pulled out a photo Haviland had obtained. It was a still shot of Ryenne Wolfe and Skyller leaving the spa. She set it on the table and pointed at Ryenne. “This woman, Ryenne Wolfe.”

“Oh,” Skyller shrugged. “That day, at the spa. We were in the sauna together. Nice lady.”

Toxic Indulgence

Paige smiled. "It seems you're the only one that thinks so."

Skyllar just glared but didn't take the bait.

Paige pulled out a picture of Martin Wolfe. "And how do you know this man?"

Skyllar glanced at the photo and smirked. "I don't believe I've ever met him."

Paige pulled out another photo and glanced at Jericho.

"I got that from hotel security," Jericho advised. "Looks like you've met to me."

"Oh," Skyller shrugged. "I think that was the nice man I met in the elevator."

Paige set out another photo and another and another. Jericho had obtained photos of Martin and Skyller each Thursday when they hooked up in the expensive hotel. "Seems the two of you ride down in the elevator frequently."

"What's your point?" Skyller asked.

"I'm glad you asked," Paige gathered up the photos. "I'm just wondering how Martin Wolfe's mistress maneuvered her way into his annual party. A party thrown by his wife at his home here in Manti."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Skyller challenged. They couldn't know she was at the party. She had covered her tracks well.

"I have several witnesses that put you in the room, at that party when Martin Wolfe died," Paige informed her. "Maybe you want a minute to revise that last statement."

Skyller sat silently trying to come up with an answer. There was no way anyone remembered her. "I think I want that lawyer."

"Good," Paige stood. "I was actually hoping you would refuse to discuss this. You see, we have plenty of evidence. We know you killed Martin Wolfe. And, well the District Attorney was at the party. In fact, he was standing right there, next to Martin, when he died. He's anxious to try this case. We know you and Martin were having an affair, we know you were there that night, and once we book you for pre-meditated murder, we'll have your fingerprints. We'll be able to match them to the ones on that tray you handed the caterer after you poisoned the champagne. Yes, we also have the champagne. We have several witnesses that remember you. You know, you really shouldn't get such a distinctive tattoo if you plan to murder your lover. It's a dead giveaway. Now, stand up and put your hands behind your back. You are under arrest for the murder of Martin Wolfe."

"Wait," Skyller held up a hand. "Okay, I'll cooperate. I didn't want to participate. I didn't want anything to do with this. It was all Ryenne's idea. She made me do it. She's a powerful

Toxic Indulgence

woman. She threatened me. Said she would hire someone to come after me if I didn't do what she wanted. I was terrified. I feared for my life. She said the poison wouldn't kill him, it would just make him sick. I had no idea she planned to kill him. And, she used me to do it."

Jericho stood and silently walked to the door. "I need a minute, Paige would you join me in the hallway?"

The two of them left the room and moved to Jericho's office. "There's something off about that woman. She's calculating and prepared."

"Havi said something when I got here this morning," Paige considered. "He called her a black widow. Do you think she's done this before? Killed a lover or a husband?"

"Call in Heidi," Jericho decided. "Get her prints so Margie can run them. I want to know everything there is to know about Skyller Franks before we continue this interview."

It was an hour later when Jericho and Paige stepped back into the room.

"Did you verify my story?" Skyller asked. "Did you arrest Ryenne Wolfe for killing her husband?"

"Ryenne didn't kill her husband," Paige settled back in the chair. "You did."

"But I told you..."

"Yes," Jericho also settled into his chair. "Before we get into that, I'd like to talk to you about Duke Winters."

"Why do you want to talk about Duke?" Skyller asked. How had these small town cops discovered her marriage to Duke?

"The death was deemed mysterious by the coroner," Jericho continued. "The local cops believe you were responsible."

"They never proved I had anything to do with that," Skyller practically screamed. She realized her mistake immediately. "Because I was innocent. They were trying to frame me for something I didn't do. Duke died of natural causes. He had a heart attack."

"Funny," Paige tapped her pen on her notepad. "That's exactly what Mrs. Wolfe said about her husband. Maybe she got confused. You know, maybe she was thinking about Duke rather than Martin."

"That's ridiculous," Skyller protested. "Duke's death has nothing to do with Martin. Ryenne killed that poor man. I know, I put the poison in his drink but his wife is the one that bought it. She's the one that told me how much to use. She said it wouldn't cause any

Toxic Indulgence

permanent damage. We were just trying to teach him a lesson, for betraying both of us that way. I was shocked when I learned Martin was married. He claimed he was divorced and lonely.”

“How did you happen to be in Italy back in November, when the two of you met?” Paige asked. Once they knew who the woman was, they had obtained a warrant for her financials. Tolman had to do some fancy talking, but he’d come through for them. Paige had discovered that Skyller Franks was running out of money. She’d flown to Italy, checked into the same hotel Wolfe always used and the bellhop had confirmed the “sexy blonde” spent hours waiting in the lobby, hoping to meet the elusive tech giant. It would be interesting to see just how she tried to spin this one.

“I was shopping,” Skyller lied. “I went to Milan to shop and ran into Martin in the lobby of the hotel. We hit it off immediately and decided to share dinner. Our relationship took off from there. Imagine my surprise when I learned we lived so close to each other. I reside in Park City, as you well know. And, Martin spends a lot of his time in Salt Lake. We developed a relationship over time and started to meet at that hotel on occasion.”

“We seized your computer,” Paige advised her. “I have a forensic specialist going through it as we speak. I wonder if you realize you can delete your history, but it’s never really deleted.” Paige was confident Carmen would find anything there was to find.

“You had no right to go through my things,” Skyller slammed her hand down on the table.

“Sheriff,” Paige asked casually. “Did we have a right to go through Miss Frank’s things?”

“I believe we did,” Jericho said calmly. “It’s a little thing called a warrant. Maybe you want to start over. And, this time tell us the truth. We know you were tracking Martin, basically stalking him for months before the two of you met. We know, based on your financials which we also had a warrant to obtain that you have nearly run through the money you inherited after the death of Duke Winters. We know you researched Martin, knew he was traveling to Italy, and you did your homework well enough to discover the hotel he always stays in. You flew to Italy, tried to get a room close to Mr. Wolfe and when that didn’t come through, you spent hours loitering in the lobby, waiting for the right time to pounce. You orchestrated the meeting, seduced a married and lonely man and maneuvered your way into his life. Let me know if I’m missing anything here.”

“All of that might be true,” Skyller said cautiously. “But it doesn’t change the fact that Ryenne Wolfe is the one that murdered the man I loved.”

“I’m curious,” Paige added. “How did you plan to get the money? With Martin dead, it all goes to Ryenne. She walks away from this a wealthy widow. You... well, you rot in a cell for a few decades.”

Toxic Indulgence

“Ryenne Wolfe killed Martin,” Skyller screamed. “She was afraid he was going to leave her for me. So, she killed him.”

“There’s just one problem with that story,” Paige sighed. “You killed Martin Wolfe.”

“Just because that stupid waitress said it was me, doesn’t mean anything. I’m sure Ryenne put her up to it. Ryenne is framing me so she can get away with murder.”

“What waitress?” Paige looked at Jericho. “I didn’t say anything about a waitress.”

“I’m not stupid,” Skyller pouted.

“That remains to be seen,” Paige stood when there was a knock on the door. Once she opened it, she stepped outside.

“Carmen called,” Margie told her. “She said there were recordings on the laptop. Skyller tried to hide them and used some cheap encryption software she probably downloaded from the internet. I would never be able to quote your friend and her colorful assessment of the program. The bottom line is she got through it. She emailed you the most pressing file.”

Paige rushed to her desk and pulled up the email. It took less than a minute to realize this was a smoking gun. And, they had the evidence they needed to arrest the callous duo for murder. She exited out of the file and returned to the room.

Jericho looked at her in question but Paige just moved around the desk. “Skyller Franks, stand up. You are under arrest for the murder of Martin Wolfe.”

“What? I thought...”

“Yeah,” Paige grabbed her arm and made her stand. It only took a few seconds to cuff her. “You thought you’d get away with murder. I’m sure it was a real kick to your ego when Martin informed you he would never leave his wife. He made her a promise, made her father a promise and Wolfe, he always kept his word.”

“How did you know?” Skyller asked in shock.

“I told you,” Paige gave her a little shove. “Delete never really means delete.”

“But they were encrypted.”

“Keep talking,” Paige shrugged. “You’re digging the hole deeper by the second.” Paige transported their prisoner to the county jail while Margie filled Jericho in on the details. The instant Paige returned to the office, their prisoner locked up tight for the time being, Jericho was pacing in front of her desk.

“It’s about time,” he growled. “Let’s go get a snake off a plane.”

Toxic Indulgence

“Wow,” Paige laughed. “Don’t look now but Jericho Walters made a joke.”

Both of them enjoyed arresting Rylene Wolfe. She too thought she had gotten away with murder. Unfortunately, she picked the wrong partner in crime. She wasn’t as easy to manipulate as Skyller. The instant they loaded her into the back of the car, she demanded her attorney. Didn’t matter, they had the entire planning session on tape. Skyller had sunk them both. In her attempt to gain evidence she could use to blackmail her partner, to ensure the grieving widow transferred the ten million dollars they had agreed to after the murder, Skyller had gathered indisputable evidence that could and would be used against them both in a court of law. There wasn’t a lawyer in the country that could prevent it.

“I’m going to lock up the evidence and head home,” Paige decided. “I’ll come in early and put the case together for Tolman.”

“He already has the basics,” Jericho told her. “Don’t come in early, it can wait. Good job, by the way. Another job well done. Guess I wasn’t snookered into hiring you after all.”

“Sure you were,” Paige grabbed her stuff and started for the door. “But it wasn’t because I let a killer walk. Of all the absurd accusations they could have made. It wasn’t because I was fired, either.”

“Goodnight, Paige,” Jericho held the door for her. “Piper Weber will do what she does. That’s a problem for another day.”

Paige pulled away, wondering what she was going to do with the rest of the evening.

“Nathan,” Dax said in surprise.

“Can I come in?” Nathan asked, glancing around the parking lot of the hotel.

“Sure,” Dax held the door open and took a step back. “What are you doing here?”

“I was on my way to Manti,” Nathan admitted. “I didn’t like that ex-girlfriend of yours or the story she planned to fabricate on Paige. Once you relayed the plan, I decided to divert. There are so many things that could go wrong out here and I thought you could use my help. I won’t get in your way. I’m just going to stand by to make sure we all walk away from this unscathed.”

“You should have gone to Manti,” Dax advised. “I might do something that could come back on you. If you’re here, you can’t deny knowing about the plan.”

Toxic Indulgence

“I wouldn’t anyway,” Nathan settled into a chair. “Dax, I don’t care what you do to that man. Well, short of killing him. Make sure he’s alive to turn over to the FBI.”

“Any update on their arrival?” Dax wondered.

“Their plane should be touching down in two hours,” Nathan had confirmed the data twice. “When are you leaving, to scout out the cabin?”

“We already scouted,” Dax admitted. “We’re leaving here in ten minutes. It takes precisely eighty-two minutes to get there from here. It doesn’t leave much time for me to locate Reynolds, get the Intel I need and get out before the feds hit the place.”

“Why not leave early? Give yourself some breathing room?” Nathan wondered.

“Because he has one guard outside,” Dax informed him. “Shift change is at twenty-one hundred. It’s the only window I have to sneak past the cameras and scale the wall onto the balcony. Reynolds feels safe leaving the door open at night. He assumes that since it’s on the second floor, nobody could use it as an entry point. He’s wrong.”

“So, you’ll go in through the balcony and then what?”

“The guard station is to the left of the property, out front,” Dax motioned to the door. “I’ll explain on the way. We need to head out.”

Nathan stood and followed Dax out the door. “Reynolds has built a sort of control center in a smaller cabin. The guard works from inside the cabin. He basically monitors the cameras, watching for anything suspicious.” They had reached the parking lot and spotted the other men at the same time they were spotted. “Nathan will be joining us. Hawk, figure out where to stage him. He needs to be somewhere out of sight, but also in a place he can come forward and intervene if something goes wrong.”

“On it,” Hawk climbed into the passenger seat of a dark SUV and began studying diagrams.

“Zee,” Dax called. “You drive the SUV. I’m going to ride with Porter, go over the mission plan and hook up with you at the staging location. We’ll need to do a quick scout of the property, make sure nothing has changed but otherwise, it’s a go. See you guys in eighty-two minutes.” He turned to Porter. “You want to drive or do you want me to?”

“You drive,” Porter decided. “I have no idea where you plan to stage.”

Toxic Indulgence

Eighty-three minutes later, the group was standing on the edge of Cole Reynolds luxury cabin getaway. Dax was surveying the house with an expensive set of night vision binoculars. “He’s not on the ground floor,” Dax reported.

“Is that good or bad?” Nathan wondered.

“Good,” Dax assured him. “I won’t have as far to go to find him.”

“He’s not on the balcony,” Hawk reported. “That means the coast is clear. We’re a go when you’re ready.”

“Wooley, check in,” Dax said into his headset.

“Green light on the two-three corner,” Wooley advised.

“Zee?”

“Good to go,” Zee reported. “All clear on the three-four.”

“Thor?”

“Same traffic,” Thor advised. “Nothing to report on the one-two.”

“Jeeves, you in position?”

“Good to go up here, too,” Jeeves advised. “I’ll let you know when I spot the feds headed this way.”

“Where did you post Jeeves?” Nathan asked, not remembering the man’s real name.

“He’s watching the road that leads up from the main highway,” Dax informed him. “I’m up. Hawk, take care of the general. I’ll be back in a flash.”

Dax was dressed for the occasion. His black jeans and black turtleneck would keep him hidden until he started to climb the log exterior of the building. He dashed across the large backyard and ducked under the wooden covering that formed a large back patio. Reynolds had spared no expense. The patio floor was covered in expensive stone tiles with an elaborate fireplace built to one side. Against the back wall of the cabin, a large built-in barbeque and granite counter took up the entire wall. Dax cautiously made his way around the furniture and heaved his body onto the counter that ran from the BBQ to the edge of the building. He gripped two of the sturdy poles that encased the balcony and pulled his body upwards. He loved this part of the job, the adrenaline, the anticipation, the danger. It was the only part of being a ranger he truly missed. Once he got his footing secure, he swung one leg over the railing, then the other. He smiled as he moved toward the open door. He still had it. Good thing, tonight he was going to need every ounce of training he’d acquired over the years.

Toxic Indulgence

“I’ve got headlights,” Jeeves reported. “You’ve got ten minutes, fifteen tops.”

Dax slid into the elaborate bedroom and silently moved toward the door. If he had to guess, Reynolds was probably in the large spa area. It was risky, most of the room was an open gym. He could never get across that entire expanse without being spotted by Reynolds. On the other hand, if his target was in the sauna or in the glass-enclosed hot tub area, he might have a chance to surprise him. Dax stopped just outside the door. “Zee?” he whispered into his mouthpiece.

“Go,” Zee said in response.

“Do you have a visual on the hot tub?”

“Affirm,” Zee said softly. “It’s a negative. Reynolds is not in the tub. I don’t have a visual on the target.”

Dax used a small mirror to look around the door. Reynolds was not in the gym, either. That meant he was inside the sauna. Dax just hoped the man didn’t relax in the steamy room naked. That was not something he needed to see. He slid through the opening and made his way silently across the room. The door to the sauna was closed, but steam was seeping under the door jamb. Dax had found his mark. He pulled his gun, swung the door open and stepped inside.

Reynolds screamed and grabbed for a towel. “What do you want? Who are you? I’m calling the police.”

Dax laughed at that one. Just his luck, the man was naked. He moved slightly to the left, so the light shone on his face and waited.

“Are you here to kill me?” Reynolds choked out.

“What was the payment to Hastings for?”

“I won’t tell you anything,” Reynolds focused on the weapon pointed at his head. “You can’t make me talk. I have a partner. He’ll kill you if you do anything to me. You were supposed to be dead already.”

Dax didn’t say a word. He was running out of time. He waited ten seconds. Silence filled the room as he waited. Reynolds started to squirm but still didn’t answer. Dax never took his eyes off his enemy, he just shifted the gun slightly to the left and fired. A loud, thundering boom filled the air. The horrific noise didn’t bother Dax, he was wearing ear protection. Hastings, on the other hand, panicked. He fell off the bench and hit the floor with a thud, covering both ears as he pushed his body backward to huddled under the long bench. Dax grinned. He’d be happy to report back to Paige that Reynolds did, in fact, pee himself. The man was shaking so violently, Dax wondered if he’d have a heart attack and die before he could get answers. “Hastings?”

Toxic Indulgence

Reynolds didn't respond. He just looked at Dax in wide-eyed shock, a dazed and confused look permanently etched on his face. Dax waited and watched as a trickle of blood slowly slid out of Reynolds' right ear and down his cheek. The crimson liquid immediately mixed with the sweat — from the heat and the fear— that was now even more prominently displayed on the man's face. Dax knew he had to give Reynolds time to recover, but time was something he didn't have. "Hastings?" he pushed.

The question seemed to bring Reynolds out of his shock. "You can't stop him," Reynolds finally whimpered. "The plan is already set in motion. Nathan thinks sending that Ranger in to evacuate Vato was a secret. It's not. We know all about it. Your ranger buddy is walking into a trap. Instead of saving one of your friends, you are going to lose two of them. You underestimated us at every turn. And this time, you're going to pay. I know you Dax Hamilton. Losing two of your lifelong friends over this is going to eat you alive. I'm glad Nassar failed. I'm glad you are going to live to suffer the pain and grief that you caused. Nobody had to die. If you had only stayed out of it. We have people," he laughed. "It's too late to save your friends. Live with that!"

Dax punched his location into his phone. He knew he was cutting it close, but he wasn't finished. He moved quickly across the room with the skill of a trained hunter. Before Reynolds knew it was coming, Dax had his body slammed against the wall, his hand wrapped around Reynolds' neck. When the man started to choke, Dax ignored the discomfort. "You underestimated all of us. Live with that." He took a step backward just as Sean stepped into the room. "He's all yours."

"Cole Reynolds," Sean moved forward and stood over the man that was currently crumpled on the floor. "You are under arrest. Put your hands behind your back. And please, do me a favor and resist."

Dax made his way back to the balcony and had just lowered himself to the ground when he heard the rest of Sean's task force barreling through the house. He wondered if they had ever heard the word stealth. He ducked behind the fireplace and waited for a two-man team to clear the dining area just inside a large bank of windows. "I'm out," he whispered into his mouthpiece. "Return to base." Once the feds were out of sight, Dax darted across the backyard and slid into the thick stand of Quaking Aspen that lined the property. In less than a minute, he was reunited with his men.

"Did you get anything?" Nathan demanded.

"Yeah," Dax nodded. "You sent Solo into an ambush. Reynolds said they know about the rescue mission, all the details and they've set a trap to kill both Solo and Vato. He's pretty confident we'll never stop it in time."

Toxic Indulgence

“We’ll see about that,” Nathan said absently. How in the world did Cole Reynolds find out about the mission?

“He also confirmed he has a partner,” Dax added. “I think he’s more afraid of him than he is of us.”

“That’s because he knows we have boundaries,” Nathan turned and headed for the car. “I’ll meet you back at the hotel.”

Dax and the men watched the most powerful man they knew slide into the driver’s side of the vehicle, slam the door and drive away. He threw up dirt and rocks as his tires spun, then caught and forced the vehicle into motion.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen him that pissed off before,” Zeus finally said what they were all thinking.

“I wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of that,” Wooley added. “Reynolds may have miscalculated. I think I’d be more afraid of Nathan Porter than some sadistic partner right about now.”

“Let’s get outta here,” Dax motioned to the SUV. “Zee, you drive.”

“All aboard,” Zeus called out. “The train is leaving the station.”