

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Active Discord* *Season 3, Episode 8*

---

*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](http://www.melaniepsmith.com)



MPSmith Publishing

## Active Discord

---

“I am so stuffed,” Paige moaned as she pulled into the driveway.

“I told you not to have that chocolate cake,” Dax laughed.

“Hello! Triple chocolate delight,” Paige reasoned.

“And now you’re miserable,” Dax leaned over and gave her a gentle kiss. “And, you taste like chocolate.”

Paige grinned. “I taste delightful.”

Dax laughed and pulled her closer for a deeper kiss when the radio came to life. They both glanced down and Dax sighed as they listened to the local dispatcher.

“Bridges,” Susie called over the air.

“Go,” Dean answered as he stood and dropped a twenty on the table. He knew the waitress wouldn’t let him pay for the coffee, but the pie was fresh and he’d more than make up the difference with such a large tip.

“I have a call over at the Moroni Feed processing plant,” she advised. “Not sure exactly what they have. The security guard called in a suspicious vehicle, said he was headed out to confront the trespassers. I haven’t been able to reach him since.”

“I’ll head that way,” Dean slid into the patrol car and started the engine.

Paige glanced at Dax, her face full of regret. Havilland was out of town, so Dean was working alone tonight.

“Go on,” Dax motioned to the radio and waited as Paige lifted the mic.

“You want a back?” Paige asked.

“I’ll advise,” Dean decided.

“I’m available,” Paige decided. She turned to face Dax, their plans for a relaxing night at home had just been shattered completely. “Sorry.”

Dax shrugged. “No apology necessary. It’s the job.” He grabbed the video they had rented from Redbox and pushed open the door. “But I’m not waiting.”

Paige laughed. “I wouldn’t think of it. Hopefully, this call will be simple, and I’ll be home just in time for popcorn.”

“I thought you were stuffed,” Dax closed the door and headed for the house, knowing he’d be lucky if she returned before the closing credits.

## Active Discord

---

“Show me enroute,” Paige told Susie as she backed onto the roadway.

“I can call you if it gets hot,” Dean offered.

“Already on my way,” Paige brushed that off. She pulled onto the highway and accelerated. Several minutes later she decided to request her colleague’s status. “How close are you? Can I catch up before you arrive?”

“I can see you in my rearview,” Dean said in amazement. The woman must have floored it the instant her tires hit the asphalt.

“10-4,” Paige gradually started to slow as she pulled in behind Officer Bridge’s cruiser. “Susie, any updates?”

“I still can’t reach... Standby.” Several seconds later Susie came back over the air. “I just got a shots fired call by someone driving past the area. They were pretty sure it was near the entry gate at the plant. But he said he had his kid with him and wasn’t comfortable stopping.”

Paige and Dean flipped on their emergency equipment at the same time.

“We’re expediting,” Dean informed the night dispatcher.

“Keep traffic light until we advise,” Paige added. Good thing she decided to back her colleague. They could be driving into a cluster and nobody should have to deal with that alone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dean pulled into the lot and immediately spotted the man lying on the ground. He shoved his car into park and jumped out, hoping the guy wasn’t dead.

“I’m okay,” the guard said as he shifted to focus on the cop. “I’m hit, in the leg, but I’ll live.”

“Show me arrived,” Dean advised. “I need medical. Gun-shot wound, left upper thigh, victim is conscious, stable and alert.”

“Copy,” Susie switched over to request an assist from Fire.

“They planted something,” the guard groaned. “Over next to the building. I didn’t have a chance to investigate but we could have explosives.”

“Susie,” Dean stood and looked around, *where was Paige?*

“Go,” Susie said in answer.

## Active Discord

---

“Ask them to send in the bomb guys, we have a suspicious package.”

“Copy,” Susie said, more alert now. “ETA on medical is three minutes.”

Dean finally spotted Paige. She had continued toward the river and was now out of her vehicle, making her way into a large field. He took a step back to see what she was chasing when the world around him erupted. Hot air slammed into him with so much force, he stumbled, tripped over the guard’s leg, and went down hard.

Paige scrambled over a large bush, ducked under a fence and realized she was never going to make it. She reached down to press the button on her walkie when a loud explosion erupted from the feed plant. A bright plume of light and dust shot several feet into the air. Paige turned and ran towards the mayhem, subconsciously headed back to check on Dean. She relaxed and paused when his voice echoed throughout the night. Dean was pissed off, but fine. Paige pivoted and refocused on her fleeing suspects.

“Dispatch,” Dean barked, clearly annoyed. “Advise Fire that the package was an explosive device and it just detonated. There could be others and the back of the building is now on fire.”

“Copy,” Susie relayed the info. “They said they are still at least five to six minutes out from your location.”

“Suspects are traveling southbound through a large field in a silver Mazda,” Paige advised as she ran back towards her own vehicle. “I can’t see the plate. It’s a newer model, no more than five years, tops.”

“Copy,” Susie switched to her computer, determined to find a silver Mazda in the system if it took all night.

“I’m fine,” the guard grumbled. “Go, catch ‘em. Don’t let them get away with this.”

Dean hesitated, but ultimately decided the leg wound was serious; but, not life-threatening. “Medical is on the way.”

“Help her,” the guard pointed to Paige. “I’ll be fine. I can hear the sirens already.”

Dean jumped back into his vehicle and stomped on the gas. The entire vehicle slid across the hard-packed dirt before the tires caught and the car lunged forward. He could see Paige had finally reached her own vehicle and was in pursuit of their fleeing suspects. She was now approaching the intersection where Moroni Feed Road connected with State Highway 132. The dirtbags responsible might have a head start but they would never outrun a cop. Especially not Dean Bridges — full-time cop, part-time race driver. He smiled as he pushed his car to go even faster.

## Active Discord

---

Paige yanked on her steering wheel and forced her vehicle into a sliding turn. She knew she was taking that right way too fast, but these guys would not escape. Not on her watch. Her heart was pounding, and her breathing was a little more rapid than usual, but she survived the turn and from here, it was a straight shot into Ephraim. She'd catch the perps, a twenty-something delinquent was no match for a seasoned cop.

"We're in pursuit," Dean advised dispatch. "Suspect is traveling southbound on one-thirty-two. Speeds are eighty-five and climbing."

"Copy," Susie replied. "Southbound, state road one-thirty-two."

"We just passed the wrecking yard," Dean called. "Still southbound on one-thirty-two. Paige, I'm closing in. Be advised I'll be passing on the left in about five seconds."

Paige shot a glance in her rearview mirror and frowned. She glanced at her speedometer, she had hit ninety and was still climbing but Dean was closing fast. In comparison, she looked like she was an old granny barely hitting forty. She tried not to be annoyed, reminded herself he was a race car driver, but it didn't help. She was still frowning as Dean's patrol cruiser flew by and maneuvered back into the southbound lane.

"Dean," Paige called. "We need to stop them before they hit Ephraim. See if you can PIT them while we're surrounded by fields. That way, if they lose control, nobody else will get hurt."

"Copy," Dean smiled, accelerated and started to close in on the vehicle. He was a little worried about bumping such young kids at these speeds, but it couldn't be helped.

"Susie, we just passed the cement yard," Paige advised. "Priority traffic only."

"I'm getting into position now," Dean advised. It took less than a minute to close the distance and set up just to the left of the silver Mazda. Dean focused on the car as he bumped the left side of the car's rear panel utilizing the PIT maneuver, or Pursuit Intervention Technique, on the inexperienced driver. The car abruptly turned sideways, slid several feet and collided with a wooden fence. The old rotting post gave way, the vehicle continued further into the field, and the entire driver's side of the car came to rest against a large sprinkler system some local farmer used to water his crops. "Vehicle disabled. We just passed mile marker sixty-two," Dean told Susie for the record.

"We got runners," Paige called into her walkie as she jumped from her car and followed three of the passengers into the field.

Dean was already out of his vehicle wrestling with the driver; who was trying to climb over the center console and escape through the open passenger's door. "I have one in custody," he said a moment later. "Paige, you need a back?"

## Active Discord

---

Paige didn't answer.

Susie waited several seconds then tried again, still no answer.

“Paige, what's your twenty?” Dean tried again, he needed to know her location if he was going to help. He reached into his trunk and retrieved his leg shackles. He'd just secure the prisoner as best as he could then go after Paige. He was nearly finished attaching his prisoner to a large bar that ran the length of the backseat when he heard a vehicle approaching. He straightened, alert and on edge, but relaxed when he spotted Sheriff Walters. He snapped the lock shut and rushed to his boss. “I have one in custody, but Paige could be in trouble.”

“I'll secure the prisoner,” Jericho frowned and tried to survey the area, but it was pitch black out here. There was never a full moon when you needed one. “Find Paige.”

Dean took off, running in the direction he had last seen his partner.

Paige was fighting with one of the runners. She knew she couldn't catch all three, but she was determined to stop at least one of them. When the trio started up the incline that led into the foothills, she had pulled a Gage Clayton. The man hadn't expected the tackle, but he recovered quickly. Before she could get the cuffs on the squirming felon, he began to fight. They were now on the ground, wrestling for control. She finally thought she had him pinned but somehow, he was able to get his right arm loose. He twisted, and Paige lost her grip and her balance. She was falling forward when the suspect swung out and hit his mark. Paige saw stars. The bright lights rendered her blind for several seconds. The man's fist had collided with her cheekbone with so much force, her eyes began to water. It wasn't just his strength; her forward momentum had made the blow that much worse. But it got her attention. She swung her elbow outward and connected with his chin, then snapped the cuffs on the guy's left wrist before he could recover. Paige yanked hard — maybe a little harder than necessary — and smiled when the kid swore and screamed out in pain. It took less than five seconds to get the cuffs on his other hand. Her prisoner was secure.

Paige stood, a little breathless, and pulled the guy to his feet. Unfortunately, he wasn't done fighting. He lunged to the side in an attempt to knock Paige off balance again. It didn't work, she was prepared this time. His shoulder missed its mark and the guy faltered, nearly falling back to the ground. He recovered quickly, took a step forward and tripped over Paige's outstretched leg. This time he did go down, hard. And, without his arms to catch the fall, his shoulder and face took the brunt of the impact.

Paige bit back the pain as the guy's boot caught on her calf and sliced a significant gash into her flesh. The sight of him lying there in agony helped to calm her anger... a little. She swung around, alert and ready when she heard a noise directly behind her.

## Active Discord

---

“Fifty percent ain’t bad,” Dean said as he moved in to study her prisoner. He’d been worried about his colleague. One against three was bad enough but knowing at least one of the three had a gun and had already used it... that made everything a hundred times worse.

“We’ll get the others,” Paige said confidently. “They’re on the run. They’ll make a mistake eventually and when they do, we’ll be there.”

“Stand up,” Paige ordered her prisoner. “Now,” she pulled on the cuffs to get the guy moving. As he began to slowly get to his feet, she took a minute to survey the area. She felt like a sitting duck out here and she didn’t like it. If the guy with the gun decided to use it again, the result could be fatal. It was too dark out here to spot him in time to avoid an ambush. The two deputies flanked the troublemaker, who was now standing, and started back toward the main road.

Jericho was standing just outside Dean’s vehicle, rifle in hand, waiting, when his two deputies emerged from the darkness and pushed their prisoner toward the back of Dean’s cruiser. “That looks painful,” he said casually when he spotted Paige’s face. His voice might sound controlled; but, in reality, he was fuming.

“It’s fine,” Paige grumbled. “I think we should move him to my car,” she decided. “Let’s keep them separated until we get answers.”

“I agree,” Jericho moved in beside Dean and the two of them escorted the prisoner up the road to where Paige had abandoned her car and took off on foot.

“You’ll never catch Liam,” the kid taunted. “He’s long gone by now.”

Paige grinned, the idiot had just given her a lead to follow and he didn’t even know it. “What’s your name?”

“I don’t think I have to tell you that,” the kid scowled and lowered his gaze to the ground. He was obviously unsure of his position.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Paige shrugged. “I’ll just book you as John Doe. I do have to warn you though, we have a lot of John Does in our facility. It’s going to make it a little more difficult, if anyone comes looking that is.”

The kid frowned, focused on Dean, then Jericho, and finally glared at Paige. “Bite me.”

“You have the right to remain silent,” Dean advised. “I suggest you exercise that right.”

“I can talk if I want to talk,” the guy was obviously feeling cocky. “I got that first amendment thingy.”

## Active Discord

---

“Yeah?” Paige grinned. “Then I guess you’re familiar with that fifth amendment thingy as well?”

“Sure,” the kid pushed out his chest and tried to act tough. “I know all about that one, too.”

“Get in,” Jericho ordered. They had reached Paige’s vehicle and he’d had about enough from the guy. “You can exercise all of your rights once we get to the station.”

Paige slammed the door shut and turned to focus on her boss. “Do we need to head back and deal with things at the plant?”

“No,” Jericho watched through the side window as a young kid, who had just ruined his entire life, shifted and squirmed in an attempt to get comfortable. “Jack’s got that investigation. They got the fire out fairly quickly, it was superficial. They found another device on the other side of the building that didn’t detonate. Once they were sure they had all the explosives, Jack sent a team over to the turkey farm. The guard told the firemen, when he confronted them, all four of the culprits started spewing some nonsense about animal rights and how tyranny will never prevail.”

“I don’t recall any animals inside the feed store that needed to be liberated,” Paige grumbled. “And I use that term lightly.”

“Exactly. That’s why Jack decided to check out the turkey farm. And, trying to apply logic to their criminal activity is like trying to argue with a drunk,” Jericho turned to face his deputies. “You two head out. I saw more explosives in the car over there. I can wait for Jack’s team. They’ll retrieve the devices and probably impound the vehicle as evidence as well. Shouldn’t take long and maybe Jack will have an update on the turkey farm by then.”

“It bites that we lost two of them,” Dean finally spoke. “Especially now that I know we’re dealing with a group of domestic terrorists. And, one of them has a gun. You sure about us leaving? Two of them are still out there and could be watching.”

Just then a red SUV appeared in the distance. “There’s Jack, get back to the office and deal with those two. I’ve got this,” Jericho ordered.

“We’ll catch the others,” Paige insisted again before she climbed behind the wheel and started her engine and pulled away. The entire left side of her face hurt and her cheekbone was throbbing with so much intensity she felt like AC/DC was performing a concert inside her head. She glanced at her glove box, trying to remember if she had aspirin in there. *Probably not.*

\*\*\*\*\*



## Active Discord

---

Dax was well into the newest action flick when his burner phone began to chime. He frowned, stood and slid the green button to answer seconds before it clicked over to voicemail. He was still frowning when he said a curt “Hamilton.” He didn’t recognize the number displayed on the screen and nobody but Porter was supposed to have this number.

“Hey, Dax,” came a friendly voice. “I was afraid I was going to miss you. Porter said to check in once I touched down in Kuwait.”

“Why me?” Dax asked. He moved back to the couch and settled in. He was grateful for the update from Bucket, one of his former Rangers, but he was also confused.

“Not sure,” Bucket shrugged. “Something about being offline while he went after another traitor. Anyway, I’m here and Camp Wolverine is the same as it was last time we were here. Hot, dry, miserable, and covered in about a foot of light, powdery dust.”

“I hear you,” Dax vividly remembered the fine flour like sand that got stuck in everything you owned. He decided it made sense for Nathan to divert the call to him, especially if he was on another one of his top secret, self-assigned apprehension projects. Porter had been on the warpath ever since the mission in Arizona. Dax had to admit he approved of the old man’s methods. But, if the guys Porter brought down so far hadn’t been traitors and criminals, he might actually feel sorry for them. General Nathan Porter was proving, on a daily basis, why he was feared and respected by so many. “I assume you’ve been fully briefed on the situation.”

“Yeah,” Bucket sighed. “This whole thing bites.”

“I agree,” Dax also sighed.

“Talon pretty much covered it, I think,” Bucket said soberly. “Basically, I was never here. In and out without being seen, then head off to Germany for plausible deniability. We’ve done this a million times.”

“Yeah,” Dax agreed. “But this time, the friendlies are the enemy. You can’t let them know you were there. You can’t trust anyone; do you hear me?”

“I know,” Bucket sighed again. “My only friends are Vato and Solo. I just don’t know what I’m going to do if someone shoots at me.”

“You shoot back,” Dax said immediately. “If they shoot, they’re dirty.”

“Or, they’ve been given an order and a BS excuse why I’m the dirty one.”

“True,” Dax relented. “But you don’t get dead over this. You know the mindset, man. This mission is no different from any other mission you’ve been sent on.”

## Active Discord

---

“We both know that’s not true,” Bucket disagreed. “But enough about that. Any ideas on how I don’t get dead sneaking up on the elusive duo?”

“Yeah,” Dax smiled. “You got a laser pointer?”

“Sure,” Bucket also grinned.

“Use the team signal. Solo and Vato will understand and the enemy won’t see it. Even if they do, they won’t understand the code.”

“Good idea,” Bucket admitted. “Now, I have to go talk to a villager about a ride.”

“Brock,” Dax said using the man’s real name. His team members knew how serious he was when he addressed them that way. Brock Jarrett, Bucket to his brothers, was a good soldier but even great men could find themselves trapped without warning.

“I’ll be fine, Dax.” Bucket assured him. “The three of us will be home-free before you know it.”

“If anything goes wrong call this number,” Dax gave him Dalia Abadi-Basara’s secret contact. He had already called her and arranged emergency help if it became necessary. She was still angry at him for letting Ahmed get killed, but she was a friend and would never deny him in a true emergency. “The woman on the other end will know what to do if you call.”

“Who is she?”

“A friend,” Dax said cryptically. “One that doesn’t exist once this mission is over. Do not mention her, whether you request her assistance or not.”

“Because?” Bucket trusted Dax, but this was all a little more secretive than usual.

“Because she was a friend of the White Scorpion and if the military ever discovered her existence, she’d be hunted the same way he was.”

Now it all made sense. “You kept her a secret, even from the brass.”

“I did,” Dax admitted. “And I need you to do the same. She’ll be there, if you need her. With any luck, it will all go as planned and you can ditch that number and forget you ever heard it.”

“I won’t say a word,” Bucket promised. “Not even to Porter.”

“Thank you,” Dax said, relieved. “But, don’t hesitate to enlist the help if you need it. The woman is resourceful and effective.”

## Active Discord

---

“Duly noted,” Bucket glanced over his shoulder. “Now, I think my ride is here. I’ll have Vato call you when we’re clear.”

“I mean it,” Dax said again. “Be careful and don’t get dead.”

“Out,” Bucket said before disconnecting.

Dax shut off the television, no longer in the mood to be entertained. His mind was racing. Bucket was headed into one of the most dangerous missions he had ever accepted. Not because the enemy was more lethal than drug lords or evil dictators; but, because the enemy was supposed to be the good guys. And, that was going to mess with Brock’s head. Dax just hoped he wouldn’t have to make that choice... shoot a soldier or get shot himself. Because he honestly didn’t know what Bucket would do in that particular situation.

Dax moved to stand in front of the large front window and stared into the darkness. Then there was Nathan. Porter was taking risks, more so than he had in years. Dax was pretty sure he and Sean were the only people on earth that knew Nathan had killed a man last week. He hadn’t had a choice, the guy had fired the first shot and missed... thank goodness. Porter returned fire and hit his mark. The General’s obsession and determination to end this battle was putting him in danger. The amateur assassin was waiting in the dark when Porter showed up at Corporal Danny Crenshaw’s ‘secret’ apartment. Within seconds, the man was dead, and Porter had a new lead to follow. He’d left the body for the locals to discover after notifying Agent Wilkens. Sean had smoothed things over and filed a report of self-defense, closing out the case. He added the necessary protection so nobody could access it without his approval, then buried it. The good General was in the clear, this time. But, Dax was afraid that incident might not be the last.

Especially now that Carmen had discovered a secret account in the Netherlands and Nathan had seized every penny. Reynolds still wasn’t talking, but his partner had to be livid. Unfortunately, Reynolds was the one to set up the account and the other signers were fake; aliases set up to mask their true identities. Dax was sure Carmen would discover the secret military mastermind they believed was behind the entire operation, eventually. But, in the meantime, Porter was making enemies, making arrests — with the help of Sean Wilkins — and refusing protection. The egomaniac was a “highly decorated General” he didn’t need a babysitter. Dax sighed and pulled on his jacket. He’d just head next door and brief his men. Trying to relax at this point, was futile.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige and Dean entered the interrogation room and settled into the uncomfortable chairs. Dean started the recording and relayed all the pertinent information, including Miranda. “Do you understand your rights as I have explained them?”

## Active Discord

---

“I’m not an idiot,” he pushed back, tipping the chair onto two legs, and leaned against the wall. “I understand just fine.”

“And do you want to talk to us without an attorney present?” Paige asked.

“Sure,” the guy shrugged.

“Can you tell us what happened tonight?” Paige asked.

“I got arrested,” he snorted. “Maybe you’re the idiot.”

“Why don’t we start with your name,” Dean shifted gears.

The man shrugged and dropped the chair back onto four legs with a loud thud. He leaned forward and smirked. “Rick Dryer.”

“Okay, Rick Dryer,” Paige said flatly. “What were you doing at the plant?”

“What plant?” Rick asked with a grin. “We just went for a leisurely walk. You know, to take in the fresh air and all before it snows.”

“Right,” Dean fumed. They weren’t getting anywhere with this guy and he was tired. “Last chance, tell us why you were at the plant or you can sit here while we go talk to your buddy in the next room.”

Rick knew they were trying to play him. Liam had explained it before they headed out tonight. “Go ahead,” he decided. “Brent won’t tell you anything, either.”

Paige pushed her chair back and stood. “I’ll be sure to let him know you’re the one that gave us his name. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to know just how... helpful you’ve been tonight.”

“Wait,” Rick jumped to his feet. “I didn’t tell you nothing.”

Dean closed the door and sighed. “You think the other miscreant will cooperate more than this guy?”

“I don’t know,” Paige considered. “I think someone told them not to talk. Someone that’s been through the drill more than once. I want to check in with Susie and see if she found a Liam that matched our description.”

“I did,” Susie stepped up to the duo. “Liam Duncan was arrested seven months ago with Brent O’Neal. Brent is your second guy in there,” she pointed to the conference room. “I already fingerprinted him and ran it through the system. He’s got a warrant, but it’s minor. Two-seventy-five out of West Valley for criminal trespassing.”

## Active Discord

---

“Better than nothing,” Dean took the paperwork. “And, it will keep him behind bars until we can put the explosives case together.”

“I doubt we need it with the fleeing,” Paige considered. “But, we can use it when we interview him. We have a name and a prior charge. Let’s see what he has to say about attempted murder.”

Dean smiled and followed Paige in to trick a criminal.

\*\*\*\*\*

An hour later the two deputies left the conference room, Brent in cuffs on his way to the local jail.

Jericho stepped from his office and glanced at the clock. “It’s nearly one in the morning. You two finished for the night?”

“We have to book these two first,” Dean disappeared into the backroom.

“It wasn’t a question,” Jericho rubbed a hand over his face. “Get them locked up then head home. We’ll finish this up in the morning.”

“I put together a press release,” Susie handed Jericho a sheet of paper. “I didn’t find anything that led to the fourth suspect, but I could send that description over to the media, ask them to run it on their morning shows first thing.”

“The fourth suspect’s name is Ryan Schmidt,” Paige advised. “This one finally let that slip.” Paige gave her prisoner a little shove.

“You tricked me,” Brent insisted. “You lied so I’d confess.”

“Well,” Dean emerged with the second prisoner. “You didn’t confess, so our tactics are irrelevant.”

The two prisoners shared a panicked glance then masked their fear and tried to return to cocky.

“Book ‘em,” Jericho said again. He handed the press release back to Susie. “See what you can do to find this Ryan yahoo and add him in. Send it to me as soon as you’ve finished.”

“And me,” Paige added. “I want to see the photo, I might be able to identify him. I got a pretty good look at all four of these guys while I was chasing them.”

## Active Discord

---

“Good idea,” Jericho approved the request. “Once Paige gives the okay, go ahead and send it off. If we get their ugly mugs to the public first thing, they’ll have a harder time hiding.”

“You’ll never find them,” Rick said confidently. “They’re long gone by now.”

Jericho studied the kid for several seconds. “Make sure you send those to Salt Lake and Vegas as well. I want a regional broadcast on these guys. They won’t be able to sneeze without being noticed.”

Brent scowled at his friend but remained silent.

Paige turned to leave then stopped. “Susie, I’ll call you when I leave the jail. Hopefully, you’ll have a photo by then.”

“Sounds good,” Susie watched as the three cops left the building. Jericho looked tired, Dean looked pumped and Paige looked like she’d just been hit by a garbage truck. That bruise was going to look awful by morning. And, was that a limp? What happened to her leg?

Paige stepped through the door, surprised to see Dax waiting. “You didn’t need to wait up.”

Dax was off the chair and across the room in seconds. “What happened?”

Paige raised a hand and gently touched her face, pain radiated through her entire head. “I ran into a fist.”

Dax shook his head, took her hand and led her into the kitchen. “And the leg?”

“A boot buckle tripped over my calf,” she shrugged at the look Dax was giving her. “What can I say, it was a difficult night, but I won.”

“I think that’s all a matter of perspective,” Dax pulled out a chair and ordered her to sit. He moved to the freezer, pulled out a bag of frozen peas and returned, placing the package on her left cheek. “That will help with the swelling, but there’s nothing I can do about the bruise or the bloodshot eye. You should have addressed that immediately. As it stands, come morning, you’re going to be in a lot of pain and you’ll look like you ran into a solid brick wall.”

“Why are you up?” Paige shifted the peas and scowled, annoyed she was getting a lecture. It was the middle of the night and she was tired. Her body ached — everywhere — and she just wanted to crawl into bed and die.

“The leg?” Dax held out the palm of his hand.

Paige narrowed her eyes at him but complied.

## Active Discord

---

Dax gently removed her boot and pulled up her pant leg. The cut was substantial, but it didn't look too deep. There was dried blood everywhere. "You didn't even clean it?"

"I was busy," Paige said defensively. "I had criminals to interrogate. Once they were booked, I just wanted to get home. I figured I'd deal with it here, alone, by myself, without the third degree."

Dax smiled. "Guess things didn't work the way you planned." He moved to the sink, soaked a small rag completely and returned to gently clean Paige's calf and ankle.

"It hasn't escaped my attention that you didn't answer my question," she studied him. Dax was worried about something. "Spill it, Dax Hamilton."

"Bucket called," Dax continued to focus on the task at hand. "I was waiting up for you, sort of. I'm also worried I'll get a call from the desert. Notification we failed, and I lost three friends in this war."

Paige reached down and took his hand, hoping her touch would give him comfort if it didn't give him strength. "You told me, more than once, to have faith in you. How about we try to have faith in this Bucket guy? Although, I'm not sure the name conjures a feeling of strength, exceptional expertise, and skill."

"His name is actually Brock Jarrett," Dax smiled. "And, he has a head the size of a five-gallon bucket. Seemed to fit at the time."

"Okay then," Paige watched Dax secure the third butterfly strip to her leg and stood. "Big head, big brain. It's all good. He's going to be fine." She took his hand and led him up the stairs and into their bedroom. She briefly paused to consider that thought. Somehow, the man had basically moved into her house. No discussion, no fanfare, nothing... but it hit her immediately, they were basically — unofficially — living together. Before she panicked and said something she'd regret, she pushed that thought aside and focused on the problem at hand. "Is someone going to call? Tonight, once they are safe?"

"Vato is supposed to call as soon as they're back at camp Wolverine in Kuwait," Dax settled into bed. "But that won't mean they're safe. From there, the two of them will be transported to Jordan, then on to St. Paul before, I assume, they'll land in Washington to be debriefed."

"So," Paige yawned. "Enough time to catch a couple hours down before we both have to get back to work."

Dax pulled Paige closer. "You sleep, I'll protect you while you do."

Dax stayed that way for several hours before he finally drifted off as well.

## Active Discord

---

\*\*\*\*\*

Brock Jarrett shifted his body into position. *Finally!* Solo and Vato were late. So late, in fact, he was starting to worry something had already gone wrong and he had failed. His mind and his body relaxed as he waited for just the right moment to deliver the message. He was close to two hundred meters away from his target. It was close enough the laser pointer would catch the men's attention, but far enough away from the enemy that they shouldn't spot the green light and investigate.

Nearly five minutes after he had first spotted his friends, he flipped on the light and flashed the laser beam in Solo's face. After a two-count delay, he flashed one more time, another second and four more quick flashes. There, that should do it. He waited patiently, hoping his message had been received and accepted. He knew it was a success when after about ten steps, the two Ranger's made an abrupt change in course and headed his way.

Bucket slowly drug his body over the tiny hill of sand he'd been hiding behind and stood. His hands were raised, just in case. Several tense seconds passed as the three friends assessed the situation.

"Bucket, is that you?" Vato finally whispered.

"It is," Bucket approached. "And we need to get out of here."

"What happened?" Solo was frowning, and he had a large gash on the side of his head.

"I think I should be asking you that question," Bucket reached into his back pocket and pulled out a large camo handkerchief.

"We need to get to safety," Vato pulled on Solo's arm. "We're trying to outrun a rogue drone. It already fired on us, but it missed."

Bucket frowned. "Not completely. Over here," he guided them further away from their path into the desert landscape, back toward the Euphrates River.

"We need to avoid the river," Vato hesitated. "They monitor this area. If we get too close to the water, we'll be detected for sure."

"That's during the day," Bucket disagreed. "Right now, the only monitoring the military is engaged in... is you. They have no idea you've been intercepted, let's keep it that way. They have to know about the drone trouble. I'm sure headquarters updated them on your status and now they're just patiently waiting to ambush you when you step over that hill."



## Active Discord

---

“They also know Solo lost most of his supplies when we were dodging a drone a few miles back,” Vato took a second to survey the area. “We basically have nothing.”

“I brought plenty of supplies,” Bucket assured him. “We’ll be fine.”

“Why are you here?” Solo asked again.

“Your mission was compromised,” Bucket informed them. “Dax cornered Reynolds and found out they knew you were coming. The extraction team up ahead... it’s actually an extermination squad. The second they spotted you, they have orders from Hastings to kill.”

“There are regular soldiers in that group,” Vato said, a horrified lump settling in his stomach. He had nearly walked into a trap. One that would have gotten his friend and brother killed. He might deserve to die, but Solo didn’t.

“I figure they were told some kind of lie to make you seem dangerous,” Bucket led them straight into the brush that surrounded the river.

“Where are we going?” Vato finally asked.

“You were late,” Bucket tried not let impatience show in the accusation. “I had time to scout around a bit. We can use the date trees and foliage to keep us out of sight all the way to the road that cuts across and leads to Diwaniyah. If we can make it to the village, I think we can find a place to hide out for the night.”

“They’re using the drone to monitor and control our movement,” Solo considered. “Once we leave the river, we’ll be out in the open. I don’t see a way to make it into town without being spotted. We can’t risk it. Any casualties will be blamed on the evil American’s. The Iraqi’s will know that drone is one of ours. Relations are bad enough as it is.”

Bucket handed Solo a pair of high-powered, night vision binoculars. “They haven’t moved. So, our only obstacle is the drone.”

Solo studied the image for several seconds, then he raised the lenses and studied the horizon. “And it’s headed right for us. I thought we lost it, but apparently, it’s still hot on our trail.”

Bucket pulled a high-powered sniper rifle from a case. “Then we take it out.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Vato shook his head. “You think you can take out a military drone with that thing? You’re nuts!”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Bucket shrugged. “Take this,” he pulled out a low-tech electronic device and shoved it at Vato. “Once I’m in position over there,” he pointed to another sand dune that would, hopefully, provide enough cover to make his plan work. “Turn it on and

## Active Discord

---

point it towards the drone. It will jam the signal long enough for the guy controlling that thing to lose contact. Once it starts to wobble, I'm a go."

"And, our well-planned escape is toast," Solo argued. "The instant you fire that rifle, the Calvary will invade."

"True," Bucket considered that. "So, what do you suggest? We have to get rid of that drone."

"I have an idea," Vato said softly. "We use part of your plan. Let's head in the opposite direction. Over there," he pointed away from the river. "You stay hidden, so nobody knows you're here. Solo and I will draw the drone into the area by moving out into the open. You turn on the device and jam the signal. If we're lucky, you can control it long enough, the pilot will return to base once he regains control. They have a mission out here, they can't risk a rogue drone turning on them and taking out our own men."

"Actually, I think that might work," Bucket considered. "I wish I knew how those guys jammed the signal and took control. I'm not sure I can jam it long enough to be effective."

"I know how it works," Vato said reluctantly. He didn't really want to tell his friends Hastings had taught him the flaws and ordered him to take out a convoy of Kurds that were helping with Intel. He didn't, of course, but Hastings didn't know that. Instead, he intercepted the group and helped them leave the country undetected.

Bucket passed the device back to Vato and waited. Vato shifted to try to get more light and within seconds he had the remote adjusted to where he needed it.

"Okay," Vato handed the controller back to Bucket. "I'll be your bait. Once you see the drone, you should be able to take control. Then, just use that thing like you would a video game. It doesn't have a stick like the military uses, so you'll have to use the arrows to fly it in the direction you want it to go."

"We'll be the bait," Solo corrected.

"If they only see me, they might think they already took you out," Vato disagreed. "It provides options if things get ugly. The two of you can make your way back home without the threat of being followed."

"Apparently he forgot that we never leave a man behind," Bucket said at Solo's look. "Go for a walk already, I want to get this show on the road."

The two men stepped forward and began walking away from the river, back toward Najaf. "I don't know about you, but I'm getting an uncomfortable feeling of déjà vu," Solo frowned.

## Active Discord

---

“I see it,” Vato said softly. “Let’s just hope Bucket does, too. Because in a matter of seconds we’re going to be a fond memory.”

Just as Solo turned to respond, the drone wobbled, stalled then accelerated. In a matter of seconds, it steadied, made an abrupt turn and headed back toward the nearest base. The two men pivoted and rushed back to the river, positive their location was masked from anyone looking. “Now what?” Vato finally asked.

“Let’s hang tight for a few and make sure they don’t send anyone over to investigate,” Bucket decided. “I’ll doctor Solo’s wounds while we wait, and you can take a nap.”

Vato snorted. “Not likely.”

“Once we’re sure the coast is clear, we make our way to the road,” Bucket advised as he pulled a first aid kit from his pack. He reached in a pocket and flipped on his satellite phone.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Solo asked, studying the device.

“Yeah,” Bucket handed Solo the phone. “Because I have to make a call. Let me know when it’s up and running.”

“To who?” Vato asked.

“No idea,” Bucket evaded. “Dax told me if we got into a jam, call the number he provided and someone on the other end would help.”

“Dax does have contacts,” Vato agreed. “And a lot of them are still here in the Middle East. If the order came from Dax, we can trust it.”

A short time later, they were climbing into the back of a beat-up, ancient pickup truck. Dax had saved them, again.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Make it stop,” Paige groaned and pulled her pillow over her head.

Dax slid from the bed, grabbed his phone and walked out of the room.

“We arrived,” Bucket advised. “And, I had to call your friend. These two were being chased by a drone and we had to take improvise. We figured once word reached the extermination squad, they’d converge and our chances of getting out alive would be greatly decreased.”

## Active Discord

---

“Don’t worry about it,” Dax would call Dalia and thank her himself. And, he’d make sure Porter bought her a dozen goats. That should cover the debt and then some. “Just forget the number, forget the contact and forget my involvement in all of this.”

“In what?” Bucket grinned. “I was never here.”

“Right.”

“I think that’s my ride,” Bucket sobered. “I miss having you in the loop, but I hope we never do another one like this.”

“Ditto,” Dax balanced the phone on his shoulder while he prepared the morning coffee.

“I’ll turn this over to Vato,” Bucket decided. “I gotta head out. Frankfurt here I come.”

“Catch you on the flip side,” Dax said softly. “And, don’t get dead.”

“You think he’s headed to another mission?” Solo asked in greeting.

“No idea,” Dax frowned. “I thought he was turning it over to Vato.”

“He said you wouldn’t want to talk to him,” Solo shrugged. “Anyway, thanks for the contact and Bucket told us nobody helped... not even him. We have about an hour before our plane heads to Ammon. Then I’m told we’ll stop in Amsterdam before heading to St. Paul. I assume the General will fill you in once this is all put to rest for good.”

“I suppose,” Dax settled onto a kitchen chair. “You get a rest before you head back out?”

“As far as I know,” Solo settled onto the hard-packed dirt, glad they made it and grateful he had friends like Bucket and Dax.

“Feel free to drop in for a visit if you’re ever in the area,” Dax offered. “I’m sure I owe you a beer... and more, for this one.”

“I’ll take the beer, but we’re good on the rest,” Solo rested his head against a large generator. “This could have gone so wrong,” he whispered. “We had no idea we were compromised. I was worried about the radio silence bit, but we all agreed it had to be that way. That’s the first thing I’m going to add to my verbal report. You never go silent completely. I should have been stopping to check in now and again.”

“It’s not your fault and things worked out,” Dax had already pointed that flaw out to Porter. He’d been a little insubordinate about it if truth be told.

“Thanks to you,” Solo continued. “And, you would have spotted the flaw before I ever left the states.”

## Active Discord

---

“Probably,” Dax agreed. He glanced up when he spotted Paige in the doorway. They wrapped up the conversation and he turned to study her injuries when she settled into the chair next to him and took a long sip of her morning brew.

“Trouble?” Paige asked.

“No,” Dax stood and doctored his own cup before settling in next to her. “The men are safe. Bucket is on his way to Germany as we speak and Solo and Vato will be taking off in about forty.”

“So why the frown?”

“Have you seen your face?”

Paige shrugged. “Battle scars.”

“You’re going to scare small children,” he glanced up at the knock on the back door. “Come in.”

Hawk and Ken stepped through the door. Hawk opened his mouth to say something, spotted Paige and just stared in shock.

“Seriously?” Paige stood and casually walked to the counter, poured another cup of coffee, and headed for the door. “You’d think the three of you had never seen a black eye before.” She continued through the door, down the hall, and back up the stairs. She needed to get ready for work. They had two more criminals to catch. She was glad Dax’s friends were safe, one less thing to worry about. Now, if she could just get Nathan Porter to stop chasing bad guys and let his team of military hotshots take the risks, life would be good.

“What happened to her?” Hawk finally asked. “I thought she had the night off.”

“She got called in and collided with a guy’s fist.”

“Ouch,” Ken settled in a chair across the table. “Jeeves probably has something that would help.”

“I doubt she’d let him near it,” Dax shrugged. “The men made it to Wolverine.” He went on to explain the mission, the complications, and the outcome.

“You enlisted the help of the Flowering Sycamore,” Hawk decided.

“I did,” Dax affirmed.

“The what?” Ken frowned.

## Active Discord

---

“It’s not important,” Dax brushed it off. “Once they reach Washington, Porter should be there to intercept the two of them and stash them away where it’s safe. Vato is going to need to visit Camille. But, once they’re done, I’d like to have some time to debrief him myself.”

“To make sure he’s telling us everything,” Ken surmised. “I’d like to think we can trust him, same as we used to but there are a few things that don’t make sense. That’s my take, anyway.”

“I agree,” Dax stood when he heard Paige. “Give me a minute.” He left the room and caught Paige just before she disappeared out the front door. “No goodbye?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” she leaned in and gave him a quick peck. “Or, give you nightmares. Apparently, my face scares small children.”

Dax pulled her closer. “Be safe and don’t stop any more fists with your face,”

“I can’t make any promises,” she took a step back. “I could be late. I was able to watch the news before I came back down. Our two missing felons won’t be able to take a leak without one of Manti’s astute citizens spotting them and calling it in.”

“But that means you will have several dozen sightings that aren’t really sightings at all,” Dax realized. “You’re going to have to check them all out. I get it. We have a plan of our own to start planning. If you can’t make it home for dinner, make sure you take the time to eat.”

“Love you,” Paige leaned in and gave him a goodbye kiss before she pulled open the door and disappeared.

\*\*\*\*\*

“I understand,” Paige dropped her head onto her desk in frustration. “Yes Mrs. Walcott, I got that, too. I believe you. I’ll look into it. I’m sure you’re right. Yes, that would be frightening. Uh-huh. Thank you for calling.” Paige hung up before the woman remembered something else that was traumatic and urgent.

Lovato silently watched Paige as she reached out, fumbled around and missed the base on her desk twice, connected and finally hung up the phone. She did this without looking up, her head was still planted face down and resting on the wooden surface of her workspace. When the phone started ringing again, she finally raised her head a few inches, focused on him and pointed to his phone.

“Margie will get it,” Lovato ignored the phone as it rang two more times.

## Active Discord

---

“I will just have to call them back later,” Paige pushed her body into an upright position and settled against the back of her chair. “And then I’ll have to deal with another well-meaning citizen who just thought they should call and let me know. Seriously, Mrs. Walcott? That woman couldn’t identify the Goodyear Blimp if it was hovering three feet above her head. She’s blind as a bat. That wasn’t a lead... it was a negative lead.”

Lovato laughed. “Paige, you have to learn to listen, jot down the basics and pretend like you believe them. Then, you hang up and file the information in the “not in this lifetime” pile and move on.”

“I’m just wondering how you and I got stuck with desk duty again,” Paige frowned. “Following bad leads. I seem to recall not too long ago we were in these exact spots, making these exact same calls, probably to the exact same people.”

“Just lucky, I guess,” Lovato reached for the phone when another line began to ring.

Paige listened to her colleague. Lo wasn’t a bad guy. In fact, sometimes he was almost human and he was a great cop. As much as he tended to annoy the locals on routine calls, he was a pro at the PR when it came to stuff like this. They were lucky to have him.

“Grab your jacket,” he stood and waited by her desk.

“What do you have?”

“Maybe nothing,” Lo handed Paige the information. “But, like I said last time, you’ve gotta get out of the office now and again and chase down the decent ones. Otherwise, you’ll get stir crazy. Let’s take a break and do a little chasing.”

“You might as well look into this one as well,” Marge held out another sheet of paper. “Seems George spotted a couple vagabonds loitering at that park across from the temple. Said they looked like the men we’re after, but he can’t be sure. The instant he headed that way, the two of them took off. He thought it seemed mighty suspicious and thought you should know.”

Paige sighed. It was suspicious, maybe. Or, it was just a couple out-of-town men who stopped to snap a photo and headed out once they were finished.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Now what are you doing?” Lovato asked when Paige fired up her laptop and tried to balance it on her lap. He was driving north, headed out to investigate a theft called in by a camper up the canyon. Could be their suspects desperate to find a place to crash. With the photos plastered everywhere, they had to be scrambling to find a way out. Not only had the media run the story, but the links were popping up constantly on social media. Margie had even

## Active Discord

---

put the details on the department's website and social media platforms. Word was spreading, and the entire community wanted to help catch the terrorist that had blown up their feed store. To them, it was personal. Liam and Ryan had hit the wrong town.

"I want to map out the reports we think are credible," Paige shifted and added another pin to her map. "The places we've been where we think someone really did see our suspects."

"Like the park across from the temple?"

"Yes," Paige added another pin. "And the market. I also think there's a good chance this call is also legit. They don't have a way out of town, the bomb guys impounded their car. They can't just check into a motel because there's not a place in this county where they wouldn't be spotted and reported."

"So, you think they headed up the canyon and stole a tent and some bedding?" Lovato actually agreed. The instant the call came in, his cop senses told him they had another lead. It was the reason he volunteered to handle the detail.

"I do and so do you," Paige glanced at him. "Okay, I think I have them all and if we're right, they've been headed in this direction all day."

"I still can't figure why they didn't split up," Lovato made a right turn onto the canyon road. "They keep getting spotted because they're staying together. It would have been smarter to go their separate ways and try to blend."

"They shot a security guard and tried to blow up the feed store," Paige pointed out. "How smart can they be?"

"You know what I mean," Lovato grumbled.

"I do," Paige had been wondering the same thing. "I'm thinking they are the only ones that can answer that."

Lovato pulled off the gravel road and parked in a large meadow. "I think this is the right spot."

A woman in her thirties stepped from a small trailer and approached the two deputies. "I'm Michelle Carlson," she held out a hand. "I know for you this is probably a nuisance call, but the trailer is so small we let the boys put up a tent. It keeps them out of our hair and it gives them a little independence. Anyway, we all went fishing earlier this morning and when we got back this afternoon, the tent was gone. Vanished and the sleeping bags, pillows and even little Bobby's bag of snacks... all gone. It wasn't windy or anything, so I can't imagine mother nature is responsible. It just had to be theft, it's the only explanation."



## Active Discord

---

Paige took the lead. She finally got the mother calmed down, had a detailed description of the missing items, down to the purple thread she'd tied to the zipper of Bobby's sleeping bag and the transparent fishing line she had used to repair a small tear in the window of the tent. If they found the thief, they'd know it. Paige assured the family they would drive the area and see if they could spot their missing property. It took longer than she had hoped, but they were finally back on the road looking for a suspicious tent.

"I guess I should tell you," Lovato finally said. "If I find the tent and the bags, I won't be booking them into evidence. I'll take pictures, document the repair and the string but then I'm taking that property back to that family."

Paige agreed, but she wondered why. She was still trying to formulate her question when Lovato answered it for her.

"I was raised in a big family," he began. "Dad tried to get out, fishing, hunting, the works as much as possible. But our setup was basically the same as theirs. We could only afford a small trailer big enough for the parents and the smaller kids. The rest of us older boys had to make due in a tent. It was a pain, at first, to set up. But, we realized out there... out in the wilderness all alone, it was a grand adventure. And if anyone had told us we had to crash inside the trailer after that... well, I'll just say it would have ruined the entire vacation."

"Mom and I never went camping," Paige admitted. "I think it was too much of a reminder of dad. Anyway, I can't relate, but I think I understand. And I agree, if we find the tent and bedding, we get to be the heroes. We get to save the day and return them. You won't get any arguments from me."

"Good..."

"Stop the car," Paige reached out and touched Lovato's arm. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"There's something colorful back there," Paige pointed off to the side of the road. There was a small camping spot on the side of the road but it was empty. To the left was a thick grove of trees.

"I didn't see it, but let me back up and we can check it out," Lovato decided. He put the vehicle in reverse and was directly in front of the area where Paige had seen something when he spotted it himself. He maneuvered the truck to the side of the road so another vehicle could snake past and parked. He was rounding the front of his car when a shot rang out and collided with his windshield, barely missing Lovato as it whizzed past his head. "Take cover!" he called out to Paige as he scrambled to move behind the left tire.

## Active Discord

---

Paige had just climbed from the truck when she heard gunfire. Before she could identify where it came from, the windshield shattered. She dropped to the ground and crab walked backward until she was completely under the back-end of the vehicle. She pulled her gun and waited. It didn't take long. She couldn't see the man's face, but a pair of jeans-clad legs emerged from behind a tree. He was approaching from the rear, probably hoping to catch Lo off guard and ambush him before he could respond. "Lo?" Paige whispered. "Incoming at your six."

"Copy," Lovato whispered into his walkie, hoping Paige had her radio on her. "I can't see him yet."

Paige hit the button on her own walkie and again and started to whisper. "Dispatch, shots fired. We're up Ephraim Canyon near Pete's Hole." She watched as the pair of legs moved closer. "Lo, he's closing in about fifty yards out, still at your six."

"I'm not going to see him until he's right on me," Lovato realized.

Paige took a deep breath and silently moved further to the back of the truck. She could finally see the man's entire body. It was Ryan and he still had the gun. Where was Liam? She studied the surrounding area closely but still couldn't see their second man. Maybe Ryan was here alone. Paige shifted and got into position just as Ryan shuffled to his left and raised his pistol. She took aim and fired. Ryan went down immediately. She was still scrambling to get out from underneath the truck when Lovato appeared and held out his hand.

"He's dead," Lo said softly. "But I can't see Liam Duncan anywhere."

Paige gripped Lovato's outstretched hand and let him pull her to her feet. "Let's move that way," she pointed to the thick stand of trees. "It will give us cover and we won't be sitting ducks like we are out here."

"Keep your gun ready," Lovato moved to stand on the left side of Paige. If anyone got shot today, it would be him.

"We're going to talk about that," Paige scowled. "Once we're in a controlled environment."

"Copy," Lovato took a deep breath before he darted out into the open and disappeared into the trees.

Paige kept pace with her partner and relaxed a little once they were shrouded in shadows and the thick aspen that surrounded them. "Let's try to make our way toward the tent," Paige whispered.

## Active Discord

---

Lovato nodded and headed that way. They were only about fifteen feet away from the tent when Liam emerged. He immediately raised his hands into the air and dropped to his knees. "I'm not armed. Ryan forced me to do this. I didn't want any part of it, but they threatened to kill me if I didn't participate."

"Don't move," Lovato commanded. "You stay here, cover me while I check it out."

"Be careful," Paige moved forward and aimed her gun at the man's head.

"I'm coming in," Lovato called out. "Don't make any sudden moves or my partner will shoot."

Liam bit back a curse. He was trapped and somehow these two small-town cops weren't making any of the usual mistakes. He had to come up with an excuse for the gun. How could he explain an illegal pistol tucked down the back of his jeans? Especially after he'd just told them he wasn't armed. His fingers itched to grab it and take his chances, but if the man really had a partner with a gun pointed in his direction, he might be able to kill one cop, but he would also end up dead. He wasn't ready to die, not yet.

Lovato grabbed the man's right hand shifted to cuff it. He brushed his knee against the man's back and felt the gun. Instinct kicked in and he had the man face down in the dirt, wrists cuffed and the gun tossed aside in a matter of seconds. "Thought you said you weren't armed."

Liam studied the cop, not sure how to respond so he didn't say a word.

Paige moved forward, away from the shadows and focused on their prisoner. She crouched in front of him to get a better look at his hands. It didn't take long, only a couple seconds. She stood and took a step back. "This one is our bomb maker."

"You sure?" Lovato asked. He took a step forward, then stopped when he heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. "I think the boss just arrived."

"I'm sure," Paige locked eyes with Liam. "He's got gunpowder stuck under his fingernails." There was more, but now wasn't the time to explain it. "Let's get him up and secured. Then we can come back and tear down the tent. Little Bobby's vacation just might be saved after all."

"Stand up," Lovato ordered. Liam ignored the request. Lovato moved forward, gripped a large chunk of Liam's hair and pulled. In a matter of seconds, Liam was on his feet, marching back toward the cars.

Paige grinned, enjoying Lo's unconventional methods. She thought he'd let go of the man's long hair once he was on his feet, but she'd been wrong. He continued to direct their prisoner like a horse being guided by a set of reins. Once they reached Gage and his patrol car,

## Active Discord

---

Lovato shoved Liam forward. Gage caught him, helped him into the back seat and slammed the door.

“Who shot him?” Jericho asked.

“Me,” Paige held out her gun. “I know you’ll need this and I’ll have to head to the office to be interviewed but first, Lo and I need to return a tent.”

“I heard,” Jericho glanced through the trees and spotted a bright swath of purple and a small patch of blue. “I assume the victims were kids.”

“They were,” Lovato stepped forward. “And I promised them if we found their property they could have it back.”

“Photograph everything, then return it,” Jericho decided. “There’s no good reason to ruin a couple kids vacation over this. We have our man and the theft of a tent is small in comparison to the other charges that man is facing.”

“Thanks,” Paige started to turn.

“But,” Jericho continued. “Lovato and Reed are going to have to do it. I need you back at the office. You can call Eric Graham on the way. I’ll transport you, Gage can handle Duncan.”

“Logan’s not here,” Paige began. She stopped when she saw another marked unit approaching the area. “Never mind.” She sighed and headed for Jericho’s passenger seat. She had barely buckled in when her boss accelerated, made a sharp U-turn and headed towards town.

“Are you mad?” she finally asked.

“I can’t talk to you about the shooting,” he turned to look at her. “But, no. Not exactly.” Jericho sighed. “Paige, look at you. You have a bruise the size of Montana that occupies the entire left side of your face. Your eye is bloodshot and you’re still limping. And to top it all off, that man tried to kill you.”

“If it makes you feel better,” Paige held back a grin. “I think he was trying to kill Lo.”

“It doesn’t,” Walters pressed a little harder on the gas pedal. “You’re off until after Thanksgiving. No argument. You need time to recover and that...” he waived his hand backward. “That’s going to take time. You’ll be on paid leave until Tolman clears you. I don’t need to hear it, I know it was justified but we have to go through the process and you need time to deal with Nathan and his band of merry men.”

“I don’t even know where Nathan is,” Paige complained.

“He’s here, in town,” Jericho glanced at Paige. “You didn’t know they were coming?”

## Active Discord

---

“They?”

“He has his wife, Sophie, I believe, with him.”

“I guess we did talk about spending the holiday together, but that was before.”

“Before he had to save the world from a rogue government agent, an unsuccessful businessman and a bunch of assassins that used to run around in camo and blow things up?”

“Yeah,” Paige smiled. “Before that.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige was halfway through the door when she spotted Nathan. He was out of his chair and across the room the instant he saw her. He gripped both of her shoulders and studied her face. Just when she thought he might release her, he pulled her closer and engulfed her in a big bear hug. Paige appeased him, wondering if this was for her... or him. She knew the General’s life was unraveling and after the last few weeks, he didn’t know who to trust anymore.

“I’m fine,” Paige finally assured him. “And, since I had to shoot someone today, you’re in luck. I have a few days off to catch up.”

“You shot someone?” Nathan took a step back and again, took a minute to study her face. “You okay, kid?” An image of a middle-aged man sitting on a chair in a dark corner, a rundown apartment, and a rifle aimed in his direction as he opened the door, flashed in his mind. Nathan pushed it aside. He wanted to focus on Paige, not deal with his most recent ghosts.

“Did he hurt you?” Dax finally asked.

“No,” Paige moved forward and settled into a chair. “It was the same guy that shot the security guard last night. And, I think he was aiming at Lo. Got his windshield and came around the back to try again. I had to stop him. I didn’t have a choice. Other than him, nobody got hurt. Well, except the truck and the Mayor’s budget. But, I think they’ll survive.”

“I doubt it was that simple,” Nathan settled into a chair across from Paige. “Can you tell us? I think both of us could use a little distraction.”

“Is everything okay?” Paige was worried now. Had something happened to the Rangers before they made it home?

“It’s fine,” Dax moved across the room and settled onto the couch. “Solo and Vato are here. They’ll be staying with Hawk and the others at my place.”

## Active Discord

---

“Which means Sophie and I will need to crash here, if that’s okay,” Nathan reached out and patted Paige’s leg. “It might be a little crowded, but I think we can manage.”

“Why are they here?” Paige wondered if she would like Vato. After everything that had happened, the meeting was going to be awkward.

“And I might as well tell you, because you are going to find out eventually,” Dax sighed. “Piper is back.”

“Why?”

“I think she smells a story,” Dax frowned.

“And, I think I put up too many roadblocks,” Nathan added. “She came back here to sniff around because of the unit. Dax and his men have been staying in one place for months. She’s decided that’s significant and she’s determined to uncover why.”

“Can we,” Paige considered. “I don’t know, do something that will lead her on a wild goose chase? I want her gone.”

“I think,” Nathan hesitated. “Under the circumstances, it might be better to let her sniff around on her own. Nobody in this town knows anything. As long as Carmen and the men don’t talk, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“But...” Paige began, then stopped when Sophie stepped into the room. Nathan’s face lit up like the north star. He rose, crossed the room and took her hand. They strolled casually across the room as Nathan led her to the couch. Paige watched with admiration. She had always envied the love they had for each other. Her gaze shifted to Dax. Could they ever have that? The kind of love that stopped everything in the room when she walked in? She smiled. Probably not. She was lucky if Dax noticed her, especially when the room was full of Rangers.

Once Sophie was settled, she focused on Paige. “I’d like to hear the story behind that bruise, dear. And, I think I heard you say you were forced to defend the life of a fellow cop this evening. I have to say, I’m starting to think it was much safer for you in Quantico.”

Paige shifted when Dax stood and moved to the couch. He settled in next to her and immediately took her hand in his. Paige glanced down, momentarily wondering if she’d been wrong. Maybe they could have that kind of connection. The same strong bond the Porter’s had always enjoyed. She forced her mind to push that topic aside, it was a worry for another day. With a deep breath, she began to tell the story of four animal rights activists that set out to destroy the area’s feed production in a misguided attempt to liberate farm animals everywhere.