

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Winter Crisis *Season 3, Episode 9*

by:

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Paige slowly opened one eye and rolled over, expecting to find Dax still sleeping soundly. He wasn't there. She glanced at the clock and frowned. It was barely after six. That sinking feeling she'd been having for the last few weeks was back. Something was wrong but Dax wouldn't talk about it. He wouldn't even admit there was a problem. Was it her? Or something with the project the guys were working on.

She climbed from the bed, dressed, and headed for the kitchen. She needed coffee if she couldn't have her man. She settled into her favorite recliner, doctored coffee in hand, and considered. She knew Dax was next door with the team. She knew they were working on some top-secret mission involving Reynold's partner and his co-conspirators. She knew if he wanted her there, he would have invited her. But, at the moment, she was finding it hard to care. Forty minutes later, she had a thermos full of her morning magic in hand as she climbed the front stairs and rang the doorbell. If Dax wasn't going to invite her over, she'd just invite herself.

Dax frowned at the sound of the doorbell. Who would be at his front door this early in the morning? He stood, but Hawk beat him to it.

Hawk glanced out the front window and grinned. "It's Paige," he focused on Dax. "I told you she was losing patience with you."

"I'll take care of it," Dax started for the door.

"I've got it," Hawk swung the heavy wooden door open wide and took a step back in invitation. Not what Hamilton had in mind, but the guy was going to ruin the best thing that ever happened to him. Hawk wasn't going to let that happen. Paige Carter was perfect for their obstinate leader, but somewhere in the past couple of weeks Dax had taken a wrong turn. Hawk was determined to correct course.

"Hawk," Dax warned.

Paige could tell Dax wasn't happy to see her. She wondered why Hawk had allowed her through the door. Normally, Dax called the shots; but, by the look on his face, Hawk was in some serious trouble. She regretted that... a little, but it couldn't be helped. She turned away from Dax and finally noticed the room. Someone had spent a lot of time creating a diagram of Reynold's players on a large whiteboard. There was also a corkboard leaning against the fireplace full of photos. "You've been busy." Paige studied the whiteboard carefully. She didn't recognize some of the names. She knew Nathan had been working nonstop to bring every player to justice, but she hadn't realized just how many he'd already identified and captured.

"We have," Dax continued to watch Paige. He was conflicted. He wanted her input, but he also wanted to protect her. He wanted to keep her safe. He knew he couldn't do that when she was on the job. The huge bruise she'd gotten fighting a domestic terrorist group that was trying to blow up the feed store, proved that in technicolor. But he didn't have to bring additional

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danger into her home, or her life. He understood that now. He had watched Porter with Sophie over Thanksgiving and realized he'd been a terrible boyfriend. He'd been including Paige in the danger instead of protecting her from it. Seeing Nathan pamper and protect his wife had made Dax feel selfish. He was trying to do better, but it seemed the universe was conspiring against him.

Paige continued to ignore Dax, but it took effort. For weeks now, she'd been trying to figure out when their relationship had changed. Was it while Nathan was still here or after he left? She didn't know. And, since she didn't know, she couldn't pinpoint the cause. A notation at the top of the board caught her eye. "Is this," she pointed to the writing. "Are you certain you're looking for a Colonel; or, is that a guess?"

"We're certain," Ken moved in closer. "Nathan confirmed it with a member of the team that was sent to eliminate Vato."

Paige focused on the newest addition to the team. She still hadn't figured him out and she was pretty sure he didn't approve of her involvement. With any of it; definitely in the mission, but did he resent her relationship with Dax as well? Was that the rub? Could Vato be the reason Dax had changed so abruptly? Paige turned back to address Ken. "Was this board your doing?"

"Yeah," Ken shrugged. "It's a logistics thing, I guess you could say."

"Ken does love his whiteboards," Zeus said cheerfully. "Nathan got Secretary Harris to round up the entire unit that was sent to deal with Solo and Vato. It was pretty easy to weed out the bad actors from the ones that were completely in the dark. Unfortunately, that left a few in the middle. The General is still working on that; but, there was a sergeant — a guy that is somewhere in the middle — he revealed that intel about the Colonel. We think it's Reynold's partner."

"Harris had Hastings picked up around the same time Bucket crossed the border into Iraq," Hawk explained. "He wanted to make sure Hastings was out of contact with the men while the rescue was in play. When the lieutenant on the ground couldn't reach Hastings, he called some colonel to get further instructions. The sergeant overheard at least part of the conversation. By that time their target — meaning Solo and Vato — had been intercepted by Bucket and the three of them were headed in the opposite direction."

Paige nodded. "Sounds like a pretty solid lead."

"Glad you approve," Vato said sarcastically. "Why is she even here? She's a civilian. Since when do we work with civilians?"

"Since the rest of us became civilians," Hawk said in challenge.

Paige tried not to be hurt by Dax's silence but failed.

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“That’s different,” Vato disagreed. “We all know she’s only here because she’s dating Dax. But Jeeves didn’t bring his wife into the mission.”

“That’s because Nancy is a trauma nurse. If I thought we needed additional medical personnel, Nancy would be here.”

“Fine,” Vato turned to Ken. “You didn’t bring your wife.”

Paige tuned them out. She was trying to figure out Ken’s method. Some connections were obvious, but some were in the wrong place.

“What did we miss?” Dax finally asked. He’d been watching Paige and realized she’d spotted a problem with the information; or, a flaw in the diagram.

Paige turned to face him, but he kept his face completely neutral. She had no idea what he was thinking at the moment, but at least Vato had finally shut up. She didn’t blame him for his skepticism, in fact, she expected it. She’d gone through the same thing with the rest of the guys months ago. She was just tired of it. She shouldn’t have to prove herself over and over again. Especially not to the man she loved. Paige turned away from Dax and focused on Ken. “Why did you put these two over here?” She was referring to Corporal Danny Crenshaw and the assassin he had hired to eliminate Nathan. Her mentor was another person that was keeping secrets. At least, before he left town, he finally relayed the story to her and admitted he’d been forced to kill a man in self-defense.

“Because...” Ken began to study the board, not sure what he missed. “They’re just periphery.”

“Paige?” Dax pushed.

Paige continued to focus on Ken. “When Nathan was here, he showed me a file you guys compiled on Danny Crenshaw and his hired hitman. Do you still have a copy of that file?”

“Uh,” Ken glanced at Dax. Once his leader gave him a subtle nod, he moved to a stack of files and began sifting through them. It only took a minute to find the one he wanted. “What are we looking for?” Ken asked, setting the file on the table and flipping it open.

“Now, we’re letting her look through the files?” Vato demanded.

“Shut up or leave,” Dax moved in next to Paige. He didn’t like being ignored and it was obvious she was doing it on purpose.

Vato dropped onto the couch with a dramatic thud and a grunt.

“I remember seeing a name in here,” Paige reached for the file. “Do you mind?”

Ken pushed it her way.

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“Do you guys have a list of Colonels that you’re working from?” she asked absently as she flipped through pages.

“Do you have any idea how many colonels there are in the army?” Vato mumbled.

Paige looked up and focused on Hawk. “You don’t need to list all of them. We know he has to work in Washington. I would think that narrows the search to someone stationed at the Pentagon.”

“Right,” Hawk pulled out his phone and snatched up a pad of paper and a pen before he settled into a chair to start a list of potential suspects.

Vato watched and wondered what happened to his team. The guys he knew would never accept a suggestion from a local the way these guys just did.

“Got it,” Paige snatched up one of the sheets of paper triumphantly.

“What?” Dax asked, taking the page from her hand. He moved in behind her and wrapped his right arm around her waist, pulling her body against his. Then, he leaned forward and whispered in her ear so only she could hear. “Tell us what you found, then we need to talk.”

Paige closed her eyes and took a deep breath to calm her nerves. Dax always had this effect on her and he knew it. He knew she couldn’t resist that deep seductive voice or his hot breath tickling that sensitive spot right below her ear. But she wouldn’t let him win that easily. She tried to take a step away, but he just tightened his grip and pulled her closer.

“What did you find, Paige?” he knew she found something, and it sounded important. But, at the moment, all he wanted to do was throw her over his shoulder and carry her back to her house.

Paige grabbed the page back from Dax and set it on the table in front of them. “Here,” she pointed to a paragraph halfway down the page. “It says Crenshaw was disciplined over an incident in Iraq. He claimed he was just following orders and tried to appeal, but the panel felt he engaged in conduct unbecoming.”

“How does that pertain?” Hawk asked.

“Because,” Dax looked up. “His supervisor, the guy he blamed for giving the order, was Colonel Terry Louis Devonshire.”

The entire room stared dumbfounded at the revelation.

“How did we miss that?” Zeus finally asked.

“He works at the Pentagon,” Hawk added.

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“Because we didn’t look,” Dax realized. He also realized just how stupid it had been to keep Paige out of the investigation.

“I’m clearly missing something,” Paige said looking at each of the men in the room wondering who this Devonshire was.

“Devonshire hates Porter,” Vato provided. He was kicking himself for not making the connection himself. Especially with Hastings involvement. “The good General blocked his promotion... because of that incident in Iraq.”

“Among other things,” Dax sighed. “Ken start gathering everything you can on Devonshire. See if you can map his movements for the past few months. Zeus, call Carmen and get her started on his financials. I need to call Porter. He’ll want to ask Bratton about this new development when they speak.”

“Nathan is going to talk to Bratton?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” Dax took her hand and started for the front door. “We’ll be back in a while.”

Paige thought about resisting, but in all honesty, she didn’t want to. She silently followed Dax next door and sighed in frustration when he retrieved his secret phone and dialed Porter.

“Is this important?” Nathan asked in greeting. “Harris and I are headed up to deal with Bratton as we speak.”

“Colonel Terry Devonshire,” Dax answered.

Nathan stopped abruptly in surprise. “What led you to him?” he finally asked.

“Paige,” Dax settled onto the couch. “He’s connected to Crenshaw.”

“The incident in Iraq,” Nathan said softly. “I should have thought of that. I should have made the connection myself.”

“What happened now?” Secretary Harris demanded.

“I’ve got to go,” Porter decided. “I’ll fill Harris in. Have Carmen do a deep run. We need everything. I’ll call you once we’re finished with Bratton.”

“I’ll look forward to the call,” Dax clicked off. “Now,” he studied Paige for several seconds. “I’m sorry.”

“For?” she asked hesitantly.

“For freezing you out,” he motioned to the couch in invitation. “I’d like to explain why if you’re willing to listen.”

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Paige moved forward, wondering if she should follow his orders so easily. She settled on the couch next to him and was a little surprised when he took her hand. Dax didn't speak immediately, he just stared at her hand as he gently rubbed circles with his thumb along the top.

"The night you came home injured, it bothered me more than it should have," he said softly. "I tried to brush it off. I told myself it was the job; and, now and again, you were going to get hurt doing your job. I don't like that, but I thought I understood it."

"And every day since was a reminder?" Paige realized. "Is that what's been going on with us?"

"Partially," Dax admitted. "It was a reminder," he reached up and gently ran his hand over her left cheek.

"Dax," Paige took his hand in hers.

"Wait, I'm not finished." He brought her hand to his lips and gently kissed her knuckles. "Then, Nathan and Sophie showed up for Thanksgiving. I watched you that first night. I saw the amazement and the longing on your face the instant Sophie stepped into the room. Nathan's whole world was consumed by that woman. And, I realized I don't give you that. I love you and in some ways, you are my world; but, I don't..."

"Dax," Paige wasn't sure what to say. She was a little embarrassed that her thoughts and emotions had been read so easily that night.

"I continued to watch, every day, as they visited," Dax continued. "And one day it hit me..."

"What?" Paige frowned.

"I don't protect you," Dax settled back against the couch. "I know you are constantly in danger at work. I know it's part of the package and I can't do anything about that. But, when you come home, I pull you in. I expose you to more danger and it's selfish. I've been trying to do better, but it seems my entire team is conspiring against me. Plus, I need you involved. Do you have any idea how much time we've spent trying to figure out who the Colonel could be? And you walk in, study the board for less than two minutes, and immediately know exactly who we're up against."

"We don't know that for sure," Paige argued. She didn't know how to respond to this conversation. She had looked at Nathan and Sophie with envy; but, it was different. Sophie was... soft. She needed Nathan to protect her but that's not what Paige wanted in a man. She needed someone that would treat her as an equal. She wanted the relationship she used to share with Dax — before their surprise Thanksgiving visitors.

"I know," Dax disagreed. "The instant you said it, everything suddenly clicked into place."

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“I can tell it clicked for the rest of your team, too. Did Nathan agree?”

“Yes,” Dax sighed. “It’s not just one thing. It’s a whole string of them linked together. And, it should have been obvious. Except, he’s been careful. He made sure his name was miles away from this thing. The man isn’t just dirty, he’s a psychopath. What he did to those villagers in Iraq, it was pure evil. Nathan blocked his promotion. He found out about the slaughter and proved Devonshire lied. Some of the men confided in Porter, told him how much Devonshire enjoyed it, and Nathan put everything he had into ruining that man’s career.”

“Sounds like he had good reason,” Paige was starting to understand. “And you? Does he have a beef with you, personally?”

“A slight one,” Dax admitted. “But, it’s mostly animosity toward my team. Not just me.”

“Which means he has a reason to want all of you dead,” Paige surmised. “Great.”

“He’s not a match for my team, Paige.”

“I hope you’re right,” Paige hesitated, wanting to get this right before she continued. “I understand how my job impacts you. I understand, because your job impacts me, too. I understand because I saw what it did to mom when my dad was killed. And I know, every time I walk out that door, you wonder if I’m coming home. The same as I do every time you leave town with your men. Every time you are forced to deal with another problem associated with this Reynold’s thing.”

“I know,” Dax sighed. “So, what do we do about it?”

“We don’t try to change who we are, for starters.”

“Meaning?” Dax asked.

“Meaning,” Paige smiled. “I’m not Sophie Porter. I’m not weak and pampered and I don’t want to be. I have no interest in being protected, Dax. I want us back.”

“I saw your face,” Dax disagreed.

“I’m not sure how to explain that,” Paige admitted. “I do envy Nathan and Sophie. What they have, the bond they share, the love that has lasted decades... I think I’d like to have that someday. And, watching the way Nathan is with Sophie did make me think. He loves her so much, the instant she walks into a room, nothing else matters.”

“And you don’t think I feel the same?” Dax finally understood the look Paige had in that moment.

“I’m not your world, Dax,” Paige shrugged. “Not in the same way. I know you love me. Just like I love you, but we both get caught up in other things. Sometimes, when you’re working

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with your men, I think I could dance naked on the table and you wouldn't even notice I was there. But, when I'm working a case... I think I take you for granted, too."

Dax smiled. "Can we put that to the test?"

"You want me to dance naked in front of your friends?"

"No," Dax didn't have to think about that one. "But you could dance for me."

"Not on your life, pal."

"I'm going to try to work on that," Dax promised. "Not the naked dancing thing," he grinned. "But, I never want you to feel like you don't matter. Because you matter more than anything. I'm just not very good at this."

"That makes two of us," Paige smiled. "Maybe we could work on it together. And don't shut me out. That was the worst part. It wasn't as bad when Nathan was here. But, at the moment, I don't even have work to fall back on."

"Any word on when Tolman will clear you?" Dax frowned. "He knows the shooting was justified."

"No," Paige sighed. "I think he's punishing Jericho. We've had more than our share of problems this past year. Tolman just wants to make sure we break the pattern."

Dax stood and held out his hand. When Paige took it and stood, he grabbed her, threw her over his shoulder, and headed up the stairs.

Paige laughed. "I'm still not going to dance."

Trent Bratton walked down the long, deserted corridor flanked by his boss, Secretary of Defense Mike Harris, and Retired General Nathan Porter. What in the world was going on here? His nerves were jumping all over the place and he wondered if he was going to have a breakdown before this day was through.

He could deal with Harris; the man was an authoritarian, but he was fair. Porter? That man scared him. The guy was connected. His connections went all the way to the Oval Office. There were a lot of people that gave a collective sigh of relief when Porter announced he'd be retiring. It was common knowledge that Nathan Porter had the power, the contacts, and the moxie to orchestrate a world war if he wanted to. Conversely, he'd probably stopped more conflicts internationally than anyone knew. Unfortunately, his retirement was on paper only. He remained active in Washington to this day. His current, top-secret committee was only one

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example of just how deeply involved the former general remained in the game to this day. And he was currently escorting Trent Bratton down an abandoned hallway into a secret facility where his body would never be discovered.

The trio stepped into a large room that contained an uncomfortable looking couch to one side, a small conference table, and several chairs.

“Have a seat,” Harris motioned to the table.

“What is this about?” Bratton demanded. “And what is he doing here?” He turned to glare at Porter, hoping his fake bravado would mask his fear. “I assume you’re responsible for all the theatrics.”

Nathan settled onto the couch. He promised Mike he’d let his friend take point and he was going to honor that promise. But, if Bratton was involved in this... theatrics would be the least of his worries.

The two men stared at each other for several seconds before Bratton caved and settled into one of the executive chairs.

Mike Harris also settled into one of the chairs. “We are here to discuss your behavior over the past several months.”

Bratton frowned, unsure what his boss meant by that.

“It has come to my attention that, on multiple occasion, you have gone behind my back and countermanded several orders I issued personally. I’d like to know why?”

“I don’t understand,” Bratton glanced at Porter then back to his boss. “Do you have specifics?”

Harris pulled out a sheet of paper and set it on the table between them. “I issued that order last month. Two days later, you issued this order.” He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a second sheet of paper. “I’d like to know why. Because my contacts have informed me that, based on your actions, two of our most valued Special Forces operatives nearly lost their lives before they made it out of Iraq.”

Bratton read through the order issued by Harris. “I never saw this.” He had checked, how had he missed this order? Harris would never forgive his actions... and he shouldn’t. But he had checked!

“It is protocol to run the names through the system to make sure you’re not interfering with an ongoing operation before taking the kind of action you implemented, is it not?” Harris demanded.

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“I did,” Bratton focused on his boss. “I ran both Vaughn Turner and Jared Soloman through the system. This was not in there. It wasn’t!”

Harris glanced at Porter, he believed Trent — the man wasn’t this good at acting. *But how?*

“They must have someone inside, a tech we haven’t located yet,” Porter said soberly. “Have you had your computer worked on recently?”

“What? Who?” Bratton asked, confused.

“I’m not willing to get into that yet,” Harris told him. “Has anyone been inside your office to work on your system in the past... six months?”

“Uh...” Bratton tried to remember. “Yeah, the new kid. He said he had to update my firewall. Something about a new spam scheme going around. Other than him... what was his name? Paul? Pete? No, it was Paton. Paton Velasquez.”

Porter stood, “I’ll check on it.”

“What’s going on here, Mike?” Trent asked when Nathan left the room.

“Cole Reynolds,” Mike replied. “I tried to warn you. I subtly suggested you might want to evaluate your friendship with that man and make sure he didn’t pull you into something shady. You chose to get in bed with a traitor and now you’re paying the price.”

Trent closed his eyes, worried how deep this thing with Reynolds actually went. He had trusted the wrong man. Cole was a friend, at least Trent thought he was. His company, Retrocero Inc. had landed the best contracts the government had to offer, because of his many contacts. When Bratton heard his old friend had been arrested, he’d gone over every action he’d made that involved the talented negotiator. He thought he was in the clear. Apparently, he missed something. He just hoped his career wasn’t over because he’d chosen the wrong friend. “How high is the price going to be?”

“That remains to be seen,” Harris sighed. “There are other orders, but I want to talk to you about that one. Why did you deem those two operatives expendable?”

“Hastings,” Bratton explained. “Major Hastings contacted me personally. Said Turner was working for him and he was dirty. He said Turner somehow arranged a transfer because things were getting hot under the Major’s command. Hastings said he was closing in and Turner outmaneuvered him, but our boys’ lives were in danger. I did not see that order, Mike. I learned my lesson after Reynolds, I realized I had to triple run everything. I checked to make sure Vaughn Turner wasn’t working some kind of mission, undercover. I confirmed he wasn’t in the system. There wasn’t a secret mission that would explain his actions. There was nothing there.”

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“Major Hastings was working for Cole Reynolds,” Harris knew the information would be a blow, but Bratton had to know he’d been used. There was no way to soften that blow.

“What?” Trent jumped to his feet and began to pace. “Hastings convinced me to kill two innocent men to cover up Reynolds crimes? I’m going to kill him.”

“You’ll have to find him first,” Mike said flatly. “And I have him hidden away so deep, not even the avenging angel could find him to escort him down to hell.”

Trent dropped back into his chair. “What kind of mess is this? I mean, active military, computer techs, these guys have been screened, Mike. How did they infiltrate the Pentagon? I thought... okay, I know it’s naïve, but I thought I could trust these guys. I got complacent. I assumed the days of foreign spies and internal corruption was behind us.”

“I wish it were,” Mike turned when Nathan stepped back into the room. “Don’t keep us waiting.”

“There is no such person,” Porter settled back onto the couch. “Never has been. The last tech you guys hired was eighteen months ago.”

“That’s not possible,” Trent objected. “He had ID, he had the proper credentials. He was in the system. That’s why I remember his name. I ran him myself.”

“If he could block my orders from showing in your system, he could add a fake profile that only popped up for you,” Mike considered. “But, if we know when he worked on your system, we’ll have video.”

Trent lowered his face into his hands, worried about every decision he’d made in the past six months. “I knew I should talk to you about some of those orders, but we’ve both been so busy. We rarely have five minutes to discuss anything that’s not pressing.”

“I’m starting to wonder if that’s by design,” Mike sighed.

“So,” Trent looked up. “What now? I’ll help in any way I can.”

“I need you to stay here for a while,” Mike told him. “I have other orders I need you to look at. I need to know why you issued each one of them. Who did you talk to? Be specific. Did anyone ask you to produce them? Even the slightest, most casual connection is important. Start with that one. Other than Hastings, did anyone get involved? Not just high level, Trent. I want to know if your secretary prompted you or made sure you completed it before you left for the day... anyone, no matter how insignificant it seems. Once you’ve finished with that one, go through these,” he placed a stack of papers on the desk. “It’s important we catch all of them. I need every name.”

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“I’ll do what I can, but what if I forget someone,” Trent worried. “Or, what if I list someone that’s innocent?”

“I still believe in due process,” Harris stood. “I’m not going to send them to the gallows based solely on your memory. Give us a little credit.” He glanced at Porter and smiled. “Even Nate has standards.”

“Okay,” Trent swallowed hard. He was still worried about his job and his involvement. The military always needed a scapegoat and at the moment he felt like the perfect patsy. No matter how bad the publicity got, Secretary Harris could just point a finger in his direction, throw him under the bus, and walk away clean. Kathy was pushing him to retire and move out to Wyoming closer to the kids — and the grandkids. Maybe he should listen. Maybe he should walk away while he still could. “I’ll handle it,” he finally said. “But, if I’m not allowed to leave, can you let Kathy know? She’ll worry if I don’t come home on time and I haven’t called.”

“I’m going to tell her you are working on something classified,” Mike nodded. “Something that took you out of town unexpectedly. And, it’s sensitive enough you won’t be able to contact anyone until it has been resolved.”

“That will be enough,” Trent was grateful at least his wife wouldn’t have to worry. “Kathy’s been in the life long enough to know how it works. She won’t ask questions.”

“Now,” Porter stood. “We’re going to leave you to that. Just punch the button over there if you have any questions. One of us will get back to you.”

Trent focused on Mike Harris. “I’m sorry. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“That’s worth a lot,” Mike said before he turned and left the room.

Paige practically skipped down the stairs and started to hum as she doctored her coffee. She turned and spotted Dax, grinning. “What?”

“Nothing,” Dax answered, amused. “I’ve just never seen anyone this happy to be going to work. Especially not in a snowstorm like this one.”

“I know it’s pathetic,” Paige settled onto a chair next to him. “But I’m going stir-crazy. You can only binge watch Netflix so long before it feels like watching paint dry.”

“I know,” Dax stood and dumped his remaining coffee in the sink. “I’ll be next door all day if you need me. Carmen found something on Devonshire last night that we need to look into.”

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“I’ll be happily assisting Manti’s residents while they deal with the winter chaos,” Paige grinned. She couldn’t help it. Tolman had finally cleared her shooting — deeming it justified after three full weeks. She knew it could be worse. Lo told her, up in Salt Lake, the guys expected their leave to last at least three months after a shooting. She couldn’t even imagine the stress and anxiety that caused. Three weeks was more than she could deal with.

Dax stopped to give her a quick kiss before he pulled on his winter coat and disappeared out the back door.

Thirty minutes later, Paige was backing out of her driveway when her first call came in.

“Fire is on the way,” Margie advised. “It sounds like a simple ambulance back. The family was up the canyon sledding when dad lost control and struck a tree. He’s unconscious, please advise on his condition when you arrive. The family is pretty upset.”

“Copy,” Paige flipped on her lights and maneuvered around a vehicle that was going so slow they might as well just stop and go home. Even the idiot driver couldn’t dampen her good mood.

Unfortunately, her first call did. Paige spotted the family immediately. Fire was already on scene and, from the looks on their faces, it wasn’t good. She pushed out of her vehicle and slogged through a foot of snow before she lost her footing, slid down an embankment, and landed on her butt in a large valley. The area was surrounded by steep hills that should have been the perfect place for family fun. Paige slowly stood and approached the small group that was hovered over a body.

“Let’s talk over here,” one of the firemen said in greeting. “I’ll fill you in on the details.”

They had just stopped a few feet away from the family when another police car pulled up. Jericho climbed out and headed straight for Paige. “You might as well wait,” Paige told the man who was apparently the first on scene. “The boss will want to hear this, too.”

“What do we have, Sam?” Jericho asked soberly.

“We called him just before your deputy arrived, Sheriff,” Sam, the fireman, advised. “It’s officially a fatality. Looks like he was booking it down that hill, lost control, and collided with that tree. I’d say, based on his injuries, he died instantly.”

“I’d like to take a look,” Paige was shifting from one foot to the other, swaying from side to side in an attempt to keep warm.

Jericho grinned. “I think you had one too many cups of coffee this morning. If you can’t stand still, you might as well head over, double check the basics, and make sure this was just a tragic accident. We’ll take it from here,” Jericho held out a hand to Sam. “I’m sure you have

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other calls to handle. It's not even ten and the entire city is already a mess. Just have the ambulance wait in case we need him to transport."

"Will do," Sam shook the sheriff's hand. "Good luck." He turned, motioned for his men to head out, then made his way back up the hill to the engine. The flashing red lights pulsed ominously creating a solemn contrast with the bright white snow as the group of somber firemen climbed aboard and drove away.

"I'll deal with the family," Jericho offered. "You check the body and the sled for any evidence this was something more than the obvious. And, try to be quick. I'm going to catch pneumonia in this wind." He pulled his cap further over his ears in an attempt to protect them from the blizzard raging around them. "And stop smiling," he ordered. "This isn't supposed to be fun."

"Aye, aye, sir," she saluted before she turned and headed toward a grieving family. It wasn't fun. The children were hunched over their father, crying. This family was devastated, and their lives would never be the same. She knew that first hand and empathized more than she wanted to. But she had a job to do. It was probably just an accident the way the fireman said. But Paige was familiar with the sled the man had been using. It was expensive, and the selling point was the fact that this sled had handles that allowed you to steer. An accident like this one was supposed to be impossible. So, what happened? Operator error? Inexperience? Or, something more sinister? *Stop it Paige*, she scolded herself. *You always assume the worst.*

Ten minutes later, Paige stood and approached Jericho. "Let's get him transported. I'm taking the sled in for evidence."

Jericho frowned and pulled her to the side where they couldn't be heard. "Something wrong?"

"The steering mechanism on that sled was cut," Paige whispered. "Not broken, sliced. It's a smooth cut like someone did it with a sharp knife."

"The sled was sabotaged," Jericho realized.

"Yeah," Paige nodded. "Now I just have to figure out who the target was. Because, unless the wife did it..."

"It was random," Jericho concluded. "It's either the wife or it had to be random. Otherwise, the suspect couldn't control which family member would be riding the thing when it malfunctioned."

"Exactly," Paige sighed.

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“Welcome back,” Jericho slapped her on the back. “Let’s get out of this weather. I’ll have John transport the body to the ME’s office. No point in making Benny respond in this mess when we have an ambulance right here.”

“I agree,” Paige focused on the lifeless form now covered with a large blanket. “I’ve got everything I need from the body. I don’t think there are any additional clues that will help, other than the sled.”

“Gage could use some help,” Jericho glanced back at the family. “I’ll get them on their way, you good to handle the rest?”

“Yeah,” Paige said immediately. “In fact, I can take care of them if you want to bolt. Go help Gage. I got this.”

Jericho hesitated, then turned and headed for his vehicle. It was going to be a very long day.

Paige slowly made her way down the nearly empty roadway that led home. She was exhausted — in a good way. Even the mess created by the severe winter weather couldn’t dampen the relief and satisfaction she felt now that she was back on the job. It suddenly hit her, she’d been in Manti for nearly three years and she loved it here. She had finally found the place she belonged. She was proud of the job she’d done in Quantico, and she wouldn’t change the relationship she had with the estimable Nathan Porter for anything, but Manti was home. She’d even found a way into the hearts and minds of the rough, macho team of soldiers occupying the house next door. That alone was a miracle.

Speaking of the house next door, Paige frowned as she pulled into her own driveway and focused on the strange vehicle parked across the street and a few houses to the south of Dax’s home. It was the same white rental she spotted last night. Was someone watching them? Someone working for Reynolds? She focused on her own house. Dax was inside that was obvious from all the lights. She glanced in her rearview mirror and debated, head inside or investigate? Suddenly, her front door swung open and Dax stepped outside. He smiled as he descended the stairs and pulled open the driver’s side door.

“Staying home? Or, did you get called back out?”

“Do you know how long that vehicle has been parked back there?” Paige glanced in her mirror one more time. “The white rental.”

Dax frowned. “Now that you mention it, I think it’s been there at least a couple hours. You want me to check it out?”

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Paige shook her head as she climbed from her vehicle. “No. I’m going to check it out.” She pointed to her chest. “Cop.” She grinned and shoved her finger into Dax’s chest. “Civilian.”

Dax grabbed Paige’s hand and linked fingers with her. “Partners,” he corrected. “Let’s go confront a bad guy.”

Paige knew arguing with the stubborn man wouldn’t do her any good, so she shifted her position, pivoting behind him as she pulled her right hand free and reached out with her left.

“Got it,” Dax grinned. “So, Trigger, how do you want to handle this?”

“You go back to the house and I’ll find out who has been watching you the past few days,” Paige offered.

“How about you tap on the window and I’ll stand to the side and serve as backup,” Dax continued to casually walk toward the vehicle. He tensed when the driver’s side door flew open and a dark figure climbed out. He relaxed when he realized the woman standing in front of them was Piper Weber.

Paige sighed and refastened the strap that secured her service weapon in its holster. She hadn’t even considered Piper Weber, but she should have. “Piper.”

“Paige,” Piper said in dismissal. “I’m here to visit Dax, do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Paige didn’t move. “Go ahead, visit.”

“Why are you here?” Dax asked impatiently. “Why are you staking out my house?”

“I’m researching,” Piper said defensively. “Her friend, General Porter, has blocked me at every turn in Washington. I’m here to find out why. If there was nothing to the hot lead my source provided, Deputy Carter wouldn’t need a powerful General’s interference. The fact she got Porter involved tells me I’m on the right path and this story is huge.”

Paige rolled her eyes. “I’ll leave you to this,” she told Dax. “I’m tired and it’s cold out here. She’s not worth it, see you inside.”

Dax didn’t let go of Paige’s hand. “I agree. Bye, Piper.” He turned and escorted Paige back to the house and through the front door.

“She’s not going away any time soon,” Paige dropped her coat onto the couch. “What is that amazing smell?” Her stomach growled so loudly, she instinctively covered it with her right palm and laughed. “Sorry.”

“Just as I suspected,” Dax rested his hands on Paige’s shoulders, then steered her toward the kitchen. “You didn’t take time to eat lunch, did you?” He pushed her into a chair, moved to the

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stove, and grabbed a huge ladle. “I made beef stew and...” he pulled open the door to the oven. “Fresh rolls,” Dax pulled a glass container from the warm oven. “Dig in,” he dumped the rolls into an empty bowl on the table before dishing a huge bowl of stew and placing it before Paige.

“You did all of this?” She glanced around in amazement. Dax didn’t cook. “Why?”

“Because,” Dax settled into the chair next to Paige and reached out for a hot roll. “I was hungry.”

“Why, Dax?” Paige asked again.

“We had a breakthrough on the Devonshire front,” Dax admitted. “And, since I was done working, and I knew you wouldn’t eat, I thought I’d throw together a quick stew and we could discuss your day and then mine over a hot meal.”

Paige took a bite of the stew and practically moaned. “You should cook more often.”

“Naw,” Dax grinned. “I can pull off a good stew and I’m amazing with a juicy steak and the BBQ, but that’s it as far as my culinary skills go. The rest is up to you, I’m afraid.”

Paige had eaten half her dinner and scarfed down two rolls before she focused on Dax. “What was the break-through?”

“You first,” Dax buttered another roll. “Tell me about your first day back on the job. Was it all you could have hoped for? Did you get to arrest anyone?”

“My first call was a death,” Paige frowned. “I think it might have been murder. But then we got swamped with crashes and stalled vehicles, and I had to put it aside to deal with the storm.”

“You think it was murder, or you know?”

“I know someone cut the lines on a man’s sled,” Paige sighed. “The obvious suspect is the wife. The first suspect is always the spouse but...”

“But...” Dax prompted.

“She was devastated,” Paige frowned. “I mean, completely shattered. And then you have the kids. I just don’t think that mother would kill her husband in front of the kids. They were hysterical. My gut is telling me it wasn’t her.”

“But?” Dax asked again.

“But,” Paige grinned. “If it wasn’t mom, it almost has to be random.”

“How so?” Dax wondered.

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“They were the only people on that hill,” Paige scraped the last of her soup from the bowl.

“Want more?” Dax stood.

“Oh, yeah.” She handed him the bowl and focused out the window. “If his wife didn’t kill him, then someone else cut the line, but they couldn’t have known who would get hurt. It could have been one of the kids, or mom, or they could have loaned the sled to a neighbor. If mom didn’t do it that leaves me with nothing. Well, nothing except random.”

Dax slid the bowls onto the table and considered. “What if it was someone that knew dad would use it first? I mean, it’s the first big snow storm this season. If the family went out to have some fun, would dad test it first? If they hadn’t used it since last year, he may have wanted to make sure it was all working the way it should before he set the kids free on a large hill?”

“That’s good,” Paige dug into her soup. “I have to go back out and talk to mom again tomorrow. I’m going to explore that possibility. I also have to look into his work and his financials. Stan’s working on a warrant for the business stuff,” she frowned again. “There’s something off with that guy. I swear he’s a nervous Nelly every time we work a case. I wonder why.”

“Because you’re scary,” Dax grinned. “What do you want to do about Piper?”

“Ignore her and hope she goes away?”

“Not likely,” Dax studied Paige. “Nathan hit her with obstacles at every turn back in Washington. In Piper’s world, that means you’re hiding something. She’ll gnaw on this until she chews it to death. We did what we had to do. There was no other way to handle it, not with Reynolds and now Devonshire involved, but she’s not going away. Watch your back, babe. She’s out for blood this time.”

“She’s out for blood because she wants you back and she thinks I’m standing in the way,” Paige stood and gathered up the dishes. “Thanks for this, it was amazing. Piper sat outside in that cold car for several hours. Why? I wasn’t here. She had to know I was at work, so why not just march up to the door and try a little seduction? What’s her end game, Dax?”

“She knew it wouldn’t work,” Dax moved to the stove and started putting things away. “But, you’re right. There was a reason she sat out there. Piper never does anything unpleasant without a reason.” He turned and leaned against the counter. “I’ll think about it. Later. Right now, I want to talk about Devonshire and what we found. This new information might take me out of town again and I want your take before I commit to a plan.”

Paige frowned but followed Dax into the living room. They settled onto the couch where she waited silently for Dax to begin. It took longer than she thought it should. “What has you so worried?”

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“Carmen traced some purchases to Arizona,” Dax began. “Just small ones and they could be a ruse.”

“A trick to lure you guys back to the warehouse,” Paige realized.

“Exactly,” Dax settled back and began to run through each purchase. “They were all made at remote locations. None of the convenience stores had camera systems. Not good ones. But, if you follow the trail, they lead right back to Arizona... to Reynolds manufacturing plant. The place they were holding Camille and Zee.”

“So,” Paige considered. “Now you have to decide if Devonshire is hiding, on the run, and he stopped at those places because he thought he could never be traced.”

“Or,” Dax added. “If it wasn’t even Devonshire at all and he’s trying to lay a few breadcrumbs here and there, so we’ll follow them and walk into a carefully planned ambush.”

“Can you show me what you have?” Paige sat up and shifted. “I mean, can I actually see the evidence? It sometimes helps me if I can see it, process it, study it myself for clues or subtle issues.”

“Tonight, or do you want to wait until tomorrow?”

“Tonight,” Paige decided. “I have a murder to solve tomorrow. Has Sean looked at all of it?”

“Not yet,” Dax admitted. “He was called back to Washington to present his final report on the cops murder. I think he’ll be back sometime this week.”

“I’d like him to look at it all, too,” Paige considered. “He’s good, better than he gets credit for. I know you military guys don’t like working with the feds, but Sean might see something the rest of us missed.”

“Or, you might.” Dax stepped onto his front porch and made a subtle perusal of the area, hoping Piper was long gone.

“She’s gone,” Paige smiled when Dax pulled open his front door. “I looked for her, too. Piper is going to be a problem, but she’s a problem for another day.”

“I agree,” the two of them stepped into the warm living room and glanced around. Hawk was sitting on the couch, laptop resting on his thighs as he used a mouse to maneuver around something. Carmen and Zeus were inside the room Carmen had set up as an office. They were arguing about something, Paige couldn’t figure out what. Vato was skimming through files and scowled when Dax stepped inside with Paige. He still didn’t understand her involvement and was pretty sure he never would.

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“I want to start with Carmen,” Paige decided. “Hey, Zeus. Can I have a few minutes with the amazing Fennelly?”

“Sure,” Zeus sighed, stood, and left the room.

“Trouble in paradise?” Paige asked, settling into the chair Zeus had just vacated.

“He wants to move here,” Carmen closed her eyes and sighed. “Permanently. He wants me to transfer out here and work with Sean or something. He doesn’t even know. He just wants to stay. He likes working with Dax and he wants... I don’t think he even knows what he wants. He just wants to stay.”

“And you?” Paige asked hesitantly. She had kind of gotten used to having her friend so close. It was going to be hard when Carmen headed back east.

“I like it here,” Carmen said carefully. “But Nathan sent me here to hide. I don’t see how this could be permanent. I have a job to do, one that is normally in Washington and before that, Quantico.”

“I think it’s a little early to be arguing over logistics,” Paige decided. What was Dax going to do when this assignment was over? They hadn’t discussed it. Did he want to move on? Find another house to flip? Move back east to continue his work with Nathan? Paige had no idea. She forced those thoughts aside and began to quiz Carmen about Devonshire and the new intel.

“Wait,” Paige held up a hand to stop Carmen’s scrolling. “Stop right there.” She waited while Carmen stopped the video.

Dax stepped into the room.

“I thought you said you didn’t have video,” Paige scolded. “What do you call this?”

“I call it a big fat nothing burger,” Zeus grumbled. “I’ve gone over that video a hundred times. The quality is crap and there’s nothing there. The timing is right, but whoever made that purchase knew there was a camera and he was careful to avoid detection.”

“Not so much,” Paige smiled at Dax. “Carmen zoom in. Right, now move the frame a little higher, right there. Okay, just a little to the left. Perfect.”

Dax crouched to get a better look. “It’s blurry,” he focused on Carmen. “Can you enhance it at all?”

“Not much,” Carmen started pushing buttons and working the mouse. “Okay, that’s the best we are going to get, I think. The video is a dozen steps below substandard.”

“That’s Devonshire,” Hawk said from the doorway. “But how?”

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“Reflection,” Zeus shook his head in disbelief. “Why do we even sit here working all day? We should just wait for Paige here to get off work. She can find whatever we’re looking for in about ten minutes.”

“Seven,” Dax corrected and grinned. “Paige found that image in seven minutes. So, it was actually Devonshire who made the purchases. Does that mean he’s running, or he wants us to chase?”

“I think,” Paige settled back against the chair. “He’s running.”

“Why?” Hawk wondered.

“Because if this was some elaborate scheme to get you to chase him,” Paige turned to face Dax. “I think he would have made it obvious. He would have tried to be subtle about it, maybe avoided all the cameras except one. But he would have made it easier to find him. This...” Paige pointed to the screen. “He didn’t know about this. Couldn’t have. He certainly wouldn’t rely on it to draw you in. He thinks he got away undetected. That was the last of it, right?” She asked Carmen.

“Yeah,” Carmen nodded. “That was the last of the video.”

“So,” Paige deduced. “If it’s a trap, he hasn’t set it yet. He could still be out there, formulating a plan. Maybe setting up the ambush, but he doesn’t know you guys know he’s there. I’d stake my life on it.”

“How about ours?” Vato grumbled. Okay, maybe the girl had talent. They had all looked through those files a hundred times and missed it. Still...

“Yours?” Paige stood and shrugged. “Sure.”

“His?” Vato pointed to Dax.

“That’s up to him,” Paige sobered. “You don’t have enough information to determine what Devonshire is doing out there, yet.” Paige frowned. “Why don’t you know? Carmen? I thought you were able to hack their camera system. Shouldn’t there be footage of Devonshire entering the compound?”

“They shut it down,” Carmen said softly. She focused on Zeus. “After the last time these guys got in. They shut the entire system down completely.”

“Why?” Paige shifted to look at Dax again. “Devonshire is a Colonel. He’s a military man. You guys rely on accurate intel. Why would he shut down the camera system? It makes us blind, but it also handicaps him and his men. Why shut it off? Especially if he thinks you don’t know he’s out there.”

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“Good question,” Dax moved out of the small room and headed for the living room and the couch. He settled in to consider. “He didn’t go dark to impede us. As far as he knows we’re still chasing our tails back east. He didn’t leave a trail, not much of one. I doubt he even knows we’ve identified him.”

“Nathan didn’t mention it to Bratton?” Paige asked.

“No,” Dax said absently. “He wasn’t sure where Bratton stood and, even though he’s locked up in a secret holding cell, Bratton could have the means to make contact. They couldn’t risk it until Devonshire was in custody.”

“Bratton is not involved in this,” Zeus insisted. “He may have been tricked into signing a few orders or altering shipments, but he’s not dirty. I know the man better than any of you and he’s unbelievably naïve, but he’s one of the good guys.”

Paige smiled. “He was right about him,” she pointed to Vato. “Well, maybe.”

“I agree,” Dax pulled Paige down next to him. “So why shut down the system?”

The group pondered the new information for several minutes. “He’s preparing another shipment,” Vato finally said out loud. He didn’t have any proof, but it made sense to him. He just wondered if it would make sense to the rest of them... especially the former agent turned deputy. He found himself wanting her approval, and that just irritated him.

“Carmen,” Dax considered. “I know you can’t tap into their system but what about traffic cams? You found a couple last time that we could use. Any chance you can tap in again and monitor what vehicles routinely head that way?”

“On it,” Carmen jumped up and left the room.

“On a different topic,” Dax decided it was time to share with the group. “When Paige got home tonight, Piper was parked up the road watching this place. I know she was out there at least two hours, maybe more. I saw the car when I headed home to start dinner.”

“Why?” Zeus asked, perplexed. “I mean, she knows you’re not ever taking her back. She knows about Paige and she’s been warned. She’d never get through this group without serious consequences. Why sit outside and stake us out?”

“Could she be working for the enemy?” Vato asked.

“Not willingly,” Dax rejected. “But unwillingly?”

“Like they kidnapped someone else?” Carmen asked, stepping back into the room. “It’s recording. I’ll skim through it in the morning.”

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“No,” Dax frowned. “But, if they fed her enough details, changed the players to make Paige and maybe even Sean look dirty, then played up the patriotic duty angle; Piper would bite. Not because she’s patriotic, but because she knows a lot of American’s are. She’d use it to break a big story in hopes of securing another promotion.”

“So, what do we do about it?” Hawk asked. Piper Weber was a distraction they didn’t need on a good day. With everything going on at the moment, the woman’s interference could be fatal. “How do we eliminate the Femme fatale for good?”

“I like the sound of that,” Vato grinned.

“Me too,” Zeus laughed.

“Not funny,” Dax rolled his eyes and glanced at Paige. Her too? The woman wasn’t even trying to hide her smile. “I’ll find a way to deal with Piper. You guys just focus on Arizona and get me some intel on what they’re doing inside that warehouse.”

“Should I call Ken back?” Hawk wondered. Their teammate left that morning to head home and spend a couple days with his family.

“Naw,” Dax stood. “I’ll call him in the morning. He can get started from home. We’ll pick this back up around nine.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Hawk agreed.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Zeus laughed at the one finger wave he got from Dax as his best friend escorted his amazing woman out the front door. Now it was time to deal with Carmen.

Paige slowly opened one eye, then the other. She shifted, knowing it had to be time to get up and head into work, but Dax stopped her. Paige smiled when he wrapped one arm around her waist, pulled her backward, and snuggled closer.

“Morning,” Paige whispered.

“Shh,” Dax gave her ear a gentle kiss then moved to her neck. “I was enjoying the peaceful morning and the warm body.”

“So,” Paige teased. “I’m just some random warm body to you?”

“Of course,” Dax bit her earlobe. “What was your name again?”

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“Louie,” Paige shifted and sat up. “As in V. Slugger.” She started to study the room in an exaggerated way.

“I suppose you want me to ask what you’re looking for,” Dax said flatly.

Paige smiled. “My balls.” She burst out laughing. “Get it? Baseball? Louisville Slugger.”

Dax stood and headed for the door. “Baby, I’m thankful every day that you don’t have any. Although, according to my men, you did steal mine.”

“If you make me coffee,” Paige jumped from the bed. “I’ll give them back.”

“Hallelujah,” Dax laughed and continued into the kitchen.

Two hours later, Paige was pulling into the snow-covered driveway of one Mrs. Yvette Hatchell. She sat in her vehicle for a few extra seconds as she slowly took in the front yard. There was a snow shovel leaning against the garage and someone had taken the time to clear the driveway and the sidewalk that led to the front door. Large red ribbons were tied in a straight line all across the front railing. The family was ready for Christmas. Paige sighed and pushed open the door. They were ready... until yesterday. Now? Paige supposed that would be answered when she solved the mystery. She just hoped three small children didn’t lose their mother so soon after they had witnessed the tragic death of their father.

One of the children in question slowly opened the door when Paige rang the bell. “Hey there.” Paige crouched down to the little boy’s level. “Do you remember me? Deputy Carter? We met yesterday. I’m here to talk to your mommy. Is she here?”

“Anakin,” a female voice came from somewhere inside. “I told you not to open the door without asking.”

“Hello, Mrs. Hatchell,” Paige straightened. “This shouldn’t take long.”

Yvette pushed open the door, taking Anakin’s hand as she waited for Paige to enter. “In here.” She motioned to a sitting room off to the side of the foyer.

Paige turned when she heard a slight noise and smiled at the little girl peeking around the corner. Kammie had also been sledding the day before and Paige guessed she was about eight. She would put Anakin somewhere around five or six. “Before we get into the details,” Paige began. “Can you tell me the full names of your children and their birthdates? I need the basics for my report.”

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“Oh,” Yvette settled onto a chair, pulling Anakin onto her lap. “This is Anakin Dillan Hatchell and he’s six.” She relayed his birthdate and motioned for her daughter to join them. “That is Kammie Anne Hatchell, she’s nine. My oldest son, Jovan Damien Hatchell, is eleven.” She added the two older kids’ birthdates then brushed a tear from her face with obvious impatience.

“Okay,” Paige lowered her notepad and focused on Yvette. “Whose idea was it to go sledding yesterday?”

“Dillan’s,” Yvette said with a hesitant smile. “Jovan has been pestering both of us for weeks to get out, but there wasn’t enough snow. Dillan bought that stupid sleigh at the end of last year. We only took it out once and the kids had a blast. I think Dillan wanted to get out and have a fun day with the kids as much as they did.” Tears flooded both of her eyes and Yvette slammed them shut and took two slow, shuddering breaths before she opened them again and focused on Paige. “It was supposed to be a grand adventure. Dillan was always buying the next big thing,” she swallowed hard. “I don’t know what I’m going to do without him. What are my children going to do without their father?”

Paige was even more certain today than she’d been yesterday, Yvette Hatchell did not murder her husband.

“I know you can’t answer that,” Yvette added immediately. “I don’t know why I asked. Deputy Carter, can you tell me why you are here today. I mean, I thought... well, I didn’t realize after a tragic accident like the one Dillan... what I mean is...”

“I’m investigating your husband’s death,” Paige offered. “I know this is difficult and I’m going to try to make it as quick and easy for you as possible, but I have some questions. I need to ask you about your husband.”

“What do you mean by that?” Yvette frowned. “What does it mean that you are investigating Dillan’s death. I mean, well this was just a tragic accident. What is there to investigate?”

“I wonder if there is someone that could watch the kids for a bit,” Paige evaded. She didn’t want to discuss murder in front of two small children that were still trying to cope with the loss of their father.

Yvette started to decline but she saw something in the officer’s demeanor that changed her mind. “Let me call Kathy, she lives next door and she offered to help out if I needed anything today. Let me just call her and see if she can take them for an hour.”

Paige stood and moved to stand in front of the window while a grieving mother made arrangements for a friend to watch her kids. She wished there was someone that could be here for Yvette, but that someone would have to be Paige. She had already delayed long enough.

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Ten minutes later, the kids were shuffled out the front door headed to Kathy Hovey's house for cookies and hot chocolate.

"This wasn't an accident, was it?" Yvette asked as she settled back into the chair. "You wouldn't be acting like this if Dillan died yesterday from a freak accident with the sled. What am I missing? What happened to my husband?"

"The sled had been tampered with," Paige decided to be direct. She was convinced Yvette was not involved. If she was, the woman deserved an Oscar.

"Tampered how?" Yvette furrowed her brow as she tried to understand what the deputy was telling her.

"Someone cut the line," Paige settled back into the chair across from Yvette. "That sled has two lines. You pull on one and it presses a sort of brake that makes the sled turn. You pull the other, it goes the other way. Pull both of them and the sled slows or stops."

"I remember," Yvette studied the deputy. "You're saying somebody cut one of the lines? That when Dillan pulled on the handle to control the direction, that's what made him go off course and slam into that tree?"

"I am," Paige said soberly.

"And you think I did this?" Yvette stood and began to pace. "That's what they say on television. The spouse is always the first suspect. You think I killed my husband." She turned and glared angrily at Paige. "You think I'd do that to my children? Never mind that Dillan was the love of my life. You think I'd take him, a loving father, away from my kids?"

"No," Paige said flatly. "I don't."

"You..." Yvette froze. "You don't?" Now she was confused.

Paige smiled. "No, Mrs. Hatchell. I don't believe you are the one that killed your husband. But that leaves me with the question of who did. Can you think of anyone that might do this? Was your husband having trouble with anyone? Had he received any threats recently? Had you?"

"Me?" Yvette settled back into the chair. "Why me? Oh, because of the sled. No. I'm a stay-at-home mom. I don't have any enemies. I'm afraid to even use that thing. There's not an adventurous bone in my body. If someone did this, they knew Dillan would be the one to get hurt."

"How?" Paige asked, more curious now.

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“Dillan let the kids think they were adventurous,” Yvette began. “He wanted to boost their confidence. He would pretend like they were taking these big risks but really, he always knew it was safe. He took the sled down first, to make sure it was working properly, on account of us only using it once last year. We tested it out then hung it in the garage all summer. Dillan was excited to go out and he wanted to use the sled, wanted to test out what it could do, but mostly he wanted to make sure it worked properly before he let Jovan take a turn. Kammie would go slow, she’s not as adventurous as her older brother. Anakin would insist Dillan ride down with him. But, Jovan...that kid inherited his father’s spirit. And Dillan encouraged it, but he was a good father. He would never let Jovan take the maiden voyage and anyone that knew Dillan at all would also know that.”

“So,” Paige pushed. “Is there anyone that Dillan knew well, anyone that was close enough to your family that they knew you would be sledding yesterday, that maybe had a falling out with your husband?”

“Recently?” Yvette pondered.

“Fairly recently,” Paige nodded. “Because they had to have access to the sled, and they had to know you guys were having a fun family day in the snow.”

“I don’t know,” Yvette stalled.

“Who?” Paige pressed.

“I think... maybe,” Yvette stood and swallowed hard. “I think there is someone you should probably speak to. Let me get his card.”

Paige frowned and wondered what this was all about. She stood when Yvette entered the room and held out a business card. Paige glanced down and spotted the private investigator title immediately. She raised an eyebrow at Yvette. “Why do you want me to speak with Craig Maldonado?”

“Dillan hired him and his partner to look into something at the office,” Yvette evaded.

“Do you know what?” Paige pressed, Yvette was hiding something.

“I think maybe you should speak with Craig and Makale. That’s Craig’s business partner, Makale Irwin. Maybe they can help. Maybe not, but if Dillan was... you know. Well, maybe they have information that could help.”

“Mrs. Hatchell,” Paige tried to press.

Yvette just shook her head and her eyes filled with tears. “Please, just talk to Craig.”

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“Okay,” Paige realized she wasn’t going to get anything more from the widow. “Could you let him know I’ll be contacting him and that it’s okay for him to talk to me? Some PI’s take the privacy of their clients more seriously than others and I can’t figure out who did this if nobody is willing to cooperate.”

“I’ll call him,” Yvette promised as she opened the door. “I’ll make sure he’ll talk.”

Paige pulled away from the house more confused than when she’d arrived. She dialed Stan on her way back to the office.

“District Attorney’s Office, Stan Donaldson speaking,” Stan greeted.

“It’s Paige Carter. Any word on my warrant?” she asked.

“I sent it to the office,” Stan said curtly. “Sheriff Walters has been notified.”

Paige hung up, frowning as usual when she spoke with Stan Donaldson. What was it about her that put that man on edge? She pulled into an empty spot and made her way through the front door of the office. The instant Margie saw her, she motioned toward Jericho’s office, meaning Paige was wanted inside.

“Stan sent over the warrant,” Jericho said in greeting when he spotted Paige in his doorway. “I thought we’d head over and serve it together.”

“First,” Paige stepped inside and dropped the card onto her boss’s desk. “You familiar with Craig Maldonado or Makale Irwin?”

“Not personally,” Jericho picked up the card to study the small print. He was pretty sure Clark knew Craig. Maybe he should make a quick call to see what his friend could tell him. “Why?”

“Yvette Hatchell gave me that card,” Paige provided. “She said she thought he might be able to answer some of my questions. She promised to call over and let him know he could speak with me about her husband’s case.”

“Dillan Hatchell hired a private investigator?”

“Apparently.”

“Why?”

“Now, there’s the million-dollar question,” Paige sighed. “Yvette clammed up. The instant I started asking about enemies and who had access to the sled, she froze and gave me that card.”

“Let’s serve the warrant first,” Jericho decided. “The longer we wait, the better the chance the partner could hear we’re coming. We don’t want to give anyone time to destroy evidence.”

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Once we've finished at the office, we'll swing by and see if we can speak with this Craig Maldonado or Makale Irwin."

"Sounds like a plan," Paige turned to leave. "How about you meet me at the office? That way, we'll have two vehicles if there's a lot to transport."

"I'll be right behind you," Jericho stopped to advise Margie of the plan and dialed Clark Anderson on his way to the car.

Paige pulled into the parking lot of Maldonado and Irwin and shut down her engine. The trip to Dillan's office at Skygen Incorporated had been illuminating. His partner, Konner Gray, was now Paige's number one suspect. Not because he'd said anything incriminating. No, it was what Konner didn't say that had Paige intrigued. Now she was off to find out why Dillan Hatchell had decided he needed a private investigator. And, if that need had anything to do with one Konner Gray. Paige would bet the farm it did. She spotted Jericho and climbed from her car, anxious to get this meeting over with. She had a ton of documents to go through and inside one of those files, there was a smoking gun. Paige and her gut knew that without a doubt. The hard part would be finding it.

"After you," Jericho pulled open the exterior door and followed Paige inside. They were greeted by a middle-aged blonde woman with bright blue streaks splattered throughout her long locks.

"You should try red and green," Paige pointed to the dye job. "This time of year it would feel more festive."

"How can I help you?" the woman glared, clearly not amused.

"We need to speak with a Craig Maldonado," Paige held out her badge.

"Do you have an appointment?" the secretary asked.

"I got this, Paulina," a man stepped from an inner office and motioned for Paige and Jericho to follow. "We can do this in the conference room. There's more space and I think it might be a little more comfortable. Yvette called. It was a shock to hear about Dillan. Awful time of year for those kids to lose their father."

"I'd say any time of year is a bad time for murder," Paige settled into a chair and waited.

"So, you're sure then?" the man dropped into a chair. "Craig Maldonado by the way. Makale will be joining us shortly. He did most of the work on this particular case." He leaned

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forward and held out a hand to Jericho then shook Paige's hand before he settled back in his chair.

"Can you tell us why Dillan hired you?" Jericho asked once he was settled across from the PI.

"He wanted us to look into his business partner," Craig glanced up when a second man stepped into the room. "This is Makale Irwin, my business partner."

"And a much better one than Konner Gray," Makale settled into a chair and dropped a large stack of files onto the desk. "I'm also a CPA, which came in handy with Dillan's case. Konner was embezzling funds. Had been for some time. He started out small and when Dillan didn't notice, he became more... confident and reckless. Dillan did notice, he just didn't want to believe someone he trusted the way he trusted Konner would jeopardize the company and their friendship. He made excuses until it got so excessive, he could no longer look the other way."

"Did Konner know he was being watched?" Paige asked.

"Not at first," Makale shrugged. "But once I had that final meeting with Dillan, he told me he was going to confront Konner and give him the opportunity to make it right."

"But you didn't believe he would," Jericho surmised.

"How could he?" Makale shook his head. "There was a reason he was stealing in the first place. We're talking hundreds of thousands of dollars. Konner couldn't make that up, not in time to appease Dillan. He only gave him ninety days. If you're looking for a suspect in Hatchell's death, I'd start with Konner Gray. The man is dirty, dishonest, and he was desperate enough to try something stupid."

"We just executed a warrant on the business," Paige provided. "It would save us a lot of time if you could share what you found."

"Yvette asked us to give you the file," Craig reached out to Makale who slid a large file across the table. "It's all in there. Makale laid it out plain as day. Dillan was smart, and he understood the accounting mumbo-jumbo; but, Makale likes to make things simple. You know, in case it went to court. He has a way with graphs and charts and all that crap. Helps with a jury if you know what I mean."

"I do," Paige smiled. She'd understand the accounting stuff just fine, but she thought the graphs and charts might help Jericho follow along without his typical whining and complaining. Dealing with finances always made the boss grumpy. Gage was worse, so she'd count her blessings and be happy it was Jericho helping her on this case instead of her childhood friend, the former football star turned cop. With Jericho, she might just make it home in time for dinner.

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“I appreciate the assistance,” Jericho stood. He was glad he didn’t have to drop Clark’s name to encourage cooperation. He’d save the Anderson connection for another day. And Clark had been right, these two were professionals.

“Always happy to help the locals,” Craig stood. “And, it makes things easier when the client doesn’t stand in the way. I know the spouse is always a suspect, but Mrs. Hatchell... she’s a sweetheart. Losing Dillan like this, well... it’s going to be tough. I hope you can scratch her off the list soon. For the sake of the kids and the holidays.”

“We’re close,” Paige decided it couldn’t hurt to tell the PI’s the truth. Yvette Hatchell wasn’t on the list... not really. But without proof, she couldn’t eliminate the woman completely. She could drop her to the bottom though. And, she had. Once they reached the parking lot, she turned to face her boss. “It’s nearly quitting time. I was thinking I’d head into the office and unload all of that...” she pointed to the evidence crammed into the back of her vehicle. “Then I’d like to head home and go through this after dinner.”

“I’ll meet you at the office,” Jericho glanced at the evidence then back to Paige. “I’d like a copy of that file. I’ll go over it tonight as well. Don’t give me that look, it’s still your case but I’m invested now. I’m the one that had to deal with that family yesterday, in a blizzard. I could have contracted pneumonia and died. I think I earned a little fun.”

Paige laughed. “You think reading through a financial report is fun? Jericho Walters, you seriously need to get out more.”

“No,” Jericho opened his door. “I think arresting the patronizing, self-righteous thief will be fun. Reading through that file is a necessary precursor. It will get me into the right frame of mind — for when I come face to face with the condescending prick again. See you back at the office, deputy.” He tipped his hat, climbed behind the wheel and drove away.

Paige was still smiling when she pulled away from the lot. Konner Gray was in for a rude awakening and he wouldn’t even see it coming.

Paige pulled into her driveway, shut down her vehicle and sighed. She climbed out and silently made her way across the street. Piper Weber ignored the gentle tapping on the side window, initially. When Paige curled her hand into a fist and began to pound on the cold barrier, Piper shoved open the door and jumped to her feet.

“This is a public roadway,” Piper growled. “I have a right to park on a public roadway.”

“What do you want?” Paige asked with a sigh. “What are you hoping to gain from sitting out here in the cold all night? If you tell me what you’re looking for, maybe I can help.”

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“Why?” Piper narrowed her eyes at Paige. This had to be a trick. Paige was a dirty cop, wasn’t she?

“Call it a public service,” Paige shrugged. “Why are you watching that house?”

“My informant said those men are hiding a criminal,” Piper admitted. “I need to get a photo.”

“What is this criminal’s name?” Paige knew Piper had to be talking about Vato. The man never left the house. The guys were worried he was still a target, and they wanted to keep him hidden for as long as possible.

“I can’t tell you,” Piper pouted. “You’ll just go in and arrest him and take all the credit.”

“If you’re looking for Vaughn, he’s not a criminal,” Paige offered. Maybe if she gave a little Piper would give something in return.

“You know Vaughn Turner is inside and you haven’t arrested him?” Piper pivoted, leaned down and pulled what looked like a warrant from the passenger seat of her car. She shoved it toward Paige. “That proves my contact is right, you’re dirty.”

Paige took it, studied it and sighed. It was a good fake, but it was a fake. “Come with me.”

“Why?” Piper didn’t move. “You can’t arrest me. I didn’t break any laws.”

“I’m going to run this name through the system and prove to you that your informant,” Paige passed the paper back to Piper. “The guy that gave you that, he’s the bad guy. He’s the criminal, and he’s using you. He wants you to do his dirty work while the coward sits in a nice warm luxury hotel and enjoys room service, cheap liquor, and a good laugh at your expense.”

“You’re lying,” Piper retorted, but there wasn’t any emotion behind her words. She was beginning to wonder if Colonel Devonshire was using her.

“Climb into my car and see for yourself,” Paige offered. She fired up the engine and punched a code into her office computer. Within seconds it was ready to go. Paige turned the screen slightly, so Piper could see it, then typed in Vaughn’s information. She just hoped nothing sensitive would come up because she had to prove Dax and his men were not hiding a fugitive, but she didn’t have to provide Piper Weber with a new story.

Piper leaned forward, watching the screen as a few names appeared. Vaughn Turner was not one of them. “Why does he want me to spy on Dax?” she asked as she plopped back against the seat.

“I can’t tell you that,” Paige closed the lid on her computer. “I can tell you the man you are working with — he’s the wanted fugitive. If I had to guess, I’d say the guy feeding you all the

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false intel is Colonel Terry Devonshire. And, if you were to run him through your stations' system, you would discover he's on the run. He's hiding out and he wants you to tell him what Dax and his friends are doing. You're aiding and abetting. I'm pretty sure the first amendment doesn't cover that one."

"Why does Devonshire want you out of the way?" Piper asked, then silently scolded herself. "I'm not admitting he's my source, but you jumped on that name immediately. Why would a man like the Colonel want you out of the way? All of you guys said the information I was given on you was fabricated. I couldn't confirm that because General Porter got in the way, but there has to be a reason."

"I can't tell you that, either," Paige sighed. She figured Devonshire just wanted her preoccupied and out of the way, but she couldn't tell Piper that. She was dealing with a reporter. Paige also figured the Colonel was trying to ruin her reputation; to discredit anything she touched that pertained to him or his men. So, how to respond to Piper? "Why do you think Dax and all of his men are here? They all left the military. Why did they settle out here, in Manti — together?"

"They're working on something for Porter," Piper dismissed the question, then straightened as things started to fall into place. "And my questions were getting in the way. Colonel Devonshire wanted them to get in the way. He wanted me to interfere with something important. If Devonshire is dirty and Dax and his team are working for Porter that means..." she studied Paige for several seconds. "That means you're not dirty. You didn't let a killer go free, did you?"

"No," Paige never took her eyes off Piper. This was too important. Piper had to find her credible. Otherwise, she would never leave. "I would never let a criminal walk, Piper. I know you don't know me and you don't like me. There is no way for me to prove to you I have integrity and I take my job as a law enforcement professional seriously. All I can do is tell you the truth. I never let a killer walk. I wasn't in the process of getting fired. I came to Manti because this is where my mother was killed. I needed to come home. End of story."

Piper frowned. "I can check that," she warned. "I can find out if your mother was killed here. If you're lying, I'll know you lied in less than an hour."

"Then, go find out," Paige said confidently. "Jericho tried to arrest my mother's killer last year. He was forced to kill him in the process. His name was Daniel Owens. Go ahead and check. And when you discover I'm telling the truth, maybe you will realize you're helping the wrong person. And then, maybe you'll understand why you need to stay out of the way. Dax and his men, they're dealing with something that could get them all killed. Can you live with that? Knowing that because of you, one or more of those men lost their lives?"

"No," Piper admitted. "But if it's that big, I want the story."

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“Which is why I’ve already told you too much,” Paige decided. “I don’t know you well enough to know if you’ll do the right thing. You are a reporter so I’m going to guess no. Just remember, if Dax dies, you had a hand in that. And, you should also know, if you compromise this mission... I’ll come after you myself.”

“You shouldn’t threaten me,” Piper pushed open the door. “I’m a reporter and I record everything.”

“Good,” Paige stepped from the vehicle. “Then, when you start to have doubts, when you start to wonder if I’m serious, be sure to rewind that tape and listen again. And know, if anything happens to Dax, I won’t rest until you pay.” Paige slammed the door shut and made her way to her front porch. She watched as Piper walked quickly to her rental, climbed inside and drove away. She hoped the woman would get a clue and leave, but she wouldn’t count on it. She wondered if giving her a new bite to chew on would keep her occupied or encourage her to get in the way. Only time would tell.

“What did you say to her?” Dax asked the instant Paige stepped inside.

“I told her she was getting in the way,” Paige used the toe of one boot to force off the other one. “I told her she was being used, and she mentioned Devonshire. I think he’s her source.”

“And?” Dax pressed.

“She had a fake warrant for Vato,” Paige pulled off her second boot. “I proved to her that it was fake.”

“She’s playing a dangerous game,” Dax moved forward. “But I think she’s too stubborn to listen.”

“I know,” Paige sighed. “But I tried.”

“There’s more,” Dax decided.

Paige focused on him. “I told her if she gets in the way and you get dead, I’m going to hold her personally responsible and act accordingly.”

“You what?” Dax erupted. “That’s going to put her mind into overdrive. Paige, you should have let me handle this. Piper Weber is a reporter first. That kind of warning, it’s going to motivate her. She’s going to dig into things. She’ll find out I’m working for Nathan.”

“Dax,” Paige sighed. “She already knows that. I can’t stand the woman but she’s not stupid. She already put it together. You and the rest of the merry band of militants aren’t

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hanging around here in Manti for kicks. Nathan blocked her. Nathan is in charge of a top-secret committee in Washington. I used to work in those same circles. She's circling the edges already. She knows it's all connected. She just doesn't know how. And, Devonshire has given her enough information that she knows Vato is involved. She knows he's here. Which means, you guys have to assume Devonshire knows Vato is hiding out here. He told her to get him a photo just to be sure; but, he knows."

Dax dropped onto the couch and considered. Paige was right. Piper wasn't stupid and if she had all the information Paige had just laid out, she knew too much. It was time to have a one-on-one with his ex. He was probably the only one that could convince her she was working on the wrong side and she was putting them all in danger... including herself. Because once Devonshire no longer needed her, he wouldn't hesitate to have her removed — permanently.

"Anything new in Arizona?" Paige decided to change the subject.

"Yeah," Dax glanced up. "Catch a murderer?"

"Not yet," Paige stood and walked into the kitchen. "I'm starving. Then, I have work. I know whodunit, now I just need to prove it."

"Tell me," Dax moved in behind her and wrapped his arms around her from behind. "Sorry I blew up at you. I'm just..."

Paige smiled and twisted to face him. "You are?"

"Sorry," Dax leaned in and stole a kiss.

"And," Paige pulled away. "You are also stressed, frustrated, and tired."

Dax smiled. "That too. Who committed death by sledding?"

"Business partner," Paige opened the fridge and pulled out a foil wrapped plate. "Mine?"

"Yours," Dax affirmed. "I already ate. Why'd he do it? Must have something to do with the business."

"Konner Gray was embezzling from the company," Paige pulled off the foil and smiled. Fried chicken, potatoes and something green. "Dillan Hatchell hired a PI firm who laid it all out in technicolor. And I mean they laid it all out, completely. The investigator guy, he's also a CPA, he created charts and graphs and everything. Gray stole over two hundred and fifty thousand from the business. Apparently, Dillan confronted him, told him he had ninety days to pay it all back, or he was taking the evidence to the cops. Konner sabotaged the sled. You were right by the way. Yvette, our victim's wife, told me Dillan would never let the kids use the sled without testing it first to make sure it all worked the way it was supposed to. Konner would have known that. He snuck in, snipped the line and snuck out. Now, I just have to prove it."

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“You will,” Dax said confidently. “Maybe he’ll confess once he knows you have the evidence on the embezzlement.”

“He might confess once Jericho arrests the guy,” Paige smiled. “My boss is pissed.” She proceeded to tell him about Konner Gray and his condescending pompous attitude while they executed their warrant.

It was nearly midnight. Paige was just finishing up with the financials she obtained from the PIs, and Dax was going through the documents Nathan had obtained from Bratton. They both froze, then looked at each other in confusion when the doorbell rang.

“I got it,” Paige stood and grabbed her gun. She cautiously glanced out the window and lowered her weapon. “This better not be a bootie call.”

Dax frowned and moved to stand behind Paige. His frown deepened when he spotted Piper. “It’s late.”

“I know,” Piper shivered. “Can I come in?”

Paige sighed, turned and headed back to her chair. She gathered up the evidence and shoved it back into a folder. One glanced at the intel Dax had been studying told her he had already done the same. “How can we help you, Piper?”

“Everything you told me was the truth,” Piper admitted. “Everything. So, I ran Terry Devonshire through our system at the station. He’s the one with the warrant. I’ve been an idiot.” She glanced at Dax. “You and the men told me I was being used, but I didn’t believe you. I didn’t want to. I guess...”

“You wanted Dax to know he chose the wrong girl,” Paige provided. “It’s not a secret, Piper. Why are you here? Now, at midnight I mean. What was so important it couldn’t wait until morning?”

“I got another call,” Piper admitted. Paige was right. She did want Dax to know he’d chosen the wrong woman. But, she was starting to think he hadn’t. She was starting to wonder if Paige Carter was actually the right woman...for Dax. “Terry Devonshire called me. He’s angry that I haven’t been able to get a photo of Vaughn Turner. He threatened to take his story somewhere else. I tried to placate him. I told him I was getting closer. I told him I thought I had a way to get inside but I couldn’t do it until tomorrow.”

“I’m still unclear,” Dax said impatiently. “What is the reason for this late-night visit?”

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“Devonshire has someone here,” Piper whispered. “I think someone is watching me, here in Manti. He told me to get the photo and then, once Vaughn’s identity was confirmed, his man would take it from there. Dax, I think Devonshire sent an assassin to take out your friend. I think all of you are in danger. I think maybe it’s my fault. I tried to tell myself it could wait until morning. That I’d rush over first thing and warn you, but what if I’m wrong? What if that call was enough and they try something tonight? I didn’t mean to wake you...” for the first time she looked at Dax and then Paige. They were fully dressed. “I didn’t wake you.”

“No,” Paige sighed. “I’m working a case, a local case that has nothing to do with Dax, his friends, Devonshire or my favorite general. It was pressing, and I was nearly finished when you arrived.”

“Oh,” Piper focused on Dax. “I know you don’t want to see me. I know I’ve caused you a lot of trouble. But, well... I just don’t want you to die.”

“I appreciate that,” Dax smiled. “I’ll warn the men. I also suggest you call the station and ask your boss to relocate you. Tonight. Tell him you need a safe house. We both know they can arrange that. I highly recommend you leave town for a few days, Piper. Devonshire is dangerous and if he sent an assassin, if he no longer needs you...”

“I might be on the list,” Piper realized. “I’ll call my boss. I’ll find somewhere else to go. Somewhere he can’t find me. You do the same. Be careful. I know this is big, I can feel it all the way down to my bones. Stay safe, I really do mean that.”

Paige and Dax watched as Piper slowly made her way to the front door and disappeared into the black winter night.

“Do you think he’s going to try something tonight?” Paige finally asked.

“I’ll call Hawk,” Dax snatched up his phone. “But I think he has decided Piper Weber is disposable. I think she’s the one that needs a safe place to stay tonight.”

“I could stop her,” Paige offered. “I could escort her somewhere, make sure she’s safe.”

Dax shook his head. “Her boss will handle it. They have contacts everywhere. If she listened, and I think she did, she’ll be fine.” He punched in a number and waited. When Hawk answered, he was on high alert. Dax explained his visitor and added a warning to be on high alert for the next twenty-four. He hung up and turned to face Paige. “You look beat, let’s call it a night.”

“I am beat,” Paige agreed. “And I have a suspect to arrest in the morning.”

“You have enough?”

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“I do,” Paige let Dax take her hand and lead her up the stairs. “People are so stupid. Even Gage could have followed the trail Konner Gray left in his wake. And Gage is allergic to bookkeeping.”

“He just says he’s allergic,” Dax corrected. “Because he knows you’ll step in and save him.”

“That’s supposed to be a secret,” Paige whispered.

“You save him,” Dax continued. “The same as you save the rest of us. Sorry about the late-night visitor. I know...” Dax paused not knowing how to continue. What was the appropriate thing to say when your ex-girlfriend showed up at midnight... at your new girlfriend’s home? “I’m at a loss here. I’m just sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Paige decided Dax was miserable enough. He didn’t need her added harassment over the whole Piper Weber fiasco.

Dax climbed into bed and pulled Paige close. “I love you.”

“Goodnight,” Paige settled against him. “I love you, too.”

Dax tossed the rag into the kitchen sink and decided he was becoming far too domesticated. He smiled, it was worth it. Paige was anxious to get back to work and had left nearly thirty minutes earlier. The least he could do was clean up after breakfast. He frowned when his secret phone began to ring. “Hamilton.”

“Dax,” Nathan answered, tension evident in his voice. “There’s been an incident and I need you to get a message to Paige.”

Paige had just finished discussing the details of the case with Jericho when her phone began to ring.

“Go ahead and take it,” Jericho nodded at the interruption.

“It’s Dax,” Paige knew it couldn’t be good. “Hello.”

“Paige,” Dax said in greeting. “I know you just got to work, but I need to meet you. Can you head over to the park? It’s important.”

“Uh...” she glanced at Jericho. “We were just heading out to arrest our suspect.”

“I know,” Dax sighed. “And I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

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“Can’t you just tell me now?”

“Not on the phone,” Dax pushed. “I need to see you in person.”

“Go ahead,” Jericho decided. “It will give me some time to finalize a few things with James before we make the arrest.”

“Okay,” Paige said hesitantly. “I’ll head over now, but I only have a few minutes.”

“I’ll make it quick,” Dax disconnected and climbed from his truck. He was already at the park. His mind was racing a hundred miles a minute and once he put everything in motion, there would be no stopping it. The plan was moving fast, maybe too fast. He glanced up and frowned when he spotted Piper Weber headed his way. He didn’t have time for her now.

“This will only take a minute,” Piper took the lead.

“I’m busy, Piper.”

“I know,” her voice began to shake and she cleared her throat.

Dax took a closer look and realized Piper looked...frazzled. Her hair was normally perfect, not a hair out of place. This morning, it was a little wild and she was on the verge of breaking down completely. He placed a hand on her shoulder and guided her to the bench of a nearby picnic table. “What happened?”

“You were right,” Piper inhaled slowly and then let out a long, deep breath. “Someone tried to kill me last night. Obviously, he failed; but, that’s only because I was prepared. I called Peter...” she motioned to the only car in the parking lot besides Dax’s truck. “He was headed down to meet me. I was traveling north on the freeway when a vehicle tried to run me off the road. I panicked a little, then realized he was trying to kill me. I took the next exit and the man pushed me off the road, literally with his truck. My car rolled, but I got away and Peter picked me up. We dumped the van a few blocks away and ran the rest of the way to the safe house. Derek took care of everything from there.”

Dax wondered what Piper had told her producer to get him to act so quickly. “Why are you here? What do you need from me? More money?”

“No!” Piper pulled an envelope from her bag and passed it over to Dax. “I just needed to...”

Dax slid open the flap and glanced inside. It was a check for a large amount of money. “What’s this?”

“I’m here to give us both closure, I guess. That...” Piper pointed to the envelope. “That is everything I stole from you plus interest. I’m sorry, I was so angry when I realized you weren’t going to fall in line with my fantasy, well... I convinced myself I deserved the money.”

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“What changed?”

“The file your men have on me,” Piper admitted. “I took it to Derek. My producer may be ruthless when it comes to a story, but he’s also protective. He sat me down and suggested the only way out of this mess, the only way to save my career and eliminate the threat, was to make things right. He offered up Frank, the station’s accountant. Frank ran the numbers and provided a figure. That’s what I owe you, interest accrued, a slight penalty for failure to pay, and then Derek added a little bonus for the help and the warning you gave me last night. If it wasn’t for you and Paige, I’d be dead.”

“I don’t need the money,” Dax tried to hand the envelope back.

“I need you to take it,” Piper refused. “I followed you here because I need to make this right. Paige was right about something else. I did think you chose the wrong woman. I was wrong about that, too. Paige Carter is exactly the woman that you need, Dax. I hope you know that. I hope you will cherish her. And, I hope one day the two of you will forgive me for the trouble I caused. Do something spectacular with that,” she pointed to the envelope. “And stay safe. Last night showed me just how real and how dangerous this situation is. I don’t think I ever really understood that — how dangerous your job was. It’s just another thing that makes Paige perfect for you.” She stood and motioned for Peter to move closer. “I’m going into hiding for a while. I’ll still be working, just from the shadows until this all blows over. I guess what I’m trying to say is goodbye, Dax.”

Dax stood and was taken by surprise when Piper pulled him into a hug and gently kissed his left cheek. As he watched her walk away, he spotted Paige standing beside a tree to his right. He sighed and made his way to the only woman he had ever truly loved.

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” Paige said, watching Dax closely.

“She was attacked last night,” Dax took Paige’s hand and pulled her toward the table. “Our warning apparently saved her life. She wanted to thank us and say goodbye.”

“She’s leaving?” Paige watched the car pull away and disappear. “What’s in the envelope?”

“Money,” Dax settled onto the bench and took her hand in his.

“What’s the money for?” Paige asked. Wondering why they were here.

“She wanted to give back the money she took when our relationship ended,” Dax sighed. “I didn’t ask you here to talk about Piper. I need to tell you something.”

“What happened?” Paige was beginning to panic. Why all the cloak and dagger stuff? Something was seriously wrong.

Winter Crisis

“Before I explain the details,” Dax linked his fingers with hers. “Nathan is okay. They tried to take him out, but he’s fine.”

“What does that mean?”

“Someone planted a bomb under his car,” Dax began. “He wasn’t in it when it exploded but he was supposed to be. You are going to hear, from the media, that General Nathan Porter is dead. He’s not.”

“I need to talk to him,” Paige jumped to her feet. “I need to call him.”

“We knew you would need that,” Dax pulled a strange looking phone from his pocket. “Just hold down the number one and it will ring his phone.” He stood, pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead and walked away. She needed privacy and he could give her that.

“Nathan,” Paige relaxed a little when she heard his voice. “I need to know what happened.”

“Hey, pumpkin.”

“Tell me,” Paige demanded.

“There’s not much to tell,” Nathan began. “I was leaving the office after an early morning meeting with Harris. There was a man in the lobby that appeared to be watching me. My gut told me something was off. I’ve always told you to trust your instincts. Well, trusting mine this morning saved my life. There was a bomb under my car. The experts are still analyzing it. If I had to guess it was on some kind of timer. I think the kid in the lobby triggered the bomb; either he was actually the one to trigger it, or he got a message to someone that I was leaving. I was suspicious enough that I took a short walk around the corridor. I wasn’t thinking bomb, I was thinking kidnapping.”

“So, you decided to take a leisurely stroll to make an abduction easier?” Paige accused.

“No,” Nathan said calmly. “I decided to draw them out. I know you think I’m just a helpless old man, but I can take care of myself, Paige. I was never in any danger.”

“I have one word for you, Nathan,” Paige tried to settle her panic but she couldn’t. “Bomb.”

“Yes,” Nathan admitted. “I was completely taken by surprise with the bomb. When nobody approached me, I started for the garage thinking I had overreacted. I stepped from the elevator but that feeling returned. Something wasn’t right. There was a homeless man pushing an old grocery cart just a few cars down from mine but everything else was quiet. Too quiet. I turned, thinking I’d just get back in the elevator and summon the car service when everything around me exploded. Somehow, I had the presence of mind to call Harris who was already on his way to my location. He got me to safety and let me know he had sent a car for Sophie.

Winter Crisis

We're safe, Paige. And, that homeless victim is currently housed in the morgue, highly guarded, and believed to be the body of retired General Nathan Porter. As long as they believe I'm dead, I'm safe. But you aren't. Devonshire is out of his mind if he thinks he can just kill people in broad daylight and get away with it," Nathan fumed. He still hadn't calmed his wife down over this and he could tell Paige wasn't taking the news well, either.

"He tried to eliminate Piper Weber last night," she informed him. "She just showed up and told Dax about the attack. She's going under. The station has a Safehouse where they'll keep her until this has been resolved."

"The Colonel must be desperate," Nathan decided. "Piper Weber is too high profile to eliminate. He's planning something and whatever it is, it's going to happen soon. I need to talk to Dax."

"I'll tell him to call you back," Paige decided. "First, I need to talk to him for a few minutes. Are you sure you're not in any danger? You're sure you and Sophie are safe?"

"I'm positive, kid. Don't worry about me. It's you and Dax and that team out there that need to be on high alert. The world thinks I'm dead and you have to keep it that way. Devonshire will only act if he thinks he succeeded in getting me out of the picture."

"I love you," she choked out.

"I love you too, kid. Don't take any risks and try to keep in touch. I'm going to worry about you," Nathan was frantic, and he needed to talk to Dax.

"I'll have Dax call you. Goodbye, for now." They disconnected and Paige turned to Dax. The instant she saw him, she lost it. Nathan could have been killed. Dax and his team were probably next. What did this Devonshire guy have in store for the man she loved? She glanced at her watch. She was running out of time, Jericho was waiting for her to arrest a killer.

Dax wrapped his arms around Paige and tried to soothe her. "We will all be okay, I promise. We will all get through this. Are things settled with you and Porter?"

"If he really is safe, yeah," Paige pulled back and focused on Dax. There was more.

"He's safe," Dax said confidently. "But, I'm not sure you are. I need you to get Jericho alone and tell him what's happening. Only Jericho. Nobody else can know the truth. The world has to believe Nathan is dead."

"I'm not sure I should. Nathan said..."

"I know," Dax wiped the tears from her face with his thumbs. "But Devonshire thinks he took out Porter. He tried to take out Piper. The next move will be you."

Winter Crisis

“Or you,” Paige disagreed.

“And me,” Dax corrected. “I have the team and we’re prepared for anything he might throw our way. You are out here in the open, most times you’re alone. It would be easy to call in a bogus call, like a vehicle burg — something that wouldn’t have you on high alert — and ambush you. I just need you to be careful and I need Jericho to know the danger, so he can prepare for it. After that stunt with the ATF, your boss could be on the list too. We have no idea what target Devonshire will try for next. Tell Jericho, promise me you will tell him everything.”

“I promise,” Paige whispered.

“Thank you,” Dax leaned in and gave Paige a gentle kiss. “I have to leave. We need to head to Arizona again. Ken’s working out logistics as we speak but if he can swing it, we’re going to be leaving before you get home tonight.”

Paige closed her eyes and tried to be strong. Things were moving too fast. Fast left room for sloppy. “Are you ready for this? It just seems...”

“We’re ready,” Dax assured her. “This is what we do, Paige. My team, we’ve been deployed tons of times on missions that have far less planning than this one. We’ve been inside the building, we know the layout, we’ve already scoped the best escape routes. This one, the risk assessment won’t reach higher than a four, five tops. Trust me. I’ll stay safe. I need you to do the same.”

“Okay,” Paige took a deep breath and let it out. “You have an op to plan and I have a killer to arrest.

“That’s my girl,” Dax pulled her in for a tight hug. He hated leaving her like this. He’d just dumped so much onto her emotional plate and he wasn’t going to be here to help her through it. After what happened with Nathan, Paige was going to worry about him. The same as he would worry about her. But they both had a job to do and they would do it... in spite of the risks. “I’ll call you.” He pulled out the phone she used to dial Nathan. “Keep that one. Nathan brought me two of them, he gave them to me while he was here for Thanksgiving. They’re encrypted, impossible to trace. Not even the NSA can record these. Keep it with you and I’ll call you when I can. And don’t forget how much I love you,” he pulled her in for another kiss.

Paige knew she had to get going, but she needed one thing from Dax before she went. She took a step back and looked him directly in the eyes. “Do me a favor, kill the sadistic SOB that tried to murder Nathan. Kill him for me, kill him for you, for Nathan, and most of all, kill him for Sophie. Because, Nathan was trying to sound upbeat, but I know his wife is a mess right now. We all need closure and locking that man in a cell just isn’t enough.”

“I’ll do my best to make that happen,” Dax gave her one more quick kiss before he released her and watched her walk to her patrol car and drive away.

Winter Crisis

Dax was just climbing into his truck when the encrypted phone began to ring. He answered as he started the engine. "Hamilton."

"Don't forget, this could be a trap," Paige said softly. "And, don't forget I love you, too."

Dax didn't respond. Paige had already disconnected. He put his truck in gear and headed home to finalize what he hoped would be his final mission. It was time for a change and he had an idea on how he could make that happen.

"Paige," Jericho watched his deputy climb from her vehicle and head his way. Something was seriously wrong. "You okay?"

"No," Paige sighed. "Do you want to talk about this now, or after we arrest Gray?"

"You tell me," Jericho decided to leave it up to her.

Paige looked around, decided they were alone and filled her boss in on the current situation.

"You're going to stick with me today," Jericho decided. "I don't want you to go anywhere alone. We'll arrest Gray and head back to the office where you can interrogate him. But under no circumstance will you step foot out in the open alone. In fact," he pulled out his cell phone and started scrolling through his contacts.

"Who are you calling?" Paige demanded.

"Gage," Jericho said in answer. "I need you to respond to my location. If Konner Gray decides to escape out the back, I'm going to be waiting. That means Paige needs a new partner to go in through the front." Jericho paused. "Expedite."

"You don't seriously believe this Devonshire guy would try to take me out inside that office building."

"I have no idea what this Devonshire guy would try to do. We're being cautious today," Jericho ordered. "We're being cautious every day until your boyfriend or that father figure that is now apparently dead can resolve this once and for all. And if they don't eliminate Terry Devonshire soon, I'll take care of it myself."

"I think maybe Arizona is just a little out of your jurisdiction," Paige glanced up when Gage flew into the parking lot. He slammed on his brakes and the tires slid at least two feet before the vehicle came to an abrupt stop. Paige rolled her eyes. "You might want to gauge the Gage. Tell that man to expedite and suddenly he turns into Havi or Dean."

Winter Crisis

“Nothing wrong with being prompt,” Jericho smiled. “You two give me exactly two minutes to get into position then you head in the front. I’ll be waiting out back for Konnor the coward to attempt his escape.”

“You say that like you know he’ll run,” Gage frowned.

“Because he will,” Paige motioned for the front door. “Clocks started, let’s move over here to wait.”

Things went down exactly the way they expected. The two deputies walked in the front, Konner Gray tried to slip out the back. He had only taken two steps when he was blocked by Jericho Walters.

“Excuse me,” Konner attempted to move around Walters. “I’m afraid I don’t have time for another interview. I said everything I had to say yesterday. If you have further questions, you will need to contact my lawyer. I’m a busy man and I’m afraid I’m late for an important meeting.”

Jericho grabbed the man by the back of the neck, spun him around and slammed his face into the bright, shiny, yellow sports car.

“Not my car!” Konner yelled.

“You mean Yvette Hatchell’s car.” Jericho slapped on the handcuffs in a matter of seconds. He was a little disappointed the obstinate fool hadn’t resisted. Today, he needed to take his frustration out on someone and Konner Gray was a deserving target. Oh well, he’d just go for a drive to calm his nerves. Now that Gray was in custody, they had plenty of time. Plus, a drive around the county would give him the chance to scour the area for outsiders. Strangers that were lurking where they shouldn’t be lurking looking for trouble... or an opportunity to ambush his deputy. Jericho was going to make sure that didn’t happen. He would not lose another Carter, not today — not ever. He’d protect Paige with his life if he had to. She was going to be safe.

Gage stepped forward. “Do you want me to transport, boss?”

“Yeah,” Jericho focused on Paige. “Paige follow him. Lock him in one of the cells then wait for me. I shouldn’t be long.”

Paige frowned, hesitated, but ultimately followed orders. Jericho was up to something but now wasn’t the time to ask what it was.

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It was almost two hours later when Jericho walked through the back door. Paige thought he had a slight limp. She still wondered where he had been and what he'd been up to. Duncan Havilland stepped inside a few seconds later. He shoved a short, bald guy into a cell before he moved forward and dropped something onto Margie's desk.

"Who is he?" Paige asked, immediately.

"The boss says he's some kind of assassin," Havi shrugged. "I was driving by, spotted the two of them in a scuffle... the boss was winning if you're wondering. But I thought, what the hell, I'll stop and see if he wants assistance. Jericho is pissed. I mean, livid. I've never seen him this angry and that guy back there..." Havilland pointed a finger toward the holding cell. "He's lucky I stopped." Havilland paused to glance around. "I think Walters might have killed the guy if I hadn't stopped him. Won't talk about it either," Havilland whispered. "I'm lucky I got that much. I'm not sure if I should book him on attempted murder or what. Is annoying the Sheriff a felony?"

Paige's mind was reeling. How did Jericho find Piper's would be assassin? "Book him on the attempted murder of Piper Weber," Paige decided.

"The reporter?" Havi asked, even more confused.

"That's the one," Paige stood the instant Jericho exited his office. She followed the boss into the conference room, knowing she wouldn't get answers until Jericho was ready to give them. It was time to focus on their killer, Konner Gray.

"You read him Miranda?" Jericho asked calmly. A little too calmly if you asked Paige.

"He's waived his right to an attorney for now," Paige nodded. "Said he considers himself a cooperating witness and there must be some kind of mistake."

"Good," Jericho settled into one of the chairs and winced at the pain he felt in his right hip. He was getting too old for this shit. One of these days, a suspect just might get the better of him if he wasn't careful.

Paige realized Jericho was injured but she could also tell he wasn't in the mood for sympathy. She settled into the chair across from Konner Gray and began her interrogation.

"We're not taking any chances," Dax ordered from the passenger seat of the jeep. He wished he had time to call Paige and let her know the op was a go, but things were moving fast and if they didn't resolve this now, they might not get a second shot. "Wooly," Dax called.

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“Chopper is in position,” Ken advised. He was able to get Harris to transport them from Manti by helicopter to Arizona. The bird was now waiting in a remote location to take them back home once the op was complete. “Harris also contacted the hospital in Flagstaff and told them he was conducting a top-secret training exercise in the area. The staff is on standby in the event any of us get injured. I recommend we don’t, much simpler all around.”

“I second that,” Dax jumped from the vehicle the instant Hawk brought it to a stop. “Zee, you’re up. Make the hole big enough this time. I’m not a freaking cat or a scrawny mutt.”

“One time,” Zeus complained. “You play it safe one time and this is the thanks.”

Dax grinned and waited for Zeus to cut the fence. They’d be heading in from the east this time. Camille had helped them understand the layout of the building a little better and that seemed like the best entrance. Once inside, they’d move through the structure as a unit and hopefully, track down Devonshire. Dax was still trying to figure out how to honor Paige’s request without causing problems for his team. He knew if push came to shove, they’d lie for him. He just hoped they wouldn’t have to. He didn’t like putting them in that position. Regardless, Terry Louis Devonshire was a deadman walking. He just didn’t know it yet.

Zeus stepped back. “Done.”

“Move in,” Dax whispered into his mic. “Coms and hand signals only from this point on.”

The group moved forward, silently approaching the side door. They were surprised to discover the guard tower was empty and there weren’t any guards at the door. Dax gave the signal to enter and Hawk and Thor took the lead. Vato and Zeus followed with Jeeves, Dax, and Wooly stepping inside and closing the door behind them. The group hesitated, listening for a disturbance but the warehouse was eerily silent.

“Move out,” Dax whispered into the headset. They had decided to methodically clear the entire structure as a group, soundlessly moving from room to room until they found their target. They were making good time, better than any of them had hoped when they rounded a corner and came face to face with two men. Well, not exactly. The workers had their backs to the team and they were hunched over an old generator. Hired help? Or, a clever disguise?

“Stand down,” one of the men ordered, obviously the team had been spotted. Instead, his partner lunged to the side. Thor raised his weapon, but the guy’s partner was quick. The threat was neutralized instantly; incapacitated by his partner with an elbow to the side of the head. In a matter of seconds, the unconscious worker was secured to the large machine. “Hawk,” the second man raised his hands in the air as he stood, hoping the group wouldn’t shoot. “What are you doing here?”

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“Funny,” Hawk stepped forward to secure the second worker. “Stand down,” he told the group gathered behind him. He always believed Charlie Hopkins was a good man. Was he wrong? “Hopper was about to tell us what he’s doing in the Devils’ lair.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Dax decided. “Secure him to the wall and keep moving.”

“Dax,” Hopper said softly. “I understand your position, but you need to know the Colonel has the place rigged. He’s planning to blow the entire building to smithereens.”

“How long do we have?” Zeus jumped in. “Can I disable the system?”

“I don’t think so,” Hopper shook his head. “They don’t trust me, which is why they sent the idiot over there down with me. They need the generator to open the large bay doors. When we don’t return, the Colonel will send someone else down to find out why.”

They all turned to Dax and waited for him to decide their next move. Before he had a chance, gunfire erupted around them. He turned, fired and took out two men. Two others had approached from the opposite direction. His men took them out immediately. A fifth guy fired, turned and started for the door. Thor moved forward, aimed and hit his mark. Dax turned back to assess the damage and realized Hawk was leaning over the body of Hopper.

“Status?” Dax demanded.

“He saved my life,” Hawk reached in and pulled a sheet of paper from Hopper’s shirt pocket. “He shoved me out of the way and took the bullet.”

“What’s that?” Dax put a hand on his friend shoulder in comfort as he took the crumpled page.

“Hopper said Devonshire loaded up at least three trucks with drones and other munitions,” Hawk stood. “He’s planning to ship them out tonight. That’s where he has them stashed. He’s blowing the warehouse so nobody misses the merchandise.”

“I’m sorry,” Dax motioned for the team to continue. “No matter his reason for being here, he was one of the good guys in the end. I’ll make sure Secretary Harris knows that.”

“Thanks,” Hawk glanced back at his man, straightened his shoulders and did his best to focus on the mission. He’d grieve for the man who saved his life later. Right now, they needed to find Devonshire. And, Hawk didn’t care if this was deemed a catch and detain operation. Hoppers death just made it a kill mission in his eyes. Devonshire would not walk out of here alive.

The group continued through the warehouse, careful to detect any booby traps Devonshire had set out for them. They had just completed a second gunfight and was assessing the damage

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when Zeus found the main device. He rushed forward and studied the explosive mechanism carefully. He was so focused on his work, he didn't realize Dax had moved in next to him.

"What's the status? Any chance we might get out of here alive?"

"Slim to none," Zeus said soberly. "And, I think slim just left the building. I can't disable it. This looks like the work of Evil."

"Vanguard's working with Devonshire?" Dax considered.

"Makes sense," Hawk put in. "Those two were inseparable before Evil got his double D and split."

"Yeah," Jeeves added. "He deserved that dishonorable discharge and a whole lot more."

"That complicates things," Dax decided. "Evil will protect Devonshire to the death."

"Or," Hawk thought about what Hopper had told him just before he died, "the shipment. I think maybe the Colonel sent Evil over to make sure the shipment didn't have any problems once he got the explosives set up."

"Doesn't matter," Dax decided. "We're screwed. Zee can't disarm the bomb. We either bolt and hope we make it out alive or we finish the mission and most likely die in the process."

"I know you're in there," Devonshire called from a room down the hall. "There's no way out of here. My men have you surrounded. Surrender and I might let you live."

"Bull," Vato disagreed. "He thinks he can kill us all."

"How much time, Zee?" Dax whispered.

"I have an idea," Zeus straightened and faced the team. "But you might think I'm crazy."

"That's a foregone conclusion," Hawk smiled. "Tell us."

"He set the bomb," Zeus explained. "Well, he ordered it done. Devonshire knows exactly how much time he has. He'll stall, hoping to take us out but knowing it won't matter if he doesn't. He'll try to bolt at the last minute."

"You want to reduce the time," Dax realized. "Then we take the offense and get the hell out of Dodge before it blows."

"Exactly," Zeus focused on each of the men. "I know it sounds crazy, but..."

"But it might be just crazy enough to work," Dax finished. "I'm in."

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“Me too,” Thor nodded at Zeus. He trusted these men with his life and if he was going to die, at least he’d die among friends.

Wooly shook his head and smiled. “I have one condition.”

“What’s that?” Jeeves asked.

“Devonshire dies,” Ken glanced down the hall. “That man does not make it out of this building alive. If you can guarantee that, I’m in.”

“I already made that same promise to Paige,” Dax admitted. “The Colonel tried to kill Porter, he’s not getting out of this building alive.”

“Tried?” Vato asked.

“That’s right,” Dax told his team. “And failed.”

“For Porter!” Hawk said, maybe a little too loud.

“The general is dead,” Devonshire called out. “You joined the wrong team.”

“Get into position,” Dax ordered as loud footsteps echoed down the hallway. Devonshire sent his men into a what was tactically called a fatal funnel. Dax and his men had the advantage, what they didn’t know was how many men Devonshire had with him. One by one, armed men fell just outside the doorway. When the onslaught ended, Dax turned to focus on Zeus. “You done?”

“We have seven minutes,” Zeus stood and joined his team.

“We go on three,” Dax ordered. “Me first, you follow in teams of two.”

“No,” Vato shook his head. “You and me, Thor and Hawk, Zeus and Wooly. Jeeves takes up the rear. We need him safe just in case.”

“I’m still in charge here,” Dax disagreed. “I go first.”

Vato started to argue but stopped when he saw the look in his leader’s eyes. Dax wanted to be the first through the door to protect his team; but, also for the best chance at killing Devonshire. He was taking all the risks and Vato wasn’t willing to let him. He started to take a step back, but when Dax took a step forward, Vato spotted the man hiding in the shadows. He lunged forward and collided with Dax, knocking his leader to the ground as the shot rang out. The man hit his target, just the wrong target. Vato went down, hard.

Dax recovered just in time to see Devonshire jump backward, pivot and take two steps forward. The coward thought he could escape. He was wrong. Dax raised his rifle, aimed and fired. His bullet sliced through the air and collided with the back of the Colonel’s skull. He

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instantly fell forward and landed face down on the hard, white floor. Blood seeped from his head and pooled against the rubber strip that ran the length of the hallway.

Dax realized the battle had continued, and he needed to engage. Before they were finished, ten additional men funneled down the hallway and were shot by Dax and his team. When silence finally settled over them Dax rushed to Vato and dropped to his knees. “You idiot, I had it covered. Jeeves, can we move him? We’re running out of time.”

“I think I’ve stopped the bleeding,” Jeeves stood, his arms were covered in blood to his elbows. “We don’t have a choice. Either we move him, or we all die. Let’s go.”

Dax leaned down and threw Vato over his shoulder. “Move out!”

Thor and Hawk moved to the front of the group. Jeeves remained by Dax’s side and Zeus and Wooly protected the team from the rear. They ran down the corridor toward the same door they had entered. Hawk broke off from the group, leaned down, and threw Hopper’s body over his shoulder. He hit the door seconds after Zeus.

“We never leave a man behind,” Hawk explained as they made their way across the large opening. They were halfway across the lot when the world around them erupted.

Dax was almost to the fence when he heard the first explosion. He knew it was only the first because Reynolds had much bigger munitions stored inside that building. Hot air slammed into his back with so much force it lifted him off his feet and catapulted him into the chain-link fence. He felt a sharp pain on the side of his head before his world went black.

Paige stood and moved to the door when the knocking continued. She flung it open, annoyed at the interruption then froze. Something else had happened.

“Carmen Fennelly is here to speak with you,” Margie advised. “She said it’s important and if I’m not willing to interrupt, she’s going to break the door down. I decided I believe her.”

Paige left the room and approached Carmen. “What happened?”

“Can we use that room?” Carmen pointed to the conference room.

“Gage,” Jericho barked. “Secure the prisoner in the back.”

Gage moved quickly into the room and pulled Konner Gray to his feet. The second they were out the door, Carmen slammed it shut and moved to the table, setting her laptop on the surface and opening the lid. She punched in a few buttons and motioned for Paige to watch the video.

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The small group watched in horror as three figures emerged from the warehouse. One of them had a man slung over his shoulder. Three additional figures emerged and the last one had a second man slung over his shoulder. Paige started to relax. She recognized Dax as the first figure carrying an injured or wounded — she refused to think dead — soldier to safety. Then, the world erupted. The video immediately became static, then turned black.

“I thought you said there wasn’t video,” Paige turned on Carmen. “How did you get that?”

“I’ve been working on reestablishing the connection,” Carmen admitted. “I was using the data from before, when they rescued Zeus. I finally tapped in and got that up and running. I’ve tried to call, I called every stupid phone they have but nobody will answer. Are they...?”

“Paige,” Jericho said softly. “Make the call.”

Carmen started to cry and Margie stumbled forward and dropped into a chair. They all looked up when Gage opened the door and stepped into the room. “Bad news?”

“We don’t know,” Jericho admitted. “Paige is trying to find out.”

“What do you know?” Paige said in greeting when Nathan answered the phone.

“Nothing,” Nathan sighed. “I’m here with Harris. We’ve lost contact. I saw the last transmission, the one Carmen sent, but we just don’t know anything at this point.”

“I need transportation,” Paige decided. “I need the fastest transpo you have to Arizona. Tell Harris to make it happen. I’m going to that warehouse and I need Sean Wilkens to join me.”

“Sean is already there,” Jericho admitted. “He’s standing by with HRT. We got there late. The building is unstable and there have been additional explosions; but, Sean is already on scene.”

“I’ll be at the airport in fifteen minutes,” Paige advised. “Make this happen Nathan. There will be two of us.” She hung up and turned to face her peers.

“Nathan?” Margie asked. “I thought...”

“There’s a lot that can’t be shared, not yet. Paige, I’ll drive you to the airport,” Jericho stood. “Margie, you see what you can find out from Flagstaff PD. I doubt they know anything, but I want to know everything they know. Gage, you need to finish up with Mr. Gray. If you can’t get a confession, just book him. We don’t have time for his games tonight.”

Paige was out the door and practically running to Jericho’s car.

Winter Crisis

“Try again,” Dax ordered. “We need to get this information to Sean. He was staging down the road far enough Devonshire’s team wouldn’t see them. He probably thinks we’re all dead and the op is complete. He needs to know there’s a shipment headed out as we speak.”

“I’m trying,” Ken grumbled. “If we don’t have service, we don’t have service. What do you want me to do, launch myself into space and establish a connection manually?”

“Yeah,” Dax answered, not amused. “I would love that. I need to speak to Sean.”

“Stop the car!” Ken ordered. “I have service.”

“No!” Jeeves yelled. “We can’t. I have him stabilized but not for long.”

“Here,” Ken handed the phone to Dax. “Make it quick.”

Dax grabbed the device and put it to his ear just as Sean was answering the call. “Sean, is that you?”

“Man is it good to hear your voice,” Sean greeted. “The world out here is on fire.”

“I know,” Dax cut him off. “I have bad news. Devonshire sent a shipment, at least three full trucks, to a garage a mile east of here.” Dax rattled off the address. “A man by the name of Evan Vanguard will be in charge over there. You need to get to that address immediately. Take HRT. This could get ugly. Vanguard will shoot first and ask questions later. Do not underestimate him.”

“As in Evil Vanguard?” Sean asked. That got the attention of the Special Agent standing next to him.

“Yes,” Dax affirmed. “There are at least three trucks, Sean. You have to get them all. Devonshire planned to ship them out tonight. He’s sending them to his same contact in the Mediterranean. We have to get them all. That explosion is a ruse, it was meant to mask the fact he was planning another shipment.”

“And Devonshire?”

“Dead.” Dax wasn’t going to elaborate. “Vato is injured, we’re headed to the hospital. Any chance you could check in with the boss. Our service is spotty out here at best.”

“I’ll call Harris with the update,” Sean confirmed. “Head to the hospital in Flagstaff. They’ve been put on alert and they’ll be ready for anything.”

“Copy,” Dax decided Sean didn’t need to know they already had that information. “Out.”

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“Hawk, step on it,” Jeeves ordered. “I’m losing him.” Jeeves shifted and started to give Vato CPR. If he could just keep his brother alive, the hospital might be able to save him. But, that was a big if. Vato was fading fast and Jeeves needed help.

Paige jumped from the helicopter and ran to the waiting vehicle. At least Nathan had come through for her... or Secretary Harris did. She didn’t care which. She had just climbed into the back seat when her phone began to ring. “Nathan, I made it. There’s a man here that says he’s taking us to the hospital. Why are we going to the hospital?”

“Sean heard from Dax,” Nathan advised. “He sounded fine. Are you on your way?”

“Yes,” Paige motioned for the driver to start moving. “You can fill me in while we drive.”

“Vato was injured,” Nathan explained. “It sounds serious. The team is headed to the hospital. That’s all I know. There is no report on any other injuries at this time. Sean’s on a second mission to stop our weapons from landing in the hands of terrorists. Seems Devonshire hooked up with a man we fired. A man with a grudge against our country. Things are still a mess out there, kid. The entire building went up, several explosions and the fire department is just now moving in to put out the flames.”

“I’ll call you when I know more,” Paige promised. “Now, we are just pulling into the hospital and I need to find Dax.” Paige hung up and unhooked her seatbelt. She was out the door before the car even came to a complete stop. She hit the ground running and burst through the emergency room doors. It only took a few seconds to zero in on Dax. He was standing alone, watching out the window, and he looked... amazing, and tired, and a complete mess. She was halfway across the visiting room when Dax turned and spotted her.

He felt her somehow, he knew she was there — for him. She had traveled all the way to Arizona to be with him. He turned and met Paige in the middle of the room. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into a tight hug.

Carmen moved forward, searching for Zeus. She didn’t see him until he stood and made his way toward her. They were still at odds when he left. Carmen didn’t see how she could make him happy and Zeus refused to accept reality. She didn’t care. She loved that man and somehow, they would figure it all out. Later.

Zeus was laughing as he picked Carmen up and swung her around. “You do care, at least a little.”

Carmen hit his shoulder. “Of course I care, you idiot.” The tears started to flow. She didn’t understand why. Zeus and Dax were okay, but she couldn’t stop them. “We saw you. I

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got the video up and running and we saw you exit the building. Then it exploded, and we had no idea what happened to you.”

“Let’s go out here,” Zeus took Carmen’s hand and led her out of the room.

Dax thought that was a good idea. He needed to speak to Paige in private.

“How is Vato?” Paige asked as they left the crowded room and headed down an empty corridor.

“Touch and go,” Dax admitted. “The idiot saved my life. He knocked me out of the way and took a bullet to save me.”

Paige swallowed the panic that clawed up her throat. Dax had come close to dying... again. “I guess that means I have to be nice to him now,” Paige tried to joke.

“I guess,” Dax took an abrupt left turn and pulled Paige down a deserted hallway.

The instant Paige knew they were alone, she pushed Dax up against the wall and wrapped her arms around him. They stood there for several minutes, each one lost in their own thoughts before Paige took a step back.

Dax put his large hand behind Paige’s neck and pulled her forward. “Paige Carter?” he said when her mouth was just inches from his.

“Yes, Dax Hamilton?” Paige whispered.

“I am undeniably and irrevocably in love with you.”

“Ditto,” Paige laughed.

Dax sobered and locked eyes with Paige. “Marry me.”