

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Explosive Appeal *Season 4, Episode 1*

by:

Melanie P. Smith

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Explosive Appeal

Previously on Paige Carter...

Dax and his team have finally stopped the national security threat, but it has come at a high price. Vato is in surgery fighting for his life. Agent Wilkens is working to locate the missing high powered, military grade weapons before they are shipped overseas and end up in the hands of terrorists. Dax surprises Paige with a proposal she didn't expect.

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."

Paige took an abrupt step backward. "What?"

Dax grinned and waited.

"Are you kidding me?" Paige demanded. "You're proposing here? In a deserted hallway — in a hospital? Now? While your friend is somewhere down there..." she flung her arm outward. "Still in surgery, fighting for his life?"

Dax continued to grin. "Seemed appropriate... for us."

Paige stared silently for several seconds. Dax was serious. Her heart began to beat way too fast and her breathing became labored. "You already maneuvered your way into my house. I still don't know how that happened, but apparently my neighbor moved in while I was dealing with dead bodies, kidnapping plots, terrorists trying to kill us all, and exploding warehouses. No discussion, no planning — just wham there you are. Now you want to get married! In the middle of all this chaos? Maybe we should just march into the chapel right here at the hospital and see if we can find the local padre. We could have the ceremony tonight. You know, get it over with before we head back home."

"Never mind," Dax straightened, livid at her reaction and more than a little hurt by her rejection. "Oh, and I'll rectify the rest of that as soon as I get home." He pivoted and walked silently away, never looking back as he disappeared around the corner.

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Paige started to panic. What was she doing? Why had she said that — out loud? Okay, so every time she stopped to think about their arrangement, it gave her a little jolt. She'd always been independent. She never truly thought she'd have her own happily-ever-after. That was something other people had, like Nathan and Sophie. For her, relationships were fleeting — not serious commitments. So, she panicked. But, was the proposal really that surprising — especially after everything they'd gone through this past year. Just a few hours ago, she had demanded the Secretary of Defense himself arrange an emergency flight to Arizona so she could make sure Dax was safe — that he was okay. Hadn't she panicked the entire way down, unwilling to consider the possibility he was seriously injured again... or worse? So, why the overreaction? Why did she just make Dax feel unwelcome, like he was an intruder in her home? In her life. "Dax!" she called as she began to run.

Dax heard Paige call his name, but he was done. She didn't want him around. Fine. He'd rectify that immediately. Okay, sure, he knew his proposal would take her by surprise. He surprised himself when he voiced the question out loud. But once it was out there — hanging in the air between them — he expected her to say yes. Instead, she made it clear just how much she didn't want him. Not as a husband, and apparently not as a roommate. Dax felt Paige's hand on his arm, but he didn't stop. Not until she jumped in front of him and shoved his body against the wall.

"I'm sorry," Paige swallowed the lump forming in her throat.

"Okay," Dax tried to move around her.

"No," Paige held firm. "It's not. And, I didn't mean what I said back there."

Dax raised an eyebrow.

Paige bit her bottom lip, knowing if she smiled Dax would misinterpret her response. "Well, I have wondered a time or two how we ended up living together. And, I can admit, it's unnerved me a little. But not because I want you to move out. It's just... new and unexpected."

"I need to check on Vato," Dax tried to sidestep but Paige moved with him.

"Do you want an answer to your question first?"

"I already got my answer, loud and clear," Dax ran a frustrated hand through his hair and leaned his head back until it collided with the wall. "I'm tired and you're right. It's not the place to have this discussion."

"My answer is yes," Paige waited until Dax opened his eyes.

"Why?"

"Because I am undeniably and irrevocably in love with you," Paige did smile now.

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“Not good enough,” Dax insisted. “You claimed to love me before I popped the question, and the answer was still — get out of my house.”

“No,” Paige said slowly, knowing he wouldn’t make this easy. He was trying to hide it, but she’d hurt him, and she was truly sorry for that. “I never said I wanted you out of my house. I said I wasn’t sure how you got there in the first place. Now I’m saying I don’t just want you to stay, I want you to be contractually obligated to be there.”

“Why don’t we talk about it when we get home?” Dax offered again.

Paige dropped down on one knee and grabbed his hand. “Dax Hamilton, will you marry me? I was an idiot. I ruined your proposal and I want a do-over. Will you please be my ball and chain?” She grinned as she batted her eyelashes at him.

Dax smiled at that. “Stand up.” He lifted her off the floor, pivoted and sandwiched her body between him and the wall. “Mine was better.” Once he had her where he wanted her, he pressed his mouth to hers. The instant they made contact, he relaxed knowing things were right between them again. The woman would drive him insane; but, he realized, she was worth every aggravating minute. Loving her might be a challenge, but it was a challenge he would face willingly — for the rest of his life. He pulled back a little so he could focus on her face. He had to know if she really wanted this the way he did; or, if she was just doing it for him. “I don’t want you to say yes unless it’s what you want.”

“Yes,” Paige gave him a quick kiss. “I want to marry you, Dax Hamilton.” She kissed him again. “I love you and I want to be your wife. I could ask the nurse to let me broadcast our news over the loudspeaker. Maybe that would convince you I’m serious.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary. But,” Dax grinned, “should I ask the nurse for directions to the chapel?”

“Nope. I want to marry you in Manti,” Paige finally relaxed. “I want Nathan to walk me down the aisle. I want Carmen to be my bride’s maid. I want Jericho, not some stranger, to conduct the service — if that’s okay with you. And, I even want that obnoxious band of militants you call friends to sit in the audience and cheer you on.”

“Then, let’s get married,” Dax pulled her closer to give her a proper kiss this time.

That’s how Carmen and Zeus found them.

“Hey, you two,” Zeus called. “We’ve been looking all over for you. The doc came out and said Vato made it through surgery. He’s still not out of the woods, and it’s gonna be touch and go throughout the night, but we can stop in for a minute if we hurry and we stay quiet.”

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Dax ignored his friend completely. When Paige tried to pull away, he gripped her by the back of her neck, shifted, and deepened the kiss.

“Uh,” Zeus cleared his throat. “Hello? I get the happy reunion and all, but if we don’t hurry, they won’t let us in.”

Dax let Paige pull away this time, straightened, took her hand and casually made his way down the hallway. He didn’t say a word as he walked past Zeus and Carmen.

“What was that all about?” Zeus asked.

“No idea,” Carmen shrugged. Paige and Dax were acting strange. “But we better catch up or you won’t get to see Vato.”

Dax glanced at Paige and grinned. His smile widened when she glanced at her left hand and wiggled her ring finger.

“Don’t look so happy,” Paige whispered. “I’m pretty sure it’s not official until you seal the deal.”

Dax lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “Don’t you worry about that. You’ll get your diamond.”

Paige frowned as they rounded the corner. “Um, I can’t...” She stopped when she spotted Hawk and the rest of the men. They could discuss the actual ring once they were home. She didn’t want a big diamond. She wouldn’t be able to wear one. It would just get in the way while she worked. Somehow, she’d have to make Dax understand that. Not tonight, though. She’d already messed this whole thing up enough tonight. They’d just go in, see Vato, and work out the details later.

Dax stepped into Vato’s room and headed for the couch. It was early, but he wanted to be here when his friend woke up. He still couldn’t believe the idiot had jumped in front of a bullet — for him. It was the second time one of his men risked their own life to save his. The first time Maverick lost his life. Now, Vato was recovering but he would never be the same. It would kill the stoic soldier when he learned the news. It was going to destroy the man’s life, knowing he couldn’t return to active duty. Dax planned to do everything in his power to make the transition easier. He settled onto the couch to wait.

Zeus slid into the room and spotted Dax. The look on his friend’s face told Zeus everything he needed to know. Dax felt responsible for Vato and he was suffering with the guilt. “I’d tell you to let it go, but I know you won’t.” He dropped onto the couch next to his friend.

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Dax remained silent.

“Can we talk about something else?”

“I’d appreciate it,” Dax said flatly.

“Good,” Zeus settled back and crossed one ankle over the other. “I want to talk about business.”

“Before you commit to something back home, don’t you think you should know what Carmen has planned for the future?”

“We’re working on that,” Zeus frowned. “But it’s out of our control.”

“Which is why talking business is futile,” Dax insisted. “Until I know if you’re actually staying, or if you’ll have to bail on me, I’m not getting into a big project with you.”

“I told you...” he didn’t finish because Vato shifted and tried to sit up.

“Welcome back,” Dax stood and helped his friend into a sitting position. “How are you doing?”

“I don’t need to be pampered,” Vato grumbled. “And, the doctor already broke the news so you’re off the hook. I’m fine. You and the guys might as well head home. They’ll release me in a couple of days, and I can head to the base so they can process me out.”

“And then what?” Dax asked.

Vato shrugged. “I’ll figure it out. The rest of you guys did. It’s not the end of the world.”

“I have a better idea,” Dax returned to the couch. “We’ll hang out here and wait for the doc to release you. Then, you can head back to Manti with me and the rest of the guys, and we’ll touch base with Porter once you’re settled.”

“There’s no reason...”

“I like that idea better,” Zeus interrupted. “We’re stuck here until Wilkins and the rest of the feds complete their inventory, anyway. They want us to stay close in case they have questions. And, I’m kind of getting used to this couch.” He bounced a couple times before he stood and made his way toward the door. “Now that we finalized a plan, I’ll be back in an hour with Carmen and the others.” He slipped out the door and disappeared, not waiting for an answer.

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Three Months Later...

Paige sipped the last of her coffee and gently set the cup on the table. She loved it out here — especially this early in the morning. With all the guys milling around, it was the only time she could get a quiet moment to herself. Hawk and Zeus were restless, Vato was miserable and obstinate. He took his foul mood out on anyone brave enough to venture into his universe. Paige was coming dangerously close to her limit with that man. She understood his disappointment and his struggles. The bullet had caused extensive internal damage and nicked a vertebra in Vato's back. Physical therapy was helping, but the doctors told him not to expect a full recovery. They wouldn't know the extent of permanent damage for another eight or nine months. Vato took the news hard and was struggling to come to grips with his new reality. But, it was time to get over it already. Yeah, he took a bullet and the injury ended his military career. The other guys found a way to settle, Vato would just have to do the same.

But, they hadn't. Not really. Zeus was still on edge, waiting to hear what the Bureau would do with Carmen. Nathan was trying to work a deal behind the scenes to keep Carmen on his team and working on special FBI projects on the side. Paige hoped he would succeed because if Carmen had to go back to work for Agent Grey... well, Paige wasn't sure her friend would survive. No doubt the egomaniac would shove her back into the dungeon. Hawk was waffling. She could tell he wanted to stay, but job opportunities in Manti were... limited for a man with his skills. And Dax was busy remodeling her basement. At least Ken was settled back home in Nephi with his family and Doc Jeeves had flown out a month ago to hook up with his wife on some humanitarian mission that desperately needed another doctor.

Paige sighed and began to absently twist her engagement ring. Her life was way more complicated than she wanted it to be at the moment. So complicated, she hadn't even started to plan her wedding. The one and only step she'd taken was asking Jericho if he'd perform the ceremony. They didn't know where they would gather, hadn't settled on a date, and every time she thought about the guest list — she got a massive headache. She glanced at the ring, amused at herself. The nervous twisting was becoming a habit. She had to admit, Dax understood her. She should never have worried about some gaudy diamond. The man knew her better than she knew herself. Oh, this ring had a diamond... three large ones actually. But they were inlaid into the white gold with a couple additional smaller diamonds that accented them perfectly. She loved it and couldn't have done better if she'd picked it out herself. "Speak of the devil," she mumbled when the back door opened, and Dax stepped onto the porch.

Dax grinned and dropped into a comfortable chair. "Just the way you like me, babe."

"Probably. Looks like we're about to get invaded." Next door, Hawk and Zeus had stepped onto the back porch. They were engaged in a deep and somewhat heated conversation. "What's the plan for today?"

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“No plan,” Dax shifted and stretched out his legs. “I should be able to get the sheetrock up in the family room. I have no idea what those two are up to, and Vato will probably piss and moan until I hit him upside the head with a two-by-four.”

“They need a plan,” Paige stood. “A clear direction for the future, a goal they can work on, something that will keep them busy. And I need to get ready for work. Forego the two-by-four. I don’t think you can rattle anything loose anyway, and it will just make Vato more intolerable. Instead, why don’t you give him a job. Ask those guys to help you with the remodel. It’ll get the dust out of my house sooner and it’ll give them a project to keep ‘em busy until things settle around here.”

“You sure?” Dax stood. “What if they can’t swing a hammer?”

“That’s what she said,” Paige laughed and dodged, darting inside before he could catch her. Dax followed. “I don’t have time for your antics this morning. I’m already getting a later start than usual.”

“Then don’t discuss my hammer,” Dax pulled her forward and wrapped his arms securely around her waist. “Good morning.”

Paige relented and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Try to be patient with Vato. You were in the same boat, not that long ago — Grumpy attitude and all. He’ll come around. He just needs to feel useful again.”

Dax gave her a gentle kiss then released her. “I know and I’m trying. Come say goodbye before you leave. I’ll be out back enjoying my morning coffee.”

Paige turned and ran up the stairs. She still had time for a quick shower if she hurried.

It was nearly one in the afternoon and things were quiet... too quiet. Gage was grumbling at his desk as he sorted through old cases. Jericho was locked in his office with the door shut so he could finalize his budget proposal without interruption. Margie was doing something magical on the computer, and Logan was studying the newest criminal justice techniques from an ugly green book. *Rookies*, Paige thought. One day he’d realize the only way to learn police tactics was through experience. She pulled up another open case and sighed, determined to get through the paperwork before she left today. It had been piling up for weeks and she couldn’t put it off any longer. Her attention shifted when a call came in.

“Sheriff’s Office, what is your emergency?” Margie asked.

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Paige watched as the dispatcher straightened and began to frantically type something into her system. Something was up and based on Margie's reaction, it was big.

"Stay on the line, please." Margie placed the caller on hold and turned to address Paige. "There's a bomb threat at the high school. The principal is on the verge of panic and the secretary is so hysterical I can barely understand her. They seem to think it's legit, not a prank. Can you and Gage head over, see what resources we need?"

"I'm coming too," Logan jumped to his feet.

Paige nodded and headed for the door. "You get to advise the boss."

"I'll take care of it," Margie assured her.

"How'd the threat come in?" Gage asked.

"Anonymous call," Margie advised. "But the caller was calm and controlled. I'm going to keep Kathy on the phone until you arrive. I'll let you know if I get anything else from her but it's doubtful. I think the scene may be utter chaos by the time you arrive."

"Copy," Paige answered as she pushed her way through the back door.

Margie was right. The parking lot was pandemonium, Paige could only imagine what it was like inside the school. She parked as close as she could to the front door and pushed her way inside.

"If one of these delinquents called in a prank to get out early, they will not like the consequences," Gage growled behind her.

"Where's the rookie?" Paige asked.

"You know I hate it when you call me that," Logan barked as he rushed in behind them. "Looks like the principal's anxiously waiting." He pointed to the man pacing inside the front office.

"Who alerted the students?" Paige asked before the office members could start asking questions. She needed to get the situation under control.

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“Uh,” Kathy, the secretary, disconnected with Margie and stood. “I made the broadcast over the intercom. It was just the code that would notify our teachers we had a situation. I guess they must have panicked and started evacuations.”

“If you were going to create chaos and mayhem, why not just pull the fire alarm?” Gage asked. “It would automatically signal police and fire, and the kids would have calmly left the building. We could have avoided this,” Gage pointed to the panicked scene just outside the office.

“We...” Principal Swanson began.

“I told him if he ever did that again, I’d make sure Jericho threw him in a cell,” Chief Rosen advised from the doorway. “Principal Swanson started using the fire alarm as his personal alert system anytime there was an emergency. Real or imaginary.”

Paige smiled. “The boy who cried wolf, I get it. I assume your bomb guys are here.”

“Yeah,” the Fire Chief nodded. “Kurt started the search with the dog and Sam just arrived with the robot. It would help if you could get the rest of the kids out of here and away from the building.”

“On it,” Paige turned to her colleagues. “Let’s split up. We can cover more ground that way.”

“I’ll take the hallway that leads to the gymnasium,” Gage offered. “I’ll herd the kids still lingering in the hallway out onto the football field.”

Paige shook her head. “I should have known. I’ll head down the main hallway and into the cafeteria. It’ll be easier to push those kids out the side doors. Logan, you take the other hall and herd the stragglers toward the rear of the building and gather somewhere out there. Once we get the building cleared, Fire will have free and unrestricted access to search for explosives.”

“I’ll set up a Command Post outside in the front parking lot,” Jericho advised, moving in next to Rosen. “Check in once you have evacuated your respective areas.”

“You got here fast,” Paige observed. She hadn’t even seen him come in.

“Head out,” Jericho answered. “Chief, let’s move outside and we can coordinate resources from there.” He turned to address the office staff. “You’ll need to evacuate immediately. I’ll wait while you lock up. We want this place locked down and the building completely cleared out just in case the call wasn’t a hoax. Swanson, come with me. I want to know exactly what the caller said and if they gave you any indication where they may have placed the device and why.”

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Nearly two hours later, the group was sitting in the faculty lounge. Logan was jotting down notes on the giant chalkboard.

“So,” Logan turned to face the group. “At twelve-forty-two the call came into the office. The caller requested Principal Swanson directly. That call lasted under a minute. Swanson notified his staff and Kathy made the announcement within minutes of the call. Then she phoned Margie through 911.”

“We need to know where the call came from,” Jericho interrupted. He didn’t want or need the recap. “Where are we at on the phone records?”

“Havilland’s working on it,” Gage provided. “He’ll head this way the minute he has them.”

“We know it was a hoax,” Paige provided. “But the caller was calm and collected. It wasn’t a panicked ‘get out of the building or it’s going to blow’ kind of thing. It was convincing enough to panic the staff. Why? What’s the motive? Are we dealing with a kid or a disgruntled parent?”

“Or a nut case that gets their kicks from causing havoc,” Jericho provided.

“When I find the turd that did this, I’m going to squash him like a bug,” Gage grumbled.

“Can’t handle a few juvenile delinquents, Clayton?” Paige teased.

“Those ungovernable malcontents ripped my shirt,” Gage pouted. “I can’t just buy another one off the rack, a uniform in my size has to be special ordered. You can give me a good armed robbery or a simple homicide over those scrawny troublemakers any day.”

The group laughed then sobered when Duncan Havilland stepped into the room.

“What did you find?” Jericho demanded.

“I have a photo,” Duncan passed a sheet of paper to his boss. “It was a kid. Probably a student. Is the principal still on scene? I’d like to see if he can identify him.”

“He’s in the office with the superintendent,” Paige offered. “I think a couple of the teachers are up there, too. Let’s go see if anyone knows this kid.”

“Good work,” Jericho put a hand on Havilland’s shoulder. “How’d you get that photo so fast?”

“Once I tracked the source it was easy,” Havilland provided as the group made their way down the deserted hallway. “The call originated at the City Pool — outdoor phone.”

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Jericho smiled. “And Public Works installed cameras two weeks ago after that last vandalism incident.”

“Exactly,” Havilland nodded. “George met me at the building and we pulled the footage in less than five minutes. He burned me a copy of the video for evidence, but I wanted a printout before I headed this way. With any luck, one of those teachers will recognize the kid and this nightmare will be over.”

Jericho stepped into the office and realized the group was engaged in some kind of argument. The instant they spotted the cops, they froze in curious silence. “I need to know if any of you recognize this kid.” He held the photo out to Principal Swenson.

“Debra?” Swenson passed her the photo. “I know who it looks like to me, but I can’t believe he would do something like this.”

Debra Dawson took the picture and studied it for several seconds. “I’m fairly certain that is Kevin,” she glanced at Swenson. “But I can’t believe...”

“What is Kevin’s last name?” Paige asked.

“Oh,” Debra focused on the photo again. “Um, Granger. Kevin Granger. Phil?”

Principal Phil Swanson sighed. “That was my guess as well. I’ll get his file.”

“Kevin is an ideal student,” Debra said, worried and confused. “He’s a straight-A student. He never causes any trouble. I just can’t believe he would do something like this.”

“Do you know his parents?” Gage asked. Maybe the kid was having trouble at home.

“Not well,” Swanson returned. “Connie and Stiles are private people. Stiles works in Gunnison, I believe. I think he does the books for the feed store. Connie doesn’t work, unless she does something from home. Kevin is their only child, and he’s a good kid; respects authority, never mouths off, never sluffs class, and always does his homework as far as I’ve heard.”

“That’s right,” Debra added. “He’s a good kid, one of my favorite students. There has to be some kind of mistake.”

“I’ll copy the details,” Swenson opened the file and began to write the information onto a large pad of paper. The cops were obviously convinced they had their man. He would never stand in their way, even if he didn’t agree. “Here is Kevin’s home address and his phone number.” He ripped the sheet from the pad and held it out to Jericho. “Is there anything else we can do to help?”

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“No,” Jericho informed him. “This will give us what we need. Thank you for your assistance. You’re free to leave at any time.”

“Thank you, Sheriff,” Swenson said sincerely. “We appreciate your work out here today.”

“So,” Paige said once they were outside in the parking lot. “Who do you want to interview the kid?”

“Take Gage,” Jericho decided. “And I want him arrested. He caused a lot of trouble today. He’ll be back home by morning, that’s if DT agrees to take him at all, but I want him to sit in a cell overnight. Use those powers of persuasion to make it happen.”

“If I’m doing all the persuading, why do I need Gage?” Paige smirked.

“Intimidation,” Jericho winked at her. “Clayton doesn’t have to say a word.” He climbed into his car and pulled away.

“I’m not sure how I feel about that,” Gage finally said.

“At least you get to participate,” Logan grumbled.

“At least you get to go home on time,” Paige countered. “Come on, Master of Intimidation. Let’s go scare a confession out of an underage miscreant.”

Paige pulled into the driveway of a well-kept, modest home. The trees were trimmed, the lawn was manicured, and there wasn’t a bit of clutter in the front yard. She frowned, that was unusual. She climbed from her vehicle and took the time to glance around. She’d guess the family owned at least an acre of property with a vacant field to the left, and another home on an equally large lot to the right. She glanced up when Gage arrived but continued to take in her surroundings.

“Something wrong?” Gage asked, stepping in beside her.

“Not wrong,” Paige corrected. “But where’s the basketball hoop? Or, the basketball for that matter? No dirt bike, no skateboard, what does this kid do for fun? And where does he store it when he’s not using it?”

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Gage shrugged. “Now days kids are more into video games than outdoor recreation. Maybe he’s not interested in that stuff and he likes to spend his free time indoors.”

“Maybe,” Paige wasn’t convinced. “Let’s go talk to Kevin.”

The two of them made their way to the front porch. Paige rang the doorbell and smiled when Gage stopped a few feet behind her. His large, imposing stature would be the first thing the resident would see when they opened the door. A small woman stood behind a sturdy screen, her demeanor telegraphing just how nervous and apprehensive she was. Panic was written all over her face before she masked it with a smile. Paige wondered if this was her normal reaction to the police or something more.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m Deputy Carter and this is my partner Deputy Clayton,” Paige paused. “Can we come in and have a word with you, Mrs. Granger?”

“Um, I guess so.” She slowly swung open the screen door and took a hesitant step back.

Paige entered the house and immediately spotted what had to be their suspect. “Kevin Granger? Would you please join us?”

Kevin swallowed hard then nervously walked into the living room and dropped onto the couch.

“Is there anyone else in the residence?” Gage asked.

“My husband,” Connie answered.

“My sister,” Kevin said at the same time.

“Ma’am could you ask your husband and your daughter to join us?” Paige asked.

“We don’t have a daughter,” a man provided as he stepped into the room. “Kevin is an only child.”

Paige focused on Kevin. Was he being obstinate on purpose or was there something else going on here? “Why would he claim to have a sister if he’s an only child?”

“I don’t know,” the man moved forward and held out a hand. “Stiles Granger. Can I ask what this is about?”

“Deputy Carter,” Paige accepted the handshake but continued to watch Kevin. “That’s my partner, Deputy Clayton.”

“I know who you are,” Stiles nodded to Gage. “You’re a bit of a local legend around here.”

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“Back to the sister,” Paige didn’t want the men to get sidetracked talking football. “Kevin, why did you say you have a sister?”

“It’s just something he does,” Stiles dismissed the claim. “Ignore it, we do. Again, what brought you to my home today?”

It’s just something he does? Paige was getting a bad vibe here. Maybe that could be true if the kid was five, but not a teenager — what would be the point? “Before we get into that, would you mind if we took a look around? I need to be certain there is nobody else here in the residence.”

“Unless you have a warrant, I’m afraid I do mind,” Stiles settled into a chair. “I already told you, there isn’t anyone else here. What is this about?”

Another red flag popped up in Paige’s mind. She glanced at Gage and saw he was frowning now, too. “As you may have heard, there was a bomb threat at the high school this afternoon. We’re following up on some information we received. I’d like to speak with Kevin alone, if you don’t mind.”

“Actually,” Stiles straightened. “I think I do mind. He’s a minor. As I understand it, you can’t interview a minor without his parent or guardian present.”

Interesting, Paige thought. *Now, why doesn’t he want me alone with his kid?* She needed a new plan. “Kevin, can you tell me what you know about the call that came into the school this afternoon? The one notifying the principal there was a bomb.”

“Nothing,” Kevin lied.

“Can you tell me where you were between twelve-thirty and one o’clock this afternoon?” Paige pressed.

“Uh, at school?” Kevin asked.

“Is that a question?” Paige inquired.

“I don’t think I like your tone, deputy,” Stiles interrupted.

“And we don’t like fake bomb threats,” Paige said in dismissal. “Kevin?”

“I was at school,” Kevin swallowed hard. This was not working out the way he had hoped. How could he tell the cops why he did it, if his parents had to be here?

“This interview is over,” Stiles stood. “If you have any further questions, you can speak with our attorney.”

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“That’s okay,” Paige also stood. “Kevin, you are under arrest, please stand up and put your hands behind your back.”

“For what?” Stiles yelled.

“For making a terroristic threat. It’s against the law to claim a bomb was planted in a building. It doesn’t matter if the threat is real or manufactured. Your son wasted a lot of time and money today with his juvenile stunt.”

“You can’t,” Stiles took a step forward but was blocked by Gage.

Paige smiled, maybe her boss knew what he was doing when he sent the linebacker as backup. “I’ll let you know once he’s been booked.”

“Stiles?” Connie whined. “Don’t let them take our son.”

“Keep your mouth shut, boy,” Stiles ordered. “We’ll deal with all of this once I get you back home.”

Paige might have felt sorry for the couple — well maybe, if they weren’t hiding a big fat family secret. But she was even more certain now than she was before — something strange was going on in this house, and she was determined to figure out what it was. She opened the passenger door and guided Kevin into the seat before turning to address Gage. “I..”

Gage shook his head and shifted his eyes to the front window. “Why don’t you take the kid up the road a ways and question him there. Maybe just go around the corner. I’m going to do a little knock and talk at the neighbor’s house. I’ll hook back up with you when I’m done, and we can transport the kid together.”

“Good plan,” Paige climbed behind the wheel and drove away. To Kevin’s parents, it would appear as if the cops were escorting their kid to detention. Once she was around the corner, out of sight, she pulled to the side of the road and shifted to face Kevin. “Okay, now tell me what the whole ‘I have a sister’ thing is really about.”

“I do have a sister,” Kevin insisted.

“Where was she?” Paige pressed.

“In her bedroom,” Kevin swallowed. “Um, if I tell you about my sister are you going to... I mean, do you have to tell my parents what I said?”

“Not necessarily,” Paige studied the teenager and realized he was afraid. “Why did you call in the bomb threat today?”

“It was the only way to get you to my house,” Kevin mumbled. His head was down and he was staring at his lap.

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The kid was in trouble and desperate. Paige had a feeling the call was a plea for help. “Here, let me get the cuffs off, then you can start at the beginning and tell me why you were so desperate to get the cops to your house, you decided to commit a felony.”

“It’s a felony?” Kevin swallowed hard. “I didn’t...”

“Come on, shift around so I can take off the cuffs.”

Kevin pivoted and stared out the window. Once the handcuffs were removed, he rubbed his wrists, wondering how he should start and how much he should tell.

“Okay, kid,” Paige settled back against her seat. “You can tell me about your sister, or you can tell me about the phone call, or you can explain why you are afraid of your father. But, start talking.”

“It’s all a part of the same thing,” Kevin took a deep breath. “I do have a sister. Dad built a bedroom, playroom, and a bathroom in the basement for Beth Ann just after mom brought her home.”

“Why did your parents say you made it up?”

“Because they don’t want anyone to know,” Kevin said angrily. “That’s why she never leaves. She’s a big secret, our secret, and I’m not supposed to tell anyone.”

“What do you mean by she never leaves?” Paige pushed.

“They have her locked in the basement,” Kevin said softly. “She’s not allowed outside. She can’t even go upstairs. She can’t go to school. She can’t have friends. Her entire world is inside that house.”

“And how do your parents treat her?” Paige’s mind was reeling. “Is she well fed? Do they care for her needs? What if she gets sick and needs a doctor?”

“It’s nothing like that,” Kevin said immediately. “My parents love her. They take really good care of her. We usually have family dinner down there, and she plays in the room they built for her. Mom spends time with her every day, like home school. They don’t hit her or abuse her, they just keep her locked up — like a stupid pet or something. It’s not right, she should have friends... and a life.”

Paige frowned. “And the bomb threat today?”

“I knew you’d find me,” Kevin admitted. “I knew you could track where the call came from, I saw the new camera. Jim and Nate think they got away with it, but after the damage they caused tagging the pool a couple weeks ago, I knew you guys would do something. When you

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put in the camera, that's when I got the idea. I just figured if you had to come to my house, maybe you would find Beth Ann."

"Any reason you didn't just tell someone?" Paige was trying to understand why the kid thought breaking the law was his only option. She also made a mental note to contact Dean. He'd want the two names Kevin just provided. It might be the break he needed to close the vandalism case.

"I tried that, it didn't work."

"You told someone about Beth Ann?" Paige asked.

"Yeah," Kevin shut down completely.

"And what happened when you didn't keep the family secret?"

"Doesn't matter," Kevin turned away.

"I think maybe it does," Paige softened. "Who did you tell?"

"My friend," Kevin said reluctantly. "He lives next door."

"Did he say something to your mom or dad? Did he let it slip that he knew?"

"No," Kevin glared at her. He didn't want to talk about this or his punishment.

"Come on, Kevin," Paige pushed. "Tell me what happened."

"He told his mom what I said. She told my mom, and I learned my lesson."

"I don't understand what that means," Paige insisted. She needed Kevin to tell her what happened. It might explain his drastic actions today.

"They locked me in the shed," Kevin barked. "Are you arresting me now or what? Will you at least go back and help Beth?"

"How long were you locked in the shed," Paige pushed, undeterred.

"Ten days," Kevin sighed. "Now can we help Beth?"

"How did you miss school that long with no one noticing?"

"It was in the summer. I didn't have school."

"Does the shed have air conditioning?"

"No," Kevin watched out the window again.

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Paige had a million questions. How hot did it get? Did they open a window? Did they give him enough water to avoid dehydration? “Did they bring you food and water?”

“Some,” Kevin still didn’t look at her.

Paige could see the kid was starting to shut down completely. He didn’t want to talk about his abuse — and she was positive now they had abused him. Kevin wanted to help his sister. A sister Paige was beginning to think wasn’t his sister at all. “Sit here, I need to talk to my partner.” She climbed from the vehicle and walked back to see what Gage had learned from the neighbor.

“Took you long enough,” Gage said through the window.

“I was busy,” Paige leaned against the door frame. “What did you learn?”

“It intrigued the neighbor when I asked about a girl living next door,” Gage told her. “Apparently, her son Shane and Kevin are friendly. One day, around three years ago, Kevin told Shane he had a sister. Shane insisted he was lying because he hadn’t ever seen a girl next door. Kevin said that’s because his sister isn’t allowed outside. Shane thought it was strange enough he told his mother. Shanda, Shane’s mother, dismissed it. Then, a few days later she had an opportunity to question Connie about it. Connie got upset and insisted Kevin made the whole thing up because he wanted a sibling. She went on to explain she was pregnant years ago with a little girl, but she miscarried. According to Connie, Kevin never got over it, so he frequently made up stories about having a little sister.”

“I want to call in Social Services,” Paige decided. “We need to get inside that house.”

“On what grounds?” Gage didn’t think they had enough.

“On the grounds that after Connie was confronted by the neighbor, they locked Kevin in the shed for ten days as a punishment for sharing the family secret.”

“We might be able to get a warrant on what we have,” Gage offered. “I mean, we’re just asking for a welfare check. We need to know if there is a little girl inside or not. Judge Potter might bite.”

“He will definitely bite if we can get DCFS on our side,” Paige insisted. “I’m going to call Jericho. Maybe he can get that same lady that helped Misty and her brothers. I think her name was Jan.”

“Right,” Gage studied Paige’s car. “Jan Bolton. Are we sure the kid is telling the truth, not just trying to get out of trouble for the bomb scare?”

“You tell me,” Paige focused on Gage. “I know you got the same impression I did once dad stepped into the room. His story doesn’t pass the smell test.”

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“Call Jericho,” Gage sighed. “There were giant red flags popping up all over the place. We have to follow through.”

Paige stepped away and phoned her boss. Ten minutes later, she returned to the truck. “Prepare yourself. Jericho is calling in Jan, but he’s headed our way. He wants to decide for himself if the kid goes to DT or a shelter.”

“If he brings in Jan, she’ll make that call and the boss won’t have a say,” Gage disagreed.

“Oh, Jericho will have his say,” Paige countered. “The question is whether or not Ms. Bolton listens. Give me a minute, I need to inform Margie. We’ve been out here too long and the happy couple might have called an attorney for their kid already.”

“Right,” Gage climbed from his own vehicle. “I’m going to go up and sit with Kevin. He might open up and tell me more while we wait.”

“I thought you were just here for intimidation,” Paige joked.

“And, I intend to intimidate the kid until he spills his guts,” Gage countered as he walked away.

Paige hung up with Margie and spotted Jericho and Jan Bolton. She just hoped she was right about this because now that the Division of Child and Family Services was involved, it just might get ugly. “Ma’am,” Paige held out a hand to the local director. “Would you like to talk to Kevin before we head to the residence?”

“I need five minutes,” Jan glanced at Jericho. “The patrol car is fine.”

“Just give Gage the boot, it’s all yours,” Paige motioned toward her car. Once Jan walked away, Paige addressed Jericho. “What was that about?”

“She’s opposed to having a discussion with a child inside a patrol car,” Jericho advised. “I explained the situation and let her know as of this minute, the kid is under arrest. She can talk to him in the car, or not at all. She decided to talk.”

“Playing hardball,” Paige grinned. “I like it, but I’m afraid she might question the whole under arrest thing. Once I realized what was really going on here, I uncuffed him.”

“I know you’re mad about the threat at the high school, boss,” Gage added stepping in beside Paige. “But that kid is a victim and he was just trying to get help.”

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“Looks like he won you over, too,” Jericho frowned. “This better not be a con.” They watched as Jan Bolton exited the vehicle and headed their way, scowling.

“Kevin says the two of you have been interrogating him without a representative.”

Paige almost rolled her eyes, but she stopped herself. “Kevin is mistaken.”

“So,” Jan pushed. “Neither one of you had a discussion with that kid about his home life?”

“Kevin provided some details of his home life on his way to DT,” Paige said flatly. “I believe it’s called spontaneous utterance.”

“You should have called me earlier,” Jan insisted. “That kid is traumatized, and you forced him to talk about it. That should never have occurred without a professional therapist present.”

“Actually, I didn’t force that kid to say anything,” Paige knew she should back down — she needed Jan’s assistance to get inside the residence — but Kevin wasn’t traumatized, he was tenacious. “How about you, Gage? Traumatize any children lately?”

“Nope,” Gage smirked.

“Enough, you two,” Jericho stepped in before Jan decided she didn’t need assistance from the local police. “However we got here, we’re here. What do you want to do about it?”

“I need to speak to his parents,” Jan sighed. “I’d like to do it alone, but under the circumstances I think it would be best to have a law enforcement presence nearby just in case.”

“Gage, you stay with the kid,” Jericho ordered. “Paige, you and I will accompany Ms. Bolton back to the Granger residence where we can have a discussion about their children.”

“I’m glad to hear you acknowledge there’s more than one child.” Paige mumbled.

Jericho gave her a warning look and started for the house.

Paige followed Jericho and Jan Bolton back onto the front porch of the Granger residence. The conversation was extremely short. Jan rang the bell. Stiles opened the door. Jan explained her request. Stiles slammed the door in her face.

“How would you like to proceed?” Jericho asked Jan. “I’m inclined to believe my deputies. There’s something strange happening in that house and we need a way inside so we can determine what it is.”

“I agree,” Jan was frowning. “I think with the bomb threat, the previous statement to the neighbor, and Kevin’s statement we have enough to get Judge Potter to issue a warrant. I mean, we’re not arresting anyone — yet. We just want to get inside to check the welfare of a child.”

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“Are you prepared to argue there is a child?” Paige asked.

“Yes,” Jan didn’t hesitate. “I believe Kevin is a good witness. He says there’s a little girl inside. I see no reason for him to lie. I need to get inside to assess the situation and make sure she’s okay. Judge Potter will agree.”

Paige returned to her vehicle and slid behind the wheel. “Gage, I’ve got this. Go strategize with the boss. I need to type up a warrant.”

“A warrant?” Kevin stared in shock.

“Your parents won’t let us inside,” Paige explained. “So, I have to get a judge to sign a warrant saying I can go in the house, look around, and see if there is a little girl locked up in the basement. And, if there is, I need to make sure she’s okay. The warrant just says your parents have to let me in.”

“Are my parents in trouble?” Kevin asked. “I mean, I know they will be but... maybe this was a mistake.”

Paige studied Kevin for several seconds. “You know what, kid? Sometimes the right thing is the hardest thing. And sometimes, when we do the right thing, life gets harder for a little while. But the right thing is always the right thing. I think your parents might be in a lot of trouble. If they are, it’s not your fault — it’s theirs. No matter what happens, none of this is your fault. Remember that. Also know, you have four people that care about you. We’re here for you and we’ll help you get through this. Okay?”

Kevin just nodded. He remained silent as Paige typed up the request and waited for her warrant to come through. It took less than ten minutes. She printed it out and approached Gage. “He’s upset. He thinks it’s his fault his parents are in trouble with the police. I think he could use a friend. Maybe you two could talk about football or something while we do this?”

“I got this,” Gage nodded. “Go save the girl.”

“Hey, Kevin?” Paige knocked on the window. “You never said, how old is your sister?”

“Ten,” Kevin answered. “Beth Ann is ten.”

“This can’t be legal,” Stiles objected. “This is our home. You can’t just barge in and invade our privacy. We have rights and you’re stomping all over them. In our own home.”

“Stiles make them stop,” Connie wailed. “You can’t let them do this.”

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“Where is the door to the basement?” Paige asked for the third time.

“Jericho, can you accompany me into the back-bedroom area?” Jan requested. “I would like to take a look and see how the rooms are set up.”

“I will not let you invade our privacy this way,” Stiles bellowed. “I’m calling a lawyer.”

“I thought you already did that,” Paige raised an eyebrow. “To help your son.”

“I…” Stiles didn’t seem to have an answer for that.

“The basement?” Paige asked again. “I’m not interested in the bedrooms. I want to see the basement.”

Paige saw Connie glance toward the kitchen, then look away abruptly. *Bingo!* She moved forward and headed straight for the kitchen. She was a little surprised when Connie jumped forward and blocked the doorway in an attempt to stop Paige from entering the room. “Step aside or you’ll be sitting in the back of a patrol car in handcuffs.”

“Stiles,” Connie called.

Paige glanced over and spotted Stiles. He was frowning and his demeanor had completely changed. Paige thought she read acceptance and defeat on his face.

“Stiles,” Connie yelled again.

Paige maneuvered around the frantic woman and made her way through the kitchen. It was larger than she expected and immaculate. She paused at the kitchen counter, turned a corner and froze. The door she was looking for was situated just inside a little alcove. There was one door that Paige was sure led to the basement, and a second door on the other side that led outside. “Where is the key?” She was fuming at the sight before her. The door was a normal wooden door, but someone had screwed a metal plate to the outside. There were two long bars that ran the length of the door, each one secured to the opposite side of the wall with two padlocks; one on top, the other near the bottom.

Jericho stepped in behind Paige and frowned. He knew Jan had followed him through the kitchen by the loud gasping sound she made when she spotted the door. “If they won’t get the keys, I have a crowbar in my car.”

Paige watched as Stiles closed his eyes and sighed.

Connie started to cry. Paige watched in fascination as silent tears turned to shuddering sobs. Then, she dropped onto a kitchen chair and began to protest. Her words were incomprehensible, but they all understood the message — she wanted all of them out of her house and she wanted it now.

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“What’s it going to be?” Jericho turned to Stiles. “The key or by force?”

Stiles gave his wife an apathetic glance before he silently walked across the room and retrieved a small key chain from inside a cabinet next to the refrigerator. He held it out to Jericho and turned to leave.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you go anywhere, Mr. Granger,” Paige informed him.

“I got this,” Jericho nodded to the door. “You and Jan go down, see what’s on the other side of that door. I’ll contain the couple until you return.”

“You sure?” Paige asked, not entirely comfortable leaving him there alone.

“Go,” Jericho answered.

Paige looked at Jan who swallowed hard then gave her a nod. The key slid into the first lock with ease. She gave it a gentle twist and it smoothly disengaged with a soft click. She slipped the lock out of the hook and repeated her actions on the second padlock. “Stay behind me,” Paige ordered Jan.

Jan nodded, but didn’t say a word. The two women descended the stairwell slowly and cautiously. Once they reached the bottom, they both froze in surprise. There was a large open play room full of the latest toys. In one corner was an enormous playhouse, in the other was a small table with two chairs. To the right of the stairs was a larger dinner table that could accommodate a family of four. Paige realized that must be where they ate dinner. There was a small hallway that led out of the room. Once Paige was satisfied the playroom was empty, she made her way across the large expanse in the direction of the hall. There were two rooms, one on each side. The one on the left was open and Paige could see it was a bathroom. It was decorated in pinks and purples with flowers and other feminine touches that a ten-year-old child would favor. She continued to the second door. This one was closed tight. Paige knocked softly and waited.

“If she doesn’t open it, we’ll need to enter anyway,” Jan whispered.

Paige turned to reply but was stopped when the door flung open and a dark-haired little girl stood on the other side.

“Who are you?” Beth Ann demanded.

“My name is Deputy Carter, and this is my friend Jan,” Paige informed her. “Can you tell us your name?”

“I’m not supposed to talk to people,” Beth Ann refused.

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“Oh, but we’re not just people,” Paige said in her most nonthreatening tone. “I’m the police. You’re right, you shouldn’t talk to strangers but it’s always okay to talk to the police.”

Beth frowned, considered and then nodded. “My name is Beth Ann Granger.”

“It’s nice to meet you Beth Ann,” Jan smiled. “Maybe we could go upstairs into the living room and talk. It’s a lot more comfortable on the couch.”

“I can’t go upstairs. It’s not allowed,” Beth looked at her feet.

The girl was dressed in a frilly dress and fancy black shoes. She looked healthy enough, Paige thought. Well, other than that whole locked in the basement and forbidden to come out thing. Kevin was right, his parents did care for this girl. A girl that didn’t possess even one trait that matched the Grangers. Connie was blonde as was Kevin. Stiles had more of a dishwater color with light brown tints. This kid, she had hair so dark brown; it was nearly black with auburn highlights and deep brown eyes. A stark contrast to the Granger’s green eyes. There was absolutely no chance Connie Granger gave birth to this little girl — unless she had a fling with a dark, handsome mailman.

Jan held out a hand. “It’s okay, let’s go upstairs. Stiles and Connie know we’re here and they said it was okay.”

“They did?” Beth asked in surprise.

“Absolutely,” Paige affirmed. “So, what do you say? Should we head upstairs? Kevin’s outside. Maybe, once Jan says it’s okay, you can go outside and see him.”

“Outside?” Beth asked in amazement.

“We’ll work up to that,” Jan shot Paige a look that screamed, GO SLOW.

Paige shrugged and motioned for the stairs. “After you.”

Beth Ann took one cautious step and then another. Paige’s heart broke to see the hesitance and the wonder as the little girl slowly ascended the staircase one tentative step at a time — headed toward freedom for the first time in her young life. Sadness turned to anger when she stepped back into the kitchen and spotted the sadistic couple that had deprived the girl of her childhood. How many things had she missed out on? She’d never chased butterflies in the spring. Never stomped in a puddle after the rain. Never laughed with her friends as she learned to ride a bicycle, or ran through the sprinklers on a hot summer afternoon.

In that moment, Paige realized just how brave and compassionate Kevin really was. He could have continued on with the status quo. Lived his life, moved away, gone to college and ignored the sister his parents kept locked in the basement. But, he wanted more for the ten-year-

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old girl he clearly loved. Wanted it enough to call in a bomb threat. Wanted it enough to suffer another punishment if his plan failed.

Jericho took in the group as they emerged from the basement. The little girl was a cute little thing and obviously the victim of an abduction. He wondered how old she had been when the Granger's snatched her up and hid her away. He'd have to order a DNA test, but it wasn't really necessary. There wasn't even the slightest family resemblance, which explained the need for secrecy and confinement. The look on his deputy's face told him Paige was furious. Jan looked sad but resigned. He knew she'd seen far worse throughout her long career, but he also knew each case she handled took a toll. It took a toll on him as well. His thoughts were interrupted when Connie jumped to her feet and lunged for Beth Ann.

"What's wrong, mom?" Beth asked. "Am I in trouble? I thought you said it was okay."

"Come in here, dear," Jan ushered her away from Connie. "It's fine. Your mom's just a little sad to see you up here. She's not used to it. Let's come out here and sit on the couch for a minute."

"I think we should have Gage bring Kevin in," Paige decided. "She's nervous and doesn't know how to act or what to think. Kevin could help her through this."

"I knew that kid couldn't keep his big mouth shut," Stiles grumbled. "He's going to regret what he's done. Mark my words, that kid will pay for destroying this family."

"Somehow," Paige said flatly. "I doubt that." She glanced at Jericho before she left the room.

Paige and Kevin stepped into the living room. Kevin was terrified, even with the knowledge his parents were in the kitchen and he wouldn't have to face them. The instant he spotted Beth Ann, he shot across the room and dropped onto the couch next to her. The two siblings began a hushed conversation. Jan stood and joined Paige near the door. They couldn't hear everything Kevin was saying, but within minutes, Beth Ann's demeanor changed. She was still timid, but she trusted her brother and it showed. Kevin stood and held out a hand. Beth Ann slowly got to her feet and slid her tiny hand into his. Beth Ann took one deep breath and the two kids walked silently toward the door.

"Ready?" Paige asked Kevin.

"Yeah," he glanced at Beth Ann. "We're fine, right?"

Beth Ann nodded and gripped Kevin's hand tighter. The instant the kids stepped through the door onto the front porch, Beth Ann stopped in amazement. "It's so bright."

"Can she have a minute?" Kevin asked Paige.

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“Sure,” Paige motioned for them to move forward. “You’ll be riding with Jan. Just let her know when you’re ready.”

“Can you let me,” Kevin glanced at Beth Ann. “Can I go with her and get her settled before you take me to jail?”

“You’re not being arrested, Kevin,” Paige shook her head. “Jan will take you and your sister to a shelter. Once you get there, you’ll have to talk to a therapist and tell her everything. Hey, kid?” Paige waited for him to look up at her. “You did the right thing. Now, you have to finish it. You have to tell her everything.”

Kevin took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Right answer,” Paige nodded at Jan. “They’re all yours. I have work inside.”

Jan stepped forward and put a hand on Kevin’s shoulder. The group ambled toward her vehicle. Paige could see Jan was letting them set the pace and she understood why. Kevin understood the gravity of what was happening, but Beth Ann was distracted. Everything out here was new to her. The shock would set in soon enough. She sighed, turned and stepped back inside.

An hour later, the group settled into the open bullpen of the office. Connie and Stiles Granger were inside the conference room waiting for their attorney. Paige, Jericho, and Gage were outside waiting for Tolman. Paige was happy to let the attorneys hash things out, as long as the dynamic duo experienced what it felt like to lose their freedom. How it felt to be locked up with no way out.

They all glanced up when the door opened, expecting to see District Attorney James Tolman. Instead, Jan walked in and made her way to the group. She settled into one of Paige’s visitor chairs and sighed. She looked exhausted and stressed.

“In addition to the kidnapping and unlawful detaining charges, I would like you to charge the Granger’s with child endangerment and neglect.”

“For?” Jericho asked.

“We had a very long, very detailed conversation with Kevin about the time he spent in the shed three years ago,” Jan took a deep breath. “It had a small window near the top, one that doesn’t open but it allowed light to come in. He could tell when it was daytime and when it was night. It’s the only way he knew he was in there for ten days. There was no circulation in that building, no ventilation, and he was locked in there without water in the middle of summer.

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They basically shoved that kid into an oven and hoped he'd survive. Kevin said he was sweating so profusely, he stripped down to his underwear hoping it would give him some relief. They didn't even give him a blanket. He spread out his clothing so he wouldn't have to sleep on the hard floor and waited out his sentence. He was so dehydrated and weak after only one day, he spent the entire time lying on the floor waiting, day after day, to be set free."

"No wonder he kept the family secret for so long," Gage responded.

"Brave kid," Paige added. "He risked everything to save that girl."

"Tolman should be here any minute," Jericho told Jan. "Let him know you want the additional charges. He won't argue."

Just then Tolman stepped into the room with a man Paige didn't recognize. "This is Dr. Howe. He'll be conducting a DNA test on our two suspects." He glanced around the group. "Jan."

"I need to talk to you about some additional charges," Jan said in greeting.

"You can use my office," Jericho offered. "I'll supervise the test. Do we have a warrant?"

"I've got it," Tolman held out a stack of papers. "Give them that copy. Their attorney will want it for his records. The man's not happy and we've already gone a round over this. He lost. He's going to try to convince you to release his clients. We've gone a round on that as well. He told me he would personally guarantee they would show up for arraignment. I rejected his request. I want those two locked in a cell." He turned to Jan. "Let's talk."

"I think he's pissed," Paige observed.

"He is," Jericho watched as the local DA stepped into the office and closed the door. "And what Jan is about to tell him, won't improve his mood. Let's get this over with," he turned to look at the doctor. "After you."

Three days after the arrest of Stiles and Connie Granger, Paige and Jericho pulled into the parking lot of the local Social Services office. The DNA results were in and the Granger's were not related to Beth Ann — no surprise there. The surprise came when Paige entered the results into CODIS, the DNA Index System maintained by the FBI. Apparently, prior to three-year-old Beth Ann going missing, her parents had completed a child identification kit. The local police department was handing them out at a summer event. Beth Ann's parents filled in the details and

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gathered the recommended samples; never truly believing they would need it. They had; and Beth Ann Savett's DNA was in the system, making identification easy.

Paige had contacted the detective working the missing person case immediately. Detective Robert Kane from Laurel Bluffs PD offered to notify the parents and arrange a meeting. Initially Paige was surprised to learn Beth Ann's family lived in Laurel Bluffs; but, once she thought about it, the child's complete confinement made more sense. *Wouldn't it have been easier on the entire family if they had just moved out of state and started over?*

With a sigh, Paige climbed from the vehicle and joined Jericho. They silently made their way inside to find Jan Bolton. The director had insisted on holding the meeting here, at her facility. She thought Beth Ann would be more comfortable in the child friendly atmosphere and Jan wanted their therapist to attend just in case Beth Ann didn't take the news well.

Paige stepped into the large foyer and glanced around. It was decorated with comfortable chairs, paintings obviously created by the children who stayed here, and lush carpet. Basically, it was designed with children in mind, not heavy traffic like the old building where she worked. To the right was a large room Paige assumed was some sort of recreation area. She spotted Kevin and Beth Ann at the far end and could tell they were having a serious discussion about something.

Jan Bolton stepped from a room to the left. She motioned for them to join her and disappeared. It was a conference room and Jan wasn't alone.

"Sheriff," a middle-aged man in a suit stood.

"Hello, Robert," Jericho turned to Paige. "This is Deputy Paige Carter. Paige, this is Detective Robert Kane with the Laurel Bluffs Police Department."

"Pleasure to meet you," Kane settled back into his chair. "Duncan speaks highly of you, which means you must be good. Havi doesn't compliment anyone. I admit, this case was a shock that came out of left field. Seven years! I honestly didn't believe we'd ever solve this one. You hold out hope, at least for the first year or two, but then another year passes and; in your gut, you know — realistically, if you find something, it'll be a recovery. This one floored me. Right here, all the time. I've kept in touch with the Savett's. They're good people. I'm glad they got their happy ending."

"Happy is relative," Jan said soberly. "They have a long, hard road ahead of them. They took Beth Ann when she was so young, she doesn't seem to remember having a family before the Granger's."

The room grew silent when a couple stepped tentatively into the front foyer.

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“That’s them,” Kane stood. “You ready to get this started or you want me to have them wait?”

“I think we’re ready,” Jan glanced at a petite woman sitting quietly on the other side of the large conference table. “Do you need more time, Nancy?”

“No,” Nancy closed a file she’d been studying. “I’m ready.”

“While Det. Kane escorts the Savett’s into the room, I’d like to introduce Dr. Nancy Atwood. Nancy is a highly qualified therapist who specializes in childhood trauma.”

Paige gave a polite greeting then refocused on the Savett’s. She recognized the couple immediately. Yes, she did a thorough background on both of them. After what Beth Ann had already been through, she wasn’t taking any chances. She watched as they followed Det. Kane into the room and slowly settled into chairs at the far end of the table, clinging to each other for support.

“I know you’re eager to see your daughter,” Jan began. “But as I told you on the phone, the police would like to speak to you first. Then, we have a few things that need to be settled before we can proceed.”

“What does that mean?” Clark Savett asked.

“It means,” Jan continued. “It’s my job to ensure the health and wellbeing of the child. Yes, you are Beth Ann’s parents, I understand that, but she doesn’t know you. We are making progress and she’s a resilient little girl. A happy child, we want to keep it that way. But, before we get into those details, Deputy Carter would like a minute to explain what brought us here in the first place.”

Paige stood. “I know this is difficult and I want to make it as quick and easy as possible. When I’m finished, feel free to ask me any questions I failed to answer.” She told them how Kevin had orchestrated a bomb threat hoping to get the police inside his house where they could discover Beth Ann. She went on to explain their daughters living conditions, making sure they knew the girl wasn’t abused or neglected... other than the no going outside thing. She finished with an assurance that they had arrested Connie and Stiles Granger and both of them were facing serious charges.

“Do you have any questions?” Kane asked the couple.

“I don’t think so,” Clark Savett glanced at his wife. “Not at this time.”

“We just want to see our daughter,” Juliette practically whispered. “We want to take our little girl home.”

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“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Nancy said soberly. “I’m Dr. Nancy Atwood, and I’ve been evaluating your daughter. Beth Ann is traumatized. There are only three people she knows in this world — and two of them are in jail. Contact with her brother is essential to get her through this transition period.”

“Her brother?” Juliette Savett asked. “You mean that boy I saw with her in the other room? That’s not her brother.”

“That boy has a name,” Paige spoke up. “Kevin is Beth Ann’s brother in every way that’s important. He is her rock.”

“He’s also the only thing keeping that child from having a breakdown,” Nancy said calmly. “It is my conclusion that without Kevin, Beth Ann will slip into a panicked state. She’ll shut down completely. Separating those two will cause irreparable harm.”

“I...” Juliette stopped when her husband placed a firm hand over hers.

“What does that mean, exactly?” Clark asked.

“We ask that Kevin have, for lack of a better word, visitation rights,” Jan explained. “Kevin doesn’t have any living relatives, other than his parents and we all know they are going to jail for the foreseeable future. That means, you will need to bring Beth Ann back here, to this facility, where the two of them can visit, play games, whatever.”

“Kevin will have to live here?” Juliette asked.

“For now,” Jan evaded. She hadn’t found a suitable foster home for the teenager yet. But, she was determined to locate the perfect couple that would take him in and give him a chance.

“You said he faked a bomb threat at the high school?” Clark focused on Paige. “I’m not sure I want my daughter to have that kind of influence in her life.”

“Kevin called in a bomb threat,” Paige nodded. “Not for kicks or for bragging rights to his friends. He did it to save your little girl. He did it knowing he was risking his own safety and wellbeing. I’d say that’s exactly the kind of influence you should want for your kid.”

“You said the Granger’s didn’t abuse or neglect our daughter,” Juliette read between the lines and worried the people who had her little girl were violent or worse, and these people were trying to hide it.

“As far as we can tell,” Jan jumped in. “They didn’t. We’re not at liberty to discuss their treatment of Kevin.”

“I don’t understand,” Juliette pushed. “Why would they treat my daughter better than their own child?”

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“Because Kevin didn’t keep their secret,” Jan provided. “And that is all I can say on the matter.”

“And if we don’t agree to visitation?” Clark asked. “Or, if we change our mind later?”

“You will not have the luxury of changing your mind,” Jan advised. “You will have to sign a document agreeing to regular visits and a memorandum of understanding will be filed with the court. It will be a binding contract, Mr. Savett.”

“And if we don’t agree?”

“Then, Beth Ann will remain here until I determine she is emotionally strong enough to endure the transition without her brother,” Nancy said flatly.

“If we won’t let that boy see her, you’re going to keep her from us?” Juliette asked in horror. “That’s extortion or bribery or something.” She looked to Det. Kane for help.

“I think you should take a minute to observe Kevin with Beth Ann,” Kane suggested. “I spent some time with both of them yesterday. He’s extremely protective of your little girl. This is a good thing, and it doesn’t have to be permanent. Once Beth Ann adjusts, you can re-evaluate how much contact Kevin has with her.”

“Can we have a minute alone with Deputy Carter?” Juliette asked.

“Sure,” Kane stood and motioned for the other two women to join him. They slid out into the hallway, closing the door behind them.

Paige waited to see what this was all about. If anything, she had expected the couple to request a private meeting with Kane.

“You seem to know this Kevin kid pretty well,” Juliette began. “Can you tell us anything about him?”

Paige studied the woman for several seconds, wondering what this was about. “I can tell you his principal and his teachers vouched for him. They said he’s a good kid, a straight-A student and he always respects authority. If you’re truly worried about the kind of influence he will be on Beth Ann, you don’t need to. He’s a great kid and doing the right thing here came with a high personal cost. He did it anyway. That alone should tell you the kind of character that kid has.”

“He’s going to be placed in a foster home, isn’t he?” Juliette asked. “If they can find a home that will take a kid that old. He looks about fifteen, sixteen?”

“He’s fifteen,” Paige affirmed. “And yes, Jan is looking for a home where he can be placed. She wants a family close enough that Kevin doesn’t have to change schools. This has

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turned his life upside-down. If she can keep him in the area, at least he won't lose his friends, too."

"We have two small boys," Clark was watching his wife and he thought he knew what she was getting at. "They're twins, five years old and a handful, but they're good kids. I can't expose them to someone that will be a bad example. I need to know it's safe to have this Kevin kid around my family."

"It's safe," Paige said without hesitation. "But nobody said you have to let the boys have contact with Kevin. If you're that worried, can't you find a sitter?"

"Can I have a minute alone with my husband?" Juliette asked.

"Sure," Paige rose and left the room. Less than two minutes later, the couple joined the group in the foyer.

"Are you ready to meet your daughter?" Nancy asked.

"Almost," Juliette glanced at Clark who gave her a quick nod. "We'd like to talk to you about fostering Beth Ann's brother."

Paige stared in wide-eyed shock. "Didn't see that one coming."

"Neither did I," Jan studied Clark and Juliette. "Are you sure? I don't want to cause irreparable damage to Kevin, either."

"We'd like to get started on the process and in the meantime, while we wait, we can take a little time to get to know him," Juliette suggested. "We don't even have to tell him until it's all official if that would help."

"Like you said," Clark added. "He's the reason we are here today. He did the right thing, now we'd like to do the same."

Paige was exhausted when she stepped through her front door. It had been a long couple of days. Worse, it had been emotionally draining. Once the Savett's convinced Nancy and Jan they were serious about wanting to take home both kids, they were introduced to Kevin and Beth Ann. The little girl was confused and more than a little scared. Clark and Juliette got to witness firsthand the strong, unbreakable bond the siblings held. They got to see why it was so important to keep Kevin in her life. She hoped things worked out — for all of their sakes.

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She took a step toward the staircase and paused when she heard voices in the kitchen. Paige pivoted and dropped her gun belt onto the couch before making her way to the back of the house and her unexpected company. She relaxed when she spotted Zeus and Carmen, grateful she wouldn't have to entertain tonight.

Carmen spotted Paige and jumped from her chair. Before Paige knew what was happening, she was smothered in a big bear hug.

"Can't breathe," Paige mumbled.

"Sorry," Carmen released her, but did a little dance in front of her friend. "Nathan called. He worked a miracle. I get to stay!"

"Here? In Manti?" Paige clarified.

"Yes," Carmen hugged Paige again. "I will continue to work for Nathan on whatever project he has going, but that won't take a full-time tech. So, I get to work with Sean Wilkins here locally. I don't have to go back... I've been permanently freed from the dungeon."

"I'm so glad," Paige moved around her and settled into a chair next to Dax. "I'd hate to have to slay a dragon just to pay you a visit."

"Which means," Zeus added. "Now Dax and I can start talking business."

"Go home," Dax ordered his friend. "I want to spend some quality time with my woman."

"Your woman wants food." Paige stood and moved to the fridge, knowing Dax had something waiting. Her man always took care of her.

Dax winked at her before he gave Zeus a playful shove toward the door.

Paige laughed and relaxed. Tonight, she was going to enjoy a peaceful night at home with her fiancé. She was still smiling when Dax returned. Finally, everything was finally falling into place.