

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Wild Excursion* *Season 4, Episode 2*

---

*by:*

*Melanie P. Smith*

**Copyright © 2019 Melanie P. Smith**  
*First Edition, First Impression*

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

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

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



MPSmith Publishing

## Wild Excursion

---

“Maybe we did take a wrong turn,” Sierra Vaughn admitted.

“You think?” Kendall said sarcastically as he gripped the steering wheel tighter and tried to slowly maneuver around the enormous ruts that were so deep, they nearly swallowed the entire tire. He pressed on the gas and hoped he had enough momentum to climb out of the hole. He knew renting a vehicle, even an SUV, was a bad idea. He was from New York. He walked to work, walked to the theater, walked to his favorite restaurants. But, thanks to his wife, he was currently out in the middle of some isolated wilderness, completely lost, nearly out of gas, and fighting to stay on a trail so tiny the vehicle barely fit.

“Don’t take this out on me,” Sierra warned. “We followed the direction that GPS woman gave us.”

“If we stayed on the highway like I wanted to, the ‘GPS woman’ wouldn’t have said a thing,” Kevin grumbled. “But, no. We’re traveling through the wild west, we have to explore, see the sites, get the whole backwoods experience.”

“Right,” Sierra grumbled. “I’m sure people from Utah go to New York and decide it’s inconvenient and not really important to see the Statue of Liberty. I mean, what’s the point when you can just detour around it and lock yourself in a luxurious hotel room? In fact, I bet they skip the city altogether and spend their time sightseeing on Ocean Parkway — it has a lot of nice beaches.”

Kendall started to reply but hit a hole so large it felt like the bottom of the vehicle hit the ground. The jolt made his foot slip off the pedal, when he slid it back, he pressed down harder than he meant to, and the back of the vehicle began to slide. He slammed on the brakes and ended up sideways on the roadway. Just when he thought things couldn’t get worse, the car died. He tried to turn the key, to restart the engine, but nothing happened.

“What’s wrong?” Sierra asked, worried.

Kendall slammed his hand on the steering wheel. “I think we ran out of gas.”

Sierra’s eyes began to water, but she blinked back the tears. She would not cry. She would not give Kendall another reason to yell at her. A knot began to form in her stomach and her throat constricted. She was on the verge of a panic attack and she needed air.

“Sierra?” Kendall studied his wife, concerned.

Sierra shoved open the door and jumped out of the vehicle. Once the cool air hit her face, she leaned forward and braced her hands on her knees. She’d get through this. They were okay. Someone had to come by, see them, and recognize immediately they were in trouble. She inhaled one long breath and slowly let it out. As she started to take another deep breath, she felt her husband’s hand on her back.

## Wild Excursion

---

“It’s going to be okay,” Kendall began to gently rub circles down her spine. “Somehow we will figure this out. They have to have Triple A. We’ll just call for help.”

Sierra straightened and turned to face her husband. Before she could say anything, he pulled her against him and pressed a gentle kiss on her temple. “I’m sorry. I was frustrated and I took it out on you.”

“It’s okay,” Sierra straightened. “Technically, you’re not wrong. I did insist we leave the Interstate and explore the old highway. I just thought...”

“You wanted to enjoy the journey not just the destination. I get it,” Kendall pivoted and crouched to retrieve his phone from the console. He frowned as he stared at the display. Nothing. No bars, no signal, no lifeline... no rescue.

“What’s wrong?”

“We don’t have a signal,” he turned the phone so she could see.

Sierra began to turn in a circle and study their surroundings. “Do you think that mountain is in the way? Maybe if we walk up there a little way, we can get high enough to send a text.”

Kendall walked forward and stood on the incline in front of the vehicle. He studied his phone display again — nothing. He raised his phone in the air and turned in a slow circle — nothing. With a sigh, he ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I think we need to try. Grab your phone too, and we’ll both watch for a signal.”

Sierra reached inside the car, grabbed her phone and a jacket, then slammed the door shut. The sound seemed to echo forever in the silent, open wilderness. A shiver ran down her spine as she realized just how alone and vulnerable they were out here.

Kendall took his wife’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze. “It’s going to be okay. Let’s continue up this roadway. It’s uphill and we might find an opening where a signal will come through.”

“And if we don’t?” Sierra asked, worried what his answer would be.

“If we don’t, we’ll have to try and walk out,” Kendall decided. “Once we hit that larger road, the one we were on originally before we turned onto this smaller trail, there was sporadic traffic. If we can get back to that road, we should be able to find help.”

Sierra took a deep breath and tried to accept their current dilemma. “Alright,” she pivoted and focused on the trail ahead of them. “Let’s go.”

Twenty minutes later, the couple stood on the crest of a hill. The area was beautiful, but isolated. It was also bright; the entire area was completely covered in snow. And, they still

## Wild Excursion

---

hadn't found a signal. "I'm afraid calling for help is out. We're not going to get cell service out here," Kendall decided. "If we want to walk out, we need to turn back and head in the other direction. Once the sun sets out here, it's going to get cold."

"I need water," Sierra settled onto a rock, she was breathing hard and it felt like she was sucking air through a straw. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"It's the altitude," Kendall ran his hand over her head. "I read about it and thought they were exaggerating the effects. Just try to inhale slow, deep breaths. We're not used to being this high up. We live at sea level where the air is thinner."

"Why aren't you winded then?"

"I am, but I started to regulate my breathing ten minutes ago and I think I'm finally getting used to it," Kendall gave her a sympathetic smile. "Why don't you wait here. I need to pee."

"What if I need to pee?" Sierra asked. She didn't, not yet; but eventually, she would.

"Pick a tree," Kendall spread his arm out, motioning to the forest.

"That's easy for you to say," Sierra grumbled. "You're a guy. The world is your urinal."

Kendall laughed. "Membership has its privileges."

"Just hurry," Sierra stood. "I'm pretty sure we only think we're alone out here. There are animals everywhere, and I think they're watching us."

"Don't let a devious squirrel steal your phone," he called over his shoulder as he headed for the thick trees.

Sierra moved closer to the edge of the mountain range. There was a steep drop-off that led to a huge snow-covered valley. She had never seen anything like this in her life. She was a city girl, always had been. It was the reason she wanted Kendall to leave the main highway and explore a little. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined anything as stunning as this. She also never envisioned the possibility they might get stranded and this isolated without phone service. She moved a few feet to her right and stared at her phone in shock. "Kendall!"

"What's wrong," her husband emerged from the trees and rushed toward her.

"It beeped," she glanced at her phone. "I don't dare move. I might lose the signal. It only shows two bars, is that enough to make a call?"

"Put it on speaker and try your mom," he suggested.

Sierra tried, but the call didn't go through. "Should I try a text?"

## Wild Excursion

---

“Yes,” Kendall moved closer to shade the phone so they could see it better. “Text your mom. Tell her we’re stranded in the mountains near Manti and we ran out of gas. Tell her to send help. Do you remember the number on that little post where we turned onto the trail?”

“No,” Sierra stood completely still and tried to type. “I think it was thirty-something, but I wasn’t really paying attention.”

“Tell that to your mom, just tell her we’re on a trail labeled thirty-something,” Kendall decided.

The couple stood completely frozen while they waited to see if the text went through. Finally, the status changed from “sent” to “delivered” and then a message popped up that read “Call me.”

Sierra began to type again. Her mother would panic when she read the message, but maybe she needed to. “Okay, we know she got the message and I told her we can’t call her because of bad service, and she needs to call for help.” She glanced down when a new message arrived. “Mom wants me to wait while she calls the police, what should I tell her?”

“I don’t think we should. We’re blocking the road, if someone sees the car, they might stop to help; but, if we’re not there, they may just leave. Tell her we need to get back to the car and that we’ll be fine, even if we’re stranded overnight,” Kendall decided. “Oh and let her know we’ll try to walk back up here tomorrow morning if we haven’t been located by then.”

“You think we’ll have to sleep in the car tonight?” Sierra asked, even more worried now.

“We might.”

Sierra sent the message. When she got an okay from her mom, they started back toward the car.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige stepped back into the office and glanced at Jericho’s assistant. The woman wasn’t herself today. Paige dropped her lunch on the edge of her desk and headed for Margie. “You okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Margie glanced up. “Headache. I should be able to make it a couple more hours.”

“Or,” Paige settled onto the edge of Margie’s well-organized desk. “You could go home now, and I’ll handle any calls that come in. I don’t have anything pressing, just more paperwork.”

## Wild Excursion

---

“Paperwork you will never get finished if you have to do my job,” Margie argued.

“Go home,” Jericho stepped from his office. “We’ll handle anything that comes in here.”

“What if you get called out,” Margie hesitated.

“Then I’ll handle the call and the boss can cover the phones,” Paige stood. “Go home already, my lunch is getting cold.”

Margie studied Jericho for several seconds then sighed, stood, and began to gather her things. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Now that we’ve settled that, you want some fries?”

“I don’t know how you eat that junk day after day,” Jericho turned and disappeared into his office.

Paige was settled back in her chair, feet propped on the desk, a French fry in one hand, her Diet Coke in the other. The office was quiet, and she was bored with the paperwork. Her mind began to wander to the situation with Dax and his men. Hawk and Zeus spent two hours the previous evening pitching a proposal for a new business venture. Dax insisted she stay for the entire thing and wouldn’t commit until he discussed it with her privately. Apparently, he was taking this getting married thing seriously. She sort of understood, but the money he was thinking of investing was his life savings. Savings he accrued before he ever met her. Most of it was the money Piper had stolen when they split up and finally returned the last time she came to town. None of it had anything to do with her.

With Dax’s financial backing and leadership, and the men’s expertise, the business would be a huge success. But, what if it wasn’t? Would Dax blame her for not anticipating the pitfalls? She didn’t know anything about business. She certainly didn’t know anything about the market they were trying to break into. The men wanted to buy some land here in Manti and open up a highly specialized training facility; high-level combat and tactical stuff with a state-of-the-art firing range. Paige figured they could easily tap into the security and law enforcement markets. She was just nervous, it was a lot of money and it wasn’t hers. She didn’t think she should have a say. On the other hand, isn’t that how marriage worked — like she’d know. Her mind drifted to her mother then even further back to her father. When she started to think of her own wedding, she remembered why she hadn’t been sleeping. The idea of planning such a big event was making her crazy, tired and grumpy.

She was grateful for the distraction when Margie’s phone rang. Paige straightened and tried to wipe the French fry grease from her fingers before she snatched up the call. “Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office.” She reached for a scratch pad and bumped her large cup of soda nearly, knocking it over. She grabbed for it, caught it just in time to avoid disaster, but knocked her remaining fries onto the floor. Resigned, she moved her soda out of the way and decided

## Wild Excursion

---

she'd lost her appetite, anyway. "Ma'am," Paige tried to calm the frantic woman. "I need you to take a deep breath and answer some questions." Paige saw movement and realized Jericho was standing in the doorway of his office waiting patiently to see what they had.

"Okay, I understand," Paige tried again. "Ma'am, I seriously need you to stop and take a breath. Tell me your daughter's name. Okay, Sierra Vaughn. And her husband?"

Jericho moved forward and settled into one of Paige's visitor chairs. From this end of the conversation, he thought she might need his help.

"Okay, your son-in-law is driving a rental vehicle and he's not familiar with the area. Yes, I am familiar with New York. I got that. Yes, I understand they rarely drive, and the car is out of gas. Yes, I got that too. Do you know what type of vehicle they rented? No, okay. Do you know where they rented the vehicle? Salt Lake? I assume they picked it up from the airport. Do you know which company? Did they have any idea where they were? No, I'm afraid indicating they are in the mountains doesn't help much. Do you know if they traveled with plenty of clothing and if they have any food or water with them? I understand you're not with them, but what are their normal habits when they travel. Do they take snacks and water or do they stop every few hours to pick something up?" Paige shook her head at Jericho in exasperation. "Can I get your phone number? Thank you, and I will also need your daughter's number. Yes. Okay, please stay by your phone in case I have further questions. Yes, our office will begin an immediate search. I'll let you know if we locate them. Alright, I'll be in touch." Paige hung up the phone and sighed. "Margie needs a raise."

"I agree," Jericho shifted. "What do we have?"

"Couple from New York decided to take back roads and explore the scenic beauty Utah has to offer. Somehow, they made a wrong turn and ended up in — and I quote — the mountains near Manti."

"That's helpful," Jericho grumbled.

"Then they ran out of gas on a trail with a brown marker that said thirty-something," Paige smiled. "I know, that's not helpful either. If they took Manti Canyon Road, all the trails are in their thirties; thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-four, thirty-seven."

"Are you telling me they left the main road and took a rental vehicle up an ATV trail?"

"I'm telling you they sent a text to mom saying they left the main road and turned onto a smaller road marked with a brown sign that had a number thirty-something on it."

Jericho shook his head. "I'll call Gage and Lovato," Jericho stood. "We're going to need everyone we can get to start driving those trails."

## Wild Excursion

---

“I’ll contact Airport PD and see if someone can track down the make and model of the car they rented. On the bright side, mom says her daughter always travels with a cooler full of snacks and water. They won’t starve and they shouldn’t wander off in search of a convenience store.”

“Not funny,” Jericho walked away.

“No,” Paige mumbled. “It’s not, because we’re going to spend the rest of the afternoon looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.” She called the Airport Police Department and was assured they would track down the car. Then, she dialed her Verizon contact to see what they could tell her about Sierra Vaughn’s phone activity. She was just hanging up when Jericho pulled his door shut.

“We’re meeting Gage and Mike at the mouth of the canyon. I’ll lock up, you go ahead and head out. Susie’s on her way in to handle the phones.”

“I’m working on phone data and Officer Stanway from the airport promised to call as soon as he located the vehicle information. I’ll see you at the mouth,” Paige headed out the back door and slid into her cruiser. Once inside, she called Dax to tell him she was going to be late.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Kendall,” Sierra wheezed. “I am so tired. Please tell me we didn’t get lost again. We should be able to see the car by now.”

Kendall paused, turned and pulled his wife into his arms. “We’re not lost. The car is just around that bend. We have plenty of water and once we get there, you can relax until the police find us.”

“If they find us,” Sierra corrected.

“They will,” Kendall leaned in to give her a quick kiss. “Let’s go. We’ll be there in less than five minutes.”

As they walked, Sierra was sure she could hear something off to the left. “What is that?” she asked as they came around the bend and spotted the car. It was only a few yards away.

“What was what?” Kendall asked, taking her hand.

“That!” she froze.

“Probably a deer or something,” Kendall pulled on her arm to get her moving again.



## Wild Excursion

---

“I don’t think so,” Sierra rushed forward and continued to walk toward the car at a quickened pace. She glanced to the left and gasped in shocked surprise. “Kendall,” she whispered. “That is not a deer.”

Kendall smiled and turned to glance in the direction his wife was looking. “Don’t panic,” he said when he spotted the large black bear. “We just need to get to the car.” He pulled the keys from his pocket and casually pressed the unlock button. Nothing happened, he was too far away. They continued to watch the wild predator as they slowly made their way toward the vehicle. The bear was watching the couple but hadn’t made any aggressive movements — so far.

Kendall pressed the button again when they were about ten feet from the car. They both began to move faster. Within seconds, he reached out, pulled open the back door and pushed his wife inside. He climbed in behind her and slammed the door shut tight. That did attract the attention of the bear. He watched in horror as the large black carnivore began to stalk their car.

“Kendall,” Sierra gasped in horror. “It’s coming after us and the window is open!”

Kendall lunged over the seat, tried to slide the key into the hole, missed and tried again. This time, he hit his mark. He twisted the key at the same time as he pulled the button on the driver’s door to roll the window back up. Once the passenger window was up, he checked the other three windows just to make sure they were completely secured, then removed the key. He dropped back onto the back seat in relief just as his wife began to scream. “Sierra,” Kendall warned. “You have to stop. That’s not helping and it’s probably going to make him try harder.”

The bear raised up on his hind legs and slammed his front paws onto the top of the car. When that didn’t work, he pressed his nose against the passenger window.

“I am not walking up that road in the morning to call mom,” Sierra said forcefully. “We can sit here and starve to death, but I will not get eaten by a bear.”

Kendall pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her, forcing her head against his chest. “We’re going to be okay. He can’t get inside, and the police are looking for us. We have plenty of food and water. We’ll be...”

“What?” Sierra asked.

“Food,” Kendall focused on the sack they had tossed on the floorboard of the backseat. “You didn’t finish your turkey sandwich at lunch. Do you think that’s what he wants? Maybe he can smell it.”

“What if we throw it out,” Sierra wondered. “Do you think he’ll leave if we give it to him?”

## Wild Excursion

---

“Maybe we should try,” Kendall considered. “We’d have to do it fast. If we unwrap it, roll down the window a little while he’s on the other side of the car, and throw it far enough, maybe we can get the window back up before he makes it around the car. Can you keep watch?”

“Be careful,” Sierra begged. “If I tell you he is coming, just drop it and roll the window back up.”

It worked. Everything went according to plan. Once the window was securely in place, the couple watched intently as the bear slowly approached the discarded sandwich. He sniffed once, then devoured it completely. Kendall and Sierra watched in horror as the large animal returned to the vehicle. This time, he climbed on top of the hood and began clawing at the windshield.

“Why didn’t it work?” Sierra demanded. “Why didn’t he leave?”

Kevin studied the bear, hoping the windshield would hold. “I think he wants more. Don’t look at him. I think I heard somewhere that you should never look an aggressive animal in the eye. Try to ignore him.”

“How?” Sierra shuddered. “That’s pretty much impossible. What if he breaks the window?”

“It will hold,” Kevin said, hoping he sounded more confident than he was. It had to hold, otherwise, they were going to be dinner.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was just after five and Paige was tired, frustrated and starving. Jericho had insisted they meet in the turnout at five o’clock sharp. So, where was he? She looked up when she heard a vehicle approaching... actually, there were two of them. The black SUV belonged to none other than Hawk. She watched as Dax climbed from the passenger seat. Zeus, Hawk, and Vato — who was still moving slower than the rest — followed.

“What are you doing here?” she wondered.

“We ran into Gage,” Dax pointed at the second vehicle. “He said you haven’t had any luck yet, so we decided to help.”

“And I have food,” Gage approached with a large box.

“Where’s the boss?” Paige asked.

“He and Mike got tied up,” Gage said as he began pulling out Styrofoam containers and placing them on the hood of his truck. “An injured hiker. Looks like he broke his leg. They’re assisting Fire but should be here any minute. The sheriff was talking about doubling up. He

## Wild Excursion

---

didn't like the idea of being out here alone after dark. When those guys offered to help, I figured they could each ride with one of us and that would keep all four search teams running, rather than condensing into two."

"Good idea," Paige glanced at Dax and grinned. "I'll take Zeus with me."

Zeus started to respond but stopped at the look Dax was giving him.

"I'm afraid you're stuck with me," Dax handed Paige her meal.

"I guess I'm stuck with the boss," she winked at Zeus. "Sorry, he pulled rank."

They all looked up when Jericho and Mike Lovato pulled into the clearing.

Once the meal was over, the group marked off trails they had already searched, and Jericho gave out new assignments. Airport PD had come through for them earlier that afternoon so they knew they were looking for a white 4Runner and they even had the license plate. Jericho had Susie put out a BOLO just in case they found their way out of the canyon and didn't think to call and cancel the search. Every cop in the state was on the lookout for their car and their lost New Yorkers.

"We stop at midnight and pick it back up in the morning if we don't locate the car," Jericho ordered. "Meet back here and check out before you go. I want to know all my people are off this mountain before we call it a night. We can start again at seven if we don't find them."

"Hopefully, it won't come to that," Lovato studied his map then turned to Vato. "You ready?"

"Let's go," Vato slowly pushed to his feet and made his way to the patrol car.

"It's good for him," Paige decided when Mike pulled away. "He needed to get out and Lo won't baby him like the rest of you do."

"We don't..." Hawk started.

"We do," Dax decided. "And Paige is right, assisting with this search might do him good."

"Pull out," Jericho gave Hawk a nod and the two of them headed for Jericho's vehicle.

Zeus joined Gage and Dax climbed into Paige's passenger seat. "You navigate," Paige instructed and held out a map. "Some of these trails are difficult in a vehicle and will need my undivided attention."

"Smells like gasoline in here," Dax observed.

## Wild Excursion

---

“It’s the gas can. I shoved it in the back and covered it with a blanket, but I don’t think it helped much. The couple ran out of gas,” she glanced at Dax. “It’s necessary. I’d say roll down the window, but it’s starting to get cold.”

Dax stretched out his legs and began pressing buttons on the side of his seat. “I think I like this — seeing you in action. You’re cute when you’re bossy.”

“Just navigate,” Paige smiled. “What’s the first trail on our list?”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Kendall, I’m freezing,” Sierra tried to snuggle closer to her husband.

“Let’s try to get situated,” Kendall focused out the front window.

“Is he gone?” Sierra asked.

“I don’t think so,” he sighed. “I think he’s just over by that tree line. Let’s move some of this stuff into the front seat to make more room. That guy at the rental place said the back seats fold down to make more room. If we can figure out how they work, we should be able to stretch out.”

“We’re going to have to sleep here, aren’t we?”

“Maybe not,” Kendall lifted the largest suitcase onto the passenger seat. “But I think we should get comfortable just in case. We’re going to be okay. We have more food in the cooler and plenty of water. I’ll set out some of the clothes for us to lie on,” he began pulling sweatshirts and t-shirts from his luggage. It didn’t take long to lower the seats and create a make-shift bed. The couple settled in for a long wait.

“Kendall?” Sierra said hesitantly.

“Yeah, babe?”

“I have to go to the bathroom and I don’t think I can wait any longer.”

“You could wander over to that tree line,” he joked.

“Not funny,” Sierra slapped his shoulder. “What should I do?”

“He looks like he’s just foraging around for food,” Kendall decided. “Maybe you could be really quiet and open the door on the opposite side of the car. If you hurry and do your business, I might have enough time to go after you — before he returns. I’ll keep watch and let you know if he starts back this way.”

## Wild Excursion

---

“What if he runs over here before I can get back inside?”

“I guess you better hurry. If I say he’s coming, get back inside the car and shut the door,” Kendall answered.

“You could be a little more thoughtful and understanding,” Sierra mumbled. “It’s not my fault I can’t just go out the window.” She started rummaging around in her purse for the small package of tissue she always carried. Once she found what she was looking for, she focused on her husband. “Are you sure this will work?”

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Kendall softened. “I promise. Go ahead, I’ll tell you if he starts back this way.”

Sierra gripped the handle on the door. She hesitated, fear coursing through her as she glanced over her shoulder to make sure the bear was still up near the tree line.

“Go ahead,” Kendall encouraged.

Sierra slowly slid the door open then paused to look around again. Once she was sure it was safe, she lowered one leg onto the hard-packed dirt roadway, froze to listen for any indication the bear was headed her way, then slid the other leg out. She held her breath the entire time she was outside, listening intently for the slightest noise. When she heard a twig snap in the distance, she barely stopped herself from screaming as she jumped into the car and slammed the door shut. Her heart was beating a mile a minute and her hands were shaking as she tried to pull on her pants and refasten the button. She glanced up and saw her husband was silently laughing at her.

“It’s not funny,” Sierra pouted. She was barely holding back her tears.

“It’s kind of funny,” Kendall moved forward. “Now it’s my turn. I thought you slamming that door was going to bring him back, but he just looked up, studied the car for a few seconds and started to dig around in those bushes again. Tell me if he heads this way.”

“Maybe I’ll just laugh,” Sierra shifted so she was close to the side window and focused on the bear. She might be mad at her insensitive husband, but she didn’t want him to be eaten by a bear.

Kendall shoved open the door and positioned his body just inside the opening. A few minutes later, he slammed the door shut, locked it, and settled back onto the improvised bed.

Sierra sighed but didn’t take her eyes off the bear. “I’m sorry. This is all my fault. If we stayed on the highway, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Hey,” Kendall reached out and took his wife’s hand. “Come over here.”

## Wild Excursion

---

Sierra crawled across the car and snuggled in next to her husband.

“Thank you,” Kendall pressed a gentle kiss to Sierra’s forehead.

“For what?”

“For making me leave the highway,” Kendall said seriously.

Sierra snorted out a laugh.

“I’m serious,” Kendall insisted. “This is an adventure you and I will remember for the rest of our lives. When we’re eighty, sitting on the balcony having breakfast with our grandkids, they’ll think you and I are the coolest grandparents ever. And, we owe it all to you. We explored the wilderness, enjoyed nature, stared down a bear and lived to tell about it.”

Sierra smiled. “The last part still remains to be seen.”

“The cops will find us. And, we’re safe until they do.”

“I hope you’re right,” Sierra grinned. “But, why the grandkids? We’re not going to share our adventures with our children?”

“Oh, heck no,” Kendall smiled. “Don’t want to give the little tykes any ideas. But, the grandkids... well, the rules go out the window when it comes to the grandkids.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Okay,” Paige said as she pulled back onto the main road. “One more down. Looks like we have two left.” She headed for the next marker.

“Wait,” Dax objected immediately when Paige took a turn onto the next trail.

“What?” Paige stopped and focused on Dax.

“You can’t drive this trail in a vehicle,” Dax glanced around. “You’ll have to back out.”

“I have to clear the trail,” Paige pressed the gas and the vehicle began to move forward.

“Paige,” Dax said more forcefully. “You cannot get your vehicle down this trail. We need to turn around and head to the last one on your list.”

“I think I’m more familiar with the trail system up here than you are,” Paige ignored him.

“Have you ever actually been on this trail?” Dax pressed.

“Not that I remember,” Paige continued down the narrow, rocky path.

## Wild Excursion

---

“Zee and I rode this trail last week,” Dax informed her. “Sounds like I’m more familiar with it than you.”

“What do you mean you rode this trail?” Paige asked. “What did you ride?”

“The dirt bikes,” Dax shrugged.

“What dirt bikes?” Paige wondered. “I haven’t seen any dirt bikes.”

“They’re stored in Carmen’s back shed.”

“So,” Paige said slowly. “While I’m slaving away at working all day, you guys are out playing.”

“Not every day,” Dax glanced out the side window and recognized their location immediately. “Now, you seriously need to stop.”

Paige bounced over a large rock and gripped the steering wheel tighter when the back-end began to slide. She over-corrected and the side of the SUV hit the dirt embankment that ran the length of the narrow trail. Once she regained control, she glanced at Dax. “I have a job to do, Dax. It would help if you’d stop complaining and help me watch for obstacles.”

“When you crash, get us stuck, or high centered, don’t look at me to save us,” Dax shifted in his seat and gripped the handle above the door. “And, I’d recommend you stop driving like Jimmy Johnson. The ruts on this trail are deep and if your tire drops into one at this speed we’re going to roll for sure.”

“Dax,” Paige said, annoyed. “I don’t tell you how to sheetrock a room. Don’t tell me how to do my job.” She did slow down but refused to admit it was because Dax told her to. She was also starting to think he was right about this trail. If she was having a hard time maneuvering, could a couple from New York that rarely drove even get this far? Probably not. She began looking for a place to turn around.

A few feet ahead, the trail made a significant bend to the right. As Paige rounded the curve, she realized the road contained a massive dip then a rise. Not a problem for a four-wheeler or a dirt bike, but there was no way her vehicle would make it through without getting stuck. She slammed on the brakes. The back wheels spun out on the soft, powdery dirt and the vehicle started to slide. Before she could regain control the front tire hit a huge rock, and she barely avoided a rollover. She turned the wheel and the vehicle jumped over an embankment that was at least a foot tall and came to rest on the flat surface of a meadow. Before Dax could say I told you so, she flung open her door and jumped from the vehicle.

Dax took a deep breath, opened the door, and casually stepped outside. One look at the right front tire and he knew they were in trouble. He just hoped Paige had a spare. He glanced

## Wild Excursion

---

up and saw she was several feet away, pacing. He moved to the front of the SUV, leaned against the front bumper, and waited.

Paige was tired and irritated. She was also trying to avoid the inevitable. When she returned to Dax, she was going to have to eat crow — he'd never let this one go. She paced back and forth a couple more times in frustration before she turned and went to face the music. She expected him to make a snide comment the moment she approached. He didn't. He remained silent as she made her way past him and leaned forward, resting her head on her forearms.

“You ready to tell me what’s going on?” Dax asked softly.

Paige raised her head and studied Dax for several seconds. What was he asking? “I have a couple of city slickers from New York missing in the wilderness, a flat tire, and it’s getting darker by the minute.”

“That’s not what I’m asking and you know it,” Dax stared past Paige into the darkness. “I’m trying not to take any of it personally, but it is personally... isn’t it?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Paige stood. “I have a tire to change.”

Dax caught her around the waist and pulled her against him. To his surprise, she went willingly. In fact, she practically collapsed against him, resting her head against his shoulder. “Talk to me, Paige. If you’re having seconds thoughts, if you’re not ready to be my wife, I need to know.”

“I’m not having second thoughts,” Paige insisted.

“You never sleep, you’re not eating and right now, if I walked away, I’m not entirely sure you’d remain standing,” Dax argued.

“I’m not having seconds thoughts,” Paige straightened. “If I woke up tomorrow and realized the wedding was over and you and I were married — well, I’d be thrilled, ecstatic, blissfully happy as I began my life as Mrs. Hamilton.”

“You’re stressed over the wedding.” Dax realized. “You’ve been avoiding me because you don’t want to plan the wedding.”

“I’m... I’ve just been busy,” Paige tried. “I’m not avoiding you?”

“You do know you don’t have to do it all alone.”

“Okay,” Paige relented. “You’re right. I asked Jericho to conduct the ceremony, but that’s as far as I got. I tried to start a list, you know order flowers, pick a dress, pick a date... but, my heart begins to race and I can’t breathe. I’m pretty sure planning our wedding is going to give



## Wild Excursion

---

me a stroke. I'm beginning to think I made a mistake. That hospital chapel is sounding pretty good right about now."

Dax laughed and pulled her in for a hug. "We will plan the wedding — together. And Carmen is chomping at the bit to do the shopping and organizing. Let her help. Let her get started and we can make the final decisions together."

"I'm afraid if I let Carmen start the planning, by the time the whole thing is over I'll have her plan the whole thing and she'll never speak to me again," Paige confessed. "You have no idea how appealing that is to me. Just pick a date and time, tell me where to show up and I'll be there. That's my idea of the perfect wedding."

"I don't think you really mean that," Dax gave her a gentle kiss on the top of her head. "And, we will discuss this further but I think we need to get that tire switched out before it gets any darker."

"I'll do it," Paige started to pull away. "I got us into this mess."

Dax tightened his grip. "I have a proposal."

"You sure you want to go there?" Paige asked. "Your last proposal was a bit of a disaster."

"True," Dax smiled. "But, I think you're a changed woman and this one will be better."

"Propose away," Paige told him skeptically.

"First," Dax settled back against the hood and pulled Paige with him. "I have a demand."

"Careful, Ace. You know how I feel about demands," Paige warned.

"When we leave here, I drive." He leaned in for a kiss. He was about to deepen the contact when Paige pulled away.

"Working here," Paige objected. "Which is why I'm also driving. My job, my vehicle."

Dax gave her another kiss.

"Dax," Paige scolded.

"I doubt the squirrels will run off and tell the good sheriff you kissed your boyfriend," Dax countered. "My demand is this. You let me drive the rest of the night and when we get home, as a reward for relinquishing control, I'll give you a nice long massage and work all those knots out of your shoulders."

"How about I drive, and you still give me the message?" She was only fighting this on principle. She actually welcomed a break and she trusted Dax to be safe.

## Wild Excursion

---

“Nope,” Dax took her hand and led her to the back of the truck. “Is this blanket clean or is it covered in some kind of bodily fluid I don’t want to know about?” He held out a folded wool blanket that she had thrown on the top of her equipment pile.

“It’s new,” Paige frowned.

“Good,” Dax led Paige away from the vehicle and shook out the blanket. He spread it onto the ground and gave her a gentle shove.

Paige lost her balance and fell to the ground, exactly where Dax wanted her. “Okay,” she laughed. “You can drive. But I get a really long message.”

“Good,” Dax moved back to the vehicle and began unloading gas cans, canvas bags, and plastic boxes in an attempt to access the spare tire compartment.

“You didn’t say what your proposal was,” Paige realized.

Dax pulled the tire and the jack out of its hiding place and set it aside. He moved back to stand over Paige. “My proposal is that you stay here and relax while I fix that,” he pointed backward. “I’ll get the tire changed and everything tucked back inside while you take a nap.”

Paige snorted. “Not likely.”

“And in return, I get one day,” Dax concluded.

“I don’t understand,” Paige sat up.

“One day,” Dax said again. “Twenty-four hours. You, me, and the chipmunks. I’ll rent a couple ATV’s and we can come up here and explore. We’ll pack a lunch and make an entire day of it. No Jericho, no Gage, no work, and definitely no wayward Rangers. Just you and me and the great outdoors. You take a vacation day so the sheriff can’t call you in.”

Paige considered. “I could just borrow the ATV’s from the office and call it a training day.”

“Nope,” Dax disagreed. “We are going on a stay-cation. If it’s training, Walters can order you back to work. I want your undivided attention for an entire day.”

“I could probably swing that,” Paige decided.

“Then it’s a deal?”

“Alright,” Paige agreed. “I don’t know when I can take the day, but I’ll ask Jericho. We might want to wait until things warm up. We still can’t get up on top and where there’s not snow it’s pretty muddy.”

## Wild Excursion

---

“I don’t want to wait,” Dax stretched out on the ground to find the best place to put the jack. “Anyway, right now we have the entire mountain to ourselves. Well, except for a couple of New Yorkers. I like it better this way.”

Paige sobered. “We have to find them tonight. Sierra’s mother assured me they could make it at least one night, but if they’re in a rental, they probably don’t have blankets or a means of staying warm. I doubt they realize just how cold it gets once the sun goes down.”

“We can only do our best,” Dax slid the jack into position. “Now, you relax while I take care of this.”

Paige settled back onto the blanket. She was tired and it was nice to have a guy pamper her for a change. Normally, it was her and her colleagues coming to the rescue. For once, she wasn’t going to argue. Instead, she’d relax and try to think of a way to be a better partner. Dax was a good man and she was lucky to have found him. She wanted him to feel the same.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dax set the gas cans at the back of the cargo compartment of the police unit and closed the door. He cautiously approached Paige, not wanting to frighten her. If he did, he might just get shot. He was a little surprised she’d actually fallen asleep, but he also knew she hadn’t slept for at least three nights. Not well. He was sure it was the reason she’d given in so easily. He settled in next to her head and gave her shoulder a gentle shake.

Paige bolted upright and looked around. “I’m awake.”

“Good,” Dax stood. “It’s all fixed, let’s head out. We still have one more trail to search.”

“I can’t believe I fell asleep,” Paige stood and gathered up the blanket. “How long was I out?”

“Not long,” Dax took her hand. “I just finished loading everything back up. I’d estimate you were only out for a few minutes.”

“A few minutes too many,” Paige grumbled as she climbed into the passenger’s seat. “I can’t believe I fell asleep on the job.”

“Technically,” Dax disagreed. “You were on a break. I believe federal labor laws require at least fifteen minutes down for every four hours you work. That means you still have at least five more minutes before you’re back on the clock.”

“I’m pretty sure law enforcement is exempt from that regulation,” Paige reached for the door.

## Wild Excursion

---

Dax didn't move. "I won't tell if you don't." He laughed, turned and slammed the door shut.

"Thanks," Paige said softly when Dax climbed behind the wheel.

"For?"

"All of it," Paige turned to watch out the front window. "Changing the tire, not giving me a hard time about it and driving."

Dax glanced at her then focused back on the trail. "We're a team." He carefully maneuvered back onto the trail and slowly made his way back out to the main roadway. "Where to?"

"The trail is just up the road from here," Paige focused on the map. "It's a fairly easy trail, nothing like that last one. I have been on this one — several times."

Dax turned on the trail and slowed. Paige flipped on a spotlight and the immediate area was instantly illuminated.

"I don't know if they would be on the trail, or if they pulled off to the side. We need to watch the tree lines and the meadows as well as the road," Paige said absently as she focused on the area.

"The road has a lot of ruts, but it's fairly easy to maneuver," Dax decided. "This could be the trail."

They traveled in silence for over a mile. Dax would slow when he spotted something, Paige would spotlight it and they moved on. "Do you think they got this far?" Dax asked.

"You never know," Paige answered absently. "Let's keep going. This trail goes on for miles and then connects with the upper loop that eventually leads to a couple reservoirs. There are some high vistas that might have cell reception."

They had traveled several miles when they spotted the white vehicle. Dax slowly maneuvered over a difficult section of the trail, expertly missing the deep ruts. "I'm surprised he made it through those."

"Maybe it's the reason he spun out," Paige focused on the vehicle blocking the trail.

Dax pulled the patrol unit up next to the rental that contained their missing persons and put the vehicle in park. "I assume you want to call this in."

"Yeah," Paige grabbed the mic for her radio. "Dispatch, Carter."

"Go ahead," came Susie's cheerful voice.

## Wild Excursion

---

“I’ve located our missing New Yorkers,” she relayed the GPS coordinates. “I’ll be out of my unit making contact.”

“I’m headed your way,” Jericho advised. “ETA ten minutes.”

“Copy,” Paige turned to face Dax. “I need you to wait here.” She pointed to her rifle case on her back seat. “If there’s trouble, you’re my back. I don’t expect anything but…”

“But you never know,” Dax glanced at the black case then back to Paige. “You sure you don’t want me to come with?”

“No,” Paige pushed open the door. “Just watch my six.”

Dax climbed from the vehicle, swung open the back door and unsnapped the brackets on the case. He checked the safety, lifted out the rifle and made sure it was loaded. He stood just inside the door and rested the rifle on the backseat, determined to be ready if there was trouble. He continued to watch as the woman he loved approach the strange vehicle. The muscles in his gut tightened and he realized just how much he didn’t like Paige approaching that vehicle alone. Was something wrong? Was this a trap? Why hadn’t the couple exited the vehicle? They should have jumped out in relief the instant they pulled up.

Paige pointed her flashlight into the front of the vehicle and realized it was empty. She moved to the back window and saw movement. Someone was inside. She knocked on the window and waited. She could see a figure leaning over the seat. It took several seconds but eventually, the window rolled down a couple inches. “I’m Deputy Carter. Can I get you to open the door?”

“You have to get back in your car!” the young guy said urgently.

“Sir,” Paige said again. “I’m the police. I need you to open the door.”

“There’s a bear!” Sierra yelled. “And he’s coming back.” She pointed out the window behind Paige.

Dax spotted the bear seconds before he saw Paige spin around and draw her gun. He rested the rifle on the open door as he moved to the front of the vehicle and pressed on the horn. The bear jumped back, growled and then darted into the thick trees.

“He…” Sierra began then jumped when Paige knocked loudly on the window.

“Come on, you two,” Paige said loudly. “I need you to move over to my vehicle.”

Sierra tossed Kendall his shoes then grabbed hers and moved toward the door. Kendall waited for his wife to slowly grip the hand. She glanced back at him hesitantly “Go on, we’re safe.”

## Wild Excursion

---

Once Sierra stepped from the car she paused and waited for Kendall. He slid outside and reached for her hand.

“He left,” Sierra whispered.

“We have to move,” Paige ordered. “I need you in my car.” She moved forward, grateful the couple rushed ahead of her. Once they reached her vehicle, she opened the back door and slide out the rifle case. The instant the couple was secured inside she turned back to Dax. “You got this?” Paige asked, glancing at the tree line where the bear had disappeared. “I need to get gas into that car so we can get out of here. I didn’t like the way that bear was acting.”

“I got it,” Dax frowned. He thought he saw a shadow headed this way. “I just spotted something to the left of where he fled. Stay alert.” He didn’t like the way the bear had acted either.

Paige set the gas can on the ground and straightened to secure the back door when Jericho and Hawk pulled up. Jericho climbed from the vehicle and glanced cautiously around. Something was up. Dax was standing guard. But it couldn’t be too serious or Paige wouldn’t be working on car maintenance.

Hawk spotted Dax and immediately pulled his weapon and moved in next to his friend. “Where’s the threat?”

“Black bear,” Dax pointed to the bear that had clearly returned. “I scared him away but for some reason, he’s back.”

“Paige?” Jericho grabbed the can and moved toward the disabled car. “Give me the status.”

“The status is a crazed black bear that doesn’t seem to want to leave,” she unscrewed the gas cap and glanced back at the bear. “Dax scared him away with the car horn but he didn’t go far. He should be ten miles away somewhere up in those hills by now, Instead, he spooked but returned. Why?”

“I’ll call Manzano,” Jericho decided. “If I had to guess, someone — or several someone’s — fed that bear. He associates vehicles with food and he wants more.

“And, he’ll do it again,” Paige realized. “Will Fish & Game relocate him?”

“It’s out of my control,” Jericho frowned. “But I intend to make sure they understand my position on the matter. In a few months, this canyon is going to be covered with unsuspecting campers. That animal is a public safety hazard and I want him gone.”

Paige emptied the gas can into the vehicle, replaced the cap and headed back to her unit. She opened the back door and focused on the terrified couple. “Did you guys feed him?”

## Wild Excursion

---

“Uh...” Sierra glanced at her husband.

“We had a sandwich in the back seat,” Kendall admitted. “He was focused on that side of the car so we thought he could smell it. I opened the window and chucked it out, hoping that would make him go away.”

“It probably made him stick around,” Paige advised. “I need your keys.”

“Oh,” Kendall pulled the keys from his pocket. “Do I need to go back? I mean, I’d like Sierra to stay in here with you. But, I should probably get the car out of here. That guy at the rental place said we couldn’t let anyone else drive.”

“I’m an exception,” Paige took the keys. “I’ll have Dax drive you out of here and I’ll follow in the rental.”

“If you take the couple back to the station,” Dax offered. I can wait here with the sheriff and me and Hawk can transport the car when we’re done.”

Paige turned to Jericho. “Any word from the feds?”

“Manzano is heading up himself,” Jericho advised. “He wants to observe the bear tonight and satisfy himself that it really is a threat. I think Dax’s plan is a good one. Gage and Lovato are both headed this way. I’ll divert Mike and tell him to hook up with you and accompany you back to the station. Gage and Hawk can continue this way and help out if we need them.”

Paige turned to focus on Dax. “Alright, but don’t forget our deal.”

“A promise is a promise,” Dax grabbed her around the waist and gave her a quick kiss.

“Working here,” Paige objected. “Now get out of my way. I need to get these two out of here and Sierra needs to call her mom. Then, I’ll make sure they get settled into a room for the rest of the night. I might be late.”

“We might be late,” Jericho frowned when the bear turned and started back toward them. Dax reached in and leaned on the horn again. The bear disappeared as he darted back into the trees.

“Give the girl her gun back,” Jericho pulled a tactical shotgun from his truck and held it out to Dax. He kept the rifle for himself. “And, I’ll pretend I didn’t see those pistols the two of you are carrying on your hip.”

“We’ve got permits,” Dax assured him. “We’re legal and lucky for you old man, we know how to use them.”

“Yeah,” Jericho grumbled. “I just won the lottery.”

## Wild Excursion

---

They watched as Paige pulled away with the lost couple from New York.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige interviewed Kendall and Sierra then waited while Sierra had a long conversation with her mother. Once she finally convinced her worried mom that she really was okay, Paige ushered them out the door. She drove down Main Street and the Vaughn's decided to stay at the Manti County Village Motel. It was late when she finally got them settled and assured them someone would be there first thing in the morning with their vehicle.

She pulled into her driveway and sighed. Jericho was on the front porch waiting.

"I was planning to catch you at the office, but it took longer to deal with the bear problem than I anticipated," Jericho stood. "Dax intercepted me to let me know you'd already left."

Paige climbed the stairs then settled into the chair next to the one Jericho had been waiting in. "What's up?"

"You get the kids settled?"

"Yeah," Paige sighed. "And mom's been assured her daughter is okay and won't be traumatized for life."

"You sure about that?" Jericho asked. "The traumatized part?"

Paige laughed. "I think I am. By the time they got checked in at the Country Village, they were laughing and joking. Kendall was entertaining us with the lively version of his Utah adventure he plans to relay to his grandchildren."

"I'm glad," Jericho straightened. "That bear was a problem. Manzano started out with a lecture about wild animals and how people have to learn to interact with them. Then, the bear charged. He put him down with a tranquilizer and called in a team to extract him, but the thing got close enough, I think it even scared our local game expert. I guess he had a change of heart and realized what would happen if a kid happened by on one of those 90cc machines. He came around to my way of thinking right quick."

"Will they be able to relocate him, or do they have to put him down?" Paige wondered.

"He's working on shipping it to some remote, rarely visited area like Alaska," Jericho assured her. "Now, what's going on with you?"

"What do you mean?"



## Wild Excursion

---

“You’re exhausted and not yourself,” Jericho pushed. “You’ve been that way for days. Is it the wedding?”

“I know I asked you to conduct the ceremony,” Paige sighed. “But that’s as far as I’ve gotten. When I think about ordering a cake, picking flowers, dresses...”

“You hyperventilate?”

“Basically,” Paige admitted. “I can’t sleep. I have nightmares about shopping... hours and hours of shopping. I just know I’m going to forget something important.”

“You have people that are willing to help you,” Jericho said seriously.

“So I’m told,” Paige settled further into the chair. “I’ll figure it out. But enough about that. What brought you to my humble home this late in the evening?”

“Just checking on a friend,” Jericho studied her. “How do you plan to handle the stress? I know how you are, Paige. You’re great with details if you’re working a case. Nothing slips by. But when it comes to organization and paperwork...”

“I suck?”

Jericho laughed. “You do. And I need you back at one-hundred percent.”

Paige considered, now was as good a time as any. “I promised Dax I would ask for a day off. He wants twenty-four hours of ‘us’ time. Something about communing with the squirrels.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Jericho decided. “Take Friday.”

“Are you sure the office is covered?”

“I’m positive,” Jericho gave her knee a pat. “But, take the whole weekend. Head up to my cabin and spend Friday communing. Then, take Saturday and Sunday to sit down with that man of yours and hammer out some of the details. At the very least, you should be able to set the date. You already know most of the other details. You want that bigshot General of yours to walk you down the aisle.”

“Um...”

“No, it doesn’t bother me,” Jericho knew exactly what she was thinking. In an alternate universe, he would have been her step-father. “I’m perfectly happy with the role you gave me. Carmen will obviously be your bridesmaid and Dax probably already asked the motley crew of his to be groomsmen. It doesn’t have to be fancy, that doesn’t fit either one of you. Just hammer out the basics. Set a date. Decide where you want the ceremony to happen. The rest will work itself out.”

## Wild Excursion

---

“You sure about the cabin?”

“Positive,” Jericho gave her another pat. “I’ll get you the keys tomorrow. It’s still a mess up there but you can use the ATV’s in the shed. Just replace the gas. Spend the day enjoying nature then get down to business. I think you’ll be surprised how much you can accomplish without distractions.”

“Okay,” Paige stood. “I think I’m going to take you up on that. Maybe if the two of us work on it together, I won’t have a mental breakdown before I say I do.”

Jericho stood. “This is one of those times I really wish your mother was still here,” he whispered before he pulled her into a fatherly hug. “Hang in there. You’ll get through this and I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks,” Paige cleared her throat. She was also spending a lot of time wishing she had her mom to help her. Chaya Carter would know exactly how to plan an amazing wedding. Unfortunately, Paige took after her father. “Goodnight, Jericho. And, thanks.”

“Any time, kid.”

Paige watched as he silently made his way to his vehicle and slowly drove away. She knew he would be thinking of Chaya Carter tonight as much as Paige was. With a deep sigh, she turned and stepped into her house. It was time to find Dax. She wanted her massage.

“Hey, babe,” Dax was sitting on the bed watching something on YouTube while he waited. “That didn’t take too long. You deal with Walters?”

“Yeah,” she settled onto the bed next to him. “How come you left him alone on the front porch? That wasn’t very hospitable of you.”

“He wanted it that way,” Dax shrugged. “Said he just needed a minute and preferred to wait outside. I offered to sit with him and relax with a cold beer but he declined. I think he was feeling nostalgic or something. Anyway, he wanted to be alone. I thought I’d grant his wish.”

“He brought up mom,” Paige said softly. “I think maybe he’s been thinking about her. You know, ever since I told him about the wedding.”

“Makes sense,” Dax shut off the television. “Now, before I fulfill my promise, I got a call from Sophie Porter tonight.”

“Why’d she call you?”

“She wanted to make sure I was going to be okay with a long-term visitor.”

“Meaning?” Paige frowned.

## Wild Excursion

---

“She will be arriving on Tuesday,” Dax informed her. “She also wanted to know if my mother was helping you plan the wedding. She’s feeling motherly and wants to help but didn’t want to step on any toes.”

“I never asked about your parents,” Paige realized. “When do I get to meet them in person?”

“They’ll come out for the wedding but have no plans to crash before then,” Dax informed her.

“But Sophie’s coming on Tuesday?” Paige mused. “Did she say why? Or how long she plans to stay? She never travels without Nathan.”

“She said she considers you a daughter,” Dax explained. “She desperately wants to help you plan the wedding. In light of our recent conversation, I think she has perfect timing. You’re like a daughter to her, Paige. I think you should let her help.”

Paige dropped onto the couch and considered. She also thought of Sophie as family. Maybe having her here would help relieve the stress and anxiety she’d been feeling. Maybe it would help fill the void her mother’s absence made. “I agree,” Paige finally told him. “Now, I have news from Jericho I think you’re going to like. Our twenty-four hours was extended to seventy-two. She waited for him to get settled before she explained their new plans.

THE END