

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Impartial Hindrance *Season 4, Episode 4*

by:

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First Edition, First Impression

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“Dispatch,” Paige called over the radio as she pulled onto the roadway. “Show me cleared on the vandalism and enroute back to the office.”

“Cleared at eleven-twenty-three,” Margie’s voice replied. “I just received a new call — fight in progress at the park. Can you head that way?”

“Copy,” Paige made a U-turn and headed in the opposite direction. “Do we have anyone available to back?”

“I’m enroute,” Gage answered. “But I just left the Lovell farm. I’ll expedite.”

“Again?” Paige shook her head. Those two brothers were becoming a nuisance. “Maybe you should have booked them.”

“Negative,” Gage disagreed. “It would give them something to brag about.”

“Margie,” Havilland’s voice crackled over the airwaves. “Clear me on this juvenile problem and show me enroute as well.”

“Copy,” Margie acknowledged. “Eleven-twenty-six.”

“I’ve arrived,” Paige notified her colleagues. “Two adult males, mid-to-late fifties, I’m going to attempt contact. I’ll advise.”

Paige climbed from her vehicle and slowly made her way to the two combatants. The smaller of the two was momentarily distracted by her approach. It was enough for the second enormous man to get the upper hand. He planted a direct blow to the guys’ ribcage. The smaller man went down — hard. He was on his knees, clutching his ribs and gasping for air. *Got the wind knocked out of you, didn’t you?* Paige thought as she moved in between them.

“Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office,” Paige barked. “Break it up. Hands in the air and step back.”

The massive giant, he was at least six-four and over two hundred pounds of pure muscle, ignored her completely. He shoved past her and swung, attempting to strike his opponent again.

Paige grabbed for his arm, caught it, and stumbled a little as she tried to wrestle control of the angry and determined suspect. “Police,” she tried again. “Get down on the ground.”

The man pivoted to face her. At the same time, he jerked his arm forcefully in an attempt to get free. Paige held firm.

“Get off me lady,” the man demanded. “This is none of your business.”

Paige tightened her grip. “I’m a cop,” she said again. “Stand-down, now.”

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Instead, the man reached out with his other hand and gave her chest a forceful shove.

Paige stumbled and lost her footing. She was finally starting to regain her balance when the large man twisted unexpectedly and focus on his original target. As he swung around, his elbow collided with Paige's face with so much force, her vision went gray. She tried to focus through the haze and the searing white hot pain that exploded in her cheekbone. Tried to regain her balance while she continued to stumble backward and ultimately fell to the ground with a thud. Tried to push aside the memory of crunching and popping noises that echoed in her head when the man's elbow collided with her nose. Tried to ignore the intense pain that radiated behind her eye, exploded across her cheekbone, and continued down to her jaw. She covered her face with the palm of her right hand in an attempt to control the blood that was now gushing from her nose. Frustrated and royally pissed off, she stood.

Paige blinked, blinked again and mentally willed her eyes to focus on the massive form in front of her. His back was now to her and he was moving closer to his prey. Paige kept her right hand on what was sure to be her broken nose and stumbled forward. *Where was her backup?* She was surprised when the smaller man jumped to his feet, spun, and used what could only be described as arrest control techniques to knock the larger man to the ground and subdue him.

"Cuffs?" the man called.

Paige yanked the steel manacles from her belt with one hand as she continued to hold her nose with the other. She dropped to one knee, hoping she could manage the restraints one-handed, then scowled when the man impatiently snatched her cuffs from her hand and expertly snapped them in place. Before she had a chance to react, an enormous shadow engulfed her. *Another threat? A partner?* Paige glanced up and relaxed. *Yeah, it was a partner — hers.* Gage Clayton was looming over her and frowning. He shoved a handkerchief in her face then turned to study the man who had slowly climbed to his feet and was now standing before him.

"You a cop?" Gage finally asked. "I was just pulling in when I saw you take that man down."

"Was," the man shrugged.

"And now you're under arrest," Paige used the picnic table to balance her weight as she stood. "Gage, cuff him."

"For?" the man asked.

"Mutual combat," Paige didn't take her eyes off Gage.

Gage sighed, moved behind the man and secured the cuffs. He took the prisoners arm and guided him to the bench. "Sit here and wait while we sort this out."

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Paige's scowl deepened when she spotted two women marching briskly across the large, well-manicured lawn. They were headed straight for her and they didn't look happy. "Now what?" Paige sighed and practically growled when the former cop — allegedly — laughed.

"Excuse me," one of the women called out when they reached the picnic area. They both stopped and slammed their hands on their hips. "Why are you harassing that man?" the speaker pointed to the guy that claimed to be a former cop.

"Police business," Paige tried.

"That man," the second woman pointed to Gargantua who had shifted into a sitting position and was now leaning against a tree. "He attacked this poor, innocent man for no reason. I believe in America we still have the right to protect ourselves. This is a clear case of self-defense."

"Don't you worry," the first woman turned to address what they believed to be an innocent victim. "We'll testify for you, if it goes that far. No judge or jury would convict you of anything. And, if she doesn't set you free, we'll complain to the sheriff. Jericho Walters will not tolerate this kind of injustice."

"You go right ahead and..." Paige was interrupted.

"Paige, sit down," Gage placed a hand on her shoulder and pushed her onto the bench next to the former cop. "Put your head back," he turned to face the angry women. "Ladies, did you witness the entire incident?"

"We did," they said in unison.

"Then would you mind taking a minute to fill out a witness statement — you know, to make it all official?" Gage requested. "It would really help us out. Let me grab the forms from my car. Maybe you could just take a seat over there, on that other table, in the shade. I'll be right back."

"We could do that," the second woman turned to her friend in question.

"Yes, we will," she took another second to glare at Paige. "Come on Cecil."

Paige watched as they settled onto the bench and began to whisper.

"So," the man turned to study Paige. "How's the face?"

"I want that man arrested," the large man on the ground barked. "I'm pressing charges... official like. I want him locked away. I want him to pay. I'm the victim here. Get these things off me. I was defending myself. That man's a stalker. He's been harassing me for over a year. I feared for my life. I demand you arrest that man and get these things off me!"

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“Those women seem to think you attacked ‘that man’ for no reason,” Paige lowered her head slowly and cautiously pulled the cloth from her face. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement in the parking lot and realized Havi just arrived. She sighed, frustrated the blood had continued to flow, and pressed the cloth back to her face.

“Better late than never,” Havilland commented as he approached the table. “Ouch.”

Gage returned from his vehicle and made a quick stop at the table where the women were still waiting. He had a brief conversation, handed them the paperwork and a couple pens, then headed toward Paige. He held out a bottle of water and a large package of gauze. “Once you stop bleeding, we’ll decide what to do here.”

“My detail,” Paige mumbled through the gauze. “My decision.”

“I want him locked up!” the huge man yelled. “He’s stalking me. That has to be a crime. I’ll go to the media, tell them how he got special treatment. I’ll tell everyone how you protected a madman and victimized an innocent guy that stopped at the park to enjoy his lunch.”

The man sitting next to Paige snorted.

Paige dumped some of the water onto the gauze, took a second to clean off her face and stood. “Havilland, can you transport Bruce Banner over there to lockup?”

“Bruce who?” the large man looked confused. “My name’s not Bruce, it’s Duke Hunter. I’m not going to jail, I didn’t do nothing.”

Havilland shook his head and gave the large man a look of pity. “If you’re going to go all Hulk Smash on us, you should at least be familiar with the radiated scientist.” He moved to where the man was sitting, gave his arm a yank and forced him to stand. “The office or booking?”

“For now,” Paige sighed. “Just take him to the office and lock him in the back. I’ll be there as soon as I can to start the interview.”

“What about him?” Duke dug in his heels.

“Not your concern,” Paige moved forward. “You’re looking at assault and battery, assault on a PO, and maybe I’ll throw in felony stupidity just because I can. You might want to focus on your own problems and let me deal with your friend over there.”

“He ain’t no friend,” the man hesitated, debated, then glanced at Gage. With a sigh, he realized fighting would be useless and let Havilland escort him to the cruiser.

“Here you go,” the women approached Gage and handed him their statements. “Will you be releasing him now?”

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Gage took the time to skim through the statements. “We appreciate your assistance and will take your information into consideration. However, we still have a few things to sort out before we can let him go.”

“My detail...” Paige started.

“Come on,” Gage ignored her, gripped the man’s bicep, and waited for him to stand on his own.

“But...” one of the women, Cecil, began.

“I’m calling Jer,” the second woman glared at Paige. “He’ll make this right. Don’t you worry, Jericho Walters is fair and sensible. He’ll sort this out in no time.” She turned away, digging around in her purse as she walked away. Within seconds, she had her phone to her ear.

“Great,” Paige sighed and slowly made her way back to her own vehicle.

The instant she stepped into the office, Paige was confronted by Margie — a cold pack in one hand, two pills in the other. She scowled, took the cold pack and ignored the pills. Margie followed as she headed for her desk.

“It’s just a couple of minor pain pills,” Margie held them out again but now had a cup full of water as well. “Take them.”

Paige sighed, gulped down the pills and tossed the paper cup into her trash can. She leaned back in her chair, propped her feet on the desk, and gently set the cold pack on her bruised and throbbing face. “Thanks,” she mumbled.

Margie gave her a quick nod and returned to her desk.

Paige closed her eyes and considered. She had a strong case against the larger suspect but next to nothing on the former cop — if he was a cop. She’d have to check that out. She sighed, shifted and tried to relax. The cold pack felt amazing on her battered face. She could take a few minutes before dealing with the cluster in back. It would do them both good to sit in a cage for a while — especially if one of them really was a cop. He’d hate that and maybe he’d be compelled to cooperate. *Or, she thought, it might piss him off and she’d get nothing.*

“In my office,” Jericho barked the instant he stepped through the door. “Both of you!”

Paige jumped in her chair, glanced at Clayton, and stood. Time to face the music.

Havilland joined them.

“As I understand it,” Jericho focused on Havilland. “You arrived late and your participation was limited to transport.”

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“I was there,” Havi shrugged and dropped into a chair.

Jericho turned to Paige. “I’d like to know why I just got yelled at for a full twenty minutes by Anna Brooks, followed by another ten from Cecil Turner. They insist my overzealous deputy is victimizing a victim.”

“I...” Paige began.

Jericho held up a hand. “I read their witness statements. It appears to be a clear case of self-defense. The man was just sitting there when the aggressor jumped to his feet, pulled him off the park bench, and punched him.”

“You read their statements?” Paige said slowly. “How?”

Jericho smiled. “Welcome to the age of technology. They both took a picture of the document before they turned it over to Clayton. Once they finished lecturing me on civility and police responsibility, they were more than happy to text me a copy.”

“Of course they were,” Paige sat back, bumped her head on the wall and winced.

“Who used you as a punching bag?” Jericho asked. “And, did you haul them both in because you were irritated and cranky?”

“Sir,” Gage answered. “Duke Hunter was booked on assault and assault on a PO.” He glanced at Paige and grinned. “I couldn’t find the code for felony stupidity. He insisted on filing a complaint against Orlando McDermid for harassment and stalking. McDermid has not been charged yet. Paige needed a little time to deal with the face before we could start the interview.”

“You okay?” Jericho asked.

“I wasn’t irritated and cranky,” Paige answered. “I’m pissed, but that is beside the point. I hauled them both in because I still have questions and I need to interview McDermid before I can fully understand the situation and decide how to proceed. And for the record, you were forced to deal with a couple women who are mildly annoyed at what they perceive as injustice. I have to go home and deal with Sophie and Carmen. Do you have any idea the kind of grief I’m going to get? We were supposed to meet with the photographer next week for some preliminary photos,” Paige grinned. “Guess I get a pass on that one now.”

“Interview this Orlando guy and see if he is, in fact, stalking this Duke character,” Jericho decided. “The assault charges are solid. Havilland, transport Duke Hunter over to booking. Keep me advised on the rest.”

“One other thing you should probably know,” Paige stood. “Orlando McDermid says he used to be a cop.”

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“And you still locked him up?” Jericho frowned.

“I did,” Paige didn’t blink. “He was cocky and uncooperative at the scene. I was hoping an hour behind bars would encourage him to talk.”

“I think you let your emotions make your decision,” Jericho steepled his hands on the desk. “Watch your step on this one. If he is a victim, and there is strong evidence to support that, he walks. In my store, an ex-cop deserves the benefit of the doubt. If you don’t boot him, I will.”

Paige opened her mouth to object then closed it. Jericho was right. Her case was weak and allegations from a suspect looking at jail time for assault, wouldn’t hold weight — not against a former cop. She needed information and Orlando McDermid was the man with all the answers. She wondered if he’d block her inquiries or answer her questions. He hadn’t exactly been uncooperative, more like pushy and used to being in charge. He hijacked her detail and her reaction had been emotional. It was bad enough when a fellow cop did that — but coming from a stranger and a suspect, that was unacceptable. “I’ll let you know what he says.”

“I’ll be here,” Jericho said in dismissal.

Paige retrieved McDermid and moved him into the conference room. Once they settled in, she read him Miranda. “Do you understand your rights?”

“Yeah,” McDermid settled back in his seat. He knew the drill and after that last cluster, he had no intention of cooperating with some local cop with a complex.

“You indicated, to Deputy Clayton, you used to be a cop,” Paige began. “What agency?”

“Why?”

“Mr. McDermid,” Paige sighed.

“Ollie,” he corrected. “Mr. McDermid is my grandfather. I go by Ollie.”

“Ollie,” Paige said flatly. “If you are in fact former law enforcement, you know why I need to verify that.”

“I know it has nothing to do with this situation,” Ollie countered. “It’s irrelevant.”

“You also know that, as a former cop, your treatment would be different than a common street thug. There’s a code, and whether you committed a crime or not, we still believe in professional courtesy.”

“That’s what you call locking me up next to a killer? Professional courtesy?” Ollie disagreed. “I can do without your brand of courtesy. I didn’t volunteer that status. He asked,” Ollie gestured to Gage. “I answered.”

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“I’ll give you that,” Paige settled back. “And still...” Paige wondered what he meant by a killer.

“How about you just treat me the same as you would any other citizen,” Ollie suggested.

“I’m attempting to do just that,” Paige pushed. “If a citizen said I learned that maneuver in the Army, I’d verify. If they said I’m a doctor, I’d verify. You said you were a cop. I need to verify.”

“Want,” Ollie corrected.

“Excuse me?” Paige narrowed her eyes at the man and wondered why he was being so difficult.

“You want to verify,” Ollie said casually. “You don’t need to.”

“Actually, I do.”

“Because?” Ollie asked, truly curious why this was so important to her.

“My boss, the sheriff, says the allegations are minor and unverifiable. He expects me to cut you loose — especially if you’re one of us,” Paige provided. “My standard is a little higher. I’m not willing to take you at your word. For me, there is no trust — I need to verify and act accordingly. If you’re impersonating a cop, I also act accordingly.”

“Is there a law in Utah about impersonating a retired cop?” he asked with a smirk. “Is that a felony or a misdemeanor?”

“Clearly, this is futile,” Paige decided. “You have two options. One, you tell me where you used to work, I verify the information, and if everything checks out, I spring you. Or, two; you continue to play games, I fill out an information, send it over to the DA’s Office, and our local prosecutor decides if there’s enough to file charges for harassment and stalking. I still spring you and chances are pretty high you’ll bolt. The DA’s office will issue a warrant and somewhere down the line, some cop somewhere will stumble onto it. He might brush it off as minimal and insignificant, or he might throw you back in jail for a few days. Either way, you’re no longer my problem. What’s it going to be? You’re choice.”

Ollie studied Paige for several seconds, shifted and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. He tossed her the leather case that had a flat badge and his Vegas ID showing his status as retired.

“Lieutenant,” Paige said, passing it back. “You’re free to go. Or, you could stay and tell me why you think that man is a killer. If I believe you, I’ll do what I can to help.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ve got it handled,” Ollie stood.

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“You might want to reconsider,” Gage spoke up. “You just got an offer nobody should refuse.”

“The case was already worked by experts in Vegas,” Ollie smiled. “I’m pretty sure they have more experience handling homicides than a cop in Manti?”

“You might be surprised. Paige is too humble to blow her own horn,” Gage began. “Have a seat and I’ll explain why you should accept the help she’s offering.”

“Gage,” Paige warned. “He said he’s got it handled. Let him handle it. Have a nice day, Ollie McDermid.”

“I believe,” Gage focused on the lieutenant, “that before somebody makes a decision, they should have all the facts. He might still say no thanks, but if he does — he’s an idiot. I don’t think he’s an idiot.”

Paige rolled her eyes but gave up. She never could control Gage Clayton, attempting to do that now was another act of futility. “While you exaggerate my credentials, I’m going to make a phone call.”

Ollie studied Deputy Carter as she moved toward the door. There was something about her that made him think she was probably a good cop — well, other than arresting him. When she reached the opening that led to the outer offices, he called out to her. “Ask for Sergeant Benner. He was primary on the murder before it went cold.”

Paige ignored him and continued to her desk. She dropped into her chair and looked up the number for Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. It took three transfers, but she was finally sent to Sgt. Benner. She didn’t ask for him directly in spite of Ollie’s suggestion, but she thought it was a good sign she ended up there based on her request.

“Violent Crimes Division, Sgt. Benner,” came a sturdy voice.

“Deputy Paige Carter, Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office,” Paige replied. “I wonder if I could have just a few minutes of your time.”

“Always happy to help our extended family,” Benner said cheerfully. “How can I assist Sanpete County, that’s Utah right?”

“It is,” Paige affirmed. “I’m looking for information on a former employee, a Lt. Ollie McDermid. He says you guys were working a case against a Duke Hunter. A homicide.”

“So,” Benner said slowly. “The L.T. followed Hunter to Utah. What did they do?”

“Do they teach avoidance as a matter of practice out there in Vegas?” Paige said, even more annoyed now.

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Benner laughed. “No, I think we just come by that naturally. I’ll tell you about the case but first I need to know if the L.T. is okay.”

“He’s fine,” Paige sighed. “There was an altercation, fight in the park. Duke Hunter has been arrested. He claims he’s an innocent victim and McDermid is harassing him. He wants charges filed.”

Benner snorted.

“Funny, McDermid had the same reaction.”

“You say tomato...” Benner smiled. “One man’s harassment is another man’s investigation. I can think of a lot of names for Duke Hunter, but innocent victim doesn’t make the list.”

“I thought McDermid retired,” Paige disagreed.

“He retired from the department,” Benner agreed. “Then he went down and obtained a PI license. The L.T. is legit. His investigation is legit.”

“Why didn’t he tell me that?” Paige wondered.

“Couldn’t say,” Benner evaded then changed his mind. “He did have a bit of trouble with a cop a few months back, over in Bunkerville. Hunter came across as the innocent victim and Ollie got tangled up some. Turns out the guy, the officer, had a grudge. He applied here with Metro and washed out. So, I’m not sure it was so much Hunter having credibility as the L.T. working for the wrong organization.”

“Which is why I got attitude when I started to push,” Paige realized. “Any way you could send me a copy of your file, on the murder that is?”

“Why?” Benner’s voice grew cold.

Paige smiled. “Guess I just hit boggy ground. You don’t need to get territorial. I’m not looking to interfere, I’d just like to take a look. See what I see.”

“There’s nothing to see,” Benner said defensively. “The investigation is solid. If you’re looking for a way to make a name for yourself — look somewhere else. The case might be cold, but it’s mine. One of ours was killed and the SOB responsible walked. We worked it hard, but there just wasn’t enough. Eventually, we hit a brick wall and the case went cold. Doesn’t mean I’m done with it. So, yeah, I’m territorial and it’s going to stay that way.”

“What do you mean by one of your own?”

“Ollie hasn’t told you?” Benner realized. “I can send you the initial report but the rest of the file is need to know.”

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“Hey,” Paige forced her voice to appear casual and unaffected. “I get it. I’m just a small-town cop with nothing to offer. It’s just... well, I was hoping to get some insight into how the big city detectives handle a case. Never mind. Guess when we come across a killer out here, I’ll just have to stumble through somehow and hope I don’t muck it up too bad.” Paige glanced up when Gage and Ollie approached her desk.

“Is that Benner?” Ollie asked.

Paige nodded.

“If you put that on speaker, I can probably cut through some of the red tape,” he smirked. “To help out a small-town cop. Wouldn’t want you to muck anything up.”

Paige studied him coolly then hit the button that switched to speaker.

“Hey, Scott,” Ollie leaned forward and hovered over the speaker. “I could share my file with these guys, but I’d rather keep it close. I tend to go over it at odd hours and I’m not comfortable parting with it, even temporarily. As a favor to me, would you mind shooting a copy of everything out this way? I think Deputy Carter just might be the miracle we’ve been hoping for.”

“You sound okay,” Benner said flatly. “At least you did before you asked me to send a confidential file to a cop who, apparently, has never worked a homicide.”

“She was being flippant and facetious,” Ollie focused on Paige. “Personally, I don’t think it helped the situation but I’m going to cut her a little slack. Looks like the damage to her face is making her grumpy.”

“Man, Ollie,” Benner groaned. “Tell me you didn’t pop a cop.”

“Not me,” Ollie assured him. “But Carter’s face got up close and personal with Duke’s elbow.”

“That should keep him behind bars, at least for a few days,” Benner decided. “Just so I’m clear, Deputy Carter, does that mean you do have experience working homicide?”

“I may have been involved in one or two,” Paige reluctantly admitted.

“Look Scott,” Ollie sighed. “Paige here used to work for the FBI. I’m told she has a doctorate in forensic science and extensive experience working cases that involved serial killers. We’re at a standstill, couldn’t get through the door at the lab, but she might be able to give us what we need. If not, maybe she’ll call in a favor. I just need to convince her I’m worth the trouble.”

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“Talk about burying the lead,” Benner sat up. “I’ll agree as long as the lot of you keep me in the loop. No more going off the radar, sir.”

Ollie laughed. “Is that an order?”

“Sure,” Benner relaxed. “As a sergeant, I always give my exec orders.”

“I’m just a regular guy now,” Ollie said automatically. “I’ll hand you back over to Carter. She can give you the details on the best way to transmit that file. The case is still yours, I’ll make sure you stay in the loop.”

Paige picked up the phone. “Email is fine unless you’d rather overnight it. Any packages should come to the main office here in Manti, I’ll give you the address.”

“I’ll do the overnight thing,” Benner decided. “More secure. And... sorry about before. I was getting territorial, it just burns that Hunter is still walking around free after all this time.”

“You guys sure he’s the one?” Paige pressed. “And, if you’re that sure, why is he still walking around?”

“I’m sure,” Benner said without hesitation. “Ever have a case where you knew in your gut the guy was guilty. A name that kept surfacing, everything pointed to him, and deep down in your marrow you just knew? That’s Duke Hunter. He’s a cold-blooded killer, I just can’t prove it. No prosecutor alive would risk a trial with what we have. Knowing is different from proving. And then there’s the one-shot deal. If we lose, we don’t get another chance.”

“Double jeopardy,” Paige said in understanding. “I get it. I’ll wait for snail mail, but is there anything you can email me today? Even if it’s just the basic stuff that already went public?”

“I’ll put something together and send it off before the end of the day,” Benner promised. “I’ll also get the file copied and mailed in the next hour or so. I know the L.T. hasn’t convinced you to take this on; or, to use up one of those favors. But, if it matters, I’m asking you to do the same. We have some trace evidence we collected at the scene, but we never found the body. Mika just disappeared. Technically, it’s still classified as a missing person case. Our department won’t approve the funds to get the evidence tested. Low priority. An adult woman has a right to disappear if she wants to and I haven’t been able to convince them it’s worth the expense. I can’t even prove she’s dead. Plus, the lab is backed up. They’re picky about what cases they approve and what evidence they process. I don’t blame them, what we got is circumstantial at best. It just would have helped add weight — or, might have. We were hoping it would give us enough to make that link, maybe give us the probable cause we need for a warrant to dig deeper.”

“What kind of evidence are we talking,” Paige asked. “If I’m following correctly, sounds like you need a forensic exam of some trace. Hair? Soil? What exactly do you have?”

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“We have hair,” Benner confirmed. “I know some of it belongs to the victim, maybe all of it. But if I’m right, there’s a good chance we could find canine intermingled in there as well. The right kind, as in breed or color, we make the connection to Hunter. Duke had a Bullmastiff at the time. We got lucky, the dog — not so much. Hunter raised him to be aggressive. Neighbors had over a dozen complaints on file before the final incident. Last year, he bit a neighbor. And I mean a serious attack. The kid, teenager that lived up the street, had to get sixty stitches. Animal Control confiscated the dog, had to put him down. Hunter got a couple charges out of the incident and was forced to pay damages. It took some fast talking, but I was able to convince the vet, as part of my investigation, to preserve some hair and DNA just in case we needed it. It’s locked up tight and I can make it available if necessary. First, we need to know if there’s anything to compare it to.”

“I can work with that,” Paige considered. “How does the dog play into this?”

“Our victim didn’t have pets, she was severely allergic,” Benner explained. “We believe Mika was abducted from her home, late at night. There weren’t any obvious signs of a struggle, but Mika would have fought. The hair particles were located in the kitchen. Like I said, I know some of it was Mika’s — several strands were found on the floor. But there are smaller, partial strands that look different. My theory is that Hunter came in, tried to drag her out, but Mika fought. Once they reached the kitchen, he grabbed her by the hair in an attempt to control her. The struggle was big enough that several strands of her hair ended up on the floor. The thing is, Hunter lived with that dog. If you’ve ever had a dog or a cat, you know they get hair on everything. If Hunter was in the home, it’s highly probable some of his dog’s hair ended up at the scene. Especially if he was fighting against a struggling, combative woman. If we can connect it, we can put him inside the residence.”

“That’s weak,” Paige argued. “A good defense attorney could come up with a million different innocent reasons for the dog hair. Anything else?”

“Ollie has a cell phone, but I think I’ll let him explain that one,” Benner decided. The phone was the reason for the trouble in Bunkerville. “We’ve got soil and vegetation, clumps that were located on a vehicle belonging to Duke Hunter. Unfortunately, we live in the desert — tracking that down to a manageable search area is going to be impossible. For now, I’ll get you what I can. Give me a call when the package arrives and let me know if you have any questions. Once you’re familiar with the case and the evidence, we can talk strategy.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Paige clicked off and glanced up. Jericho had settled into her visitor’s chair.

“Now what?” Jericho asked. “I see your cop isn’t in cuffs, but you haven’t set him free.”

“Actually, I have,” Paige ran through the situation with Jericho and waited.

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“So,” he finally said. “When I told you to extend your prisoner a little professional courtesy; you took that to mean, jump in and solve a murder?”

“Um-huh,” Paige tried to hold back her grin. “I’m sorry, did I misunderstand your directive?”

“Deliberately,” Jericho grumbled. “How is your caseload? We have a responsibility to the citizens of this county before we take care of a cold case from Vegas.”

“I’m good,” Paige shrugged. “I’m waiting on a couple things. If they come in, I’ll juggle. I still have a few questions for Ollie the former cop. You want to join me while I try to get answers?”

Jericho nodded and stood. “Let’s go see what we can do to assist Nevada.”

Paige pulled into her drive, shut down the engine, and just sat there. Once Ollie McDermid realized Paige might be able to help him, he spilled the entire depressing story. Now, here she was, determined to nail the clever killer, frustrated he had evaded this long, and still annoyed at the throbbing in her face. She might be home at last, but at the moment, all she wanted to do was run. Maybe she could head back to the office and use the new case as an excuse to hide. She felt like a coward but facing Sophie Porter was worse than staring down the barrel of a gun held by a meth-head flying high from his last fix. With a loud sigh, she climbed from the vehicle. She turned toward her house, but spotted Dax headed her way and waited. He was traveling quickly across his own front lawn. He must have been visiting with his men on the front porch and spotted her car. Maybe this was good, in the low light, her bruising and swelling might not look as bad. *Yeah, this was good.* Her optimism lasted exactly six seconds.

“You worked late,” Dax said as he approached. “The guys wanted to BBQ so...” He stopped, frowned and moved closer. Once he was within reach, he gripped her chin and turned her into the light where he could get a better look. “What happened?”

“Fight at the park,” Paige pulled away. “It’s fine. I’m fine. The guy was huge, I mean megasaurus huge. He got in one good shot with his elbow. Now, he gets to spend the next few days in a cell wondering if that was such a good idea.”

Dax took her hand and silently pulled her into the house.

Once they were standing inside the kitchen, Paige couldn’t take the silence any longer. “I know the timing is off. I know it complicates things. And now I’m going to have to deal with Sophie and Carmen, so do me a favor, please?”

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Dax pulled a cold pack from the freezer and moved to stand in front of her. He tilted her head back and studied the damage before gently pressing the frozen bag to her face. “I don’t think you broke it, there’s a possibility you have a crack; but if so, it’s minor. Can you breathe okay?”

“I breathe just fine,” Paige said impatiently. “It’s bruised, that’s all. I’m fine. I’m sorry. We’ll have to cancel pictures next week, but I’m hoping my face will be back to normal on our wedding day.”

“As long as you didn’t break it,” Dax settled onto a chair. “It should be.”

“I can tell you’re angry,” Paige settled in next to him. “I am sorry.”

“I’m not angry at you,” Dax sighed. “You can’t expect me to just shrug it off when you come home injured.” He took her hand. “I know it’s part of the job, but I don’t have to like it.” He brushed his hand over her head, pulled her forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “Other than the elbow to the face, how was your day?”

“Busy,” Paige relaxed. She realized she’d been just as stressed over a confrontation with Dax as she’d been over the inevitable confrontation she was going to have with Sophie and Carmen. “The other guy, the original call was a fight, the other guy is a retired cop from Vegas. He retired after elbow-to-the-face guy murdered his sister. They haven’t been able to build a strong enough case, so Ollie McDermid — the retired cop — has been following the suspect; trying to get something that will break it wide open and get a violent predator off the streets. He’s determined to give his parents some closure.”

“If they don’t have the evidence, how can they be sure he did it?” Dax asked, amazed he’d been able to follow that convoluted explanation.

“They’re sure,” Paige shrugged. “And from what I’ve heard so far, I’m leaning in that direction. Ollie’s sister, Mika, she was a prosecutor for Clark County. She told her brother she stumbled onto something big and if she could confirm it, she was going to need his help. Then she disappeared, whoosh, vanished completely. That was nearly two years ago. Problem is, they can’t find the body. Duke Hunter was well known in the area as a local spine cracker.”

“So, you plan to step in and help?” Dax gave her hand a quick squeeze. “They’re lucky to have you. Does this mean you’ll have to leave town again?”

“Not yet,” Paige set the cold pack on the table. “I’ll work it from here for now. I might need Carmen’s help on a cell phone. I need more details to ensure it was a legal seizure. Benner was vague about that and it could get sticky — Which is why I need the amazing Fennelly. Anyway, let’s go get this over with. If I’m lucky, Carmen and Sophie will scold me for a few minutes, we’ll have an uncomfortable dinner, and in a day — two tops, Carmen will forgive me enough to help.”

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“At least you have a plan,” Dax stood and took her hand. “Bring the cold pack. You’re going to need it. What about the pain? Do you need something to take the edge off?”

“I took a couple pills before I left the office,” Paige continued out the door. “I’m good for now.”

Dax knew being angry with Paige was pointless. It wasn’t her fault some killer decided to slam her in the face with his elbow. He could be furious at the killer, though. Good thing the guy was behind bars. Otherwise, Dax didn’t think he’d be able to stop himself from launching a search and destroy mission of his own. He pushed his raging emotions aside, masked his face, and pulled Paige onto the front porch. Conversation stopped completely the instant the group saw her.

“Oh my goodness,” Sophie Porter stepped forward. “What on earth happened to you?” She spotted the cold pack in Paige’s left hand and immediately snatched it up, directed Paige to a chair, and set the frozen bag onto her nose. Once she settled in beside her, she gently took Paige’s hand and waited.

“I was trying to break up a fight at the park and one of the men elbowed me,” Paige mumbled. “It looks worse than it is.”

“Not really,” Hawk took a swig of his beer and flipped over a steak before he lowered the lid on the grill and settled back in his chair. “I’ve had one or two of those myself. They hurt like a bugger, look bad too; but, I can’t say the visual is worse than the reality.”

“Thanks,” Paige shot him an annoyed look. “You’re a plethora of information tonight Hawk.”

“You’re welcome,” Hawk grinned. “I’m just that kind of guy.” Hawk sobered. “Tell me you got him. Tell me the man that did that to your face is locked up tight, because if I know anything about Dax Hamilton, jail is the only place the guy will be safe from his wrath.”

Paige focused on Dax, studied him for several seconds and realized Hawk was right.

“There’s nothing wrong with protecting your woman,” Zeus said, pulling Carmen closer.

Paige shifted her attention to her friend. So far, Carmen hadn’t said a word.

“We’ll have to cancel the photographer,” Carmen said without emotion. “It would have been easier to get some of the shots out of the way ahead of time, and we could have incorporated them into the displays. We’ll come up with something else. There’s not enough time to reschedule. We’ll just have to do the entire shoot on your wedding day. I didn’t cause this, so don’t take it out on me when you two want to escape and head off on your honeymoon, but you’re stuck hanging around dealing with pictures.”

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“Are you mad?” Paige asked Sophie.

“No, dear,” Sophie patted her knee. “Everyone here knows being a cop is dangerous. I got the anger out years ago — Back when you were still with the FBI tracking down violent killers. It took a bit of time, but I accepted the risk long ago and trust you to be careful. Carmen and I will just have to shift some things around and adjust,” she shrugged. “We’ll manage.”

“I’ll help with that,” Paige promised. “I’m working a case, but I’ll help.”

“That’s okay dear,” Sophie said again. “Carmen and I have a system. We’ll take care of everything.”

“Carmen?” Paige pushed. “Do you want to help me grab some drinks from the kitchen?”

“We’re good,” Carmen forced a smile. “Don’t worry about this, Paige. Sophie’s right. It’s not a big deal, we’ll adjust. It doesn’t require a private discussion.” Carmen didn’t want Paige to corner her alone tonight. Her friend had a way of reading her, forcing her to open up, and that wasn’t something she could do. Not tonight. The attack on Paige’s face was unavoidable and just one more thing to deal with in an already stressful day. She’d been a mess for hours. Was still a jumbled mass of nerves. She’d been stressed, anxious, and confused since this afternoon when the guys approached her, gave her some cryptic story about a project — a covert, off the books, venture she couldn’t discuss with anyone — and told her to take twenty-four hours to decide if she wanted in. They needed her help, would happily read her in, but she had to decide for herself if she could hide things from her best friend and help them work out the tech stuff. She loved Zeus, more than she believed she’d ever love anyone, but could she betray Paige? Could she hide something important from her closest friend? Because, from the serious and covert explanation she’d received earlier in the day, this was important. She wasn’t sure she could risk her friendship that way though, not even to help this team of men that had slowly become family. But, now that she knew, could she walk away and forget it? Or would the not knowing drive her insane? She wanted to scream. Instead, she forced a smile on her face and settled in to pretend she was having a good time.

The large package was sitting on her desk when Paige arrived the next morning. “That was fast.”

“Huh?” Gage looked up from a report he was typing.

“Nothing,” Paige settled into her chair and emptied the contents on her desk. There was a plastic bag filled with photos, a stack of papers stapled into sections, and a CD. She decided to

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skim through the photos first. She wanted to create a visual image of the scene before she dove into the details.

There were a lot of them. Sergeant Benner, detective at the time, was thorough. Paige was studying a photo of Mika McDermid's bedroom when Ollie stepped into the office and settled into her visitor's chair. She glanced up and considered. "Tell me about your sister."

"In general?" Ollie shifted in an attempt to get comfortable. "That could take days."

"Okay," Paige realized that was too general. "Her last name was McDermid, and the file says she was single at the time she went missing. Had she ever been married?"

"No," sadness showed on his face and in his eyes. "Mika was driven to succeed. She had a few boyfriends over the years. There was a fairly serious relationship in college I thought would lead to marriage, but Mika..." he sighed. "My sister was an attractive woman, beautiful inside and out."

"I can see that," Paige glanced at a portrait that was taken the year before she disappeared.

"But," Ollie continued. "She wasn't... I don't know exactly how to put it. She didn't use men, was never insensitive or cruel — she truly was a good person and the idea of using someone would never occur to her — she just never took them seriously. She was obtuse, I guess you could say, when it came to men. Which I always found perplexing because Mika wasn't simple-minded or stupid. She was a very astute woman and highly successful in her professional life. Her personal life? Mostly she was just casual and spontaneous when it came to men and she expected the same from them. She worked long hours, dedicated her life to her career, and if the current man in her life became too much of a distraction, she ended it."

"Sounds lonely," Paige observed.

Ollie smiled. "That's exactly what I told her, many times. She told me, I had my priorities; and, she had hers. She insisted she wasn't lonely and casual affairs filled that hole. My family, my kids, filled the void not having her own children left. She was amazing with my kids. I don't think she ever missed a school play or a baseball game. They're adults now, both of them have their own lives and their own children, but they always remained close to their Aunt Mika. They're struggling. The not knowing, it eats at you and it never goes away. To be honest, in some ways, Booker and Kierra were closer to my sister than they were to me or their own mother." Ollie took a moment to pull in the emotions. "Anyway, her work was her life and she excelled at it. I know she got a great amount of satisfaction from it."

"I'm sorry," Paige said softly. She gave him a moment, clearly seeing he was lost in old memories and the pain those memories caused.

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“Anyway,” Ollie finally said. He didn’t have time to wallow. “My sister was devoted to her career and her family. She did not just up and leave on her own. You know, I’ve heard that a million times. We all have. I can’t count the number of times a parent told me the same thing about their teenage runaway, or an abusive husband insisted his wife was missing in spite of evidence to the contrary. I worked the streets nearly all of my thirty years and I know there’s an element of denial when you don’t have logical answers.”

“Yes,” Paige said slowly. “But, I agree with you. Mika didn’t decide life was too... something, pack up and disappear without a trace. Everything I’ve read so far, including the public stuff that I found on the internet, points to foul play. Your sister was grounded, she was successful, and she had strong ties to her community.”

Ollie studied Paige and nodded.

“I have to get this out there,” Paige said soberly. “If she didn’t escape, if she didn’t run away to enjoy a simpler life, you have to know she’s dead.”

“We know,” Ollie glanced out the window. “My family, my parents, my kids, they still hold out hope. I do not. I’ve done my best to prepare them for the worst but, until we find her, until they have her physical remains — that tangible proof — they will continue to hope. They need closure, Paige. They need me to succeed or they will never truly move forward.”

“I understand,” Paige thought of her own mother’s murder. There was no doubt her mom had been killed, but until she solved the mystery, until she caught the man responsible, her life had been uncertain. She had gone through the motions, but never truly lived. It was a cloud that hung over her, the same as Ollie now had a cloud over him. She would do everything in her power to give him what Jericho had given her... she would give him answers. “Benner said Mika was working on something. Something she thought was big. Did she ever tell you what it was?”

“No,” Ollie frowned. “I pushed her. She said if she could verify it, she’d ask for my help. We argued about that. I told her it was my job to verify — to do the investigating — it was her job to get justice. She wouldn’t budge. I do know she was working a case that involved a dancer and a rich casino owner. I got the feeling something came out in that case that pointed to darker, more serious criminal activity.”

“Do you have the details on that other case?” Paige asked. “I don’t think it’s out of the realm to consider a hit. The rich casino guy could have hired Hunter to eliminate the problem — especially if she was getting close to exposing him for something. If Mika was digging into something big, we have to look at it.”

“I considered that,” Ollie told her. “It’s a dead end. Not because there’s nothing there, but because we can’t get access. Once the charges involving the dancer were disposed of, the judge sealed it. He won’t unseal it so I can go fishing. And yes, I asked. So did Benner.”

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Paige thought of Carmen and wondered if she could justify using the talented hacker to gain access to sealed records. She'd have to think about that one. For now, she'd move on. "I was looking through the pictures that Benner sent with the file. He documented everything."

"Benner's good at what he does," Ollie admitted. "He's one of the best investigators our department has ever had. I'm not an investigator. I'm a street cop. As a deputy, I worked graves, hunted the criminals that came out after dark, even ran a dog for a while until I made SWAT. Once I was promoted to sergeant, it was back to the streets," he smiled. "Most of my colleagues wanted a desk job as they rose up the ranks. I got promoted to lieutenant, requested Watch Command, and loved every minute." He shrugged, not sure why he shared that.

"Did you retire to pursue this?" Paige asked. She could understand it if he did. She'd quit a prestigious job with the FBI to move back home and work the streets. She quit to solve a cold case, her mother's case. Maybe it was the similarities in the cases that kept pulling her deeper.

"I retired because it was time," Ollie said thoughtfully. "Thirty years on the street is a long time. Thirty years in law enforcement feels more like ninety. Maybe it was this case, maybe it was just all the changes. The job, it's different today than it was a few decades ago. Different than it was a decade ago. A cop's job has always been difficult, but nowadays — with all the cameras and armchair quarterbacks in the media, the politicians, the public — it was time to hang it up and move on."

Paige understood and there was nothing more to say on that topic. Well, nothing they could do to fix it. Cops today just had to learn to adjust. She passed Ollie the photo of Mika's bedroom she'd been studying. "I have a question, well a few questions, about that photo."

Ollie took it, studied the familiar scene closely then dropped it back on the desk. "Shoot."

"Do you know if Benner and his team, or the forensics team took the lid off that small ceramic box? The one on the nightstand."

Ollie opened his own file and flipped through pages until he found the one he wanted. He skimmed through the report, picked up the photo and sat back. "Yes," Ollie nodded. "They opened the box to get a detailed shot of the contents. Why?"

"Inside that box is a key," Paige considered. "It looks like a safe deposit box key to me. Do you know where she banked and if anyone else had access to that box? Could she have put information in there, on the case she was working?"

"I doubt there's anything work-related in there," Ollie considered. "I know she stored the basics in there; her will, titles to her vehicle, the deed to her house, that sort of thing. I can access it, but I haven't dealt with it. I figured it was low on the priority list."

"Where would she put work-related information?" Paige pushed.

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“Mostly, she kept it all in her briefcase,” Ollie sighed. “And it’s missing.”

Paige passed him another photo. “Is that what she kept here?” The photo showed a small work area, a desk, an executive leather chair, a bookcase filled with binders of case law, and a small credenza with a large open space just the right size to fit a standard briefcase.

“Yeah,” Ollie nodded.

“What about digital files?” Paige asked.

Ollie frowned. “She would have backed up her work, she was careful, and she wouldn’t want to lose hours of prep work and research. I don’t know where she kept it.”

“What about a cloud account?”

“No,” Ollie shook his head. “Not private enough. She was a prosecutor. Even I know a cloud account can be hacked and the owner of the cloud has access to files. If she kept it on her home computer, she would have made sure the computer had a password and the files were password protected. We’d have to ask Benner if they looked at that. They did take the computer into evidence.”

“I have to call him anyway, I’ll ask,” Paige decided.

“Alright,” Ollie realized Paige was asking questions he’d never thought to ask. He wondered if Benner had. “Now what?”

“Benner mentioned a phone,” Paige said. “Tell me about it. Then we’ll start going through this one report at a time. You can explain what you know and provide any details that didn’t make it into the official reports.”

Ollie reached into his bag and pulled out a cell phone secured in an evidence bag. “I’ve maintained the chain of evidence with this. Benner is expecting to get it as part of his case.”

“He’ll get it,” Paige shrugged. “First, I want to see if there’s anything on it. Once I’m finished, I’ll book it as evidence then turn it over to Sgt. Benner.”

Ollie handed Paige the bag. “It has a passcode.”

“I figured,” Paige took the bag and slipped it into the bottom drawer of her desk.

“How did you get it? And who does it belong to?” Paige asked.

“I’d say it’s mine,” Ollie said flatly. “It used to belong to Duke Hunter. I assume he realized I was tracking him and he got nervous. He tried to sneak away and toss his phone. I followed him to Bunkerville. When he tossed it into a dumpster, I retrieved it. I was just tucking it away when he came back. Maybe he was having seconds thoughts, maybe he forgot and left

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something in the memory, maybe it was something else entirely. Only Duke knows the reason he returned. It was too late. I secured it in a lockbox in my trunk. Hunter realized he couldn't get it back and went nuts. He called the local police and we had a little disagreement over the whole thing, but I won."

Paige ran the situation through her mind and tried to think of every angle, every argument some shifty defense attorney would use to try to get it tossed. They were on solid ground. The second Hunter threw the phone into a dumpster, he lost all expectation of privacy. He also forfeited ownership. "We don't even need a warrant to access it," Paige realized. "We just need your permission."

"Clearly, you have it."

She'd talk to Carmen as soon as she got home. If her friend wasn't too busy, there was nobody better to hack into the device. "Alright, let's get to work."

Dax was sitting in the kitchen, architectural plans covering the entire table, when the doorbell rang. He frowned, wondering who could be visiting in the middle of the day. He swung the door open and spotted Carmen. "Hey, Paige is still at work."

"Um," Carmen shifted nervously. "I actually wanted to talk to you."

"Alright," Dax stepped back so she could enter. "Let's sit here, I've got plans covering the entire table. You want something to drink?"

"No thanks," Carmen settled onto the couch.

Dax moved to the lounge chair across from Carmen and studied her face. She was nervous and more than a little stressed. "What's up?"

"You guys wanted an answer today, this afternoon," she clarified. "I was hoping I could talk to you about something before I make my decision."

"You want to know how I can do it," he said in understanding. "You want to know how I can live with myself, keeping secrets from the woman I love."

"In a nutshell," Carmen relaxed a little.

"At first," Dax admitted. "I had decided to back out. I decided I couldn't do it. It felt like a betrayal."

"Exactly!"

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“Then,” Dax continued. “I realized if I backed out, my men would continue. You have a right to decide your own course of action on this. You are the one that will have to live yourself knowing you are keeping secrets from a friend. I was there initially, so I didn’t have a choice. You do. But...”

“Do I?” Carmen sighed. “Now that I know you guys are involved in something, I’m not sure I do. I don’t want to betray Paige, but I also need to protect all of you.”

“We don’t need your protection,” Dax smiled.

“Protection through help,” Carmen clarified.

“Alright,” Dax gave her that. “But we can do this without you. It would just be easier and safer if you’re involved. I can tell you this,” Dax decided. “I’m mostly okay with it now. I might not like having to keep secrets from someone I love, but I can live with it. I can live with it because I’m keeping the secret to protect Paige. Not from harm or danger but from having to make a difficult ethical decision. She shouldn’t have to choose. She shouldn’t have to suffer for my actions or my decisions.”

Carmen frowned. “You’re making me think I should run in the opposite direction. Are you asking me to do something that will risk my job? What are you guys into?”

“It’s a gray area,” Dax admitted. “I don’t think so. Your federal and nothing about this falls under your jurisdiction.”

Carmen covered her face with her hands. “I thought coming here, discussing this one-on-one, would help. You’re just making things harder... and scarier. Can you tell me if you broke the law?”

“We didn’t,” Dax said without hesitation.

Carmen studied him intently. “You didn’t waver or evade on that one. I guess that’s a good sign. Okay,” she finally said. “I’m in.”

“You sure?” Dax pushed. “You can’t change your mind.” He was pretty sure once she knew what they had, she wouldn’t back out; and, she’d understand the need for secrecy.

“I think I’m sure,” Carmen nodded. “I guess we should go tell the rest of the gang. Maybe once I know what I’m getting myself into, this nauseous feeling might go away.”

“It will,” Dax assured her. “I’m not sure we handled this the right way. I think fear of the unknown has made you panic.”

Dax knocked, then pushed his front door open. All eyes were on them as they stepped inside. Dax gave Zeus a nod before he moved to sit in his favorite chair. He really should take it

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next door. That was another thing he'd need to discuss with Paige. He was living with her, but the majority of his belongings were still here. Once they were married, they'd have to work on a more permanent, mutual arrangement. Dax watched as Zeus settled in next to Carmen and took her hand in support before he spoke. "Carmen has decided to join us."

"Now," Carmen glanced at each one of them. "Tell me everything."

It was late in the afternoon and Paige and Ollie were still scouring through reports and photos. Ollie dropped back in his chair and ran a hand over his hair in frustration. "I've gone through these a million times. There's too much information and we've still got nothing."

Paige glanced up from a photo she'd been studying. "Can you hand me that magnifying glass?"

Ollie casually passed it over, sighed and pulled up another interview. Due to the large volume of information, they had readjusted their process. Ollie would skim the report or the typed interview and fill in any blanks that were left out. Benner had interviewed over seventy people, coworkers, former associates, old boyfriends, even casual dates and acquaintances that only lasted a few days or weeks. He was thorough. Yet, they still didn't have a single lead to follow.

Paige lowered the picture and focused on McDermid. She could tell he was frustrated and knew she'd have to read through each of the documents herself. It would take time, which is why she agreed to have him go through them one by one and relay anything the document might be missing. She watched as he set one document aside and picked up another one. "I need you to look at something," she interrupted. "Take a look at this picture," she passed it over to him with the magnifying glass. "Something is missing from that display case."

Ollie studied the picture and considered. Paige was right. There was an obvious hole between a tall crystal award Mika had received from the city after winning a difficult, highly publicized case and a collection of law enforcement challenge coins. *What used to be in the middle?* He closed his eyes and tried to remember. He'd been in that room a million times, what was missing? "It was the three monkeys," he frowned. "Why would someone steal a bronze statue of monkeys?"

"The three monkeys?" Paige asked.

"See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil — The three monkeys," Ollie shrugged. "She put it up there as a joke... or a reminder."

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Paige frowned. “A reminder of what?”

“She had a case,” Ollie settled back and tried to remember the details. “It was a few months before she disappeared. Do you think that could be important?”

“Anything could be important,” Paige motioned for him to continue.

“Mika prosecuted a man that had embezzled a lot of money from a local business. What was it?” He stared out the window and tried to recall the details. “It was an Italian import business. High-end artsy stuff; statues, paintings, blown glass, that kind of thing. Movous Gallery, that’s it.”

“Okay,” Paige considered. “And they gave her a statue that represents corruption and looking the other way in the face of impropriety? That doesn’t fit the image you described.”

“That’s why it was a joke,” Ollie explained. “It was a simple bronze statue, nothing special and it couldn’t have been that valuable. There was a guy, the son of a congressman. He had influence and privilege. He had money and didn’t need to embezzle anything. His father insisted he had to get a job. I think the guy was rebelling, stealing from his employer for sport and to embarrass his father. For years, everyone looked the other way. The District Attorney himself feigned ignorance and initially tried to block Mika from pursuing the indictment. She believed the congressman was pressuring her boss, forcing him to turn a blind eye.”

“How’d she win that one?”

“Mika also had friends in high places,” Ollie smiled. “She called up a former lover who is now one of the governor’s top aides. Suddenly, the DA backed off. Told her she was risking her career but he wouldn’t stop her. If she had failed, she would have been fired immediately. She didn’t fail. At the press conference, the CEO of Movous presented her with that statue. It was engraved. I’m going to get this wrong but it said something like ‘With sincere gratitude for standing up for justice,’ I think that’s close. Anyway, it was just a token — an amusing symbol.”

“So, basically the entire world knows about it,” Paige surmised.

“Pretty much,” Ollie agreed. “Anyway, Kyser Stafford is now serving ten years in a federal prison. He can’t be responsible for this.”

“You sure about that?” Paige asked. She picked up the phone and dialed an old friend. “Hey, Allen, it’s Paige Carter.”

“Paige, it’s been a while. How are you?”

“Life is good. Hey, I need a small favor,” she requested.

“It’s gonna cost you,” he joked.

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“Add it to my tab,” she laughed.

“Your tab is running out of room, it’s enormous!”

“Not so big,” Paige disagreed. “I seem to recall cleaning the slate a few years back when a certain guard who was also a close friend of yours nearly lost his job over a mistake.”

“Yeah,” Allen sobered. “Thanks again for that. How can I help you?”

“Can you run a name for me?” Paige requested. “See who he’s been talking to. I need to know if there has been any contact between a Kyser Stafford and Duke Hunter.”

Paige waited and listened to keys tapping in the background. “Kyser maneuvered himself into quite the luxury accommodations out there in High Desert. Well, luxury for a federal prison in the middle of the desert, that is. Some of these units are more like a country club than a prison. Kyser Stafford, most likely with influence from his father — the esteemed gentleman from Nevada — has managed to get himself fairly liberal phone and visitation privileges. I’m not seeing a Duke Hunter on the records, though.”

“Is there anyone that stands out?” Paige asked. “Someone who visits him regularly?”

“Looks like Jeanette Ramsey checks in every Wednesday like clockwork,” Alan advised. “I can pretty much guarantee they engage in what you would call conjugal visits.”

“Ever heard of Jeanette Ramsey?” Paige asked Ollie.

“No,” Ollie stared at her in amazement. With a casual phone call, she’d just accomplished something that would have taken him days and the information wouldn’t have been as detailed.

“Give me everything you have on this Jeanette woman,” Paige requested. She jotted down an address, date of birth and basic description. She could get the rest from the woman’s driver’s license. “Any chance you could email me the visitation logs?”

“Sure,” Allen decided. “Give me ten and you’ll have them.”

“Thanks, Allen,” Paige said sincerely. “I do owe you one. If I can ever help you out, don’t hesitate to call.”

“It’s a pleasure as always,” Allen clicked off.

“Can you call Benner?” Paige asked. “Give him this information and have him run a complete background on this Jeanette Ramsey. She says she lives in Vegas and visits Stafford weekly. That’s only what? An hour’s drive?”

“About that. You think this was a hit,” Ollie considered. “One ordered by Kyser Stafford.”

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“Or his father,” Paige said soberly. “I could be wrong, but why would Mika’s killer steal a worthless statute if it didn’t have relevance?”

“I have no idea. But, what good would it do him to kill the prosecutor?” Ollie wondered. He didn’t expect an answer, so he just stood and moved into the conference room to make the call to Benner.

“Any progress?” Jericho approached her desk.

“I’m not sure,” Paige considered. She told him about the missing statue and the connection to Stafford. “Why kill her? It won’t change his sentence or get him out early.”

“Revenge?” Jericho provided. “He was a spoiled rich kid. His behavior, the embezzlement, it wasn’t about the money. He wanted to get revenge on his father and humiliate him. Why? Because dear old dad forced him to get a real job. It plays for me. Just more of the same pattern. Revenge is revenge. It wouldn’t surprise me to learn this Kyser kid paid, manipulated, or conned someone into killing Mika McDermid — because she had the nerve and the talent to not only file charges, but win.”

“I hope not,” Paige fumed. “Because if it’s that simple, if Mika died because she did her job; well, that’s just going to piss me off.”

“Welcome to my world,” Jericho stood. “By the way, Tolman just called. It seems our friend Mr. Hunter insulted Judge Potter. He’s been remanded to jail for thirty days for contempt of court. Potter won’t even consider a plea on the assault until he’s served his time for contempt.”

“Really?” Paige grinned. “Gives us more time. If I can’t find anything in thirty days, I doubt I’ll find anything.”

“Put it to rest for the night,” Jericho ordered. “I’m calling it a day. Go home.”

Ollie stepped back into the room. “Benner’s on it. We’ll know everything there is to know about Jeanette Ramsey by morning.”

“I just ordered Paige to go home,” Jericho informed him. “You should take a break as well. Paige can fill you in, but Hunter isn’t going anywhere. We’ve got time.” He turned and disappeared out the door.

“What does he mean by that?”

Paige told him about the contempt charge. “Now, I am going home. I’ll take this file and read through some of the documents later tonight.”

“If you’re going to work anyway,” Ollie suggested.

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“Nope,” Paige stood and gathered up the files. “I’m getting married next month. I have plans to finalize and my face is killing me. I need a break. Go back to the hotel, take a swim, order a movie and relax. We have a couple good leads. Put it away. I have a feeling you’ve lived inside this case twenty-four seven for the past two years. Instead of reading all the reports again, call your kids or your parents. Do something other than work.”

“You’re right,” Ollie knew he wouldn’t do that. He might call home, but he wouldn’t put it aside. They had new leads, he was determined to follow them.

Paige stepped into the room and spotted the gang hovered over what looked like large rolls of paper. She slipped upstairs and changed, then joined them in the kitchen. “That was fast,” she glanced over Dax’s shoulder and realized the architect had completed the plans for the new training facility.

“Hey,” Dax straightened, turned, and smoothly wrapped his arms around her waist. “How’s the face?”

“Okay,” Paige relaxed against him, realizing just how exhausted she was.

He kissed her on the top of the head then pulled back. “Sophie was a little frustrated with the mess. She headed over to my place to cook dinner in peace. I promised her we’d relocate once you got home.”

“Why don’t you take your men over,” Paige glanced at Carmen. “I need a minute with Carmen.”

Carmen shifted in her chair uncomfortably. Could Paige know already? How?

“I think...” Dax began, recognizing Carmen’s panic.

“I need a favor,” Paige said softly. “I need to see if Carmen can work on a project for me. I may have to call Nathan for approval. It shouldn’t take long. We’ll be over in just a few minutes.”

Carmen relaxed.

Dax kissed Paige on the forehead and winked at Carmen. “Alright.”

As soon as the men left, Paige explained what she needed. She pulled the phone from a bag and passed it to her friend. “Can you help?”

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“I don’t see why not,” Carmen considered. “I’m just assisting the local cops on a case. And this hacking is legit. We don’t need a warrant, the guy tossed it freely into the trash.”

“That’s how I see it,” Paige agreed. “I still don’t know where Mika kept her backup files. Benner has the computer in evidence. I could ask him to pull the hard drive and send it to me.”

“No,” Carmen shook her head. “I’ll call down, have it transferred to the Bureau and sent to me directly. It preserves the evidence. I’ll put a rush on it, make them send it overnight. If there’s something to see, I’ll find it.” And assisting Paige would help push aside the feelings of guilt. She understood why Dax insisted on secrecy. He was right, Paige would suffer if she knew. But, Carmen also knew they couldn’t keep the money or their plans hidden from the astute deputy for long. She just hoped when it all hit the fan, Paige would be in a forgiving mood.

Two hours later the group had relocated to Dax’s spacious back porch. Dax and Paige had settled onto a glider. Paige was sprawled on her side, her head in Dax’s lap. Dax was messaging her head, her hair tangled in his fingers. He focused on her face, there was a multitude of hues; purple, black, blue and a tint of yellowish-brown — dark nasty splotches that started out almost black then faded from a dull green to an unsightly yellow. At least the swelling was finally under control. With a sigh, he forced himself to push the anger and frustration away. There was nothing he could do about it, anyway. Paige shifted, grabbed a small decorative pillow from under her feet, and settled it under her head. Dax smiled. They didn’t relax like this nearly enough. He could push everything else aside for just a little while and enjoy it.

Sophie stepped onto the porch, spotted Paige and smiled. Finally, the girl never took an instant for herself. It wasn’t healthy. “I forgot to mention, Nathan called earlier this evening.”

“Yeah?” Paige asked. “Did he save the world from imminent destruction?”

Sophie grinned and glanced around for an empty seat.

Hawk jumped up, took her arm and led her to a rocker covered in an enormous and extremely soft cushion.

“I can’t take your seat,” Sophie argued.

Hawk ignored her and settled into an Adirondack chair a few feet away.

“Oh, alright,” Sophie settled in and focused on Paige again. “Nathan is sure he can tie things up in the next couple days. He’s heading out as soon as it’s all settled. I expect him this weekend. If you don’t mind, he plans to stay out here with me until after the wedding.”

“I wonder if that’s a good idea,” Paige grinned. “Who else is going to protect the world that hates and fears him?”

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Zeus laughed. “Sophie, are you familiar with the X-Men?”

“I knew that sounded familiar,” Sophie smiled. “I always did enjoy the good-natured teasing between Paige and Nathan. I think she’s the only one that could get away with it.”

“Someone has to keep him grounded,” Paige smiled.

“You do that in so many ways,” Sophie said seriously. “You came to us when things were a bit strained. Our life was difficult and complicated. You saved us. I will always be grateful to you for that. I’m even more grateful today. I’m not sure you understand just how much it means to me, having the opportunity to help plan the wedding. I wasn’t able to have children, you know that. I’m well aware I pushed my way in uninvited; but, thank you. You have made an old woman’s dreams come true.”

Paige sat up, a little shocked by the turn in the conversation. “Sophie, you never have to be invited. You and Nathan, you’re family. I’m the one that should be thanking you. I was overwhelmed and stressed before you arrived. I think Dax was harboring a few homicidal urges, but he’s a controlled man... he resisted.”

Dax pressed a kiss to her temple and draped an arm over the back of the chair. “Paige is right, you are family. And, you’re always welcome in our home. I’ll enjoy having a little time with Nathan as well. I know Paige has enjoyed your visit.”

“Well,” Sophie brushed a tear from her cheek. “Enough about that. I just wanted to let you know Nathan is only a few days out and I’m grateful you gave me the opportunity to help. In every way that matters, Paige, you are my daughter.” She glanced at Hawk. “I don’t suppose you have any wine?”

Hawk jumped to his feet. “Your wish is my command. Paige? Carmen?”

“Absolutely,” they both said in unison.

Vato stood and moved to a cooler tucked away in the corner of the patio. “Who wants beer?” The men responded with an affirmative and Vato quickly passed each one of them a cool, wet bottle.

Once the wine was poured, the group settled into casual and jovial conversation.

Paige’s mind returned to Sophie’s words. She hadn’t really thought of it, but looking back, she could see Sophie and Nathan’s life had been difficult. Nathan rarely stayed home for any length of time, picking up and leaving at the worst possible moment on a new secret mission. Sophie never knew if he would come home alive. There had been tension, frustration, and worry. A tight bond had grown out of that frustration, at least between her and Sophie. She knew their weekly lunches gave Sophie an outlet, an escape from the loneliness. She had never

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doubted the love or devotion the Porter's had for each other. It showed the instant they were together. She did, however, see the void and understood — almost immediately — she had been the one to fill it. Who filled Mika's void? She told her brother if she got lonely, she'd just have a quick fling with a new man. But Paige wasn't buying it. Maybe Ollie's children were enough, just like Paige had become like a daughter to Sophie. Maybe Mika developed a bond with her niece and nephew to fill the void left by her solitary life. *A life she chose*, Paige reminded herself.

“We lost you,” Dax whispered in Paige's ear.

“Just thinking,” Paige took his hand and finished off her wine.

“You ready to go home?” Dax asked.

“We can stay,” she shrugged.

“If you're leaving,” Carmen spoke up. “I'd like to spend an hour on that phone. Unless you're too tired.”

Paige turned to Dax. “Why don't you stay and visit for an hour while Carmen and I do a little hacking.”

“One hour,” Dax reluctantly agreed. “Then you're mine.”

Carmen grinned all the way back to Paige's house.

“Knock it off,” Paige handed the evidence bag to Carmen.

“Can't,” Carmen took the phone and glanced around. “Do you know where Dax put that laptop? The one Nathan sent him.”

“Yeah,” Paige motioned to the couch. “Make yourself comfortable. I'll get it.”

Ten minutes later, they were in.

“He only had the basic security on this thing,” Carmen complained. “Next time, bring me a real challenge.”

“Alright,” Paige decided. “Find me a link between Mika McDermid and Duke Hunter. Or, a link between Duke Hunter and Jeanette Ramsey. Kyser Stafford could have hired Duke to take out Mika but there's no record they ever had contact — it could have been his father. But, why would a sitting congressman risk losing everything for revenge? That doesn't play for me. I don't think the esteemed gentleman from Nevada would get his hands dirty that way. Especially not for a son who had embarrassed him and jeopardized his re-election the way Kyser did. No, I don't think it was dear old dad.”

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“You want me to check?” Carmen asked, excited at the prospect of hacking into another politician’s private computer.

Paige eyed her friend. Carmen was a little too accommodating on that one. “No, that’s how you got caught before. Stay away from Congressman Stafford. He’s not involved.”

“Killjoy,” Carmen continued to scroll through data. “I have a number this Duke guy called daily, sometimes a couple times a day.”

“Can you tell who it belongs to?” Paige asked with anticipation.

“Nope,” Carmen pulled up his contacts. “He has her listed as ‘Hot Legs’ — men!”

“What about the number?” Paige asked. “Can you track it?”

“It’s one of those pre-paid things,” Carmen shook her head. “I might be able to trace it back to the distributor and then hack their files to get customer data but that will take time. And if she paid cash...”

“What about movement?” Paige asked. “Can you track the movement of that phone? Can you tell me where the phone has been?”

“Which one?” Carmen asked.

“Both.”

“Sure,” Carmen agreed. “This one is easy. I can just pull up the GPS history and map it out. The burner? That will take time and I can’t do it on this unit. I need my computer. I’ll work on it tomorrow,” Carmen promised when she saw the frustration in Paige’s eyes. “If she still has the phone and she’s still using it, and it’s still turned on, I’ll get you everything I can. If she tossed it already...”

“She still has it,” Paige was sure of that. “I’ll stop at the jail in the morning, see if Hunter had a phone on him when he was booked. Maybe we’ll get lucky. I’d lay odds he has a listing for Hot Legs. If it’s not the same number, we’ll have another phone to track. Get me something. I don’t have enough PC for a warrant on the phone right now. I need more.”

“Go away,” Carmen ordered. “Let me work.”

Paige stepped into the kitchen and began to pace. A missing statue connected to Kyser. A missing woman. A missing briefcase. Something big Mika was working on. If she found something illegal or even unethical on the congressman that would change things. And who was Jeannette Ramsey? Did she play into this or was she just a handy release for a caged man? The problem with this case was too much information. Information that led to clues, but the clues were taking them into a dozen different directions.

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“Paige,” Carmen called. “I think I have something.”

“What did you find?” Paige rushed back into the living room.

“I’m not sure,” Carmen was studying a map. She minimized the screen, opened a new program and punched in an address. It was an apartment building. “Give me...” Carmen opened a third program, typed rapidly on the keyboard and sat back. “Bingo!”

Paige smiled at the name. “Jeanette Ramsey,” she dropped into a chair. “Duke Hunter’s been canoodling with Kyser Stafford’s woman.”

“Canoodling?” Carmen snorted. “Yeah, that’s one way to put it.” Carmen moved back to the map, punched a couple buttons and the lines changed colors. “That’s Duke’s activity for the three months before he ditched the phone.

“He visits that address at least once a week,” Paige realized.

“I’m thinking she bounced on Duke at least as often as she did Kyser the criminal,” Carmen sat back.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Paige smiled. They both looked up when Dax stepped through the door.

“Hour’s up,” he moved over and took Paige’s hand. “Sorry, Carmen. You have to go home now. Zee’s waiting on the porch. He said something about you playing with Paige long enough, now it’s his turn.”

Carmen rolled her eyes. “I’m going to keep this,” she slid the phone back into the evidence bag. “I’ll tag you tomorrow and let you know what I find.”

The instant Paige stepped into her room, she dropped onto the bed. She was exhausted and still a little shaken by Sophie’s remarks, but revved. Her mind was racing with the new information.

Dax settled on the bed next to her, lifted her leg, and began to remove her boots. “What’s on your mind? It sounded like Carmen found something.”

“A connection between Duke Hunter...”

“That’s the man responsible for your face?” Dax forced his voice to remain flat.

“I always thought that was my parents, along with a little help from a higher being,” Paige joked.

Dax studied her silently.

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“Okay, yeah,” Paige confirmed. “Duke is the guy that assaulted me. He’s messing around with the same woman that pays weekly visits to Kyser Stafford in prison.”

“The congressman?” Dax asked.

“His son. Why did you know that, but I didn’t?” Paige shrugged it off and focused on Dax. “And this can all wait until tomorrow. Do you know what that was all about? With Sophie? She’s normally not that... open.”

“She’s worried about you,” Dax took her hand and began running his thumb over her palm. “You asked me one time about my parents. I shrugged it off, gave you a dismissive answer and put it away. You let me.”

“I figured you didn’t want to discuss it,” Paige shifted and leaned against the headboard wondering where Dax was going with this.

“When I joined the army, my father was proud,” Dax began. “My mother was upset. I suppose that’s a natural reaction for a mother. She was worried. She knew very well, especially at the time, all the soldiers that were sent to Iraq wouldn’t come home alive. I brushed off her concern, annoyed she wasn’t happy for me. When I joined the Rangers, it got worse. I tried to visit my family between missions, tried to fit into their happy, normal little world; but I couldn’t. The life I was living was starkly different from the life my parents lived. My dad, he did his best to be supportive. Oh, he was worried. He always told me to be careful, but he tried; and, I think under it all, he was truly proud of the man I had become. My mom was distant. Every time she looked at me, there was sorrow, fear, and frustration. I knew she worried about me. I knew she was frustrated because I wouldn’t give it up. I guess it shouldn’t have surprised me when she started to pull away. It did. I eventually decided it was better for both of us if I gave her what she wanted. I stopped visiting. Instead, I called them. I usually spoke to my father, but I stayed away. I think it was easier for all of us.”

“And now?” Paige wondered. “You’re no longer a Ranger, you’re no longer in danger.”

“I was,” Dax disagreed. “They don’t know. I didn’t tell them I’ve been working with Porter. They don’t know I was kidnapped, or anything about the ordeal in Arizona. I’d like to keep it that way. Our relationship is slowly getting better. It has been getting better since I retired. We talk more, but our wedding will be the first time I’ve seen them in years. They believe I’m settling down. They think I’m more grounded now and I’m safe. My mother is better off believing I’m just a carpenter.”

“That’s your choice,” Paige decided. “Um... does she know I’m a cop?”

Dax gently traced the outline of the ugly bruise. “They know. I told my father months ago. He said he’s breaking it to mom gently, whatever that means. Anyway, they know. I can’t say how mom will treat you. She won’t be rude or insulting, but don’t expect a warm and friendly

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greeting. Anyway, I've seen the same look of worry and fear in Sophie's eyes since you ran into Duke's elbow. I think being here, seeing you day after day, it's more real for her. Sophie is not like my mother. If you stopped visiting, she'd just fly out and stand on the front porch until you let her into the house."

"She would," Paige laughed.

"My mother has a weakness that Sophie Porter doesn't have. Maybe living with Nathan conditioned her to accept the fact that danger and evil is a part of life," he shrugged. "I don't know. I just think, once she's back home, once the wedding is over and she doesn't have to see your injuries up close and personal, she'll be fine. Everything will go back to normal. Until then, she might be a little emotional and more affectionate."

"I know it bothers you, too," Paige said softly. "I am careful and this..." she motioned to her face. "It's not the norm."

Dax raised a brow. "That's the second time you've come home with a bruised face in a matter of months."

"True," Paige said slowly. "But before that, how many times last year?"

"I understand," Dax locked eyes with her so she would know he meant it. "I don't have to like it when you come home hurt, but I understand. And, I trust you to be careful."

"It still makes you angry," Paige argued.

"Yes," Dax agreed. "And, it always will." He grabbed her around the waist and dragged her toward him.

Paige was laughing when he pressed his lips gently to hers.

He pulled back and smiled. "Now it's my turn to play."

"You have Hunter locked up," Ollie argued. "Bring him in and question him."

Paige sighed. They'd been having this argument for over an hour and Ollie McDermid did not want to take no for an answer. "I'm not going to interview him until I hear from Carmen. I need to know what Mika had on her computer and I need to know if she was able to get anything from Jeanette's phone number. Once we have the answers, I can get a warrant and then, maybe we'll interrogate Hunter."

Ollie opened his mouth to argue.

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“No,” Paige said before he could go over it all again. “The instant Hunter knows we’re onto him, he could alert Ramsey. He’s in jail, not Gitmo. He has phone privileges.”

Ollie settled into the chair. “Okay. What is taking Benner so long?”

“The wheels of justice?” Paige offered. “I hear they turn a bit slow.”

“I just can’t figure out how this all ties together,” Ollie admitted. “Mika was chasing something big. Did that connect to Stafford or his old man? With the Ramsey connection, it looks like Hunter went after Mika for revenge. For Stafford? What’s the connection? Other than Ramsey being involved in some sick love triangle. Did she get her boyfriend to knock off the person responsible for her other boyfriends’ incarceration?”

“It appears that way,” Paige agreed. “Maybe the something big doesn’t have anything to do with her...disappearance.”

“Her death,” Ollie corrected. “If we can get enough, maybe we can get Hunter to produce the body.”

“I don’t... hold that thought,” Paige said when her phone began to ring. “Deputy Carter.”

“You busy?” Carmen asked. “I need to stop at the store anyway, so I gathered everything up and I’m headed your way.”

“We’ll be here,” Paige promised. “Did you find anything?”

“Three minutes,” Carmen promised. “It will be easier if I show you.”

Gage, Ollie and Paige were impatiently waiting in the conference room when Carmen arrived. “I need a minute to set up,” Carmen told them. She set her laptop on the table and powered it up.

“Carter,” Paige said when her cell began to chime. “Yes. Uh-huh. And it’s a match? Thank you. I owe you one.” She slid the phone into her pocket and realized everyone was staring at her, waiting for news. “That was Sean — Agent Wilkens,” she settled into a chair. “Benner was going to ship the hair and other particles to me. Then, I’d have to analyze them and ship them back to Vegas for comparison with the controlled samples from Duke Hunter’s former dog. Instead, I called in a favor. Sean personally delivered both samples to the FBI lab this morning. Most of the hair found in the kitchen was from a human female. There were a few strands that were canine. After a comparison to the Bullmastiff owned by Hunter, the results are conclusive. It’s a match. Either Duke or Duke’s dog was inside your sister’s residence.”

“I knew it,” Ollie said grimly.

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“Sean is bringing the soil and vegetation samples as well as Mika’s hard drive back to me,” Paige explained. “He’s leaving Vegas now. Once he arrives, I’ll analyze the samples and see if there’s anything unique.”

“The only thing unique about the Vegas desert is its vastness,” Ollie grumbled.

“I think the phone records might help narrow that down,” Carmen provided.

“Right,” Paige focused on her friend. “Show us what you found.”

“I’m going to start with the map,” Carmen began. “I was able to access basic information on the burner, the one Duke Hunter called daily.”

“Jeanette Ramsey’s phone?” Paige asked.

“I can’t confirm that,” Carmen shrugged. “It’s a high probability, but there’s no way to confirm.”

“Go ahead,” Paige knew the drill, but she also knew in Carmen’s world high probability meant they were right.

“Okay,” Carmen turned the computer screen so they could see.

“Wait,” Gage jumped up. “Let’s put this up on the wall.”

Minutes later a large map was covering the side wall.

“The phone Lt. McDermid recovered from the trash is highlighted in blue.”

“What time frame?” Paige asked.

“The dates you provided,” Carmen assured her. “It’s the two-week period that covers the time of Mika’s disappearance.”

“Okay,” Paige stood and moved closer. “And this would be date and time?”

“Right,” Carmen agreed. “I added those to keep everything straight.” She punched a few buttons and pink circles appeared. “Those are from the burner in question. I don’t have the phone so I can only show you what tower she was using during that time frame. Once you get the phone, we can match it up the same as I did with the blue info. She’s still using it, by the way,” Carmen added. “Guess she doesn’t want to toss a perfectly good phone.”

“They overlap, though,” Ollie observed. “She was in the same area as Hunter. Frequently in the same area. What is that, off to the left? That’s not the prison.”

“Good eye,” Carmen gave him an approving smile. She punched a few buttons and most of the lines disappeared. Seconds later the map was enlarged. “Okay, on this day, at twenty-three-

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eighteen, Duke Hunter's phone — the one you recovered from the trash — was at this address based on his GPS history.”

“Mika's house,” Ollie realized.

“I'm sorry,” Carmen could see how difficult this was for the grieving brother.

“Continue,” he motioned to the screen.

“Okay,” Carmen moved the mouse so the display followed Duke's route. “He stopped here,” she zoomed in. “I downloaded the data from the tower, and it matches. Duke's phone pinged off that tower at zero-zero-forty-three. The second phone, the pink circles, she got a call at the same time. That one pings near her apartment. I don't have her phone so I can't tell you anything more about that. Her phone pings again, off the same tower Hunter's phone connected to for the original call. That was at two-ten. I'm thinking she headed out and got lost or was maybe giving Hunter a heads up the approaching car was just her. They did whatever, maybe she insisted on seeing the body, maybe she helped in the killing, who knows. Anyway, Hunter's phone stays in that location for almost two hours. It narrows things, but if Hunter left his phone in the car and Ramsey drove him and the body out to the middle of the desert, the area could still be unmanageable.”

“It doesn't make sense to transfer Mika's body to a different car,” Ollie disagreed. “Maybe Hunter left his phone in Ramsey's car and they took his truck out to dispose of her remains.”

“Makes more sense,” Carmen agreed. “Anyway, once they finish, they head off in different directions. The pink phone returns to Ramsey's area. I only know that because she made another phone call and it pinged near her house. Hunter's phone heads back to his place. I can trace that route using GPS.”

“What time was the call?” Paige frowned. “It had to be in the middle of the night.”

“Zero-five-twenty-eight,” Carmen glanced at her notes.

“She didn't call Hunter to tell him she got home safe?” Paige asked.

“Nope,” Carmen shrugged. “I couldn't tell you who she called, only that she called.”

“We need to call Benner,” Ollie decided. “With the dog hair and this...” he motioned to the map. “He should be able to get a warrant for Hunter's place and it's enough to bring Jeanette Ramsey in for questioning.”

“The call means we're missing someone,” Gage said softly. “There's someone else involved. If you bring in Ramsey, will her accomplice rabbit?”

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Ollie called Benner. The sergeant listened to the new evidence and frowned. He hadn't exactly missed the statue. He noticed something had been there and was gone, but it seemed unimportant at the time. It was enough for him to request a photo, but he didn't look into it any further. He should have. That was a mistake. They could also prove Duke Hunter had been inside Mika's home and he made a trip to the desert in the middle of the night. It was still circumstantial but stronger than anything he'd uncovered. Okay, there was no way he could have discovered any of that at the time. Most of the information came from the phone Ollie retrieved just over a month ago. At least he had the foresight to preserve the evidence from the dog but knowing someone else cracked his case stung. "I'm not ready to bring her in. And before you start to argue, I want to see if we can locate the burial site, maybe find Mika's body before we go that far. It will give us leverage. I'm going to hook up with Thad and see what his schedule is like today. If we take the chopper, we have a better shot of narrowing things down. We have a starting point and with the FLIR, we should be able to see if the ground has been disturbed. It's a long shot, the body's been out there for two years now."

Ollie didn't like it, but he knew Benner was right. "Agent Wilkens is on his way back with the soil sample," Ollie advised. "I'll let you know if Paige narrows things down any further. We've got a two-hour window, that's too wide with too many unknowns in a desert the size of the Sierras."

"I agree," Benner was trying to picture the area. "There's nothing out there, not much traffic either. We should be able to search without much fanfare. I assume Wilkens was looking for me to run through the new info on the dog?"

"Yeah," McDermid agreed. "He said you were in court and he couldn't wait around. He asked me to relay the details for him."

"Let me know if this miracle worker discovers anything about the soil," Benner decided. "In the meantime, I'm going to nag our favorite pilot. The sooner we get up, the longer we'll have to search." He clicked off, punched the GPS coordinates into his phone, and dialed the hanger.

It was just after three when Sean Wilkens stepped into the office. He handed Paige an evidence bag then moved to study her board. "You've been busy."

"As we speak," Paige moved to a desk where she had set up a microscope, "Benner is flying the desert looking for a grave. Carmen came through for us, as usual. She's amazing."

"Where is the digital dung digger anyway?" Sean asked.

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“She had another project she needed to work on,” Paige said absently as she turned knobs and adjusted settings.

Sean joined her. “You’re not going to take it to the lab for testing?”

“Eventually,” Paige looked through the lens and frowned. “I need the report, which one was it? Where’s Ollie?” The two of them had spent so much time together over the past couple days he almost felt like an old friend.

“The report on the soil sample?” Sean asked.

“Yeah,” Paige was flipping through documents.

“I can tell you the details,” Sean leaned against the table. “I asked for them when I picked it up. Several witnesses reported seeing a strange blue pickup in the neighborhood, different times, different areas. One neighbor insisted the truck made Mika nervous. After at least a half dozen interviews, with each person saying the same thing, Benner realized someone was casing Mika’s home.”

Ollie stepped back into the room, realized they were talking about Hunter’s truck and shuffled through the photos until he found the pictures. He handed them over to Sean. “Description matched perfectly.”

“I remember that,” Paige nodded. “I need to know where you got this soil.”

“I won’t go into detail on how we narrowed down the vehicle,” Ollie settled into a chair. “It’s all in the reports and you can read them later. As you can see, there is damage to the left rear panel. That was one of the leads we received from the neighbors. There’s more but I’ll just say that truck is the truck Mika’s neighbors observed frequenting her home; or, I should say the area surrounding her home. That’s when Benner put Hunter under surveillance.”

“But this was days after Mika disappeared?” Paige wondered.

“Weeks, actually,” Ollie admitted. “But, Duke Hunter was no longer driving his truck.”

“Okay,” Paige nodded. “Strange, but how does that pertain to the soil?”

“They were able to locate a storage area,” Sean provided, hoping to move the explanation along. “Hunter was the only name on the rental.”

“Benner got a warrant to access the garage,” Ollie provided. “By then we knew the date and a probable time, when Mika disappeared that is. The manager of the storage unit was able to determine Hunter accessed the shed the following morning at approximately zero-seven hundred. With a suspicious disappearance, witnesses seeing the strange vehicle at odd times in the area, and Hunter hiding the truck the day after Mika went missing, a warrant was approved.”

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Sean shook his head. “I have no idea how, that’s the weakest case I’ve ever heard to seize a vehicle.”

“Just lucky, I guess,” Ollie shrugged. “The soil came from the truck. The tires were clear by then. I think Benner dug a large chunk out of the wheel well. Hunter just drove up the following morning, backed the truck inside and stored the vehicle — preserving the evidence for us.”

“You look confused,” Sean noticed. “What’s wrong?”

“This mud came from a marsh,” Paige straightened and began to pace. “It has cattail and cottonwood in it. There are also bird feces from more than one species. How is that possible in the desert?”

Ollie smiled, “Because we have a wildlife refuge out in the middle of our desert.” He snatched up his phone and moved just outside the door to call Benner.

Sean moved to the computer and pulled up a map. “Looks like it’s about ninety miles north of Vegas on I-93.”

“It’s close,” Paige nodded. “They may not find her tonight, but they’re going to find her out there. Eventually, somebody would have found the body,” Paige decided. “That area has a campground, hiking trails, and visitor center. Someone would have eventually stumbled onto a shallow grave.”

They glanced up when Jericho stepped into the room. He stood in front of the elaborate board and studied the case. “Looks to me like you still have several unknowns.”

Ollie McDermid stepped into the room. “I’m heading...” He stopped. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Jericho turned and held out a hand. “It’s good to see you again, Lt. McDermid.”

“Retired,” Ollie said out of habit. “I really appreciate your support on this. I know you have your own crimes to solve. I can’t thank you enough for allowing Deputy Carter to assist us in getting justice for my sister.”

“Justice is the reason we all became cops,” Jericho said soberly. “It doesn’t stop at the border.”

“True, but I still want to say thank you,” Ollie turned to Paige. “Benner and the team have moved over to the Pahrnagat Wildlife Refuge. They still have a couple hours before dark. I’m not sure I can do anything more here. If you don’t need me, I can be of more help out there with the search.”

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“You’re going to head back to Vegas?” Paige asked. “Before I bring Hunter into interview?”

“We both know I can’t be involved in that,” Ollie said soberly. “I think I can be more useful to my team back in Vegas.”

“I’m intrigued now,” Sean offered. “I can stay and help Paige if nobody objects.”

Ollie focused on Paige, his expression told her he was deferring the decision to her.

“I’ll take the help,” Paige turned to Jericho. “If you don’t mind.”

“Not our case,” Jericho glanced at McDermid.

“If Paige is willing to involve Agent Wilkens, I don’t have any objection,” Ollie decided. “However, it’s not my case either. It’s Sgt. Benner’s.”

“I think he’s a little busy at the moment,” Paige smiled. “I’ll just make an executive decision. Sean’s in. Ollie,” Paige approached him and held out her hand. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you. Have a safe trip back. You have my number. Be sure to give me a call as soon as you find her. In the meantime, Sean and I will see what we can do to identify the third suspect.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” he glanced at Jericho. “We’ll be in touch and Sheriff, thanks again.”

“Alright,” Jericho settled into a chair. “Tell me about this third suspect and how are we going to find him?”

The group broke for dinner and had now reconvened. They were currently discussing possible connections between all the players. Jericho decided to stay and work on the puzzle, he didn’t have anything better to do. Might as well support his cop.

“Deputy Carter,” Paige answered her phone on the first ring, thinking it was news from Las Vegas.

“Paige,” Carmen said hesitantly. “I know you’re busy, but I was wondering if you could head over to my place? I found her files. I’ve been going through them for the past hour and I need to run something by you.”

“We’re on our way,” Paige clicked off. “Carmen has something. From the hard drive Sean brought back from Vegas.”

Moments later they were standing on Carmen’s front porch. She answered the door, glanced at Jericho and Sean, then motioned them inside. “No Ollie?”

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“He’s headed back to Vegas,” Paige settled into a chair. “He wanted to help with the search.”

Carmen relaxed. “I think that might be a good thing.”

“Why?” Paige was now on alert. Whatever Carmen found, it wasn’t good.

Carmen motioned to her computer, they all moved to the small office and settled around the desk. “I’m going to project it up there,” she pointed to a large television mounted to the wall. Within seconds Carmen had a document displayed where they could all see it. “This was the last entry. I think it has something to do with the case she was working. In a nutshell, this Callie Winters was having an affair with some big-time casino owner, Dagon Ripley. Ripley spends money like its water, takes Callie on expensive vacations, buys her jewelry, the works. He basically gives her anything she asks for. Which was quite a feat for the exotic dancer. Anyway, that’s all fine and good until Callie decides she doesn’t want to be the side-piece. She wants to be the main attraction. She pushes and complains and keeps pushing until Dagon decides she’s more trouble than she’s worth. Now, here’s where it gets dicey. Mika’s case is against a guy named Neville Hunt. Callie claimed Hunt was muscle for Dagon. One night, Callie was found beaten to the verge of death in a local park. She identified Hunt immediately but insisted he had to be acting on orders from Dagon. Mika decided to look into the claim.”

“What does this have to do with Mika’s death?” Sean asked.

“I’m getting to that,” Carmen explained. “So, Mika starts playing detective. She has tons of notes in here. I think she used her computer like a whiteboard, or more accurately a sounding board. She rambles sometimes and jots down ideas to follow. I had to sift through a ton of entries to find her conclusions. Here is the first one you need to see. She’s been hanging out at the casino regularly, trying to spot something she can act on. This goes on for several weeks then she decides it’s a waste of time. Instead, she pays Callie another visit and demands more details. This is when Mika learns there’s a connection to Kyser Stafford.”

“What kind of connection?” Paige sat up straight.

“Thought that might get your attention,” Carmen scrolled to the entry. “Okay, here we go. She says Callie was telling her about parties on a yacht, blah, blah, blah... Okay, this is it.” Carmen clicked on an MP3 file and a female voice filled the room.

“I don’t know, the ocean,” the woman that must have been Callie Winters said. “It was warm. I never paid attention to where we were going. I was having too much fun.”

“Were you and Dagon alone?” that must have been Mika.

“No,” Callie pouted. “He always had to bring his stupid friends with him.”

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“What friends?” Mika again.

“They were younger than Dagon,” Callie said. “Kyser, the stupid politician’s son.”

“Kyser Stafford?” Mika asked.

“I guess, yeah,” Callie pouted again. “I hated them. They were childish and stupid. They thought they were all that just because their daddies were important. I asked Dagon why he always had to invite the immature crowd when he knew how much I disliked them. He said they were harmless, and they were just having a little fun. He said if you grease the right hands, have the rights friends, business runs smoother all around.”

“Did he say what he meant by that?” Mika asked.

“Not then, but later he got angry. Told me to stop complaining about Kyser and Butch because Congressman Stafford was paving the way for big changes and if I liked the parties and the spas I should just go along, keep my mouth shut, and enjoy the good life.”

Carmen hit pause. “She continues on, whining about pretty much everything and she never explains who Butch is.”

“We could go through Kyser’s records, see who he was linked to,” Paige decided.

“Wait on that,” Carmen was skimming through files again. “Okay, I think this is the right one.” Another document popped up on the screen. “It’s another, what I’ll call journal entry. Mika was digging into the Kyser connection. I haven’t found it yet, but I assume Callie gave her something that intrigued her. She talks about high-level corruption and how Dagon made huge contributions to the congressman’s campaign. Something about using a PAC so he didn’t have to declare it and they could keep everything hushed. Okay, here’s what I was looking for. *Callie’s certainly not a credible witness and would be destroyed on cross so I have to find something concrete. I think Dagon’s men are onto me so I can’t go back to the casino. Not for a week or so, anyway. That will give me time to look into Carson. If I’m right, this scandal is going to be devastating for Las Vegas.*”

“Carson?” Jericho asked.

“Could that be Dale Carson? The Attorney General?” Sean asked.

“That’s my guess,” Carmen told them. “Because Dale Carson has a son named Dale Carson Jr — a son everyone calls Butch.”

“What do we know about Butch?” Paige asked Carmen.

Carmen pulled up a photo. “He’s tied loosely to Kyser, but this was the only photo I could find that includes them both. They run in the same circles, seem to know the same people, attend

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the same parties but they're never captured together. Carmen opened several additional pictures. This is the same party. They're both there, but not together."

"Hiding their friendship or casual acquaintances?" Sean wondered.

"That's the million-dollar question," Carmen shrugged. "If you believe Callie, they're tight. When they travel with Dagon, they're always together. She says they act like immature brothers."

"I still don't understand how it could be devastating," Jericho put in. "So the AG's son is a douche? A lot of rich kids are spoiled brats. So, he's friends with Kyser. Might be embarrassing to admit your son has a close friend that's a criminal but not devastating."

"I agree," Sean considered. "Is there more?"

"Some. I was curious," Carmen admitted. "I don't have the records, that would be illegal, but I was able to track down both Butch and Dagon's cell phone numbers. I checked the tower by the casino and Dagon got a call the morning of Mika's death at five-forty-six. Butch got a call at five-twenty-eight."

"The same time Jeanette made the call after returning home," Paige considered. "So, they con Duke Hunter into killing Mika, Jeanette makes sure he goes through with it, then calls Butch to report in. Butch then contacts Dagon to inform him the job is done. It's complete speculation, but it fits. What did Mika have on Dagon? Because that's a lot of work and probably a lot of money for an assault."

"One more thing," Sean focused on Carmen. "Why didn't you want Ollie here for this?"

"Mika dated Dale Carson," Carmen provided. "Before he got married. Some long-term relationship they had in college. They remained casual friends. But Dale stayed close to Ollie. McDermid helped support Carson when he was running for office. There's a newspaper article about how Lt. McDermid, a highly respected administrator with the LVMPD worked hard to get the police union to back his friend."

"And then his friend's son kills his sister," Jericho sighed. "I hope that's all it was because if Carson is dirty, McDermid is going to be crushed."

"He told me there was a guy in college he thought Mika would marry," Paige explained. "I bet it was Dale Carson." She sighed. "I'll have to go through all of it, see if there's more. Flesh out the details and determine if there's a solid case and Mika just didn't see it. Or, if she did and that's what got her killed."

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“No,” Jericho stood. “You need to gather all of this up as well as the soil samples you analyzed and transport them back to Vegas. Turn them back over to that hotshot homicide sergeant and put it all behind you.”

“You want me to quit?” Paige said, clearly outraged by the suggestion.

“It’s not your case, Paige,” Jericho said forcefully. “We’ll give them until tomorrow, see if they locate the body. If so, we bring Hunter back in and grill him. You and Sean should be able to crack him. See if he knows Jeanette was using him while she continued an intimate relationship with Kyser. Then you take everything we have and dump it back on Benner.”

“But,” Paige wanted to argue but she didn’t have an argument, not really.

“I can look into their financials,” Carmen offered. “I have some time tonight, I can see if anyone was getting paid off. Maybe with a focus on Carson.”

“I don’t want to hear this,” Jericho grumbled. “Hacking into the personal financial data on a sitting State Attorney General? You’re crazy. If you can accomplish that, you’re good but I don’t want to know.” He turned and headed out the door.

“Do it,” Paige decided. “We need to know why she thought it would be so destructive. And, I need to know if I should warn Ollie it’s coming before anyone else gets wind.”

“I’ll call you,” Carmen promised.

It was one o’clock in the morning when Carmen finally figured it all out. She glanced at the phone, debated then punched in Paige’s number.

“Hello,” came Paige’s groggy voice.

“I’m sorry to wake you but I thought you’d want to know what I found.”

Paige glanced at Dax, saw he was still asleep and rushed out the door. She made her way down to the living room and dropped onto the couch. “Okay, tell me.”

“It’s not Dale Carson,” Carmen knew Paige would want to know that first. “The senior attorney general. It’s his Deputy. Assistant Attorney General Gerry O’Neal. He’s on the payroll for Dagon Ripley. I have to assume that O’Neal ran interference, made sure Dagon and his men got off on any charges that were serious. Butch is dirty as they come. He’s being paid by Dagon as well. I started running the names of Dagon’s men through the court system. A ton of arrests, his musclemen are violent, but no convictions. And, from the looks of it, Neville Hunt was his best man. Most active one, anyway.”

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“And if it came out that O’Neal was on the take,” Paige realized. “Any cases he tried would come under scrutiny. They’d have to be retried and a ton of criminals might be set free. Mika was right, this will be catastrophic for Vegas.”

“There’s more on the congressman,” Carmen provided. “Dagon Ripley donated heavily to his campaign. I’ve found a half million he transferred to two separate PACs. There could be more.”

“Why?” Paige wondered. “The casino business is profitable. Why did Dagon need to bribe his way through?”

“I haven’t discovered that, yet,” Carmen rubbed at her eyes. “And, I’m too tired to keep looking. I can pick this back up tomorrow if you need me to.”

“I’ll let you know,” Paige said feeling a little guilty. “Go to bed. You can call me when you wake up.”

Carmen shut down the computer and turned to see Zeus standing in the doorway.

“You’ve been busy today,” he took her hand and kissed her palm.

“I have the information you and the guys wanted as well,” she dropped onto the bed exhausted.

“That could have waited a few days,” he said, worried. She looked wiped out.

“I know, but while I was digging, I thought I might as well shovel your steaming pile of dung as well,” Carmen sat up and pulled off her shoes. “I hacked into the ME’s computer and got the name. Your pilot was Holden Driscoll from El Paso, Texas. I’ll play with it more tomorrow once I get Paige the rest of what she needs.”

“Thank you,” Zeus climbed into bed. “You’re amazing.”

“I know,” Carmen smiled and climbed in next to him.

It was four o’clock in the morning when Paige was once again awakened by her phone.

“Once we’re married,” Dax grumbled. “I’m enacting a bedroom rule. No cellphones.” He turned over and covered his head with his pillow.

Paige smiled and left the room. “Ollie?” she answered.

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“Sorry to wake you,” Ollie said immediately. There was a lot of noise in the background and Paige could barely hear him. “We found her. I thought you might want to know.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Paige realized. “I, well, congratulations is definitely wrong.”

“I understand,” Ollie said softly, remembering how it felt to stand over the shallow grave. He had silently stood there for several long agonizing minutes frozen in place, too many emotions flowing through him to identify. It was so surreal. After all this time, after devoting his life to bringing down her killer, it was all coming to an end. And, he owed it all to Paige Carter. He sighed as the image of bones popped back into his head. Mika was no longer Mika. Her body was decomposed, just a pile of bones but it would give his family the closure they desperately needed. They could have a funeral now, dedicate a place in the local cemetery where they could visit and mourn. He had to keep telling himself this was a good day. Through the sorrow and the gut-wrenching pain, he would remember it was a good day.

“Are you alone?” Paige asked. “I have something I need to tell you. I’ll share it all with Benner, but you need to know first.”

Ollie stepped away from the crowd and wandered to a tree several yards away. “What did you find?”

Paige began to lay it all out for him. When she finished, he remained silent.

“She should have brought this to me,” he closed his eyes, knowing, before this was over, another family was going to be destroyed. Dale Carson had never stopped loving his college sweetheart. He moved on, fell in love with Kate and started a family, but Mika remained an important part of his life. Knowing his son was involved in her death, even if the involvement was minor, would destroy him. Knowing he had trusted a man that was dirty, was going to be almost as difficult. Raging storms were on the horizon for his friend, in his private and professional life. Ollie would make sure he was there to help his friend through it. “So, now what?”

“Now,” Paige decided. “I’m going to try to get a couple more hours sleep. Tell Benner to call me later and let me know what else he needs from me. I can interrogate Hunter if he wants me to or he can head this way and conduct the interview himself. Either way, the boss approved a trip down to Sin City to turn everything back over to Benner. He can pick it up from there.”

Benner did want her to interview Duke Hunter immediately. Once Paige laid everything out, he sang. She could tell he was livid that Jeanette was still spending time with Kyser. Hunter mistakenly believed, once the guy was convicted, she dumped him. He had killed for her, with

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her. He was clear about that. Jeanette Ramsey participated in the assault. In fact, he claimed she had dealt the final blow using the bronze statue of three monkeys. Then, they dropped the statue and the lifeless body into a hole and headed out. Duke didn't know anything about Butch, O'Neal, or Dagon. He killed Mika because he loved Jeanette and she asked him to. It was that simple. The idiot.

Paige was just finishing up her report when Jericho appeared in his doorway. "You're done here. Get that stuff gathered up and hit the road. Take tomorrow off, it's Friday and you can start your weekend early."

"But..."

"Do it," Jericho ordered. "I'm sending you to Vegas. That's at least a five-hour drive, ten round trip, and you put in a full day today. I'll see you on Monday."

Paige was still feeling guilty about the extra time off when she pulled into the driveway. The instant she stepped through the front door and spotted Nathan, guilt changed to happiness. She dropped her bag on the chair and moved in for a big bear hug. "I heard you saved the day and decided to head to Manti to see if we have any small buildings you could leap in a single bound."

Nathan pressed a kiss to her temple. "Always were a mouthy little thing."

Paige frowned and pulled back. "Um, I have to make a trip to Vegas. I'll be back tomorrow but..."

"I'm here until after the wedding," Nathan studied her face and scowled. "Sophie played that one down. That's not like my wife. Did you at least get your man?"

"He's currently sitting in jail," Paige smiled. "Pissed off the judge. Thirty days contempt of court before they even get into the assault. Once he's done here, he's headed to Vegas to be tried for the murder of a well-respected prosecutor. I think I can safely say, that man will not see the outside of a cell anytime soon."

"Then we both saved the day," Nathan settled back in his chair. "Don't you worry about the trip." His eyes twinkled as he leveled them on his wife. "I can show my wife how much I've missed her. Plus, it will give me some time to relax and settle into my vacation."

"Want company?" Dax moved from the foot of the stairs and wrapped an arm around Paige's waist. "We can head to Vegas, get a room for the night, and come back tomorrow."

"I like that plan," Paige turned and kissed him softly. "I have to change and pack a few things, then we need to head out. But first, I should call Carmen and thank her again for all her

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help.” She stopped halfway up the stairs and looked at Nathan. “And you will not hassle her about it. She was mine before she was yours.”

Nathan laughed. “Wouldn’t think of it, sweetheart.”

Once Dax had an overnight bag packed, he moved up behind Paige and pulled her against his chest. “I need to head next door and let the guys know I’m going out of town. I won’t be long. Take your time. If you want, we can take an hour or so to visit with Nathan before we go.”

“I’ll visit when I get back,” Paige settled against him. “Jericho gave me tomorrow and the entire weekend off. Let’s do what you said. We’ll go to Vegas, drop all the evidence off with the homicide guys, and get a room. We can relax, maybe go for a swim, and have a little downtime. Things are going to get crazy and hectic around here once we get back. The wedding is less than a month away and we’re not even close to ready. We’ll get back tomorrow, and I’ll have the entire weekend to visit with Nathan.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Dax turned her to face him and ran his thumb over her face. “You might not think so, but it’s looking better today.”

“It must be, I got through my entire shift without a pain pill,” Paige smiled and pressed her lips to his. “Go fill in your team. I’ll be ready when you get back.”

Dax made his way next door. He stepped into the living room and spotted his men. Ken was packed and ready to leave, Vato and Zeus were playing some kind of video game. Hawk was still rumbling around in the back bedroom. “I have to head to Las Vegas with Paige tonight. I’ll be back sometime tomorrow. Maybe you could wait to leave until we pull out.”

“We can do that,” Hawk agreed, stepping into the room. “Vato will drive us up to Salt Lake and we’ll head out from there. Ken’s flight leaves first but he’ll probably make it back before I do.”

“Don’t worry,” Wooly told Dax. “I know what I’m doing. We just need to determine if the pilot was knee-deep in the muck or if he was coerced. That should be simple enough.”

“If the pilot checks out, I’ll have Evan start working his magic from the Cayman’s while I’m there to oversee it. If not, we can go over the preliminary stuff for the scholarship program. Wooly will keep me posted and I’ll proceed accordingly. Go spend some time with your woman. With all the wedding plans and the new business, you two haven’t had ten minutes alone,” Hawk observed.

“Do you want me to call you from Texas?” Ken asked Dax.

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“No,” Dax shook his head. “Keep Zee up to date and Carmen’s here if you need anything from her. She finished up with the case Paige had her working on and Nathan’s here visiting until after the wedding. Carmen should have some free time over the next few weeks. Let’s take advantage of that while we can. I’ll be back tomorrow night at the latest. You’re sure we can trust Evan with this?” he asked Hawk.

“We can trust him,” Hawk assured them. “I’d trust him with my life.”

“I think you are,” Dax grinned and headed back home. He had two full days alone with Paige. He was going to make the most of it. Heaven only knew the next month was going to be complete chaos.