

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Lucrative Deception *Season 4, Episode 3*

by:

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Lucrative Deception

Paige woke to the smell of breakfast. She shifted and snuggled in closer to Dax. Maybe if she pretended like she was still asleep, she wouldn't have to start her day.

"I know you're awake," Dax sniffed at her neck.

"What are you doing?" Paige swatted him away.

"I smell bacon," Dax grinned. "I wanted to see if it was you."

"Ha, ha," Paige tried to shift away, but he wrapped his arms around her and wouldn't let her move. "Not funny, it's not that kind of morning."

"I don't know," Dax climbed from the bed and began to get dressed. "Smells like we have an amazing breakfast waiting for us downstairs and I don't have to settle for stale donuts."

Paige groaned. "Really? Pig jokes and donuts?"

"I'm an overachiever," Dax shrugged. "Should I tell Sophie you're on your way?"

"Fine," Paige threw off the covers and climbed from the bed. "I'll be down in a minute."

Dax settled onto the mattress. "Now what?"

"She just makes me feel guilty," Paige dropped down next to him. "I mean, she's amazing and I can't believe how fast this wedding thing is moving now that we've picked a date, but she shops and cooks and spoils us constantly. Shouldn't we be doing the pampering? I mean, she's our guest."

Dax smiled and took her hand. "Sophie is having fun. You have to see that. She's having a blast shopping and cooking and pampering. I'm not going to dampen that by resisting. You shouldn't either. Instead of feeling guilty, I choose to be grateful." He stood. "Which is why I'm going downstairs to set the table and have an amazing breakfast before I go sign away my life savings and my future."

"Then you've decided?" Paige asked seriously. "You're going to buy that land?"

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"No," Paige considered. "Not second thoughts. It's an amazing location and I'm still shocked you got such a great deal. It's just..."

"It's just a lot of money," Dax agreed.

"And, it's a little scary," Paige added. "Plus, with Sophie buzzing around like a queen bee managing wedding stuff — I guess it's just a little overwhelming. All the changes, I mean."

Lucrative Deception

“I think having Sophie, Carmen, and my team here is the reason I am good with all of it. It’s the reason we can plan the wedding and take steps to start up the business at the same time. Plus, it leaves you free to save the world. But this is our future, Paige. You have to be okay with it, too. All in, or all out.”

“All in,” Paige stood. “I need a little bathroom time and then I’ll be down to help. Tell Sophie I will only be a minute.”

“There’s the strong, confident woman I fell in love with,” Dax kissed her temple before he headed downstairs.

Paige stepped into the kitchen and paused in the doorway. She watched silently as Dax and Sophie finished cooking, made coffee, set the table, and chatted easily about their upcoming day. Sophie casually commented she was feeling rushed because Carmen was due to arrive in forty minutes. The two of them would be interviewing photographers all day. Dax insisted on handling clean up, arguing that if Sophie was going to cook, he was doing the dishes. Paige wondered if she’d ever settle into a rhythm that smooth with the man she was about to marry. Somehow Sophie was just a natural — at everything.

Dax glanced up and spotted Paige. The look on her face must have given away her musings because he shot her a slightly worried, questioning look.

“Good morning, Sophie,” Paige said cheerfully as she moved toward the woman who had become her surrogate mother nearly a decade earlier. “Any word from that workaholic husband of yours?”

“Good morning, dear,” Sophie set a large plate of pancakes on the table. “Nathan is tied up with some project again. He thought maybe he’d swing out this weekend, but it’s looking doubtful. He doesn’t think he’ll be able to get away. Maybe next week. Sit down, fix your plate while it’s hot.”

“Why don’t you sit down and let me finish up here,” Paige offered. “I heard you say Carmen will be arriving soon. Dish your plate and tell me about the photographers. Are you sure you don’t mind handling that while I’m at work today? I feel like I’m taking advantage.”

Sophie turned back toward the stove. Dax blocked her path. “Sit,” he motioned toward the table. “We’ve got this.”

“Oh, alright,” Sophie relented. “Paige, you need to stop stressing about this.” She settled onto a chair and began to fill her plate. “I’m here to help you plan the most important day of your life. Carmen and I have it covered. We’re enjoying ourselves. And we both know you would be perfectly happy to throw on a dress someone else picked out for you, slip on an old pair of shoes, and walk down the aisle come August. Let me do what I do best, and you go serve and protect the community.”

Lucrative Deception

Paige slid a plate of eggs onto the table and settled in to join a woman she loved dearly, but she would never understand. “Just don’t let Carmen buy any more shoes.”

“I second that,” Dax slid onto a chair. “Zee threatened to shoot me if the two of you go shopping again. Apparently, last week Carmen came home with half a dozen bags. I’m told they’ve run out of closet space.”

“That friend of yours exaggerates,” Sophie smiled. “There were only four bags and two of them contained wedding supplies.”

The three of them fell into comfortable conversation as they had a cozy family breakfast before each of them rushed off to start their busy day.

“Well,” Dax said as he stepped from the building. “It’s official. We are cash poor but land wealthy.”

“It was a great deal,” Wooly said defensively. “I can’t believe those kids went for it. I offered to have someone appraise the property out here in Manti, but Darrell convinced his sister they should rely on someone they trusted back in Tennessee. Worked out better for us, but I still feel a little guilty.”

“I don’t,” Hawk shrugged. “It’s not our fault they trusted the wrong guy. We simply paid their asking price. They can’t complain and we got an amazing deal. Now we have more cash than we expected to cover startup costs.”

“It’s going to be tight,” Dax warned. “We’ll have to be frugal and make do with the necessities until we start bringing in clients. Most of the reserve will be used up by construction costs. We don’t have a business until we have a building.”

“We can’t skimp too much, though,” Vato argued. “If we don’t have top of the line equipment and a great course, we won’t get any clients.”

“I found that property and convinced Darrell it was the perfect time to sell his great-grandfather’s ancient investment,” Wooly shrugged. “I’ll get us a deal on equipment. We lucked out. Far as I can tell, nobody in that family has ever even been to Utah, let alone seen the property they just off-loaded.”

“I’ll give you that, but getting a deal on the equipment will be even more challenging,” Vato argued. “Maybe we can find an estate sale somewhere. You know, keep an eye out for some widow selling her late husband’s prized gun collection. They don’t always know what

Lucrative Deception

they have and if we stumble onto the right sale, we might be able to pick up a few rifles for a good price, but that's a long shot at best."

"I don't want cheap weapons," Dax disagreed. "We need modern, top of the line rifles, shotguns, and handguns if we want to compete in this market. We'll have to find other ways to save and just expand slowly over time."

"Maybe we should consider a loan," Vato pushed. "I know all the reasons you don't want to; but, if we are going to do this, we have to do it right."

"Since we finished early," Hawk interrupted, "I wanted to head into the canyon and see if we can find a spot to use for the backcountry training courses." He knew Dax was getting annoyed at Vato's insistence they go into debt to make this venture a reality. "We won't be able to leave the equipment up there. We'll have to set up at the beginning of each session so we should go deep into the wilderness and find a spot that's not easily accessible by the regular campers but close enough it doesn't take all day to get there. We have the rest of the day free, you guys up for a road trip?"

Dax glanced at his watch. He had time. "Let's take your car," Dax decided, motioning to Hawk. "We have a few hours to scout before I need to head home."

Zeus began kicking at Dax's ankle.

"Knock it off," Dax gave his friend a shove.

"I was just trying to dislodge that ball and chain," Zeus laughed. "Not even hitched yet and you're already tied to a schedule."

"You've got nerve," Dax grinned. "Who rushed off yesterday because his woman was due home any minute and he hadn't finished his honey-dos."

"Not the same," Zeus opened the back door and slid into Hawk's vehicle.

"You just keep telling yourself that," Dax climbed into the passenger seat and started adjusting the controls. "Maybe someday someone will actually believe you."

"It's that one, up ahead," Dax pointed to a smaller pathway that took off from their current trail. "We should be out of the way up here. I think we'll have enough privacy to make one of these camping spots our staging location. From here, we'll take the men and hike further into the wilderness — away from the public. We'll need to locate at least two more backup areas in case someone sets up here during the busy season."

Lucrative Deception

“How far do you want me to go?” Hawk asked.

“At least another half mile,” Dax decided. “Just keep your eye out for a good spot. The downside is the weather and access.”

“Yeah,” Zeus focused out the window. “It’s the end of June and there’s still snow on the northern benches and look how muddy it is. Any earlier and we might not get in at all.”

“Eventually, we’re going to need snowmobiles,” Vato added.

Dax shot the man an annoyed look. The guy needed an attitude adjustment. When he wasn’t complaining about his injuries, he was complaining about money and doing his best to blow what little they had left. “Pull off to the side over there. I want to get out and take a look around.”

“Yes, sir,” Hawk pulled off the road into a small camping area and shut down the engine. “Let’s scout.”

“It’s clearly not used frequently, but it is used,” Wooly observed. “We’d have to send someone out to ensure it’s available before each session.”

“I know we’re spending money like it’s going out of style,” Zeus considered. “But it’s the right time of year to get a good deal on a cheap trailer. We don’t need anything elaborate, just something we could use as a mobile office.”

“Good idea,” Hawk added. “The backcountry portion won’t be longer than a week. If we pulled the trailer up a couple of days before each course and left it throughout the training, nobody would mess with the area.”

“Legally,” Wooly added. “We could stay for a full fourteen days. That would give us plenty of time...” He realized Dax had left the conversation and was distracted by something off in the distance. “Dax?”

Hawk moved to stand next to his friend. “It’s low.”

Zeus joined them. “That plane has to be in trouble. No pilot would fly at that altitude in these canyons on purpose.”

“Or, he’s avoiding detection,” Dax didn’t take his eyes off the plane. “I think he’s using the river as a guide but, he’s going to crash. Let’s see if we can get to that canyon from here.”

“Why do you think he’s going to crash?” Vato asked.

“Because that’s a boxed canyon and at that altitude, he’ll never be able to pull out,” Dax headed for the SUV.

Lucrative Deception

“And if I remember correctly,” Wooly added. “It’s too narrow to maneuver once he realizes the danger.”

“Exactly,” Dax slid into the passenger seat and slammed the door.

Hawk jumped in and waited while Vato slowly climbed into the back seat. Once the door closed, he floored it. Moments later, the vehicle was flying over the terrain, bumping over rocks, and barely avoiding protruding limbs.

“Take that trail that leads off to the left,” Dax ordered. “We need to get further east, and this trail is slowly making its way west.”

“That’s not a trail,” Wooly objected.

“It is today,” Hawk laughed as he veered sharply and began to follow what looked like a flash flood drainage creek that was currently bone dry. He pressed harder on the gas, hoping it would give him the momentum he needed to get through the soft sand without getting stuck. They moved quickly, leaving a huge plume of dust in their wake.

The group was still flying down the dry creek bed, but the area had opened up providing several feet of clearance on each side of the vehicle. Zeus rolled the window down and stuck his entire upper body outside. He raised a high-powered set of binoculars and did his best to hang on while he searched for the wayward plane. “Got it!” he called after only a few seconds. “We’re headed straight for it and it’s definitely going down. He’s not trying to climb, he’s slowing. Okay, he’s banking hard to the left and losing altitude. Now he’s leveling out...”

There was silence for nearly a full minute. “Zeus?” Dax pushed.

Zeus dropped back onto the back seat. “Lost him,” he sighed. “He never pulled out. I think he collided with the trees. At least we didn’t see a huge explosion. That’s good news, right?”

“Maybe,” Dax said soberly. “If the crash doesn’t kill him on impact, we might get there in time to help.”

“How close do you think we can get in this creek bed?” Hawk wondered.

“It’s the only drainage system for that entire canyon besides the river,” Dax advised. “If we’re lucky, this trail will lead us directly to the plane.”

“It’s not a trail,” Wooly mumbled again.

They had traveled over a mile and the terrain was getting more difficult to maneuver. Hawk glanced at the dials on his dashboard, grateful they still had over half a tank of gas. He would not make the same mistake that couple from New York made last month. He’d never hear

Lucrative Deception

the end of it if he did. The engine was a little hot, but the levels were holding steady. They should be okay if they didn't do any heavy climbing. "We have to be close."

"Slow down," Vato called out. "I think I saw something. Looked white with a little splash of red."

"That could be our plane," Zeus tried to glance over the front seat through the windshield. "Or, it could be a Coke can. Where is it?"

"Up," Vato held out a hand. "Give me the Steiner's."

Zeus passed over the binoculars and waited.

"It's the plane," Vato lowered the high-powered lenses and passed them to Dax. He motioned in the direction he had spotted the wreckage.

"I'll guide you in," Dax told Hawk as he peered through the lenses and focused on the dangling airplane. "Looks like we're headed straight for him."

"Where?" Hawk studied the open terrain ahead.

"The plane is dangling in the trees a couple hundred yards out," Dax advised. "To the left at your ten."

"Alright," Hawk nodded. "I see it now. I'll park over there to the right. If that thing comes crashing down, I don't want it to take out our only means of transportation."

"Good call," Wooly leaned forward and studied the dangling object. "I can't see any movement. Do you think he could have survived?"

"Doubtful," Dax continued to watch as they approached the scene. He couldn't see the front of the plane but from this angle, it looked like the pilot had crashed headfirst into a large trunk.

Dax climbed from the vehicle and cautiously made his way closer to the small plane that was perched precariously in the trees above him. As he circled around to the left, he immediately spotted the damage. There was no chance anyone had survived that impact. The nose of the aircraft had made a direct hit into an enormous tree trunk. The entire cockpit had crumpled into a mangled mess. The front end of that plane looked like a Coke can — one that had been stomped on before it was thrown into the recycle bin. The pilot was clearly dead. Dax pivoted, thinking he'd head back and give his team the bad news, but stopped. He didn't have to go anywhere. His entire team had followed him into the forest — even Vato.

Lucrative Deception

“I’ve still got our gear in the car,” Hawk silently pondered the situation and considered. “Pilot’s dead for sure, but we have to check. Could be an injured passenger that’s trapped in the back.”

“Yeah,” Dax sighed. “We do. Let’s grab the gear we need and get this done.”

Vato didn’t move. He just stood there, looking at the wreckage and the plane that was dangling precariously in the thick trees.

“You coming?” Dax turned to Vato.

“You know I’m sidelined on this one,” Vato barked. This was normally his area of expertise, but not anymore.

“Why?” Dax pushed.

The men stood frozen, waiting for Vato’s response, hoping he didn’t blow up at the suggestion — the way he normally did these days.

Dax silently waited as he continued to study Vato. It was time they all stopped being so overprotective of the former Ranger. If he was going to be part of the new team, he’d have to pull his weight. Today was as good a day as any to start. “If you’re up to it, I’ll leave you here to decide our approach while we grab the gear. If not, you might as well wait in the car.”

Vato focused on the task at hand. Could he do it? Was he ready? He’d been demanding the team treat him with respect for several months now. He hated the way they protected him, the way they were always watching, expecting him to trip and fall or something, never giving him any real responsibility because they didn’t believe he could handle it. Dax was finally complying with his request. Their leader was giving him a chance to prove he was a valuable resource, not just a burden. What if he failed? Would they give him another chance? Or would he be out for good? The stakes were high and that scared him? He took two steps forward and focused on the obstacle above him. That’s when he realized he could do this. It looked worse than it really was. “I’m in.”

“You sure?” Hawk began then stopped when he saw the warning look on Dax’s face.

“Good,” Dax turned. “You can tell me the plan when I get back. Is there anything we’re going to need that Hawk won’t have in his regular gear?”

“Pry bar,” Vato said absently. He was focused on the trees around the plane. He already knew the route he wanted to take to get there. “We might have to use some muscle to get that back door open.”

“Is there any way to steady the carnage while we work?” Wooly asked.

Lucrative Deception

“Not really,” Vato shook his head. “Grab whatever rope you have. We’ll have to construct a safety system so if the plane dislodges, it won’t take us down with it.”

The men worked as a cohesive team to rig the safest system they could come up with utilizing what little they had available. They just hoped the plane didn’t come crashing down during the rescue mission.

“Are you sure we need to do this?” Wooly asked one final time. “I mean, as long as we’ve been here, there hasn’t been the slightest hint of movement inside that thing.”

“It’s necessary,” Dax buckled his harness and motioned for Vato to head up.

Vato shifted and tested the branch to his right. It seemed sturdy enough. He climbed out of the way and motioned for Dax to proceed. His leader, and friend, maneuvered his body onto the upper branch and pulled his flashlight off his belt. Vato relaxed for the first time since he’d been shot. He felt free again. Being up here, in the trees, working, being part of the team... it felt right. He knew if he tried to thank Dax for giving him this opportunity, the man would just shrug it off and pretend it wasn’t significant. But, it was. And, they both knew it. Things changed the moment he gripped the rope and pulled his body off the ground the first time in months. Now, sitting here on top of the world, he swore to himself he was never going back. No more feeling sorry for himself, it was time to get to work. “Pilot’s gone. They might be able to identify him through dentals but...”

“Nobody should have to see this,” Dax finished, turning his attention away from the bloody mess tangled with twisted metal that used to be a man’s face. He was thinking of Paige, knowing she’d probably be the one to deal with the carnage. Once they cleared out the scene, Paige would work tirelessly to identify the victim and notify the family. She had a difficult task ahead of her. He shook off his thoughts and focused on Vato. “You hang out here, let me see if I can get inside. Only one of us needs to go in there.”

“I can...”

“I’m here,” Dax cut him off. It was one thing to push his men beyond their comfort zone. It was another to risk their safety when they weren’t a hundred percent. He reached his gloved hand out and pulled on the lever. They were all surprised when the large door swung open.

“Well,” Zeus called up. “At least that’s one problem eliminated.”

Lucrative Deception

Dax pointed his flashlight inside the open cargo area of the plane. He frowned when it hit a large clear plastic package filled with white powder; the image of a scorpion prominently displayed across the top.

“See anything?” Hawk called up.

“Drugs,” Dax continued to slowly move the light around the entire area. He spotted two more packages of what he thought was cocaine. “And three large black bags.”

“Empty?” Wooly asked.

“They look full,” Dax shifted and slipped the flashlight back into a clip. He steadied his weight on the flimsy branch in front of him and leaned inside as far as he dared. It took two attempts, but he finally reached the handle of the bag and pulled it forward. The plane creaked and groaned, but didn’t move.

“Stop messing around up there,” Hawk ordered. “What’s in the bags?”

Dax slid the zipper sideways and peeled back the opening. He wasn’t too surprised when he spotted the contents. The low-flying plane, the drugs, it all fell into place.

“The suspense is killing us down here,” Zeus called. “What did you find?”

Dax zipped the bag closed. He lifted it carefully out of the plane as he turned and released it. The heavy canvas dropped with a thud onto the hard-packed earth below.

“There is a lot of cash in there,” Vato observed. “Are you debating your options?”

“It’s not my decision,” Dax moved backward until he felt like his position was solid again.

“What are we going to do?” Vato pushed. “You know we could use that money to help us with the necessities.”

“Is that your vote?” Dax wondered. “This isn’t my call alone. We all have a say.”

Zeus whistled.

“You said there are three of those?” Wooly asked for clarification.

“Yep,” Dax drawled.

“Can you get to all of them safely?” Hawk wondered.

“Is that what we decided?” Dax sobered. “There’s nobody else in here, by the way. It looks like it was a solo run. Just the pilot, the drugs, and he must be on his way back to Mexico with the cash.”

Lucrative Deception

“I say we take it,” Hawk decided. “It would be different if it was some businessman or a wealthy family’s legacy, but this is drug money. It’s not like anyone will report it. I say take it all and we can decide how to handle it later.”

“I don’t know,” Wooly disagreed. “It feels like stealing.”

“I don’t have a problem stealing from the Cartel,” Zeus said without hesitation. “It’s their fault I ended up in a Mexican prison fighting for my life not so long ago. As far as I’m concerned, they owe me restitution. My vote is hell to the yeah.”

Dax grinned. Of course, Zee would see it that way. “Whatever we’re doing we have to decide. Someone else may have seen that plane go down. Once the authorities arrive, it’s out of our hands. Do I pull out the rest, or do we walk?”

“We take it,” Vato voiced his opinion. “I’ll help.”

“Ken?” Dax focused on Wooly. He wanted it to be unanimous.

“You didn’t vote,” Wooly observed. “Are you a yes, or a no?”

Dax nodded. It was only fair, he needed to voice his feelings out loud, just like his men. “I say yes with a condition.”

“Which is?” Hawk asked.

“We keep it to ourselves,” Dax decided. “Until we decide how we’re going to handle it, and what we are going to do, nobody besides the five of us can know anything about this.” He focused on Zee. “Not even Carmen.”

“I can’t...”

“If I have to hide it from Paige, you can keep it from Carmen,” Dax interrupted. “At least temporarily.”

“Why not just tell them both?” Wooly asked, not wanting to keep the discovery from his wife.

“Because I would never force something like this on Paige,” Dax answered immediately. “It’s not fair. Knowing would risk her career — everything she’s worked so hard for her entire life — just to make our lives easier. It’s an unfair position to put her in. It’s an ethical dilemma I can’t ask her to face — especially not as a local cop responsible for this area. She can’t be a part of this. She can’t know anything about it.”

“Right,” Zeus realized. “Because if she knows, she’ll either have to look the other way or seize it. You’re right. Paige shouldn’t have to make that decision. She shouldn’t have to choose between her professional life and her personal life. Neither should Carmen.”

Lucrative Deception

“Okay,” Wooly decided. “We need it, let’s take it. We can debate how we use it later. Let’s just grab the loot and get out of here.”

“You also have to keep this from Jaime,” Hawk warned.

“I got that,” Wooly sighed. “I don’t like it, but I get it.”

Dax managed to slide the other two bags out of the plane and dropped them onto the ground below. He turned to Vato, “You go first. I want to do another quick check to make sure we’re not leaving anything incriminating. You never took off your gloves, did you?”

“Nope,” Vato shifted and started to cautiously make his way back down.

Dax patted his flashlight — check. He studied his gloves — no tears. He surveyed the area where he and Vato had waited — nothing left behind there, either. He lowered the door on the plane, making sure it was tightly secured, and headed down. The only evidence they were leaving behind was something they couldn’t control. Paige would notice the rope burns on the trunk of the tree and realize whoever discovered the wreckage had also explored it. He dropped onto the ground, released the rope, stepped out of his harness, and motioned for his men to head out. Couldn’t be helped and she wouldn’t know who discovered the body or what else they had discovered. That would have to be good enough.

“Wait,” Wooly objected. “I can live with taking the money, I think. But, I can’t live with sneaking away and not reporting this. That man’s family has to know what happened to him.”

“We call it in, we get caught,” Vato objected. “You know I’m right,” he turned to Dax for support.

“There are only two things I know for sure at this moment,” Dax answered. “Somewhere inside those bags, the Cartel has at least one — maybe more — tracking devices.”

“We can’t stay here until we find them, and we can’t take those bags home,” Hawk realized. “We need a plan.”

“What’s the second thing?” Zeus asked.

“I know that Hawk has one of those burner phones he loves so much inside the car,” Dax waited for Hawk to confirm he was right.

“A couple of them, actually,” Hawk grinned.

“Let’s get this loaded up,” Dax motioned toward the money. “We’ll make our way out of this canyon and moved further up into the next canyon. There’s another area I wanted to look at, anyway. Once we find a secluded spot, we hunker down and go through all of this, find the

Lucrative Deception

trackers, and then drive around until we find service. That's when we call it in. The man is dead already, a few hours won't make a difference — not to him.”

Three hours later, the group was confident they had located all the tracking devices. They were state-of-the-art GPS units and must have been expensive. They were also easy to detect. Each bag had three of them hidden inside various stacks of money. Once they located the first one, they realized all they had to do was fan the entire stack and the bundle with the metal strip inside wouldn't fan. It was too stiff and rigid.

“You would think they'd hide these better,” Zeus observed.

“I would think they'd be more random,” Hawk added. “I mean really, three strips in each bag. It would have been more difficult if they had put one in one bag, four in another, two in another...”

“What are we going to do with the trackers and the bags?” Wooly asked. They didn't trust the bags. Dax worried they could have trackers sewn into the seams somewhere, so they had emptied all of their gear into the back of Hawk's cargo area and transferred the money one stack at a time into their canvas gear bags.

“Let's load up and try to find a signal so we can call in the crash,” Hawk suggested. “We'll keep an eye out for a good spot to dump those along the way.”

Dax stood. “Give me a minute.” He walked to the SUV and started rummaging through the loose gear in the back. Moments later, he returned with the first aid kit. He dug around for a minute and pulled out a small package.

“What's that for?” Zeus asked.

“I'm being careful in case Paige finds any of this stuff,” Dax slid his gloves back on. “If we leave so much as a stray hair on one of those bags, she'll find it.” He tore open the plastic, removed the thermal blanket from the package, and spread it on the ground. “Grab those bags and drop them at one end. We'll roll this up and find a cave or something to dump it in.”

“I think that foil liner will interfere with the GPS signal,” Wooly realized as he dropped one of the bags onto the blanket. “When the owner of that money heads out to search, they might never find it.”

Vato gathered up the trackers and dropped them on top of the pile.

Lucrative Deception

Dax hesitated, ripped open an alcohol wipe and thoroughly cleaned each of the tiny metal strips before dropping them one by one on top of the bags. Once everything was gathered, he rolled it all up, tucked the corners inside to keep it closed tight, and carried the bundle to Hawk's SUV.

"I can't exactly say it's hidden, but it's out of sight," Zeus said as he climbed back into the vehicle. "With any luck, it will stay that way."

"Good," Hawk pulled away. "I called in and reported the crash. Gave them the coordinates we jotted down when we exited that dry creek bed."

"What voice did you use? Are you sure Paige won't recognize you?" Dax asked. "That's the first thing she'll do — pull the tape."

"Nasal accountant with a twangy lisp," Hawk laughed.

"Did the dispatcher understand you at all?" Wooly wondered.

"Enough," Hawk shrugged. "Even my mother wouldn't recognize me. We're safe. And, we should have enough time to get out of this canyon before they arrive."

"Doubtful," Dax disagreed. "They're probably at the mouth already."

"They would be," Hawk smiled. "If I called Sanpete County."

"Who did you call?" Dax frowned.

"Nephi Police Department," Hawk made an abrupt turn and continued quickly up the trail. "The non-emergency line. With the delay, we should be free and clear before Manti's finest is even notified."

Dax groaned. "Did it have to be Nephi?"

"What's wrong with Nephi?" Hawk asked absently as he pulled to the side of the road. He slid the sim card from the burner and tossed the device into the river. With the spring run-off, the phone would be miles away within an hour. He pocketed the card and pulled away.

"Sheriff Dusty Hawkins," Dax answered softly.

"The idiot cowboy you told me about?" Zeus asked. "The sheriff you decked for kissing Paige?"

"That's the one," Dax sighed.

Lucrative Deception

“Oops,” Hawk said sheepishly.

“It probably won’t matter,” Dax decided. “It’s not his jurisdiction. The call taker should just pass the information on to the right department and close it out on their end.”

“Paige?” Margie called across the room.

“What’s up?” Paige shifted to look around her computer screen.

“Natalie, a dispatcher up in Nephi, got a call,” Margie began. “Some guy reported a downed aircraft. She could barely understand him plus service was terrible, kept cutting out, but she was able to get the coordinates. When she plugged it into her system, she discovered it’s ours. The man said he would wait for the authorities to arrive. Can you head up while I try to contact Gage?”

“On it,” Paige stood. “Where am I headed?”

Margie handed her a map that marked the location where the caller was supposed to be waiting. “He said the plane is northeast of there in the canyon.”

“I’ll advise,” Paige snatched up the information. “How did Nephi end up with this, anyway?”

“No idea,” Margie shrugged. “Call came in on the non-emergency line. That’s all I know.”

“Tell Gage I’ll meet him there,” Paige said as she headed out.

Gage parked behind Paige’s unit and joined her on the side of the road. “You think it was a hoax?”

“Not sure,” Paige sighed. “Clearly we don’t have a complainant, but someone left the dedicated trail and drove down that dry creek bed. I talked to Air Traffic Control; they’ve got nothing — not even a blip on the radar. They were surprised when I told them we might have a downed aircraft out here. I think we need to document this and then follow the creek in just to be sure.”

“Could be a hoax; but you’re right, we have to check. I’ll drive,” Gage offered. “Snap your photos and let’s go.”

Paige finished documenting the area and climbed into Gage’s passenger seat. She thought about the call for several minutes before she spoke. “Why would someone call in a downed

Lucrative Deception

plane, agree to wait for the police, and leave without providing the details? Maybe you're right and it is all a big prank."

"It could be legit," Gage decided. "Some people don't want to get involved. It's possible someone was out here in an area they know they're not supposed to be in and saw a plane go down. They decided it was important to call in what they saw but didn't want to get caught."

"True," Paige continued to study the tracks ahead of them. "They came back here quite a ways."

"Yeah," Gage agreed. "There are two sets of tracks, in and out. Could have been a couple of kids messing around off-road when they saw the plane and got spooked."

"Could be," they continued in silence until Paige saw something in a tree. "Slow down."

Gage slowed to a crawl then slammed on his breaks when he spotted the plane dangling haphazardly in the forest to the left. The two of them sat silently studying the area. "Got any theories?" Gage finally asked. "Because I'm a little stumped here. I do know it wasn't just an innocent mistake."

"No," Paige sat back in her seat and pondered the evidence. "Someone tracked down that plane and deliberately misled us. If they went to the trouble of locating the wreckage, why call in coordinates nearly a mile away from here?"

"Some kind of delay tactic?" Gage offered.

"Makes sense," Paige reached for the handle. "It's also the reason they called this into Nephi instead of us?"

"What?" Gage joined Paige in front of the vehicle. "This didn't come into Margie?"

"Nope," Paige spotted the area where their mysterious vehicle must have parked. "Why don't you start taking photos of the area. I want to check something out. Then I'm going to do a quick search to see if they left anything behind."

"On it," Gage turned and pulled a camera case from his back seat. He snapped photos of the tire tracks, the disturbed dirt that made a trail toward the forest and the foliage that led into the trees. Clearly, someone had driven out to the crash site, then left their vehicle and wandered in for a closer look. A section of foliage was trampled down creating a trail that disappeared into the shadows of the thick trees, but there wasn't any other evidence. No obvious leads they could follow. He took his last shot then moved in beside Paige. She was crouched on the ground, studying the dirt. "Did you find something?"

"Nothing that will help us solve this mystery," Paige stood. "But this is where they parked."

Lucrative Deception

“They?”

“Yeah,” Paige pointed to a spot on the ground. “We can follow the tire tracks and see this was the end of the road for them. They parked here, then when they were finished doing whatever it was they did, they circled around and headed back out.”

“Right,” Gage nodded. “I noticed that.”

“So,” Paige pointed to another disturbance in the dirt. “Driver and a couple feet back, passenger.”

“Which means there had to be at least three of them,” Gage realized. “Only way somebody would jump in the back seat. But, what’s the deal with that?” He pointed to an area that looked like something had been dragged or someone stomped around a bit before climbing in.

“No idea,” Paige shrugged. “You get what we needed from here?”

“Yeah,” Gage said with a sigh. “But it just tells us someone was here. I didn’t find anything that would indicate who.”

“Either they were careful or lucky,” Paige agreed. “I didn’t find anything either. I guess it was too much to ask for a dropped wallet or a used water bottle we could process for DNA.”

“Let’s take a look at the plane,” Gage decided. “I called it in. Jericho is sending out the experts, so we’ll have company soon.”

The two of them slowly made their way into the thick trees. The area below the crash site was also disturbed. “They spent some time here,” Paige deduced.

“I can’t see the pilot,” Gage moved back where he thought they might be safe if the plane suddenly dislodged and came tumbling down. “But, by the look of it, the plane struck that tree with so much force he most likely died on impact.”

“I agree,” Paige joined him. “You have any binoculars? I want to get a better look and I’m not comfortable climbing that tree just yet.”

Gage headed back to the vehicle and returned with a case.

Paige studied the plane, the tree, and the cockpit. “I can kind of make out a body,” she finally told her partner. “Identification is going to be difficult.”

“Let’s hope he’s carrying a wallet, or his flight data has enough to track him,” Gage said hopefully.

“I can see marks on the trunk and the limbs just above the left wing,” Paige’s mind was racing. What was going on here?

Lucrative Deception

“What kind of marks?” Gage wondered, confused. If the pilot was killed instantly, how could there be marks on the tree?

Paige handed the binoculars back to Gage. “Do you think he was meeting someone? Out here? If he’s not showing on the radar, he had to be flying low.”

“If they were doing some kind of illegal deal, why call it in at all?” Gage wondered. “I mean, wouldn’t it be easier to just get in, grab whatever it is you wanted, and bolt? Safer to just leave the thing out here to be discovered a year from now — or never.”

“It would,” Paige hadn’t figured it all out yet, but none of this passed the smell test. This was not an innocent crash with some good Samaritan calling in the tragedy. All she knew at the moment was a group of at least three people located this plane and scaled that tree. Which meant they had come prepared. They probably retrieved something, called in the crash, and disappeared. And, at the moment, she didn’t know who the pilot was, what he was transporting, or how in the world she was going to solve this mystery. Because, the three men left enough evidence to prove they were here, but they didn’t leave a single lead she could use to identify them.

The men had gathered in Dax’s living room. They silently studied the large bags of cash on the floor before them. Nobody said a word. The reality of what they had done was still setting in.

“We survived phase one,” Hawk finally said. “Now, what’s phase two?”

“We need a place to stash it,” Dax looked at his men. “Somewhere safe. Once it’s secure, we can debate what to do with it.”

“What’s to debate?” Vato asked. “We need it, we spend it.”

“We spend it,” Wooly disagreed. “We get caught.”

“Or dead,” Zeus said, remembering his time in Mexico. The Cartel took their business seriously and wouldn’t hesitate to kill when crossed. “We have to be smart about this. It’s not just the law or the IRS we have to avoid. It’s Eduardo Contreras and his ruthless band of savages.”

“What makes you so sure this is Contreras and not Ramin Trevils?” Hawk asked.

“Because Dax saw a scorpion on the bag of cocaine,” Zeus answered soberly.

“It’s Eduardo Contreras,” Dax confirmed. “His mark was on all three bags.”

Lucrative Deception

“That would have been valuable information to have,” Wooly grumbled. “I mean, while we were deciding if we should take the money and run.”

“Why?” Hawk asked. “Doesn’t really matter which Drug Lord is after us. Ramin would be just as ruthless over this much cash.”

“I agree,” Zeus sighed. “We knew we were taking money from the Cartel. Didn’t really matter which one. Eventually, one group will emerge as the victor in their battle for control, but it doesn’t really matter which one. They are both willing to kill, Ramin Trevils is just more sophisticated about it. He fancies himself a gentleman. Rules matter in his organization. With Contreras, there are no rules. Either way, the code dictates death when it comes to stealing.”

“True,” Ken relented. “I guess Ramin’s need to keep up appearances just makes him seem less threatening. But, when it comes right down to it, dead is dead.”

“So,” Dax brought the conversation back to its starting point. “Where do we hide the loot?”

“We need to go through it completely,” Hawk decided. “I know we’re fairly confident we ditched all the trackers, but I want to be more than fairly certain. Vato and I can do a more thorough search tonight. We’ll go through the stacks one bill at a time and make sure we didn’t miss anything.”

“I can stay and help,” Wooly decided.

“I don’t like having that much cash lying around,” Dax disagreed. “We need to stash it somewhere close. You can methodically search a few stacks at a time, but I want the rest safe and secure while you do it.”

“What’s more safe and secure than a safe?” Zeus asked. “You got somewhere we can stash a new gun safe out of sight? The basement would be ideal if we can get the thing down there.”

Dax considered. “Let’s head down and find the best location. I’ve got that storage room in the back. Should be enough space if we move some stuff around. We don’t need anything big, just strong and secure. We’ll measure the stairwell and the hallway while we’re at it.”

“That doesn’t cover tonight,” Hawk challenged.

“It does if we take the truck up to Cabela’s today. The five of us should be able to manage one of the smaller models,” Dax decided.

Hawk stood. “First, let’s stash these in your current gun safe in the spare bedroom. We can shuffle your guns around to make room temporarily.”

The men went to work rearranging and measuring. The sooner they could get the cash out of the living room, the better.

Lucrative Deception

Paige watched as Search & Rescue extracted the mangled body from the cockpit, secured it to a stokes for transport, and slowly lowered it to the ground. She continued to watch as the experienced team of volunteers made their way out of the trees. Jericho called in NTSB after Gage verified they did, in fact, have a downed aircraft. Their team would deal with the wreckage, but they wouldn't arrive for at least another day. Once they extracted the plane from the tree, it would be transported to a federal facility where they could conduct their own investigation. Paige knew it could take months, but eventually they would all know why the plane crashed; pilot error, or mechanical failure.

Alan Banks dropped from the tree and approached their small group. Jericho had arrived before the rescue team and the three law enforcement officials were standing stoically by watching as the volunteers did their best to retrieve the remains. "You were right," Alan told Paige. "Someone scaled that tree before we did. Basically, the same way we did. They had to have climbing gear readily available. Kind of rules out a of couple kids messing around where they shouldn't."

"Find anything else we should know about?" Jericho asked.

"There are a couple bags of white powder," Alan advised. "We left it where it was. Didn't want to contaminate any evidence. I'd say you're dealing with a drug plane. Explains why they weren't detected by radar. They were probably flying too low, ended up in this boxed canyon and couldn't pull out. High price to pay for an easy mistake."

"Only a couple of bags?" Jericho wondered. "Not an entire shipment?"

"Nope," Alan glanced back at the scene. "At a glance, I spotted two. Body's ready for transport but I doubt the ME can get his vehicle back here. What do you want us to do with the remains?"

"Leave him on the stokes," Jericho decided. "We'll transport him back to the road in Gage's truck. ME should be waiting for us by now."

"On it," Alan turned and headed back to his team.

"They retrieved the money," Paige said softly.

"How did they know he would crash here, though?" Jericho agreed, but it still didn't make any sense.

"Now you understand my frustration," Paige answered. "I guess I have to go up there. Now that they have the body, I'll need to document everything and retrieve the drugs."

Lucrative Deception

“Let’s wait,” Jericho decided. “I’ll call Mike in, have him protect the scene until the NTSB arrives. Their investigators can secure the drugs. It’s not like we’re going to charge this guy for possession or distribution. Our chain of evidence will be intact if we discover something related down the road.”

Paige didn’t like it. She wanted to get up there, scour the entire area for clues, and see for herself there wasn’t anything more to find. But in her gut, she knew it was useless. Search & Rescue had already disturbed any clues she might find in the trees. Nothing she found would be worth the risk. She had to accept, this time, there was nothing more she could do.

The following morning Paige woke early. She rolled over and realized she was alone. Where was Dax? She stumbled into the kitchen and spotted him at the kitchen table, sipping coffee, and scrolling through something on his phone. “You’re up early.”

“I was just about to say the same,” Dax slid his phone into his pocket and studied Paige. “Long night, early day?”

“The NTSB will be arriving today,” she settled in next to him and took a tentative sip of her doctored brew. “I want to be there when they bring the plane down. The SAR guys could see drugs in the back. I need to have them analyzed, see if we can figure out who they belong to, dust for prints, that sort of thing.”

Dax hated knowing his team was causing sleepless nights and long hours for Paige. It made him feel guilty about the way they had handled things. On the other hand, even if they left the money where it was, she’d still be working through the case exactly the same way she was now. Technically, his involvement hadn’t changed anything. Somehow, that didn’t erase the guilt. “Then what?”

“I’m waiting to hear back on the dental records,” Paige settled back. “The pilot can’t be identified unless the ME finds something we can trace, like a knee replacement with a serial number or a unique tattoo — Something that will give us a lead to follow. I might have to wait for the DNA results to come back and see if he’s in the system. If he’s running drugs, there’s a good chance I’ll get a hit.”

“What about the plane?” Dax asked. “Can’t you see who owns it and then trace it back to the pilot that way?”

“I’m still working on that,” Paige sighed.

Lucrative Deception

“There has to be a record somewhere,” Dax pushed. He initially thought identification would be easy. The plane was still intact. You could see the N number from the ground. Tracking the registration through the FAA should have been simple and quick.

“There is,” Paige sighed. “The plane is registered to a guy by the name of Stanley Whittle. He died twelve years ago. The record hasn’t been updated; they just keep renewing the registration under the same name.”

“Who pays for it?”

“The Stanley Whittle trust,” Paige frowned. “I’m hoping to get more today. Dean uncovered what little we know last night, but we’ll have to track down the trustee today and try to get the details. Once the NTSB arrives, they should have all the FAA records, maybe that will help. With any luck, I’ll know who was flying that plane before I come home tonight.”

“I’m not sure how lucky that is,” Dax disagreed. “Once you know, you have to make notification to the poor saps family.”

“True,” Paige moved to pour herself another cup of coffee. “Those are always stressful. But he might have a wife or a brother that can fill in some blanks for me.”

“Like?”

“How did they know?” Paige said in frustration.

“I’m not following.”

“Somebody got there before we did,” Paige admitted. “Someone knew he crashed, swooped in, and retrieved the money before we could seize it. How did the Mexican Cartel know he was going to crash? Assuming he works for the Cartel.”

“And, assuming it’s gone,” Dax said carefully. “How do you know they swooped in and took the money? Or that there was any money there to take.”

“What else?” Paige said absently. “It had to be money.”

“You know you get into trouble when you try to spin theories instead of following the evidence,” Dax warned. “You’re making a lot of assumptions. It could have been something else.”

“Like?” Paige asked doubtfully.

“I don’t know,” Dax shrugged. “Guns or people.”

“Not people,” Paige disagreed. “Or we’d have more dead bodies.”

Lucrative Deception

“I agree,” Dax was at a loss here. “Walk me through it.”

“Money is the only thing that makes sense,” Paige repeated. “I think he was doing a delivery. He loaded up a bunch of magic powder and headed out to make his run. He drops off the drugs and picks up the cash. Then, he heads off to the next stop. Alan said there were only a couple packages of drugs inside a nearly empty cargo area. He did spot a scorpion on one of them, so I have a call into DEA. Hopefully, we can identify which organization is involved. Anyway, I think he was nearly finished delivering the merchandise. Or he was completely finished, and the leftover packages belonged to him. — payment for the run, maybe.”

“I guess it’s possible,” Dax relented. “But, it’s just as likely that the man already finished the drug run, stopped off somewhere to deposit the money, and was on his way back home to enjoy his nose candy. Maybe he even had a quick whiff before he crashed.”

“Tox report will tell me if he had a habit of sampling the goods,” Paige dismissed that and considered. “Nope, not buying it.”

“Which part?”

“If he didn’t have anything valuable in that plane, why did someone follow him out, climb that tree, and remove something from the wreckage?”

“Are you sure they did?” Dax pressed.

“Yeah,” Paige focused on him. “I saw the markings on the trees myself. And, I saw the tire tracks. Somebody was there. At least three people. They left footprints in the dirt. Someone got there before we did. Someone followed him out and did something before we even knew we had a crash. I need to find out what.”

Dax held back a sigh. He told the guys Paige would recognize the markings on the trees. He hadn’t even considered their footprints, but he should have. Paige Carter never missed a thing which is why he made sure there wasn’t anything there for her to find. “I still think you’re jumping to conclusions. You said the pilot was flying a plane that belongs to a dead man. What if this has something to do with fraud, embezzlement, or even blackmail? He could have had paperwork somebody wanted destroyed, a compromising video he was using to blackmail the Whittle family, or a million other possibilities. Assuming there was money is making a huge leap if you ask me. What if you’re wrong?”

“You’re right,” Paige yielded. “I still think it was money. Basically because of the drugs. It’s the only thing that makes sense. I also know the Cartel has spies littered around the country. The odds are too astronomical to consider, but its possible someone was watching for the plane, saw it go down, and rushed out to retrieve the money for their boss. The loot could be halfway to Mexico as we speak. On the other hand, you could be right and there wasn’t any money. If

Lucrative Deception

there was something else in that plane, it was important enough that somebody was willing to kill the pilot to retrieve it.”

“People do like their secrets,” Dax answered.

“That would mean the plane was sabotaged. We won’t be able to answer that question until the NTSB concludes their investigation. If someone tampered with it, they’ll find the evidence. Until I know for sure, I shouldn’t limit my investigation. I’ll need to explore all possibilities. But first, I need to figure out the identity of the corpse in the morgue. Anyway,” Paige stood. “I should get started. You might want to grab dinner with the guys tonight. I’m pretty sure it’s going to be another long day.”

Dax watched silently as she turned and left the room. He focused his attention out the back window. Feeling guilty over a secret was bad enough, what he was feeling right now was more difficult to describe. He normally walked Paige through an investigation in an attempt to help her solve the mystery. This morning, he’d thrown out possibilities and planted seeds of doubt in an effort to hinder one. It didn’t sit well, and he had no idea what he was going to do about it. He let out a long, frustrated sigh. There was one thing he did know for certain, he needed to know more about that pilot.

“Give me some good news, Doc,” Paige said in greeting.

“Tox report is back,” Benny Parks glanced up. Their unknown victim was currently on his table awaiting autopsy. “Our John Doe wasn’t sampling his product.”

“So, it was clean?” Paige asked. “Completely?”

“It is,” Benny nodded. “I’ve done a visual search of the body and an x-ray. This individual didn’t have any major medical procedures or implants that will help in identification.”

“I’m still waiting for that good news,” Paige frowned.

“I might have something once I cut into him,” Benny shrugged. “Right now, I can tell you he’s a fairly healthy male — other than the obvious.”

“You mean death?” Paige said flatly.

“Yes,” Benny nodded. “He’s in his mid-fifties and at some point, he broke his right ankle.”

“That’s it?” Paige asked. “That’s all you’ve got? Then why am I here?”

Lucrative Deception

“Now there’s a question,” Benny mused. “A conundrum debated by the greatest philosophers throughout the ages.”

“Benny?” Paige warned.

He grinned. “I thought you might want to look into this...” He pulled back the sheet and displayed a large tattoo that covered the man’s lower right calf.

“Now we’re talking,” Paige moved closer to get a better look. “That’s got to be unique. Can you tell if it was one sitting or a series of additions over the years?”

“I’d say it was done by the same artist,” Benny pivoted and snatched a digital camera off a nearby counter. “I don’t see any fading. That means it wasn’t started thirty years ago and finished up last year. The ink is consistent.”

“So maybe a series,” Paige decided. “But not one that extended for a long period of time. He didn’t get the sword, wait ten years and add the skull.”

“Exactly,” Benny agreed. “And look here...” he pointed to an image near the center of the tattoo. “This orange is the same as the orange on the outer rim.”

“Okay,” Paige pointed to the camera. “Can you send that to me right away? I want to start looking for those symbols. I don’t suppose you know what they mean?” She studied the image for several seconds. “That looks like an eagle’s claw, but it blends with that symbol.”

“Sorry, I’m afraid I won’t be any help there,” Benny continued to study the image. “But it is intriguing, isn’t it? If I had to guess, I’d say each one of these has significant meaning — at least they did to this man. What it means, I couldn’t begin to guess. The symbols could be Chinese, Korean, Mandarin. I just don’t know.”

“Okay,” Paige straightened. “Send that to me. It gives me a lead that I can start looking into. And let me know as soon as possible if you find anything else once you get started on the autopsy.”

“With any luck,” Benny set the camera back on the counter. “I’ll be able to track down the dental records before the end of the day.”

“That would be amazing,” Paige glanced back at the mangled body. “Goes to show one mistake... Anyway, I appreciate your help, Doc.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Benny called after her.

Lucrative Deception

“You’re late,” Jericho said when Paige stepped into the office.

“Actually, I was early,” Paige moved to her desk and flipped on her computer. “Any word from NTSB?”

“ETA is noon today,” Jericho followed Paige to her desk. “Where have you been?”

“Talking to Benny,” Paige settled into her chair. “No word on dentals yet and apparently the guy was a healthy man before he nosedived into that tree.”

“We’ll figure it out eventually,” Jericho told her not really worried.

Paige turned the monitor so Jericho could see the tattoo. “That’s our victim’s right calf.”

“Gives us somewhere to start,” Jericho moved closer. “There’s a lot to decipher in there. And again, it’s going to take time. Which means it’s going to have to wait. We have a video conference to attend.”

“A what?”

“Join me in the conference room,” Jericho stood and headed for the large room.

“Who are we conferencing?” Paige asked dropping into one of the large comfortable chairs.

“Margie tracked down the attorney that oversees the Whittle trust,” Jericho informed her. “He’s located in San Francisco.”

“And you arranged a meeting?”

“I asked SFPD to pick him up and bring him to the station for a meeting,” Jericho corrected. “I want this to be official. We’re dealing with an attorney and if we tried this on the phone or in his office, he could just hang up if he didn’t like our questions. This way, we have backup.”

“Good thinking,” Paige considered. She was about to ask Jericho another question when Margie stepped into the room. The secretary powered up the large television set, connected a few cords to a laptop and then handed Paige the remote.

“You ready?” Margie asked.

“Let’s get this started,” Paige wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do with the device so she set the remote in front of her on the large table.

Margie pressed a few buttons on the computer and a room occupied by three people appeared on the television screen. With a nod, Margie left the room.

Lucrative Deception

“Good morning,” one of the men said in greeting. “I’m Detective Mark Whitaker. To my right is my partner, Detective Scott Landry and over there is the man of the hour, Mr. Keller Williams, the attorney overseeing the Whittle trust.”

“I understand you have some questions,” Keller Williams spoke up. “I’m not sure I will be much help. I do oversee the Whittle estate, but as I understand it, you are inquiring about an aircraft. I’m afraid that portion of the trust is sealed, and the details cannot be disclosed.”

“Why?” Paige asked, annoyed.

“Again,” Williams sighed. “I’m not at liberty to say.”

“What can you say?” Jericho pressed.

“I can tell you the aircraft in question is the property of the trust,” Williams said cautiously. “I can tell you the registration and all the paperwork are up to date and that everything is legal and above board. Beyond that, I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“You said that portion of the trust is sealed,” Paige said. “Does that mean the rest of the trust isn’t sealed?”

“That’s correct,” Williams nodded. “With a few other exceptions. The vast majority is open and accessible. Unfortunately, this item is not.”

“But Stanley Whittle is deceased,” Paige pushed. “Why the need for secrecy?”

“Again,” Williams said with impatience. “I’m not at liberty to discuss that. Now, I’m afraid I’m due in court this morning so if that’s all…”

Paige glanced at Jericho. There was nothing they could do. Williams was free to leave and they couldn’t stop him.

“One last question,” Paige decided. “Can you tell me the name of the judge that sealed the information? Our local District Attorney is going to want to know the details.”

Williams let out a loud sigh. “That would be Judge Andrus. Clinton Andrus. But, I have to warn you, if you try to interfere with the late Stanley Whittle’s wishes, I will do everything in my power to stop you.”

“Then it’s personal?” Jericho realized. “Whittle was a friend and this was personal for him.”

“I will confirm that much,” Williams stood. “Good day, gentlemen.”

Once the attorney left the room Jericho addressed the detectives. “I’m afraid I wasted your time this morning, gentlemen. For that I am sorry.”

Lucrative Deception

“No apology necessary,” Whitaker shrugged it off. “Gave us a break from the tedium.”

“Well,” Jericho gave them a friendly smile. “I appreciate your time in any case.”

“Uh,” Scott Landry spoke up. “I can’t confirm any of this, but I talked to a friend at the courthouse earlier this morning. I was digging a little, hoping to get something we could throw at the attorney if we needed to. Anyway, she wouldn’t tell me the specifics, said it could get her fired, but apparently... let’s call it a rumor. Apparently, Stanley Whittle was your typical spoiled playboy. He was caught with his pants down, so to speak — more than once. My source hinted that the estimable Stanley Whittle sealed that document because all of his offspring aren’t legitimate. He threw the illegitimate children, the ones conceived through various illicit affairs, a bone when he died. Probably to keep them quiet.”

“Interesting,” Paige thought. “Well, thank you for your help.”

“If I can ever do anything for you,” Jericho added. “Be sure to give me a call.”

“Will do,” Whitaker replied. “Good luck with the secret plane mystery.”

“Thanks,” Paige said before clicking off. She disconnected the cables that ran to the laptop in an effort to ensure the call was really gone.

“What does that tell you?” Jericho asked.

“It tells me the pilot was a secret,” Paige recalled her conversation with Dax. “What if he had something? What if he was blackmailing the Whittle family — threatening to expose the secret if they didn’t give him his fair share of the estate? That could get him killed if the family is as wealthy as we think.”

“It’s a theory,” Jericho decided. “Problem is, you have no idea what was in that plane. In fact, maybe there wasn’t anything in the plane but a dead pilot.”

“Someone climbed that tree,” Paige disagreed.

“Someone might have thought there could be something in the plane and when they got up there, they realized it was empty. You need to focus on identifying the pilot, notifying the family, and leave the rest alone. Drop it, Paige. I mean it. The case is closed until we actually have a case.”

“But...” Paige started.

Jericho stood. “That’s an order. We have enough to do around here without conjuring up mysteries that might not be mysteries at all.”

Paige settled back in her chair and sighed. She knew Jericho was right, she just didn’t like walking away before she had all the answers.

Lucrative Deception

Dax stepped through his front door and spotted Hawk, Vato, and Wooly relaxing in the living room.

“You look as bad as we feel,” Hawk observed. “What’s up?”

“We need to talk,” Dax settled into an empty lounge chair. “Have you talked to Zeus? I tried to call, but he didn’t answer.”

“He’s on his way over,” Hawk admitted. “I was just about to call you. I agree, we need to talk.”

The front door opened, and Zeus walked in.

“Now that the gang’s all here,” Dax began.

“First,” Wooly interrupted. “We have something we need to say.”

Dax was surprised. Normally, Ken would never cut him off. This must be important.

“We spent the night securing the safe and transferring the money,” Vato began.

“It’s clean,” Hawk assured them. “We went through each stack a bill at a time and there’s nothing that will lead anyone back to us. The trackers we ditched were the only ones.”

“Okay,” Dax settled back. “Good.”

“We counted it,” Vato provided. “Since we were doing a thorough search anyway, we decided we should have an accurate accounting.”

“There’s just over seven million,” Wooly said softly. “Seven million reasons Contreras will want us dead.”

“Which brings us to the reason for this meeting,” Hawk said soberly. “The gravity of what we have done hit the three of us about halfway through our inventory.”

“We can’t spend the money,” Vato provided. “Not the way I’d like to. We have to be smart about it. If we suddenly buy land, build a state-of-the-art training facility, and purchase expensive equipment like ATV’s, snowmobiles, guns and the rest...”

“We’ll stick out like a neon sign,” Zeus agreed. “And, Contreras is going to be watching. He probably knows by now that his plane went down, and he knows where. He’ll have spies, guys he sent here to investigate. The kind of spending we need to do, that’s just going to draw attention.”

Lucrative Deception

“I agree, and you guys will need to be careful,” Dax decided it was as good a segue as he would get.

“What do you mean us guys?” Hawk narrowed his eyes at their leader. Dax was still in charge and he always would be.

“I mean, I’m out,” Dax ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I can’t do it. I can’t create a wedge between me and Paige for money. I trust you to use it wisely. I won’t stop you from using it to supplement the business, but I don’t want to know about it. I can’t.”

“What changed?” Zeus asked. He didn’t like keeping secrets from Carmen either, but something happened and it was eating Dax up inside.

“One of the things that brings Paige and me together, something we share, is our breakfast conversation. She runs through her current investigation and I help her sift away the clutter and focus on the evidence. This morning, for the first time since I met her, I was impeding her investigation instead of helping. I can’t do that again. I won’t.”

“As much as I understand your position,” Hawk said cautiously. “I don’t think you need to back out completely.”

“I’ve made my decision,” Dax disagreed.

“Just hear us out,” Wooly pushed. “We talked about this most of the night. And, if you two agree, we think we’ve come up with a solution.”

“I’m listening,” Dax told him.

“Like we said,” Hawk told him. “We can’t spend the money on the business. Not overtly anyway. So, we thought we could use it to help others.”

“How?” Dax wondered.

“We would need Carmen,” Hawk warned Zeus. “We need someone that could set up a secret account that can’t be traced. We were also thinking we should look into the dead pilot. We all know enough about Contreras and his organization to understand all of his employees aren’t willing participants. If the pilot has a family, and he was participating out of fear or coercion, I think we should make sure that family has a nice big insurance policy they didn’t know existed. If he was there because he chose to be, for greed or power, they’re on their own.”

“Okay,” Dax considered the proposal. He might be able to work with that. “What about the rest?”

“We’d like to set up a scholarship program,” Vato answered. “It would give access to smaller departments or injured soldiers that might not be able to afford our prices.”

Lucrative Deception

“So,” Dax considered. “We use the money to pay ourselves, which funds the equipment we need and allows participation by those who couldn’t otherwise attend?”

“Exactly,” Wooly nodded. “If we have a lot of interest in the scholarship program, we could approach Porter, maybe tap into his contacts for donations.”

“And Carmen could hide our funds by funneling the money into a dedicated account along with the legitimate sponsors,” Zeus added.

“It could work,” Dax decided. “But it doesn’t solve my problem with Paige, and it involves Carmen. She also works in law enforcement, in a different capacity, but it creates a conflict. Zee, how do you feel about all of this?”

“I want to leave it up to Carmen,” Zeus said without hesitation.

“How is that possible?” Hawk asked skeptically.

“If we decide to bring Carmen in, I want to explain the situation to her. Tell her we have a proposal and we could use her help, but it might create an ethical conflict. She also needs to know it's something she has to hide from Paige. We can give her enough information to make the decision. With the current structure, what we’re talking about here, I think Carmen will join us. I also don’t think she’ll have a problem with it. She’s a hacker, and this will be hacking for the good of others. The idea is growing on me. I think it might be fun, we have a chance to use our good fortune to help others.”

“I support the endeavor, but I still can’t be part of it,” Dax decided.

“I have a suggestion,” Zeus focused on Dax. “A way to be involved with us and not cause problems with Paige.”

“Go ahead,” Dax didn’t see how the problem could be resolved but he was willing to listen.

“This morning you and Paige sat down for your morning ritual,” Zeus began. “She started talking about the crash and you tried to steer her away from the details. Is that the issue here? You feel like you were being dishonest and standing in the way of her discovering the truth?”

“Basically,” Dax nodded.

“Then stop impeding,” Zeus suggested. “Don’t try to redirect her. Just talk things through the same as you normally do. This case is short lived. Once she discovers the identity of the pilot and makes notification to the family, she won’t have anything to investigate. Sure, she might come back to it. She’s tenacious that way. She might continue to search for the truth. She will probably work hard to figure out what was in the plane and who could have taken it. But, we didn’t leave any clues. We don’t need you to run interference. Don’t redirect. Don’t

Lucrative Deception

stand in the way. Let Paige do what she does. Talk things out the way you always do. As long as you don't confess, we're safe."

"And if she figures it out?" Dax pushed.

"Then we'll deal with it," Hawk decided. "I don't see how she could, but I also don't think it's the monumental problem you believe it is. Paige is a smart woman. If we took the money and bought a private island or used it to throw big drunken brawls, maybe. But if we stick to the current plan? If we use the funds to provide advanced training to her fellow law enforcement professionals, and soldiers that need a fresh start — I don't think Paige would care. I honestly don't think Paige would have the major ethical dilemma you are envisioning. She's smart and she's practical. If nothing else, your kidnapping demonstrated to all of us that Paige can be an ends kind of cop."

"What does that mean?" Dax wondered.

"Only that she willingly accepted our tactics," Wooly provided. "Even when they didn't line up with her personal and professional standards."

"Paige is solid," Zeus added. "We don't need you to run interference. And if you abandon those efforts, there's no reason you can't be involved in our plan."

Dax considered the situation. They were right. This morning, he was torn between loyalty to his friends and loyalty to Paige. If he took a step back and didn't try to influence her one way or the other, maybe he could still be involved. It's not like he could distance himself completely, even if he wanted to. The business was as much his as it was theirs. Anything his men did on behalf of the company would also touch him. It wouldn't matter if he was involved or not. "We'll move forward with this plan, as long as Zeus agrees to involve Carmen. I think we should let things settle for a month or two before we bring her in, anyway. We can't do anything until we look into the pilot. And, we can't do that until we know who he is. Plus, we have enough on our plate. We need an architect to draw up the plans and Ken needs to locate a construction crew that won't take us to the cleaners on the building."

"Agreed," Hawk relaxed. He firmly believed everything they did, they had to do as a team. If Dax bailed, the entire plan would fail.

"Deputy Carter," Paige answered the ringing phone.

"Dental records are in," Benny advised. "The pilot is from El Paso, Texas. His name is Holden Driscoll. I've emailed you the details."

Lucrative Deception

“Anything else I should know?” Paige asked.

“Not from my end,” Benny admitted. “Autopsy showed basically what we thought it would. Driscoll died from blunt force trauma from the impact. No surprises. Let me know when notification has been completed with the family. I’ll contact the wife and let her know how the process works to claim the remains.”

“Will do,” Paige hung up and spotted Jericho. “Benny’s identified the victim. I’ll need to call El Paso and have one of their officers handle notification. Apparently, he was married and now has a widow.”

“Let me know if you have any trouble,” Jericho offered. “I’ll make a call to the boss if necessary. I want this closed out as soon as possible. The sooner we tie up loose ends and turn it over to NTSB, the better.”

“You’re not even curious?” Paige wondered. “You can just drop it and move on?”

“I can and you will, too,” Jericho advised. “We have enough to do without manufacturing busy work just to satisfy our own curiosity. If something comes up regarding that plane, we’ll deal with it. Otherwise, close it out and move on. Any word from Gage?”

“He’s on his way back,” Margie advised. “He said he was able to handle the family without making an arrest.”

“What was Gage on?” Paige asked.

“Another family fight at the Lovell farm,” Margie sighed. “If those two boys don’t learn how to moderate their liquor, someone is going to get seriously injured.”

“One night, or five, in a cell might make that sink in better than placating the parents. Separating a couple of thirty year olds as if they’re still misbehaving teenagers engaged in harmless sibling rivalry, isn’t working.”

“Maybe,” Margie agreed. “But, I doubt locking them in a cell would alter their behavior. That ship sailed years ago.”

“I guess,” Paige dropped back into her chair. Once she read Benny’s report, she located the number for El Paso and made the request. She didn’t like passing such a difficult task off to another department but that seemed to be the theme of the day. Pass notification off to El Paso. Pass the investigation off to NTSB. Pass her unanswered questions off to the round file and move on. Paige glanced at the pile of unsolved crimes accumulating in her open file and sighed. She didn’t have the energy to tackle those today. “I’m heading out,” she called to Margie. “See you tomorrow.”

Lucrative Deception

Paige stepped through the front door and immediately heard voices. She made her way into the kitchen and spotted Carmen and Sophie at the kitchen table. Photos and notes were scattered across the entire surface of the table. “Am I interrupting?”

“Not at all,” Sophie stood. “Join us. We’re trying to make the final decision on the photographer and decided we need wine. Do you want some?”

“Absolutely,” Paige grabbed a wine glass from the cupboard and joined the women at the table.

“Rough day?” Carmen asked.

“Frustrating day,” Paige corrected. She settled in next to her friend.

“Then wine and good company are just what the doctor ordered,” Carmen smiled, pouring Paige a generous glass of the golden liquid. “Let’s get drunk.”

Paige laughed. Maybe Carmen was right. A little girl time might pull her out of this funk. And, it was probably time she put a little effort into planning her wedding. Sophie and Carmen were great, but she couldn’t let them do everything. “Tell me about the photographers.”

THE END