

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Tumultuous Bliss *Season 4, Episode 5*

by:

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“Deputy Carter,” Margie’s voice came over the radio.

“Carter,” Paige responded.

“Your assistance is needed on an investigation,” Margie advised before rattling off the address. “Contact Sheriff Walters when you arrive.”

“Copy,” Paige flipped around and headed in the opposite direction, curious about all the secrecy. Clearly Margie, and by extension Jericho, didn’t want the details going out over the air. The address was on the outskirts of the county, just this side of Laurel Bluffs. From what she could remember, nobody lived out there anymore. So, what kind of investigation could Jericho need her help with? A million different possibilities ran through her mind before she reached the turnoff.

As Paige made her way slowly down the dirt and gravel roadway that led to an abandoned home, she studied her surroundings carefully. All the buildings had been constructed well away from the highway. The house itself was situated about a hundred yards from the base of some rolling hills directly behind the property. About fifty feet to the left of the home was a huge barn. Paige spotted Jericho’s vehicle immediately, it was parked next to an expensive white compact car she didn’t recognize. The entire area was overgrown with tall grass, weeds, and wildflowers. The field to the left of the barn as well as the section directly in front of it was a mess. If she had to guess, she’d say at least a couple dozen cars had driven through the area recently leaving trampled down grass and huge ruts. Halfway between the house and the barn it was obvious someone tried to go four-wheeling and got stuck, leaving a muddy mess in their wake.

She backed her vehicle in next to Jericho and shut down the engine. Now that she arrived, she could see Gage’s truck and a small red Toyota Camry parked closer to the barn. If Clayton was here, why did Jericho need her? She paused for another minute to take in her surroundings. Jericho was standing near the red car talking to three teenagers and a man. Gage must be inside the barn — someone as big as he was couldn’t remain hidden for long. It was time to talk to her boss and get the scoop before she tracked down her partner. She climbed from the vehicle and only made it a few feet across the newly formed parking area when Jericho broke away from the group and headed her way.

“I know you were hoping for an easy day today,” he said in greeting. “Sorry to disappoint you. Don’t worry, I won’t cancel your vacation. Dax would kill me if I didn’t let you off for that fancy wedding of yours.”

“I can work another day or two if I need to,” Paige glanced around casually. When she was sure the group of citizens remained where Jericho had left them, she refocused on her boss. “Why am I here? And, why would I expect you to cancel my vacation?”

“There’s a body inside the barn,” Jericho practically whispered.

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“Is that the family?”

“No,” Jericho sighed. “Before I get into the details, I want you to take a look around. Go in, do what you do, and come back out here and tell me if there was foul play or just death by misadventure.”

Paige raised her eyebrows. “Now you’ve got my attention. Seriously, if I need to, Dax will understand. I can work tomorrow. Carmen and Sophie have it all covered, anyway. I’m pretty sure I was only requested to keep up appearances.”

“You work the case today,” Jericho sobered. “Then you let it go. Didn’t I hear someone say the in-laws arrive in the morning? You need to be there to greet them, make a good first impression and all that. I’ll back Gage on this one if he needs it and I’m pulling in Mike to help. I just want your eyes on it today. That’s it, Paige. I want your word on that or I’ll send you back to the office to deal with all that paperwork you hate so much. Today only, then put the job aside and prepare for the wedding. You have other, more important things to concentrate on — like finalizing the flowers and buying some new shoes.”

“Really?” Paige frowned. “You default to flowers and shoes? I’m pretty sure that’s called stereotyping — or in our world, profiling. And, it’s persona non grata these days. Some might even call it sexism.”

“Paige,” Jericho warned.

“Fine,” Paige sighed. “I’ll be in the barn.”

Paige stepped through the small man door and immediately spotted Gage. The building was dimly lit from two small windows situated in the upper loft area of the barn. Clayton was standing at the far end of the building looking down on what was obviously a body. She slowly made her way toward him, careful not to disturb any evidence along the way. The instant she saw his face, she knew. “He was one of your boys, wasn’t he?”

“Huh?” Gage looked up, dazed.

“He played football, at the high school.”

“Yeah,” Gage sighed. “He was a good kid. I know what this looks like, but I don’t believe it. I need your help, Paige. You have to prove this wasn’t a simple overdose.”

“Let’s step away for a minute,” Paige suggested.

“I’m fine,” Clayton said stubbornly.

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“Good,” Paige answered flatly. “But I want you to give me some information about the victim and I don’t want any evidence destroyed while we stand around chatting. We need to move over there, to those chairs.” She pointed to the side of the large space where a few folding chairs had been abandoned. Or, maybe they were already here when the party started.

Gage studied his partner for several seconds before his shoulders slumped and he headed for the chairs.

Paige followed. The instant he settled his large body onto one, she dropped down next to him. “What was his name? Our victim.”

“Adam Langford,” Gage said absently.

“Age?” Paige could see she was losing him. He was too close to this case and his emotions were driving him, not his training.

“He was a junior,” Gage stared vacantly across the large empty barn. “I guess that would make him seventeen.”

“Did he have a history of drug use?” Paige pushed.

“No,” Gage focused on her intently. “The opposite. After that fiasco with the steroids, Mark and I implemented new rules. In addition to the random drug testing, we have a zero-tolerance policy on the team now. You get caught using, you’re benched. No excuses, no exceptions. Adam never used, his tests were always clean. The kid was a health nut, Paige. I don’t think he even used aspirin. He wouldn’t have done this, not the way it looks. I’m actually surprised he was even here.”

“Did his friends know why?”

“I haven’t talked to them,” Gage admitted.

“If you want my help, you have to do things my way on this one,” Paige decided. “Can you do that?”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning,” Paige glanced around. “I want some time in here alone. I need to take a closer look around, see if there’s any evidence, and examine the body. I need you to go outside and figure out a way to interview the witnesses. They’re minors so it’s going to be tricky. Find a way to make it happen. Get me some answers, Gage. I need to know why he was here, who he came with, and if he was having any problems in his personal life.”

“He was,” Gage sighed. “But he wasn’t suicidal if that’s where you’re going with this.”

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“I was actually wondering if he was stressed and thought a party would loosen things up a bit. You know, give him a little escape from reality.”

“His parents are in the middle of an ugly divorce,” Gage told her reluctantly. “But he was handling it. He was using football to cope; and, the hopes of a scholarship to a good school. He didn’t risk that to let off a little steam. There has to be another explanation.”

“Then go find out what it is,” Paige pressed. “I need to start working the scene before Benny arrives to take the body. I’m sure Jericho has called him in by now.”

“I’ll leave,” Gage relented. “But you have to promise me you won’t just accept the way things look on the surface. You need to investigate this and find the answers.”

“I promise I will do my best to find the truth,” Paige worded her response carefully. “But you have to promise to accept my findings, even if you don’t like them.”

“I promise to accept the truth,” Gage evaded.

Paige smiled. It was just like Gage to use her own words against her. “Go get me some answers. And tell Jericho I’ll let him know when I’m ready for Benny.” She watched her friend slowly leave the building and wondered if she could keep her promise. She only had one day to figure this all out. It was clear Jericho wouldn’t back down and let her work another day. *Better get to work*, Paige thought as she crouched down and began a thorough examination of the victim.

Paige stepped to the large wooden doors, studied the locking mechanism, then disengaged the system and pushed the heavy doors open. Sunlight burst through the opening and illuminated the interior of the barn. She stood in the doorway and imagined how the place had looked only hours before.

Jericho stepped in beside her and waited.

“I see Benny arrived,” Paige didn’t look up, she continued to survey the scene, then the parking lot and considered.

“He’s ready whenever you are,” Jericho provided. “Mike and Gage are inside the motorhome interviewing the kids. Dr. Anderson, the girl’s father, is sitting in because they’re all minors.”

“Do you know if they’ve learned anything?” Paige shifted to look up at her boss.

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“Maybe,” Jericho shrugged. “I told them to finish up with all three so we can send them on their way, then we’ll have a briefing to discuss the situation. Do we have a situation, Paige?”

“Yeah,” Paige sighed.

“Walk me through it,” Jericho demanded.

“What do you see?” Paige asked.

“I’m more interested in what you see,” Jericho countered. “It’s the reason I called you out here this morning.”

“Plastic red cups,” Paige said flatly. “I need to grab some things from my vehicle. Take a minute to look around. I assume you called in forensics. I’m going to need them.”

“I did,” Jericho studied his deputy for several seconds. “Heidi’s on her way. She should be arriving any minute now.”

“Good,” Paige jogged across the expanse, flung open the back door to her SUV and began pulling items from the back seat. Within minutes she was back by Jericho’s side.

“Red cups?” Jericho asked. He followed Paige inside and watched as she started placing markers next to what looked to him like random items. “What are you doing?”

“I want the cups tested,” Paige told him. “I’m selecting them randomly, so we have a good dispersed selection of evidence to prove my theory.”

“What is your theory?” Jericho pressed again.

“Red cups,” Paige shrugged. “It makes the party unusual.”

“Not really,” Jericho disagreed. “There’s a reason Toby Keith wrote a song about the plastic red cup.”

They had reached the body and Paige carefully set a marker next to a cup that had to be the victim’s. Jericho figured the boy was drinking out of it when he collapsed. The physics, based on the placement of the body and the location of the cup, fit.

“Do you see anything unusual about that cup?” Paige asked, straightening to her full height.

“What I want to know is what you see,” Jericho told her again.

“I see a black mark running up the side,” Paige sobered. “One that I haven’t seen on any other cup around here. Why does the victim’s cup have a black line running up the side?”

Jericho spotted the marking, it looked like someone had used a thick black marker to run a black line from the bottom of the cup all the way to the top. That was curious. He took a few

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seconds to look around. None of the other cups had the line. “That’s odd, but I’m not sure it makes this suspicious. Kids do strange things. That marking might mean something silly and innocuous.”

“Kids do strange things, I agree,” Paige slipped her hands into her front pockets. “But I’m not convinced this party was thrown by a bunch of high school kids.”

“You think... Paige, if there was an adult here, and they did nothing to help that boy when he went down, they’re culpable. You better be sure, because the kid was beyond help when Dr. Anderson arrived. He estimated the boy had been deceased for at least two hours by the time he got here. But, if there was an adult present, and they just abandoned that boy and let him die...”

“Then its negligent homicide,” Paige nodded.

“I’d push Tolman for more,” Jericho said angrily. “I’d push for the max he thought he could get and let him deal it down from there. But, before you go there, explain your theory.”

“The red cups,” Paige grinned when her boss scowled.

“You keep saying that,” Jericho glanced around, not seeing where she was going with this.

“How many teenage, or underage drunken fun fests have you broken up over the course of your career?”

“A lot,” Jericho frowned as her point finally struck home. “Where are the beer cans?”

“Or the empty bottles?” Paige added. “Girls like wine coolers or hard lemonade. You’ve been to more of these than I have, but with all the trash left behind, there should be bottles and cans. Plus, the red cups. That implies a mixed drink. It’s difficult for a kid to get the hard stuff. It’s only sold at the liquor store and they ID everyone. Hell, they still ID me.”

“Some kid could have stolen his father’s vodka,” Jericho considered.

“I think they had some kind of jungle juice,” Paige shook her head. “And a lot of it, more than you could get with one bottle of vodka. Some of the cups have red liquid in them. Others have what looks like beer. So, my educated guess is some kind of jungle juice and beer... a keg.”

“And,” Jericho considered. “Like the hard liquor, you have to be over twenty-one to rent a keg. Unless...”

Paige cut him off. “I realize some kid could have found his dad’s keg in the old shed and pulled it out to use for a party. But where did he get the beer to fill the keg?”

“They do it all the time over at the college,” Jericho was playing devil’s advocate, but he was starting to believe Paige was onto something.

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“True, but at the college, they just con some twenty-two-year-old student into joining the festivities. It’s easy to find a willing adult to do the buying.”

“Okay,” Jericho decided. “We’re officially classifying this as a suspicious death. Now, you have eight hours to prove you’re right. Less than eight, you’ve already been here for one.”

“Eight,” Paige pushed. “If I can’t come in tomorrow, I want to work late and see what I come up with before it’s all turned over to Gage.”

“It will be turned over to Mike and Gage, but I’ll give you the eight. Then,” Jericho gave her a stern look, “the only thing you will be thinking about for the next month is a wedding, your in-laws, and relaxing on the beach.”

“I could...”

“No,” Jericho put his foot down. “Eight hours, then you’re done. We did solve one or two crimes around here before you arrived. I think we can handle this one without you.”

“Alright,” Paige grumbled. “Eight hours. And, I need both Mike and Gage to help.”

“You’ve got them,” Jericho glanced up and saw Brian Anderson exiting the motorhome. His daughter, Kate, was directly behind him. “Are we finished here?”

“Not quite,” Paige crouched down next to the victim’s lifeless form. She used a pen to push up the sleeve of his shirt. “He has bruising,” Paige glanced up at Jericho.

“I’ll get Benny to rush the preliminary,” Jericho sighed. “Maybe he can determine if they’re defensive wounds or if someone held him down while he was convulsing and tried to help. Either way, it’s suspicious. Work the case.”

“That’s all I have for now,” Paige stood and brushed the dirt from her pants.

Jericho gave her a subtle nod, then headed out of the building to speak with the doctor.

Once the witnesses had been sent on their way, the body had been removed and Heidi had collected the evidence and was headed for the lab; Jericho gathered his deputies for a briefing inside the motorhome.

“First,” Jericho began. “I want Paige to explain why she has determined this was a suspicious death and not a simple overdose.”

Gage’s head shot up and he focused on Paige in surprise. It’s what he believed, what he had hoped for, but deep down, he knew it was a longshot.

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Paige walked Gage and Mike Lovato through her findings and waited while they considered her theory.

“Somehow,” Lovato focused on Paige. “I think you might need more than a red plastic cup to get a conviction on this one. I could be wrong of course, but I think a jury of some poor smuck’s peers might need additional concrete evidence before they throw his sorry butt behind bars for a decade or two. Unless you think he was bludgeoned to death with one of those offensive red containers.”

“It’s possible,” Paige took a sip of water. “Five minutes around you and my inner Lizzie Borden is screaming to get out and say hello. A little red cup might be more than enough to get the job done.”

“Yeah, well tell Lizzie I said hi,” Lovato grinned and held up his middle finger.

Paige also grinned and slid her hand out of her front pocket, her middle finger the only one extended as she reached up and scratched her temple with the extended digit.

“That’s enough,” Jericho sighed. “Mike, tell us about the witness interviews.”

“Right,” Mike shifted and pulled a notepad from his back pocket. “It took some doing, but we finally got the kids to admit they did sneak out last night. With Dr. Anderson in the room, they didn’t want to come clean at first. He actually helped push them until they confessed. The original plan was to meet up at the high school at midnight and attend this party; but, they ultimately decided against it.”

“Adam convinced them it was a bad idea,” Gage corrected. “They met at the high school as planned, but once they were gathered on the bleachers and started to talk, Adam refused to go. He said with all the turmoil at home, it was even more important to get a football scholarship to a good school. He thought it was his only chance to escape; and, attending a party with alcohol and drugs would risk his future. He wasn’t willing to take the risk.”

“So, what changed?” Paige asked. “Because obviously, he ended up here after he ditched his friends.”

“The four of them drove around, goofed off for a few hours, then headed home with plans to meet back up for breakfast this morning,” Mike continued. “None of them knew Adam was coming here but when he didn’t show up at the café and didn’t answer their calls, they got worried and drove out to take a look around. Kevin Draper provided our best insight into what was going on with Adam last night. He showed us a text he received from Adam just before four in the morning. It mentioned Felicity Broadhead and said she claimed she was in danger.”

“Who is Felicity Broadhead?” Jericho asked.

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“I should have thought of that before,” Gage sighed. “She was Adam’s girlfriend, but they broke things off earlier this year. The best we could pin down with the help of the witnesses was early February.”

“That’s more than six months ago,” Paige considered. “If they split that long ago, why the contact last night?”

“Kevin didn’t know,” Mike picked it back up. “Adam told him she’d been texting all night and said she claimed to be in trouble, but he didn’t trust her. The texts seemed to get more urgent and Adam didn’t know what to do. Kevin told him to ignore her. She was old news, and she was trouble.”

Paige turned to Gage. “Is she? Trouble, I mean.”

“She is,” Gage nodded. “About this same time last year, the two of them were pretty hot and heavy. In fact, Felicity was distracting Adam to the point his game was suffering. It was like he was obsessed, and that girl was all he could think about. I finally pulled him aside and had a talk with him. Focusing all his attention on a girl is fine off the field, but the minute he hit the grass, his teammates counted on him and he was letting them down. I told him to put the girl aside and focus on the game when he was on the field or I’d be forced to reduce his playing time. He bounced right back. I actually thought the relationship was — I don’t know — healthier I guess, after our talk.”

“But they broke up in February?” Paige asked.

“They did,” Gage shrugged. “Apparently, Felicity preferred obsession to real emotion. As soon as Adam took a step back, she looked for other ways to get that high. Rumor had it, one of those ways included illegal drugs and booze. Adam came to me for advice before he finally ended it. He said he cared for Felicity, a lot, but he didn’t like the person she had become. Adam ended things and Felicity used partying to fill the void. When the old man found out about the wild behavior, she blamed Adam. He immediately tried to get Adam thrown from the team, or at least benched for the rest of the season.”

“For what?” Jericho asked.

“Felicity is the daughter of Rodney Broadhead, the state legislator who has higher aspirations. Rodney approached Mark and asked for a favor. He wanted Adam punished. Said all his daughters’ problems were a direct result of her short relationship with Adam. His goal was to get the kid thrown off the team permanently. Short of that, he wanted Mark to bench Adam for the rest of the season. The pompous idiot tried to convince Mark it was the right thing to do. He said his daughter was suffering and the only thing that made her happy was going to the football games with her friends. If Adam was playing, Felicity couldn’t enjoy the evening. She had no other choice, her only other option was a drunken party. Plus, according to him, it

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didn't look good to have the boy that broke his precious daughter's heart out there representing the local high school and having a good time while she was home suffering," Gage shook his head in disgust.

"Did she cause problems for Adam?" Paige asked. "Could that be why he decided to meet her last night? An attempt to make it stop?"

"Not that I know of," Gage frowned. "From all outward appearances, it looked like the two of them just went their separate ways."

"We need to interview Felicity Broadhead," Paige decided. "We need to know why she contacted Adam last night and if she somehow talked him into coming out here to see her."

"Kevin was clear," Lo put in. "Felicity kept saying she was in danger and needed Adam's help. It doesn't explain how he got dead, but it is suspicious."

"Then why did you give me grief about my theory?" Paige glared.

"Because I could," Lovato laughed.

"Paige and I will notify Adam's parent," Jericho cut in. "Mike, I want you and Gage to start contacting local breweries and find out who bought the beer. It's the middle of summer and a weekend, so that should keep you busy until we're finished. Once Paige and I have talked to the Langford's, I want to switch off. Gage, you'll come with me. We'll start at the top of that list you got from the kids and try to determine who was here last night and who wasn't. Paige, I want you and Mike to go out and interview Felicity."

"Mike and I could start by interviewing Felicity and then move on to the breweries," Gage suggested.

"I understand why you want to conduct the interview," Jericho told Gage. "But it won't work. She knows you, from school. You're big and strong and intimidating. I'm talking stature, but I'm also talking reputation. You played for the NFL, now you're a cop, and you were Adam's coach. The only hope we have of getting answers from that girl is to put her at ease. We do that by sending in two cops she's never seen before and then we hope her father is playing golf."

"I agree," Paige gave Gage a sympathetic look. "We'll get answers, but it has to be me and Lo. Trust us, we'll do right by Adam Langford."

"Yeah, man," Mike put a hand on Gage's shoulder. "We got this. Now, let's go harass the local breweries."

"He's struggling," Paige told Jericho as they watched the two men walk away. "What are we doing with the motorhome?"

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“He’ll get through it,” Jericho said confidently. “And we’re leaving it. If Dean has time, he’ll bring Havilland out to retrieve it. If not, we’ll deal with it later today.”

Paige climbed into the passenger side of her bosses’ truck and buckled in. “Then, I guess it’s time to head over and ruin the lives of an innocent family. I hate notifications.”

“So,” Paige slid into Mike Lovato’s passenger seat. “Any luck with the beer?”

“Maybe,” Lo answered. “There were a couple good possibilities. We’ll have to speak to the buyers in person before I decide. I take it the notification was a difficult one.”

“They all are,” Paige sighed. “But I mostly feel sorry for Adam’s little brother. The kid won’t be able to leave the house unsupervised until he’s forty.”

“It’s tough to lose a kid,” Lo sympathized.

“Worse when you have two parents who seem to hate each other,” Paige sighed. “They immediately started the blame game. I think an ugly divorce just got much worse.”

“Then let’s solve this and get it off the table,” Lo suggested as he pulled into the driveway of a large home.

Paige glanced up. “So, this is the guy I complain to when I don’t like the annual budget?”

“Good luck,” Lo laughed. “He’s a politician. I’ve never met one that couldn’t dodge and weave when they wanted to.” Lovato shut off the engine and climbed out of the vehicle.

“Think he’ll let us through the door?” Paige wondered as she joined him at the front bumper.

“Let’s go see,” Lo decided. Moments later they were sitting in some kind of flowery, pink room with fluffy doilies made from feathers. The butler had placed them here and assured them he would retrieve Mrs. Broadhead at once. That was at least ten minutes ago, and Lovato was beginning to wonder if she’d escaped out the back door.

“I’m so sorry to keep you waiting,” a woman that looked to be in her late forties said as she flounced — that was the only word to adequately describe her bouncy walk — into the room and dropped onto the fluffy pink lounge chair. “Linton, darling, would you please bring us some iced tea? It’s truly stifling in this room today.”

“Yes madam,” the butler gave a little bow before quickly exiting the room.

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“Linton said you needed to speak to me about my daughter,” Mrs. Broadhead said once he was gone. “I can’t imagine what Felicity could have done to bring the police to my doorstep.”

“It’s more that we need to speak to your daughter,” Paige corrected. “We think she might have some information that will assist in our investigation.”

“What kind of investigation?” the woman asked.

“First,” Paige ignored the question, “could you tell us your first name? For the report.”

“Report?” Mrs. Broadhead frowned.

“Your full name, please,” Lovato repeated.

“Francine Dubois Broadhead,” she spat. “What is this investigation you mentioned, and what does my daughter have to do with it?”

“Is Felicity at home this morning?” Paige asked.

“She’s sleeping,” Francine narrowed her eyes at Paige, clearly used to getting her way.

“Would you mind asking her to join us?” Lovato pushed. “This shouldn’t take long.”

Francine stared at the attractive man for several seconds before she pushed to her feet and left the room.

“This is going to be fun,” Paige mumbled under her breath. “Do you think Felicity will answer our questions with her mother in the room?”

“We don’t have a choice,” Lo settled back. “We’ll get what we can from the girl and hope we get more from the others that attended the party.”

Mother and daughter stepped back into the room. The connection was obvious immediately. Francine was completely put together, not a hair out of place, makeup expertly applied; while Felicity was disheveled and clearly annoyed. But the coloring, the build, the attitude, was identical.

“Felicity,” Paige began. “We need to ask you some question about Adam Langford.”

“We have nothing to say about that horrible boy,” Francine scowled. “If you had told me this was about that selfish, no-good...”

“It’s okay, mom,” Felicity swallowed hard and looked from Lovato to Paige then to her mother. “Can you give me a minute?” she finally asked. “Mom, can I talk to them alone.”

“No,” Francine’s chin raised an inch. “You know your father would never let you talk to the police without an adult present.”

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“Either you can leave now,” Felicity pushed. “Or, I’ll just sneak down to the station later and talk to them there.”

“Why?” Francine asked. “Why do you want me to leave? What could you possibly say that you don’t want me to hear?”

She sounded hurt, but Paige thought it was all an act. Her usual way of getting what she wanted from those around her.

“You and daddy hate Adam,” Felicity didn’t budge. “I can’t have a conversation with you in the room. You’ll interrupt, and the police will never get the information they need.”

“I promise, I won’t say a word,” Francine settled back into her chair. “Go ahead ask your questions.”

“Felicity,” Paige started again. “I have information that you were trying to contact Adam last night. Can you tell me why?”

Felicity glanced at her mother, straightened her shoulders and sighed. “I was at a party with a few friends.”

“Where?” Lovato asked.

“Some old barn out by the Bluffs,” Felicity waved that away with a hand. “Scratch was pissed all week and he wanted to let off a little steam. He promised us a good time and said he’d bring all the...” she glanced at her mother then back at the cops. “Well, he brought the entertainment.”

“He brought the booze and narcotics,” Paige corrected. “Do you know what he was mad about?”

“No,” Felicity shrugged. “Something about some guy back in Mexico. Who cares, I was there to have a good time. I didn’t want to hear about Scratch and his stupid problems.”

“Do you know Scratch’s real name?” Lovato asked, maybe it was one of the guys on his list of beer purchases.

“That is his name,” Felicity shrugged again. “Anyway, as soon as I got there, he started to go on and on about Adam. Langford this and that stupid jock that. It was getting boring. I finally told Scratch I was leaving, but he said I had to get Adam to come out first — to the party.”

“Why?” Paige asked.

“I have no idea,” Felicity rolled her eyes.

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“He didn’t say anything, didn’t give you a reason why he needed to talk to Adam?” Lovato leaned forward. “You do understand lying to the police is a crime.”

“You wait just a minute,” Francine jumped in.

“He said this guy in Mexico was on his back because business was slow,” Felicity admitted. “Scratch said it was Adam’s fault, and he wanted to talk to him. He just wanted to warn him, you know, scare him a little.”

“What did you do?” Paige asked.

“I laughed at first,” Felicity admitted. “I thought he was kidding. There was no way Adam would show at a party. Mr. Goody-to-shoes doesn’t know how to have a good time. It’s all about football and the stupid future. One day he’s going to look back and regret how he treated me, he’ll realize how much fun we could have had and he’ll wish he listened to me. He’ll wish he had a little more fun while he was young. That’s why old people have a midlife crisis, you know? They take life too serious, waste all their time on homework and never let loose and just have fun. Most people don’t let loose and enjoy the adventure while they can. Then wham! One day, they’re old and it’s too late. They have kids and jobs and all that stupid stuff to deal with. They try to fix it with a lame tattoo and hope it will make them feel cool again.”

“Right,” Paige wondered if Felicity would make it to her eighteenth birthday. Especially when her mother sat there quietly and didn’t say a word about this intellectual philosophy on life her daughter seemed to embrace so willingly. “So, you laughed at Scratch and he did what?”

“He grabbed my arm and yanked me outside,” Felicity pouted. “It hurt and I think I might have a bruise.” She lifted the sleeve of her shirt to inspect her bicep.

“Did he say anything else to you?” Lovato asked impatiently.

“Oh, yeah,” Felicity looked up. “He said I had to get Adam to the party or he would cut me off,” she glanced at her mother. “All of it. So, I sent Adam a text and said I was in trouble and I needed his help.”

“Did he respond?” Paige asked.

“No,” Felicity pouted again. “He ignored me completely. Can you believe that? He just ignored me. But Scratch said to try harder and so I kept texting all night. It was about three-thirty, I think, when Scratch warned me I was running out of time. That’s when I sent Adam another text begging him to help me. I told him I was in danger and I needed a ride home.”

“But there wasn’t any danger?” Lovato asked.

“Well,” Felicity glanced at her mom again. “I was in danger of losing my supply. That’s the worst kind of danger, right?”

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“Your supply of what dear?” Francine asked. “You know your father and I would buy you anything you need.”

Felicity gave her mother a condescending smile. “I know mom, but I don’t like to bother you. And, Scratch likes to help me out now and then. It’s a win, win for everyone.”

“Apparently not Adam Langford,” Paige grumbled. “What happened when Adam got there?”

“How did you know he finally showed up?” Felicity asked, amazed.

“Because Adam’s body was found in the barn this morning,” Lovato glared at the girl. “So, if you know anything about what happened to him now is the time to speak up.”

“Adam is dead?” Felicity’s eyes widened in shock.

“My daughter didn’t know,” Francine jumped in. “You can’t hold her responsible for something that happened without her knowledge.”

“What happened when Adam arrived?” Paige asked again.

“Um...” Felicity looked at her mother, bit her bottom lip and considered.

“He came into the barn,” Paige pressed.

“Yeah,” Felicity nodded. “He um, well he came in and saw I was just partying like normal and he started in with the same old sermon. It annoyed me. He was all high and mighty, lecturing me about using people and how I’m ruining my life and all that. I heard it all before and didn’t want him to kill my buzz, so I left.”

“You didn’t say anything to him?” Lovato didn’t believe her for one minute.

“Maybe I yelled at him a little,” Felicity admitted. “I mean, he really was ruining the whole party. I just wanted him gone but Scratch said he needed to talk to Adam alone. That’s when I left. Me and... it doesn’t matter who. We just got in our car and left.”

“So,” Paige said slowly. “You lured Adam Langford out to the middle of nowhere so your drug dealer could confront him about lost sales. You knew Adam would show up if you said you were in trouble, because Adam was a good guy that cared about people. But you just ditched him as soon as he arrived because he had the gall to try to help you clean up your life. Does that about cover it?”

“Well, when you say it that way,” Felicity pouted. “It makes me sound cruel or something.”

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“Or something,” Lovato mumbled. “How many people were still at the party when you left?”

“Just a couple,” Felicity admitted. “Most everyone had already left by then. Like I said, it was like... three or something, maybe closer to four when I told Adam I needed a ride. It had to be after four when he got there and most everyone already went home to crash.”

“Do you remember, specifically, who was still there when you left?” Paige pushed. “And, I need names.”

“Oh, but I don’t want to get anyone into trouble and stuff,” Felicity bit her lip again.

“Would you rather get yourself into trouble — and stuff?” Lovato asked.

Felicity glared at him, pouted, then relented. “I don’t think anyone from school was there. Maybe just Scratch and his crew.”

“The names of the people in his crew,” Lovato glared back at the girl.

“Um... Chevy? Yeah, Chevy was still there,” Felicity nodded.

“Does Chevy have a real name?” Paige asked.

“Just Chevy on account he drives a Chevy, you know.”

“Who else,” Lovato asked.

“Um, Peaches,” Felicity whispered. “His name is Peaches cause he can’t grow a mustache.”

“Anyone else?” Paige pushed.

“Um, maybe Dong,” Felicity closed her eyes. “Yeah, Dong on account...”

“We got that one,” Lovato shook his head. “Anyone else still there when you left? Maybe someone with an actual name?”

“Those are names,” Felicity looked at Mike confused.

“Anyone else that you can remember?” Paige asked.

“No,” Felicity closed her eyes again. “No, I think that was it. Everyone else had left by then. I just stayed because Scratch said he had some great...” she trailed off and glanced at her mother.

Paige stood. “We may need to talk to you again, Felicity. And, I’d tell you Adam was right, you are ruining your life, but I’m sure you wouldn’t listen — so, what’s the point?”

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“My daughter isn’t in any trouble, is she?” Francine stood and clasped her hands together.

“I don’t know yet,” Paige told her. “We’re still in the early stages of the investigation. But Felicity did lure Adam out to the barn and, as a result, the boy is dead. You might want to keep a tighter rein on your daughter from now on, Mrs. Broadhead.”

Once they were back in the vehicle, Mike turned to look at Paige. “I’d never believe it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. How can anyone be that freakin’ stupid and make it to adulthood?”

“The daughter is trouble, the mother is oblivious to reality,” Paige leaned her head back and closed her eyes. “And Felicity is stupid enough to do this Scratch guy’s bidding.”

“Well, he did threaten to cut her off,” Lo smiled as he pulled away. “There’s nothing more dangerous than losing your supply, right?”

Paige snorted. “That one will be dead or in prison before she hits thirty.”

“What do you want to do now?” Lo wondered.

“Let’s head out to Laurel Bluff and see if there’s anyone available that deals with the drug trade out there,” Paige decided. “There has to be a reason he chose that particular barn and the closest town is Laurel Bluffs.”

“I agree,” Mike made a left onto the highway and headed out of town. “Maybe we should call Havi. He might have some insight, or at least know who to tap for intel when we get there.”

“Good idea,” Paige pulled out her phone. When she was finished, she looked at Mike. “Take a detour and head back to the office. There’s no need to make the trip to the Bluffs, Havi is very familiar with Scratch and his entire crew. He said he’ll meet us in ten and provide all the dirt in person.”

“Back to the office it is.”

It was after dark when Paige finally made it home. She hadn’t exactly solved the case, but they were close. Scratch’s real name was Santiago Esposito. He was a known dealer with close ties to Eduardo Contreras and his drug organization down in Mexico. He’d been operating out of Laurel Bluffs for nearly a year now, but he was slippery. There were several warrants for his arrest, but nobody seemed to be able to catch the weasel. Every time they closed in on him, he vanished with his entire crew. Havi thought Contreras, or high-level members of the cartel,

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provided safe passage back to Mexico when it got too hot here in the states. Most of the warrants were drug-related, but there were two for violent assaults.

Paige thought Havilland might be right, but that didn't help put the men that killed Adam Langford behind bars. Benny came through for them. The preliminary autopsy showed defensive wounds and bruising on Adams arms and legs. They were consistent with her own conclusion, Adam had been restrained by more than one person. The lab results weren't back on the liquid in that cup yet, but Paige was sure it would be toxic. It was clear from the investigation they'd completed that day that Scratch decided Adam was interfering in his business — so, he took him out and tried to make it look like an overdose. It made Paige sad and furious that it was that simple. A good kid with a promising future was dead over a few bucks and a drug dealer's need to act tough in front of his friends.

She was able to give Gage what he asked for, but she wasn't sure it made the end result any better. At least she proved the kid didn't head out to a drunken fun fest and accidentally overdose. The world would know that Adam Langford was murdered by a sadistic criminal that was just out to make a buck. Warrants had been issued and, once again, Scratch had disappeared into the wind. Paige was a little surprised when she heard Tolman had charged Felicity as a co-conspirator. The esteemed Mr. Broadhead would use his influence to get her off, no doubt. But he would also be embarrassed in the process. Paige wondered how he would handle it, but she didn't really care that much. The Broadhead family mess was completely out of her control — thank goodness.

With a sigh, she glanced at the front door then dropped into a lounge chair. She couldn't face the happy people inside. Not yet. Today was not the kind of day you shared with the people you loved. Paige absently wondered if this was how it started. She'd heard stories from other cops who said their marriages started to crumble because they left the job at the door and couldn't share the day-to-day events with their spouse. She'd always shared the details of her investigations with Dax, sometimes when she shouldn't. Would marriage change that? Would they become distant? Would she feel like she had to shield him from the ugliness of the job? Or, would he get tired of hearing about it? With a long sigh, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Paige heard the screen door open and instantly knew Dax had joined her on the front porch. She didn't open her eyes, couldn't open them yet. She hadn't decided how much she should tell him tonight. Laughter and joy had echoed out from the kitchen since the moment she arrived home. Something inside her didn't want to ruin that for him.

“Rough day?” Dax asked settling in beside her and taking her hand in his.

“Sad and frustrating day,” Paige opened her eyes. “You don't want to hear it. I don't want to ruin all of that...” she pointed to the door. “So, I thought I'd just sit out here for a little while.”

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“Paige,” Dax drew circles on the top of her hand with his thumb. “Tell me. That’s our thing. I don’t want it to change just because we have company or because we’re getting married. You can always share your day with me, good or bad. I’ll understand, I promise. And, it usually helps to unload.”

“One of Gage’s boys died,” Paige stood and moved to stand against the railing. “He was only seventeen and he was trying to do the right thing. It got him killed by a drug dealer out of Mexico. It’s just sad and infuriating and the guy, the villain in all of this who goes by the ridiculous name, Scratch — he’s vanished. Havi said that’s what he does. He gets into trouble and poof — gone like the wind. Apparently, he gets help from his boss, some Contreras guy that everyone seems to be afraid of. Eduardo Contreras runs a group of monsters that are giving the cartel a run for their money down south. He’s rumored to be ruthless and batshit crazy. Probably why he has guys like Scratch working for him in the states. Anyway, Adam Langford tried to help an old girlfriend in need and he got dead for it. This Scratch guy believed that Adam was interfering with his dealing. He might have been right, on a really small scale. There were a couple guys on the team — football — that considered trying something or other. Adam talked them out of it. Scratch heard about the lost deal and now Adam’s life is over. It’s such a waste and Gage is crushed. Adam was one of his boys. I solved the crime but what difference did it make? I didn’t even know how to help Gage deal with his grief.”

“So, you came home and sat on the front porch alone, brooding.”

“I’m not exactly brooding,” Paige said in defense. “I’m readjusting.”

Dax moved in behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Sometimes the job is harder than it should be. It’s hard because the answers don’t give you the closure you were looking for. You investigated that boy’s death hoping when you solved the mystery, you would understand why he ended up dead. Unfortunately, the why of it just made things seem more... unjust. And for you, a woman who lives her life seeking justice, it’s a difficult pill to swallow.”

“It’s not any easier for you,” Paige settled back against him. “You spent an entire lifetime seeking justice. Which is why I didn’t know if I should talk to you about this.”

“Of course, you should,” Dax pressed a kiss to her temple. “I’m familiar with Contreras and his men. Zee has experienced their kind of vengeance up close and personal. Be careful. He’s dangerous and the rumors are true, the man’s as crazy as a stomped ant.”

“That’s who had Zeus? When you went down and rescued him from that prison in Mexico? It was Contreras that did that?” Paige asked.

“It was,” Dax turned her to face him. “I have contacts in Mexico. Do you want me to find out if this Scratch guy is down there? The authorities won’t be able to pick him up, they’re almost useless when it comes to dealing with the cartel. But at least you’ll know where he is.”

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“Can you do it safely?” Paige wondered. “I don’t want a target on your back over this. But, if you can do it secretly, I think I would like to know. His real name is Santiago Esposito.”

“Consider it done,” Dax leaned in and gave her a proper kiss this time. “Welcome home.”

“Sorry I didn’t come in right away,” Paige rested her head against his chest.

“All I ask is that you don’t shut me out,” Dax said softly. “This, talking through your day, sharing the details of an investigation, it’s sort of our thing. I don’t want to lose that. We’re both busy. Me with the training center, you with your job, and then there’s the wedding chaos, but we still need to take time for us. That’s what the joviality and the laughter in there is all about. Once our big day is over, we can get back to normal again. When we do, I hope you remember you can talk to me about anything. I plan to share my frustrations and triumphs with you. I’m hoping for the same in return.”

Paige straightened and looked Dax in the eye. “Okay, it’s a deal. No secrets.” She froze when she saw the flicker, just for a second, before he masked it. Dax was keeping a secret from her and he had no intention of sharing. Her mind was racing, but she allowed the kiss. She knew it was his way of shielding the truth and she wondered what he was hiding. So much for sharing frustrations and triumphs. The man was a fraud. The two of them walked into her small home together. Paige greeted her guests, but her mind was still reeling. She had always trusted Dax, was planning on marrying the man, but that little flicker had changed everything. Could she trust him? Was she making a mistake? Would her family and friends understand if she called the wedding off this close to the big day? Was she overreacting? Did Nathan know the secret? Had the good General pulled her fiancé into another dangerous mission without telling her? She had to stop this, or she was going to go crazy. She forced a smile on her face and settled into a chair to visit with her guests. Tonight, she’d just pretend everything was fine. Once she retired for the evening, she could think about her future — or her lack of one.

Dax watched in frustration as Paige pulled his mother’s luggage from the back of the car and headed for the house. Anyone else would say she was just being helpful. He knew better. He knew Paige, her moods, her demeanor, her reactions. Something was off today. She was avoiding him, putting his parents between them, using his family as a buffer so she didn’t have to talk to him. But, why? He couldn’t think of a single thing he had done to upset her. And, with his mother jabbering on, he wasn’t going to find out any time soon.

“Hawk and Vato are staying with Zee,” Dax set the luggage inside his old living room. “So, the two of you will have the house to yourself. Make yourself at home. We’ll meet at six and head into town for dinner.”

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“It’s so good to see you, son,” his mother leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek. “But you should have told us you were marrying a cop. I wasn’t prepared for such a shock.”

Dax shot a glare at his father who just shook it off and lowered his head in regret. So, his father had failed him — again. The man promised to break the news to his mother before they flew out to visit. Now Dax would have to deal with the passive-aggressive crap from his mom. He just hoped she didn’t take her annoyance out on Paige. Something was already wrong. He didn’t want his mother to make it all worse. He had to get Paige alone somehow and force her to tell him what was bothering her. But how? Every time he turned around, she was heading off with Carmen or Sophie to check on the shoes or the dresses or the flowers. He was afraid he might not get a second alone with his bride until after the wedding was over.

“Dax,” his mother called out. “Your home is lovely. Can you explain again why you’re moving next door to a house that needs so much repair when you have this lovely home available immediately?”

Dax sighed and settled onto a chair, prepared for an afternoon of frustration and meddling. Maybe he should have waited and flown his parents in the day before the wedding. He was beginning to think less time with them might have been better.

“Paige,” Sophie stepped into the kitchen. “I know it’s early, but the dress shop just called. We need to head in right away for your final fitting. The wedding is only two days away and the seamstress wants to make sure she got the alterations correct this time.”

“Can I join you?” Olivia Hamilton asked sweetly.

“Um...” Paige wondered what Dax’s mother was up to. She was being way too friendly, more so than she’d been since she arrived ten days ago. “I guess, if Sophie doesn’t mind.”

“It’s fine, dear,” Sophie studied Dax’s mother. It was clear the woman had an ulterior motive, she just couldn’t figure out what it was. “But we need to leave immediately. If the dress needs further alterations, the seamstress only has today to complete them.”

“I’m ready,” Paige stood.

Olivia carried the empty mugs to the sink before joining them in the doorway. “Do you think I’ll need my purse? I left it over at my son’s home. Dax has such a lovely home, doesn’t he?”

“Dax is a talented man. Don’t worry about your purse. You shouldn’t need it,” Sophie assured her.

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The dress shop was bright and cheery with hundreds of wedding dresses laid out on racks with the best ones displayed on individual hooks that covered the cream-colored walls.

“Oh,” Olivia said immediately. “What a quaint little store.”

Paige eyed her suspiciously but didn’t say a word.

“I can’t wait to see what you picked out,” Olivia said absently as she moved from rack to rack sliding the sleek material between her outstretched fingers.

A middle-aged woman approached the group with a garment bag over her shoulder. “I think it’s perfect but go on into the dressing room and try it on just to be sure.”

Paige gripped the bag like a lifeline and rushed out of the room. She wasn’t sure how to take the change in Dax’s mother. Her thoughts turned to Dax and that same feeling of unease swamped her. She still didn’t know how to feel about the secret. Should she confront him, demand to know what he was hiding? Should she just let it go? Should she take it as a sign that this was all wrong and put a stop to the wedding before it progressed any further? That last one felt wrong, but if he couldn’t be honest with her, did they even have a chance? She was so deep in thought, she actually jumped at the loud pounding on the dressing room door.

“Come on, Paige,” Carmen’s voice filled the stall. “I know you’re in there, let me in. I want to help.”

Paige unlocked the door and slid it open just enough for Carmen to slip inside. “What’s with Mrs. Hamilton? I didn’t know she was coming today.”

“I didn’t either, but I couldn’t say no when she asked. It would have been rude,” Paige slid the dress up her body then turned, a silent signal she wanted Carmen to zip up the back.

“It’s perfect,” Carmen grinned. “Come out and see how amazing you look in the big mirror.”

They had just stepped through the door when Sophie and Olivia joined them. “You look absolutely beautiful,” Sophie brushed a tear from her cheek. “I am so happy for the two of you. Dax is going to adore you in this,” she added with a watery smile. “Don’t you agree?” Sophie turned to address Olivia.

“Oh,” she looked away. “It’s fine. A little simple for my taste, but if that’s what you like I suppose it will do.”

Carmen opened her mouth to respond but Paige stomped on her foot. “Does that mean you don’t like it?” Paige asked, wondering what had prompted her to say anything. She didn’t care if the woman hated the dress, so why was she pretending she did?

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“Well,” Olivia said slowly. “I just think my son would prefer something more feminine. But if you like it, I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Have you met your son?” Carmen asked, annoyed. Paige elbowed her in the ribs.

Thirty minutes later the group was pulling into the driveway of Paige’s residence. Carmen jumped from the backseat and darted onto the front porch. She shoved Dax, who had been impatiently waiting for the women to return, back into his chair. “No you don’t,” she warned. “The groom cannot see the wedding dress before the big day.”

“I don’t need to see the dress,” Dax shifted in a failed attempt to stand again. “I need to talk to Paige.”

Paige slid past Dax and rushed up to their room, slipping the garment bag into the closet before dropping, emotionally exhausted onto the bed.

Carmen leaned against the door jamb and waited. When Paige didn’t look up, she confronted her friend. “First of all, I’m going to tell you straight out, if there was a two-by-four inside the vehicle, I would have given Dax’s mother a few good whacks to the head. That woman is... I don’t even know what to call her.”

“I know,” Paige sat up. “But she’s only here a couple more days. I can tolerate her subtle jabs a little longer.”

“If you call that subtle,” Carmen stepped inside and dropped onto the bed next to Paige. “Never mind. Go talk to Dax. I don’t know why you’re avoiding him, why you’re shutting him out this way, but I can see how much it’s hurting him and if nothing else, he deserves to know why.”

“I’m not...”

“You are, and you know it,” Carmen interrupted. “If you won’t talk to me, go talk to him.”

Paige climbed from the bed and went to stand in front of the window. She should talk to Dax, but what was she supposed to say? Spill the secret you don’t want me to know. What if it was something stupid, just a small, innocent thing he couldn’t reveal? She’d feel like an idiot if she made a big deal over nothing. Well, she wouldn’t know if she didn’t ask. “I’ll be on the front porch.”

The instant Paige stepped outside, she spotted the truck. She didn’t recognize the sleek black vehicle and she couldn’t see the driver well enough to identify him. Not until he shut off the engine and jumped out of the driver’s side door. “Wyatt?” Paige called out in surprise. “I thought you said you had to work. Please tell me you didn’t do something stupid just to attend the wedding.”

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“I couldn’t miss my favorite cousin’s big day,” Wyatt moved forward and lifted Paige into a big bear hug. “It’s good to see you, Paige. I have so much to tell you. The job, it’s amazing and the crew, I couldn’t ask for a better group of guys to work with. I owe you big time for the reference.”

“Put me down already,” Paige grumbled. The instant her feet hit the ground, she pulled him toward the front porch and dropped into a comfortable chair.

“Hey, Dax,” Wyatt said in greeting before settling into the chair next to Paige.

“Wyatt,” Dax nearly sighed. He almost had his chance to speak with Paige, but once again they were interrupted by company. “Glad you could make it.”

“How did you make it?” Paige demanded. “You said something about a big race. I hope you didn’t jeopardize your job just to attend the wedding.”

“The race was canceled,” Wyatt told her. “Well, most likely it will be rescheduled later in the year, but there was a problem with the track. When I heard the race was off, I explained how important it was to me to attend your wedding and the boss approved a few days off. I’ll have to bolt as soon as the ceremony is over, we have another race on Sunday but when I realized I could squeeze this in, I didn’t hesitate.”

“I’m glad,” Paige said sincerely. “Now, tell me about the job.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Dax stood. “I’m going to head out. I have a few things I need to handle over at the training center. I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

Paige watched him go and wondered if Carmen was right. Was she hurting him? Or, was he using the training center as an excuse to escape? She wasn’t going to worry about it. Right now, she wanted to hear all about Wyatt’s new job. He looked so happy, much better than the last time he came to town. Back then, he’d been working for criminals, though. Back then, he’d been under the thumb of his no-good father which had nearly landed him in federal prison. She was glad he escaped and was hopeful the move would last this time.

Dax silently slid from the bed and made his way through the darkness to the closet. He grabbed a t-shirt and jeans, pulled them on then fumbled around for his shoes. He hadn’t slept a wink last night. The strain between him and Paige was just too big to ignore. The answer hit him at around three this morning. Now, he just had to figure out how to deal with the fallout. When he stepped back into the bedroom, he realized the small lamp next to the bed was now on, illuminating the entire room with its soft glow. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

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“Are you leaving?” Paige focused on Dax’s face and frowned. For the first time in nearly two weeks she saw him, really saw him, and she realized Carmen was right. She was hurting him. She hadn’t meant to, but the sadness and the pain radiating in his eyes nearly broke her. She hesitated, shocked that she’d missed it, unsure how to fix it.

“I’m going for a drive, I need some time to myself,” he mumbled as he walked quickly from the room.

Paige jumped from the bed and ran to the window just in time to see his taillights disappear into the darkness. She rushed to the closet and pulled on one of Dax’s shirts and the first pants that hit her fingers, slid into a pair of shoes and darted toward her vehicle. Moments later, she was pulling into Carmen’s driveway. The area was dark, the sun hadn’t even come up yet. Zeus and Carmen were probably still asleep. Well, this was the price they were going to pay for friendship. She jumped from her vehicle and dashed up the stairs. She was pounding so hard on the front door that, by the time Carmen opened it, her hands were aching and raw.

“What?” Carmen demanded.

“I need to talk to Zeus,” Paige rushed past her friend and darted into the master bedroom. She paused for a second beside the groggy lump then shook him as hard as she could.

“Paige,” Zeus threw off the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed. “This better be important.”

“I need you to find Dax,” Paige moved to stare out of the window. Partially for her but also to give Zeus a little privacy as he pulled on a pair of sweats.

“Is he missing?” Zeus frowned. “Not that I’d blame him. He’s been hurting for weeks and you haven’t seemed to care.”

“I know I deserve that and more,” Paige turned to face him. “I know this is my fault, but he said he was going for a drive. He said he needed time to be alone. What if he doesn’t come back?”

“He will,” Zeus gave her shoulder a little pat. “Do you seriously think he’d abandon you? That he’s cruel enough to disappear and make you deal with his mother alone?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Paige dropped onto the bed. “I might have to deal with Dax’s mother.”

“Just sit tight,” Zeus winked at her. “I think I might know where he went.”

Once Zeus was gone, Carmen settled onto the bed next to Paige. “Coffee’s on. Do you want to move this to the back patio? We might as well enjoy the sunrise since we’re up.”

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“Sorry,” Paige tried to smile but didn’t quite pull it off. “I think I might have messed up this time. I think... what if I broke it beyond repair?”

“Fix your coffee, then tell me what caused this,” Carmen soothed. “Then, we’ll figure out a way to fix it.”

Paige doctored her coffee and joined Carmen on the back porch. She didn’t sit, she was too worried and upset to calmly talk this out. “It started almost two weeks ago,” Paige began to pace. “When I got home from my last day at work. I’d worked a homicide all day and I was emotionally drained from all of it, I guess. The situation was sad and depressing and you guys were all inside laughing and joking. I just couldn’t handle it, so I procrastinated. I settled into a chair on the front porch and tried to leave the job at the door.”

“I remember,” Carmen took a sip of her coffee. “Dax gave you a few minutes then he joined you. The two of you seemed fine when you finally came inside.”

“I wasn’t,” Paige admitted. “We talked about work but then Dax said something about us always sharing our lives with each other. It was a good moment,” Paige admitted.

“So, what happened?” Carmen pushed.

“I agreed with him and said something about no secrets,” Paige turned to face her friend. “That’s when I saw it. Just a flicker, it only took a second, less than a second really but it was there and it sucker punched me. Dax has a secret. One, I realized that night, he doesn’t plan to share with me. I saw it, the sadness, the deception, the guilt. He tried to mask it with another kiss, but I know what I saw.”

Carmen shrugged. “So?”

Paige narrowed her eyes at her friend and forced back the emotions. “So, he’s a fraud. He’s lying to me. He’s hiding something.”

“You hide things from him, too.”

“Not the important things,” Paige dismissed the claim immediately.

“Oh,” Carmen took another sip of her coffee. “So, you told Dax that you and Gage dated in high school?”

“Of course not,” Paige frowned. “That would only hurt him and it only lasted a minute, less than a minute. Gage and I had a few dates and realized we were better suited as friends. End of story.”

“Then why haven’t you told Dax?”

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“Because there’s nothing to tell,” Paige insisted. “Plus, Clayton’s my partner now. Sometimes we need to work late on a case. I don’t want Dax to worry. There’s no point in telling him, in forcing him to deal with everything that would come with the knowledge. So what, about a million years ago, Gage and I had a disastrous kiss before we decided we should just be friends.”

“So,” Carmen settled back. “You have a secret, one you don’t plan to share with Dax. I guess you’re a fraud. Call the press.”

“You’re not helping,” Paige dropped down next to her friend. “That’s different.”

“Why?” Carmen wondered. “Because it’s your secret? You and I, we fell in love with complicated men. They are former Rangers, tough, strong and loyal men. But, they come with baggage. They’ve both been on top-secret missions that were dangerous, controversial and classified. They have secrets they will never be able to share, not even with the women they love.”

“But all of that is in the past,” Paige insisted. “This is a secret he’s keeping now.”

Carmen shrugged. “I still don’t see the problem. The man loves you, a blind man could see how much that man loves you. He demonstrates it every day in so many ways. I think you miss half of them, maybe on purpose, maybe because you’ve gotten so used to the little things, you take them for granted. Dax is not a fraud. He’s honorable and trustworthy and if he has a secret, there could only be two reasons why. One, because he’s working on something for Nathan. And, you said you could live with that. He asked before he accepted the job. You assured him you were used to the national secrets and they didn’t bother you.”

“Is he?” Paige asked directly. “Is he working on something for Porter?”

“I have no idea,” Carmen said truthfully. “I get the impression General Porter confides in Dax more than anyone else. I also get the impression that Nathan shares intel on other missions, stuff being worked by other operatives just to get Dax’s take. The man knows his stuff and he can spot pitfalls and potential issues better than anyone I’ve ever worked with. I suspect he frequently works on things for Nathan. Things he never shares with the rest of us.”

“You said two reasons,” Paige pressed.

“The only other reason Dax would keep something a secret from you, is to protect you,” Carmen said flatly. “And, I know you don’t think you need to be protected from anything or anyone, but if you love Dax, you have to love everything about him. He loves you and it’s his nature to try to protect you. There’s not a malicious bone in that man’s body. Whatever he’s hiding, he’s doing it for noble reasons. I have no doubt about that.”

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“How can you be so sure?” Paige wondered. “From the minute I saw it, I hopped onto the express train to crazy town and I couldn’t get off. Not until this morning when I saw the pain in his eyes. He’s hurting, and it’s my fault.”

“How could you not be headed for crazy town, Paige?” Carmen asked. “Especially since that woman that calls herself Dax’s mother arrived. For the past several months you and Dax have not had one minute to yourselves. I love Sophie and Nathan dearly, but having them living in your house while they plan your wedding would make anyone take a dive into the batshit cave. Then, add in Dax’s parents and now your cousin? Mother Teresa would be searching the deepest, darkest sections of the basement for her sanity.”

“So,” Paige sighed. “What do I do?”

“You wait for Zeus to find Dax,” Carmen shrugged. “Then you fix it.”

“Wow,” Paige rolled her eyes. “You’re so insightful. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Good question.”

Zeus pulled in behind Dax’s truck and watched his friend for several minutes. Finally, he pushed open the door and moved in beside him.

“I wanted to be alone,” Dax continued to stare into the wilderness. Bright rays of light were beginning to crest over the horizon turning the sky a deep shade of orange.

“Keep this up,” Zeus put a hand on his friend shoulder, “and you might just get your wish.”

“Meaning?”

“You have that woman of yours terrified,” Zeus scolded. “She rushed over to my house, dragged me out of bed and made me promise her I would find you. She made me promise I wouldn’t let you leave her alone to deal with your mother.”

That did make Dax smile. “I doubt Paige is terrified. She seems to be handling mom better than I am.”

“Only because she’s a cop and she has a lot of practice dealing with the unreasonable,” Zeus smiled. “I have always adored your mother, but that passive aggressive crap she pulls makes me want to smack her.”

“Get in line,” Dax sighed. “I’m not leaving, and Paige doesn’t have to deal with mom.”

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“She’ll be happy to hear that,” Zeus told him. “After the whole gay thing, I think it might be a good idea to keep those two separated for a while.”

“What gay thing?” Dax wondered.

“Man, the two of you seriously need to talk more,” Zeus shook his head.

“I agree,” Dax did look at his friend now. “That’s the problem. One I plan to fix as soon as I see her. Now, explain the gay thing.”

“Your mom was doing that thing she does where she pretends to be asking innocent questions, but really she’s just being nasty. She started asking Paige questions about being a cop. Then, she implied it was a man’s job and told Paige you like your women feminine. She said if Paige wanted this marriage to work, she should seriously think about switching careers. Or better yet, just stay home and take care of you like she did with your dad. She went on to suggested that Paige might be comfortable as a cop because it’s a man’s world with high levels of masculinity and testosterone. Further implying that Paige has more than her share of both for a woman.”

“What?” Dax fumed. “She’s finally crossed the line and this time her petty excuses and false innocence won’t save her.”

“Then she asked Paige if she was absolutely positive she’s not gay,” Zeus continued. “Your mom suggested that, for the good of all parties involved, Paige might want to postpone the wedding until she comes to grips with her own sexuality. After all, it would be extremely unfair to a man like yourself to get married, only to realize a few years down the road that his wife actually prefers women — which would explain Paige’s career choice, of course.”

“When did this happen?” Dax fumed.

“When they went to get the dress,” Zeus admitted. “Carmen was already beyond livid with your mother. She said Olivia criticized Paige’s wedding dress and said it was fine, but not really something you would like your bride to wear. Olivia advised the group that her son would like something with frills and lace; a dress that’s feminine and girly. Not the simple gown Paige picked for the occasion. But if Paige liked the dress, your mom thought it would be okay to keep it.”

“I know she’s my mother,” Dax ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “But, sometimes I wonder why I spend so much time and energy trying to please her. I’m the disappointment. She wanted a doctor, or a lawyer, and I became a soldier. She can’t accept the person I am, so she’s taking it out on Paige and for some reason that I can’t begin to understand — Paige is taking it. This has to stop.”

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“So, go stop it,” Zeus suggested. “But you need to start with a meaningful conversation with Paige.”

“She doesn’t want to marry me,” Dax admitted and realized somehow it hurt more when he said it out loud. “I should have realized that months ago. I should have known after I proposed.”

“I think you’re wrong about that,” Zeus disagreed. “I think it’s something else, something the two of you need to discuss, to air out and deal with it in the open. She loves you, even I can see that and I’m shallow.”

“You’re not shallow,” Dax disagreed. “You just want everyone to think you are. Paige might love me, but she doesn’t want to marry me. I have to accept that. It’s more important for her to be happy than it is for her to be my wife.”

“Let’s go home so Paige can prove you wrong,” Zeus suggested. “She’s waiting for me to bring you back so the two of you can have that meaningful talk.”

Dax nodded and headed for his truck.

Paige was out the door and sliding into the passenger seat of Dax’s truck before he came to a complete stop. She slammed the door shut and turned to address the man she loved. “I’m sorry.”

“We need to talk,” Dax said at the same time.

“Let’s go to the training center,” Paige suggested. “I haven’t had time to stop by for awhile. I’d like to see the progress.” And, it was only a short drive, but it would be private.

Dax pulled up the drive and parked in front of the large building. He shut off the truck but remained frozen behind the wheel. Paige jumped out and rushed around the front of the vehicle. When she reached the driver’s side door, she flung it open and grabbed Dax’s hand.

Dax studied her with confusion but complied. If she wanted to talk inside, that would be better. They’d have more privacy that way.

“I heard you telling the guys the offices were finished,” Paige waited for Dax to unlock the front door. “Will you show me yours?” she was grinning inside. She’d just take Dax to his office and show him everything was fine, she was no longer a crazy lunatic. She had a plan now, and she hoped it would work. It had to work. They were getting married in less than twenty-four hours. This cloud that had been hanging over her needed to be gone before then.

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“Sure,” Dax cringed inside. He didn’t want to call off the wedding in his office, the place he’d be spending countless hours trying to concentrate on business. “It’s this way,” he motioned toward a hallway that was nearly finished.

“It looks like it’s ahead of schedule,” Paige observed.

“It is,” Dax agreed as he maneuvered her into his corner office. The room was framed in completely and the sheetrock was up, but a thin layer of powder still covered the entire concrete floor. “Look, I know you’ve been miserable, and I finally figured out why.”

“Oh?” that took Paige by surprise.

“I’m sorry I pressured you,” Dax tried to readjust his thoughts and move forward.

Paige frowned and realized he didn’t know why she’d been so crazy. Didn’t matter. She was here to seduce the man she loved and there was no time better than the present to do it. She took him by surprise, tried to pivot and trap him against the wall, but she lost her footing and they both tumbled to the ground. Paige smiled, even better. She landed on top of Dax, then shifted and pinned him beneath her. He was looking a little dazed and a lot confused. She’d remedy that soon enough.

“I thought we were going to talk,” Dax said once he caught his breath again. “You are completely covered in white powdery dust.”

“So are you,” Paige grinned. “And I think we just had a pretty intimate conversation.”

“Paige,” Dax began. “I know I pressured you into getting married. You said no when I asked, and I should have respected that. I’m going to respect it now. When we get back to the house, I’ll break the news to Sophie and Nathan. I created this mess, I’ll clean it up.”

Paige sat up in surprise. “You don’t want to marry me anymore?”

“Oh, baby,” Dax closed his eyes. “I want to marry you more than I want to take my next breath. But, not when I know you don’t want to marry me.”

“What if I do want to?” Paige asked hesitantly.

“We did this at the hospital,” Dax shook his head. “I asked, you panicked, and I got mad. I forced you to reconsider, and it isn’t what you want. I love you too much to go through with this. Sometimes I wonder if you truly know how much I love you. I need you to be happy and this wedding isn’t making you happy.”

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“I admit I haven’t been myself lately,” Paige began. She had to fix this. “I’ve been a little crazy and extremely selfish. I’ve hurt you and I didn’t mean to do that. But, sometimes I think you don’t understand how much I truly love you.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Dax admitted. “I don’t know what’s right anymore. I just know you haven’t been happy. You’ve been upset and you shut me out. I don’t know why, I just know I can’t live like this.”

“I’m sorry,” Paige said again. “Dax, do you trust me?”

“Of course,” Dax answered immediately.

“Then will you try to trust me when I say I do want to marry you?” she asked. “Will you have faith in us, in what we have and believe me when I say you are the perfect man for me?”

“But…”

“No buts,” Paige interrupted. “I’m asking you to believe in us if you can’t believe me. I broke this, I know that. I’m trying to fix it. I know I’m not the woman your mother wanted for you, but I think I’m the right woman for you.”

“You’re perfect for me,” Dax scowled. “And I’m going to have a little chat with that mother of mine the first chance I get. I’m sorry, Zeus just told me about the whole gay cop thing. I’m sorry.”

Paige laughed. “It was actually sort of funny, once I took a step back from being insulted,” she grinned. “And I think I just proved how into men I really am.”

“Right,” Dax sighed. “Maybe I’ll start the conversation with a recap of this morning’s events.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not a conversation you want to have with your mother,” Paige shuddered then sobered. “Dax, I’ll call off the wedding if you don’t really want to marry me. But, if you’re taking that step because you believe it’s what I want, we are so getting married tomorrow. Because I want to be your wife. I trust you enough to believe in us. Can you do the same?”

“On one condition,” Dax decided.

“What’s the condition?” Paige asked, worried.

“You tell me why,” Dax brushed her hair away from her face. “What happened that made you step back? What made you stop believing in us?”

Paige studied him for a long time before she answered. “You’re keeping secrets.”

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“What?” Dax tried to think back, to figure out what she was talking about.

“That night on the porch,” Paige admitted. “You said we would always share the good and the bad. I said something about no secrets and I saw in your eyes that you have one. There’s something you can’t or won’t share with me. It rattled me. I’m not proud of the way I handled it and I’m better now. But I started thinking all these crazy thoughts. Was there another woman in your life? Maybe your mom was right, and you really wanted someone more girly with a safe, frilly job. Was it something bigger? A few logical thoughts broke through, like maybe it had something to do with Nathan and the consulting gig. I let it consume me until I lost sight of who I am and what we are together.”

“All of this was because of that stupid secret?” Dax pulled her onto his lap. “Let’s get it out of the way then. I didn’t want to keep it from you, anyway. I’ll explain everything, and you can tell me how you want me to handle it. I’ll do whatever you want me to do. No arguments, no complaints.”

“You’ll just lay down and beg like a little puppy?” Paige frowned.

“That’s not what I meant,” Dax shook his head. He knew that freakin’ money was going to come between them. It was the reason he decided to bail in the first place. He let the guys talk him out of it before, but he was going to resolve this today. He’d just tell Paige everything and she could decide where they went from here. He’d support her no matter what she decided.

“In a way, I suppose you gave me the answer I needed,” Paige began. “But, I don’t want to know the secret anymore. It’s enough that you were willing to share it with me. I can see there’s a legitimate reason you haven’t done so already. I also know you and eventually, you’re going to tell me whether you should or not. What I won’t accept is the rest. This is a partnership. You won’t tell me something and then silently sit back and do whatever I demand. It’s not who we are, Dax. I never want it to be that way with us.”

“Then I’ll tell you the entire story and we’ll decide how to move forward,” Dax suggested.

“Is it about work or pleasure?” Paige asked.

“Work,” Dax hesitated.

“Then we’re not going to talk about,” Paige insisted. “We already agreed both of us would put work aside and only discuss the wedding and our future. I have to insist we stick to the original agreement. Today is going to be a busy day. You need to confront your mother, then we need to prepare for the rehearsal and the dinner, then we need to get ready for tonight’s events and don’t even get me started on the chaos of tomorrow morning. I simply don’t have time to discuss your work right now,” Paige stood. “We better head home. We have a lot to do.”

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Dax didn't move. She was brushing the secret aside, after nearly two weeks of making him suffer for keeping it, now she didn't want to know. She refused to listen to his explanation. Maybe this wedding was making her crazy. With a sigh, he stood and made his way to the truck. He wasn't sure he would ever understand women. They truly were a dangerous and perplexing species. He walked to the passenger side and pulled open the door. Paige shifted and pulled him in for a long, deep, passionate kiss.

"Yeah," she grinned as she slid onto the seat. "We're good now."

"Right," Dax shook his head and wondered what had just happened as he climbed behind the wheel and headed for home.

Paige knew something was wrong the instant she saw Wyatt's face. She jumped from her car and rushed to the front porch to find out what had happened. She barely registered Dax moving in behind her. "Wyatt?"

"Hey, Paige," Wyatt glanced up, then away.

"What's wrong?" Dax asked.

"Um," Wyatt looked from Dax to Paige and sighed. "Dad is what's wrong. He showed up. I swear I didn't tell him anything. He just showed up and informed me he's going to the wedding."

"And?" Paige pushed.

"And," Wyatt swallowed. "He said he's going to cause trouble for you if I don't quit my job and work for his friend Nigel."

"Then," Paige shrugged. "He can just do his best to cause trouble for me. You are not going to ruin your life, Wyatt. Promise me you won't listen to him. That's what I want as a wedding gift, your promise that you won't give in to Boyd Darrow or his strong-armed tactics."

"Paige, when dad says he'll cause trouble, he means it."

"I'm a cop, Wyatt," Paige grinned. "I live for trouble."

"Dax," Wyatt turned pleading eyes his way. "Tell her not to fight this. I have to do what dad says. It's not worth the damage he could do to Paige or you if I resist."

Dax smiled and wrapped his arms around Paige. "I'm a former Ranger, I also live for trouble. Tell your dad to bring it on. There's nothing he could do that would cause any real

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trouble for either one of us. Stand your ground, Wyatt. At some point, we all have to stand up to our parents and set new ground rules.” He pressed a gentle kiss to Paige’s temple. “I think I’m going to go inside and do just that myself.”

“What did he mean by that?” Wyatt asked once the door slammed shut.

“His mother is trying to rule his life,” Paige shrugged. “Dax has decided to shift the balance and let her know he’s going to live his life the way he chooses, not the way she would choose.”

“Oh,” Wyatt studied the closed door. “Dad will lie, he’ll spread false rumors and damage your reputation if I don’t do what he wants.”

“Wyatt,” Paige settled into the chair next to him. “Your dad can’t ruin my reputation, not around here. Mom was very well liked by the people of Manti. And, I think I’ve proven myself since I arrived. I’m not worried about your dad. You shouldn’t worry either. I’m serious, that’s all I want as a gift. I want your promise that you will return to that great job you told me so much about and you’ll let yourself be happy. The rest will work itself out.”

“Are you sure?” Wyatt asked, skeptically.

“I’m one hundred percent positive,” Paige grinned. “Now let’s go see how Olivia Hamilton handles the news that, in spite of her best efforts, Dax really is going to marry this testosterone filled, danger seeking, ordinary woman.”

“There’s nothing ordinary about you, Paige,” Wyatt grinned. “And that’s a good thing. Don’t let your mother-in-law or anyone else tell you differently.”

The instant Paige stepped into the room, Dax moved toward her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Paige is ready for her apology, mom.”

“I don’t...” Paige started.

“Hush woman,” Dax leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. “I’ve been waiting for this my entire life. Don’t spoil it.”

“I’m sorry,” Olivia said reluctantly. “If Dax wants to marry you, if he thinks he loves you, and he’s willing to spend the rest of his life with you, I’m willing to support him.”

“Mother,” Dax grumbled. “Is that seriously the best you can do?”

“It’s okay,” Paige winked up at Dax. “If your mother still wants to attend our wedding, and she thinks she still loves you, even though you’re not a boring accountant or a dentist and you’re marrying a cop, I’m willing to accept her. And, I’ll try not to tell my friend’s too many mother-

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in-law stories.” Out of the corner of her eye, Paige saw Dax’s father wink at her and for the first time since the couple arrived, she thought she might come to like the man one day.

Dax broke the silence with his laughter and the tension immediately left the room.

The night was nearly over. Paige surveyed the room again grateful everyone she loved was here with them tonight. Dax was huddled in the corner with Nathan and Zeus. Sophie just excused herself to head to the ladies room and Carmen was approaching with another glass of champagne.

“Just a few more hours,” Carmen said, passing a flute to Paige. “And you’ll be Mrs. Dax Hamilton. Have you decided if you’ll change your name at work? Will you still be the infamous Deputy Paige Carter, or will it now be Deputy Hamilton?”

“I think, for now, I’m going to keep Carter at work but change it officially to Hamilton,” Paige smiled. “The community just barely learned my name, I can’t wait three more years for them to figure out Carter and Hamilton are the same person.”

Carmen smiled and glanced at Zeus. “I wonder if we’ll ever decide to do this.”

“Are you finally talking about it?” Paige asked.

“Excuse me,” Boyd Darrow moved in front of Paige, partially blocking out Carmen. “I need a word with my niece. You don’t mind, do you?” He glared at Carmen, clearly dismissing her.

“Actually,” Carmen began.

“No,” Paige shook her head. “We need to do this, Carmen. Please excuse us for a minute.”

Carmen hesitated before she moved across the room and joined the men.

“Funny,” Paige took a casual sip of her champagne. “I don’t remember inviting you to the wedding or any of the festivities leading up to the main event.”

“I noticed,” Boyd growled. “You’re just as spoiled and ungrateful as that mother of yours. Guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” He began searching for Wyatt.

Paige spotted him first. When Wyatt stood and started her way, she gave him a subtle shake of her head to dissuade him.

“You might want to explain that to my son next time you see him,” Boyd leaned in closer and wrapped his beefy hand around Paige’s arm. “Wyatt seems to have forgotten his place in

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this world and that seems to have started the moment he reconnected with you.” He tightened his grip until it pinched. “Rectify that or you will regret it.”

“I doubt that,” Paige shrugged. She was going to have a bruise, but she wouldn’t let Boyd Darrow see he was hurting her.

“Right now,” Boyd tightened his grip even more. “This town believes the nonsense your mother fed them about that no-good father of yours. You’re riding high on daddy’s status as a war hero. How do you think the good citizens would feel if they knew your daddy was a coward? How do you think they’d react if they found out Dylan Carter was nothing but a common bully that picked on people, including soldiers, that were weaker than him just to make himself feel like a big bad tough guy? You still believe that nonsense my sister tried to peddle. You’ve cozied up to his bully friend and you fell for the national hero crap General Porter fed you. I know the real story. Dylan Carter died as he lived... a big, phony coward. You think about that, Deputy Carter. You think about your reputation in this small Podunk town and decide if you want them all to know where you really came from. Tell Wyatt to call me, I’ll let him know who to contact for his next job. If I don’t hear from him by tomorrow, everyone will know what really happened the night Dylan Carter died.”

Paige was fuming. She didn’t stop to consider where she was. She completely forgot she was in a fancy dress. She just knew — at that moment — she hated her uncle more than she’d ever hated anyone in her life. Her body reacted to the fury. She pivoted and slammed Boyd Darrow against the wall just before she brought her knee up and slammed it into his groin.

Darrow doubled over in pain but still had enough venom in him to spew more hatred.

“Go ahead, spread your lies,” Paige took a step back. “Nobody will believe you and Wyatt, well I think you just sealed the deal on that one. You’ll be lucky if your son forgives you in time to attend your funeral. Have a nice life, Uncle Boyd.”

He tried to reach out, tried to snatch onto her arm again, but he missed, and the momentum had him falling face first onto the hard ground.

Dax was across the room and by Paige’s side immediately. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Paige focused on Wyatt. “I’m good. I need to go settle my cousin. He looks a little green around the edges.”

“Let me see your arm,” Dax insisted.

“Later,” Paige locked eyes with Dax. “Right now, I really need to settle Wyatt down before he does something he regrets.”

“I understand,” Dax let her go. He had something important he needed to deal with as well. Dax caught up with Boyd just outside the main entrance to the reception center. The man was

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still hurting from Paige's carefully placed knee but Dax didn't care. He moved in and blocked the man's path, then he shifted, wrapped his hand around Boyd's neck and slammed him against the brick wall.

"Back off," Boyd wheezed.

"I held back," Dax tightened his grip. "I let you put your hands on my woman because she needed to handle you herself. I'd say she did a pretty good job, but now I have a message for you. Come after my wife again and you'll deal with me."

"That's enough, kid," Nathan moved forward. The man was starting to turn blue. "Come on, Dax. Loosen up a bit. The last thing Paige needs right now is her future husband locked up in prison for murdering her scumbag uncle. He heard you and I think he understands."

Dax released his grip but didn't move away. "Do you?"

"Bite me," Darrow spat. "I'm finished with the lot of you. This town's not worth the trouble. You want to run around and pretend like your someone out here in Podunk, be my guest. My son will come running back soon enough, tail between his legs. Mark my words, that traitor of mine will beg me to get him another job so he can be someone." He shoved past Dax. "He needs me."

"Where do you think he's going?" Dax watched as Boyd headed across the parking lot, stepped over a loose chain and made his way toward a brand-new Lincoln Navigator.

"I think he plans to steal that car," Nathan shook his head. "The idiot."

The two of them watched as Boyd did in fact, try to steal the car. The vehicle was so new it still had the temporary tag in the windshield. They continued to watch as Jericho Walter's stepped from the shadows, threw Darrow to the ground, and cuffed him.

"I'll go see if he needs help," Dax decided.

"Naw," Nathan put a hand on Dax's shoulder. "You get back to Paige, I'll see if Jericho needs help."

The party was over and all the guests had retired to bed when Paige stepped onto the back porch and dropped into her favorite chair. It was only then that she let the tears flow. She knew it was all a lie. She knew she shouldn't listen to anything that man said, but his words had sliced open an already raw wound. How could she not think of Dylan Carter just before the most important day of her life? How could she not long for him to be here, to walk her down the aisle,

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to give her away to a man she knew — without a doubt — he would have loved immediately? They had so much in common. Which is why she knew, deep down inside, her father was not a coward.

Dax stepped silently into the darkness and sighed. “I’m beginning to think the universe is conspiring against us.” He lifted Paige into his arms and settled onto the chair with her in his lap. “Talk to me, Paige. Tell me what that vile man said to upset you.”

“That’s only part of it,” Paige bit back another sob. “I’ve been thinking a lot about dad lately. I love Nathan and I’m so grateful he’s here. I’m happy but a little conflicted, I guess.”

“You wish it was your own dad giving you away tomorrow,” Dax tightened his grip and pulled her closer. “That’s understandable. I don’t think Nathan would be hurt at all if he knew you felt that way. He loves you, he made a promise to your dad to protect you, and over time he came to think of you as his own daughter, but he also loved your dad. I bet he’s been thinking about Dylan Carter a lot over these past weeks as well.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Paige admitted. “But, you’re probably right. They were best friends. I don’t think they could have been closer if they were brothers.”

“They were,” Dax said softly. “In every way that matters.”

“My uncle said that dad was a coward,” Paige admitted. “He said mom was so in love with my father that she turned a blind eye to his faults and idolized him. She made him into a martyr. He said dad lived his life as a coward and a bully and he died a coward. He said Nathan is protecting him. He said if Wyatt doesn’t call him, he’s going to tell everyone how dad really died.”

“The man is a liar, Paige,” Nathan stepped from the shadows. “Boyd Darrow is the coward, and he was always jealous of Dylan. He set out to hurt you tonight, and it looks like he succeeded. Don’t let him ruin your happiness.”

“I know he was lying,” Paige took a deep breath. “My gut tells me he was lying. It’s just... there are so many secrets. It seems we’re all drowning in them these days. Everything dad did was a secret. His death was a secret. Mom went chasing killers in the middle of the night and didn’t tell anyone because she was trying to uncover a secret, she fell in love with Jericho but that also had to remain a secret. My entire life is one big secret.”

In that moment, Dax realized why Paige had reacted to his secret the way she had. And he knew, without a doubt, he was going to come clean. Not tonight, not over the next couple weeks, but soon. He was going to tell her everything and let the chips fall where they may as the saying went. “Paige,” he shifted so he could see her better in the dim lighting. “I didn’t know your father, but I knew of him. Every Ranger that came after him knows who Dylan Carter was

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and what he stood for. There are legends, I guess you could say. Dylan Carter was a legend. Not only because he died heroically for his country, but because of the way he lived.”

“How so?” Paige asked.

“Everyone knows that Dylan Carter wouldn’t tolerate bullying,” Dax began. “He was the exact opposite of what your uncle depicted tonight. The instructors relay a story at the beginning of every new Ranger class to drive home the need to work as a cohesive team. We have to put personal grievances aside and function as one unit. We’d never survive if we didn’t trust our men. Our very lives are in their hands. We understand that on a mission or when we’re deep inside enemy lines. It’s a little harder to live by at a training exercise.

Every session begins with the story of Dylan Carter. We’ve all heard it a million times. Carter was training with his men but there was this one guy that everyone hated. He wasn’t Ranger material and was close to washing out. This guy was arrogant and a know-it-all to the core. On this particular day, Carter was training with his men when this guy that was disliked by pretty much everyone started to struggle to complete the task. One of your dad’s best friends jumped in and started to give him a hard time. It was payback pure and simple and everyone knew it. Well, according to legend, your dad stepped in and told his friend to knock it off. The friend was having too much fun, though. So, when this guy messed up again, he mocked him in front of the whole team. Dylan stood up for the loser. He spun around and punched his friend in the face so hard the man had a black eye for three weeks.”

“It was more like two,” Porter smiled. “Closer to ten days.”

“It was you?” Dax burst out laughing. “If the guys knew Carter gave the infamous General Porter a black eye, the story would take on a whole new life.”

“Which is why they will never know,” Nathan grinned. “The point is, your dad always stuck up for the little guy, even when he hated the twit with every fiber of his being. There was a place for frivolity and during training, on a mission, that was not the place or time to divide the team or trample on a man’s confidence.”

“Why is tonight the first time I’ve heard of this? Why didn’t you tell me that story before?” Paige asked Nathan.

“It wasn’t my finest hour, kid,” Porter shrugged. “I was the bully that day. I still contend the idiot deserved it, but it wasn’t the proper time or place and your dad knew it. He warned me, but I thought he’d ultimately take my side. He didn’t. Your dad did the right thing. Your dad always did the right thing when it mattered, Paige. I hope you will remember that. He was a great man. That uncle of yours tried to convince you he wasn’t. He questioned my credibility because your dad was my best friend. That’s like saying your confidence and loyalty toward

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Carmen is somehow biased and not a true representation of the amazing woman she is because Carmen is your best friend.”

“Okay,” Paige nodded. “That makes sense. I guess it’s just hard because I will never know how or why he died. That mission is classified, and I suspect it always will be.”

“You are correct,” Nathan sobered. “The mission was controversial. Nobody wants the world to know what happened during those three days. I know you were complaining about secrets, but anything I tell you about that time must stay within this circle. You can’t utter a single word outside the three of us. Can you do that?”

“Won’t you get into trouble for telling me anything?” Paige asked. “And, even if you could justify letting something slip to me, how would you explain relaying top-secret information to Dax?”

“He wouldn’t have to,” Dax said softly. “I already know.”

“You know how my dad died?” Paige turned on him. “How? Why?”

“I was pulled in,” Dax told her. “I read the file because a mission I was leading was similar to the one that killed your father. Someone decided it would benefit my team if I knew the details of that earlier mission — a mission that didn’t go as planned. For all I know,” he turned to focus on Porter. “That someone was you.”

“I had a hand, but it wasn’t my decision,” Porter admitted.

“That sort of irritates me, but it also makes things easier,” Paige decided. “I mean, he was my dad and I’m not allowed to know, but this man — a guy who never even met Dylan Carter — knows all about his death.”

“Paige,” Porter sobered. “That mission will never be open and available. Not in my lifetime, not in your lifetime. We went in to rescue a dignitary. A guy who had been captured by the enemy and was being tortured for information. The amount of intel he had was astronomical. If the enemy knew everything he knew, many, many lives would have been lost.”

“Isn’t that what you guys did?” Paige asked. “I mean on a regular basis. Why was this mission such a secret?”

“Because the dignitary wasn’t being held behind enemy lines,” Dax answered. “He was being held in a country that was supposed to be our ally. A county that just turned a blind eye to what was happening. They had to go in, rescue the prisoner, and get out without anyone knowing they were even there.”

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“Right,” Paige was starting to understand now. “So we don’t want anyone to know we snuck in and executed a mission behind our friend’s back and this friend doesn’t want anyone to know they allowed the enemy to use them to hurt us.”

“Basically,” Nathan agreed. “We rescued the prisoner but there were complications. Before we could regroup, Dylan realized the enemy had captured one of our men. Keith was injured and they took advantage of that vulnerability. You never leave a man behind — never. Dylan went back in, hoping to catch them by surprise and rescue Keith. It took time before we realized he was missing. Two of us followed your dad back in, but we were delayed. Dylan got Keith out, but he lost his own life in the process. All of us were injured that day, but we made sure everyone came home. It wasn’t easy, but we brought Dylan home. At that point, it was all we could do. We figured at least it would give your mom closure.”

“And you had to do something similar?” Paige asked Dax.

“Yes,” Dax closed his eyes as he remembered his own mission, the gunfire, the mortars, the loss of life. “And I too lost a great man.”

“Can I ask you something?” Paige turned to Nathan.

“You can always ask,” Nathan smiled.

“Boyd said if I didn’t talk Wyatt into taking the job that he had, he was going to make sure everyone knew the details of dad’s mission. Is there any way he knows?”

“No,” Nathan and Dax said together.

“He was lying,” Dax assured her. “I wasn’t even allowed to tell my men. I could use the information to help ensure the mission’s success, but I couldn’t share what I knew with anyone. Not even Hawk and he was my second at the time.”

“I miss him,” Paige focused on Nathan. “It helps to have you here, but I miss him so much.”

“Come here,” Nathan held out his arms to her. “I know, sweet pea. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of your father. It’s been difficult these past few months. He would be so proud of you and he would approve of this one. I have no doubt your father would be thrilled with the man you’ve chosen to marry.” He took a step back and brushed away her tears. “It’s late and you have a big day tomorrow. You should turn in now. I’m sorry Boyd Darrow ruined your evening and I hope you will disregard everything he told you tonight. He was being cruel and selfish.”

“I love you,” she pushed up on her toes and kissed his cheek. “Goodnight, Nathan.”

“Goodnight, kid.”

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Dax took Paige's hand and led her to their bedroom. "Before we settle in, there's something you need to know. I planned to wait until after the ceremony, to tell you. Instead, I think I should get it out there now."

"What is it?" Paige braced for more bad news.

"Boyd was arrested immediately after he left the reception center tonight," Dax paused. "Well, after I warned him what would happen if he ever laid a hand on you again."

"You didn't!"

"I absolutely did," Dax shrugged unapologetically. "He slithered away to lick his wounds in someone else's Lincoln Navigator. Jericho arrested him on the spot. I think he enjoyed it a little more than usual."

"I should be mad, at both of you, but I'm not. He seriously tried to steal a car right outside?" Paige asked in amazement.

"Shows what a complete idiot that man is," Dax pulled off his shirt and tossed it onto a chair. "Anyway, Jericho turned him over to Agent Wilkins. Sean has a file on Boyd two inches thick. The feds are fighting, as we speak, to see who gets him first."

"I knew Sean had a file," Paige admitted. "He showed it to me. We agreed he could use it later once we knew if Wyatt was going to go clean or return to the life. I didn't want Wyatt to feel responsible for his father's arrest back then."

"How do you think he'll take it now?" Dax dropped onto the bed and began to remove his shoes.

"I don't know," Paige shrugged. "But it's out of my control. If he's dumb enough to steal a car right out in the open like after, just after he made a scene with a dozen cops in the house, he deserves to spend the rest of his miserable life behind bars."

"You realize, he probably will?"

"I know," Paige pulled back the blankets and climbed inside. "Thank you, for everything."

Dax slid in beside her. "I don't know how you define everything, but there's no need to thank me, baby. I will always be here for you and I'm always going to sneak behind your back and threaten anyone that touches you."

Paige gave his shoulder a swat.

"I am," Dax grinned. "Deal with it."

"I love you, Dax Hamilton," Paige whispered into the darkness.

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“I love you more, Paige Carter,” Dax shifted and wrapped his body around Paige in comfort and love.

Paige stood at the top of the stairs and tried to will the butterflies in her stomach to take a nap. She wasn't nervous about her future, not anymore. She was terrified she was going to trip on the long dress, rip out the back, and take an unceremonious tumble down the huge flight of stairs. Couldn't she just start this walk from the foyer?

“Breath, Paige,” Sophie Porter gave the dress one last tug, moved to stand directly in front of Paige and gave her a nod and a smile. “Perfect, now you just need that gorgeous husband of mine and you're ready to go.”

“Thank you,” Paige pulled Sophie into a last-minute hug. “I never could have pulled this off without you.”

Sophie pulled out a small handkerchief and began dabbing her eyes with the cloth. “I'm heading down, now. If I don't, I'll never get through this. Make sure you smile at least a little, Dax is waiting.”

“Come on, kid,” Nathan slid his arm through hers. “I've got you and I won't let you fall.”

“You never did,” Paige gave his arm a quick squeeze, let out a huge breath and waited for the music to start. The instant it did, Carmen and Zeus slipped out of some hidden room and made their way down the stairs. Paige watched as Margie and Hawk moved forward, then it was her turn. The rest of the men were already waiting next to Dax. Nathan held firm, moving at pace with Paige as they took one step at a time until they reached the landing.

“Piece of cake,” Nathan whispered into her ear. “Now, look at your man. He only has eyes for you, my dear. The look of love on his face says it all.”

Paige looked up and locked eyes with Dax. Nathan was right, his face radiated love and it was all for her. At that moment, she realized it was all worth it. She was marrying her perfect soulmate. The secrets didn't matter. The long hard road they took to get here didn't matter. Her uncle and his words of hatred didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was Dax. She reached the front of the room and waited while Nathan placed her hand on Dax's palm and in that moment her entire body relaxed. Today was the first day of the rest of her life and she was going to make sure that life was amazing.