

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Inevitable Apprehension *Season 4, Episode 6*

by:

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Paige stepped into the office and grinned. It was good to be back. Oh, she loved her honeymoon. She loved the beaches; she loved the food, and most of all she loved the uninterrupted time she had with Dax. But there was nothing like sleeping in your own bed and she was definitely glad to be home.

“Look who the cat drug in,” Havilland smirked. “And look at that tan. Must be nice to have two full weeks lounging on the beach, Pina colada in one hand...”

“If you finish that sentence, Duncan,” Jericho warned. “You’ll be handling phone reports for the next two weeks.”

“Hello, Jericho,” Paige settled into her chair.

“Glad to have you back, Carter,” Jericho frowned. “Or is it Hamilton now?”

“I haven’t decided,” Paige admitted. “I kind of like being Paige Hamilton, but I’ve been Carter for so long it’s hard to give it up. Plus, it was my dad’s name. I’m still contemplating my options.”

“Well, make sure Margie knows what to put on your check,” Jericho paused in his doorway. “Gage is handling a felony theft over at Jake Pendleton’s farm. Why don’t you head over and give him a hand?”

“Is he okay?” Paige wondered. “From what I’ve heard, Scratch is still hiding out in Mexico.”

“He’s coping,” Jericho moved into his office, cutting off any further conversation.

“Hello, Margie,” Paige stopped at Jericho’s ace-of-all-trade’s desk on her way out the door. “For now, just leave it Carter on the check. I’ll let you know when, or if, that changes.”

“He’s doing better,” Margie assured her. “Gage, I mean. He sometimes gets that sad, melancholy look in his eyes, but he’s doing okay.”

“Good,” Paige smiled and headed for the door.

“The place looks amazing,” Dax settled into the executive chair behind a large wooden desk that wasn’t here when he left for his honeymoon. “You guys have made remarkable progress in my absence.”

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“Most of it was Zeus and Ken,” Hawk dropped into a fancy new visitors chair. “Zeus has been using the center to occupy his time since his woman had to fly out to Washington to help Porter on a new top-secret operation.”

“I didn’t realize Carmen was out of town,” Dax frowned. Paige was going to be disappointed. His wife — and he could admit, he enjoyed calling her that — planned to have a dinner date with Zee and Carmen now that they had returned. Sort of a thank you for all of Carmen’s hard work on the wedding. Apparently, that would have to wait.

“You up for a staff meeting?” Hawk asked. “We need to bring you up to speed on everything and decide if we’re ready to start a session. The course is nearly full for October if you think we can swing it.”

“Call in the rest of the guys and we’ll discuss it,” Dax decided.

A few moments later, the entire group was gathered in his office.

“Looks like sunshine and a fine woman agree with you, man,” Zeus observed.

“Right,” Dax sighed. “Honeymoon was great, the beach was great, Paige was great. Now, let’s move on.”

“Testy, isn’t he? You’d think two weeks relaxing on the beach would make him more amenable to our charm.” Hawk shot a grin to the rest of the room. “If Dax doesn’t want to share, let’s get down to it. Ken?”

“Maybe we should start with the pink elephant in the room,” he suggested. “The insurance packet has been delivered to El Paso. Once I determined the widow wasn’t involved and the pilot was working for Contreras against his will, we put it all in motion. Everything went smoothly on our end. Evan had her sign the documents and it’s all legit now. Or, at least it appears that way. Mrs. Holden Driscoll is officially a quarter of a million dollars richer.

Carmen has hidden the insurance company information well enough to pass a cursory look. If anyone digs deeper, they could get suspicious but there’s nothing to find. It might come across as a shell corps if Paige or any of her friends start sniffing around; but, it will never lead back to us or the center.”

“Do we know how the widow reacted when she got the surprise money?” Dax wondered.

“Yeah,” Hawk jumped in. “Evan said she was shocked, but didn’t ask too many questions. We know Contreras needed a plane and he threatened the husband, using potential violence against Darla and the kid as leverage. Darla Driscoll knew all about her husband’s activities, though. My take, she didn’t push very hard because she didn’t want to risk losing the cash.”

“Did she say anything we could use?” Dax asked.

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“There was one strange comment she made to Evan,” Hawk paused to remember the exact wording. “She thought it was odd that the cartel used threats and intimidation to force her husband to fly for them, then offered such generosity after his untimely death.”

“So,” Dax sat back. “If questioned, she’ll assume the money came from Mexico. Sounds like we’re covered on that end. I think we can close that chapter out for now.”

“I agree,” Hawk opened a binder. “We have used some of the cash to outfit this place. Money was tight after we purchased the land and paid for construction. Carmen worked her magic before she got called away, so we should be covered there as well. I’ve left a file for you to look over in the desk. Take a look when you have a chance and let’s decide how to proceed in the short term. Long term, the requests are coming in; so, we shouldn’t have to tap into the emergency funds once we’re up and running.”

“I trust you were extra careful when you covered your tracks?” Dax was a little uneasy about using drug money to fund operations at the center, but he wouldn’t complain.

“We’re good,” Zeus assured him.

“I’m going to tell Paige about the money,” Dax decided now was as good a time as any to break the news.

“I trust the lot of us won’t end up behind bars once she knows the truth,” Vato spoke up.

“I trust Paige,” Zeus jumped in. “In fact, I’m not sure why you haven’t already discussed this with her. It would have made things easier before the wedding.”

“We brought Carmen in to help,” Dax continued, ignoring Vato’s question. “Hawk and Vato are single, but that leaves Paige and Jaimie. I can’t share the information with my wife and ask Ken to keep the secret from his. For what it’s worth, I trust Jaimie. Ken, if you explain the need for complete secrecy with her, I’m confident Jaimie will keep this within the family.”

“We all know this was an issue before the wedding,” Hawk began. “We could see Paige was upset. But obviously you worked that out. Why risk it now when the conflict has been resolved?”

“I haven’t exactly had problems keeping it from Jaimie,” Ken cut in. “But the guilt is killing me. We’re struggling a little on the money side. Jaimie is stressed all the time because the center is new, and we don’t know if it will take, or if we’ll all lose our shirts. I’d like to tell my wife we have a buffer. I’d like to ease her mind. Keeping the secret just feels wrong to me. I know you guys can’t understand, not until you’re married. I’m with Dax on this one. He tells Paige and I talk to Jaimie.”

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“And if it all blows up in our faces?” Vato asked. “If sharing the secret gets us in hot water with the law?”

“I don’t see how it could,” Hawk relented. “Plus, I trust Paige. She won’t do anything that will hurt Dax — or by extension us. She proved herself, more than proved herself, when Dax went missing. I’m good with it. Confess your sins to your wife,” he glanced at Ken. “Both of you. If Jaimie had to talk to someone, she would talk to one of us. She’s a safe bet and I get your point. Starting a business is stressful for all of us. You’ve got the added concern of the kids and your mom. I can see how Jaimie would be worried. If telling her helps ease that off a little, have that talk. Just make sure she knows how ruthless Contreras is. If word gets out about the money, Jaimie, the boys, your mom, Paige, Carmen and all of us will be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our very short lives.”

“I don’t like it,” Vato grumbled. “But it looks like I’m outnumbered.”

“Looks like,” Dax agreed. “Ken keep it from the boys and your mom. Only discuss this with Jaimie and only in private. If your mom finds out, she might let it slip to that no-good brother of yours and then we will have trouble.”

“Agreed,” Ken nodded. “I just need Jaimie to know and she’ll safeguard it with her life. I’m not worried about that and you shouldn’t either.”

“Will we at least be notified?” Vato wanted to know. “Will you let us know when you’ve told Paige, so we can prepare for the worst?”

“I have no idea when I’m going to tell her,” Dax admitted. “If it will help you accept it, I’ll inform you after we’ve talked. I think I’ll know the right time to bring it up. In my case, it’s better if it just happens naturally. In Ken’s case, I think the sooner the better. There’s no need for Jaimie to worry.”

“Alright,” Zeus spoke up. “There’s no need for anyone to worry, because our tentative October session is booked. We have one slot open if we want to start the scholarship program immediately. Hawk selected the candidate, we just need to take the final vote.”

Hawk pulled out a file and began to read through the reasons he selected Deputy Nick Crandall from Truth or Consequences, New Mexico as their first scholarship recipient.

“Where the hell is Truth or Consequence?” Ken wondered.

“No idea,” Hawk smiled. “But it seemed appropriate for our first good deed.”

“I think we’re ready for October,” Dax decided. “We’ll still have some final touches to work through on the building but the session is booked, let’s get this venture rolling. I’m also a yes on Deputy Crandall.”

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“I’m a yes,” Hawk lifted one hand.

“I’m in,” Zeus smiled.

“Me too,” Ken nodded.

“Then it’s unanimous,” Vato settled back. “Now, we just need to divvy up assignments and finalize the lesson plan.”

“I’ll notify the sheriff that we’ll have a class running here and up the canyon,” Dax added. “Hawk, can you meet with me later this afternoon? You and I will start going through the course with a fine-tooth comb and start filling in the details.”

“Sounds good,” Hawk agreed. “I’ll head back in here after lunch.”

“That will give me some time to sift through these files and get back up to speed on the progress,” Dax sat back. “We’ve got a lot to do before October, let’s make this happen.”

The men silently filed out of the room, each deep in their own thoughts.

“I heard you were due back today,” Gage said in greeting. They were standing in the middle of an alfalfa field.

“I heard you were outstanding in your field, but isn’t this a little much even for you?”

“Funny,” Gage shot her an annoyed glance. “Our victim left his tractor out here last night with plans to finish working the field early this morning. Unfortunately, someone stole it before he got the chance. I’ve got it listed on NCIC, so hopefully it will turn up in a day or two.”

Paige glanced around but didn’t see anything she could really help with. “Jericho sent me out here to back you, but it looks like you’ve got it handled already.”

“Pretty much,” Gage shrugged. “You look good. Sunshine and relaxation seem to agree with you.”

“Maybe you should try it,” Paige squinted up at her oldest friend. “Because you look like crap. You have to put the Langford case behind you, Gage. We’ll catch the monster as soon as he gets back. He won’t stay in Mexico forever.”

“I don’t know if you heard, toxicology matched the results from the lab,” Gage sighed. “Adam was given a concentrated dose of ecstasy. That red cup was laced with enough poison to

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bring down an elephant. His heart would have given out in minutes. It wasn't negligence, it was premeditated murder. Scratch has to pay for what he did."

"We'll make sure he does," Paige gave him a friendly pat on the back. "Every cop in the country is looking for him. He's listed on NCIC as the homicidal maniac he is. The minute he steps foot in our grid, we'll scoop him up. In the meantime, you need to find a way to get your own closure."

"I'm working on it," Gage sobered. "I just can't get the image out of my head. I wish I'd sent Lo to the lab to retrieve the results. The tech was very detailed in her description of those last minutes. He had to be terrified. There's no doubt about the homicide when you combine the drugs with the autopsy report. Scratch and his crew held Adam on the ground and poured a lethal dose of narcotic laced punch down his throat, then they just left him there to die. And for what? The couple hundred he might have made from high school kids looking to experiment?"

"Well," Paige desperately wanted to change the subject, but she knew Gage needed to talk this through. "On a positive note, Lo tracked the beer to a brewery in Laurel Bluffs. We know who purchased the alcohol that night. Trent Hanson, also known as Chevy on account he drives a Chevy, has been positively identified. That's one more link in the chain and one more piece that will bring Scratch and his gang down when we locate them. We did the work, Gage. The case is solid. Have a little faith. Scratch will pay, eventually."

"Enough about that," Gage changed the subject. "Tell me about you. Paige Carter, a married woman. It's going to be hard to think of you as Hamilton after all this time."

"I'm thinking about leaving it," Paige admitted. "I mean for work. My email, my name tag, everything is under Carter. I thought maybe I'd legally change it to Paige Carter Hamilton then just drop the Hamilton at work. What do you think?"

"What does Dax think about that?" Gage wondered.

"I haven't talked to him yet," she confessed. "I thought I would have more time to decide. Then I get to work, and Jericho wanted to know what Margie should put on my check. I guess It's more pressing than I originally thought it would be."

"You have a couple days to decide," Gage assured her. "Give me a minute, let me clear this." He moved to his truck and picked up the mic. After a short exchange with Margie, he glanced back at Paige. "I have a gas theft at the Chevron. If I clear in time, maybe we can meet back up for lunch."

"Sounds good," Paige glanced down at her phone when it started to ring. "Catch you later." She watched as Gage pulled away before she answered Dax's call. "Deputy Carter," she said out of habit.

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“I must have the wrong number,” Dax smiled. “I was looking for Mrs. Hamilton.”

“You found her,” Paige slid behind the wheel and started the engine. “You at the training center?”

“Yeah,” Dax relaxed. “The boys have been busy in my absence.”

“If you’re not too busy, I’ll drop by for a minute,” Paige offered.

“I always have time for my wife,” Dax grinned.

“You just like saying that,” Paige accused.

“Absolutely,” Dax motioned to Zeus who was standing in the doorway, waiting for Dax to finish his call. “Duty calls. Just head back to my office. I have chairs and an actual desk now, we don’t have to settle for the floor.”

“I’m working,” Paige laughed and disconnected.

It took longer than she expected to reach the training center. On the way out, she’d been interrupted by a shoplifter. The instant she parked the vehicle, she realized Dax was right. The boys had been busy. The front door was unlocked, so she let herself in. The main lobby was now painted in a neutral tan color. The floor was sleek marble and the counter was a deep black granite with gray veins running through the large rock. It looked professional, but expensive. She wondered how deep in debt the men had gone to create this image. She wasn’t going to worry about it. This was Dax’s dream and she would support him. As she made her way down the hallway, she glanced into rooms along the way. Some were completed, others empty. Lavish expense transitioned into sturdy, serious, and comfortable. Again, she wondered about the cost.

When she reached Dax’s door, she smiled. “Fancy digs you got here, cowboy.”

“Hey beautiful,” Dax closed the file he’d been studying. “Come over here and sit on my lap.”

“I’m working,” Paige rolled her eyes.

“What a coincidence,” Dax pushed his chair back. “Me too.” He gave his thigh a little pat.

Paige shook her head and couldn’t help but smile. “I wanted to talk to you about the whole name thing.”

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“At least come over here and lean against the desk,” Dax patted the elaborate wood surface.

Paige sighed, but moved forward. She had just leaned up against the front, facing Dax, when he wrapped his arm around her and pulled. She wasn't ready for the assault and tumbled straight into his lap. She burst out laughing but narrowed her eyes at him. “Working here,” she scolded.

Dax leaned in and pressed his lips to the side of her neck. “Me too.”

“Stop it,” she wiggled but he wouldn't release his grip.

“What about your name?” he whispered in her ear.

“Dax,” Paige warned. “I need to have a serious conversation with you.”

“I can't help it if I missed you,” Dax kept his grip on her waist but shifted so they could have a more serious conversation. He reached up to run his hand over her back and felt the ballistic vest instead of flesh. “I'm glad you wear this on the job, but sometimes it really does get in the way.”

“Like a chastity belt?” Paige laughed.

“Something like that,” Dax sighed. “Okay, the name. I would like you to change it to Hamilton but it's your name, your decision.”

“I was thinking of legally making it Paige Carter Hamilton. That would make Carter my middle name, officially.”

“Unofficially?” Dax wondered.

“Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about,” Paige bit her bottom lip. “I was thinking I'd still go by Carter at work. It would make the transition easier and I wouldn't have to change my business cards, my name tag, my email address and about a million other things I haven't thought of.”

“Okay,” Dax shrugged.

“If I do that, when I'm at work, I'd still answer Deputy Carter,” she warned. “Will you be okay with that?”

“Sure,” Dax reached out and began rubbing Paige's right thigh. “Work is work, Paige. Sure, it might be an easier transition, but I think there's more to it. I think this has more to do with your mom and dad than work. If you want to honor the old man by keeping his name on the job, do it. Work is work, and no matter what you call yourself, I know your mine.”

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“I thought this was going to be harder than you’re making it,” Paige admitted. “I didn’t want to hurt your feelings, but it seemed simpler this way. Plus, there is the family thing. I’m the last of us. It just feels wrong to completely abandon Carter.” Her phone started to ring. Paige glanced down and saw Jericho’s name. “I need to grab this.”

“Go ahead,” Dax let her shift but wouldn’t let her get off his lap when she tried to stand. He immediately realized the call was important.

“Let me up,” Paige told him the instant she disconnected the call. “Does that television work?”

“Sure,” Dax reached for the remote and flipped on the screen.

“See if you can get a local news station,” Paige requested.

“Sounds like duty calls,” Dax started scrolling until he found what she wanted. “What’s up?”

“There,” Paige pointed to the screen. “Pause that.”

“Who are they?” Dax studied the five photos displayed across the television.

“Escaped prisoners,” Paige turned to face Dax. “From Gunnison Prison. They were up Mayfield Canyon working to clear out debris from a camping area. Apparently, the creek got clogged with branches and other debris from a collapse upstream. The forest service sent in a couple guys who got the jam cleared, but they requested a work crew to clean up the mess. One of the guards took those five men up to do the work. They killed the guard and escaped into the wilderness.”

“So much for easing back into things,” Dax stood and moved to stand next to Paige.

“Dax,” she reached for his arm. “This place would be an ideal location to get all the provisions those men need. You have guns, clothing, backcountry gear, all-terrains. Do you know what they could do or how far they could get if they found this place?”

“We haven’t officially opened yet,” Dax soothed. “Very few people even know we’re here. Even less know what we do. We’ll have to take that into consideration once we’re fully operational. We’re close to the state prison in Gunnison, and our security will need to be tight. But right now, I don’t think those men would even know to come here.”

“Leave that picture up there,” Paige requested. “Call in your men, make sure they stay alert. And you be careful today. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

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“Hawk,” Dax called before he reached out and took her face between his hands. “Relax. We’re going to be fine. I’m worried about you. Promise me you’ll be careful. Those men already killed once, I doubt they would hesitate to kill again.”

“It’s barely... oh, hey Paige,” Hawk glanced from Dax to Paige then back to Dax. “What’s wrong?”

“Jot down the information on those men,” Dax ordered. “Then, go do what you do. I want to know everything there is to know about all five of them.”

“Who are they?” Hawk began to write down names.

“Escaped prisoners who killed the prison guard that was supervising them,” Dax informed him. “Send anything you find to Paige’s phone immediately.”

“On it,” Hawk turned to go.

“I’ll leave those pictures up until you have better ones,” Dax added. “Get the info out to the men. They escaped from Mayfield, but the canyons are connected. If they make their way north...”

“We’re in their path,” Hawk nodded. “Do they have a vehicle?”

“No,” Paige shook her head. “That’s the only good news of the day. The prison vans are equipped with kill switches that require a code to activate the engine. They wouldn’t have the code and the guard was dead. Even if they hot-wired the van, it wouldn’t activate without the code.”

“I guess that’s something,” Hawk shifted back to Dax. “We have security and we’d be a prime target. The good news is nobody really knows what we’re doing here yet. Well, except for the military and law enforcement. The escaped felons shouldn’t know how lucrative a hit this would be. Do you want me to activate the system?”

“Yeah,” Dax decided. “Get the world out, activate the system, and then come back in here and explain exactly what that means.”

“I have to go,” Paige announced. “Don’t wait up. I could be late.”

“Be careful,” Dax grabbed her and pulled her against him, pressing his lips to hers. “And call if you can. I love you.”

“Love you too,” Paige stepped back. “Stay alert. If they get up in the mountains and steal a car, it wouldn’t take long to hit this area. I know you guys are working on getting this place up and running, but don’t leave the building without a partner.”

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“We know what to do, babe,” Dax grinned. “Now, stop playing cop with us and go catch the bad guys.”

“That’s a big ten-four,” Paige rushed out of the room.

“I’ll get started on the intel,” Hawk decided. “If you press the green button on your phone, it’s an intercom. All the guys will hear it, we can brief in your office.”

“Sounds good,” Dax said absently. He moved to the window and was now watching the woman he loved rush into danger.

“She’ll be fine,” Hawk understood immediately. “She’s a good cop and she’ll be careful.”

“I know,” Dax continued to watch as Paige pulled onto the highway and disappeared. “The minute you get something, send it to Paige.”

“I’ll send it to both of you,” Hawk assured him. “I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

Paige pulled up at the park across from the Gunnison State Correctional Facility and parked next to Jericho in such a way that they could talk through their driver’s side windows. “Why are they staging here?”

“The prison warden chose the location,” Jericho advised. “I tried to talk him into relocating but he wouldn’t hear it. I think he’s looking for visibility.”

“How soon can we leave?” Paige asked. “I want to get a look of the actual crime scene before it’s trampled by a million cops with good intentions.”

“I have the details already,” Jericho advised. “Let’s head up now. We can check back in later, once we have a better idea of where those men are headed.”

“I’ll follow you,” Paige shifted into drive. “You do know the feds will be all over this don’t you?”

“I was hoping for Sean,” Jericho admitted.

“He’s in Washington,” Paige shook her head. “Nathan’s working on something big and pulled both Sean and Carmen back east. Brinkley specializes in these types of searches,” Paige added. “I’m hoping Trent’s close enough they’ll pull him in.”

“The name sounds familiar,” Jericho frowned and tried to remember why. “Do I know him?”

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“Baby theft case,” Paige reminded him. “I know you were really impressed by his charming personality when he followed you down that creepy staircase into the cellar of death.”

“Right,” Jericho remembered now. “If I recall correctly, he had a little thing for you. Does the man know you’re married?”

“He’s all talk,” Paige shrugged that off. “I’ll follow you out.”

Paige pulled off to the side of the road behind Jericho and joined her boss at the junction where the small trail led off the main dirt road. “There’s been a lot of traffic up here already,” she observed.

“I’m told they tried to keep it to a minimum,” Jericho started forward. “But with the original crew that found the body, the ME, and an entire K9 unit, it’s been compromised for sure.”

Paige stopped a few feet away from where the guard’s body had been located. She glanced at the van, a long folding table and then back to the body. “It looks like they just finished lunch and initiated the attack while the guard was relaxed.”

“I agree,” Jericho moved forward. The remnants of their meal were still spread out over the table. “There are only five places,” he observed. “But, it appears the guard sat down and ate with the men. Where’s the sixth lunch?”

Paige started to look around when she spotted the sleek black Ford pull in behind her cruiser. She grinned when the door flew open and she saw a familiar face. “I wondered how long it would take you to break away and find the real action.”

“Carter,” Brinkley didn’t break his stride. He walked right up to Paige, wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a hug, lifting her feet off the ground. “Good to see you, again.”

“Right back atcha,” Paige laughed.

“Sorry I missed the big day,” he frowned. “That’s right, it’s not Carter is it?”

“I pretty much answer to anything,” Paige shrugged. “I got your message. How’d the case turn out?”

“We got our man,” Brinkley grinned. “Always do. So, I guess I have to curb the naked jokes from now on seeing as you’re a married woman and all that. I suspect my prurient fantasies are no longer appropriate.”

“Your fantasies were never appropriate, Trent,” Paige grinned. “Maybe we could oh, I don’t know, start looking for five dangerous killers that are on the loose and desperate.”

“I’m game if you are,” Trent turned to Jericho. “Sheriff, good to see you again.”

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“Ditto,” Jericho relaxed grateful the fed was someone he already knew and had worked with on a previous case.

“So,” Brinkley turned back to Paige. “Any thoughts?”

“The boss just pointed out that we’re missing a place setting,” Paige informed him.

The group walked forward, and Paige spotted the remnants of a half-eaten sandwich next to a large log. “I think I found something over here.” She straightened and studied the area carefully. “We have a straggler,” she decided. “I think one of our prisoners headed out alone.”

Agent Brinkley studied the ground that surrounded the rock, then took several steps toward the thick trees. “I agree, you two up for a little hike?”

“I’m game,” Paige answered immediately. She glanced down when her phone chimed. “And, I have some new information on our bad guys.”

“Dax?” Jericho asked.

“He put Hawk on it,” Paige informed him. “Next to Carmen, there’s no one better.”

“What did he find?” Trent tried to see the display.

“John Delaney has a girl,” Paige turned the phone around so Jericho and Trent could see her picture. “Looks like her mamma lives close by here. She rattled off the address.”

“That’s just outside Gunnison,” Jericho pulled out his phone. “I need to call this in. Chief Strong will need to get some of his men over to the house and hold surveillance just in case he shows.”

“How will you explain the intel?” Trent asked.

“Paige was contacted by her CI,” Jericho grinned. “Did that come from Dax?”

“Nope,” Paige shook her head. “Directly from Hawk.”

“Can you call him?” Jericho asked. “Tell Hawk to send the information directly to you. We’re going to officially list him as your CI. I want this all above board.”

“Dax already told him to send me whatever he finds as soon as he finds it, but I’ll call him and let him know he just got a new title,” Paige started for the truck. “Before we head into the woods, I want some provisions.”

“And, I want my rifle,” Jericho decided.

“I want my binoculars,” Trent joked. “And a latte. Anyone know where I can get me a good latte?”

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Both Paige and Jericho ignored him. Paige grabbed a bottle of water from the cooler in the back seat, her go bag, an extra magazine for her pistol, and then swung her rifle over her shoulder. She started to shut the door, then snatched up one more fully-loaded magazine for the rifle and shoved it into her pocket. Once she shut the door, she glanced up and realized the men were waiting on her. She rushed forward to join them by the rock.

“Maybe you want to reapply your lipstick and add some pink gunk to your cheeks while we wait,” Trent called out as she approached.

“Shut up,” Paige growled. “It looks like the dogs all went after the other four. The ground here doesn’t look disturbed at all.”

“I agree,” Trent sobered. “Let me take the lead, you two follow close behind.”

“Maybe Paige...” Jericho began.

“No,” Paige interrupted. “Next to Sean, Trent’s the best tracker I know. He should lead.”

“I’m hurt,” Trent didn’t take his eyes off the ground. “You think Porter’s pet agent is better than me?”

“I think most people would call me Porter’s pet, not Sean,” Paige replied. “And you know Wilkens could find a mountain man in the Alaska wilderness and still make it home in time for dinner.”

“Alright,” Trent relented. “I’ll give credit where credit is due. Sean Wilkens is unnaturally adept at tracking. Turn here.” He led the group further into the wilderness, stopping occasionally to read the signs.

“The man isn’t hiding his tracks all that much,” Paige observed.

“If he continued this way,” Jericho realized. “He connected with an old dirt road that leads to a small cabin.”

“If he holed up inside,” Brinkley frowned. “We could have a barricade deal on our hands.”

“We’ll deal with the situation when we get there,” Jericho decided. “No use borrowing trouble.”

“Oh, hey,” Trent fell back beside Paige. “I was going to tell you, I checked on that widow you asked me about. You know, the downed aircraft you guys had out here a few months back.”

“And?” Paige hadn’t given up on finding the missing property from that plane.

“She came off clean when I initially made contact,” Trent explained. “She said she didn’t know what her husband was doing or why he was flying under the radar. I didn’t believe her.”

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She knew more than she was saying, but I let it go. Bothered me, though; so, I asked a buddy of mine that works the area to check up now and again and see if anything changes.”

“Did it?” Paige wondered.

“Yeah,” Brinkley nodded. “She recently came into some money.”

“What kind of money?” Paige was now alert.

“Came from an insurance company,” Brinkley continued. “The documents say it was life insurance. My guy got the loan officer at the bank to show him the file. But, here’s the thing... there’s no record of the late Holden Driscoll or Darla — his wife — ever paying into an insurance policy.”

“Is the insurance company legit?” Paige wondered.

“On the surface it is,” Brinkley shrugged.

“What does that mean?” Jericho asked, the first indication he was following the conversation.

“It means the comp geeks are indecisive on their conclusions,” Trent admitted. “I got conflicting answers. One guy said it’s legit. Another piped up and said it’s only legit on the surface, like a shell or something. He tried to follow it further, but hit a wall. He can’t find anything hinkey, but he can’t find anything so...”

“So,” Paige surmised, “its hinkey.”

“That’s my take,” Brinkley agreed. “Our guys are good, but the trail just vanishes.”

Paige wished Carmen was home. She’d ask her friend to do a little digging, but she couldn’t interrupt when she was on a real op for Nathan. His endearment only went so far. “She had an alibi,” Paige recalled. “It couldn’t be the missing money, could it?”

“If there was money missing,” Trent added. “I know you think someone climbed up there and ran off with something. But, that something doesn’t have to be money. And, the widow didn’t strike me as someone that had computer skills. Especially not these mad skills. Someone with experience and knowhow had to set this up to get by our techs. And they got by, Paige. I’ve pushed. There’s nothing there, they said they can’t go any further and they have other cases that needed their attention. I decided they’d wasted enough time on a hunch.”

“I understand,” Paige would ask Carmen to take a look once she was back home. In the meantime, she’d do a little more digging on the widow. Darla Driscoll just might not be as clean as they originally believed.

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“Heads up,” Jericho slowed as he approached the edge of the trail. “Our guy veered off here. That means, he’s headed straight for the old cabin. It would be an ideal place to hole up for a few days and see if the dust settles enough to sneak out undetected.”

“How far?” Trent asked Jericho.

“Maybe five-hundred yards out,” Jericho guessed. “It’s been awhile since I’ve been up here. The cabin is located off to the right. It sits back in the trees a little ways, but you’ll see it clearly from this dirt road.” He frowned when his phone began to buzz.

“Once you’re finished with that,” Trent frowned. “I think maybe you should shut it off, at least until we know what we’re dealing with.”

Paige pulled out her phone and switched it to silent.

Jericho moved a few yards away, back into the shadow of the trees as he took the call. A few moments later, he approached the duo. “That was Strong. Our guy is at the location Paige provided. He’s armed, the girlfriend’s mom had her father’s old deer rifle stashed in the closet. They’ve called in SWAT. Looks like that op might take a while. The girlfriend is still inside. So far, they can’t tell if she’s a willing participant or a hostage.”

“Either way,” Paige whispered. “He’ll use her once he realizes he’s trapped.”

“I agree,” Trent motioned toward the trail. “Let’s go see if we’re in the same boat and on our own.”

The instant they came around the bend, they knew their man was inside the cabin. There was a dim light flickering behind what Paige assumed was the kitchen.

“Candle,” Jericho whispered. “He’s not using the fireplace yet. He’s probably waiting a few more hours before he risks it. He has to feel pretty safe in there. The chance of discovery was pretty low.”

“We discovered him,” Trent disagreed.

“We’re the best of the best,” Paige grinned. “With honors.”

“We need to get close enough to see inside,” Jericho ignored her. “I happen to know the owner doesn’t leave any weapons inside the cabin when he’s not using it, but the suspect could have taken the pistol off the guard.”

“Someone did,” Paige agreed. “Let me see if I can sneak around the side and get a clear view through the window.”

“Why you?” Trent objected.

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“You have your strengths, I have mine,” Paige answered softly. “Cover me just in case.”

Jericho and Trent both pulled their handguns from their holsters and watched as Paige made her way silently toward the side window.

It didn't take long before she returned. “He's in the kitchen eating a cold can of stew,” she scrunched up her nose. “Nasty.”

“Does he have a weapon, Paige,” Jericho asked impatiently.

“I didn't see one,” Paige shook her head. “I suppose he could have it sitting on his lap under the table, but there was no indication that he's armed.”

“Do we burst in and take him by surprise, or announce ourselves and tell him he's surrounded, and he should surrender?”

“Both,” Jericho decided. “I'm going to take cover behind that tree right there. You and Paige head to the back. There's a small door just around the corner to the left. Once you're in position, I'll announce I'm here and tell him to step out onto the front porch with his hands up. He won't do it, but that's your cue to break in the back door and subdue him. The door leads into the kitchen, so you should be right on him before he knows there's trouble.”

“Unless he's hiding a pistol in his lap,” Trent grumbled.

“You got a better idea?” Paige asked

“No,” he admitted.

“Paige,” Jericho continued. “Try to get into position so you can see his reaction when I announce I'm here. He might stand up, try to look out the window and to determine how many he's up against. If he does, you'll know if he has a gun.”

“Right,” Paige pulled out her own gun and moved toward the house. She glanced back at Trent and silently mouthed “Stay close”.

The apprehension was uneventful. Stanley Barber wasn't armed. And, he did exactly as Jericho had predicted. The instant Jericho called out, Stanley stood and moved to the window. He was unarmed and taken completely by surprise when Trent and Paige burst through the back door. Trent kicked the wooden barrier open and Paige flew past him, vaulted over a kitchen chair, and collided with Stanley with so much force they both dropped to the floor in a daze. Trent was on their prisoner immediately and had him cuffed in a matter of seconds.

“These local cops you work with are a bad influence on you agent,” Trent grumbled, a little breathless from the action.

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“I have no idea what you mean by that,” Paige was grinning and thinking of Gage Clayton. More than once she’d scolded him for the exact same takedown technique.

“I’ve read the book,” Brinkley replied. “That maneuver is not in the book.”

“Depends on what book you read,” Paige glanced up at Jericho who was now blocking the doorway.

“The only place you’re going to find that move is in the NFL playbook,” Jericho frowned. “The locals aren’t a bad influence, that retired linebacker you call a partner is.”

“Don’t rain on my parade,” Paige pushed herself up until she was standing again. “What are we going to do with him? I don’t think we should escort him through the forest on foot.”

“I called Strong,” Jericho answered. “He’s sending up a guy in an explorer. They can access this cabin from that trail we intercepted. In the meantime, we wait. He’s not going anywhere.”

“I have a better idea,” Trent moved to their prisoner. “We interrogate.”

“How’s the standoff going?” Paige asked Jericho.

“No progress,” he admitted. “Don’t worry, John Delaney’s not going anywhere but a cell.”

“Or a box,” Trent disagreed. “It’s just as likely he’ll choose death over a long, miserable life in a cell.”

“He won’t go back,” Stanley provided. “He told us as much when he planned the breakout. He can’t take life without his girl. He might take her with him, he might go the suicide by cop route, but he’s not going back.”

“And you?” Trent asked. “You didn’t put up much of a fight.”

“I never planned to leave in the first place,” Stanley told them. “Once they killed the guard, I didn’t have a choice.”

“They killed the guard?” Paige asked.

“That’s right,” Stanley shrugged. “One minute I’m wolfing down that sorry excuse for a sandwich, the next the guard is dead and the four of them are searching the body for the keys to the shackles. Once they got all of us free, they disappeared into the woods. I had a choice, sit there and get blamed for the whole mess, or take my chances alone. I figured I’d walk in the opposite direction and let fate decide where I landed.”

“You just landed another life sentence behind bars,” Trent rolled his eyes and looked at Paige. “Anything you want to know?”

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“Yeah,” Paige moved forward. “You said John planned the escape. When, if one minute you’re dining on that sandwich and the next the guard is dead?”

“He was whispering about leaving all day,” Stanley admitted. “At first, I thought it was just talk. I mean, what are the chances? Nobody breaks out and makes it for long. But he kept it up. Said he couldn’t live without his girl. The next thing I know, he jumps the guard and the other three joined in. I didn’t see exactly how that guy got dead, but I think one of them broke his neck. Then, they were gone and I was left to decide what to do. I bolted.”

“John needed his girl, but what about the other three?” Paige asked. “Did they say where they’d go if they got away?”

“No,” Stanley evaded and looked away.

“You know,” Trent leaned forward. “I get the feeling he’s lying.”

“Yeah,” Paige agreed. “I bet that Warden knows what Stanley here lives for. I bet if I asked him real nice like, he’d be more than happy to share the details. I wonder what life behind bars would be like without that favorite luxury.”

“You cops are all the same,” Stanley complained.

“I imagine you’re right about that,” Trent sat back. “So, what’s it gonna be, Stan? Loyalty to a bunch of guys that left you holding the bag, or you go back to the same life you left. It ain’t pretty but it’s yours.”

“None of them have a girl,” Stanley began. “Not that they mentioned. The three of them, they’re tight. They started talking about the Great Western. One of them said it runs all the way from Canada to Mexico. I don’t know where they went, I really don’t. But I’d start searching that trail if I were you.”

“Which one, Stan?” Trent pushed. “Canada or Mexico?”

“They were still fighting about that when they disappeared,” he looked away. “LeRoy wanted to head for Mexico. Brent said it had to be Canada. Darrin didn’t say. I don’t know, I don’t,” he insisted.

“Transports here,” Jericho announced. “Stanley,” he moved forward. “This is your last chance to do the right thing. Where are the three remaining men going? We’ve already got John trapped and they’re not with him. Where did they go?”

“It could be either,” he insisted. “If I say, it would just be guessing.”

“Then guess,” Trent pushed.

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“My guess would be Canada,” he admitted. “They didn’t say that, so I don’t want any trouble if I’m wrong. But Brent said the cops would expect them to go to Mexico. That’s why he was pushing for Canada. He thought they’d have a better chance of disappearing if they headed north.”

“You ready for us to head out?” two uniformed cops stepped into the doorway. “The Chief’s anxious to get this one into a box.”

“He’s ready,” Jericho motioned for them to take the prisoner.

“We had another guy follow us up,” the cop informed them. “He’s available to give you three a ride back to the scene if you want. We spotted your vehicles parked down there on the side of the road and thought you might need transpo once we relieved you of this guy.”

“That would be great,” Jericho answered for all of them. “I didn’t think to ask when I spoke to the chief.”

Paige, Trent, and Jericho were back at their vehicles in a matter of minutes. Jericho had pulled out a map of the area and they were searching it for the most likely route the remaining men would take to Canada.

“I just have to say,” Trent finally spoke. “We’re taking the word of a convicted criminal that, at the very least, watched while his buddies murdered their guard. Are we sure he’s not leading us astray? Can we be certain he’s not engaging in a little misdirection, so the three buffoons can sneak down to the border and slip into the Mexico?”

“No,” Jericho didn’t look up from the map. “Which is why Chief Strong is taking three of his men and half a dozen of you feds south to search that area as well. Feel free to peel off and join them if you think we’re on the wrong track here.”

“While you two fight this out,” Paige pushed away from the hood of the car. “I need to make a phone call.”

“Checking in with the old ball and chain?” Trent asked.

“Yep,” Paige said unfazed by the comment. She had promised Dax she’d call if she got the chance and she was going to keep her word.

“I saw you got your man,” Dax said in greeting.

“One of them,” Paige agreed. “We think three of them are headed to Canada. The last one is barricaded and surrounded by SWAT, so he’s not going anywhere.”

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“I heard that, too,” Dax admitted. “Sounds like you might be awhile.”

“Probably,” Paige agreed. “We have a lot of ground to cover but if our prisoner was telling the truth, we have a place to start.”

“Did it sound credible?” Dax wondered.

“It did to me,” Paige told him. “He could be lying, trying to give the others time to get away, but I don’t think so. If they were that close, I think he would have joined them. He strikes me as the loner type rather than a team player.”

“Be careful,” Dax couldn’t help but worry. Paige was out chasing killers.

“I’m always careful,” Paige said casually. “Brinkley’s with us. I don’t think you two met, but he was helping us on that baby theft case. The one with Sean’s sister.”

“Right,” Dax remembered that case well.

“He had news of the missing money from that plane that crashed,” she shifted to make sure the others couldn’t hear. “He said the widow received a huge sum of money in the form of a life insurance payout. But here’s the thing, the pilot never paid for life insurance. The geeks back at Quantico haven’t been able to trace it yet, but I think she may have been involved somehow. Brinkley has a man down in Texas keeping his eyes and ears open.”

“Hum,” Dax said evasively. “Sounds like you have a new lead.” He still planned to tell her everything, but he didn’t want to do it over the phone, and he didn’t want her distracted while she was chasing three dangerous men through the wilderness.

“Maybe,” Paige frowned in frustration. “If Carmen was home, I’d ask her to look into it, but I can’t bother her while she’s on some secret assignment to save the world.”

“It does pale in comparison when you put it that way,” Dax laughed.

“I gotta go,” Paige said abruptly. “Don’t wait up. I could be a while.”

“Zee is a little lost without Carmen,” Dax told her. “I talked him into coming over for an evening of guy time since you were busy. We might still be up when you get here. Until then, tell Jericho to take care of my cop.”

“Not likely,” Paige laughed. “See ya.”

“I love you, too,” Dax laughed as he disconnected then sobered thinking of the news Paige had shared. He’d have Zeus call Carmen. The guys were sure she’d handled it well enough and he didn’t doubt her. Carmen would have covered her tracks well, but it was worth another look just to be safe. He didn’t care if Paige discovered the truth, he would eventually tell her the entire story anyway. He did care about some fed he didn’t know. He also cared about the entire

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tech section of the Bureau back at Quantico. Carmen would care about that, too. Yeah, it was always better to be safe.

Paige made her way back to Jericho's vehicle. He was still studying the map, but this time Trent was explaining something.

"You two get it all hashed out?" Paige wondered.

"Yeah," Jericho folded up the map. "We're heading this way. Brinkley will let us know when to shift gears and alter our route."

Paige focused on her old friend and former colleague. "High praise. Jericho doesn't give up the reins easily."

"It's my charming personality," Trent grinned. "He can't resist."

"Right," Paige rushed to catch up with Jericho, who had passed the vehicles and was now waiting on the gravel road.

"We'll head north," Trent was serious now, he had clearly transitioned from relaxed to serious tracker. "I may veer off now and again. You don't need to follow. I'll let you know when I pick something up. In an area this populated, there are bound to be false hits — tracks that are fresh, but don't belong to our men."

"You can tell the difference?" Jericho wondered.

"Usually," Trent shrugged. "Not always, thus the warning. I might need to head in, leave the actual path and survey the area for clues before I know if we're heading in the right direction."

"Lead the way," Paige said cheerfully. She hung back a little, wanting to give Trent his space to work. Jericho matched his stride with hers.

"You get things squared with Gage?"

"Gage is fine," Paige insisted. "It makes it worse, knowing the suspect is out of reach."

"We'll get him," Jericho said confidently. "I take it you're not going to let that plane crash situation go. That's why you asked Agent Brinkley to keep his eyes and ears open."

"I did let it go," Paige disagreed. "I inactivated the case, we don't have any leads to follow at this point. But I haven't been able to close it and I know there was something inside that

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plane. Whoever took it knows what it was, and the cartel knows. I have a feeling, before this is all said and done, we'll all know."

"Trent is leaving the roadway again," Jericho focused up ahead. Brinkley had disappeared into the trees, Paige and Jericho patiently waited on the main trail. The agent returned almost immediately, shook his head, and continued forward. This same ritual continued for over an hour.

Paige stood, impatiently waiting for Trent to return from another excursion into the forest. She was tired, hot, and her feet were killing her. When Trent returned, she expected him to continue hiking, the same as he'd done every other time he returned from a wild goose chase. He didn't.

"I've got them," Trent approached the duo. "I spotted a new trail and the footprints are a match for one of our convicts."

"You couldn't possibly know that," Jericho disagreed.

Paige moved forward and followed Trent back into the trees. She crouched and studied the clean, undisturbed footprint among the other, less obvious prints. "He's right, we found them — or, at least their trail. Trent, lead the way."

"The route continues, in sort of a parallel path along the road," Trent advised. "They are probably sticking close to the road, feeling safer and more confident with the constant reminder they are headed in the right direction."

It was almost an hour later when the small group located their target. The fugitives were camped a few hundred yards from the road — not nearly far enough away to avoid detection. Trent and Paige held surveillance while Jericho slipped away to call in reinforcements.

"We've got men in position sixty yards to the north," Trent updated Jericho. "Are you guys set to the east?"

"Clayton and Havilland are set up in those trees about fifty feet to the east," Jericho confirmed. "They're ready on my go with one of the feds and two men from Gunnison."

"My guys just checked in," Chief Strong advised. "They have two feds and three of my officers set up to the west, about a hundred yards from camp. The terrain is difficult and they didn't dare go any further for fear the noise would tip them off."

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“Paige,” Jericho looked up. “You, Trent, Mike and Dean will head in from the south. I want this to be a coordinated attack. All sides converge as a cohesive unit and take them down hard. We know Barber didn’t have the weapon and Delaney is using an old rifle he found in the house. That means the likelihood that at least one of these three is armed, is high. Nobody gets dead, not on my watch.”

“I second that,” Chief Strong added softly. “I need to take this,” he motioned to his phone.

Within minutes Strong returned. His face was stone-cold and void of emotion. “The situation in the valley has concluded. John Delaney decided to come out shooting. He’s dead, one of my officers sustained injuries, but he should make a full recovery. Let’s take these three down and end this tonight.”

Margie’s voice came over the radio. Paige adjusted her earpiece until the message came through loud and clear. They had finally patched the radios and all the agencies could now communicate on one channel. Paige switched over and checked in.

“Get in position,” Jericho motioned to Paige.

Her team slowly made their way toward the target.

“On my mark,” Jericho’s voice sounded in Paige’s ear. “When I say go, everyone moves in. We know Team Bravo to the west will be slightly delayed. If the suspects head that way, Alpha, Delta and Charlie make sure you notify Bravo they have incoming.”

“Copy,” Paige answered for her team. She waited while she heard the acknowledgment from the other.

“No tackles,” Trent warned. “This one is different. We have three bogies and at least one is armed. We do this by the book, Carter.”

Paige shot him an annoyed look but just nodded in agreement. The man had always been bossy but thorough, it was just one of the many reasons he was the best. She knew, no matter what happened out here, Trent would have her back. She was sure he knew she would return the favor.

“Move in,” Jericho’s distinct voice echoed over the air. Dozens of cops converged on the small camp, determined to capture the three fugitive’s and return them to a cell where they belonged.

The first few seconds were pure chaos. The three men, who had been relaxing in front of a small campfire, jumped to their feet in surprise. One of them, Paige thought it was Darrin Benson, started to reach for something under his shirt — most likely the missing pistol. She didn’t have a chance to find out; within seconds, he was thrown to the ground from behind. His

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two friends were also faced down in the dirt, hands cuffed behind their backs, cops yelling over each other as they ordered their prisoners to keep their hands visible and remain on the ground. Not one of them moved an inch.

Paige currently had her left knee shoved into the back of LeRoy Harris. Trent tested the cuffs to make sure they were tightly secured then motioned for Paige to stand. As she got to her feet, she glanced around. Now that the dust had settled, she let out a sigh of relief. “That was almost too easy,” she softly complained to a small group that was huddled around the prisoner.

“Quick and clean,” Trent moved forward. “Just how I like it.”

“You might want to keep that little tidbit to yourself,” Lovato laughed. “It’s nothing to brag about my friend.”

“Men,” Paige rolled her eye and took a step back when Dean reached down and yanked LeRoy to his feet.

Dean quickly marched the prisoner out of the camp and dumped him unceremoniously into a waiting van. Smiling he returned to the group. “Ladies, I think my job here is done.”

“I suppose you’re going to take credit for that arrest,” Lo smirked.

“Nope,” Dean smiled back. “I think we should let the fed take the glory. That way, he gets to write the report.”

“That’s not necessary,” Trent began.

“Just accept it,” Paige patted him on the back. “We’re used to it. You wouldn’t want to confuse the locals with interagency cooperation, would you?”

“Then you do the report,” Trent called out.

“Nope,” Paige said over her shoulder. “I left the Bureau. I’m just a local now. I might not hit all the salient points. It’s been way too long and I already demonstrated I lost the book.”

Trent turned to focus on his agents and zeroed in on a man just a few feet from his location. “You,” he pointed at the guy. “This one is yours. Make sure the report is finalized by ten tomorrow morning. We’re moving out.” Brinkley smiled and winked at Paige when he saw her roll her eyes. He moved in beside her and slung an arm over her shoulder. “I’ve been at this long enough, I know how to play the game.”

“You always did,” Paige admitted. “Looks like this op is finally over.”

“Can’t complain,” Trent glanced around. “The good guys won this round. Hey, if I don’t see you before I go, it was a pleasure doing business — as always. You look good Carter, stay tight.”

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“You too,” Paige smiled at her old friend. “Stay safe and don’t be a stranger.”

She climbed into her vehicle and headed for home. Another win for the good guys.