

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Treacherous Kinship *Season 4, Episode 7*

by:

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“You made that up!” Paige insisted. She knew graveyards was more adventurous than the day shift, but Dean had to be exaggerating.

“Nope,” he shrugged and laughed. “I guess we’re just lucky she didn’t use the frying pan on his head.”

“Domestics are dicey,” Paige grinned. “I’ve always said you never know what you’re walking into, but that one takes the cake.”

“All in a day’s,” Dean shrugged, took a sip from his cup and scowled. “You call this sludge coffee?”

Paige took a sip from her own cup. “I’ve had worse. You need to work more day shifts, buddy. You take what you can get because if you wait for a fresh pot, you don’t get your coffee.”

“Naw,” Dean shook his head. “The dark agrees with me. I’ll stick to graves.”

Paige dumped some cash on the counter, held up her cup and pointed to Dean’s. “We took most of what was left, but you could use a fresh pot, Beth.”

“Thanks, hon,” Beth called back, slid the cash into the register and continued to ring up her customers. She liked knowing the local cops would stop by during her busy time to check on her. She offered the coffee for free, but they wouldn’t accept. Didn’t mean she’d stop trying. Convenience stores could be dangerous, her husband reminded her of that often enough, but she’d never be happy sitting behind a desk. She liked people, she loved this job; and, she had to admit, she enjoyed her daily interaction with the men and women in blue.

“Let’s ditch the stale brew and head over to Dirk’s for a real breakfast,” Dean suggested.

“I’m game,” Paige agreed. “You buying?”

“Not on your life,” Dean tossed his cup in the garbage. “I’ll meet you over there.”

“Deputy Carter,” Margie’s voice came over the radio. “Not so fast,” Paige called to Dean. “Go ahead dispatch,” Paige replied but remained focused on Dean. “I think you ditched the sludge a few seconds too soon.”

“I need you and Deputy Bridges to head to Highway eighty-nine, just south of town. There’s an accident, at least three cars are involved.”

“Injuries?” Paige asked, rushing around her vehicle.

“Unknown at this time,” Margie advised. “Do you want me to notify Fire?”

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“I’ll advise,” Paige decided. If there weren’t any injuries, there was no need to bring out the engines.

“Bridges,” Dean’s voice came over the air. “I’m enroute.”

“Copy,” Margie acknowledged. “I just received another call on this. Complainant says it all started with a hit and run. Maybe a pickup, maybe an SUV. No further at this time.”

“Copy,” Dean sighed. With that description they’d never locate the vehicle.

Minutes later, Paige pulled to stop in the southbound travel lane and flipped on her lights. They had a real mess on their hands. “Dispatch, myself and Bridges have arrived.”

“Copy,” Margie answered. “Zero-nine-thirty-eight.”

Paige had just exited her vehicle when a woman in her mid to late thirties rushed toward her.

Dean joined Paige and waited for the woman to reach them.

“We need an ambulance,” the woman said in greeting. “There’s a man in that truck over there with a head injury.” She pointed up the road, several yards to the north. “He’s lost a lot of blood. His wife got him into the back of the truck so he could lay across the seat, but she hasn’t been able to stop the bleeding. I tried to step in, but she wouldn’t let me.”

“Can you tell us your name, ma’am?” Paige asked.

The woman hesitated, trying to hear what the male officer was saying into the radio. Once she was sure he was calling for medical assistance, she refocused on the woman. “Um, Tracy. Tracy Cox.”

“Okay, Tracy,” Paige soothed. “I’m Deputy Carter. I need to go check on the injured man. Which car is yours?”

“Um,” Tracy looked around then pointed. “The white Camry.”

“Okay,” Paige put a hand on her shoulder. “I want you to go wait next to your vehicle. I’m going to head over and check on the others. I need Deputy Bridges to join me. Together we might be able to stop the bleeding. Before we do that, do you know what happened to the driver of this truck?” Paige pointed to a well-maintained Ford truck that was only a couple years old. The owner wouldn’t have abandoned it, unless he was the suspect.

“He...” she glanced around then pointed north. “There. He’s related to the others. They had a little boy, three, maybe four years old. He was upset, when he saw the blood and realized his father was hurt, he — well, basically he lost it. This guy, the driver of this truck was related. Grandpa, uncle, I don’t know. He took the little boy for a walk to calm him down.”

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Paige spotted a man and a young child walking away from the area. The man was holding the kids' hand and appeared to be talking to him. That could wait. "Okay, if you'll just head over —" She didn't finish the sentence. A shot rang out from the hills to the east. It was so close, she could actually hear the bullet wing by before it collided with a wooden fence post. She lunged for the woman. Dean did the same. Together they dragged a panicked Tracy behind the large pickup truck.

Dean basically shoved the woman onto the ground, positioning her behind the large tire. "Don't move," he ordered. "The engine block and the wheel will protect you. Don't move an inch, do you understand?" he wasn't sure she was listening. It was obvious the woman was in shock. "Tracy Cox?" he barked.

"Uh?" she screamed when another shot rang out and the window of the pickup shattered.

"Don't move," Dean ordered again. He turned to address Paige but waited. His fellow deputy was notifying dispatch they were taking fire. She had moved several feet away and was currently crouched at the back of the truck, trying to locate the sniper. "I need my rifle," he settled in beside her. "Can you see him?"

"No," Paige shifted her attention to Dean, "we need our rifles. How are you going to get from here to there without getting dead?"

"I have to try," he insisted. "We're sitting ducks out here and our handguns are useless."

"I agree," Paige glanced at the woman. Tracy hadn't moved an inch, maybe she'd actually stay there until the danger was over. "But we have to be smart about it. As soon as he fires the next shot, dart behind Tracy's Camry. That's the easy part. The challenge will be getting from the Camry to our vehicles."

"One obstacle at a time, Paige," Dean shifted, ready to move the instant the next shot sounded.

It was a good plan. One that might have worked if it wasn't for traffic. Everything happened so quickly they didn't have time to block off the roadway. The shot rang out, Dean darted behind the Camry and a teenager driving an old, beat-up Acura that had seen better days panicked, swerved, and collided with the back end of the Camry. The front panel struck Dean with so much force he catapulted through the air and landed in the middle of the roadway.

Dean hit the ground with so much force, Paige heard the thud and winced. She rushed to the Acura, determined the teen wasn't hurt — just dazed, and ordered her to stay sheltered inside the vehicle. Then, she rushed to Dean. He was unconscious but she had to get him out of the roadway. She had to find cover. She glanced up and realized she was only a few feet away from her own vehicle. She shifted, slid her arms under Dean's shoulders and started to pull. Tracy

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rushed in, grabbed Dean's legs and the two of them moved quickly, sliding in between Dean's car and Paige's.

"Thanks," Paige glanced up once Dean was settled back on the ground. "But that was dangerous. We told you to stay behind the truck."

"I'm a nurse," Tracy kneeled over Dean, pressed her hand to his neck and sighed in relief. "He has a pulse."

"Can you tend to him?" Paige wondered. She needed her rifle.

"I — " Tracy raised her arms over her head and screamed. Bullets rained down around them. The onslaught seemed to last forever.

Paige lunged forward, shielding Tracy's body with her own. They were on the ground, both of them covering Dean's body with their own. The shooter was now out of control. Bullet after bullet struck the surrounding area. Windows shattered, bullets bounced off the concrete and sliced through metal as the projectiles struck vehicle after vehicle. All Paige could think of was that poor, frightened teen she'd left in the car. She'd never forgive herself if the young girl didn't make it.

"It's a great unit," the man said. "You won't find one this age in better shape."

Dax studied the travel trailer for several seconds. He was pretty sure he'd toured at least fifty of the things over the past two days. None of them would work for what the team needed. This unit was in good condition, but it would take too much time and effort to alter the design and give them what they wanted. He waited until the man wasn't looking, then subtly shook his head and left the rest to Hawk.

"Thank you for your time," Hawk reached out a hand. He was a little annoyed they had to drive all the way out to Palisade Lake to see the trailer in the first place. "We still have a few more trailers to look at today. If we decide we're interested, I'll contact you later tonight."

Once they were back in the vehicle, maneuvering their way through the campsite, Dax sighed. "Maybe we should find a way to use some of that money and grab one from a dealership."

"I know you don't want to do that," Hawk shifted to study his friend's face. Dax was staring straight out the window. His right hand was draped over the steering wheel, his left resting on the door through the open window. He looked relaxed, but he wasn't. He was worried. "I agree with you. It's too risky. We can use some of the cash, if the rig only costs a

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few thousand but we won't find anything less than twenty at a dealership, that's going to raise a few eyebrows. It's a small town and people talk. We'll have better luck if we stick to private. Prices are better." Hawk frowned when he heard gun fire.

"Probably someone up in the hills target practicing," Dax knew that sound well.

After the second shot, Hawk started to frown. "It's closer," he rolled down his own window. After the third shot, he knew. "I want a better look. Take this road, I'll guide you in. I'm not sure that's target practice. If it is, they're too close to the road to be legal."

Dax shrugged and made a right turn onto a well-packed dirt road. He continued to follow Hawk's directions as they made their way north on what looked like a service road. When it came to shooting, there wasn't a man alive that was better than Hawk. The instant they heard rapid fire; they knew. Dax pressed on the gas, the vehicle shot forward, and they flew toward the danger.

Dax spotted the dust before he saw the vehicle. He had to swerve quickly to avoid a head-on collision. Seemed the truck was in a hurry. Well, so was Dax. He focused on the driver, wanting to get a good visual just in case this was their shooter. They had only gone a few more yards when Hawk ordered him to stop. Dax slammed on the brakes, the vehicle slid on the dirt then caught. The instant the truck stopped sliding, Hawk flung open the door and jumped to the ground.

"You're a maniac," Dax climbed from behind the wheel. "You know that, right?"

"Get your binoculars," Hawk ordered soberly. "And call Paige."

"I will," Dax snatched up a black case that held an expensive pair of high-powered Swarovski optics. "Maybe they can stop that guy that almost hit us, see if he's the sniper."

"Call her now," Hawk insisted. "Then take a deep breath."

"Why would I — " Dax froze at the sight below. His breath stuck in his throat, his stomach clenched, and he could barely hold himself upright through the panic. "Paige," he whispered. He recognized her truck. What was left of her truck, anyway?

"Call her," Hawk ordered. "Take a deep breath and call her."

The damage was horrendous. At least two dozen rounds had struck Paige's vehicle alone. The other truck, Dax thought it belonged to Gage or Dean, was partially blocked by her car, but what was visible was equally destroyed. He yanked out his cell phone and dialed Paige. "Voicemail," he tossed the device to the ground in disgust.

Hawk continued to study the area below. "Call her again."

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“She won’t answer,” Dax insisted. “Even if she’s not — ” he couldn’t say it.

“She’s not,” Hawk put a hand on Dax’s shoulder in support. “Call her again.”

Dax took a deep breath, leaned down and retrieved his phone. He waited then disconnected when he got voicemail again.

“Again,” Hawk pushed.

“What’s the point?”

“Because she’s probably busy at the moment,” Hawk was careful to keep his voice level. “If she saw it was you, she most likely thought ‘I’ll get back to him later’. If you keep calling, she’ll know it’s important and she’ll answer. Or, if the phone is in the car, she’ll see you called several times and it must be important and she’ll take a minute to call you back. Keep calling.”

“Fine,” Dax hit send again and started to pace. He couldn’t take his eyes off her vehicle. There was so much damage, if she was inside... he swallowed hard and hit send again.

Paige pushed her body into a sitting position and surveyed the area. The attack had stopped and the area was quiet now — eerily so. She tried to brush glass shards from Tracy’s hair but pulled her hand back when the woman raised her head and stared straight into Paige’s eyes. Paige felt sorry for the unlucky nurse. She hadn’t signed up for this. Tears rolled down Tracy’s dirt-streaked face, her eyes were wild, and her breathing was labored.

“Tracy,” Paige said softly. “I need you to calm down. Are you injured?”

“I...” she paused. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Good,” Paige put a supportive hand on Tracy’s thigh. “I know you’re terrified. I know this is the last thing you thought you’d be dealing with today. I need to check on Dean. You cannot go into shock. You’re a nurse, you know what will happen if you slip into shock. Take deep breaths and let them out slowly.” She frowned when her phone began to ring. She slid it from her pocket and saw it was Dax. He’d have to wait. She had more pressing things to deal with at the moment.

“He needs a doctor,” Tracy glanced at Dean. “If he’s still unconscious, he must have a serious head injury. Time is not on his side.”

“I’m not,” Dean opened his eyes and moaned. “I do have a killer headache though. What in the hell happened?”

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“You got hit by a car,” Paige moved forward and impatiently snatched up her phone. She glanced at the display, Dax again, she slid it back into her pocket and ignored it. “You hit your head pretty hard. Then the world erupted in gunfire. Are you hit?”

“I don’t think so,” Dean tried to sit up, but his head felt like it would explode.

“I need to go check on the teenager,” Paige wondered if this was a trap. Had the sniper stopped, reloaded and was right now waiting for someone — anyone — to surface so he could get a clean shot?

“Deputy Carter,” Margie’s voice came over the radio. “Medical is arriving, where do you want them to stage?”

“Tell them to hold back,” Paige decided. “We need to secure the area and make sure it’s safe before we bring unarmed responders into a hot zone.” Her phone chimed again but she ignored it. “Can you contact the sheriff? Tell him he has a man down. 10-85 bravo.”

Margie relaxed, Dean was injured but not seriously. “Copy, I’ll handle it.”

“Maybe you should answer that,” Dean suggested when Paige’s phone rang again.

“I’m a little busy here,” Paige growled, yanked out the phone and saw it was Dax again. She frowned, that wasn’t like him. “Hey, Dax. I’m in the middle of something, can I call you back?”

Dax felt his body relax. “Your sniper’s gone. It’s safe to move around. And, you have a terrified kid hyperventilating in an old Acura. You might want to check on her before she has a heart attack.”

“How do you know that?” Paige stood and started to turn in a circle, wondering where Dax was and what he knew about this. “Where are you?”

Dax would never be able to describe the overwhelming relief he felt the instant he spotted Paige. “To the east, if I had to guess, I’d say your two o’clock.”

Paige swung around and spotted two men on the hill. She held back a smile when Dax gave her an exaggerated wave. “What are you doing up there?”

“Hawk followed his nose,” Dax shrugged. “We’ve got your nest, babe. Hawk and I will hang here until you’ve finished your work down there and can join us.”

“Dean is injured, and I know we have one more injury from the crash,” Paige glanced toward the truck and spotted the older man and the boy crawling out of a nearby ditch. *Good thinking.* “Jericho is on the way, but he had a meeting out at Laurel Bluffs. It might be awhile before I can join you.”

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“I’ll maintain,” Dax hesitated. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” that’s when it hit her. Dax kept calling because he saw the destruction and he didn’t know if she was alive — or dead. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I didn’t know you were here,” Paige began. “I didn’t…”

“I know,” Dax assured her. “That’s why I kept calling. It’s not something I would normally do. I figured you’d realize that and get in touch.”

He sounded casual, but Paige knew it was an act. He’d been worried, she could tell just by the tone of his voice. “I’ll get up there as soon as I can. Right now, I need to check on the teen and the others.”

“Get the medics up here,” Dean couldn’t sit up, but he wasn’t helpless. “I’ll hang here with Nurse Nancy.”

“Tracy,” the woman corrected.

Dean smiled but remained focused on Paige. “You check on the man with the head wound.”

“First, I need to calm down a terrified teenager,” she smiled at Dean. “I’ll trade you places.”

“Wish I could,” Dean sobered. “I’m pretty sure my head is about to explode, though. Guess you better sooth the kid.”

“Dispatch,” Paige said into the radio. “Send in medical. Multiple injuries. I’ll take as many as I can get at this point.”

“Copy,” the air went silent for several seconds. “You have an EMT vehicle and two ambulances headed in now. They’ll assess and determine if they need additional manpower. Direct them to the most severe case and they’ll take it from there.”

“Copy,” Paige stepped around her vehicle just in time to intercept the EMTs. “I’m told there’s a man in the truck down there with a head wound. It happened in the initial crash. I never made it far enough to evaluate. I was headed that way when the gunfire started. Deputy Bridges is over there, sandwiched between our vehicles. He also has a head wound, but he’s coherent. I’ll see what I can do about the girl in the car.”

“I’ll head to the truck,” the driver told her. “The rig will come with me, Sam will stay here to deal with the deputy. Let me know if you need help with the teen. She looks shocky, but not injured — then again, I could be wrong. You never know until you know.”

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“I’ll advise,” Paige took a deep breath and started for the car. She was about to make contact when she spotted Jericho. Logan and Havi pulled in behind him. She considered, then decided Jericho could wait. She reached out, pulled open the door and focused on the girl. “Are you hurt?”

The girl continued to suck in air and frantically slapped at the seatbelt release.

Paige crouched down and took the girl’s hand in hers. “Hey,” she soothed. “I need to know if you’re hurt. Look at me. Just me. You need to take slower breaths. In... out... in... out.”

“I...” she hiccupped through violent sobs.

“What’s your name?” Paige asked, hoping to draw her attention away from the panic.

“Bianca,” she choked.

“Okay, Bianca,” Paige reached across her body and released the seatbelt. “Can you move? Do you think you can get out of the car? I need to make sure you haven’t been injured.”

“I...” she took another long breath. “Okay.” She slowly slid one leg around, then the other. Her entire body was shaking uncontrollably.

“How are you feeling?” Paige asked. “Any pain? Did you hurt yourself when you crashed into the car? Any dizziness?”

“No,” Bianca shook her head. “I’m not hurt. I’m okay.”

“Good,” Paige relaxed. She was studying the vehicle and realized it didn’t have one bullet hole. Bianca wasn’t the target — just a traumatized witness.

Jericho stood back and waited for Paige to deal with the upset teen. The area looked like a war zone. And, it didn’t escape his notice the bulk of the damage was directed at his deputies. *Was this personal? A madman who just wanted to take out a cop?* In all the chaos, nobody seemed to have seen anything. Margie had reports of maybe a truck, maybe a sports utility vehicle, maybe a man, maybe middle aged, maybe in his twenties. Once the shooting began, that’s all anyone focused on. It would be a miracle if they tracked down the shooter at all.

Paige escorted Bianca to the EMTs then headed for her boss. “I need to get up on the hill.”

“Because?” Jericho glanced up and spotted two men.

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“That’s Dax and Hawk,” Paige responded to his frown. “They found the nest. The spot where the sniper set up to ambush us. I need to process it, see if there are any clues up there...” she glanced around. “Because there aren’t any down here.”

“Where is Dean?”

“Over there,” she pointed to her car. “The EMT is making sure he’s stable before they transport.”

“Let me have a word,” Jericho sighed. “Then we’ll head up and see what the boys have.”

Paige pulled in behind Dax’s SUV and took a few seconds to look around. It was a good hiding place. She couldn’t even see the vehicle from below. She was studying the ground when Dax moved in beside her. “I assume that was you.” She pointed to the tire tracks in the dirt.

“Yeah,” Dax shrugged. “We were in a hurry. Gunfire tends to generate that reaction. Well, it does for us.” He reached out and ran a hand down her arm. He needed the contact. “The truck slid a bit before I got it stopped. You okay?”

“Yeah,” Paige sighed. “I don’t — ”

Jericho stepped forward. “I’m heading down,” he motioned to the side where the ridge tapered off and flowed into a stand of trees. “Hawk says that’s where our man set up.” He glanced at Dax then back to Paige. “You two take a minute, this can wait.”

Paige watched him walk away. She knew he was giving her permission to take a personal moment with her husband. The instant he faded into the trees, she turned back around and placed her hands on either side of Dax’s face. “I’m fine.”

Dax silently studied her face, then pulled her against him and wrapped his arms around her in a desperate hug. They stood there for several seconds before Dax pulled back and pressed his forehead to hers. “You scared me.”

“I know,” Paige straightened then linked her hand with his. “Sorry.”

“I know,” Dax gave her hand a quick squeeze then the two of them headed for the tree line where her boss had just disappeared.

“Well,” Dax studied the spent casings that covered the ground. “Apparently nobody taught the man to police his brass.”

“Not military,” Hawk agreed. “And the gun jammed.”

“What makes you think so?” Paige wondered. “It would explain the time lapse. I wondered why he let me pull Dean to safety once he was injured. We were out in the open, he had to have a clean shot at one of us, but he didn’t take it. It all happened fast, just a few seconds tops. Dean

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went flying and landed in the road. I rushed out and the nurse helped me get him situated between our vehicles. Then the world exploded.”

“You lost me,” Hawk glanced at Dax and knew this was going to be difficult to hear, but they needed to know.

Paige explained the events and the delay while she pulled Dean to safety, ending with bullets flying everywhere.

“And he focused on the patrol vehicles,” Jericho added.

“So,” Dax considered. Knowing how close Paige had come to getting shot, then the risk she took to save Dean, was giving him a bad moment but he had to put it aside. “The target was either you, Dean, or the nurse.”

“I’d have to agree,” Jericho nodded. “But the nurse, by all accounts, is a happily married woman with a young family. Her kids are in elementary school, she had just dropped them off and was headed for work when all of this happened.”

“And her husband?” Hawk wondered. “Anything in his job or personal life that might set someone off?”

“We’ll have to look into it,” Paige moved toward the pile of casings. “But so far, no. Now, explain how you know the gun jammed?”

“I can see a bullet in that pile of brass,” Hawk shrugged. “Once you retrieve it, take a close look. Odds are good you’ll find some slight scraping from when it jammed and then cleared. Regardless, a live bullet among the empty casings tells me the gun jammed.”

“We’ll get forensics up here once they’ve finished down on the highway,” Jericho advised.

“There might not be a target,” Dax hesitated.

“Meaning?” Paige asked.

“The target might be cops in general,” Dax frowned. “His goal could be to kill a cop, any cop, he might not care who it is.”

“I thought of that,” Jericho admitted. “I don’t like it, but it’s possible. Makes investigating difficult, though. If Paige or Dean was the target, it gives us something to look into. Random gives us nothing.”

“Targeted doesn’t give us much,” Paige disagreed. “I’ve been in law enforcement more than a decade. There are innumerable cases, not just during my time out here, but also when I was chasing serial killers for the FBI, that are controversial. I couldn’t begin to narrow down suspects at this point.”

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“We saw a guy leaving the area in a hurry,” Dax provided. “A guy in an old white truck.”

“Witnesses told Margie it was a truck that started all of this,” Jericho considered. “They also said it could have been an SUV.”

“What did start this?” Hawk asked.

“Hit and Run,” Paige moved forward and crouched to get a closer look at something on the ground.

“Did you find something?” Jericho asked.

“Cigarette butt,” Paige stood. “I need my bag.”

“I’ll get it,” Dax offered and headed back to the vehicles. He needed a few minutes alone to settle his nerves. Paige could have died today. One slight deviation, one lucky shot, and he would have lost her. Knowing that, having it shoved in his face this way, was a little unnerving.

“He’s worried about you,” Hawk watched Dax leave.

“I know,” Paige frowned, “but, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You didn’t see him,” Hawk continued. “Dax is good under pressure. He’s the coolest, most level-headed man I know. This shook him. Seeing the damage down there nearly leveled him. I know this is going to keep you busy and you’ll probably take a few risks before it’s all done. Just remember you’re married now. You have a husband who loves you.”

“I’m well aware of that, Hawk,” Paige grumbled.

“Try to remember you’re his entire world,” Hawk added.

“He’s right, seeing the destruction down there would have been like a punch to the gut,” Jericho thought about Chaya. Paige understood loss, but he wasn’t sure she understood the kind of loss a person felt when the love of their life was suddenly and violently taken from them.

“Speaking of that,” he turned to face Hawk. “Why are you here, anyway?”

“Hawk recognized the shooting as a problem — we scoped the problem,” Dax provided as he handed Paige her go-bag.

“I’m not biting,” Jericho scowled. “Those first few shots could have been target practice. It’s common in this area.”

“I agree,” Hawk shrugged. “At first, we shrugged it off as reckless fun.”

“But?” Paige asked.

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“But I wanted to be sure,” Hawk glanced at the casings. “It was too close to the road and I had a bad feeling, plus the timing... well, it piqued my interest. Could have been someone serious about their target practice, I didn’t think so. Like I said, too close the road and the rounds were carefully executed. Anyone that careful and calculating would know the laws and wouldn’t draw unnecessary attention to himself. He shot, then waited a few seconds like he was readjusting and focusing in, then took another shot. Those first three were precision shooting. The last was a temper tantrum, in my humble opinion.”

Paige was going over the entire incident in her head. “It fits,” she decided. “Dean and I arrived, and the nurse approached us immediately. We were gathering information from her — right out in the open — when the first shot rang out.” She began to pace the area. “This spot — it’s not that far away. It could be two men working together, one to set up and get into position up here, the other to cause the crash.”

“To set up the ambush,” Dax nodded.

“Or,” Jericho added. “It could be one man acting alone. He could have been the driver and that’s why he’s so close to the road. Cause a little hit and run, speed away, and slide your truck into those trees over there. If he had the gun ready to go, it wouldn’t take long to set up and fire that first shot. From the reports the initial contact with the Camry was basically a PIT maneuver. She lost control, struck the first truck, which slid into the second truck. A few seconds later you have a chaotic scene in desperate need of a cop. It was well executed — like a pro.”

“A pro could do it easy enough,” Hawk agreed. “But this guy’s not a pro.”

“You sure about that?” Paige asked.

“Positive,” Hawk moved to stand on the edge of the tree line, parallel to where the shooter set up. “If I wanted to take out a cop — or two — I wouldn’t set up here. Over there you’ve got a cleaner shot, the vehicles are obstructing from this angle, ten feet to the north, they’re still obstructed, but I could make the shot. The angle’s better.”

“And,” Dax joined his friend, “then there’s the weapon. A pro would use a .308 not a .223.”

“And a pro wouldn’t have missed,” Hawk added. “He had a shot of you and Bridges, the nurse too — if you still want to include her in the mix. He had a clean shot before you even knew he was up here. A pro could have eliminated all three of you while you stood out in the open chatting, then drove away clean. This wasn’t the work of a pro.”

“I agree,” Jericho glanced around. “A pro wouldn’t have left that, either.” He pointed to the array of casings scattered around the area.

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“No,” Hawk focused on the sheriff. “This was personal and, unless you find some nefarious dealings with the nurse or her husband, the target was one — or both — of your deputies.”

“And the job wasn’t finished,” Dax realized. He focused on Paige. “You’re still in danger.”

“If he was after me,” Paige sighed and relented. “And, yeah, I know with my background, especially the FBI stuff, that I’m the likely choice. If he’s after me, it’s going to take time to figure out who. I’ve worked a lot of cases throughout my career. All those files, it’s a ginormous haystack, I’ll never find the needle.”

Jericho focused on Dax. “There’s another possibility.”

“I thought of that,” Dax nodded. “I’ll meet with the team as soon as we’re finished here. We’ll see if there’s anyone nearby that we may have pissed off.”

“Focus on spouses or loved ones,” Jericho suggested. “If they have a beef with you but they’re after Paige, it might follow you took out their spouse and they want to reciprocate.”

“Right,” Dax’s mind was racing. There were so many possibilities. The most obvious one was something none of them had thought of because they didn’t know it was a possibility.

Paige turned to Dax. “I know you had a busy day planned today. I’m going to be at least an hour up here, maybe two. Why don’t you and Hawk head back to the Center? I’ll stop in once I’ve cleared here and conduct an official interview with both of you.”

“Good idea,” Jericho focused on Hawk. “Seems you know your stuff. I assume you have experience — as a marksman?”

“I do,” Hawk nodded.

“Mind if we keep you on tap?” Jericho asked. “I’m hoping we can catch this guy before he strikes again but if not — ”

“I’ll be here,” Hawk agreed. “Whatever you need.”

“Thanks,” Jericho smiled. “Go ahead and take off. I’m sure you have top secret training ops to plan.”

Dax took Paige’s hand and grinned at her scowl. “Walk me to the car.”

“Why?” Paige tried to pull away.

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Dax leaned forward and whispered close to her ear. “Because you’re my wife and you’re contractually obligated.” He gave her earlobe a gentle nip before he turned and pulled her forcefully toward the trees.

“I’m working,” Paige protested.

The instant they were out of the sight, Dax grabbed Paige around the waist and sandwiched her between his body and a nearby tree. He pressed his mouth to hers in a desperate and wild kiss. After a few seconds, it turned loving, then he shifted and deepened the kiss into a passionate promise of more. Finally, he stepped back.

Paige took several seconds to calm her breathing and her racing heart. The man had moves. With very little effort, he could take her breath away while leaving her frustrated and on the verge of begging — for more. She narrowed her eyes at him when she realized he was grinning. It was a satisfied cat just ate the canary grin. “No kissing,” she hissed. “I’m working here.”

The grin turned into a huge smile, amusement sparkled in his eyes. “Me too. I’ll be at the Center until fourteen hundred, then we have another appointment.”

“I’ll make it long before then,” she assured him. She slugged him in the stomach when he leaned in and gave her another quick peck on the lips before turning to walk away. She nearly missed; he was that quick. She shook her head, turned and headed back to the scene. She had work to do.

“Alright, spill,” Hawk demanded. He was driving now. They had made their way back to the highway and were speeding toward town.

“There’s another possibility we didn’t discuss up there,” Dax turned and gave his friend a grim, worried look. “Contreras.”

Hawk’s eyes widened in surprise. “I didn’t think of that. It’s his MO, but we’ve been careful. There is no way he knows we have his cash.”

“You sure about that?” Dax asked. The men had spent a lot of money while he was away on his honeymoon. It was time to double check. He had to make sure they covered their tracks and laid enough breadcrumbs that anyone that did come looking would find a logical explanation for the sudden influx in the budget.

“I’m sure,” Hawk said confidently. “Carmen handled it, but I checked her work. I did a search. There’s nothing to find, nothing Contreras has the ability to find. We’re covered, Dax. I just don’t see how he could know.”

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“He’d go after Paige first,” Dax pushed. “Paige and Jaimie. Contreras is smart enough to know he couldn’t hit any of us directly. We have training and experience. His goons are hacks. But he could hit Paige. Today proved just how vulnerable she is when she’s working.”

“We’ll take another look,” Hawk decided. “I’ll have Zeus call Carmen in. We’ll sit down and go over everything just to make sure, but I don’t see it. It feels personal to me. I think someone’s been harboring a grudge. The question is ‘against who’ and only Dean or Paige will be able to figure that one out.”

The instant they arrived at the Training Center; Dax locked himself in his office. An hour later, he had a detailed drawing of the driver of the truck completed and ready to distribute. *None too soon*, he thought when he heard the impatient knock on his door. “It’s open,” he called out.

Zee and Carmen stepped into the office. “Hawk tells me you have doubts about my work,” Carmen said as she dropped into one of his comfortable visitor chairs. “Don’t. I’ve covered my tracks and then I covered them again. Nobody, not even the hot-shot geeks at Quantico, could follow the money. I’m just that good.”

Dax smiled. “I know you are that good, but someone took a shot at Paige this morning and I need to be sure it’s not our not-so-friendly drug lord south of the border.”

Hawk stepped in, spotted the drawing on top of the desk and picked it up. He studied it for several seconds then dropped it back on the desk in front of Dax. “He had a scar over his right eye.”

“What?” Dax let his gaze skim the drawing again. “I didn’t see a scar.”

“Because you were too busy playing chicken with a madman,” Hawk settled into a chair. “Trust me, there was a scar. Ran just above the eyebrow.” He closed his eyes and tried to call up the image. “Jagged, not smooth, about three quarters of an inch long, no more than an inch tops.”

Dax pulled the image toward him, hesitated, then added a scar.

Hawk nodded once. “Better.”

Wooly stepped into the office, glanced around, then took a seat. Vato followed and did the same.

“Alright,” Dax began. “Now that we’re all here, I want to start by discussing the shooting that occurred this morning.” He outlined what happened and his concerns. “Carmen, I know you’re confident in your work and I don’t want to offend you, but I need you to go over it one more time. I need to be sure Contreras is not the one taking shots at my wife.”

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“I’ll double check it, but it’s not him,” Carmen assured him. “I’m sure of it. I’ve been watching his organization for several months now — for Paige. She wants to know if Scratch lands back here in Manti. I’ve been keeping an eye out for him and the others. I haven’t detected any activity from Contreras, not here in Utah.”

“Wooly,” Dax shoved the drawing toward him. “Run it. See if you can identify him. You’ll need to take a copy. I have to give that one to Paige. She’s going over her old cases and Jericho wants Dean to do the same once he’s released from the hospital. I know I could be wrong. I hope I am wrong, and this has nothing to do with us. I hope that man can be linked to a previous case one of them worked years ago. I just need to cover all the bases.”

Ken stood, snapped a photo with his phone then pushed the drawing back to Dax. “That’s all I need. I’ll get on it. He doesn’t look familiar. I’m fairly confident this guy doesn’t belong to Contreras. If he does, he’s new. I’ll check, but I have to agree with Carmen on this one. We’re headed down the wrong road here. We have to follow it, but I don’t expect to find anything. I think this one is going to lead back to one of the cops. Or, it’s just a crazed madman that wants to take out a cop and he doesn’t care which one.”

“Where are we at on the trailer?” Vato considered the topic of Paige closed and decided to move on. “Has this scared you enough you’re bagging the plan we all agreed on?”

“What plan is that?” Dax focused on Vato with barely contained anger.

Vato squirmed, a little. Dax had that effect on people — especially when he was pissed. Right now, he was livid. “The plan to use some of the cash to purchase a decent unit rather than settling for some handy POS.”

“We didn’t agree on that,” Hawk stepped in. “We agreed to use the remaining legitimate funds and buy something that actually fit into the budget.”

“We could get a better unit if we just used the cash and found something on a lot,” Vato pushed. “We all know it. If Dax was still lounging on a beach with his new wife, you wouldn’t hesitate.”

“You’re wrong,” Hawk headed Dax off. “We used the funds as we needed but we were cautious. Flashing thirty thousand at some used trailer lot might be easier, but it wouldn’t be cautious. In fact, it would be stupid. I don’t do stupid.”

Vato jumped to his feet.

“Sit down,” Dax ordered. “The unit we’re looking at this afternoon looks promising. I did a little research. The floor plan is about as perfect as you can get. We’ll still have to do a little remodeling, but the price is right, and the layout is right. If the condition is right, we’ll make an offer and this task will be finished. We need to discuss the upcoming session. We only have one

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week before the men start to arrive. This first go-around has to be perfect. We want return customers and that means the client goes home happy.” He glanced up at the soft knock on the door. “It’s open.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Paige pushed the door open and leaned against the door jamb. “I can see you’re busy. Maybe I could borrow Hawk first. It should give you enough time to finish up this meeting.”

Hawk stood. “I’m up to speed. We can discuss anything I missed on our way to check out the trailer this afternoon.”

“Alright,” Dax nodded and waited for Hawk to leave the room.

“Okay,” Paige settled into one of Dax’s soft leather chairs. “Hawk took me through what happened this morning. I just need you to walk me through what you remember, and I’ll get out of your hair.”

Dax pushed his chair back, away from the desk. “Come over here,” he held back a grin.

“No,” Paige frowned. “This is official business, Dax. I’ll conduct it from here.”

“Alright,” he snatched the drawing off the desk and opened a drawer on his desk. “I was going to give you some information, but I guess it’s not important.”

“What information?”

“You’ll have to come over here, next to me, if you want to see it,” he waited. It only took five seconds. She was up and around the desk holding out her hand. Dax reached around and gently began to run his palm up the inside of her leg. He was only a couple inches above her knee when she swatted it away. He chuckled, feigned surrender, and pressed his knuckles into the back of her knee. When her leg buckled and she started to waver, he pulled.

Paige tried to stifle the laugh but failed. She landed in Dax’s lap with an ungraceful thud. “I’m still working. This is an official interview, Dax. Let me up.”

“Take a break,” he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. “I miss having you all to myself twenty-four hours a day. Our honeymoon wasn’t nearly long enough.”

Paige managed to sit up but, when she pushed forward and tried to stand, Dax stopped her. She shifted but hesitated when he slid the drawing of a man in front of her. “What’s this?” She was suddenly serious.

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“The man driving the truck,” Dax knew he had her attention, but it wouldn’t last long. Any second, she’d remember where she was sitting and insist on moving. “I sketched it for you, Hawk added a few details as well. It’s as close as we’re going to get to the man that nearly wiped us out. We only saw him for a few seconds.

Paige shifted and looked at Dax in amazement. “You drew this? You got a quick look at the guys face when he drove past, and you drew this — from that?”

“Yeah,” Dax shrugged. “It would be sharper if I hadn’t been dodging, trying to avoid a collision, but it’s close enough.”

She studied it for a few more seconds. “I don’t recognize him. I’ve been going over cases in my mind all day, thinking about the ones that might come back on me. There are some — there’s almost always a relative, or a loved one, that’s convinced we got the wrong guy. Their brother, father, mother wasn’t capable of the horrible things we accused them of doing. They cling to the belief we messed up, have the wrong guy. Usually, they turn that anger, that denial, onto us. We become the bad guy. I learned to deal with it pretty early on. You have to. This picture — it’s not someone I remember.”

“Take it,” Dax offered. “Maybe Dean will recognize him. Maybe it’s not you, after all.”

“I’d like to say that would be a relief,” Paige set the paper on the desk and turned to face Dax. “I don’t think it matters. Me, Dean, the nurse — it doesn’t matter who. The guy we’re looking for didn’t care if he killed other people as long as he hit his mark. He failed, which means he’ll come after us again. I know you’re worried about me. I know there’s nothing I can do to ease that concern, or to spare you all the stress. All I can do is say I’m sorry for it.”

“I know there’s a risk,” Dax spoke softly. “Every time you walk out the door, I know, and I accept that. I thought I understood. I was a soldier. I marched into battle willingly, knowing the risks, knowing I might not come home. It’s different on the other side. I don’t think I truly understood what I put my family through every time I headed off on another secret mission. Standing on that ridge today, seeing what was done to your vehicle, not seeing you, not being able to contact you — ”

“I know,” Paige settled in closer and rested her head on his shoulder. “How can I make it easier? Because this one worries me, Dax. We’re dealing with a dangerous man — one that didn’t leave me any clues to follow. And, he’s not done.”

Dax smiled. “That’s not your job. It’s your job to chase down the bad guys and stop them. You will stop this one, and I’ll be home waiting for you once you do. You have accepted my past, my secret missions for Nathan, and this training center. I accept you. I accept all of you. Just don’t take to many risks. Promise me you’ll be careful. I love you, Paige. I don’t think I can manage without you.”

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Paige stood, leaned forward, placed a hand on each arm rest, and trapped him in the chair. She studied his face, wanting to ease the worry she saw there. Instead, she brushed a gentle kiss over his lips. “Same goes.” She moved back to the visitor’s chair. “Now, run me through what happened this morning and don’t leave anything out.”

He waged a silent war within himself but, in the end, his need to protect her won. He knew he should tell her all about the money, his fear Contreras was behind all of this because his team stole the maniac’s money, and the danger she could face because of it. He knew it was a lead, one she’d insist on following. He also knew, if he confessed it all now, she’d be distracted. She’d be upset with him, furious he kept it from her and distracted. He couldn’t risk it. Her job was too dangerous at the moment, Paige needed a clear head, revealing something that would interfere with her concentration could be deadly. No, confessing his sins would have to wait. He just hoped he hadn’t already waited too long. Couldn’t be changed. For now, duty called. He took a deep breath and began to describe his morning.

Paige made her way down the long hallway and tried to ignore the smell of — hospital. She failed. Dean’s room was easy to find, he had a uniformed officer standing guard outside. She flashed her badge and ID then stepped inside the room. The first thing she noticed was Jericho sitting casually on the couch reading a magazine.

She crossed the room and dropped down next to him. “Anything new? Other than the armed guard outside.”

Jericho set the magazine aside and focused on Dean. “The doctor wanted to keep him overnight. He’s pretty sure the kid just has a severe concussion. They gave him a heavy dose of pain meds then sedated him. He’s out for the night. You might as well head home, too. Logan and Havilland have the city covered. Lovato will be working the graveyards with Gage. This can wait until morning.”

“Where did you get the cop?” Paige wondered. “I didn’t recognize him.”

“Laurel Bluffs,” Jericho admitted. “Chief Beckett called, wanted to know what he could do to help. With Dean out cold for the night, I wanted someone watching over him just in case.”

“Good thinking,” Paige agreed. “Are you going home?” Paige wondered.

“Yeah,” Jericho settled back. “Soon.”

Paige pulled out the drawing Dax created and passed it to Jericho.

“Who is this?”

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“The man Dax and Hawk saw speeding away.” Paige sighed. “Could be nothing, could be our sniper. I wanted Dean to look at it, see if he recognizes the man because I didn’t — don’t. He doesn’t look familiar to me. I may forget names, but I remember faces and I’m fairly certain I’ve never seen that one before.”

“Put it away until morning,” Jericho handed the drawing back to her. “Dean will be awake and you can run it by him. Go home, Paige.” He stood. “I’ll walk you out.”

“And you’ll go home, too?” she wondered.

“I will.”

The following morning Paige, once again, made her way down the long corridor that lead to Dean’s room. She wasn’t at all surprised to see Jericho was already there.

“Paige,” Dean pushed his body into a sitting position.

“You look better,” Paige moved forward and settled onto the couch. “How do you feel?”

“Head still aches, but mostly I’m fine,” Dean frowned. “The doc said he’d release me this morning, but no word yet on when.”

Paige pulled the sheet of paper out and handed it to Dean. “Dax and Hawk saw that guy speeding away from the area after the shooting. I don’t recognize him, do you?”

Dean frowned and studied the drawing closely. “Maybe,” he glanced up and locked eyes with Jericho. “He resembles someone I knew once. I haven’t seen him in years, and I could be wrong, but — ”

“Who?” Jericho was afraid he already knew the answer.

“Harold Kingsley had a lot of relatives,” Dean handed the sketch back to Paige. “This could be a brother or a cousin. He did have a brother, what was his name? Evan, no Ethan. Ethan Kingsley. This could be him. I never actually met him, just saw him a few times at... well, I saw him.”

“Paige,” Jericho continued to watch Dean. “Step outside.”

“Huh?” Paige was focused on the sketch but looked up in surprise at the request. “Why?”

“Because your boss told you to,” Jericho said impatiently.

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Paige looked from Jericho to Dean and, scowling, made her way to the entrance. She let the door close behind her, but immediately began to pace. Every few seconds she would glance through the window, curious and angry that she'd been ordered out of the room like a child. Dean and Jericho were engaged in a heated debate for several minutes before Jericho motioned for Paige to return.

"Before you say anything," Jericho jumped in. "Dean is going to share some sensitive and highly personal information with you. It does not leave this room. He thinks you need to know everything if you're going to investigate.

Interesting, Paige thought. "You can trust me."

"If I didn't believe that," Jericho frowned, "we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"I'm not entirely sure that is Ethan Kingsley. Harold came from a big family and there were lots of cousins, uncles and nephews."

"Why does that name sound familiar to me?" Paige wondered.

"It should," Jericho laughed. "The man killed at least fifteen women before he got dead himself."

"Right," Paige moved to the couch and slowly lowered herself onto the cushions. "He was murdered by his own son. I didn't work the case. I was knee-deep in the Blue Mountain Butcher case at the time. Sean worked it, though."

"I didn't realize," Dean frowned and wondered how much the fed remembered.

"Even if Sean recognized you from the case, he'd never say a word," Paige assured him. "How were you connected? I don't remember the name Bridges with that one."

"My family officially changed our names," Dean admitted. "The whole ordeal was such a fiasco and the media was relentless. After the case closed, we all petitioned the court together and then had the records sealed. Bridges was my mother's maiden name."

"I'm ordering you to keep that to yourself, Paige," Jericho supplied.

"Right," Paige growled. "Because I was going to head on over to the local news station and give them a hot scoop. Utah cop changed name after controversy details at ten."

"Both of you stop," Dean said quickly. Jericho was about to erupt; it was written all over his face. "I trust you and I need you to know what happened. I guess, in a twisted, illogical way, it might explain the reason that man took a few shots at us. Well, it might if it's a relative of Howard Kingsley."

"Go ahead," Paige settled back and waited.

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“Like I said, mom’s family name was Bridges. My father was a Clawson.”

“As in Mandy Clawson?” Paige asked, surprised.

“She’s my sister,” Dean admitted.

“That makes James Clawson your father,” Paige realized. “But he was exonerated. The son did it,” Paige frowned.

“To protect Mandy,” Dean reminded her. “And Harold’s family never believed he killed those girls, or that Allen killed his own father. They still blame my family for all of it.”

“That’s more common than you might think,” Paige told him. “People don’t want to believe the person they love is capable of such horrific, inhumane acts. They live in denial long after the evidence proves they’re guilty.”

“As you probably know,” Dean continued. “Kingsley tried to abduct Mandy. She was dating his son, Allen, at the time. She left his house and was walking home when Harold attacked her. You might not know I was the one that stepped in and saved her. It was dumb luck, really. I was seventeen and working a part-time job for the summer. One of the guys called in sick and I had to stay and work instead of heading out of town to party with my friends. We closed up, I headed home and came around the corner to see Harold struggling to load Mandy into the back of his van — she was fighting like a caged alley cat. I would have beat the man to a bloody pulp if it wasn’t for Mandy. She was hysterical. I got her home and my dad went nuts.”

“Did you guys report the assault?” Paige wondered.

“Yeah,” Dean sighed. “For all the good it did. Dad was ready to head straight to the Kingsley farm and kill Harold that night. Mom talked him down and called the cops. Mandy was a mess and not a good witness. Harold denied everything. As a family, we finally decided to focus on Mandy and drop the charges.”

“Why couldn’t you do both?” Jericho wondered.

“Mandy couldn’t handle it,” Dean admitted. “She was dealing with too much. Not just the attack, but an attack by her boyfriend’s father. She really liked Allen, but she couldn’t stand being around him. She finally refused to see him. The idea of facing him and his father in court really freaked her out.”

“And then Harold ended up dead and your family became the prime suspects in his murder,” Paige realized.

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“Yeah,” Dean agreed. “And the cop remembered dad’s demeanor and his comments the night we reported the attack. He threatened to kill Harold. It was all they needed. They focused in on dad and didn’t look at anyone else.”

“Sean did tell me that,” Paige admitted. “We talked our cases through — often, even when we weren’t working together. We met up and talked through the Kingsley case. Sean was out on an island and needed confirmation he was headed in the right direction — the rest of the team disagreed with his assessment but he couldn’t let it go. He told me the locals zeroed in on someone, but he didn’t think they had the right guy. If I recall, he also said a family member did most of the real investigating before the Feds were called in.”

“It was me,” Dean admitted. “I think that’s when I decided to become a cop. Dad was charged with homicide and his attorney hired a PI, but the guy was green. We were working together to clear dad’s name. I think it was more luck than talent, but once we started looking, we realized — almost immediately — Harold had to be responsible for all the missing girls. We knew we were right once we located the cave. That’s when we notified dad’s attorney. Dad didn’t kill Harold, but someone did — he was dead. The attorney was the one that called it in to the FBI.”

“You located the cave?” Paige asked. “The one Harold kept the girls locked up in while he tortured and abused them?”

“We found it,” Dean admitted. “I knew if I found any evidence alone it would be tainted. I was the son of the accused. I never went anywhere without the PI. We found it, knew immediately it was some kind of prison. The PI spotted a huge lock of blonde hair. We backed away, careful not to disturb anything and contacted the lawyer. The FBI showed up the next day. I think the attorney put some pressure on someone and left my name out of it completely to keep it clean.”

“He must have,” Paige nodded. “It would have stuck out if the son of the man accused of killing Harold located the bat cave.”

“Right,” Dean agreed. “I do know the PI submitted his report and left me out altogether. He said I was a minor and my identity had to be protected. Anyway, the Kingsley’s refused to believe Harold had a part in the disappearance and murder of fifteen girls. You said women, but they were only kids. They accused dad’s attorney of planting evidence to frame Harold. Insisted Allen was innocent, and Mandy made the whole thing up. Every day one member of the family or another was on the news screaming about corruption, cover-ups and misdirection. The media ran with it. I suppose it pushed up the ratings. Nobody seemed to care they were ruining the lives of innocent victims.”

“You said you didn’t change your name until after,” Paige remembered. “Why did you wait? Why not move in the middle of it all and change your name, start a new life?”

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“I was determined to go to the trial,” Dean admitted. “I was the only one but I had to know. I had to see for myself that Allen was convicted, and my family was in the clear. We thought once Allen was sentenced our lives would return to normal. They didn’t. The media didn’t stop. The Kingsley’s didn’t stop. Ultimately, we had to move, there was no other option.” He sighed and glanced out the window. “I know you expect me to say Allen Kingsley got what he deserved. I still struggle with it, though. I don’t know if the verdict was justice. I do know, Harold Kingsley was a monster and Allen is paying the price for his dad’s heinous crimes. It doesn’t surprise me to learn someone in that family still blames me.”

“He was an accomplice,” Paige argued. “He is paying the price for his own participation in those repulsive crimes.”

“Maybe,” Dean focused on her. “Or, maybe he was another victim.”

“He lured those girls out to their farm and turned them over to his sociopathic father,” Paige argued. “He bears just as much responsibility for what happened as a result of those actions as Harold does.”

“He was seventeen years old when he lured the last girl,” Dean said softly. “He started dating Mandy just before his eighteenth birthday. There was no proof he continued after that. I think it’s the reason Harold tried to eliminate Mandy. He wanted her out of the way, believing life would go back to the way it was before Allen fell in love with my sister.”

“What if he wasn’t in love?” Paige wondered. “What if it was a handy front? One that allowed him to continue the partnership unnoticed.”

“He loved her,” Dean said without a doubt. “That is the one thing I do know.”

“Maybe it’s the reason he killed his father,” Jericho provided.

Paige almost forgot Jericho was in the room. “Doesn’t matter. So, he loved her. He still helped his dad torture and kill fifteen girls.”

“No,” Dean studied Paige. “He lured fifteen girls out to the farm where his father took control of them, locked them into a make-shift prison he constructed from an old cave, where he tortured; and, ultimately, killed them. I’m not saying Allen’s innocent in all of this. I’m just saying one day he’s seventeen years old, a minor that has no individual rights or control over his life, a kid who was raised by a monster, and the next he’s eighteen and in love. A year later, he’s standing trial for killing the monster, and on top of that he’s blamed for the maniac’s heinous crimes. Someone had to pay and Harold was dead. Allen was the perfect stand-in. I don’t believe Allen would have confronted his father for anyone but Mandy — for anything but love. Maybe that’s enough to make the outcome just. I don’t know. But, I wonder, was he an abused kid conditioned to do what his father said, or was he a willing participant? I’m not sure any of us will ever know. I also think, if justice is the goal, the answer matters.”

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“Right now,” Jericho cut in before Paige could continue the argument. “The question isn’t Allen Kingsley’s punishment and if it was appropriate. We need to figure out who wants you dead.”

“Start with Ethan,” Dean turned back to Paige. “I didn’t know him, but I heard he was close to his brother. I also heard he has a questionable past.”

“You didn’t look?” Paige asked in surprise.

“I was trying to get away from the past, not bring it into my new life,” Dean reminded her.

“What — ”

“Mr. Bridges,” the doctor said, stepping into the room. “I’m about to sign your discharge papers. Is there anything I need to know before I send you on your way?”

“No,” Dean assured him. “I’m doing much better this morning. I’d really just like to go home.”

“Give us fifteen minutes,” the doctor told him. “The nurse will be back to escort you out.”

“Do you have a ride home?” Paige asked.

“I was hoping one of you would do the honors,” Dean admitted.

“We’ll both go,” Jericho decided. “Paige, you load up Dean and follow me out. I want to get a look at the place, see if we need added protection until this thing is over.”

“I’m a cop,” Dean grumbled. “I don’t need protection.”

They ignored him and started to formulate a plan.

Paige slowly made her way up Dean’s driveway. She hated to admit it, but she was impressed. “I think I need to talk to the boss about a raise.”

“Racing,” Dean glanced around, wondering if the enemy could be hiding in the trees. “Pays well.”

“Why work the job when you could just do this?” Paige asked. “Have this. I know you’re good. I’ve seen you race. You’ve got natural talent. Why not focus on that?”

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“Why did you leave the FBI to work for a small-town police department?” Dean challenged. “You’d be more effective, have more money and more prestige if you stayed in Washington.”

“True,” Paige grinned. “But the commute would be impossible.” She brought the vehicle to a stop in front of the large home and spotted Jericho on the porch waiting. Before climbing out, she reached into the back and released her rifle.

“Don’t you think that’s a little excessive?” Dean asked.

“Have you forgotten what it feels like to cower behind a vehicle while a maniac fires in your direction and all you have on you is a pistol?”

“Point taken,” Dean shoved open the door and started for the house, wishing he had his own rifle now.

They had just reached the porch, Dean was ascending the first step, Paige standing behind him, when the first shot rang out. Dean dove to the right behind a large metal cooler, Paige joined him. Jericho was using a large wooden pole attached to the railing for cover. Bullets flew by, splintered the thin wooden rail, shattered a clay pot, and ricocheted off the metal leg of a nearby chair.

Jericho shifted and fired in the general direction the shots were coming from. Paige followed his lead. The volley of gunfire intensified. Jericho aimed and fired two more rounds into the trees, then he dropped, blood immediately saturated his shirt on the left side of his torso.

“How bad?” Paige called out. “Jericho, answer me.” She wanted to run to him, she wanted to throw all her training out the window and make sure he was okay. Instead, she waited. The air around them had become eerily quiet. Not only because the shooting had stopped, but because not a creature was stirring; no birds chirping, no squirrels gathering nuts or leaves, nothing.

“We need to get him inside,” Dean pushed up and lunged across the opening, landing so close to Jericho’s body, Paige thought he was going to land on top of him.

“You get him inside,” Paige decided. “I’m going after the gunman.”

“No,” Jericho croaked out.

He was holding his side, blood covered his hand now, but Paige tried to ignore the panic and desperation she was feeling. “He’s not getting away this time.”

“Not alone,” Jericho tried to shove his body upwards. “Call for a back and wait.”

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“You’re delirious,” Paige decided. “You have to be to think I’ll just sit out here and wait for help to arrive before I corner that maniac.”

“You’re delusional if you think I’ll allow the insubordination,” Jericho was sitting now. “Dean, go inside and see if you can find a towel or something. We need to put pressure on this wound until Margie can get me transport.”

“Call for help, Paige,” Dean demanded before he disappeared into the house.

“He’s going to escape,” Paige grumbled. “And we’re going to be dealing with this nonsense again tomorrow.” She ran her hand through her hair in frustration, dropped down next to Jericho, and contacted Margie. “Shots fired. I need medical. Patient is conscious, breathing and alert. Make sure they know we have an officer down with a gunshot wound to the left torso. Margie, I also need backup.”

“Carter from Havilland,” Duncan Havilland said the instant she stopped talking.

“Go,” Paige answered.

“What’s your location?”

“Dean’s place,” Havilland knew where Dean lived, and Paige knew that. The two of them hung out and talked racing every waking minute they weren’t working.

“Show me enroute,” Havi advised dispatch. “ETA two minutes.”

The instant Havilland pulled in, Paige was off the porch, darting toward his truck. “Grab your rifle, we need to go.”

Havilland glanced at the porch, decided Dean could handle Jericho and followed Paige across the open front yard. He had his own rifle slung over his shoulder. The instant they stepped into the dimly lit forest, he shifted the gun from his shoulder and held it in his left hand, prepared to raise and fire if necessary.

Paige slowly made her way through the woods. It didn’t take long before she spotted blood. So, one of them hit their target. Jericho wasn’t the only one leaving the area with a gunshot wound.

“He’s losing a lot of blood,” Havilland observed. “He won’t get far.”

They continued to follow the path of crimson liquid all the way to a narrow dirt road. The trail stopped and fresh tire marks told Paige, their suspect had vanished into the wind — again. In frustration, she kicked the trunk of a nearby tree. “I knew it! I knew if I waited we’d lose him.”

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“It was the right thing to do,” Havi moved in beside her. “You know it. At least you would if you weren’t emotionally involved in this case.”

“I’m not emotionally involved,” Paige disagreed. “I’m frustrated and determined to catch the coward,” she paused to focus on her friend. “He is a coward. He can’t even confront his enemy head on. He hides in the trees and sets up an ambush. He’s a loser and a coward and I’m freakin’ pissed we lost him again.”

“Yeah,” Duncan grinned. “Because none of that screams emotionally involved. I stand corrected, pardon the mistake.”

“Bite me,” Paige growled before she turned and stomped back toward the house.

“I might,” Havilland called out to her. “If you weren’t married to the scariest man on the planet. Speaking of which,” Havilland considered.

“What?” Paige came to an abrupt stop before she turned to glare at her colleague.

“You should probably call him,” Havilland decided.

“Why?” Paige started forward again.

“To let him know you’re okay,” Havilland glanced pointedly at the media vans and the cameras the reporters were now setting up.

“Right,” Paige sighed and pulled out her phone.

“Miss me already?” Dax asked in greeting.

“I um...” Paige hesitated. “I’m just calling to let you know I’m okay.”

“What happened?” Dax sobered.

“Not anything too bad,” Paige lied. “I was just, well... there was another shooting. But I’m okay.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at Dean’s house,” Paige frowned. “But Jericho was shot. I’m leaving here in a couple minutes. I want to follow the ambulance to the hospital and make sure he’s okay.”

“Did you catch the mystery man?” Dax wondered. “If the shooting happened at Dean’s house, did that mean he was the target?”

“No,” Paige admitted. “He got away, but he’s injured. Both Jericho and I shot back. One of us hit him. There’s a trail all the way out to a dirt road then it disappears.”

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“I’ll get Ken working on identifying him from the sketch, then I’ll meet you at the hospital,” Dax decided.

“I’ll deal with that later,” Paige didn’t want Ken poking around, drawing the ire of a madman intent on killing toward Dax or the team. “Dean was the target. It has to do with his past, a family thing. I’ll fill you in on what I can later. Just don’t do anything that will redirect his attention to you or your men.”

“We’ll talk about it at the hospital,” Dax evaded.

“You don’t — ” she sighed. No reason to end that sentence, Dax already disconnected the call.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Havi asked.

“What?”

“Maybe you should stay out here, gather clues and do what it is that you do and I can follow the ambulance to the hospital and make sure the boss is stable,” Havi offered.

“There’s nothing I can do here,” Paige glanced around. “We’ll have forensics gather up the blood and the empty casings, but beyond that, there’s nothing to find.”

“You’re probably right,” Haviland told her. “I’ll direct them in, see if they can get a cast of those tracks, too. Could be the tires are unique and we can narrow down the vehicle.”

“Thanks,” she put a hand on his arm. “Let’s go check on the boss.”

Dax stepped into the waiting room and immediately spotted Paige. She looked tired and a little lost. He was halfway across the room when she turned and locked eyes with his. He detected a million emotions in that one look. Without saying a word, he stepped forward, wrapped his arms around her, and silently held her for several seconds. Her body shook and he could tell she was fighting to keep her emotions under control. Paige was such a strong woman — a true warrior — allowing herself a moment to just feel, to let loose and give in to the emotions was always an internal battle with her. He stepped back, took her hand and led her out of the room.

“Where are we going?” Paige didn’t think they should leave. “What if the surgeon can’t find me?”

“I checked at the desk when I arrived,” Dax assured her. “Jericho will be in surgery for another hour at least. We need privacy and you need a break.” He pushed on a door, grateful

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when it opened. The room was a smaller version of the waiting room they just left. He stepped inside, pulling Paige in behind him, then let the door close. After a slight hesitation, he flipped the lock.

“I don’t think—”

“Shut up, Paige,” Dax pulled her across the room and settled into an old, well-used lounge chair. Once he was settled, he pulled Paige onto his lap. “Just let go, baby.”

“I can’t,” Paige took a deep breath. “We didn’t get him. I should have chased after him but Jericho ordered me to wait. He was lying there bleeding all over the place and he ordered me to wait for backup.”

“He was right,” Dax said softly. “I know that’s not what you want to hear with your boss lying on the operating table fighting for his life, but he was right. The man you’re after is dangerous. Nobody should go after him alone.”

“I thought he was fine,” Paige sighed. “I stood over him and saw the blood, but he was talking, giving orders, being his usual bossy self so I thought—”

“He’s going to be fine,” Dax pressed a kiss to the back of her head. “And, once he’s off the operating table and settled into a room where he can start to recover, you and the boys will catch the man that did this.”

“I’m being ridiculous,” Paige impatiently wiped a tear from her cheek. “I’m sitting here crying because my boss took a bullet.”

“We both know Jericho is much more to you than a boss,” Dax turned her face toward his and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. “Don’t minimize the relationship you share with him. Jericho Walters is family — to both of us. We’ll get through this together, I promise.”

“Okay,” Paige took a deep breath. “I’m not sure how much I should tell you, but I don’t think you need to go over your past missions any longer. We know who this is — well, we have a general idea. The DNA will confirm, but this isn’t about me or you. It’s about Dean.”

Dax relaxed. This wasn’t about him and it wasn’t about the money. He would tell Paige about that, when the moment was right, but it was an immense weight off his shoulders knowing the danger came from Dean, not him. “Can you tell me about it?”

“Later,” Paige decided. “I’ll tell you what I can later. Right now, I want to focus on Jericho.” She stood, wiped the moisture from her face and held out a hand. “Margie and the others are on their way over. I need to be there, I need to explain what happened once they arrive.”

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“Alright,” Dax stood and took her hand. They were almost to the door when he stopped her, turned her to face him and kissed her. This kiss was gentle and supportive. “I’m here for you, Paige. Lean on me, I won’t let you fall.”

Paige gave him a weak smile. “I know.”

Four hours later, Jericho was out of surgery and recovering in ICU. They had to remove his spleen, but the doctors believed he would make a full recovery. Paige was now lying across her bed, Dax settled at her feet. He was giving her the most amazing foot massage she had ever experienced. “I’ll give you an hour to stop that,” she moaned.

“Tell me about this guy. Why is he after Dean?” Dax wondered. “The kid is probably the most likeable cop you have in the department.”

“I thought that was me,” Paige feigned hurt.

“Nope,” Dax grinned. “You’re the most meticulous. You’re also the sexiest, the most adorable and the most stubborn. Dean’s likeable.”

“You’re right,” Paige decided. “About Dean.”

“I’m right about you, too,” he lifted her leg and pressed a gentle kiss to her ankle before shifting it aside and picking up her other foot. “Tell me what you can.”

“I know I’m stalling, but I don’t know how much to share here,” she dropped her head on her pillow and let out a huge, audible sigh. “Dean told me some stuff in confidence. It’s personal and if anyone found out about it — well, let’s just say it would be complicated and intolerable.”

“Are you worried I’ll tell someone,” Dax wondered. “Or are you worried about betraying a trust?”

“The trust thing,” Paige said immediately. “I know you wouldn’t say anything to anyone. But, just to be clear, anything I do tell you — it has to stay here, with you and me. You can’t share it with your men.”

“So,” Dax said slowly. “Both then.”

“No, I...” Paige paused. “Maybe. I know you tell your guys everything.”

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“Not everything,” Dax disagreed. “You have to trust the people you work with. They have to trust you. If this is about trust, Dean’s trust, I can live with that. You don’t have to tell me anything. It’s enough to know it was about him, not me — or you.”

“I don’t know how to do this,” Paige growled. “How do I maneuver through the gray area? Dean told me some stuff about the case, Jericho brought you into the case. Then there’s the whole contractually obligated thing. Am I contractually obligated to tell you? How far does that contract go? What secrets are acceptable? I just don’t know.”

Dax laughed and stretched out next to her on the bed. He pulled her against him and ran his hand down her arm. “You and I, we will always have secrets. You on a case, me when I’m working something hot with Nathan. It’s part of the package. I can live with it. I knew the score, Paige. I accepted the entire sordid bundle of complications when I married you. There is no contract that says what we tell each other, and when.” He truly hoped that was true.

“Sharing my work,” Paige turned to face him. “That’s our thing. Walking you through a case helps me organize my thoughts. It helps me see things I missed before. I’m struggling to do that with this one because it’s all so personal — and emotional. Havi told me that and I jumped down this throat, but he was right. I want this guy, bad. That’s emotion talking. The maniac shot at me, twice in as many days. I want to shove his rifle down his throat for what he’s done — to me, to Dean, and to Jericho. I’m not staying objective on this. Dean is far from unbiased. You’re not impartial, either. There are too many emotions flying around and not enough logic.”

“So,” Dax pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Set the emotions aside and be logical.”

“Right,” Paige threw her hands in the air. “Because it’s that easy.”

“No,” Dax wasn’t deterred. “But it’s necessary. You have accepted the emotions, now set them aside. Focus on the evidence, on the logic. It’s what you do best. Walk me through what you can. Leave out what you think you need to protect. It might help.”

“I’m going to tell you everything,” Paige decided. “You’re my husband and I trust you. I know you’ll understand why it has to be kept under wraps and you’ll protect the secret — probably better than I can.”

“Just tell me what you’re comfortable sharing,” Dax offered.

“I’ll tell it all,” Paige insisted and then she did.

Once Paige finished, Dax took a moment to consider. “So many things just fell into place,” Dax admitted. “I remember Dean’s reaction when Jericho wanted him to keep Piper busy. He would have hated that. Dealing with her advances, her attempts to manipulate him out of a story, that would have been harder on him than anyone else in the department, I think.”

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“I forgot about that,” Paige cringed. “I made a comment, questioned his resolve and it offended him. Now I understand why. I think I owe him another apology.”

“Where will you go from here?” Dax knew, but Paige needed to focus on the work, not the personal, emotional aspect of this case.

“I need to start running backgrounds,” Paige decided. “I want to track down this Ethan Kingsley guy, see if he’s anywhere near Manti. If I can’t place him here, or if he has a solid alibi somewhere else, I’ll fan out. Somehow I need to create a family tree. I think Sean might be able to help with that, but it’s sticky. I don’t know how much he remembers and if he put it all together.”

“I suspect he did,” Dax shifted and rolled on top of her. “Sean’s a good cop and he understands the code. I’m sure he recognized Dean the instant they met, he just kept it to himself.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her neck.

“What are you doing?” Paige narrowed her eyes at him.

“If you have to ask, I’m not doing it right,” Dax tightened his grip when she tried to move.

“I have work,” Paige insisted.

“It can wait,” Dax wasn’t deterred. It took less than a minute to change her mind.

“Ethan Kingsley is in the clear,” Paige announced when Dean stepped up to her desk. The man looked horrible, exhausted for sure, but she also recognized the guilt. “It’s not your fault.”

“Of course, it is,” Dean settled into her visitor’s chair. “Jericho was shot because of me. All of us could be dead, because of me.”

“Alright,” Paige settled back. “Tell me what you should have done differently. If this is your fault, you must have made a mistake. You did something that caused this situation to escalate. What was it?”

“I... don’t know,” Dean said in frustration.

“Because it’s not your fault,” Paige insisted. “Harold Kingsley was a predator and a sociopath. We’ll just have to disagree about Allen. He may be a victim, but he was old enough to know better. He was old enough to find a different way. I don’t feel a bit sorry for either one of them. Your sister fell for a charming guy and you saved her from a horrendous attack. Does that make this your fault?”

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“No,” Dean sighed.

“If this is one of Harold’s relatives,” Paige said forcefully, “and, after pulling photos, mug shots and driver’s license photos, I think it is — all of this is on them, not you.”

“Jericho lost his spleen defending me,” Dean ran a hand through his hair. “The rest of his life will be filled with antibiotic shots, blood clots and the risk of infection.”

“You’ve been spending entirely too much time with Google,” Paige tossed her pen at him. “Stop it. I need your focus on this case, not fretting over the worse case scenario when it comes to Jericho’s future health.”

“It’s all a part of the whole,” Dean insisted.

“Well,” Paige smiled. “It’s not your part. I’m leaving the worrying to Margie. That’s her part. Your part is compiling a list of relatives you remember. I’m searching, pulling names from booking sheets and police reports but you lived this. Who lived in the area? Who came to visit? If your sister can handle it, she might know some names you don’t.”

“I’ll talk to my parents,” Dean agreed. “I need to let them know someone found me, anyway. They need to be on alert.”

“I was thinking the locals should be notified, but I wanted to leave that up to you,” Paige suggested. “If there’s someone you trust, let them know what is happening here and ask them to watch out for anything suspicious out there. Where does your family live now?”

“Here,” Dean said absently. “Well, over in Fayette. They built and run the racetrack.”

“Why didn’t I know that?” Paige wondered. “That’s still our area. We don’t have to notify anyone. What about Mandy?”

“She helps my parents deal with the day-to-day operations and she races now and again,” Dean shrugged. “What can I say, it’s in our blood.”

“You haven’t told them?” Paige realized.

“Not yet,” Dean frowned. “I need to do that in person and it’s going to shake them. We’ve been safe here for the past Seven years. How did the Kingsley’s find us?”

“Do you think it was the serial killer case? By the way, I need to apologize to you for that,” Paige sobered. “For how I handled the thing with Piper Weber. I offended you and I’m sorry.”

“Let’s just leave that in the past,” Dean decided. “We already worked it out. My baggage made me overreact.”

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“Your baggage made you the perfect distraction,” Paige corrected. “But it also came with a price. I’m sorry for that.”

“It wasn’t your choice,” Dean brushed that off. “Let’s just set it aside for now. All of it. I don’t think we’re going to know how they found me until we catch them — or at least identify him. Now, tell me why you’re so sure Ethan isn’t involved.”

“If he’s involved,” Paige passed over an email she got from Ethan’s employer, “it’s long distance.”

“Okay,” Dean dropped the paper back on the desk. “So, Ethan was at work when the shooting occurred — That’s a pretty solid alibi. It takes at least nine hours to get here from Pueblo.”

“Yeah,” Paige agreed. “I don’t think his lunch break lasts that long.”

“Alright,” Dean pushed forward and snatched up a pen and a pad of paper. “Here are the relatives I know off the top of my head.” He listed names and approximate ages for those family members he knew.

Paige took the paper when Dean finished. “There’s at least two dozen names here.”

“There are more,” Dean told her. “I can think of others. Faces I remember but I have no idea what their names were. Dad might be able to help. Are you comfortable with me sharing that photo? I’d like to show it to my parents. I was just a kid, a senior in high school. I didn’t pay attention to the neighbors — not really.”

“I disagree,” she pointed to the list. “As far as the photo? I don’t have a problem with you sharing it with your parents. Take a copy, see if it jogs something. In the meantime, I’ll start running this list. If we get lucky, one of these guys owns a white pickup truck and doesn’t have an alibi.”

“Thanks,” Dean stood and pulled out his phone. “I’ll just take a picture and they can look on the phone.”

“No need,” Paige pulled out a copy of the original drawing. “I made a few thinking we might need them. Take one, show your parents and see where it leads.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can but—”

“But it might take time to explain,” Paige nodded in understanding. “I’ll be here, take whatever time you need.”

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Dean walked with trepidation up the back stairs and through the French doors into the spacious kitchen. That's where he found his mother. He knew she'd be there.

"Dean?" she smiled in greeting. "I didn't know you were coming out today."

"We need to talk," he stood a few feet away, focused on her face. "Where's dad?"

"There's trouble," she realized. "How bad?"

"Could be bad," Dean admitted. "Can you get Dad so we can talk this out together?"

"He's in the den," she wiped her hands on a towel, moved forward and placed a gentle hand on his cheek. "It will be okay. Let's go interrupt your father."

They walked down the long hallway, through a classy foyer and into a dimly lit den. James Bridges was sitting casually behind his desk, going over the books.

"James, come on over here, we need to talk," Charlotte Bridges told her husband.

"Charlotte, I need to... oh, I didn't realize you were here, Dean," James stood and joined his wife on the leather couch. "What brings you out in the middle of the day?"

"Dean said there's some trouble," Charlotte told him.

"What kind of trouble," James demanded.

"The old kind," Dean settled into a lounge chair. "First, I need to explain what has been happening and I need you to listen. Once I'm done, we can discuss it."

"Alright," James took Charlottes hand and silently listened to Dean's version of events.

"All of you need to be careful," Dean added after he finished the story.

"Why didn't you tell us you were in the hospital?" Charlotte scolded. "We should have been there for you."

"I'm sorry," Dean sighed. Dealing with his mother was always tricky. "They admitted me and almost immediately administered pain killers. They knocked me out. When I woke the next morning, the doctor was ready to release me. I didn't have time to fill you in."

"Then you went home and this man shot at you again," James considered. "What do you know about him? Why do you think it's connected to us?"

Dean pulled out the drawing and handed it to his father. "Paige's husband, Dax and one of his military friends spotted this man leaving the area. He was driving reckless, speeding away like he was in a hurry. I don't recognize him but he resembles—"

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“Yes,” James cut him off. “Yes, this is... what was his name? Charlotte?”

Charlotte took the drawing and studied it for several minutes. When she finished, she dropped the paper on the table in front of her and focused on Dean. “I can’t be positive.”

“Guess,” Dean pushed.

“I think,” Charlotte looked at James. “I think that might be Terrance.”

“That’s right,” James picked up the drawing again. “Terry Kingsley. He was a cousin to Harold on his father’s side. This man is slightly older than I remember, but it could be Terry.”

“Is that a guess?” Dean wondered. He didn’t know any Terry Kingsley.

“It’s a good guess,” Charlotte told him. “It could also be Liam, but the man in that drawing looks more like Terry.”

“Charlotte,” James said softly. “Did you see the scar?”

“I did,” Charlotte pursed her lips. “A lot of people have scars.”

“Not like that one,” James insisted. “Terry was wild and uncontrollable, even as a child. He was only fourteen years old when he snuck through the back door to Twisted Lizard Tavern. Nobody noticed him until he stole a beer from a guy playing pool. A brawl broke out and Terry tried to steal the group’s money. They were betting on the game and the pool was sitting on the edge of the table. Terry snatched it up and tried to run. He stole from the wrong crowd. The guy went after him, Terry broke a beer bottle and charged his aggressor. The man easily plucked the bottle from Terry’s hand and hit him in the head with it. The edge sliced open Terry’s right eye.”

“That would leave a jagged scar like that one,” Dean agreed. “Any idea where Terry is now? I don’t remember him from the trial.”

“He was locked up,” James admitted. “When all of... well, you know. When it happened, Terry was in prison. You could find out why. There were a lot of rumors, but there were always rumors about Terry. Like I said, he was wild.”

“I don’t think that word is nearly strong enough for what you’re describing,” Dean stood.

“Dean?” Charlotte also stood. “Do you have protection? Is the department watching out for you to make sure your safe?”

“I work with good people, mom. I’ll be fine,” Dean gave her a quick hug. “I do have one last question.”

“What’s that?” James also stood.

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“Do you have any idea how he found us?” Dean looked from one parent to the other. “I thought we were careful. I thought changing our name and moving was enough.”

“I don’t know,” James considered. “But the racetrack is becoming more popular. It’s possible someone we knew, from the old days, attended a race and spotted one of us. We did interact with the Kingsley’s. We were all part of the racing world. Someone could have told someone who told someone and so on. Terry may have been chasing rumors.”

“Why?” Dean wondered. “Were they close?”

“Not exactly,” Charlotte sighed. “Why don’t we sit back down?” Once they were settled, she got a faraway look on her face, like she was remembering a story from another time. “When they were kids, Terry, Ethan and Harold were very close. But, like your father said, Terry was wild. He didn’t seem to have any boundaries.”

“You knew them?” Dean asked.

“We didn’t associate with them,” James corrected. “But we all went to the same school. We knew of them and we steered clear. Most everyone did.”

“Okay,” Dean nodded. “So, what happened?”

“What always happens,” James laughed. “A girl.”

“It wasn’t Dawn’s fault,” Charlotte insisted. “But I suppose you could say she was the catalyst. Both Terry and Harold fell for her. Things got ugly and there was a fight. Harold ended up in the hospital and Terry fled. He stayed away for nearly three years. Then, one day he marched back into town large as life and started wreaking havoc again. Nobody really knows what happened, but the two of them had another falling out. None of us heard from Terry again.”

“But there were rumors,” James added. “You know how it is in a small town. We heard when Terry was arrested, when he was in prison, when he got out. We all wondered if he’d ever return. Guess he did.”

“So, why come after us?” Dean still didn’t understand.

“An old grudge,” James focused on Charlotte. “Terry blamed your mother for Dawn’s rejection. She rejected both of them, but Terry convinced himself Charlotte was the reason Dawn never gave him a shot.”

“Maybe I was,” Charlotte admitted. “I did put pressure on her to stay away from them.”

“She made her own choices,” James gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I think, if Terry rolled back into town and discovered his cousin had been murdered and Allen was in prison for

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it, he would have wanted details. Once he learned Mandy, you and me were involved, he wouldn't let it drop."

"Okay," Dean stood again. "Be careful until we catch this guy. And do what you have to do to keep Mandy safe. I don't know what you want to tell her, but I'm going to leave that to you."

"I'll handle it," Charlotte assured him. "You be careful, Dean. He's already come after you twice. Make sure the sheriff and your fellow officers have your back."

"Jericho is in the hospital," Dean admitted. "He was shot protecting me, at my house."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Charlotte patted his shoulder. "We're going to worry. Please keep in touch and let us know you're okay."

James stepped forward. "You're good at what you do, but watch your back. The Kingsley's are ruthless and Terry is the most unpredictable of them all. He won't hesitate to take you and a couple dozen others out if it achieves his goal."

"Don't worry about me," Dean told them. "I've got backup. I have highly trained professionals watching out for me. Take care of yourself and if you hear or see anything suspicious, call."

"We will," Charlotte assured him.

Dean left the house and headed for his car. He could see his parents were still watching him when he left their driveway and pulled onto the highway. He considered the new information all the way back to the office.

"Okay," Paige settled back in her chair. "So, Terrance Kingsley does not have a white pickup truck registered in his name. However, his father — Stanton Kingsley — does."

"One more thing that points to Terry," Dean agreed. "Any idea where he might be?"

"Not a clue," Paige sighed. "We don't have enough for a warrant, yet. Let me check something." She turned to her computer and punched in some information, seconds later, Terrance Kingsley's rap sheet was displayed on her screen. "Okay, he did some time in federal prison. Gotcha!" Paige snatched up her phone and scrolled through her contacts until she found the name she needed.

"Agent Robins," he said in greeting.

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“Randy, it’s Paige Carter.”

“Been a while,” Randy grinned. “You must need something. Make it quick, I’m on my way out. I have just enough time to grab a bite before I have to catch a plane.”

“Where to?” Paige wondered. “Florida Keys? Some beach in Texas?”

“Bugtussle, Kentucky,” Randy grumbled.

“You made that up,” Paige insisted.

“You have no idea how much I wish I had,” Randy complained. “What can I do for my favorite ex Fed?”

“I have the name of a guy who served some time in federal prison,” Paige filled him in on the case, leaving out Dean’s family details. “I have DNA, I was wondering if you could check, see if you guys have a sample I could use for comparison. I need a warrant and if the results match, I should have enough to get what I need.”

“Sure, Casey can help you with that,” Paige heard him call for Casey in the background. “Casey will get the info and take care of what you need. If there’s DNA, she’ll find it. Now, gotta go. I told her to give you whatever you need but if you have any trouble, you know how to reach me.”

“I wouldn’t want to interrupt your vacation in Bugtussle,” Paige laughed at his curse then sobered when Casey came on the line. She explained what she needed and gave the woman a number where she could be reached. Once she hung up, she focused on Dean. “Now we wait.”

“They’ll have a sample,” Dean was sure of it. “My parents said he was wild, always in trouble and usually getting caught. So, if I followed you correctly, you want to obtain the genetic framework from the Feds, take it over to our lab and compare the two. If the results match, we take that to a judge and get a warrant?”

“Exactly,” Paige grinned.

“What’s the warrant for? We don’t know where he is.”

“Financials,” Paige frowned. “We track his movements through his purchases, see if we can place him here in Manti — hopefully at a motel.” She glanced at the phone when it rang. “Deputy Carter.”

“It’s Casey,” the woman on the other end advised. “I’ve got your results, where can I email them?”

Paige provided the information and was about to disconnect. “Was this in CODIS?”

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“Nope,” Casey said cheerfully, referring to the national database that contained DNA information. “It was still waiting in the black hole. I got some grief about it, seems nobody thinks this Terry guy is a priority. I cut through it and you’ve got the intel. Randy said to help you with what you need. So, is there anything you need?”

“Nope, I think this will do it,” Paige advised. “I’ll let you know if I need anything else. Tell Randy I owe him.”

“We all do,” Casey said before she disconnected.

“Now what?” Dean asked. “Do you want me to take that over to the lab and push?”

“Naw,” Paige stood. “I’ll take care of it. It’s been a long day, go home. I heard Havi and Logan check on. We’re off duty until tomorrow. If I’m lucky, we’ll have a warrant and the information first thing. Once it comes in, we can figure out where the man is hiding out. A motel would be nice, but I don’t think we’ll get that lucky.”

“I agree,” Dean headed for the door. “Goodnight, Paige.”

“Hey, Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“Havilland is waiting outside for you,” she admitted. “He’s going to escort you home and make sure there’s not another ambush. You can thank me later.”

“Not likely,” Dean grumbled.

Dax made his way into the house, tired, hungry and in desperate need of a shower. The instant he stepped through the door, he spotted Paige — and she was still working.

“Long day for you,” Paige glanced up from the report she was reading.

“You too,” Dax settled onto the couch and began removing his boots. “Hot lead?”

“Not so far,” Paige focused on Dax. “You look tired. You never look tired. Trouble in paradise?”

“No,” Dax dropped his boot to the floor and settled back on the couch. “Wooly found a trailer — finally. I swear if I never look at another travel trailer in this lifetime it will be too soon. Unfortunately, it was in Nephi. Hawk and I decided we’d better headed out and look it over. It was after six when we got there but the three of us decided it was perfect. We’ll have to

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do a little altering, but not much. We paid the man, took care of all the paperwork and transported the unit back to the Center.”

“Sounds straightforward enough,” Paige wanted to ask him where he got the money to buy the trailer, but she stopped herself. She agreed to support this endeavor, she’d trust Dax not to get so far in debt they wouldn’t recover.

“It was,” Dax agreed. “Until we parked the thing. We were just closing up when Vato arrived.”

“And that created a problem?”

“He launched into another rant — I’d heard it all before and I was tired so, well... it got pretty ugly.”

“Rant about what?”

“He’s upset that we settled for a used trailer instead of investing in a newer unit from a lot,” Dax ran his hand through his hair in frustration.

“I thought you said the trailer was just a sort of... mobile office,” Paige sat back. “I didn’t think you were planning to stay in the thing, just park it to reserve a camping spot and have a place to work while on a training mission.”

“It is,” Dax agreed. “Which is why this trailer is perfect. It’s in excellent condition, the layout is great for our needs and we don’t need comfort — we need functionality.”

“I know Vato is one of your guys,” Paige said carefully. She knew the newest member of the team didn’t like or accept her. In fact, she got the distinct feeling he resented her, but she wouldn’t put Dax in the middle of it. She’d find a way to deal with Vato and the tension she felt when he was around. “I also know you guys are giving him a lot of leeway because he was injured — ”

“Paige,” Dax warned. He didn’t want to have this conversation again.

“Just hear me out,” Paige requested. “I’m not saying you’re wrong. I just think he’s taking advantage and sooner or later, you will have to reign him in. You wouldn’t let Hawk or Zeus get away with questioning your authority. You shouldn’t let Vato, either.”

“I’ll think about it,” Dax relented. “Now, what’s all this?”

“I was able to get a warrant for Terry Kingsley’s financials,” Paige updated Dax on the new developments. The lab confirmed the DNA was a match to both the cigarette butt and the blood. With that and Jericho in the hospital, plus all the rest, it was easy to get a warrant for Terry’s

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financials.. “I’ve been going through them, trying to figure out where he’s staying but I’ve got nothing.”

“Maybe it’s because I’ve got trailers on my mind, but have you considered the possibility he’s camping out in the mountains? He was driving a truck. It would be easy enough to drop the trailer and have easy transportation until he’s finished,” Dax stretched out his legs, dinner could wait.

“I hadn’t considered that,” Paige admitted. “But it’s possible. And, it would explain why I can find gas charges and sporadic restaurant tabs, but nothing that points to lodging.”

“You said he’s driving his father’s truck,” Dax considered. “Check and see if dear old dad owns a trailer.”

Paige shifted her laptop and punched in Stanton Kingsley. Sure enough, Stanton Kingsley owned a twenty-four-foot travel trailer, properly registered to his address in Pueblo, Colorado. “I’ll call the locals in the morning, have them drive out and check to see if the trailer is parked at Stanton’s residence.”

“It won’t be,” Dax said confidently. “I’m starved, but we could take a little nighttime drive through the mountains if you want to go looking tonight.”

“No,” Paige sighed. “We’d never find it. Terry’s a seasoned criminal. He wouldn’t make it easy for us. I think, for now, that’s a dead-end.”

“So,” Dax stood and held out his hand. “What’s next?”

Paige stared at the outstretched hand in confusion.

“I’m starving and I doubt you ate,” Dax grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. “We can finish this discussion over dinner. There must be something we can throw together in the kitchen.”

“I’ll make us a sandwich,” Paige offered. “And, I don’t know. I asked Sean to get me the original file, on Allen Kingsley’s case and Harold.”

“Makes sense,” Dax started to pull items from the fridge. “Go back to the beginning and see what pops.”

“I’m worried,” she admitted. “There’s not a lot to go on here. We might have to wait until he strikes again. What if he succeeds this time? What if someone ends up dead? So far, two cops have ended up in the hospital.”

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Dax moved around the counter and wrapped his arms around Paige. “You’ll figure it out. If there’s a clue to find, you’ll find it.” He just hoped she did before this Terry fanatic struck again. Because Paige was right, next time the casualties could be higher.

Paige had just set the top piece of bread on their sandwiches when the doorbell rang. “That’s going to be Sean.”

“I’ll get it,” Dax headed for the door and returned a few seconds later.

“You want one?” Paige offered.

“Naw,” Sean shook his head. “I ate. I would like to know why you’re looking into one of my old cases.”

“Your case?” Paige raised an eyebrow.

“I worked it,” Sean shrugged. “Maybe I wasn’t primary, but it’s still mine.”

“Dean Bridges,” Paige watched Sean for a reaction. It was subtle, but it was there. “You knew.”

“That he’s really Dean Clawson?” Sean settled onto a chair. “Sure.”

“Have you heard what’s been going on out here?” Paige wondered.

“Apparently not,” Sean frowned. “I just got back in town two hours ago. What did I miss?”

Paige filled him in while she ate her dinner.

“Terry Kingsley wasn’t part of the investigation,” Sean said confidently. “If I remember correctly, his name did surface. He had a sheet about a mile long, but he was locked up tight.” He closed his eyes in concentration. “Bank robbery, I believe.”

“He’s out now,” Paige popped a chip in her mouth. “And he’s working hard to take out Dean.”

“Why?” Sean couldn’t see it. “He hated Harold. I can’t see him tracking down James Clawson’s son and assassinating him for revenge.”

“I agree,” Paige admitted. “At first, that was the theory. We thought a family member discovered Dean’s location and wanted him to pay for Harold’s death and Allen’s incarceration. But, Dean’s parents painted a different picture. The cousin’s weren’t on speaking terms, so why go after Dean now?”

“Beats me,” Sean focused out the window and considered. “I can’t think of a single reason. That’s a copy,” he pointed to the file. “I’ll go through my own file and my notes and see if I can

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come up with anything. I want in, Paige. This was my case, if it's come back to bite the Clawson's I want in."

"Clear it with Nathan," Paige didn't hesitate. "I've got no objection. I'll take all the help I can get."

"I'll let you get back to it," Sean stood. "I'll call if I hit on anything, you do the same."

"Count on it," Paige stood.

"Naw," Sean smiled. "Finish your dinner. I'll let myself out."

"So," Dax said when he was gone. "I guess play time's over and we're spending the evening revisiting the life of a serial killer?"

"I'm spending the evening working," Paige corrected. "You can relax with a good movie."

Dax gathered up the dishes and set them in the sink. "I'm contractually obligated as much as you are. Let's go see if we can figure out a motive for all of this."

They didn't. They worked until one o'clock in the morning, but nothing jumped out as a reason to try to kill Dean.

"You can pick it back up in the morning," Dax slid into bed and pulled Paige against him. "Give it time, you'll figure it out."

"What if I don't?"

"You will," Dax said through a yawn. "Shut it down and go to sleep."

Paige smiled and settled in closer to her husband. She got lucky and she knew it. Not just anyone would spend the night skimming through the gory details of a serial killers crimes. It wasn't his job, wasn't his responsibility, but he did it for her — and he did it because he was still worried. She knew that too. Dax wouldn't relax until the sniper was caught and the threat was neutralized. She drifted off, thinking about the motives of a killer.

Three hours later, Paige bolted upright in bed. She knew what Terry Kingsley wanted.

"What are you doing?" Dax asked when Paige jumped from the bed and began to dress.

"I know what he wants," Paige whispered. "Go back to sleep."

"Not likely," Dax climbed from the bed and began to dress.

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“What are you doing?” Paige frowned.

“Going with you,” Dax pulled a clean shirt over his head and began searching around in the dark for a clean pair of socks.

“Police business,” Paige disagreed. “Go back to bed.”

“I have no idea where you’re going,” Dax found some socks and settled onto the bed and slid them onto his feet. “I do know you’re not going alone. Tell me what you figured out.”

Paige sighed, slid into her boots and headed for the stairs. “I’m not waiting,” escaping without him wasn’t possible, so she reluctantly agreed. She knew she shouldn’t hunt a killer by herself, but she didn’t want Dax risking his life for this. He would. He’d jump in front of her and take a bullet if he thought she was in danger.

Once they reached the living room, Dax gripped Paige’s forearm and forced her to stop. “What did you figure out?”

Paige reached out and snatched up a photo of a necklace. “This!”

“Your sniper is after a necklace?” Dax took the picture to study it more closely. “Your sniper is after the key. That’s not some decorative symbol. It’s a real key, that opens something real.”

“And probably something valuable,” Paige added. “Sean said Terry was in prison for bank robbery. What if that key opens a box or a safe where he stashed the money?”

“But how did Mandy get it?” Dax wondered. “This says the necklace belonged to Mandy but she didn’t want it back after the case was closed.”

“She didn’t want it back because Allen gave it to her,” Paige provided. “We need to get to Dean’s house.”

“You think Terry went back?” Dax considered. “I agree, should we call Dean? Maybe you should warn him there’s danger.”

“Dean’s not there,” Paige stepped onto the porch and waited for Dax to follow. She frowned when she saw the rifle but didn’t object. “Havi talked him into staying at his place for the night. Jericho was shot at Dean’s residence. Clearly Terry knows where Dean lives, and his special talent is B&E.”

“That’s breaking and entering?”

“You’re catching on,” Paige headed for the driver’s side of her vehicle, but Dax stopped her.

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“I’ll drive.”

She started to object but decided if Dax drove, that would give her time to plan. “Don’t pull into the driveway. I want to approach the house from the woods. We need to scope it out, see if Terry’s gained access before we decide how to handle it.”

Dax maneuvered the vehicle off the road and into the trees. “That’s as far as I can get,” he told Paige once he parked and shut down the engine. “What’s the plan?”

“First,” Paige jumped to the ground and retrieved her own rifle from the back. “I want to scout the area. Be careful, if he’s not inside, he could be hiding out here in the trees.”

“Copy that,” Dax slung the rifle over his shoulder and followed Paige further into the dark forest.

The instant they reached the edge of the trees that bordered Dean’s house, they spotted him. Someone was moving around inside Dean’s house.

“You sure it’s not Dean?” Dax whispered. “I’d hate to storm the place and shoot a cop in his own home, or worse, get shot myself because I startled the jumpy lawman.”

“I’m pretty sure,” Paige pulled out her phone. “Havi wouldn’t let Dean come back here, but just in case — ” she punched send and waited. “Havi, Paige. Is Dean still at your house?”

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” Havi grumbled. Then it hit him. “He’s here. Why?”

“I’m at his place and there’s someone inside,” Paige advised.

“We’re on our way,” Havi disconnected.

“Is that a guy thing?” Paige frowned.

“Is what a guy thing?” Dax asked innocently

“Barking into the phone then hanging up before the other person can respond?” Paige slid the phone back into her pocket.

Dax shrugged. “Maybe. It’s effective when dealing with a woman who likes to argue about everything.”

“Then why did you do it to me?” Paige narrowed her eyes in challenge.

“It’s a mystery,” Dax grinned. “What’s the plan?”

“We might as well wait,” Paige decided. “Havilland lives just up the road.”

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“Nice digs,” Dax glanced around. “Racing must pay well.”

“Apparently,” Paige pulled her phone back out and sent Havilland a text letting him know they were camped out in the trees.

Three minutes later, Havilland responded. ‘Incoming, don’t shoot.’

“They’re here,” Paige told Dax. “Don’t shoot my backup.”

“I’ll try to control myself,” Dax said flatly. He glanced up when he heard the men approaching. “I thought Paige called in the cops, not a couple elephants stomping through the wilderness.”

“Stealth wasn’t our priority,” Havilland grumbled. “You better be right about this, Paige. It’s cold, I haven’t had nearly enough coffee and its four freakin’ clock in the morning.”

“Nearly five,” Paige motioned to the house. “You tell me. Am I right?”

“What’s he looking for?” Dean wondered.

“I think he wants the necklace,” Paige focused on Dean. “The one Allen gave Mandy. I think it opens something. I think he took a shot at you because killing you would flush out your family. If I’m right, they’re safe. If I’m right, he has no idea where your parents or Mandy are. He came after you hoping to ambush Mandy at the funeral. Then, he could get the key and disappear.”

“Why?” Dean wondered. “It’s just a stupid plan. Especially because Mandy doesn’t have the stupid thing. The Bureau still has it.”

“He doesn’t know that,” Paige glanced back at the house. “He’s searching for something.”

“He has to know I wouldn’t have it,” Dean objected.

“He’s looking for an address,” Paige decided. “He’s trying to locate Mandy. I think he’s in there looking for a clue. His attempts on your life have failed so far, I think he decided to fall back into old habits. He’s a B&E man. He’s just engaged in a little burglary while you’re away.”

“How do you want to handle it?” Havilland asked. “Do we storm the house or set up and call him out?”

“Or just wait him out,” Dax added.

“Dean,” Paige focused on her colleague. “It’s up to you. No matter what we do, there could be a shootout in your home. In addition to the damage, there will be questions once it’s all over. You tell us how you want to deal with this.”

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“Wait him out,” Dean decided. “He’s dangerous. If we call him out, we lose the element of surprise. If we storm the house, we lose the element of surprise. If we wait, we might catch him unprepared and have enough time to neutralize him before anyone else gets hurt.”

“I’ll take the back,” Havilland offered. “Paige you and Dax take the front. Dean, you joined me out back. We’ll set up on all four corners and wait. Don’t take any chances. Have your weapon out and ready to go before you make contact. We don’t take any chances here.”

“Agreed,” Paige watched as Havilland and Dean walked away. “I’ll take the left corner, you take the right. Make sure you can see the front of the house and any windows on the right side. I’ll do the same on the left. If he comes out, tell him to freeze, then shoot if he doesn’t comply. He’s already put the sheriff in the hospital. We can justify our action if he hesitates for even a second.”

“I’ve got this, Paige,” Dax leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. “Be careful.”

Paige watched him walk away. She knew he could handle himself, but it didn’t make the situation any less stressful. With a sigh, she moved into position and settled in to wait.

Havilland slid in behind a tree and focused on the side door. If the suspect didn’t exit through the front, this was the most likely escape. It didn’t take long. The instant he spotted the door slide open, he pulled his gun and prepared himself for anything.

Terry Kingsley stepped through the side door and started across the lawn. He was frustrated and out of ideas. Taking out the cop hadn’t worked; he’d only succeeded in getting himself shot. Breaking into his house hadn’t led to any clues either. He had to find a way to bring the girl out in the open. He was so engrossed in his thoughts, he didn’t register the danger until it was too late.

“Police, freeze!” Havilland called. His gun was drawn, and he was ready for anything. The instant Kingsley reached into his pocket; Havilland fired. The bullet hit its mark and the suspect dropped to the ground. “Subject neutralized,” Havilland called over the radio.

“Can you repeat that?” Susie asked, confused. She didn’t show Havilland on duty. He certainly wasn’t checked out on anything.

“Dispatch,” Paige answered. “Reserve this frequency for priority traffic. I’ll advise when the situation is resolved, and the scene is secure.”

Situation? What situation? Clearly Paige and Havi didn’t want the details going out over the air. She punched in what little information she had and hoped someone would fill her in soon.

“He’s dead,” Havilland informed Paige when she stepped in beside him.

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Paige moved forward and crouched next to the body. “You check his pocket?”

“Nope,” Havilland frowned. “He didn’t obey my command and reached for something. He’s a sniper that’s already taken a few shots at the police. I wasn’t willing to risk it.”

Paige reached into her go-bag, grateful she’d thought to bring it with her. She pulled out a camera and shot a couple photos. Forensics could document the rest of the scene, she wanted to know what he was reaching for. She slipped on a pair of rubber gloves and slowly slid her hand into the outer pocket of Terry’s jacket. Her fingers hit what could only be a pistol. “He was going for a gun. You’re lucky you shot first. If you hesitated, even for a second, he might have got off a shot.”

Havilland relaxed. He was confident he could justify his actions even if the man didn’t have a gun, but this was cleaner. “What do we tell the media?”

“Nothing,” Paige pulled out her phone and scrolled through her contacts until she found Tolman. “The DA can handle the press. If I’m going to wake him up, we should give him something to do.”

“It’s over,” Dax placed a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “You and your family are safe. You can put this behind you and move forward.”

“This isn’t the way I wanted it to end,” Dean let out a long breath. “I wanted answers. Now, I’ll never get them. We can never relax, not as long as there are questions.”

Paige slipped her phone back into her pocket. “Tolman is on the way. Dean, we’re going to keep you out of this as much as possible. Terry came back because he followed us here after we left the hospital. Tolman will buy it because he knows this is where Jericho was shot. We were watching the place and spotted the subject inside. We waited for him to exit and when Havi gave him the command to stop, he went for a gun. You don’t talk to the media. You steer clear of the cameras and when this is all over, you and your family go back to your normal routines.”

“You know I can’t do that,” Dean shook his head. “I’ll tell Tolman what happened. I’ll explain why. If he feels it’s necessary to include my real identity, my family will deal with it.”

“That’s not necessary,” Paige insisted.

“It is,” Dean said stubbornly. “Because if we hold anything back and it somehow gets out, it will turn a clean shooting into something surrounded in controversy. I won’t do that. We give Tolman the facts and let him handle the situation the way he deems fit.”

Paige wanted to argue, but she recognized the look of determination in Dean’s eyes. It wouldn’t do any good and it would just waste time. “Fine, we lay it on the line and hope Tolman sees things our way.”

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“Stop worrying,” Dean placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s going to be fine.”

“Sure,” Paige didn’t believe that for one second. “It will be fine — Dandy. You’ve got to be kidding me, Dean. How do you think Jericho is going to react once he hears what happened out here and he finds out you spilled your family secret to the local district attorney?”

“He’ll understand it was my decision and he’ll support me,” Dean shrugged.

“Must be nice,” Paige grumbled. “Existing in that fantasy world you created. Do you have unicorns? Fairies? Oh, are there dragons?”

Dean laughed. “Relax, Paige. I’ve got this.”

They all looked up when they spotted the headlights. Tolman had arrived.

Paige stepped outside and dialed Dax.

“Let me guess,” Dax frowned at the information Ken left on his desk. “You’re headed to Colorado?”

“Sorry,” Paige balanced the phone on her shoulder while she dug for her car keys. “I have to deal with this.”

“You going alone?”

Paige glanced up and spotted Dean leaning against her vehicle. “I was.”

“What does that mean?”

“Looks like I’m going to have to fight Dean on this one,” Paige glared at her fellow deputy.

“Don’t fight it,” Dax suggested. “He has a bigger stake in this than you do. Let the kid go with you. It might help him close this out and move on.”

“Maybe,” Paige motioned for Dean to move so she could open her door. “Anyway, it’s a nine hour drive one way. I’m going to be late. Don’t wait up.”

“I’ll see you when you get here,” Dax turned to look out the window. He’d wait up. It was time to have that talk.

“Anyway,” Paige shook her head, knowing Dax would do what he wanted no matter what she said. “Love you.”

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“Paige?” Dax was serious now. “I love you, be careful and make sure you stop for dinner on the way back. I need to work on something with my men. We’ll order in, so I won’t have anything handy when you get home.”

“We’ll stop,” Paige hung up and climbed behind the wheel. “Get in already,” she motioned to the passenger’s door.

Dean climbed in and studied Paige. “I thought I was going to have to argue.”

“You might have,” Paige put the vehicle in gear and pulled onto the highway. “Dax did that for you.”

“How?”

“He reminded me of the stakes,” Paige told him. “The personal stakes for you and your family. Plus, I figure if I said no, you’d just climb into your own car and head out alone. This way is better. I can keep an eye on you.”

Dean shook his head and settled in for a long ride.

They arrived at the Colorado State Penitentiary at a little past six. The inmates were just finishing up mealtime. It took some fast talking and twenty minutes, but they were finally escorted into a room where they could speak with Allen Kingsley without the glass barrier. The guard escorted him in and shackled him to a chair.

“I have to say,” Allen studied Dean. “You’re the last person I thought I’d see here.”

“This isn’t a social visit,” Paige jumped in. “What happened to your face?”

“I walked into a door,” Allen shrugged.

“Right,” Paige set that aside. She didn’t really care why the man was attacked. She had a message to deliver.

“Did Terry arrange that?” Dean asked.

Allen’s surprised showed, just for a moment but it was enough for Paige and Dean to recognize. Terry Kingsley was responsible for the bruises. “I said I walked into a door.”

“As you wish,” Paige settled back. “Did you break? Did you tell Terry’s thugs that you gave the necklace to Mandy?”

Allen glared at her but didn’t say a word.

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“I don’t think you did,” Dean provided. “But someone did. He located us. Came after me, but he failed. When you talk to your family, you should tell them that. Terry failed and if any of them try to follow in his footsteps — they’ll fail, too.”

Paige leaned forward. “We’re better than you are. We’re faster, more experienced and we’re smarter. You relay that message to your clan, Allen. Tell them I have the necklace now and I’m not nearly as easy to get to as a young inexperienced girl. I have it locked up safe and secure. In fact,” she looked at her watch. “Agent Sean Wilkins retrieved the item from evidence nearly an hour ago. You remember Agent Wilkins, don’t you Allen?”

“Sure,” Allen glanced at Dean. “He’s the reason I’m in here instead of his father.”

“You’re here because you’re a killer,” Paige corrected. “You’re here because you helped your father kidnap, torture and kill at least fifteen girls. You’re here because it’s where you belong.”

“I didn’t torture anyone,” Allen’s face paled at the accusation.

“I believed you,” Dean said softly. “I actually believed you loved her. Paige said it was all a ruse, but I believed you. Realizing I was wrong, it makes this easier for me. If you actually loved my sister, you never would have put her in danger. You used her, gave her the key to protect yourself but you risked her life — for what?”

“I didn’t know anything about the key,” Allen admitted then clamped his mouth shut.

“Right,” Paige studied the man before her. He was weak, but he was clever. She could see it in his eyes. “I think we’re finished here. We just stopped by to let you know your cousin failed. Terry is dead. Your family has probably been notified by now. He failed and if anyone else comes for the key, they’ll fail too. Make sure you relay that message, Allen.” She stood and waited for Dean to join her.

“I did love Mandy,” Allen focused on Dean. “Maybe you could tell her that. I didn’t know the necklace was a key. My father lied. I made the mistake of believing him. He said the necklace was an heirloom, a romantic token my grandfather gave my grandmother on their wedding night. He said he picked the key because Gran held the key to his heart. It was too sentimental, too normal. I should have recognized it as the lie it was, but I believed him, maybe because I wanted to believe something good came from my family. I gave that necklace to Mandy because I loved her. I will always love her. I have no reason to believe you’ll pass on the message, but I think knowing might help her accept what happened. It wasn’t fake, it wasn’t a ruse like you said, it was real. At least it was for me.” He stood and motioned to the door. “Guard, I want to go back to my cell now.”

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Paige watched as the inmate was escorted from the room. She waited, knowing the words struck a cord with Dean. Once he moved toward the door, she followed. They walked in silence all the way back to the car.

“Don’t say a word,” Dean told her once they were settled and on their way back to Manti.

“You were right,” Paige admitted. “I didn’t think he was capable of love, but he was. He loved Mandy. I’m not sure what that means, but you were right about that.”

“I don’t think he knew,” Dean told her.

“About the necklace? No, he didn’t know,” Paige agreed. “Or he didn’t want to. Deep down, he knows his father is a liar and a sociopath. He had doubts, but he pushed them aside. I think he was telling the truth, or at least a version of the truth. He desperately wanted to believe in romance. He wanted to believe his grandparents had something good. His father was a predator. Terry was a maniac. Allen was searching for something good and he thought he found a little bit of light in the necklace. Will you tell Mandy?”

“I don’t know,” Dean admitted. “I’m going to talk it over with my parents. They’ll know if the time is right better than I will. Mandy and I used to be close, but this incident, me deciding to become a cop, it’s pushed a wedge between us. I can’t read her the way I used to. Mom will know and I’ll follow her lead on this one.”

“He’ll give the message to his family,” Paige assured him. “Your parents, Mandy, they’ll be safe now. Even if the Kingsley’s know where you live, they’ll come after me — or they’ll let it drop.”

“Is that better?”

“Of course,” Paige grinned. “Because I’m married to a macho, former Special Forces, warrior. I also have a whole team of fighters living next door. And, if that wasn’t enough, the scariest general that ever lived is only a phone call away. The threat has been redirected at worst, neutralized at best. Put it away, Dean. We won this one.”

“I guess,” Dean pushed the seat back, stretched out his legs and closed his eyes, prepared for the long ride home. “Maybe we could stop in Colorado Springs for dinner. I’m starved.”

Paige laughed and relaxed. Life was finally back to normal.