

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Collateral Damage *Season 4, Episode 8*

by:

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“So,” Paige finished off her coffee and focused on Dax. “What’s on the agenda for today?” She held up a finger when her phone rang. “Hold that thought. Hello?”

“Paige,” Margie greeted. “I know you still have twenty minutes but is there any way you could check on early?”

“What’s going on?”

“Sherrie Norton, the manager up at the Manti Campground,” Margie began. “She called, I’m going to warn you ahead of time, she’s pretty hysterical. Anyway, she says there’s a dead guy up at the campground.”

“I thought it was closed,” Paige frowned.

“It is,” Margie confirmed. “She went up to do one last check before she leaves town. She always spends a couple months with her sister down in Mesquite during the off season. She’s scheduled to leave in the morning, so she was doing one last drive through before she heads out. She was nearly finished when she spotted the body in one of the campsites.”

“Alright,” Paige stood. “I need a minute, then I’ll head that way.”

“Duty calls?” Dax asked once she ended the call.

“Yeah,” Paige sighed. “Body up the canyon. I might be late.”

“Watch your six,” Dax stood and pulled her in for a quick kiss.

“Yeah,” Paige stepped back. “I’ll do that.”

A few minutes later, Paige was climbing into her vehicle and pulling onto the highway. “Dispatch,” Paige called into the radio. “I’m enroute to the campground.”

“Carter?” Gage’s voice came through the speaker.

“Go ahead, Clayton.”

“I’m about two minutes away from the mouth. I’ll follow you up.”

“Sounds good,” Paige considered. Margie must have called Gage in, too. She spotted the sheriff’s vehicle pulled off to the side of the road, slowed, honked, then continued up the canyon. It didn’t take long before they reached their destination. The instant Paige pulled through the gate, Sherrie Norton jumped from her vehicle and rushed to the driver’s side of Paige’s marked unit.

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“He’s up there,” she pointed to the left. “At that last campsite. I um... well, I was wondering if I had to go back up there. I don’t want to see him again and I was thinking maybe... well, maybe I could just wait here.”

“That would be fine,” Paige agreed. “I’ll need to talk to you once I’ve seen the body, but you don’t have to go back up there again.”

“Thank you,” Sherrie said in obvious relief. “So, just follow that road. At the end, it loops around and the body is in the site at the top of the loop. Don’t worry, you can’t miss it.”

“Thanks Sherrie,” Paige smiled then motioned for Gage to follow her. She made her way through the campground and stopped at the base of the loop. After pulling her vehicle to the side, she jumped out and approached Gage. “I want to walk in. I need to see if there are any tire tracks that might be unique or any other clues that might help. You can wait here if you want. I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

“Naw,” Gage slid from the vehicle. “I’ll walk in with you. Two pair of eyes are better than one. Let’s see what we see.”

The two deputies slowly made their way up the roadway. There were tire tracks, tons of them. Some were smaller, clearly ATV’s, others were larger from a truck or a jeep. None were unique. “Let’s see if we have better luck with the body.” Paige sighed and slowly made her way to the large lump situated next to the firepit. The instant she reached the man, she cursed under her breath.

“I wanted him to pay,” Gage said soberly. “But not like this.”

“Yeah,” Paige circled around and crouched down in front of the lifeless form to get a better look. “Santiago Esposito also known as Scratch, seriously pissed someone off.”

“I agree,” Gage scowled. “What is that, the brown stuff smeared all over him.”

Paige glanced up in surprise. “You hit the turf one too many times with that linebacker nose of yours, Gage?”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I could smell the peanut butter a mile away,” Paige straightened. “How did you miss it?”

“First,” Gage’s scowl deepened. “That’s a gross exaggeration. Second, I smelled peanut butter, but why in the world would someone smear it all over his legs, chest and arms?”

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“It’s a trick the Mexican Mafia uses,” Paige explained. “If they’re close to a wilderness area, like this one, they smear the dead body with peanut butter after they’ve finished. It’s a great way to dispose of a corpse that you never want found.”

“Because the peanut butter will attract the wildlife in the area,” Gage nodded. “Especially in the winter. It would probably have worked if Sherrie hadn’t come up to do one more walkthrough before she left town. The campground is closed, nobody uses it this late in the season. A good hard winter, hungry carnivores, and a little good luck,” Gage snapped his fingers. “Your unwanted body simply disappears.”

“Exactly,” Paige sighed. “I need to walk the area, just in case, but I don’t think we’re going to learn much up here. Somebody wanted Scratch dead; but first, they wanted something from him.”

“I know we have to look at the Langford’s,” Gage ran a frustrated hand over his face. “I know we have to look, but will you let me try to do it quietly? I don’t want them pulled into the middle of this unless they belong there. Adam’s friends are still struggling to cope with his senseless murder. His parents are now divorced and they’re both struggling. Adam’s younger brother has closed himself off completely. The entire family is a wreck. I’d just like to talk to them, see if I can determine where they were at the time of death before we do the official interrogation thing. Do we know time of death? Based on the condition of the body do you think he was killed today?”

“No,” Paige sighed. “The ME will determine TOD, but if I had to guess, I’d say it was probably yesterday — last night at the latest. The cold weather has delayed the process which is the only reason he wasn’t discovered by the coyotes or a mountain lion yet. I’m surprised the crows and the buzzards haven’t started in — we got lucky and he still has his eyes. Another day or two and it’s possible we never would have found him; or, if we did, his body would have been destroyed by wildlife to the point we’d never know what happened to him.”

“Are you cool with me talking to the Langford’s?” Gage asked again.

“Sure,” Paige shrugged. “At this point, I’m not sure that’s even necessary. Scratch was tortured for information before he was shot. We already know he’s part of the Contreras organization and they used a well-known cartel technique to dispose of the body. My focus will be on the Mexican drug trade.”

“Then let’s wait on talking to the Langford’s,” Gage agreed. “I just can’t see any of them doing this.”

“I don’t see that either,” Paige sighed. “There’s nothing here. I’m not even sure this is where they tortured him. There’s just nothing here,” she repeated in frustration.

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“I’ll call the ME,” Gage offered. “You do your thing and make sure you can’t find any other clues.”

“Before we get into the weeds on the upcoming training session,” Dax started the meeting. “Wooly, tell us what you found on the intel I received.”

“Nothing good,” Ken admitted. “Scratch is back in town. I know Paige will want to know immediately so she can go after him. He’s wanted for the murder of that high school kid.”

“Right,” Hawk nodded. “The one out at that barn just before the wedding.”

“I’ll make sure she knows,” Dax decided. “She’ll have to fight Gage for the arrest though, that case was personal for him. The victim was one of his boys. The minute I tell Paige he’s back in the states, she’ll want to know how I know — and why.”

“That won’t be hard,” Ken added. “He’s not being subtle. He’s out there, driving an expensive car and flashing cash like it grows on trees or something. Scratch is showing off and acting like he doesn’t have a care in the world.”

“Where’s he getting the cash?” Zeus wondered.

“That’s the question,” Ken shrugged. “There are rumors he’s working both sides and skimming a little from everyone. If any of them are true, he’s an idiot.”

“Both sides?” Vato asked.

“Edwardo Contreras and Ramin Trevils,” Wooly explained. “The two main cartels in Mexico.”

“I thought you said that Scratch guy worked for Contreras,” Vato said, confused. “How does Trevils play into this?”

“From the intel I was able to gather, Scratch was a low to mid-level dealer for Contreras. When he disappeared, after the murder, he returned to Mexico. While there, he hooked up with some of Trevil’s men and decided to work for him as well. He’s actually kept the double duty thing under wraps — for the most part. I wouldn’t say it’s a well-hidden secret, but it’s not common knowledge, either. Which is probably the only reason he’s still breathing. Those two are enemies and neither one of them would tolerate an asset working both ends. Anyway, scratch is back and he’s spending money like it’s going out of style. I realize the cartel pays well, but not that well. You can only skim for so long before you get caught. I’m afraid Scratch’s time is running out.”

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“Because?” Hawk asked.

“Contreras also sent two of his best men up here, Mook Bugatti and Pablo Veranda,” Wooly explained. “No word on when they left or if they’ve arrived, but they’re headed to Manti for a reason. I think the reason is Scratch.”

“Not just two of his best men,” Dax added. “Two fixers. Okay,” he nodded, resigned. “I’ll let Paige know. Now, let’s get down to business. Our first session went well but we have that three-day winter survival course coming up and we need to tweak the lesson plan a little for the session just after Thanksgiving.”

“Right, I have some ideas on that,” Hawk pulled out his notes and began to explain the changes he wanted to implement.

Paige pulled into the driveway and frowned when she realized the house was completely dark. Where was Dax? Surely, he hadn’t gone to bed already. She wasn’t that late. With a sigh, she reached for her bag and climbed from her vehicle. Her frown deepened when she realized the front door was locked. She dug out her keys and fumbled around in the dark for several seconds before she finally got the thing unlocked. Once inside, she moved to the couch and began to discard her gear. She had just slipped out of her uniform shirt and was standing there in a white t-shirt when her phone began to ring. She snatched it up without checking, positive it had to be Dax. It wasn’t.

“Hey, Paige,” Carmen said relieved. “I’m glad you’re home. Since Zeus went with Dax, I didn’t want to stay home alone so I’m on my way over to your place. In fact, I’m just pulling into your driveway. Is the door locked?”

“No,” Paige frowned at the headlights shining in through the large bay windows. “Why... never mind.”

“I’m headed in,” Carmen informed her before disconnecting the call. Seconds later, she bounced through the front door and dropped a large bag on the floor with a thud.

“What do you mean Dax is with Zeus?” Paige asked.

“Do you ever check your messages?” Carmen scolded. “Dax said he couldn’t reach you, but I was sure the two of you must have connected by now.”

“It was a busy day,” Paige said feeling defensive.

“Fine,” Carmen dropped into a nearby chair. “Don’t kill the messenger.”

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“Where is Dax?” Paige pulled out her phone and saw Dax had indeed been trying to call her.

“Ken found a good deal on some snowmobiles,” Carmen explained. “But they were up in Salt Lake. The guys headed out to take a look. Zeus wasn’t sure they’d make it back tonight. It was late — after work — when Wooly finally got ahold of the guy. The seller I mean. They headed up, but it’s at least a two-hour drive one way. By the time they get there, stop for dinner, check out the machines and head back, it would be in the middle of the night. I told Zeus they should just find a hotel and hit the road first thing.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Paige settled onto the couch. “Does any of this worry you?” Paige asked hesitantly.

“Any of what?”

“The training center,” Paige clarified. “It just feels like they are spending an awful lot of money. I want to be supportive, but if they get too far into debt, they’ll never get out of the red.”

Carmen frowned. Dax said he was going to talk to Paige about the money. Obviously, they hadn’t had that conversation yet. Even so, without the extra cash, the guys wouldn’t be that far into debt. “Do you and Dax even talk? I mean, I know you married the guy, but do you talk about what he’s doing with the new business?”

“I guess we don’t,” Paige realized. “We talk, but usually it’s about my work, not his. I don’t know that much about the courses, the goals, or the finances.”

“Well,” Carmen considered. “Maybe you should make the time. It’s a big deal, Paige. What those guys are doing—it’s huge and they’re already in demand. Zeus told me they’re nearly booked solid. That’s for next year. The guys wanted to add another course this year, but Dax won’t budge on that one. He’s doing the survival course this weekend, then another session the week after Thanksgiving, but after that, he’s shutting down until mid-January.”

“What do you mean shutting down?” Paige was beginning to feel selfish. They always talked about her cases and what happened on the job that day, but she was starting to realize they never talked about Dax and his new project.

“Seriously, Paige?” Carmen censured. “They’ll still be working, Dax just decided they needed time to evaluate, revamp the lesson plans, come up with new courses so every class wasn’t just a repeat of the last. He really is brilliant — in the training and the business stuff. This is going to succeed and he won’t have to leverage the farm to make it happen.”

“They’ve spent a lot of money,” Paige disagreed. “I know Dax had a pretty big chunk, but that has to be gone now. I’m not complaining, if the guys had to get a business loan to get

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started, that's normal. I just think buying all the extras is excessive. They just purchased that trailer, now they're off splurging on snowmobiles."

"Used snowmobiles," Carmen corrected. "And how else are they supposed to get the clients into the backcountry in the wintertime? You say splurge, I say necessity."

"You're really not worried?" Paige realized.

"Nope," Carmen insisted. "Paige those men are minimalists. Their world consisted of tents, desert sandstorms, and powering through anything to get to the bad guy. Almost everything they made before this went into savings. They're not out buying expensive tuxedos and fast cars. They're spending the money each of them scraped up from various jobs and locations to get their business — one that has tremendous potential — up and running. Don't worry about the money, your man is keeping a tight rein on things. Vato? That man would mortgage the farm, the business, and his right kidney if they let him."

"Okay," Paige stood. "If you say it's fine, I'm going to trust that it's fine. Now, I'm starving. Did you eat?"

"Nope," Carmen followed Paige into the kitchen. "Let's order pizza."

"Brilliant idea," Paige reached for the phone just as it began to ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, kid," Nathan Porter's voice came through the line. "I just wanted to check in and make sure we're still on for Thanksgiving."

"We are," Paige settled into one of the kitchen chairs. "Dax has a course the week after that, but we should be all set for the holiday."

"Great," Nathan frowned. "I'll let Sophie know. Now tell me what's wrong."

"It's complicated," Paige admitted. "Nothing to worry about. I just have a lot on my mind, and I caught a case today. One that is frustrating me. You don't want to hear this."

"I'd love to hear it, but it sounds like you have company," Nathan heard the female voice in the background.

"Right," Paige gave Carmen the thumbs up. Pizza was on its way. "That's just Carmen."

"I'll let you go for now," Nathan decided. "Sophie and I were on our way out the door anyway, but I wanted to check in and make sure our plans were still a go before I purchase airfare."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you," Paige told him.

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“You’re not getting off the hook that easily,” Nathan warned. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Have a good evening and try not to keep Carmen up all night. I need her on a conference call at ten — my time.”

“I’ll be sure to remind her,” Paige smiled. “Have fun and I’ll talk to you soon.”

“I love you, kid,” Nathan answered.

“Love you, too,” Paige disconnected and slipped her phone into her pocket. She turned to Carmen to ask if she’d deal with the pizza while she called Dax but didn’t get the chance because the doorbell rang. Once the driver had left, Carmen talked Paige into eating while their dinner was hot. By the time they ate, cleaned up, and Carmen told her what she could about the project for Nathan, it was nearly midnight. The instant she stepped into her room, she pulled out her cellphone and realized she’d missed another call from Dax. And, he sent a text.

“Sorry I missed you. I’m beat, turning in. Early start in the AM. You should know, Scratch is back, and Contreras sent Mook Bugatti and Pablo Veranda up with him. Bad news. I love you. Dax.”

Paige frowned at the message. How did Dax know Scratch and two other thugs were close by? Why was he watching Contreras? Did this have anything to do with the secret he’d been keeping? And if so, how would it connect with her current case? Was he involved? She knew Scratch was back in town, his body was currently on a slab at the morgue. Was it possible this Mook and Pablo duo was responsible? She didn’t get to talk to her husband, but she was pretty sure he just gave her a solid lead. With a sigh, she hit voicemail and heard Dax’s voice explaining why he’d suddenly gone to Salt Lake. Once she finished listening to the messages, it hit her. Dax was better at this marriage thing than she was. He’d called four times today and she’d not only missed every one, but she hadn’t returned any of them. Carmen’s words hit her again — with even more force this time around. She was a horrible wife. She didn’t know anything about the work Dax and the guys were doing, but Carmen seemed to know everything. She climbed into bed and stared at the ceiling willing her mind to relax so she could get a few hours’ sleep before she had to get back to work. She failed.

Paige made her way down the stairs and followed her nose down the hallway. Obviously, Carmen was already up. She stepped into the kitchen and spotted her friend flipping pancakes on the grill. “Morning,” Paige stumbled to the coffee pot and began doctoring the elixir she desperately needed this morning.

Carmen turned, studied Paige and frowned. “You look awful.”

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“You’re so good to me,” Paige dropped onto a chair and took a long, desperately needed sip. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“What are you stressing about now?” Carmen slid a plate stacked high with pancakes in front of her.

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to Dax last night,” Paige admitted. “I feel like a horrible person. He called five times and I missed every one. He also sent a text message informing me a killer I’ve been chasing is back in the area. He’s always thinking of me and my job, even though he has to be more than busy with his own.”

“And I basically threw that in your face last night,” Carmen realized. “I wasn’t being critical.”

“You were,” Paige took another sip of her coffee. “And, you were right. I guess I take Dax and our relationship for granted sometimes. He’s just always there and when he’s not...”

“You can’t sleep,” Carmen settled in next to her. “I couldn’t settle either. I guess I didn’t realize how much I rely on Zeus either. I tossed and turned for over an hour before I dropped off. I think I’ve gone and done it, Paige.”

“What’s that?” Paige scooped several pancakes onto her plate and drenched them in syrup.

“I think I’m in love with him,” Carmen said softly. “I think I’ve fallen so hard for that man I’ll never recover if it doesn’t last.”

Paige looked up and realized Carmen was really stressed over her emotions. “He feels the same, you have to know that.”

“I know he loves me,” Carmen admitted. “But would he be devastated if I dumped him?”

“Absolutely,” Paige frowned. “You won’t, right?”

“I don’t think I could,” Carmen sighed. “I’ve never been this entangled before. You know that. I keep my distance, keep it all safe and casual — just in case. I don’t have a ‘just in case’ with Zeus. That man snuck in and stole my heart. He broke down all my defenses because he wouldn’t allow any distance between us.”

“The sneaky troublemaker,” Paige grinned.

“This is serious,” Carmen stabbed at her pancake.

“Carmen,” Paige reached out and covered her friend’s hand in support. “It’s okay to fall in love. I’m still stumbling around, trying to figure out how to be a wife to the most amazing guy on the planet, but the one thing I don’t stress over is the love — mine for him or his for me. That part, it’s natural and it’s real. It’s also mutual, just like you and Zeus.”

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“What if I mess it up?” Carmen asked.

“Then you’ll fix it,” Paige shrugged.

Carmen pondered her relationship, then shifted to consider her friend. “Will you fix things with Dax?”

“What does that mean?” Paige didn’t like knowing her friend sensed she had a few issues that needed to be worked out with her husband.

“You’ve been different,” Carmen said hesitantly. “Since the wedding. No, that’s not right. Something changed before the wedding. If you don’t fix it, the relationship is going to change and if you wait too long — the change will be permanent.”

“I know,” Paige relented. “I’m still struggling with the secrets.”

“You need to get over that,” Carmen insisted. “Whatever Dax is keeping from you, he has his reasons. I keep secrets from you and so does Nathan. You aren’t bothered by those, in fact, I think you expect it from us. Why is Dax held to a different standard?”

“Maybe because I love him,” Paige said absently.

“Thanks,” Carmen stood. “I thought you loved us, too. I won’t break the news to Nathan, it would devastate him, and he has too much on his plate to deal with the heartbreak.”

“You know what I mean,” Paige grumbled.

“You get the dishes,” Carmen evaded. “I cooked and I have a conference call to get to.” She moved forward and pulled Paige into a hug. “Thanks for letting me crash here. I really did appreciate the company.”

“Any time,” Paige watched her friend disappear out the back door. She focused on the dishes, tempted to ignore them, but she couldn’t. If she left them in the sink, Dax would deal with them when he got home and that wasn’t fair. Once they were rinsed and loaded in the dishwasher, she showered, dressed, and headed into the office — all the while thinking about Dax.

Paige approached her desk and frowned. Duncan Havilland was settled in her visitor’s chair, one leg crossed over the other resting casually on her desk.

“Paige,” Havi said in greeting.

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“Duncan,” Paige mimicked his tone as she dropped into her own chair. She stared at his feet and waited for him to get them off her desk.

“Didn’t realize you were so testy in the morning,” he dropped his feet to the floor with a thud and grinned.

“Why are you here?” Paige asked, annoyance replacing the guilt and confusion she’d been feeling all morning. “I thought you were on afternoons this week.”

“I was,” Havilland shrugged. “Gage and I decided to trade shifts. You’re stuck with me for today and tomorrow.”

“Why?” Paige narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re up to something.”

“Naw,” Havilland grinned casually. “We traded because Gage needs to be at some football camp, training event, or some such thing at the high school and because I can help get to the bottom of the Scratch issue.”

“How so?” Paige wondered.

“Detective Nelson got ahold of me yesterday,” Havilland was all cop now, the casual teasing set aside to focus on business. “He works drugs over in the Bluffs.”

“Okay,” Paige was alert now. “I assume he had a lead on the murder.”

“Maybe,” Havilland shrugged. “Not sure. He did say Scratch was running with a couple frequent fliers. David Winzer also known as Tarzan, and Horatio Fino who is not so affectionately called the Nose. Tarzan is locked up at the moment. I thought maybe we should pay him a visit this morning.”

“And Fino?” Paige asked. “I refuse to call anyone the Nose.”

“You say that now,” Havi stood. “You might change your mind when you see his.”

“I doubt it,” Paige also stood. “I’ll meet you at the jail and we’ll go from there.”

It took less than ten minutes to get David Winzer into a private room where they could discuss his association with Scratch and his friend’s untimely death.

“I don’t know nothing about Scratch,” Winzer insisted.

“You do know Scratch,” Havi pressed.

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“Maybe I did,” Winzer admitted. “But, I didn’t do nothing and I don’t know how he got dead.”

“Where was he getting the money?” Paige asked softly. “He was throwing money around like he owned a money tree. Where did he get it?”

“Don’t know,” Winzer turned his face away from hers, but there was a look in his eyes that told her the man was lying.

“Answer the question,” Havilland demanded.

“That’s okay,” Paige smiled. “You and I know he’s not spilling his guts in here, but I’m not sure Mook and Pablo will see it that way.”

“You know Mook?” Winzer asked, surprised. “You have to tell him I didn’t say nothing. You have to tell him, I’m not a rat.”

Havilland flashed her an annoyed look. Paige ignored it. “Why would I do that? You’re not helping me; I can’t see any reason to help you.”

“He’s gonna kill me,” Winzer whined. “You don’t narc on Mook.”

“Where did Scratch get the money?” Havilland pushed.

“Don’t know,” Winzer’s gaze bounced from Paige to Havilland, back to Paige and then landed on Havilland. “For real. You have to help me, man. Tell Mook I didn’t talk, and I’ll tell you what I know about the cash.”

“Did Scratch always use cash?” Havi asked.

“Yeah,” Winzer nodded. “Yeah, always cash. So, you’ll help me. You gonna tell Mook?”

“Where did he get the cash, Tarzan?” Havi asked again.

“It’s a secret,” Winzer whispered. “We tried, me and the Nose. We badgered him but he wiggled and wouldn’t tell. Maybe Trevils? They hooked up — when he was down in Mexico on account of that kid dying. Scratch, he was furious. He’s the one that did that kid. He said Football, that’s what he called him, he said Football was bad for business. Scratch wacked him because he stuck his nose in at the high school. Scratch ghosted the next day, slid into a hole down south and ran into Trevils’ men somehow. They worked out a deal and Scratch, he thought he was smart — playing both sides and getting paid for it. Now he’s dead.”

“He was dropping more cash than that,” Paige insisted.

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“Yeah,” Winzer nodded. “Yeah. He scored that dope car. I dunno how he did it. Scratch, kept it on the down low, we couldn’t break him. The Nose, he even broke Scratch’s face, but he wouldn’t say. It was a secret, but Pablo said he stole it.”

“Pablo told you Scratch stole from Contreras?” Havilland asked.

“Yeah,” Winzer bobbed his head. “Sure. Me and the Nose was trying to find the cash. Pablo said Contreras would be happy if we found it and we’d be dope. But Scratch wouldn’t tell. Now he’s dead.”

“How much cash did Scratch steal?” Paige asked. Could this be about the plane crash?

“Dunno,” Winzer frowned. “Nobody steals from Contreras but...” he paused to consider. “Well, Scratch bought that sick car — must have been a lot. I mean, Mook came looking, so it had to be a lot.”

They worked him for another twenty minutes but didn’t get anything else. The man that called himself Tarzan didn’t know where Mook and Pablo were staying. According to him, you didn’t contact them, they called you.

Havilland followed Paige to her vehicle. “So, what’s our next move? Chase down Horatio Fino or focus on Mook Bugatti and Pablo Veranda.”

“You’re familiar with Mook and Pablo?”

“Anyone that’s ever worked dope knows about Mook and Pablo. I suffered through a year in Narcs before I left Laurel Bluffs,” Havi scowled. “You should have told me — before we confronted Tarzan in there.”

“I don’t get it,” Paige considered. “Why Tarzan? The guy’s a scrawny wimp, not a sexy jungle man. What gives?”

“Don’t change the subject, Paige,” Havilland pushed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Dax sent me those names and I haven’t had a chance to run them,” Paige shrugged. “I just threw out the names to see if I got a reaction. I had no idea who they were.”

“Even more reason to mention it before we questioned a suspect,” Havilland insisted. “You didn’t answer me — The Nose, or Mook and Pablo?”

“I think Mook and Pablo will be more difficult to locate,” she glanced down when her phone beeped. She yanked it out and saw Dax sent her a text.

“I’m home.”

“Problems?” Havilland asked.

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“No,” Paige sighed. “But I need an hour.”

“I’ll head back to the office,” Havilland decided. “I can call the hotels from there and see if any of these guys made things easy for us.”

“I’ll meet you back at the office in an hour,” Paige said before she climbed behind the wheel and pulled away.

Paige pulled into the driveway and just sat there staring at the front door. She had no idea what to say to Dax, she just knew she had to say something. She wasn’t angry with him, not really. She knew it was irrational, but she was annoyed. She felt abandoned, and the irrational side of her thought he should have made more of an effort to talk to her before he left town. She knew it was her fault and maybe that’s why it bothered her so much. Dax had called, then he called again. When he didn’t hear back, he left a detailed message telling her what he was doing and then sent her a text. What more did she want from him? With a sigh, she pushed open the door and started for the house. No sense asking herself questions she didn’t have an answer for.

She had just reached the top of the stairs when she spotted movement at the house next door. Curious, she made her way to the edge of the patio and spotted Ken. She was about to call out and say hello when she spotted the envelope. When Ken pulled the side door shut, the envelope shifted, and several hundred-dollar bills dropped to the ground. He crouched, snatched them back up and tucked them inside an envelope — a thick envelope. Where did Ken get all that cash? She continued to watch as he slid into the SUV and pulled away.

Paige shot one last glance at the front door, silently made her way across the patio and darted back down the stairs. She climbed into her patrol vehicle and backed away. Just before she pulled onto the highway, she spotted Dax standing in the open doorway, frowning. “In for a penny,” she mumbled and headed for the canyon. Before she returned to the office, she wanted one more look at the dump site. And, she needed time to think. Where did Ken get all that cash? From Dax’s old house, that’s where. Where did Dax get that kind of money? Most of his funds were gone now. He used them to buy the property and build the training center. Her mind was racing with thoughts she didn’t want to consider.

She pulled into the campground and made her way to the end of the loop. She had just finished walking the perimeter of the site when she heard a noise. She pulled her weapon and swung around to face the intruder. “Stop, police.”

Vato emerged from the shadows, glanced at her gun and frowned. “I realize we’re not exactly friends, but I don’t think I deserve to be shot — again.”

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Paige shoved her gun back into the holster. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” Vato moved forward and casually settled on top of the picnic table. “We need to talk.”

“About?” Paige didn’t move.

“A truce,” Vato glanced around and frowned. “Why are you out here, anyway?”

“Police business,” Paige moved forward and settled onto the table next to him. “What did you have in mind?”

“Look,” Vato sighed. “I know you and I got off to a bad start.”

“So,” Paige glanced toward the trees just in time to see something glistening in the distance. She stood and made her way toward the shiny object.

Vato watched, interested in what she was doing and more than a little curious. He continued to watch as she slid a pair of tweezers and a plastic bag from the large pack she carried and crouched. Moments later, she had dropped the mysterious item into a bag and was headed back toward him.

“Sorry,” she settled onto the table. “Duty called.”

“What was it?” Vato asked. “If you’re allowed to say.”

Paige shrugged. “A fitness watch.”

“Do you know who left it here?” Vato didn’t see how she could possibly know that.

“No,” Paige set her go-bag on the table and turned to address a man she didn’t really know. “I’m working a case, Vato. A man’s body was located out here. Over there,” she pointed to the fire pit. “It could be a clue, or it could be nothing. That’s police work. Now, tell me how I can help you.”

“I haven’t watched the news,” Vato admitted. “Who died?”

“A drug dealer named Scratch,” Paige saw the recognition in his eyes. “You know him.”

“I don’t,” Vato said honestly. “I know of him. I know he’s the guy that killed that kid just before your wedding. I know you’ve been looking for him and I know Dax conned Carmen into watching the cartel’s movement just in case the guy returned.”

“Why?” Paige wondered if he would answer. It was a question she should be asking Dax.

Vato shrugged. “For you, I suppose.”

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“There’s no more to it than that?” Paige challenged.

“That’s a question for Dax,” Vato decided. “What I will say is that Dax has a grudge against the up-and-coming drug lord. I assume you know what happened to Zeus down in Mexico.”

“I do,” Paige considered. She should have thought of that. Of course Dax had a grudge against Contreras and of course he’d have Carmen keep an eye on things with Zeus living in the area. “You’re right, I’ll ask Dax directly. You can tell me more about this truce you’re proposing.”

“There are very few people I trust in this world,” Vato began. “Dax and the others, that’s basically it. For me, they’re family. I have my sister, but she’s... well, she lives in a whole different world. She doesn’t understand what I do — what I’ve done. She doesn’t understand me. Don’t get me wrong, I love her, and I would do anything to protect her.”

“I got that loud and clear,” Paige said without emotion.

“I guess you still blame me for what happened to Dax,” Vato realized.

“I don’t,” Paige said honestly. “I think you should have trusted these men you call family. I think you should have told Dax and Hawk what was going on, so they could have helped from the start, but I don’t blame you for a madman’s actions.”

“I think maybe that’s the problem,” Vato said soberly. “The problem between you and me.”

“Care to share?” Paige looked up and waited.

“It’s easy for you,” Vato refused to look away. “Trusting people. It seems to come easy for you. Something comes up and you instantly share — with Dax, with Carmen, with Nathan. Your natural response is to talk it through, trust those around you, and ask for their input while at the same time you demand their loyalty. It’s not that easy for some of us.”

Paige thought about the situation with Dax. It wasn’t all that easy for her, either. “Assuming you’re right, how does that explain the tension between us?”

“I don’t know you, Paige,” Vato sighed. “At first, I think I resented you. Resented the relationship you had with Dax and the others. I wasn’t coping well and it felt like I was the outsider. I blamed you for that. I didn’t know you, I didn’t trust you, but they did. And, because of what I did, they didn’t trust me. I have no one but myself to blame for that, I’m not saying different, but it was... challenging.”

Paige studied Vato for several seconds. “I know how it feels to be the outsider in that group. Hawk, Wooly, and the Doc — none of them trusted me when they first arrived. I had to

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prove myself and it took time. Less time because we had to save Dax, but I had to prove myself just the same. You're not an outsider, Vato. You're on the injured list. You shouldn't be, we both know that. They know it, too. But, Dax feels guilty and that guilt is pushing him to indulge you and your whims. He continues to be overprotective of you and you let him because more often than not, you get what you want. You're taking advantage of the situation while at the same time, you resent it. You want things to change, change them."

Vato considered what she was saying. She was right. "I guess I don't get any pampering or kid gloves from you?"

"Nope," Paige stood. "I tend to be a straight shooter, it's part of my charm."

"You're good for him," Vato said softly. "I've never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. I'm not sure you understand how important you are to him. You're his world and you can hurt him. You are probably the one person that can destroy him. He trusts you, more than he trusts us. I would never have believed that could be possible if I didn't see it for myself. I guess part of my resistance — towards you — part of it, is knowing just how much power you have. You scare me, Paige. There's nobody in this world I respect more than Dax and you have the power to break him."

Paige studied Vato for several seconds. She didn't know how to respond to that. She decided on honesty. "Then you should know — should understand — it's mutual. Dax has the power to destroy me, too. He can hurt me; he could break me. I'm just as vulnerable when it comes to Dax as he with me."

"I think maybe I believe that," Vato stared aimlessly into the wilderness. "I'm going to work on the rest of it, too. I'm going to stop taking advantage, I'm going to stop milking their sympathy, even if that means I no longer get what I want. Because, I don't want to be protected. I want to be their equal. I think, maybe, once I accomplish that — things between us might begin to improve."

"I think they already have," Paige put a hand on Vato's shoulder. "Dax respects you, too. It won't take much. If you push back, just a little, he'll realize it's time to let his little bird fly."

Vato scowled.

Paige laughed. "Lighten up, soldier. It was a joke."

"Too bad it wasn't funny," Vato grumbled but he was smiling.

"Good talk," Paige called over her shoulder as she walked away.

Vato continued to grin and watch as Paige slid into her vehicle and drove away.

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Paige tried to focus on the case, but her thoughts kept going back to Vato's words. She had the power to destroy Dax. And, if she was going to be honest with herself, she was breaking a promise. Her actions were causing a rift in their marriage. She was the one taking a step back. She was the one that didn't return his calls. She was the one avoiding him. Carmen had been right, too. Secrets were a normal, expected part of her relationship with Nathan and her best friend. Knowing that, didn't bother her at all. Why did knowing Dax had a secret hurt so much? She couldn't explain it, not even to herself. It just did.

She pulled into the police station and shut down the vehicle. She had to push her personal issues aside and focus on the murder. Scratch might have been a turd, but he was dead and that made him hers.

Havilland glanced up when Paige stepped through the doors. He glanced at the clock, then refocused on his call.

Paige waited for him to hang up. "I don't want to hear it. I decided to check out the campsite again." She pulled out the evidence bag and dropped it on the desk. "Know anyone that can access the data on this thing?"

Havilland stood and moved to stand next to Paige. "Maybe. You think it belonged to one of the killers?"

"I think it's a long shot," Paige dropped into her chair. "If this Mook guy and Pablo are professional fixers, what are the odds they lost a watch right next to our crime scene?"

"Long," Havi admitted. "I've got nothing. They're not staying here in town. I asked Nelson to check the lodges in Laurel Bluffs just in case, but I think it's more likely they're staying with fellow cartel members."

"We'll chase the leads," Paige decided. "Even if they're long and improbable."

"Give me the watch," Havilland decided. "I'll see what I can track down from the serial number."

"Alright," Paige agreed. "I'm gonna spend some time getting to know Mook and Pablo. Maybe something will jump out at me."

Paige pulled into the driveway and for the second time that day, just sat there — thinking. She owed Dax an apology and procrastinating wasn't going to help. She slowly made her way to

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the front door, pushed it open and stepped inside. Dax was waiting for her on the couch. She could feel him watching her as she pushed out of her boots, unsnapped her duty belt and dropped it over a chair. He didn't say a word, just watched her walk across the room and settle onto the couch next to him.

"I was hoping you'd tell me what I did," Dax forced his face to remain neutral.

"Nothing," Paige admitted. "I did."

"I don't understand," Dax continued to watch her, barely blinking.

"I'm a horrible wife," Paige said in defeat. "I was busy, but that's no excuse. I wish it was. I got so caught up in what I was doing, I got lost in my world and didn't even think about yours. Then, I pulled up to the house and it was dark — completely dark and I was confused. When Carmen called and said she wanted to stay with me because you and Zeus were spending the night in Salt Lake, I was taken completely by surprise. And, I guess I was disappointed. I've gotten used to having you here, when I get home. Especially after a long, difficult day and you abandoned me. I know it's not rational, but..."

Dax pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. "It doesn't have to be. That's love, babe. I'm sorry I left without talking to you."

Paige pushed away from him. "Don't." She shook her head. "Don't take the blame for what I did. I was hurt and disappointed and then that turned to annoyed. I knew it was illogical to be angry with you. I'm the one that failed here. Then Carmen slapped me with another unpleasant reality, and I realized just how bad I am at this."

"What reality?" Dax reached over and pulled her onto his lap.

"You are in the middle of a huge project," Paige began. "The training center, it's important, it's amazing and I'm told you guys are already in demand. Yet, I have no idea what you're doing, what you need, if the previous courses were a success — I basically know nothing about what you're doing. We talk about me, my job, my cases, my feelings. I never ask about you."

"That's not true," Dax disagreed. "You've been to the training center. You've seen the progress. You know I have a three-day winter survival course this weekend. You know I have another course the week after Thanksgiving. I know you know, because I talked to Nathan earlier and he said you mentioned it."

"How monumentally supportive of me," Paige grumbled.

Dax shifted, placed one hand on the back of Paige's neck, the other around her waist. Then, he pulled her forward and pressed his mouth to hers. The kiss was loving but a little desperate.

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When he pulled back, he smiled at her. “I happen to like our life. I like talking about you, your job and how you’re feeling. I missed you.”

“I’m sorry,” Paige whispered.

“You’re forgiven,” Dax gave her another quick kiss. “Now, tell me about your day.”

“Nu-huh,” Paige shook her head. “You tell me about your day.”

Dax laughed. “Okay, but can we do it after dinner? I’m starved.”

Friday morning, Paige stood just inside the front door and watched as Dax, Hawk and Vato pulled away. Once they hooked up with Wooly and their clients at the training center, they were headed into the wilderness for three days. *Finally*. She’d been trying to act normal for the past two days after her husband’s disastrous trip to Salt Lake. She tried to push her growing anxiety aside, tried to forget the image of Ken dropping hundred-dollar bills just outside Dax’s back door, and failed. A million different possibilities had run through her mind. *Were the men into something illegal?* She dismissed that one almost immediately. *Maybe one of them inherited a fortune from a surprise relative.* Again, no. If that had happened, they would have told her about it immediately. That only left one possibility. The more she considered it, the more she was starting to believe Dax and his men discovered the downed plane in the tree. They were the ones that took the cash. They climbed inside, took the money then called in the tragedy. It made sense, didn’t it? If she was right, what was she supposed to do about it?

She was saved from answering that question when her phone rang. “Carter,” she answered.

“I found the Nose,” Havilland said in greeting.

“Me too,” Paige grinned. “I just looked in the mirror and there it was — like magic — right there on my face.”

“You want in or not?” Havilland wasn’t amused.

“Where?” Paige pulled on her coat.

Havilland rattled off the address. “It’s a sort of flop house for company men,” Havilland explained. “The Contreras estate owns the place. He sends his men up to deliver product, collect money, deal with a problem, whatever. They flop at the house then head back to Mexico.”

“Do you think Mook and Pablo could be staying there, too?”

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“It’s possible,” Havilland admitted. “I asked Nelson to help since he pitched in with some of the leg work and Gage is going to meet us out there as well. I thought, with him being so close to the kid and all, well I thought it might help.”

“I agree,” Paige slid behind the wheel and started the engine. “I’m headed out now. See you in ten.”

She pulled up to the staging area and spotted Havilland, Gage and Jericho. So, the sheriff was coming out to play on this one. She approached him and took a minute to study him carefully. “You seem to be able to stand upright okay,” she said in greeting. “Glad to see you’re recovering.”

“Paige,” Jericho ignored her assessment.

“I’m just wondering if this is a good idea,” Paige continued.

“You don’t think these particular members of the drug cartel should be arrested?” Jericho asked.

“I don’t think a man who is recovering from a gunshot wound should participate in the arrest of some high-level, violent members of the drug cartel when he’s on light duty,” Paige corrected. “You’ve been off less than a month, Jericho. Maybe you should sit this one out.”

“I’m fine,” Jericho assured her. “I’m not planning to join the entry team. I’ll just wait out here and support my men if they need me.”

Paige didn’t like it, but she backed off. He was the boss and babying him like a mother hen wasn’t going to fly with Jericho. “At least go sit on Gage’s tailgate. I’m getting tired just looking at you.”

Jericho scowled, but obeyed.

They stormed the house, guns drawn, ready for anything. What they got was a quick and easy sweep. Nobody drew a gun, all the occupants surrendered without incident. Paige recognized the man called the Nose immediately from his mugshot. He had a humdinger, alright. She covered her mouth to hide her grin, then turned away and focused on the rest of the men sitting against a far wall. It took her a minute, but she also recognized Mook. The single photo they had of him was a few years old, black and white, and grainy, but there was no mistake — they had Mook Bugatti in custody. Pablo Veranda had to be the man sitting next to him.

The group decided they would not conduct any interviews at the scene. A transport van arrived and took all the prisoners to booking except for the Nose, Mook and Pablo. They were separated from the others and shuttled to the main office.

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Paige brought Horatio Fino — the Nose — in first. After she recited Miranda, she settled back in her chair and waited. It didn't take long.

"I want a deal," Fino demanded.

"You need to have something I want to get a deal," Havilland advised. The man wasn't under arrest, yet. Maybe there was something they didn't know and he wanted to confess.

"I know who killed Scratch," Fino admitted.

"You got proof?" Paige asked. "Or is this just a ploy to get off easy?"

"I know," Fino insisted. "I didn't do nothing. You can't arrest me for not doing nothing."

"You got me there," Paige glanced at Havi. The two of them shared a smile before she focused on Fino. "Who killed Scratch?"

"I get a deal?" Fino asked.

"Tell me what you," Havilland casually suggested. "What deal are you looking for?"

"I don't go to jail," Fino insisted. "I didn't do nothing, so I don't go to jail."

"I think we can accommodate that," Paige said reluctantly. "Who killed Scratch?"

"Mook and Pablo," Fino glanced around nervously.

"And how do you know Mook and Pablo killed Santiago Esposito?" Paige asked.

"Who?" Fino asked, clearly confused.

"Scratch," Havilland shook his head at Paige. "How do you know Mook and Pablo killed Scratch?"

"Because they made Dingo ditch the car," Fino swallowed hard.

"Do you know where this car is located now?" Havilland asked.

"Uh-huh," Fino swallowed again. "Dingo told me. He said he dumped it in the ravine. The gully out by the Bluffs. You know after you leave the city and head west, out by the old railroad tracks."

"Right by the tracks or further out?" Havilland knew the area well.

"Right there," Fino insisted. "He said he crossed the tracks and headed into the trees right there. Then he pushed it over and it tumbled and rolled a few times then wham, it settled at the bottom with a thud."

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“Why did they want Dingo to hide the car?” Paige asked.

“That’s where they done it,” Fino explained. “That’s where they killed him. They had to hide the blood.”

“Is that the only reason?” Havilland asked.

“Well — ” Fino hesitated. “I guess some of the blood was from them trying to find the money. Scratch wouldn’t crack. That made Pablo furious, but Mook said the idiot wasn’t holding out, he just couldn’t tell on account he already spent it all.”

“What money?” Paige asked, a knot forming in her stomach.

“The money from the plane,” Fino said it in such a matter-of-fact way, it didn’t leave room for uncertainty.

“So,” Havilland glanced at Paige. “You’re talking about that plane crash earlier this year?”

“Sure, yeah,” Fino nodded. “The plane went down on the way back to Mexico and the money disappeared. Contreras was livid about that. He was hot to get it back. When Scratch started spending like he did, we all knew. I warned him. Told him he was gonna get dead if he didn’t stop but he thought he was invincible. I was right, he got dead.”

“Scratch said he took money from the plane after it crashed?” Paige pushed. If Scratch took the money, she was wrong about Dax and his men.

“No,” Fino shrugged. “But that would be stupid. Ask me, he waited a few months then he couldn’t resist and started spending some of it. When nobody noticed, he spent more. He had that dope ride and he bought a house on the beach. Said he always loved Texas and he wanted a place to relax. Before long, he was buying expensive jewelry and clothes to go with the ride. Contreras noticed, sent Mook and Pablo up to whack him and recover the rest of the funds.”

Paige frowned. “But they didn’t recover the funds?”

“Nope,” Fino shrugged. “Like I said, he must have spent it all. Scratch wasn’t what you would call a financial genius. If he had a dollar in his pocket, he couldn’t wait to blow it. Sometimes on blow,” Fino laughed at his own joke. “Between that and the house, the car, the clothes, I think it went poof. That’s what Mook and Pablo say. They said their work here was done and they were going to split, head back to Mexico and report in. They already broke the news to Contreras over the phone. He wasn’t happy, but what you gonna do?”

“You done?” Paige looked at Havilland.

“Yeah,” Havilland focused on Fino. “You want that deal, you stay where I can find you.”

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“Where would I go?” Fino held up his hands and sobered. “You won’t tell Mook or Pablo, right? They won’t know I told you about the car?”

“I won’t tell,” Paige stood and motioned toward the door. “You’re free to leave.”

Once he left the room, Paige sighed. “The guy’s an idiot but as long as we locate the car before we talk to Mook and Pablo, they won’t know he ratted them out. Well, unless he blabs about it to all his friends.”

“I don’t think he’ll blab,” Havilland considered. “He’s afraid of Contreras and Mook and Pablo are upper level. Fino won’t want anyone to know he said a word. He’s smart enough to realize if word gets out, it will buy him a one-way ticket to the morgue.”

“I hope you’re right,” Paige stood. “Let’s go see if we can find the car that went thud.”

It took two hours to locate the car and another forty-five minutes to yank it out of the ravine. Once it was on level ground, they towed the mangled mess back to evidence. Paige spent three more hours going over the vehicle inch by inch. She had blood, she had teeth, she had skin. She also had a gun. She was pretty sure, once ballistics were analyzed, they would be able to prove it was the weapon that fired the final shot that killed Santiago Esposito — also known as Scratch. Now she just had to put Mook and, or Pablo inside the car. She gathered up the blood and tissue samples, pulled as many prints from the inside and outside of the vehicle as she could find, and dumped it all on the lab techs to analyze. Then, she headed back to the office.

The instant she stepped through the door, Havilland was up and headed her way. “The guys we left at the flop house, found a video camera. It was in the room where Pablo was staying. They also gathered up all the discs. Nelson has a couple guys going over all of it now. If they find anything, they’ll let us know.

“You think they were that stupid?” Paige wondered. “To make a tape of something incriminating?”

Havilland shrugged. “We’ll know when we know.”

“There’s nothing else we can do tonight,” Paige decided. “Shift was over an hour ago. We might as well head home and pick this back up in the morning once we have the results on the search, ballistics and if we’re really lucky, answers from the lab.”

“I agree,” Jericho stepped from his office. “Let’s all go home.”

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Paige entered her empty house, dropped a white paper bag containing a burger and fries onto the kitchen table, set the official file on the plane crash on the table next to it and dropped into one of the sturdy kitchen chairs. She had to know. She just kept telling herself, she had to know. Maybe she'd look over the case file and decided Mook, Pablo and the irritating Nose was right. Scratch stole the money and he was blowing it on frivolous extravagances. Right, and Pegasus is going to mystically appear and give me an adventurous ride over the city.

She pulled out her dinner, took a bite of the burger and flipped open the folder. Her report sat on top, but that's not what she needed. She flipped through the documents until she located the envelope that contained the photos. She flipped through them one by one, absently nibbling a fry as she worked. Suddenly, she found the one she was looking for. The image was clear. Whoever climbed that tree left very distinct gouges in the trunk, evidence they couldn't remove or undo once it was there. She sat back and considered, taking another bite of her burger.

Setting her dinner aside, she flipped through a few more images and stopped once again when she found the one she was looking for. She focused on the strange drag marks in the roadway. The evidence that proved there were at least three men on scene that day. Sitting back, she considered. At least three, most likely four; Dax, Hawk, Zeus and Vato. During that time period, the men were frequently in the backcountry, scouting for the best locations to hold their training exercises.

They were the type of men that would rush to the scene and try to help if they could. If they saw a plane go down, they wouldn't think twice. They'd just rush in and see if they could help. They also had the skills and the equipment to scale the tree and take a look inside. And, Dax would be careful. He'd eliminate any evidence once he realized the significance. Then, there were the markings in the dirt. At the time of the crash, Vato was still struggling with his leg. She remembered the way he shuffled and balanced on one leg before he pushed his weight inside and dropped onto the seat — sliding his bad leg across the ground before lifting it inside. The last clue was the generous 'insurance policy' the widow received even though she'd never paid a dime for a policy. The men would have investigated her thoroughly. Once they realized she had a son, they would have stepped in and helped. It was the type of men they were. But, wasn't that noble and selfless?

Everything fit. If she was right, she would have to decide how she felt about it? That was a conundrum. One she wasn't going to solve until she knew for sure. So, what should she do about it? She closed her eyes and tried to talk herself out of the next step. Dax and the men had a big secret, but did that justify snooping? Illegal snooping? Could she live with herself if she snuck over to the house, broke in — using Dax's key, of course — and found their stash? Then what? Confront them? Arrest them? She frowned. No, she would never arrest them and, technically, they hadn't done anything illegal. No victim, no crime and nobody reported any missing money. She might be able to swing evidence tampering. "Stop it Paige," she scolded herself. "What are you doing? Trying to find a crime you can indict them for?" She'd never do that. She wouldn't

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do that even if her sneaky husband wasn't involved. She stared out the window, aimlessly lost in the darkness. It didn't take long to realize she wouldn't do anything, but she had to know.

Paige stepped onto the back patio of Dax's house and glanced around nervously. She couldn't believe she was doing this. Her hands were shaking when she pulled Dax's spare keyring from her pocket, fumbled around until she found the right one, slipped the key into the lock, and turned. The soft click of the lock disengaging felt like an explosion in her current state of mind. She slipped inside, silently closed the door and flipped the deadbolt behind her.

Paige just stood inside the kitchen for several minutes, working hard to steady her nerves. She hadn't been inside this house for several months, but nothing had changed. Memories flooded her mind and she had another internal debate with herself. This was wrong. She should just go back home and wait for Dax to return Sunday night. She'd corner him, confront him about what she knew and see if he admitted everything. What if he didn't? Maybe it made her a coward, but she couldn't confront him and risk, even the slightest possibility, that he would lie. She could forgive a secret. She wasn't sure she could forgive a lie.

Paige took a deep breath and forced her body to move forward. If Dax was involved, if he discovered a large crate or bag of illegal drug money inside that plane, he'd secure it. Dax would be careful. She knew that. Dax wouldn't take any chances under normal conditions but his relationship with Contreras wasn't normal. As ruthless as the drug boss was, Paige was pretty sure Dax was already on his hit list. Probably Zeus too. Contreras wouldn't be happy that Zeus escaped his near death experience, or that Dax broke him out — killing several of his men in the process.

Anger and annoyance replaced the anxiety. What in the world was Dax thinking? What was Zeus thinking? The dynamic duo were the last two people in the universe that should steal from Contreras. She slowly made her way down the stairs and stopped at the door that led to the basement. Once she stepped through, there was no going back.

A short time later, she was standing in a room at the far end of the house staring at a brand new, expensive, gun safe. It was similar to the one she had in her own basement. She reached out a hand and tried the knob. No luck, but she hadn't expected it to be open. Kind of defeated the purpose of the safe. Knowing Dax, he'd have the combo hidden somewhere inside this room. She began to search the obvious spots, then the not so obvious ones. She was about to give up when she spotted the manilla folder barely poking out from under a sturdy filing cabinet. Bullseye. She gripped the edge with her fingernail and slowly slid the file across the concrete floor. Once it was clear, she flipped open the lid and frowned. Inside was some kind of military notes. She flipped through, careful not to bend or damage any of the pages inside.

When she flipped over the fifth page in the file, she found what she was looking for. Scribbled on the back of the page was the combination to the safe. She recognized it for what it was immediately, it was similar to the safe she had at home. She carefully moved forward and

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began to follow the meticulous directions. Paige held her breath as she made the last turn and heard the soft click of the lock releasing. She reached out, then hesitated. Once she opened the thing up, there was no going back. “You’ve never backed down from anything, Paige,” she whispered. “No reason to change that now.” With the flick of her wrist, she turned the knob and pulled open the heavy door.

She thought she was prepared for what she would find. She wasn’t. There were so many stacks, row after row of carefully piled hundred-dollar bills filled the shelves. A clipboard was tucked into a sleeve on the door. She pulled it out, unable to stop the curiosity. Her eyes widened in shock — millions. Someone had printed up a ledger, but there were very few entries on the page. The first one — labeled Driscoll — had to be the payment to the pilot’s widow. There was another ‘withdrawal’ while she was on her honeymoon with Dax, and one with the name Deputy Nick Crandall.

She knew that name. Why did she know that name? Then it hit her, Crandall was the deputy from some small town in New Mexico. The cop that attended the October training session on a scholarship. Paige looked up at the money again, then back to the ledger. The men were using the funds to sponsor participants who otherwise wouldn’t be able to afford their course. They were using the money for good. They were using the money to help cops and small police departments with a limited budget get state-of-the-art training. Did that change things? She didn’t know. What she did know, was how much the revelation hurt. Why was Dax keeping something good and philanthropic a secret? Didn’t he trust her? She slammed the door shut, locked it, slid the folder back under the file cabinet and rushed out the door. She needed space and she needed time to think.

The following morning, Paige stepped into the office tired, exhausted and grumpy. Her mood didn’t improve once she met Mook’s attorney. The man insisted on having one present before any questioning. Being the rule abiding cop she was, she obliged. The lab did have good news for her. Both Mook and Pablo’s prints were found inside the vehicle and the blood matched Scratch’s blood type. They were still waiting on DNA, but they were fairly confident it would match.

There was also another interesting development. The gun. They could confirm it was the weapon that was used to kill Scratch, but it could also be matched to two other unsolved murders. Now she just had to put that gun in the hand of one of her suspects. Paige knew that was going to be difficult with the annoying attorney in the room.

“I’m just asking if you know Santiago Esposito,” Havilland pushed. “His friends and colleagues call him Scratch.”

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“I have advised my client not to answer that question,” the attorney jumped in.

Paige wanted to punch the woman in her nasally nose and see if it cleared things out enough to make her speak in a normal tone. She refrained — barely. “You don’t want to answer any of our questions, Mr. Bugatti. That’s fine, how about you listen? Last night, a vehicle was recovered from the ravine near Laurel Bluffs. The vehicle had Mexico plates and was registered to the Contreras Enterprise — I believe that would be your boss.”

“I object,” the attorney interrupted. “You’re stating facts that have not been established.”

“This isn’t court, Ms. Stamile,” Paige rolled her eyes.

“Actually, those facts have been established whether your client wants to admit it or not,” Havilland added.

“When you ditched the car,” Paige continued. “You probably didn’t realize that is a common dumping ground for vehicles. The Laurel Bluffs Police Department does regular sweeps in that area for the very reason you chose to ditch the car in the gully.”

“Again,” Ms. Stamile objected.

Paige held up a hand. “We have the car, Mook. We have your prints; we know you were the driver of that van. We have Mr. Esposito’s blood and tissue in the back, on the carpet, the seat and the right panel. We have the gun.” Paige smiled inwardly. That got a reaction.

“My client denies any knowledge of this Mr. Esposito character,” Stamile parroted. “That van was stolen from the driveway of the house where he was an invited guest while he vacationed here in America.”

“Right,” Paige began. She paused at the sharp knock on the door.

Jericho pushed open the door and motioned for both Paige and Havilland to join him.

“For the record,” Paige stood. “Deputy Havilland and myself will be leaving the room for a moment. Recording will be stopped at zero-nine-fifty-two.” She pushed the button to shut off the recording and slid through the open door.

“You need to see this before you go any further,” Jericho motioned to his office. Paige and Havi followed him. Once they were all inside the room, Jericho closed the door.

Paige frowned, glanced around, then settled into a chair next to Gage. Havi followed her lead.

“Detective Nelson had this brought over first thing,” Jericho began. “By the time the officer arrived, you two had already begun your interrogation. I decided to view the footage along with Gage before I interrupted.”

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“They found something significant?” Paige asked.

“You could say that,” Jericho motioned to Gage, who used a remote control to start the video.

The group watched, horrified as Mook and Pablo tortured Scratch without mercy. It was immediately clear they believed, without question, that Scratch was the one that took the money from the plane. Their reasoning was solid. Scratch was in the area at the time of the crash. Scratch knew the plane would be transporting goods and in the area on that day. Scratch was currently spending money like it was going out of style. Scratch was working for Ramin Trevils. The video clearly showed both men participating in the torture. Finally, Mook pulled out what appeared to be the gun they currently had in their possession and fired the fatal blow. He then told Pablo to save the video so they could deliver it to Contreras as proof the job was done.

“It looks to me like you just solved two cases, Paige,” Jericho studied her. “Mook Bugatti pulled the trigger and we solved the mystery of the downed aircraft. The man inside was transporting illegal drugs and cash for the Mexican drug cartel and Santiago Esposito decided to help himself to the loot.”

“Right,” Paige’s mind was reeling. A man had been tortured and killed for a crime he didn’t commit. Well, partially. She was pretty sure Mook would have killed Scratch, anyway. She didn’t think Contreras would tolerate one of his men working for his biggest competitor. Especially when that competitor was Ramin Trevils and Contreras’s sworn enemy.

“You disagree?” Jericho frowned.

Paige forced her face to remain neutral. Revealing the questions, the confusion, and the uncertainty she felt at the moment wouldn’t do any of them any good. “No,” she sighed. “I just think it was a senseless murder and the victim wasn’t any better than the perpetrator. All of this nonsense happened over power, greed and ego. Some days a win just doesn’t feel like a win at all.”

“That’s why we will always have a job, kid,” Jericho softened. “Wrap this up then go home. You look worse than I feel.”

“I think I will,” Paige stood. “I’ll go book Mook on first degree murder and while I’m at it, I might as well deal with Pablo as well.”

“I’d like to do that, if you don’t mind,” Gage stood. “For Adam. I’d like to handle it myself.”

“You sure?” Paige focused on Gage.

“Positive,” Gage nodded.

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“Then you two go home,” Jericho ordered. “Both of you are on overtime at this point. Take the afternoon off. This cluster is now in the hands of our illustrious DA.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Havilland asked once they reached the parking lot.

“Peachy,” Paige gave him a half-hearted smile. “We got the bad guys, case closed. I’m just tired. I’ll be good as new come Monday morning. You should head out to the track this weekend; the weather is supposed to be great and it might be your last chance to have a little fun before the snow flies.”

“I just might do that,” Havilland settled into his car and pulled away.

Paige stepped into her empty house and went straight up to her room. She felt sick and bone tired. For the first time since they started dating, she was glad Dax wasn’t home. She needed time to work through everything she’d discovered over the past few days. This would be her only shot at quiet contemplation. She didn’t know how to handle the information. For a brief second, she almost took it to Carmen. The idea popped into her head, but just as quickly, she realized Carmen knew. Carmen was part of it — had to be. Her best friend had deceived her just as much as her husband had. That’s when she realized, she was alone. She couldn’t talk to Nathan, Dax had top secret security clearance. If the government found out the guys stole money from a vicious, violent man on the FBI’s most wanted list, they wouldn’t forgive him. No, for Nathan’s sake as much as Dax’s, she couldn’t discuss this with him.

That meant she couldn’t discuss it with anyone. She had one day to figure out how to proceed. Dax was due back tomorrow night. Then, Nathan and Sophie would be arriving early Monday morning. They’d spend the week together, enjoy the holiday, then Dax and the men would be heading out Friday morning to supervise their last course of the year. The timing sucked royally. She curled up in a ball and let the misery engulf her. Within minutes, exhaustion won, and she drifted into a fitful sleep.

She woke early the next morning, still not sure what to do. She stumbled to the kitchen, prepared a pot of coffee and settled onto the couch with a throw blanket and a steaming cup of magic. *Okay*, Paige thought, *instead of falling apart, define the problem*. It was a technique she’d learned at the academy. As she saw it, the problem was twofold. First, the criminal investigation into the crash. That had pretty much resolved itself. Jericho, Havilland, Gage, they all thought Scratch took the funds and he paid a high price for his greed. She could just close it out and be done — end of story. Could she live with that? *Yeah*, she realized. *She could*. Would that cause her any trouble down the road if the truth ever came out? That one was harder. Technically, she might be able to get evidence tampering on the guys, but not likely. Even that

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was weak. There was no crime, there wasn't even a victim. Well, no victim when it came to the missing money. Scratch had been victimized, but that was a different problem. She'd just close out the case first thing Monday morning and be done with it.

Second problem, Dax. He lied to her. Maybe not straight out, but he did mislead her, and he interfered in her case. Maybe that was overstating things. When she insisted there was money in the plane, he simply told her to follow the evidence and not chase theories. It was a deliberate misdirect on his part, but she had to be honest and admit he'd told her that a million times before — on other cases. Logical, sure. But this problem wasn't logical. It was emotional. Hiding this from her, leaving her out, sneaking around behind her back because none of them trusted her enough to include her — that hurt. Logically she could tell herself to forgive Dax. Emotionally? Well, that's where things got a little dicey. She was in the same boat with Carmen and didn't know how to handle any of it.

Plus, she didn't know how to confront Dax and not tell him about Scratch and the torture. She knew telling him would upset him. It would hurt him to know a guy, even Scratch, endured that kind of torture as a result of something Dax did. She could never tell him. If that meant the money remained a secret, that's how it had to be. Dax could never know Scratch was killed because of him. With that decided, she got up and shifted gears, preparing for company and the upcoming holiday. She knew things would be strained for the next few days but Nathan and Sophie would serve as a buffer. Paige would just try to push the rest to the back of her mind and fake it.

Dax climbed from the bed, dressed then just stood over Paige, debating if he should wake her up or let her sleep. Something had changed between them. He felt the distance every time they were alone together. With company, she mostly just ignored him. It wasn't blatant. She didn't act like she was angry. They weren't fighting, but they weren't together either. He sighed, slung his bag over his shoulder and left the room.

Dax was surprised to see Nathan already up, sipping coffee and reading the morning news on his tablet. "Morning."

"Leaving already?" Nathan glanced up. There was tension between Dax and Paige, he felt it the instant he arrived. They didn't fight, but there was something off between them.

"Yeah," Dax dumped the remaining coffee into a mug, then absently filled it and started a new pot. "We decided to take the entire course into the wilderness this time. I probably won't see you before you head out. I'm glad you could come out again this year and hope you have a safe trip home."

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Nathan frowned. They were well beyond that kind of goodbye. “You want to talk about it?”

Dax hesitated then shook his head. He didn’t have time to talk and what would he say? I’m not myself because something changed between me and my wife and I have no idea what it could be. Better to just bolt and try to corner Paige once they were alone again and things settled down. “Seriously,” Dax moved forward and gave Nathan a quick hug. “I’m glad you had the time again this year. It’s a tradition I look forward to. Please tell that lovely wife of yours I’m sorry I missed her. Now, I’ve got to head out before I’m late. That’s not the example I want to set for the attendees.”

“Dax,” Nathan said softly. “I hope you know you can talk to me about anything. I realize I’m sort of a father figure to Paige, but I think of you as a son and I will always make time for you.”

“Thanks,” Dax nodded, touched by the offer.

Paige remained in bed until she heard Dax’s truck roar to life and pull away. With a sigh, she climbed from the bed and made her way down to the kitchen. She needed coffee and time alone to think. The instant she stepped through the door; she knew that was something she wasn’t going to get — not today. “Good morning, Nathan.”

“Is it?” Nathan studied Paige carefully. Something was seriously wrong, and she was going to tell him what it was so they could fix it. “Dax wasn’t himself this morning. I wonder, do you normally let your husband head off into the wilderness for an entire week away, in the middle of winter, without saying goodbye?”

Paige moved to the counter and began preparing her coffee. “Leave it alone, Nathan.” When she finished, she turned to face him and did her best to appear casual and unconcerned. Apparently, she failed.

“Sit down,” Nathan ordered.

Paige raised an eyebrow, hesitated, then complied. Once she was settled into the chair next to the one man she respected more than anything, she felt childish. He was only trying to help. “Why do I feel like I was just called to the principal’s office?”

“Interesting that you would revert back to adolescence,” Nathan observed. “Tell me what is going on with you.”

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“I just finished a difficult case and I have a lot on my mind,” Paige tried to appear nonchalant.

“Whatever this is — ” Nathan studied her more closely then shook his head. “This has nothing to do with the job or a case. This is marriage drama.”

“Then it should stay inside the marriage,” Paige thought she was right about that, but keeping it inside the marriage hadn’t resolved anything.

“No,” Nathan sat back. “It should remain within the family. We’re family. Spill it.”

Paige looked away and focused on the wintery scene just outside the window. Guilt hit. Nathan was right. Dax was headed into the wilderness, in freezing temperatures, for an entire week and she hadn’t even said goodbye. What if something went wrong? What if he was injured?

“Paige,” Nathan reached out and laid his hand over hers. “Talk to me.”

“I’m just not sure I should,” Paige admitted.

“Because it’s personal marriage stuff?”

“No,” Paige turned her gaze to his. “Because Dax still works for you. He has a pretty high security clearance. What if I say something that puts that in jeopardy?”

“You’re not speaking to Retired General Porter here,” he gave her hand a squeeze. “You’re talking to family. No matter what you tell me, it will stay here, between you and me.”

“And Sophie,” Paige said confidently.

“Maybe,” Nathan admitted. “Depends on what it is. Sophie and I — we don’t exactly have secrets, but we have an understanding. I’ll tell her as much as I can, and she trusts me to deal with the rest. The same goes for her. Family issues, neighborhood drama — my Sophie only tells me what I need to know.”

“Dax has a secret,” Paige began. “One he’s keeping from me.”

“But you know what it is.” Nathan nodded. “And it bothers you. It’s something you believe would get him into trouble?”

“It’s not just Dax,” Paige continued. “All the men are in on it — and Carmen.”

“So, what is this secret?”

“Before I get into that,” Paige shifted. “I want to ask you a hypothetical question.”

“We can play it that way,” Nathan frowned. “What in the world had the kids done this time?”

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“If, hypothetically, someone with top level credentials had in his possession a large sum of money — cash he basically stole from a violent drug boss wanted by the Bureau — would that risk his security clearance?”

Nathan sat back. So, the boys found the money. They had the missing cash Contreras was fuming over. “Paige,” he answered carefully. “Has a crime been reported regarding the cash?”

“No,” Paige said immediately.

“Then,” Nathan smiled. “There’s your answer. No victim, no crime. You know that better than anyone.”

“But — ” Paige frowned.

“But nothing,” Nathan sobered. “Do you think Dax and his men forced the plane to crash?”

“So, we’re tossing out the facade of a hypothetical now?”

“We are,” Nathan watched her carefully. “Because we don’t need it. There was no crime. If the boys found the plane, discovered there was cash inside and hauled it away to use for that new training facility — I say good for them.”

Paige looked at him in surprise. “You’re serious. You really don’t have any problem with this, do you?”

“Nope,” Nathan wondered why she did. He couldn’t come up with an answer, so he just asked.

“There’s more,” Paige admitted. “Dax has a secret, but so do I. A man is dead. He called himself Scratch, but his real name was Santiago Esposito. He was a mid-level dealer in the area. A few months back, he murdered a kid — one of Gage’s football players — over a few hundred bucks. He claimed Adam got in the way of his business, so he took him out. I’m telling you this because you need to know the guy wasn’t an innocent victim. He worked for Contreras and he was bad news. Even so, he didn’t deserve what he got. His body was dumped up the canyon, at the campground, covered in peanut butter.”

“Awe,” Nathan said in understanding. “An old, but reliable way to dispose of a body. I’m guessing it didn’t work this time?”

“No,” Paige forced the image of Scratch’s mutilated body — and the images on that video of how he got that way — from her mind. “The weather delayed things. The odor didn’t draw in the local carnivores soon enough. Local camp host did one last, quick drive through before she left town for the winter and discovered the remains.”

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“I take it the condition was horrendous?” Nathan once again placed his hand on top of Paige’s.

“He was tortured,” Paige said flatly. “There was a moment, in the beginning when I wondered if Dax and his men did it.”

“What?” Nathan asked in shock. “We don’t torture people, Paige. How could you suspect Dax of something like that?”

“I don’t know,” Paige shrugged. “It didn’t take long before I realized he didn’t do it. They didn’t do it. None of them would participate in something that sadistic.”

“I think you need to take a minute and ask yourself why you considered it in the first place,” Nathan pushed. “Because the fact you thought, even for an instant, that your husband would torture and kill a man that way, speaks volumes.”

“Why does my fleeting thought disturb you so much?” Paige wondered. “You guys kill people all the time. You send top secret, lethal teams into strange countries and gun down the enemy for nothing more than getting in the way of the mission. Killing a drug dealer isn’t out of the realm of possibilities. Especially when that dealer worked for a man who abused and nearly killed Zeus.”

“It is when the man was tortured first,” Nathan returned. “That’s not what we do and the fact you could suspect Dax, even for an instant, makes me wonder if you even know your husband at all.”

“Maybe I don’t,” Paige admitted. And that was the thing she was wrestling with the most. “We talk about me, my job, my cases. We have long, intense and sometimes heated conversations about what’s going on in my life. We don’t talk about Dax.”

“Is that his choice, or yours?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet,” Paige admitted. “I feel like a horrible wife. I don’t know anything about the training center, how Dax feels about it, if he’s stressed or excited, or if they are drowning in debt and uncertainty. I was worried they were going too far into debt, so I asked Carmen about the money. She was surprised and disappointed in me for not knowing more about the details. She praised Dax, said he’s an amazing businessman and he’s good at reigning in the others. I didn’t know that. I don’t know anything because we don’t talk about it. Dax asks me about my day, he pushes and prods until I give him all the gory details of whatever case I’m working at the moment, and we hash it out. Then we have dinner, go to bed, whatever. He doesn’t tell me about his day, his projects, his frustrations or triumphs with the job.”

“Why do you think that is?”

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“I’m worried it’s my fault,” Paige blinked the moisture from her eyes. She would not cry over this. “I get so caught up in what I’m doing, I don’t stop to ask about his projects. Half the time I miss his calls and don’t remember to call him back. When I’m working a case, I tend to get tunnel vision. I cherish the talks I have with Dax. Walking him through a case clears my head and lets me sift through the evidence. Rearrange the details and leads so I can explain them to Dax helps me arrange them in a more logical and organized fashion. He helps me work through what I know, and where I need to go next, like nobody else could. I’m not sure it has ever even crossed my mind to ask him about his day.”

“Again,” Nathan pushed. “Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know,” Paige said in frustration. “Maybe I’m just selfish.”

Nathan laughed. “You’re the least selfish person I know. Tell me why, Paige.”

“When I was little,” Paige said softly. “I’d ask my dad about his missions. He’d brush me off, change the subject, or tell a story I knew was fake. He did the same with Mom. She never knew where he was, what he was doing, or any of the details. Dad protected us, I guess he needed to shield us from his work. I understand that now, but it made me believe there was a dark side to what he did. I think — well, recently I’ve been thinking I don’t ask Dax about his day because I just assume he’ll do what dad did. He’ll brush me off or change the subject.”

“And somewhere deep inside, you worry there’s a darker side to the man you love,” Nathan nodded. “There’s not. What your dad and I did, it wasn’t dark, either. Not in the way you mean. It was difficult, it was dangerous, and it wasn’t something you didn’t discuss with a five-year-old child. It might have seemed the same, from a child’s point of view, the way he dealt with your mother — but it was different. Chaya didn’t want to know. Dylan couldn’t discuss any of it with your mom. Not the way I discussed things with Sophie. I couldn’t tell her everything — still can’t — and she understands that, but we do talk about some of it. We always have. She was there for me when I needed her, when I needed to feel something good and bright to clear out the bad and the ugly. Dylan didn’t have that with Chaya. He dealt with it in other ways. When things got bad, he’d head to the batting cage or go for a long run. Once his head was cleared, he’d go home and play a game with the daughter he loved more than anything in this world or have a quiet evening with his wife.

What I’m trying to explain to you, is that things were different between them. Chaya couldn’t handle the ugly. Your life is swamped with it. Dax was special forces, there’s nothing you could deal with out here that’s too difficult or horrific for him to handle. There’s nothing Dax deals with now that you couldn’t handle. And, because Dax knows and respects you — he would never change the subject or tell a fake story. I think this goes back to trust, Paige. You don’t trust Dax. Maybe you should ask yourself why that is.”

“Maybe because he’s keeping secrets,” Paige mumbled.

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“No,” Nathan disagreed. “Because I have more secrets than a hundred men, but you trust me.”

That was true. She considered for several seconds but didn’t have an answer. “I don’t know. I do trust you, so why do I doubt Dax?”

“Only you can figure that one out, kid,” Porter smiled.

“There’s more,” Paige told him. “I’m keeping a secret from Dax.”

“What kind of secret?” Nathan wondered.

“I told you the man was tortured,” Paige took a deep breath and spilled it all. She told Nathan about Mook and Pablo, and the video. She told him Contreras killed Scratch in such a violent and horrific way because he believes Scratch was the one that stole the money. She explained her concern and her worries because of the history Dax and Zeus have with Contreras. She explained her concerns about the money. At the moment, Contreras is confident he punished the right man, but he wasn’t able to locate the cash. He hasn’t stopped looking.

“And you haven’t told Dax because — ”

“He’ll feel responsible,” Paige once again looked out the window. “I guess that means deep down inside, maybe where it counts, I do trust Dax. I know he’s a good, honorable person. And, because I know that, I also know he’ll suffer knowing an innocent man paid the price for what he did.”

“Again,” Nathan shook his head. “I’m beginning to wonder if you know that man of yours at all.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” Nathan paused to consider. “It means Dax is a good, honorable man. He’s also level-headed — well, he is when it comes to everything but you. He’s realistic with a worldview that is more in line with mine than yours. Dax might feel a little twinge of guilt over the way this Scratch character died — because Dax and his men took the money and someone else paid the price. He won’t feel guilty over the death of a common street thug, one who murdered an innocent high school kid over a few bucks. The man deserved to be punished. He was a killer, Paige. How do you know he didn’t kill others? I realize your unwavering moral compass pushes you to believe justice could only be served if Scratch was arrested and spent the rest of his miserable life in jail. I tend to be more flexible on the matter. I can be satisfied and accept justice was served with his death. Dax and the rest of his men will see things my way.”

“You seem pretty confident you’re right about that,” Paige realized.

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“I am,” Nathan assured her. “Now, stop trying to protect that man of yours. Sit him down, tell him everything and let him explain his side of things.”

“Are you sure he will?”

“Positive,” Nathan sobered. “Is that what’s stopping you? You’re worried he will lie?”

“I don’t understand why he’s hiding it in the first place,” Paige evaded.

Nathan was pretty sure he did, and because he did, he remained silent. Dax was protecting Paige. He was worried the money would be a complication for her. He was worried she’d have to take sides, betray her unyielding sense of right and wrong, or demand he turn the cash into the authorities. Dax didn’t want to put her in that position, and he knew the money was better off with him and his crew. Once the newlyweds dealt with the issue and the fallout, he’d have to sit down and have a little heart to heart with Dax Hamilton. He had a few ideas on how they could shift those funds around and make them legit.

“I guess why doesn’t matter,” Paige decided. “And, he’s unavailable, out in the middle of nowhere for the next six days. I’ll talk to him, but that’s going to have to wait. How — ” she stopped when Sophie stepped into the room.

“Carmen just called,” she announced. “I’m heading out for the day. Nathan, our plane leaves early tomorrow. Please try to pack up what you can today. I’ll finish up when I get home, but as fun as it is, shopping can be exhausting.”

“I’ll take care of dinner,” Paige offered. “I’m off today. Nathan and I will block out some time to gather everything up so you won’t have to deal with it. Don’t worry, just go have fun with Carmen.”

“Thank you, dear,” Sophie relaxed. “I’ve had such a wonderful time out here. I am so grateful we’ve turned this into an annual tradition.”

“Me too,” Paige gave her a warm smile just before she heard a car horn beep twice.

“That’s me,” Sophie stopped to give Nathan a quick kiss, then glided across the room and out the door.

“She is the most graceful person I have ever met in my life,” Paige observed.

“She’s one of a kind,” Nathan said absently. He turned back to Paige. “Dax won’t lie to you, Paige. Now that we’ve settled that, anything else on your mind?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

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“Probably,” Nathan stood. “Let’s take the day to relax. I’m thinking we binge watch action flicks, scarf down too much popcorn, and leave the worries of the outside world behind for a few hours.”

“We’ll have to take an intermission at some point and pack up a few things,” Paige warned. “I promised Sophie I would help you pack; I won’t break my promise.”

“It’s a deal,” Nathan settled onto the couch.

Paige paused for a moment to glance around the room. When her gaze reached him, she noticed the amusement in his eyes. He didn’t say a word, just silently waited to see if she’d take her usual place by his side. They’d done this a million times back in Virginia. Nathan would always be a second father to her and for one night, she was going to let herself be a carefree child and lean on her dad.

Nathan waited for Paige to settle in next to him, then he casually draped an arm over the back of the couch and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Talk to Dax, princess. Once you do, you’ll feel better. Now, I thought we could start with Die Hard.”

Paige laughed. “By all means, no reason to break tradition now.”

Nathan hit a button and the music began to play. They were the closest thing to father and daughter either of them would ever have. They were both thinking how lucky they were to have one another — to have this closeness — as they settled in for a long mindless day of entertainment.