

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Dubious Loitering *Season 4, Episode 9*

by:

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Paige pulled into a parking spot a few feet away from the salon and shut down her vehicle. The man was still sitting causally on the bench and did seem to be watching the small business but trying to be cool and nonchalant about it. She continued to watch for several minutes and understood why Trudy had called. The man was making her ‘girls’ nervous.

She pushed open the door and slid from behind the wheel, strolling toward the stranger. Her gait was slow and easy. She didn’t want the man to feel threatened, if she did this the wrong way, rather than cooperating, he’d become defensive.

When she reached the bench, she moved in close enough for him to know she was there for him but not too close. It took several seconds before he calmly glanced in her direction, then refocused on the beauty salon. Paige took in his attire, not a homeless guy. Oh, he was dressed to blend with an old, somewhat tattered coat that had definitely seen better days, scuffed cowboy boots and faded jeans. He topped it all off — literally — with a black Stetson cowboy hat that had a thin silver band covered in large turquoise stones. Not a homeless guy. If the hat didn’t give him away, the expensive wristwatch would have.

“You plan to stand there all day, officer?”

“You plan to sit here all day, cowboy?” Paige answered, but settled onto the bench next to him. The cowboy’s mouth twitched slightly, but that was his only reaction. “I’m Deputy Paige Carter,” she held out her hand in greeting. He ignored it.

“Is that your way of asking for my name?” he gave her another quick glance before stretching out his long legs and settling further into the bench. Clearly telegraphing the fact that she didn’t worry him one bit.

“It’s my attempt at polite conversation,” Paige shifted and tried to appear equally unconcerned.

“I’m pretty sure I haven’t broken any laws here,” the man continued to watch the salon. “If there’s something I’m unaware of, by all means, let me know.”

Paige grinned. “You’re making the girls inside a little nervous,” Paige debated but decided honesty would be best with this guy. “I’m wondering if that’s your objective.”

“Nope,” he glanced at her again, then refocused on the shop.

Paige waited, letting the silence settle around them. He ignored her. “So,” she said when it became obvious he had no intention of sharing. “When I’m finish up here with you, I’ll need to head inside and assure those women they’re safe. Trudy is pretty protective of her employees. She thinks of them more as family than the hired help. She’ll demand an explanation from me. I’ll have to explain how I know you’re not an ax murderer.”

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Once again, the corner of his mouth twitched. He slowly turned his head toward her, one eyebrow raised in question. “Do I look like an ax murderer?”

Paige studied him carefully. “Going strictly from first impressions, I’d have to lean toward no. However, first impressions aren’t always correct. We learned that lesson with Ted Bundy. That man was a chameleon, he was also a cold-blooded psychopath that could blend in with anyone. Those close to him, truly believed he was a smooth talking, good looking, young man with loads of potential.” She leaned in closer to him, “guess you never really know.”

The man laughed. “You have a valid point.” He continued to grin as he stood and held out a hand. “Good talk, Deputy Carter.”

Paige stood, took his hand and was impressed by his firm and professional handshake. The guy was clearly used to being in charge. She studied his profile, more than a little curious now. After a quick shake, he dropped her hand, pivoted and strolled away. Paige watched him disappear and was amazed he never looked back. Once he was gone, she turned and made her way inside the salon.

“So?” Trudy glanced up from the front desk. “What did you find out?”

“The metal bindings on those benches are just as bad in the winter as they are in the summer,” Paige gave her hips a little twist. “Sizzling hot when you’re wearing shorts but the cold, well that’s just as uncomfortable in the wintertime.”

“Paige Carter,” Trudy wasn’t amused. “You have exactly ten seconds to answer my question before I call Jericho Walters.”

“You sure you want to go there, Trudy?” Paige asked, undeterred. “He’s still a little grumpy these days.”

“Spill it!” she demanded.

Paige sighed. “He seemed harmless enough,” she glanced around the room then focused back on Trudy. “You in the middle of a civil suit or anything?”

Trudy frowned. “No, why?”

“Because he struck me as an investigator,” Paige told her. “Anyone cheating on their spouse? Embezzling from a part-time gig? Hiding a deep, dark family secret?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Trudy scowled. “A private investigator?” She shook her head and focused on each of her girls. “Anyone want to share anything?” When nobody responded Trudy focused back on Paige. “What do you suggest we do?”

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“Nothing,” Paige shrugged. “If he comes back, call dispatch. Margie will notify us and someone will come back out and have another talk with the man. In the meantime, just take normal precautions. Don’t open the shop alone, don’t leave anyone to close by themselves. Walk to your vehicle’s together, that sort of thing. If he comes back, call.”

“That’s it?” Molly Savage asked.

“For now,” Paige addressed the entire room. “Sitting on a public bench, even in the middle of winter, isn’t against the law. But, if you feel harassed or threatened, call. We’ll drive by the area now and again over the next few days to see if he’s still hanging around. Otherwise, try not to worry.”

“Sure,” Peggy Newton grumbled. “Some homeless vagabond sets up residency on the bench outside our window and we’re not supposed to worry.”

“He’s not homeless,” Paige answered casually.

“How can you be so sure about that?” Trudy asked.

“I just know,” Paige wasn’t about to reveal her observations to these women. Twenty minutes tops and the entire city would know the deets.

“You really don’t think we should worry?” Trudy pressed.

“I don’t,” Paige assured her. “I think you should be careful, and I think you should call if he returns. Other than that, enjoy the holiday season.”

Paige left the shop and climbed behind the wheel; grateful her shift was over. She snatched up the mic and called dispatch. “Show me clear and off duty. You can short form this, no police action necessary.”

“Copy,” Susie’s voice crackled over the airwaves. “Fourteen hundred hours.”

Paige pulled into her driveway and shut off the engine, then she just sat there, disappointed. Dax was due back today. She felt anxious to see him but was hoping he’d beat her home. Apparently, hope had turned its back on her — she probably deserved it.

The house was cool and felt too empty. Dax had only been gone a week, but she was lonely without him and she felt a little lost all alone night after night. How had she come to depend on his presence so quickly? Well, he would be home tonight and they would talk. Because of her, Thanksgiving had been strained. She wouldn’t drag this out and ruin her first Christmas with her new husband.

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After a quick shower, Paige slid into her favorite sweats, pulled an old FBI hoodie over her head and paused, glaring into her sock drawer. The thick, soft, and obnoxiously bright socks called to her. With a grin, she snatched them up and yanked them on. Happy feet made for a happy girl. She was still smiling when she reached the living room. Now what? She dropped onto the couch, snatched up the remote and turned on the gas fireplace. Then she settled back against the cushion, propped her legs on the coffee table and let her head fall back.

Questions about the mysterious stranger flooded her mind. He intrigued her, but her gut said he was harmless. There was a reason he landed in Manti, a reason he was scoping out the hair salon. And, only he knew what that reason was. She closed her eyes and let her mind circle the possibilities.

That's how Dax found her. He was tired, dirty, cold and happy to be home. This training session had been the best one yet. If things continued on the path they were going, their biggest challenge would be fitting in all the applicants. He pushed open the door and had only taken one step inside when he spotted her. His breath caught in his throat and his heart skipped a beat. His wife — that fact still amazed him. Sometimes, the reality of it hit him upside the head with so much force he couldn't believe it was real.

Paige Carter, now Hamilton, was a complicated woman. She was focused, relentless in her pursuit of justice and unwavering when it came to her own sense of right and wrong. She was also beautiful and loving. He silently slid the door shut and just stood there, watching her sleep. She looked peaceful, like an angel without a care in the world. Then, she slowly opened her eyes and focused on him. Not sleeping, just letting her mind wander and sift through a case most likely.

Paige felt Dax's presence. Her toes began to tingle and she opened her eyes, wondering how he'd managed to get inside the house without her hearing him. "Hey," she said in greeting.

"Hey," Dax answered. He hated this wall that had erected between them, but at the moment he didn't know how he was supposed to act around her.

Paige stood and slowly made her way across the room. She caused the tension they were both feeling and she was determined to fix it. Nathan was right, hiding from Dax wasn't the answer. They needed to talk.

Dax was so distracted by Paige walking toward him, he didn't realize her intentions until she was less than a foot away from him. He raised his arms and braced his hands on her shoulders to stop her. "I need to shower. I have a weeks' worth of grime to wash off before I feel human again."

Paige leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss to his lips, then she took a step back. "I missed you."

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Okay, that was progress, Dax decided, a little surprised at her words. “I missed you, too.” He smiled, reached out and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “You have no idea how much I missed you. Give me ten minutes, fifteen tops. Once I wash off the wild, we can catch up.”

Paige watched him make his way up the stairs. She continued to stare at the empty staircase for several seconds before she headed for the kitchen. After pulling the pizza she remembered to buy at Papa Murphy’s out of the fridge and dropping it on top of the stove, she too made her way up the stairs and into their room.

The shower was still running but Dax hadn’t closed the bathroom door. Her showers were always hot and steamy, Dax liked things lukewarm — tepid even. She didn’t know how he could stand it — no scorching hot water steaming up the mirror or escaping under the door for him. Not even after surviving an entire week in the wilderness, in the middle of winter, with temperatures that had dropped below zero. Not to mention the storm that had blown through three nights ago.

She moved to the door that separated their bedroom from the bathroom and leaned against the jamb. She was still watching when he pushed open the door and stepped onto the cool tile, snatching up a towel and running it over his head. She let her eyes drift and frowned. Dax had always been fit and trim, but looking at him now, he was totally ripped. How had she missed that?

Clearly, he was working out on a regular basis. Probably a training regimen he developed for himself and his men. Knowing Dax, whatever he came up with was mandatory for all employees. A unit that trains together stays together and the center relied on the men’s reputation and image to bring in clients. Dax would understand that more than most. Carmen’s words came back to her and for about the millionth time, Paige realized she’d been neglecting her duties — neglecting her husband. She’d been so focused on her own job and her own problems, she wasn’t really seeing Dax, wasn’t paying attention to the world he was creating.

She knew the instant Dax spotted her. He had dried off his hair and ran the towel over his body then wrapped it around his waist, tucking a corner in near his hip. Then, he turned, took one step toward the sink, and froze. Their eyes locked and she wondered what he was thinking. Normally she could read him, but not tonight.

Dax spotted Paige and for the second time tonight, he was surprised. When he focused on her eyes, something sparked, only for a second before she masked it. He continued forward and picked up his regular routine; deodorant, a splash of cologne, then he finally pulled out his toothbrush to clean his teeth. When he finished, he turned and was surprised to see she was still there. “You keep looking at me like that and I guarantee we won’t be doing any talking tonight.”

Paige nodded and disappeared into the bedroom.

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“Not the reaction I was hoping for,” Dax mumbled. When he entered the bedroom, he spotted Paige on the small couch positioned against the far wall in the sitting area. He quickly dressed, pulling on a faded pair of comfortable jeans and then slid a long-sleeved t-shirt over his head. He considered socks, dismissed the idea and settled onto the couch next to Paige. They sat there for several minutes, inches away but worlds apart as each of them tried to decide how to start the conversation.

Dax spoke first. “There’s something I want to tell you.” He stood, frustrated at himself. He always knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. He moved to the window and stared into the darkness. “That’s not exactly true. I need to tell you, have needed to tell you for several months.”

“What made you wait months before discussing it?”

Dax turned to face her. “Timing. You were stressed over the wedding, then your uncle showed up. I couldn’t add even more stress to your plate. Then you were dealing with violent and dangerous felons who had escaped from the Gunnison prison. After that, you had a madman taking shots at you, Dean and Jericho. I couldn’t divide your attention and risk it. If you got hurt because of me — ”

In that moment, Paige wondered if she’d been wrong. Was Dax keeping secrets because he was trying to protect her, not because he didn’t trust her? She considered that and realized it was something she could live with. Much easier than knowing him, his men, her best friend — none of them trusted her. “I know you worry. I know my job is dangerous — sometimes — but not all the time. Usually I’m just dealing with strange men loitering on a public bench or a gas theft.”

Dax just stared at her.

Paige stood and moved to stand next to him. She reached out and took his hand then guided him back to the couch. “Tell me.”

Dax let out a huge sigh, leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “You got it right,” he began. “Early in the summer, when you discovered the downed aircraft. You’re right. There was money inside.” He proceeded to tell her everything. Why they responded, how they initially climbed the tree to make sure nobody was injured inside, why they decided to take the cash and what they did to make sure Contreras could never trace it back to them.

“You’ve been busy,” Paige should have known Dax would be careful. She should have trusted him.

Dax focused on her for several seconds then let out a long, tense breath. “You already knew.”

“I did,” Paige admitted.

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“How long?”

“When did I know for sure?” Paige asked. “The weekend before Thanksgiving when you and the guys did that three day survival course.”

“How?”

Paige confessed. She told him how she borrowed his keys to do a little breaking and entering. She explained why she knew the funds would be in the basement and even confessed to snooping until she found the combo.

“Ken was taking the funds to the bank to deposit them into the account to cover another scholarship,” Dax told her.

“I saw that, too,” Paige dropped his hand and settled back against the couch. “You manipulated me. You may not have lied to me, but you took something that’s important to me and used it against me. Talking through a case with you is important to me and you used that to try to redirect my investigation.”

“I know,” Dax took her hand again. “And it nearly killed me. The instant you left that day, I confronted the guys and told them I was out. I told them I didn’t want any part of it.”

“But,” Paige frowned. “Carmen said you have to keep reigning in Vato.”

“Did you talk to Carmen about this?”

“No,” Paige hesitated. “But I did talk to Nathan.”

Dax considered, then decided he could live with that. “They talked me out of it. While I was over here struggling to deal with the situation and not tell an out-and-out lie, they were over there freaking out a little. They realized just how much money we took and what would happen if Contreras ever found out. With us particularly because of the history Zeus and I have with the man.”

“What happened?”

“I told them I was out, they convinced me we could use the money for good and nobody had to be out,” Dax shrugged. “It was a good plan and so far, it’s worked.”

“I like that you’re using the money to sponsor cops who wouldn’t be able to attend without it,” Paige admitted.

“So,” Dax shifted and focused on Paige. “Where do we go from here? I broke something and I need to fix it. I just don’t know how.”

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“I think we both broke it,” Paige stood and began to pace. “I told you it was okay to keep secrets. I told you I could live with it. I promised you I could deal because I was already used to Nathan keeping secrets. I was wrong. The instant you had a secret, I went bat-shit crazy. Before the wedding, I kept thinking maybe there was someone else.”

“What?” Dax jumped to his feet and moved to stand in front of Paige. “Never,” he reached up and placed a palm on each cheek. “Never. You’re it for me now and forever. I don’t understand why you can’t trust that. I know that sounds ironic under the circumstances, but Paige how many times do I have to tell you, in how many ways, before you believe I love you?”

“See,” Paige pointed a finger at him. “I told you I helped to break this. I’m not good at it. I might never be good at it.” She took a deep, shuddering breath and dropped back to the couch, placing her hands over her face in frustration. “I know you love me. I do. I’m just having a hard time trusting that love will last forever.”

“Why?” Dax settled down next to her and took her hand in his. He was kicking himself all over again. He should have known keeping a secret, any secret, from Paige would cause this kind of crack in their foundation.

“I think, maybe,” she glanced up at him and took a deep breath. “I think, deep down inside, I feel like I’m going to lose you, too. Just like I lost my dad all those years ago. Like I lost my mom. I’m afraid to get too close because I already love you so much I don’t think I can live without you. If I stop fighting these feelings, if I just let them grow and develop and then something happens — ”

“Nothing is going to happen to me,” Dax assured her. “Look at me,” he insisted. When she finally raised her head to look at him, he reached out and ran a gentle hand over her cheek. “My job isn’t dangerous. Not anymore. I know I help Nathan out sometimes, but that’s just behind-the-scenes stuff. Tactics, planning, risk assessment and troubleshooting — from home mostly. But, if I have to go to Washington, I’m still locked up in a skiff somewhere hammering out the details with your favorite general. I’m safe. You’re the one that risks your life every time you walk out that door.”

“I’m beginning to understand that, too,” Paige admitted. “And, I have no idea how you stand it. I’m sorry, for all of it. I’m sorry that your parents hate the woman you married because I chose to be a cop rather than a fashion designer or an accountant.”

Dax grinned. “I don’t know, I’ve heard it can be brutal backstage at those fashion events. Being a cop might be the safer option and I can’t see you sitting in front of a sewing machine playing with silk and lace.”

Paige laughed. “I can barely sew on my own buttons.”

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Dax sobered. “My relationship with my parents is complicated. It’s always been complicated. You didn’t create it and you’re not standing in the way now. They made their choice. If they can’t accept who I am, what I do and who I love — it’s their loss.”

“It really is,” Paige leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his lips. She was about to move back when he pulled her forward and deepened the contact.

“Now that we’ve finally made progress,” he grinned, then pulled her in for another kiss. “Do we need to discuss the details of the money? We’re not throwing it away on expensive equipment or blowing it in Vegas.”

“If you want my opinion,” Paige waited until Dax nodded. “I think you should go to Vegas. Maybe one weekend in Vegas, a couple weeks later another weekend hanging out in Mesquite.”

“I don’t understand,” Dax frowned. “You think we should stop being cautious and throw the money away on gambling and expensive toys?”

Paige laughed. “No, I think you should each take around ten grand and head for Vegas.”

“Paige,” Dax sobered. “Contreras is watching. We can’t flaunt the money or he’ll realize we took it. He won’t come after me or my men. He’ll target you, Carmen and Jaimie.”

Paige hadn’t thought of that, but Dax was right. Contreras and his men were cowards. They got rich by taking what they wanted and never giving a second thought to the victims they left in their wake. “I’m not saying to flaunt the money. I’m saying you should launder it. If you each take around ten thousand in cash, head to Vegas, buy that much in chips, play a few games, then cash in — you can keep the receipt and show exactly where the funds came from. That would give you around fifty grand to use for the rest of the snowmobiles you need, ammo, additional weapons, snow gear, whatever. Then, you head to Mesquite and do it all again. Suddenly, the training center has enough petty cash to get you by until the real money starts flowing in from your courses.”

Dax just stared at her, dumbfounded. It was a good plan, but he never would have considered it. He wanted to keep the money legit so when Paige discovered what they were doing, she could live with their decisions. He had seriously underestimated his wife.

“You can breathe now,” Paige laughed.

“Are you really okay with this?” Dax wondered.

“I am,” this time Paige was the one to gently run a hand over his face and then slid her fingers through his damp hair. “The money is ill-gotten gains. I won’t lose any sleep knowing that monster Contreras lost and lost big.”

“But — ”

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“But nothing,” Paige shrugged. “I trust you with the funds more than I trust some government bureaucrat that would just use it to build another golf course. You are actually using the money for good. You’re benefitting law enforcement and the military. You’re giving back to the men and women who stand at the gates and guard the innocent. I’m good with that. I’m more than good, I’m proud of what you’re doing. And, at some point when you and the guys decide I can be trusted, I’d like to help.”

“Paige,” Dax took her hand. “This wasn’t about trust. It was about protecting you. I could never ask you to choose.”

Paige frowned as the weight of that sentence hit her. “You thought I’d chose duty over you?”

“No,” Dax sobered. “I knew you’d choose me and I couldn’t live with that. I couldn’t live with what it would do to you. You have more integrity and honor than anyone I’ve ever met. How could I force you to turn your back on your ethics, on your duty over money?”

Paige just sat there in shocked silence. “Wow,” she finally whispered. “I never saw that coming.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” Paige ran her hands over her face. “I couldn’t have been more wrong about all of this. It means, I’m the one that broke something in our relationship and it means I’m going to fix it.”

“We’re going to fix it,” Dax corrected. “Because I’m the one that took the money and hid things. I’m the one that started all of this. I was wrong to keep secrets from you.”

Paige studied her hands. “I have a secret I’ve been keeping from you, too.”

“That you knew about the money?” Dax wondered. “That’s a pretty small secret considering.”

“No,” Paige stood and this time she was the one that moved to the window. “Contreras killed Santiago Esposito — Scratch. Contreras had two of his men, Mook and Pablo, the names you gave me, they killed Scratch.”

“I figured,” Dax studied her, wondering where this was going.

“First,” Paige turned to face him. “They tortured him and questioned him about the money. We found a tape. Apparently, Contreras insists on proof when he orders a hit. Mook and Pablo taped the entire torture session and planned to return to Mexico and turn the evidence over to Contreras as proof the deed was done and the money is gone.”

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“I’m sorry you had to watch that,” Dax moved to her and pulled her into his arms. “Knowing Eduardo Contreras, I’m sure it was excessive and violent.”

“It was,” Paige admitted. “I’ve been able to piece things together — Scratch’s movements while he was in hiding. He fled the area after he killed Adam Langford, worried he might be sent away for life. Once he returned to Mexico, he hooked up with some of Ramen Trevil’s men and convinced them to bring him into the fold. He was throwing money around, which put him on the radar for both of them. Once he was killed by Mook and Pablo, the Trevils connection slipped back into the shadows. Nobody is willing to confirm it.”

“I’m confused,” Dax pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “What’s the secret?”

“Scratch was skimming funds,” Paige took a step back. “He bought a beach house, an expensive car, new clothes, you get the idea. Contreras is convinced Scratch stole the money from the plane.”

Dax nodded. “And that’s the reason he was tortured.”

“It is,” Paige watched him carefully as he considered the new information.

“I know you think I should feel guilty about that,” Dax began. “Maybe I should. Maybe I do feel a twinge of sympathy for this punk kid who hooked up with bad people and got himself killed. I don’t feel responsible, Paige. And, just like I accept you as you are, risks, dangerous job and the possible implications of that — I hope you can accept me, warts and all. Scratch was a drug dealer. He was also a killer. I don’t know if this Adam Langford kid was his first victim. I actually doubt that he was. The instinct to kill was too quick and calculating. Scratch’s death is not on me or my men because we took that cash. His death is a result of his own choices. My intel also revealed skimming from both sides. Scratch was stealing from both Contreras and Trevils. He tried to play both ends. The instant he accepted a job from Ramin, he was a dead man. The instant he dipped his hand in the cookie jar, he ensured that death would be painful. I can say that nobody should have to die that way, but I won’t feel guilty or responsible — not even for you.”

“It’s a little unnerving,” Paige sighed. “To realize that General Nathan Porter, a man I respect more than anyone in this world — well, present company excluded — a man that filled in for my father when I needed him, knows my husband better than I do.”

“I assume that means you discussed this with Porter and he had the same take?”

“Yes, and yes,” Paige squirmed. “Did I break a rule or a sacred marriage edict? Because, I didn’t plan to tell Nathan anything. He just has a way of knowing and as much as I tried to resist, he somehow got me to open up and tell him what was bothering me.”

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“You didn’t break a rule,” Dax grinned. “He’s your father — in every way that counts — and he cares about you. I understand.” He flashed his sexy grin. “Now, if we’re finished talking,” he plucked her off the floor and tossed her onto the bed. “There’s something else I’d rather be doing tonight.”

Paige laughed and rolled away when he dropped down beside her. “We’re nearly done.”

Dax groaned.

Paige laughed. “I know you think you just disappointed me. I saw it in your eyes before you so carefully explained your absence of guilt. I’m not disappointed. I actually agree with everything you just said. I was just worried — because I do know you and I know you are an amazing, caring, fair man. I supposed, in my way, I was trying to protect you.”

Dax relaxed. “Thank you.” He moved forward and pressed his lips to hers.

“All this protecting each other seems to be the thing that’s getting us into trouble,” Paige observed. “Don’t protect me, Dax. I would choose you. I will always choose you. The rest doesn’t matter. We can work through the rest, fight it out, compromise, negotiate, and then make up, but I don’t want you to protect me.”

Dax grinned. “It’s so cute that you even think that’s possible.” He sobered. “Paige, I protect what’s mine. I protect what’s important to me. There is nothing more important than you. I guess you’ll just have to learn to live with that, too.” He shifted and pulled her against him, nuzzling her neck and inhaling her scent. “I love the way you feel.”

Paige sat up. “There’s one more thing.”

“You’re killing me,” Dax rolled over and studied the ceiling.

Paige hesitated, but she wanted to get it all out there. “Vato,” Paige said softly.

“What about Vato?” Dax turned a worried glance her way. “Did he do something to you? Say something?”

“No,” Paige settled back down next to him. “He and I had a conversation. I guess you could call it a first step towards a truce.”

“And?”

“And you guys need to stop protecting him,” Paige demanded. “Every time you do that, it makes him feel like an outcast. You’re not helping him, you’re hurting him.”

“Look at you,” Dax grinned. “All logical adult.”

“I’m serious,” Paige pushed.

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“I know,” Dax sighed and took her hand in his. “I’ve actually been pretty hard on him lately. Mostly because of you. He opens his mouth and I think — not again. Not another complaint about Paige knowing too much. Not another argument because he doesn’t trust you the way the rest of us do — and I slam him, sometimes too hard because of it.”

“You need to stop that, too.”

“What part of protect what’s mine did you not understand?” Dax wondered.

“I’m serious,” Paige turned onto her side to face him. “Vato and I will figure this out but it’s between us. If you stand in the middle and grunt like some macho caveman protecting his frail wife, we’ll never work through it. The others, your men that would do anything for you, they didn’t trust me either. But desperate times forced us to work together. There was a metaphorical pissing contest, followed by some push and pull, but we worked through it quicker because we all wanted the same thing. We were desperate to find you before you got dead. It’s going to take longer with Vato. Emotions aren’t driving us at the moment. Just give the two of us a little time, I think we can work it out.”

“I think when I tell the guys I brought you in,” Dax said softly. “When they know you know, and none of us will be arrested or pulled into interrogation — I think Vato will take that first step towards trusting you. The others already do. I hope you know that, too.”

“I do,” Paige rolled over on top of him. “Now, as much as I love the goofy gang of militants. There’s something else I want to do tonight. I hear making up is explosive. Let’s make up.”

Dax laughed but willingly complied.

Paige and Dax sat on the bed, him in nothing but his tight, black briefs, her in nothing but his shirt — scarfing down pizza.

“Tell me what I’ve missed,” Dax took a swig of beer and set his plate aside. “I’ve been gone nearly a week. Any big cases that are baffling the amazing Paige Carter?”

“Not really,” Paige set her plate aside and snuggled in close to him. “Things have been pretty normal for the holidays. A few shoplifters, gas thefts, public shouting matches over the last Instant Pot. Normal stuff for the season.”

“But?” Dax detected something; he just wasn’t sure what.

“I was called to the salon just before I went off duty today,” Paige began.

Dubious Loitering

“Hair emergency?” Dax grinned.

“Do you want to hear this or not?”

“My bad,” Dax motioned for her to proceed.

“I’m intrigued,” Paige admitted. “Trudy said there was a guy loitering on one of the benches. He’d been there for three hours, just watching.”

“You checked him out?”

“Not really,” Paige admitted. “He wasn’t doing anything wrong. I watched him for a few minutes. Trudy thought he was a homeless guy, but he’s not.”

“How could you tell?”

“Expensive watch,” Paige said absently. “And he had an expensive Stetson with an expensive band, silver with turquoise stones. Not the cheap kind, not imitation, the real thing and they were large stones, intricately strung together by a professional. He’s not homeless. I think he was just trying to blend in.”

“But he didn’t,” Dax observed. “Not really. What did he say?”

“Why do you just assume I talked to him?” Paige wondered.

“Because Trudy called it in, Margie sent you out to look into things and you couldn’t look into it if you didn’t talk to the guy.”

“You have a good cop brain,” Paige grinned, knowing it would annoy him. He considered himself a soldier and a carpenter. Being a cop wasn’t even in his stratosphere.

“What did he say?”

“Not a lot,” Paige admitted. “He never told me his name and I didn’t have any reason to insist he show me ID. He wasn’t harassing anyone, not even Trudy or the girls. He was just relaxing on a public bench watching the world go by.”

“But?”

“I don’t know,” Paige settled against the headboard. “At first I thought maybe PI, he had a professional air about him.”

“Now?”

“I think businessman,” Paige shrugged. “I don’t know why he’s here, but he’s not homeless and I don’t think he’s a threat.”

Dubious Loitering

“You liked him,” Dax realized.

Paige shifted her eyes to the side to give him a quick look and admitted she did.

“Sounds mysterious,” Dax decided. “And if you’re right, he’s here for a reason and a little friendly chat with my cop didn’t scare him way. He’ll be back.”

“I can’t decide if that’s a good thing or a bad thing,” Paige admitted.

At eleven o’clock the following morning, Paige was called back to the salon. As she pulled up, she spotted the same man, sitting in the same spot, wearing the same coat, hat and boots. She waited and watched, same deal as the day before. He wasn’t bothering anyone, wasn’t breaking any laws, wasn’t really a problem for anyone but Trudy and the girls. She stopped at a temporary sidewalk vender, bought two coffees and made her way to the bench.

“I didn’t realize cops walked the beat here in Manti,” the man said without looking over. “I always thought that was a big city thing, like in New York.”

“Small town charm, I guess,” Paige held one of the cups out to him. “I come in peace.”

The man glanced at the coffee then focused on Paige. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m not a coffee drinker.”

“Never?” Paige asked in amazement. “How do you get up in the morning?”

He laughed, a genuine, amused reaction to her sincere astonishment.

“You don’t miss what you never had,” the lines in his face hardened and he refocused on the large bay window of the salon.

Interesting, Paige filed that away for later. “So, of all the gin joints in all the cities — ”

He didn’t take the bait. They sat there in silence while Paige drank her coffee and realized there was more to this man than she originally thought. He was scoping out the place but he was also suffering. He was stressed about something and a little sad. She read it in his eyes, every time he looked at the large open window.

Paige was just finishing her coffee when the man turned and focused on her. “I take it they called you again.”

“Yeah,” Paige admitted. “They did. Like I said, it’s a small town. Having a stranger sit outside watching like they’re fish in a large hair styling tank is making them nervous.”

Dubious Loitering

“I’ll go,” he stood, looked at Paige as if he was going to say something, shook his head once and started to turn away.

“I know there’s no reason to trust me,” Paige stood. “I’m a stranger to you, too. But, if there’s anything I can do to help you — just give me a call.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a business card.

He blinked in surprise, slid the card into his inside pocket, nodded once and walked away.

“Right,” Paige headed for the salon, Trudy, and twenty questions.

That night, Paige stepped through the front door and was greeted by the amazing smell of sweet, honey barbeque. She followed her nose to the kitchen where she found Dax sliding a foil covered container into the oven. “Forget the man, I want ribs.”

Dax smiled, moved across the room, and pulled her body against him.

Paige was so focused on dinner; she wasn’t paying attention to Dax. Not until he pulled her against him and gave her a steamy welcome home kiss that added a hint — or, more accurately, a promise — of so much more. “You’re in a good mood.”

“I am,” Dax agreed. “You ready to eat or do you need a few minutes?”

“I’m starving,” Paige moved to the cupboard and grabbed two plates. She returned for the glasses and flatware, snatched up the paper towels and set those on the table with the other dishes. She had just moved to the refrigerator and pulled out a gallon of milk when she was struck by her surroundings. She froze in place and only broke out of her stupefied shock when Dax turned and bumped into her. She would have tumbled to the floor if he hadn’t wrapped a strong arm around her and pulled her against his chest.

“What is it?” he whispered so close to her ear it gave her goosebumps. “You okay?”

“I — ” she took a step back, set the milk on the table and focused on Dax. “I’m fine. It’s just — ” how to explain what she was feeling without sounding like a complete idiot.

“Tell me,” he pulled her against him again, eliminating the space she’d put between them.

“It’s stupid,” Paige decided. “Let’s just eat.”

“We will,” Dax guided her to a chair and gave her shoulder a gentle push. “Talk to me.”

“Don’t laugh,” Paige warned.

Dubious Loitering

“I make no promises, babe,” Dax grinned.

It was just what she needed. “Just before the wedding, when Sophie was staying here,” Paige began.

“Yes,” Dax settled into the chair next to her.

“There was one morning when she was down here making breakfast for all of us,” Paige shifted absently. “When I walked into the kitchen, you were here, setting the table, just like I was doing tonight. Sophie was frying bacon or something and the two of you seemed to have a smooth rhythm. It was like a well-choreographed dance with you slipping behind her to set the table, her loading up pancakes and bacon then moving to set them on the table, neither of you colliding or getting in the others way. Anytime I’ve tried to help Sophie in the kitchen, she ends up frustrated and finally tosses me out. I remember standing right over there,” she pointed to the kitchen door, “wondering if I would ever have that with anyone. I knew I’d never have it with Sophie, but I wondered if you and I — maybe a few years down the road — if we might get there. If we’d get to a point where we could just sense each other’s next move and smoothly slide around it. For some reason I wanted that, I longed for it.”

“And now you have it,” Dax leaned in and kissed her forehead. “We have it.”

“It’s nice,” Paige whispered. “And now, it would be nice if the man I love more than anything in the world would bring me some ribs already.”

Dax was still laughing when he set their dinner on the table and settled in to enjoy a meal with his wife. “So, anything happen today?”

Paige swallowed a huge bite of potatoes, wiped her mouth, then glanced at Dax. “I got another call on the mysterious stranger at the hair salon.”

“How did that go?”

“I think this has something to do with one of Trudy’s girls,” Paige admitted. “And whatever it is, I think it makes him sad.”

“Sounds like you made some progress,” Dax decided. “Did he tell you his name yet?”

“No,” Paige sighed. “And I’m not sure we made progress. I just got a tiny glimpse before he masked it and left but I think he’s suffering in some way.”

Dax reached out and took her hand. “And it makes you sad.”

“A little,” Paige shrugged. “Anyway, tell me about your day.”

Dax grinned. “Before I do that, I wanted to run something by you. See how you would feel about it.”

Dubious Loitering

“Alright,” Paige sat back to give him her full attention.

“I’d like to have Christmas Eve dinner with all our friends and extended family,” Dax told her.

“I don’t think Nathan and Sophie can get back here that soon,” Paige considered. “Nathan said he’s knee deep in a new project and it was hard to take the time in November.”

“I know,” Dax admitted. “I talked to him already. He can’t fly out again and I understand that. We’ll just have to catch him next year. But, I wanted to do something special, not formal or anything but a big fancy meal for the guys, Carmen, Jericho and us. I want Christmas day for just you and me. I thought if we did it up right the night before, maybe the peanut gallery would give us one day alone to just celebrate us.”

“I like it,” she frowned. “But what are we going to eat? Sophie always cooks the turkey. I can’t do that. I’m sorry I’m not domesticated that way. I know that has to be disappointing, you married a woman who can’t scramble eggs.”

Dax laughed. “I’m perfectly happy with my wife, thank you very much. I’m never disappointed. I’m proud of you. This is my idea, I’ll take care of the turkey.”

Paige narrowed her eyes at him. “You can’t cook either.”

“No,” Dax’s smile widened. “But I can deep fry.”

“You’re going to deep fry the turkey?” Paige shook her head. “No, do you have any idea how many people burn down their house trying to fry a turkey?”

“I won’t do it inside and I have the men to help,” Dax assured her. “Have a little faith. I’ll order the rest. I’m sure Carmen will make a pie or something.”

Paige let out a huge breath. “Alright. Carmen makes amazing pie and I’ll come up with a menu I can handle. Anything else, you can order in.”

“You sure?”

“Positive,” Paige considered. “It’s a good idea and I’m glad I have an excuse to force Jericho to join us. He normally heads up north and spends the holiday with his family but he’s still not fully recovered and I get the impression he doesn’t feel up to all the chaos. His siblings have a million kids and Jericho needs to relax this year. He doesn’t need more stress.”

“How is my favorite sheriff doing?” Dax wondered. “I’ve been so busy, I haven’t had a chance to check in.”

Dubious Loitering

“I’m worried about him,” Paige told him. “I think now that things are starting to settle down and he doesn’t have the investigation into Mom’s death occupying his time — he’s a little lost.”

“He’ll pull through,” Dax said confidently. “Now, let’s talk about our own plans for the holidays.”

“Paige, my office,” Jericho demanded the second she stepped through the door.

Paige glanced at Margie who shrugged before she answered an incoming call. She slid through the door and settled into one of Jericho’s chairs. “What’s up?”

“I got a call from Trudy,” Jericho informed her. “She’s worried about that stranger and doesn’t think you’re taking the situation seriously.”

“She’s wrong,” Paige said flatly.

“What are you doing to get rid of him?” Jericho asked.

“Nothing,” Paige shrugged. “I’m keeping an eye on him, trying to get him to trust me enough to at least tell me his name, but other than that, he hasn’t done anything illegal.”

“He’s sitting on a park bench holding surveillance on a private business,” Jericho grumbled.

“Is this about Trudy complaining, or is it about you being in a pissier of a mood ever since you got shot?” Paige wondered. “We both know the man has a right to sit on that public bench for the next twenty-four hours if he wants to. He’s not breaking the law and I’m not going to do anything to get rid of him as you so eloquent put it until I figure out why he’s here in the first place.”

“Another Paige Carter mystery to solve?” Jericho grumbled.

“Tell me what’s going on in that head of yours,” Paige pushed.

Jericho glanced away for a minute then refocused on Paige. “It’s nothing,” he sighed. “Really, Paige. I’m fine. Just keep me in the loop on the mysterious stranger. I’ll handle Trudy. She’s just worried about her girls.”

“I understand that,” Paige considered. “But I don’t think he’s here for nefarious reasons. I think it goes deeper and it’s personal. Kind of like whatever you’re keeping locked up inside.”

“I’m — ”

Dubious Loitering

“Yeah,” Paige stood. “I know, you’re fine. Dax and I are making dinner on Christmas Eve. Nothing fancy, just a small get together for close family and friends. You’re invited to join us. I expect you to join us,” Paige added.

“I might be busy,” Jericho fibbed.

“Nope,” Paige moved to lean over his desk. “I know you’re staying in town for the holidays. I know you are going to be alone and I won’t accept that. You are my family whether you like it or not and you will be missed if you stand us up.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jericho finally told her. “I just don’t want to get in the way. You don’t get to spend a lot of time with that obstinate general you care about so much. You should have this time with him and his lovely wife.”

“They won’t be there,” Paige settled back into the chair. “Nathan is working on some top-secret project again. Whatever it is, he’s right in the middle and can’t get away. It’s just me, Dax, you, Carmen and the boys. I might add one or two people, but it’s not likely. Jericho, I think of you as family. I need you to celebrate the holidays with family.”

“I’ll try,” he offered.

“Nope,” Paige shook her head. “Not good enough. I want a commitment. Nathan was a good friend of my fathers. He’s like family on Dad’s side. You are the man my mother loved. If things had turned out a little differently, you would actually be my family. I think of you — on my mother’s side — the same as I do Nathan and Sophie on Dad’s side. I need you to be there, Jericho.”

“I’ll stop by for dinner,” Jericho decided. “What can I bring?”

“It’s up to you,” Paige stood. “Thanks, it means a lot to me — having you here and sharing that time with you.”

“What about Dax’s parents?”

“He sent them a card and a couple presents,” Paige sighed. “I feel like I’m getting in the way, then Dax reminds me they were like that before I was in the picture. I guess it is what it is and we all have to accept it.”

“Don’t sweat it too much,” Jericho laughed. “Nobody gets along with their mother-in-law.”

“Good to know, Sheriff Crankypants. Don’t even think about bailing on me,” Paige warned, but she was grinning as she left the room.

Dubious Loitering

Dax was curious. No better way to satisfy that curiosity than personal contact. He had some Christmas shopping to do, anyway. He wanted this Christmas to be unforgettable. He wanted Paige to remember their first holiday season together as special. Starting the tradition of friends and family for Christmas Eve dinner was only the beginning. He had a whole list of traditions he wanted to start with Paige. If he also got a chance to talk to this mysterious stranger while he was out and about — well, that was just a happy bonus.

He pulled his truck into a slot a few rows down from the salon and took in his surroundings. At the moment, the bench was empty. Not a problem, he'd just step into the jewelry store and take a look around. Thirty minutes and several hundred dollars later, Dax exited the store and spotted the man Paige had described. And, just like clockwork, he was settled in on the public bench watching the women work inside the salon. With a grin, he headed that way.

The man looked up when Dax settled onto the bench, stretched out his legs and crossed his arms over his chest. He continued to study Dax for several seconds before he shifted, and his attention was once again on the women inside.

“I think you should go with red,” Dax said without emotion. “Yeah, it’s in season and the blue and the purple — don’t get me wrong, I know they’re pretty popular at the moment — but I just don’t get it and I think red will match your scowl a little better.”

“Why do I get the feeling I’m being tag-teamed by the clever Deputy Carter?” the man asked.

“She didn’t send me,” Dax continued to watch the women work. “In fact, she has no idea I’m even here.”

“Friend of yours, then?” the man asked.

“You might say that?” Now Dax did glance at the man now. “She’s my wife.”

He shook his head but smiled. “Lucky man.”

“I agree,” Dax openly studied the stranger.

“Had I known what the future held for me,” he sighed. “I would have just given the woman my name.”

“You could always give it now,” Dax suggested.

“I think that persistent wife of yours deserves that honor,” he shifted and settled further into the bench.

That was true, so Dax didn’t push it. “You could always go in, schedule a cut if you’re not sold on the red highlights.”

Dubious Loitering

“I’m picky about my cut,” he answered honestly. “As are you. What branch?”

“Army,” Dax studied the man a little closer. “You?”

“Same,” he admitted. “Although, it was a lifetime ago. I’d guess your departure was a lot more recent.”

“Do we ever really depart?” Dax wondered.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I got out a few years back,” Dax admitted. “Started a new life and thought I was happy. I was wrong. Then, two things happened. First, I met Paige and she changed my life in ways I never expected.”

“And the other?”

“My past came back to haunt me and my team,” Dax hesitated. “My men, my family — they didn’t hesitate. They rushed in and saved me — with the help of my talented and extremely smart and observant wife that is.”

“And somehow you got pulled back in?”

“Oh,” Dax grinned. “That happened first. The rest followed. General Porter doesn’t seem to know how to take no for an answer. Plus, I’m not sure he realizes he’s actually retired.”

“You work for Nathan Porter?”

That got Dax’s attention. “I do. I’m guessing you know him.”

“Is there a soldier that doesn’t?”

“Good point,” Dax frowned. “If you know Porter and that relationship is good — If there are no surprises, you should talk to Paige.”

“Because?”

“Because they’re tight,” Dax stood. “They’re family. And if Nathan vouches for you, Paige will go out of her way to help you — in whatever way you need her to.”

“I’ll think about it,” he hesitated. “Thanks, uh — I won’t ask your name because you didn’t press on mine.”

“Dax Hamilton,” he reached out a hand. “Thank you for your service. And, I’m serious, talk to Paige. You can trust her and I’m sure she can help. She seems to be magical that way.” He walked slowly back to his truck, deep in thought. The instant he climbed behind the wheel; he knew — once again — he was going to act on impulse.

Dubious Loitering

Dax could feel the mysterious stranger watching him as he pulled into traffic and made a quick right. He'd have to be careful, but he was certain he was doing the right thing. He made another right and pulled into a parking spot several feet from the intersection. Then, he slipped out of the truck, using the building for cover, he got into position and waited. It didn't take long. The man shifted and was so focused on the salon, he didn't notice the sneaky soldier snapping photos around the corner. Once he was certain he got enough, Dax slid back into his truck, made a U-turn and headed toward the office.

He was smiling when he stepped into his new, lush surroundings. He had to admit, the guys could decorate. He dropped into his leather executive chair and pulled out his phone. Three rings later, he connected with the tenacious general. Well, Dax could be stubborn, too.

"Is this important?" Nathan asked in greeting.

"Could be," Dax evaded.

"Cut the crap, Hamilton," he barked. "It's not that kind of day and I'm headed into another superfluous meeting with a group of stuffy bureaucrats who overrate their importance in my world."

"Okay," Dax sobered. "I get it. I caught you at a bad time. I just need you to look at a few photos and tell me if you recognize the man."

"Send them —" Nathan glanced at his phone when the notification sounded. "Give me a minute." He pulled up the text message and scrolled through the images. "Looks like David Jackson, why?"

"And this Jackson is former Army?"

"Sure," Nathan said impatiently. "What is this about?"

"He's here in town," Dax told him. "Paige has encountered him twice now. He seems to be casing a small hair salon and he's making the women nervous."

"That's ridiculous," Nathan scoffed. "If that's David, he's not casing anything. You make it sound like he's planning a diamond heist. Did he tell Paige who he is and why he's there?"

"Yeah," Dax said sarcastically. "That's why I went to the trouble of sneaking a picture and texting it to you. I missed your charming demeanor and pleasant personality."

"Didn't I say it's not that kind of day," Nathan grumbled. "Anyway, I am charming and pleasant. Now, I have to go. The meeting is about to start. Tell Paige to call me later tonight if she needs to know more." He took a step toward the door. "Dax?"

"Yeah?"

Dubious Loitering

“Did the two of you work things out?”

“We did,” Dax assured him.

“I have some ideas about that other thing but now is not the time to discuss them,” he said cryptically. “I think we can make things work for you, without fear of... complications.”

“We’ll talk when you have more time,” Dax assured him. “If I don’t catch you beforehand, have a Merry Christmas and give Sophie a kiss for me.”

“Will do,” Nathan said before he disconnected the call. What in the world was David Jackson doing in Manti?

Dax glanced up and was surprised to see Hawk standing there. Just the guy he planned to look for.

“You were late for the meeting, so Zeus ordered pizza for all the vultures,” Hawk moved forward and settled into a chair. “I can grab you some before it’s gone if you want.”

“I ate,” Dax brushed that off. “I’m glad I caught you alone, anyway. I need help with something and it just occurred to me that some things probably need to change around here.”

“How so?”

“We all just fell back into our normal routine,” Dax settled back. “I used to be your commander, but out here I’m an equal partner. I’ve been giving you assignments as if you were still my right-hand man.”

Hawk shrugged. “I think it was easier to just fall back into old habits and nobody around here minds.”

“I’m not the boss, Hawk. We all contributed to this endeavor.”

“Not equally,” Hawk objected. “And, before you jump me, I’ll concede and say I agree — to a point. But, I also think we need a final voice of reason and you have established yourself as that voice with each one of us. I think this structure works. In fact, I think we should make it official. We can hash it out in the meeting, but as far as I’m concerned — you’re the CEO of this venture. The rest of us can be VP’s or whatever. What I’m saying, is we need to develop a business plan, an organizational structure and a contingency if someone gets disgruntled and decides to leave.”

“Is there trouble I don’t know about?”

“No,” Hawk shook his head. “But we’re all alphas with hair trigger tempers. I just think we should plan for the worst and hope for the best.”

Dubious Loitering

“Alright,” Dax nodded. “We’ll add it to the agenda.”

“What’s the favor you need?”

“A complete packet,” Dax pulled out his phone. “I’m sending you some photos. The guy’s name is David Jackson, former Army and he’s associated with Nathan Porter somehow. I need everything you can find.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing,” Dax sighed. “Yet. He’s dodging Paige and he’s being cryptic. I just want to know everything I can about him until she figures out why he’s here.”

“On it,” Hawk stood to leave.

“There’s one more thing,” Dax focused on Hawk. “I told Paige everything. You were right, she’s on board and there won’t be any trouble because of it.”

“Told you so,” Hawk laughed as he again turned to leave.

“You’ve been waiting a long time to say that,” Dax laughed, too.

“Decades,” Hawk said casually before stepping into his own plush office.

Paige pulled into the closest spot, snagged the two cups of hot chocolate she’d purchased and headed for the bench — and the man. He didn’t look up. “You said you don’t drink coffee,” she settled onto the bench. “How do you feel about hot chocolate?”

He glanced up and smiled. “Love it, actually.” He took the cup she offered. “Maybe tomorrow you’ll bring donuts.”

Paige rolled her eyes. “Clichés.”

“Thanks for this,” he took off his gloves and gripped the hot mug with both hands. “Temperatures are dropping.”

“You need warmer outer gear,” Paige observed.

“I met your husband today,” the man said.

“Where? Why? Wait — ” she frowned. “How do you know it was my husband?”

“He told me,” the man shrugged. “Seems like a good man. He said I could trust you.”

Dubious Loitering

“I — ”

The man held up a finger as he fished his ringing phone out of his pocket. One look at the display and he smiled. “And he works fast.”

What did that mean? Paige wondered.

“Hello, Nathan,” the man greeted.

Nathan? Paige’s frown deepened.

“David,” Nathan greeted. “I’m just heading into another meeting, so I only have a minute. Rumor has it you’re in Manti, Utah.”

“And by rumor, you mean Dax Hamilton called you,” he corrected.

“Not the point,” Nathan brushed that off. “I also understand you’re avoiding Paige Carter.”

“Not really,” he glanced at Paige. “In fact, she just brought me hot chocolate. And she doesn’t look happy about this call.”

“I’ll deal with Paige later,” Nathan paused outside a secure room. “My meeting is about to start. I just wanted to let you know, you can trust Paige. Tell her why you’re in town. She can help.”

“You’re the second person today that told me to trust the persistent deputy,” the man smiled. “I’ll think about it. Go deal with your meeting. Everything is fine here.”

“Are you?” Nathan softened. “Is everything okay with you?”

“No,” he sighed. “But I’m working on it.”

“One more thing,” Nathan glanced up and motioned for the guard to wait. “Paige is Dylan Carter’s daughter.”

“Really?” the man studied Paige with interest now. “I see and I understand. Stop holding up your meeting for this. I’ll let you know if there’s anything you can do to help because I know that was going to be the next thing out of your mouth. Go, save the world.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Nathan said before disconnecting.

“Clearly, I’m missing something,” Paige sipped her hot chocolate.

“They’re only trying to help,” the man assured her. “In fact, there’s a good possibility it worked. I need to go. I need to think. Thanks again for the hot chocolate,” he stood and walked away.

Dubious Loitering

Paige remained on the bench until her chocolate was gone. She was fuming by the time she climbed behind the wheel. Dax had some explaining to do. He had no right to interfere in her case or go behind her back. And, Nathan — that man was going to answer for his intrusion as well. Seriously, the guy was over a thousand miles away and he still insisted on butting in where he didn't belong. She backed out of her parking spot and punched the gas. First stop, the training center.

She was nearly there when she got a call from Margie.

“Paige, where are you?” Margie’s voice was strained.

“What’s wrong?”

“Jericho collapsed,” Margie told her. “He’s on his way to the hospital. I don’t know how serious it is and I have to stay here. Someone has to man the store. I was wondering if you could go, make sure he’s okay.”

“I’m on my way,” Paige didn’t hesitate. “Where did they take him?”

“Gunnison Valley,” Margie choked out. She was doing her best to hold her emotions in check, but she was worried.

“I’ll call you as soon as I know anything,” Paige clicked off, hesitated, then called Dax.

Dax was just closing out his meeting when his cell phone rang. He glanced at the display, debated, then answered. “Is this a social call or am I in trouble?” he teased.

“I’m going to be late getting home tonight,” Paige told him.

“What’s wrong?” he stood and started to leave the room.

“Jericho collapsed at the office, he was rushed to the hospital by ambulance,” Paige tried to keep the panic at bay. “I don’t know how long it will take.”

“Where are you?” he pivoted, snatched up his coat and started for the door.

“Actually,” Paige nearly laughed. “I’m approaching the training center as we speak. I wanted answers as to why you interfered in my case and thought that was a conversation we should have in person.”

“Pull into the lot,” Dax ordered. “I’m coming with you.”

“What?”

“Pull into the lot, Paige. I’m headed outside,” he could hear the stress in her voice. She was worried about her boss.

Dubious Loitering

Paige hesitated, then pulled into the lot. She spotted Dax immediately. Just seeing him standing there, ready to give his support and comfort, his love — it made her heart do a little flip and she realized she was no longer angry. Dax would always be there for her when she needed him. He would always step in and help in any way he could.

Dax strolled across the parking lot, yanked open the door, and wrapped his arms around his wife. She was trying to hide it, but her eyes told him just how worried she really was. “It’s going to be okay.”

“He collapsed, Dax,” Paige whispered. The sound was muffled because she was holding onto Dax, her face pressed against his large chest.

“It was probably a complication from his injury,” Dax said calmly. “He’ll be okay.”

“I called him names,” Paige choked. “He didn’t want to come to that Christmas dinner you’re planning, so I bullied him into it and told him he’s cranky.”

Dax laughed. “He is cranky and that’s why he’s going to be okay.” He took a step back and unbuckled her seatbelt. No way could she drive to Gunnison like this. Once the belt was free, he reached in, shut down the vehicle, and lifted her out of the seat.

“Dax!” Paige protested. “Put me down, this is embarrassing. We have an audience.”

Dax turned and grinned at his men. “That’s not an audience.”

“Dax,” Paige gave his chest a shove.

He continued across the parking lot until he reached the passenger side of his truck. Zeus lunged forward and opened the door. “Thanks,” Dax said as he gently set Paige on the seat. “I won’t be back today.”

“We got the gist,” Hawk stepped forward and passed Dax a thick manila folder. “Easy reading on that — thing you asked for.”

Dax raised one eyebrow in surprise. The file was thicker than he expected.

“It’s all good,” Hawk assured him. “Call us with an update. He might be cranky, but we all have a soft spot for the good sheriff.”

“Will do,” Dax dropped the folder onto the back seat and climbed behind the wheel.

“What’s in the file?” Paige asked once they left town and were headed toward Gunnison.

“Intel on David Jackson,” he glanced at her then refocused on the highway. “I got your mystery man’s name from Nathan. Hawk pulled everything he could find. It’s in the file.”

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“Are you going to share?”

“Of course,” he reached out and took her hand. “I wasn’t stepping on toes, Paige. I went Christmas shopping because I had a few minutes before a staff meeting and he was there, sitting on the bench, watching the salon. I reacted; it was impulse. I’m sorry if that bothers you, but I don’t regret it. I asked Hawk to run everything so I could give it to you.”

“Thank you,” Paige close her eyes and readjusted her seat.

“That’s it?” Dax assessed her. “You must really be worried.”

“I am,” Paige admitted. “He’s family and I jumped him this morning because I was annoyed. He’s struggling, has been for months. He’s just not himself and I think he’s lonely — maybe a little lost without Mom’s case to occupy his down time. So, I pushed, he relented, and I left. I don’t know if I can live with myself if that’s the last conversation we have.”

“Paige,” Dax took her hand. “He’s going to be okay.”

“You hope he’ll be okay,” Paige disagreed. “You want him to be okay but we don’t even know what happened.”

“We will soon enough.” The two of them drove in silence the rest of the way to the hospital.

“Are you family?” the receptionist asked.

Paige was nearly out of patience with this woman. “Yes.”

“Relationship?”

“Daughter. Step-daughter,” Paige corrected at the woman’s skeptical look. She didn’t hesitate, didn’t flinch, didn’t regret the lie for a minute.

“Jericho Walters is in surgery at the moment,” the receptionist softened. “There were complications from his previous surgery where they removed his spleen. The details are vague, but from the notes I believe there was a tear of some kind that caused internal bleeding. They are repairing the damage and expect him to make a full recovery.”

Paige sagged against Dax in relief.

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“Thank you,” Dax guided Paige to a waiting area and settled her onto a small couch. “He’s going to be fine. Breath, baby. It’s okay. I need to call the men, do you want me to contact Margie?”

“No,” Paige pulled out her own phone. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Anyone else?”

“I don’t know,” Paige frowned. “I don’t think so. He has a brother and a sister I think, but I don’t know anything about them.”

“Margie will know,” Dax patted her hand and moved just outside the door to make his call.

Two hours later, Margie had joined them. Paige was reading through the file Hawk compiled, fascinated. The man was a saint. David Jackson had flown Apache helicopters then Black Hawks in the Gulf War. He left the army and, along with another man in his unit, started up an aviation company where they transport rich executives around in style. The company was a huge success and the two men continued to use some of their own wealth to help their fellow soldiers. They volunteer their time and resources to helping wounded warriors get back on their feet. “Nowhere near homeless,” Paige mumbled.

“I’d say he’s the furthest thing from,” Dax agreed. “So what brought him to a small town hair salon?”

“I have no idea,” Paige jumped to her feet when a man in a white coat stepped into the room.

“Is the family of Jericho Walters in here,” the doctor asked.

“We are,” both Paige and Margie stepped forward. Dax slid in behind Paige and wrapped his arms around her waist in support.

“Mr. Walters came through the surgery well enough,” he glanced at his notes. “He’s been overdoing it. Near as we can tell, he took a fall or overextended somehow causing a tear. Basically, we had to go back in and stitch him back together. He was bleeding internally, which is why he collapsed. I want to keep him here for a few days. Once he’s released, he will need to take it easy. Does he have anyone to help him?”

“Yes,” all three of them said at once.

“We’ll handle it, doc,” Dax assured him. “We just need you to tell us how far we need to go. He’s independent and he won’t be straight with us. If someone could give us the details before he’s released, we’ll make sure he behaves this time.”

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“I’ll meet with you again before I sign off on the release,” he promised. “We just finished the procedure. He’ll need at least another hour before the anesthetic wears off. I’ll approve visitors in ICU once he wakes. He’s fine. Go get dinner, take a break and try to relax while you can. I know Jericho Walters and he’s going to be a handful. You’ll need all the rest you can get. Now, I have another patient waiting.” With that, he turned and left the room.

“He’ll stay with me,” Margie decided. “I don’t care what he says, he’ll stay with me.”

“You know he won’t,” Paige shook her head. “He’ll insist on going home, alone. Instead of fighting him on that, maybe you could start to put together a schedule. The guys will want to help. We’ll make sure he has three meals, shovel his driveway, do his laundry, whatever. Once he’s back on his feet, the schedule can taper off but I want it to last at least until the end of January.”

“I can do that,” Margie shifted from worried friend mode to competent assistant.

“She’ll have the schedule finished before we leave tonight,” Paige smiled.

“I want in,” Dax decided. “My men will want a turn on that schedule as well.”

“You guys are so busy,” Paige objected. “We can handle it.”

“I care about him, too,” Dax stood. “Let me make a call. I think the best route is to have them call Margie individually. That way, they can pick up a shift when they’re available and I don’t have to be the middleman.”

“Thank you,” Paige decided not to argue. Instead, she pulled out her own phone and dialed Nathan. She needed to know more about David Jackson and his family.

“Paige, I’ve been expecting your call,” Nathan said in greeting.

“Something came up and it’s later than I originally planned,” Paige sighed. “Can you talk?”

“Why are you at a hospital?”

“How do you know I’m at the hospital?”

“Are you hurt?”

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“No,” Paige rushed to reassure him. “It’s Jericho. He’s as stubborn and pigheaded as a certain general I know. Complications from his previous surgery and they had to go back in and stitch him up. He was bleeding internally and collapsed at work.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Nathan said sincerely. “And since I am stubborn and pigheaded, let me know if there’s anything I can do to help. I understand just how annoying over cautious doctors can be. I know a guy, a doctor in the area who would be more than happy to make a house call so your favorite sheriff doesn’t have to return to the hospital.”

Her heart softened. Nathan Porter was stubborn, pigheaded and interfering but his heart was always in the right place. And there was nobody on the planet that had more contacts, more access to intel and more leverage than he did. “I think he’d appreciate that.”

Nathan laughed. “Not if you tell him I arranged it, but I’ll call Scott and give him your number. Now, you didn’t call to discuss your boss or his health problems. You want to know about David.”

“I do,” Paige agreed. “I’m not going to yell at you over that because Dax told me he called you.”

“I’m so relieved,” Nathan said flatly.

“I also have a pretty complete packet — from an anonymous source — that gives me a clear picture of his military service, the business he started with another soldier and the work he does for our wounded vets.”

“Since we both know there are only two possibilities for that anonymous source and I had Carmen tied up all day, tell Hawk to send me what he has and I’ll fill in any blanks.”

“I don’t think I need that,” Paige disagreed. “Thanks, but I think I have what I need on that end. What I want from you is the personal stuff. You called him, which tells me you know him. How close are you?”

“I have to admit,” Nathan said with regret. “Not as close as we should be. He stays busy with the various pursuits you mentioned, and I’ve been busy with my committees. He’s a good man, if that’s what you’re asking.”

That was a huge compliment coming from Nathan Porter. “I think something personal brought him to Manti. Do you know him well enough to tell me what that could be?”

“I know him well enough to know about his personal life,” Nathan frowned. “I don’t know how that would bring him to Manti.”

“Can you guess?”

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“No,” Nathan dismissed that.

Paige laughed. “Why do I even try?”

“David Jackson is married to a lady with class,” he said easily. “Kendall is very supportive and generous. She’s also heavily involved in the volunteer work David engages in to help our veterans. They’re good people, Paige.”

“Do they have children?”

Nathan frowned. “Two, I think. Although, I believe they are adopted. Like I said, I haven’t kept in touch on a personal level as much as I should have. Are you thinking one of his kids could be in trouble?”

“I don’t know,” Paige sighed. “He’s not talking, and I just don’t see anything in this file that points to a reason for him to be here. Or, a reason to sit out in the cold on a public bench in front of a hair salon.”

“Do you want me to call him?” Nathan offered. “I could try to dig, see if he’ll confide in me.”

“No,” Paige said immediately. “I’m trying to gain a rapport with him. Maybe he’ll break and confess everything.”

“Not likely,” Nathan laughed. “I said he was a good guy; I didn’t say he was a sap.”

“Anyway,” she wouldn’t get anything more on that topic from Nathan. It was time to finish out this call and get back to work. “I mailed a package to your house yesterday. It should be arriving in the next couple days. You’ll have to let me know if you like your present.”

“I know you didn’t get what you wanted from me,” Nathan debated. “I’m sorry for that. I’ve thought about checking in a hundred times over the years, but I just got busy and pushed it aside. As a favor to me, will you try to help him. Whatever he’s dealing with, I could tell it was bothering him. Work that magic of yours, flash your charming smile, and he’ll be putty in your hands.”

“I thought he wasn’t a sap,” Paige smiled, knowing that was exactly what he intended.

“He’s not,” Nathan assured her. “One more thing before I let you go.”

“What’s that?”

“He knew Dylan.”

“He — ” Paige blinked in surprise. “He knew my father?”

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“He did,” Nathan sobered. “They worked together and sometimes played together. They were friends. Not like I was, but David was someone your dad confided in, blew off steam with, had serious discussions with. They were friends and you should know, when I spoke with David this afternoon, I told him who your father was.”

“David Jackson flew Black Hawks for an elite unit,” Paige realized. “Did he transport you guys on your missions?”

“Sometimes,” Nathan wasn’t going to hide anything from Paige.

“Did he fly that night?”

“No,” Nathan didn’t hesitate. “David wasn’t assigned to that particular mission. I do think it impacted his life, though. I’ve always wondered if it’s the reason he delves so deeply into his volunteer work. We’ve never talked about your dad in that way. It’s just too painful.”

“I understand,” Paige didn’t know what else to say. “I’ll let you go, I know you have a million things to do. Make sure you take Christmas off. For Sophie, take the day off and spend it with her. You’ve been working a lot lately and she’s felling a little lonely.”

“Understood,” Nathan smiled. Paige was good at stepping in when he neglected Sophie too long. It wasn’t necessary, he could always tell when it was time to show his wife just how special and important she was, but he was glad Paige noticed. He thought it might help her figure out her own marriage. “Goodnight, kiddo.”

“Goodnight, old man,” Paige grinned as she disconnected. She was still sitting there in shock when Dax returned.

“You okay?”

“I don’t know,” Paige turned to look at Dax. “David Jackson knew my father.”

“It really is a small world,” Dax wrapped an arm round her and pulled her toward him. “Where will you go from here? I mean, will you tell him who you are?”

“Nathan already did,” Paige’s mind returned to their meeting that afternoon. “I think that’s why he left so abruptly after Nathan’s call. It shook him, probably as much as it just shook me.”

“He — ” Dax stopped and looked up when Margie approached.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” Margie focused on Paige. “Susie just called. She said a David Jackson is trying to locate you. He’s called three times now and she doesn’t know what to tell him.”

“Did he leave a number?” Paige asked.

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“Not exactly,” Margie frowned. “He wouldn’t leave a message, just said he’s staying at the Country Village Motel in room 115. He wants you to call him when you can.”

“You want me to find you an empty room?” Dax offered.

“No,” Paige considered. “I think Jericho is out for the night. I’ll come back in the morning and see if he can handle visitors. Let’s head back, I want to talk to David Jackson in person.”

“Goodnight, Paige,” Margie pulled her in for a hug.

“Do you need a ride back?” Paige wondered.

“No,” Margie smiled. “Riley is on his way. He should be here any minute then I’m heading home as well. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Dax pulled Margie in for a hug. “Get some sleep. Jericho is going to be fine.”

Paige knocked on the outer door and waited. No answer. She knocked again. Still no answer. She waited a few seconds then gave it one last try. She was about to give up when the door suddenly swung open. David Jackson stood there, ear pressed to his cellphone, a weary look on his face. He motioned for them to enter then walked away.

“I love you, honey,” David said into the phone. “I know. I’ll call first thing. I’ll think about it. Goodnight, dream of me.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Paige said the instant he disconnected the call.

“My wife,” he settled into a chair with an exhausted sigh. He focused on Paige, then turned his attention to Dax.

“I can wait outside if it would make you more comfortable,” Dax offered.

“No need,” David motioned for both of them to sit. It was a small sitting area with a couch and a lounge chair. David currently occupied the lounge chair. “I have a few contacts of my own. I made a few calls after I spoke to Nathan. I should probably amend my previous statement, from earlier, and say you are both lucky. I don’t mind you hearing this. In fact, you might be able to help. Stay and let me explain why I’m here and why I’ve been spending so much time at the salon. If I don’t accept your offer to help, I think my own amazing wife might just fly out and tan my hide.”

“Because?” Paige wondered.

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“Because, she thinks I’m obstinate and stubborn,” David covered his face with his hands. “And, she’s right.”

Paige glanced at Dax and smirked. “Must be an army thing.”

David looked up and locked eyes with Paige. “In the spirit of full disclosure, I knew your father.”

“Nathan told me,” Paige said softly. “We can get into that later. I’m here to see why you have that weary, desperate look on your face and how I can help.”

He smiled and got a sad, far-away look on his face. “That’s something your father would have said. If I can barely bring myself to discuss Dylan Carter, I can’t even imagine what it’s like for you. Yet, you’re willing to put that aside to help me with my problems. He would be proud of you.”

“You knew him well?” Dax asked, taking Paige’s hand.

“I did,” David nodded. “I wasn’t as close to Dylan as Nathan — nobody was as close as Nathan. But, we were friends — good friends. His death, it left a permanent scar.”

They sat there in silence for several seconds. None of them sure how to proceed. Finally, David spoke again. “I was born into a family that was very religious. An LDS family with strict rules and morals. I think I accepted them because I was raised to live a certain way, not because I knew it was right for me. When I turned nineteen, they expected me to serve a mission for the church, but I had other plans. I joined the Army and lucked my way into an aviation career. I loved flying Apaches and I was good at it. So good, I soon found myself on the front lines flying in horrendous conditions, often operating under the cover of darkness.” He smiled then. “Still, I loved it and apparently I was good because the army fast tracked my progress, sent me to additional training, and within a fairly short amount of time, I found myself flying Black Hawks for SOAR — I’m a Night Stalker,” he said to Dax.

“Special Operations Aviation Regiment.” Dax explained. “The Night Stalkers don’t quit. They’re a highly trained unit that flies the most dangerous and top-secret missions.”

“We provided Special Forces teams with aviation support,” David added.

“Is that how you met my father?” Paige wondered.

“We met before that, but it’s when we got to be true friends,” David closed his eyes as dozens of memories tried to flood his mind. He pushed them back, determined to explain the reason he was here. “Like I said, I joined the army when I was nineteen. My parents were disappointed, I was an arrogant know-it-all kid and I was hurt. I wanted them to support my dream and they didn’t — because me serving a mission for our church was their dream. I turned my back on everything I believed in. While assigned to Fort Carson in Colorado, I started dating

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a girl and thought I was in love. She was a little wild, pretty much up for anything, and it was just the outlet I was looking for.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and say it wasn’t Mrs. Jackson,” Dax deduced.

“No, her name was Tilly,” David smiled. “I never questioned that, being a stupid kid with a huge crush.”

“It wasn’t really her name?” Paige realized.

“It was a nickname,” David closed his eyes, regret so palpable it nearly swamped him. “I got transferred to another base. When I asked Tilly to join me, she laughed and explained that our relationship was always temporary for her. She didn’t love me, was just having fun in the moment, and wasn’t looking for anything more. I was and it crushed me. I moved on, transferred around a lot, threw myself into my training, and my missions became even more dangerous. I never gave Tilly a second thought, not once my heart recovered. That experience shaped my life for a lot of years. Then, I met Kendall and she showed me what true love and a true partnership means.”

“What happened?” Paige asked, knowing the real reason for being here hadn’t been revealed yet.

“A private investigator paid me a visit,” David explained. “It was a few months back and completely out of the blue. He said he was hired by a woman named Matilda Beckett to deliver a letter. He left the letter and his card then told me if I had any questions, I could contact him. I had tons, some he could answer, some he could not. The letter was written by the girl I knew as Tilly. Her real name was Matilda. I’m not going to go into detail because much of the letter was personal and private. In short, I have a daughter I never knew existed. Tilly didn’t know she was pregnant at the time of my transfer, but once she realized we were having a baby, she decided to raise the girl on her own. She had been honest with me. She really didn’t want anything permanent. She also decided she didn’t want a man in her life, and she made the decision to raise the girl on her own.”

“Then why have a PI track you down?” Paige wondered. “This daughter had to be an adult by then.”

“Tilly was dying,” David answered softly. “She had cancer. In fact, she had already passed away by the time the detective found me. Tilly was worried about Amy. She thought she needed someone to look out for her and she wanted me to step in and fill that void.”

“Did she regret her decision to keep you out of your own daughters’ life?” Paige wondered.

“No,” David sighed. “Not according to the letter. She insisted she did the right thing and she had no regrets. She only wanted me to step in because she wouldn’t be there for Amy.”

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“Amy Moore?” Dax wondered.

“Yes,” David nodded. “So, now you know why I’ve been sitting outside the hair salon. I’ve been watching Amy, trying to get a feel for her personality. I figured her mother didn’t want me around and Amy is her daughter. I don’t want to make things more difficult for her or appear out of the blue if I’m not wanted.”

“Did you know Amy was married and has two small children?” Dax asked.

“I didn’t realize Amy was a friend of yours,” Paige studied Dax carefully. “Did you two date?”

Dax laughed. “No,” he sobered. “She cuts my hair, baby. She cuts all of our hair. Amy was married to a man by the name of Gabriel Moore. He was also in the army. Unfortunately, he was killed on a mission in a remote Afghan village. Gabe and his unit were engaged in a humanitarian mission — of sorts. The day started out pretty routine until they were ambushed. It resulted in multiple fatalities and a boat load of injuries — the whole thing was FUBAR in a matter of minutes.”

“I didn’t know that,” David considered. “In fact, Tilly didn’t mention Amy had a connection to the military at all. I wonder why.”

“Wild child,” Paige shrugged. “Apparently he knows your daughter better than I do. What I do know is the woman is shy and reserved. That doesn’t sound like this Tilly you described. I think you should approach her. Tell her who you are, tell her Tilly contacted you and you’re not here to disrupt her life, you just want to make sure she’s okay and she knows how to reach you if she ever needs anything.”

“Voice of experience?” David asked.

“Sort of,” Paige shrugged again. “You know my dad was killed when I was young. I didn’t hear from Nathan until I was an adult. I had my mom and he didn’t want to get in the way. Then Mom died. I lived out here until I turned eighteen, then I moved back east. That’s when Nathan approached me. He told me about the connection to Dad and he explained why he watched from the shadows, but he was watching. Then, he said he just wanted to make sure I was okay and I knew I had a friend in the area if I ever needed anything.”

“It didn’t end there,” David insisted. “I know Nathan, he didn’t just walk away and wait for you to call.”

“No,” Paige grinned. “I don’t think you should, either. I think you should approach her, take a step back and then just appear unexpectedly. Drop in for a haircut and request Amy. Go for a walk at the same time the salon closes and just happen to run into her and walk with her to the parking lot. I’m not saying stalk her but just be around. Let her get to know you. I don’t

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know how much time you have, but I recommend you take that first step soon. I'm pretty sure that wife of yours wants you home for Christmas."

"Why are you helping me?" David wondered.

"I'm a cop — serve and protect, remember," Paige stood. "Honestly, it really is that simple for me. But, you also have the Nathan connection. He seems to think you're a good guy, Dax thinks you're a good guy, and my gut is telling me you're a good guy. If that's not enough, anyone that was a friend of my dad's — is a friend of mine."

"Paige," David also stood. "Your dad was an amazing person, warrior, and friend. He was also the best mentor any soldier could have. He'd been in the game longer than me. He helped me navigate the minefields and avoid the normal pitfalls and mistakes. I truly believe I owe my success to Dylan Carter."

"Dad would disagree," Paige hesitated. "I was just a kid when he died, but I know that much. My father helped people, not just on the job. He mowed the neighbor's lawn when she broke her leg. He used to snow blow the entire block if he was home after a blizzard hit. Your belief that my dad would be proud of me, that means a lot. It means a lot because I want to make him proud and because you knew him. He thought of you as a friend and if he helped you along the way — it was because he could see your potential. That's on you, not him. Once I knew your name, I had a friend pull some information on you. I'm sure you expected that, I had to see who I was dealing with. Your accomplishments are impressive. The life you've made for yourself, the volunteer work you do taking care of our injured soldiers — all of it proves my dad was right. Dylan Carter saw the possibilities, David Jackson lived up to that potential on his own."

"Thank you," he turned to Dax. "Both of you."

"I know Amy a little," Dax offered his hand. "Let me know if you want help with the impromptu meeting. I think I can arrange something to make it less awkward."

"I'll let you know," David waited for the two of them to leave and close the door behind them. Then, he called his wife.

Two weeks later, it was a cold, crisp Saturday morning and Dax was standing in Jericho's garage — knuckles scraped raw and bloody, his shoelaces slathered in oil, and his pant legs soaked all the way through and frozen to his skin. "Screw it," Dax gave the snowblower a little kick. "I'll just shovel the snow the old fashion way," he started to clean up his tools when his

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phone began to ring. Grateful for the distraction, he snatched it out of his pocket and didn't even look at the display. "Hamilton."

"Dax?" Came a soft, tentative female voice.

"Yes," Dax frowned, not recognizing the person on the other end of the line.

"This is Amy Moore," she said. "From Trudy's salon. I um... well, I was wondering if I could talk to you about something. I'm sorry, I pulled your number from the records here at the salon and if you wanted to, you could probably get me in some really serious trouble — but, this is important."

Dax laughed. "I won't rat you out to Trudy. I need an hour, to finish up a few things before we meet. You still at the shop? I can swing by there and hook up with you at the bakery. Important issues are always better with coffee and pie."

"I agree," Amy smiled. "I'll be there in an hour."

Dax stepped into the bakery and spotted Amy in the far corner of the room. She was staring out the window and tearing a thin white napkin to shreds. When he pulled out his chair, she nearly fell out of hers she jumped so high. "You okay?"

"I'm not sure," Amy admitted. "Um, the waitress said she'd come back."

"That's fine," Dax reached out and patted her shaking hand. "Talk to me."

Tears started to fill Amy's eyes, but she blinked them back. "I don't know what to do," she whispered.

"About David Jackson?" Dax wondered.

"I was pretty sure you knew," she sniffled. "That's why I called you."

"I know the basics," Dax glanced up when the waitress approached. He ordered two coffees, a slice of pumpkin pie and a cherry pie with whipped cream for Amy. He topped it all off with a dozen donuts. He planned to take those home to his wife and knew the boys would devour anything left behind. Once the waitress left, he focused on Amy. "Tell me what has you so upset."

"All the girls were terrified," Amy began. "When he was just sitting out there watching us. It didn't bother me that much, but I grew up with my mom and she was a little crazy. I guess you probably figured that, too. Anyway, she had people over all the time, so I was used to being watched, or shoved to the side. Mostly her friends treated me like a miniature slave. And that sounds petulant — and petty."

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“It sounds human,” Dax corrected. “Are you saying you feel bad because David scared your coworkers?”

“A little,” Amy admitted. “I know that shouldn’t matter, I mean it wasn’t really my fault — but, it was.”

“Is he still watching?”

“No,” Amy shook her head. “He’s really nice, actually. He came in for a haircut and explained who he was and said what happened between us was my choice. He assured me he would accept my decision, but he wanted me to know he would like me in his life.”

“Sounds nice,” Dax decided. “So, what’s the problem?”

“I feel — ” she sighed. “This is going to sound stupid. I feel like I’m betraying my mom. I think I could handle this better if she was still alive. I’d not only handle it; I’d demand an explanation. She told me my father left because he loved his job more than us. She lied. My entire life was a lie and I’m not sure I can forgive her for that. Dax, he let me read the letter mom sent him. She made so many decisions — for all of us — she didn’t have the right to make. Then, I think about Gabe. David Jackson, my father, was also in the army. He was a hero and I think Gabe would be disappointed in me if I don’t give this stranger a chance. I’m just so torn up and confused I don’t know what to do.”

“How can I help?”

“I realize you and I don’t really know each other that well and I’m dumping a lot of bad, personal crap on you right now,” Amy’s face flushed with embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about that,” Dax gave her hand another friendly pat. “What do you need?”

“Information, basically,” Amy took a deep shuddering breath. “I know you have access to stuff normal people can’t see. I don’t know David Jackson. I have no idea what kind of man he is, if he can be trusted, if he’s after something, or if he really is just a great guy that wants to get to know his daughter. I need to know if this is real. I have to protect my kids.”

“Give me a minute,” Dax stood and stepped just outside the door to make a call.

“Hey,” Paige answered. “What’s up?”

Dax explained the situation and asked her to bring the file Hawk generated so Amy could read it. “There’s nothing classified in there and I think it will help ease her mind.”

“When I didn’t hear anything further and he stopped hanging out on the bench, I thought he might have run for the hills,” Paige admitted. “Give me a couple minutes, I’m actually just

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around the corner from there. I'll bring you the file, there's nothing classified or sensitive in it. She can have it."

"Who did you call?" Amy asked when Dax returned.

"My wife," Dax smiled.

"Why?"

"She's bringing something I think might help," Dax stood when he spotted Paige in the doorway.

"I'm going to leave this to you," he brushed a gentle kiss across Paige's lips. "Amy, this is my wife. I think you've met before. She can answer your questions better than I can and I have about a dozen honey do's on my list — and only three more days to complete them." A thought struck him and in typical Hamilton fashion, he went with his gut. "What are you and the boys doing Christmas Eve?"

"I'll probably be finishing up my list as well," Amy smiled. "The kids are out of school but I just can't seem to find the time to get everything done."

"We're having a little get-together," Paige gave Dax a nod. "Just a few friends and extended family. You should come, bring the kids with you. The last thing you need to worry about is dinner that night."

"Oh, I couldn't," she started.

"I also think we should invite David Jackson and his wife, Kendall," Paige continued undeterred. "I called him on my way over. His wife will be arriving in the morning. That gives them Sunday to catch up and spend time together, Monday for a little last-minute shopping and Christmas Eve dinner on Tuesday night with all of us. It's a great way to interact and you know I'm a cop. You know it will be safe."

"You know him well enough, trust him enough, to invite him into your home?" Amy looked from Dax to Paige.

"I've got this," Paige nodded to Dax. "You can take off."

Dax gave Paige one last kiss, snatched up his donuts and disappeared.

"I don't know David Jackson that well either," Paige began. "But, a very good friend, someone I would trust with my life, he knows David very well. He has assured me, I can trust him. Now, I'm going to do the same for you."

"Because this man you know trusts him?" Amy asked.

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“This man’s name is General Nathan Porter,” Paige went on to explain who Nathan was, what he did and how he knew her father.

“Okay,” Amy let out a relieved breath. “That actually makes me feel better about all of this.”

“Amy,” Paige reached out and took her hand. “My father died when I was little. There’s so much I don’t know about him. So many things I would love to know. I have memories, which is more than you have and I cherish those. You have the opportunity to meet your father. You can ask him those questions, spend time with him, get to know his kids — your brother and sister — and you might even have nieces and nephews. If not now, it’s entirely possible you will later on. What I’m saying, is that you have been given the chance of a lifetime. I personally believe you should grab on with both hands and enjoy the ride.”

“I know I’m not being rational,” Amy looked away. “Mom was — I don’t know, she was different. My childhood was unconventional and chaotic. I think that might be the reason I was so drawn to Gabe. From the very beginning, he helped me find structure and stability. Now he’s gone and I’m having a hard time keeping my feet planted firmly on the ground. Working for Trudy helps. I don’t know what I would have done if my Aunt Clemmie — Mom’s sister — didn’t contact me. Clemmie has known Trudy for decades and she knew I had a license to do hair. It worked out, but I sometimes worry about my kids. I’m terrified I’m going to turn into my mother and make their life unstable and chaotic the way mine was.”

“You seem pretty stable to me,” Paige observed. “So, what do you say? Wanna come to my house for dinner on Christmas Eve? I’ll invite David and his wife and all of us can spend some time getting to know each other better.”

“You want to get to know him, too?”

“I guess I forgot that part,” Paige nodded. “My dad, Dylan Carter, and David Jackson were friends. They served together in the army. I would very much like it if I could get to know him better. I think he might have some stories to tell. And, I think if I take the pressure off a little and get him to tell me about my father — it might help you learn a little about your father.”

“Okay,” Amy agreed. “Okay, we’ll come. I just don’t know how I’ll explain him to my kids. I don’t know if I want to tell them he’s their grandfather, yet. I’ll explain it to him, but maybe you could let Dax know.”

“We won’t reveal the secret,” Paige promised. “I also have a file for you. Take it, read it after you put the kids to bed. I think it might help you understand the kind of man your father really is. I think it might help you relax a little and enjoy getting to know a good man who traveled miles from home, at Christmas time, to do the right thing.” With that, Paige stood, passed Amy the file, and walked away.

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Two days later the Hamilton house was filled with friends, family and noise. When Paige heard that Duncan Havilland wasn't headed home for the holidays, she insisted he join them for dinner. He arrived five minutes ago, Jericho Walters in tow. The men were all outside on the back porch now, arguing over the best way to fry a turkey.

"They're all nuts," Carmen stepped into the kitchen and handed Paige a glass of wine. "And before the night is over, they'll probably burn down your house."

"Hope not," Paige smiled. "Because then Hawk and Vato will have to move in with you and Zee."

"Why are you trying to ruin my evening?" Carmen wondered. She glanced back outside and grinned when she spotted Zeus.

"Just the facts ma'am," Paige smiled. "Grab that bowl so I can keep these warm while we wait for the main course."

"I don't think I've ever seen you cook before," Carmen considered. "Nope, never."

Paige smiled. "Why cook when you can get your friends to do it for you? Speaking of friends and cooking, that pie looks amazing."

"Thanks," Carmen beamed. "It's my specialty. The newfound family out there seems to be getting along pretty well." Carmen was referring to Amy, David and Kendall. The kids were outside with the crazy men, of course.

"I think that's going to work out okay," Paige decided. "Amy's a little lost and David and Kendall have their feet planted firmly on the ground. They have a lot to offer her and in return, David gets a new daughter and two grandkids he never knew about."

"Do you think she'll relocate?" Carmen wondered. "Because that would be a shame. She's the only person Zeus will let cut his hair."

"Dax said the same thing," Paige shrugged. "I guess if she does, they'll just have to deal."

"So," Carmen studied the sheriff for several seconds. "What's the deal with Jericho? He seems down and I don't think it's all about his injuries."

"I don't know," Paige frowned. "I'm worried about him."

"Maybe you should go out there," Carmen suggested. "Take a minute to pry, you're good at that."

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“Thanks a lot,” Paige slid a salad she’d been tossing into the fridge and turned to study Jericho. He did seem down. “Duty calls, wish me luck.”

“You won’t need it,” Carmen assured her before she walked away.

Paige stepped onto the porch and made her way to the chair next to Jericho. He watched her intently as she crossed the open area and dropped down beside him.

“If you came to chant Ho, Ho, Ho — your husband already took care of it.”

“He would,” Paige smiled. Her husband looked like he was having the time of his life, showing off to his friends.

“Looks like you solved the mystery of the strange man,” Jericho shook his head at the men’s antics. “You do know one of them is going to get third degree burns and end up in the emergency room.”

“I’m used to it,” Paige assured him. “They’re always like this. I have no idea how they get anything done.”

“Your mom would like him,” Jericho said softly.

Paige reached out and took his hand, hoping to give him comfort. “Mom would have loved him. Tell me what’s going on with you, Jericho.”

“I’m fine,” he gave his automatic response.

“Of course, you are,” Paige gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

“Just evaluating my life,” Jericho said cryptically. “Where I am and where I want to be.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning,” Jericho sighed. “Next year is an election year,” Jericho stared into the darkness. “I need to decide if I have four more years in me.”

“You’re thinking about leaving us?” Paige asked in horrified shock.

“I’m not leaving,” Jericho studied her in surprise. “I just have to decide if it’s time to retire.”

“It’s not,” Paige dropped back in her chair. “It’s really, really not.”

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Now Jericho gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm too old to be getting shot, kid."

"So, stay behind your damn desk where you belong," Paige barked.

That made Jericho laugh out loud, something he hadn't done in a while. "I'm still pondering, that's all. I promised myself I wouldn't leave until I got justice for your mother. We did. Then, we had all that trouble and had to rescue Dax and just when things were settling back down, a crazy man came to town and shot me. I'm just wondering if I'm getting too old to keep up."

"Well," Paige sighed. "Then act your age and stop trying to keep up with Jimmy Johnson over there. Nobody can, so trying is futile."

"Don't worry about me, Paige," Jericho patted her knee. "Whatever I decide, I'm going to be fine. In fact, spending more time at the cabin fishing sounds pretty good right about now."

"Because it's freakin' wintertime," Paige bumped him with her shoulder. "Any warm summer activity sounds pretty good right now. And, if you want to fish more, get your obstinate, cranky butt out of the office and fish more. Instead of retiring, just utilize your vacation time and work on more balance in your life. I understand why you lived the way you did. I basically did the same. Until Mom's killer was dealt with, all I had was work. You too. Now you have me, those nuts over there, Margie and all of your men. Not to mention Angela Hayes. That woman has a thing for you and she's got it bad."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jericho shifted uncomfortably. "Angela Hayes is very supportive of law enforcement. She no more has a thing for me than she has a thing for Mike Lovato."

"Right," Paige shrugged. "Maybe I'll suggest a date to Mike, if Angela is into him, too."

"I'm not taking the bait, Paige," Jericho grumbled. "Don't you have potatoes to burn or something?"

"Nope," Paige grinned. "Already burned. Seriously, Jericho. I want to spend more time together. I already told you that. We have a date on the night of mom's death. I want other dates, happy ones. I want you to drop in for a casual BBQ in the summer. I want you to feel comfortable enough to stop in on your way home if you are feeling lonely, missing mom, or just want to talk. You find excuses, use my cases and come by on rare occasions. Stop using work as a crutch. Just come by. I think it's time we started treating each other like family because that is exactly what you are to me. And you're not quitting. That's non-negotiable."

"Let's start that family thing by keeping this discussion to yourself, alright?"

"No problem," Paige stood. "I don't have to keep it to myself because you didn't even say it. You didn't think it and you certainly won't be following through with it. Now, I'm going to tell Havi to come over and babysit his boss because that man is feeling out of sorts this

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Christmas the same as you are. The two of you can cry on each other's shoulders and enjoy the entertainment while I finish throwing together this meal."

The group spent the next several hours laughing, joking, and harassing each other. By the time they left, it was indeed a very Merry Christmas.