

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Peculiar Inquiry
Season 5, Episode 1

by:

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“Don’t forget the whipped cream,” Paige called out. “And sprinkles.” She laughed when Gage flipped her the middle finger.

Deputy Clayton tried to hold back his smile but failed as he covered the white foam a little too thoroughly with tiny, colorful sprinkles. He was still smiling when he slid the mug of hot chocolate onto the table in front of his partner and settled into the chair across from her.

“You think I’m going to be annoyed,” Paige grabbed the mug of hot chocolate and raised it to her lips, closed her eyes, and took her first slow sip. “But you, my friend, underestimate the power of the sprinkle.”

“And you, my friend,” Gage sipped his mug of coffee. “Underestimate the power of the sugar crash.”

“That’s a myth,” Paige settled further into her chair. “Like Big Foot and werewolves.”

“Actually,” Gage watched his partner lick the sugar-coated foam covering her drink before she took another careful sip. His teeth ached just watching her. “It’s a scientific fact.”

“That’s what they say about Big Foot,” Paige countered. “Stop being a party pooper just because I was right.”

“I still can’t believe you won that one,” Gage grumbled.

“Lost a bet, Master Clayton has,” Paige did her best Yoda voice. “Sore loser he is. Accept defeat and humility he must, before his attitude banish, he can.”

“You,” Gage shook his head. “Make a terrible Yoda, but you did get the master part right.”

“Funny,” Paige held up a finger before Gage could continue. “Hold that thought.” She reached down to respond to Margie’s call over the radio. “Go ahead for Carter.”

“I need you to respond over to the Temple View Lodge on an unattended death,” Margie relayed. “The manager discovered one of the guests in his room after checkout.”

“Copy,” Paige grinned when Gage shoved a disposable mug toward her. It now contained the sweet mess Gage had purchased as payment for losing a bet.

“Need a back?” Gage followed her out to the parking lot.

“Couldn’t hurt,” Paige shrugged. “And, thanks.” She held up the mug of hot chocolate.

“A bet’s a bet,” he answered before climbing behind the wheel of his own vehicle. He fired up the engine, then waited for Paige to pull onto the highway.

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“ME will verify,” Paige sighed as the coroner’s transport van pulled from the lot, “but it looks natural to me. He also wasn’t dead long before the body was discovered.”

“So, what prompted him to stay?” Gage wondered.

Margie’s initial information was that the manager waited an hour after checkout before he headed to the room to confront his guest. The story changed once the deputies arrived. The manager corrected his original statement and admitted the man had called the night clerk and arranged to stay another three days. The clerk was a new hire and didn’t know how to enter an extension into the system. The manager didn’t see the note his employee left him until after he’d called the police to report the death.

“No idea,” Paige turned and headed back toward her crime scene — if it was a crime. She had just finished searching the small drawer of the nightstand when Jericho stepped into the doorway.

“Why don’t you have a log?”

“I put up tape to block off the sidewalk,” Paige objected. “You’re trespassing in a restricted area, Sheriff.”

“I contacted Tolman,” Jericho ignored her. “He doesn’t see a need for a warrant at this time. Unless we find something that points to foul play, we’re working this as a natural death. Just collect all his personal belongings and notifying his next of kin.”

“We have to find them first,” Paige pulled out another drawer then moved to the table that was covered with maps, file folders, and a laptop computer. She flipped open the top folder and frowned.

“Find something?” Jericho moved to stand next to her.

“The manager was able to give us a name,” Gage slid open one of the drawers in the small dresser and began to sift through it. “Our victim is Chris Kendall of Twin Falls, Idaho. We have an address but Inspector Clouseau over there doesn’t want to turn notification over to the locals yet.”

“Inspector who? Never mind. Why not?” Jericho started flipping through documents. “Looks like our guy was a private investigator.” He held up a business card. “Maybe we should call the office, see if anyone answers.”

Paige was silently reading through the document on the top of the file she’d opened. “Pink Panther,” she said absently.

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“What are you talking about, Paige?” Jericho asked, annoyed.

“Jacques Clouseau,” Paige glanced up. “The incompetent detective in the Pink Panther series. And, just because I’m not ready to rule this death-by-one-too-many-cheeseburgers doesn’t mean I’m inept. I’d rather be Yoda.”

“And I’d prefer you stick to deputy and act like a cop,” Jericho grumbled; Gage turned away to hide his smirk.

“From all appearances,” Paige shrugged. “It looks like a heart attack.”

“Death by cheeseburger,” Gage nodded in agreement.

Jericho frowned and moved closer to Paige. Clearly, it was going to be one of those days. Sometimes he felt more like a babysitter than a supervisor. He focused on the file Paige had discovered. “I agree, it looks natural. So, I need to know why we aren’t calling the locals up in Twin Falls, Paige.”

“Because we haven’t determined cause of death yet,” she said flatly. “Appearances aren’t facts. And before I notify anyone, I’d like to know what he was up to. From the information in this file, it looks like he was following a woman by the name of Charity Johnson. His client was the victim of a burglary and fraud — it’s vague, but I’m guessing identity theft.” She hesitated at the bottom of the page. The document looked like a summary of some sort and read like cop notes. To the side were the letters ‘JDLR,’ but Paige had no idea what that meant.

“Just doesn’t look right,” Jericho said softly.

“What doesn’t?” Paige pivoted abruptly to focus on her boss.

Jericho pointed to the handwritten letters in the margin of the document. “JDLR just doesn’t look right. I wonder if our PI was on the job before he broke out on his own.”

“You think he was a cop? I agree, because that’s how this summary reads; but, how did you know that?” Paige looked back at the paperwork. The letters in question were scribbled next to Charity’s name. “I’ve never heard that abbreviation before.”

“We don’t use a lot of acronyms here,” Jericho shrugged. “But in some larger departments that’s cop speak. It means something he uncovered doesn’t pass the smell test. There was something about this Charity Johnson that didn’t add up.”

Paige focused out the window for several seconds, then gathered all the documents into a pile and set them on top of the laptop.

“Paige,” Jericho said hesitantly. “What are you doing?”

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“Collecting our victim’s personal property,” she grabbed all the items off the table and headed for the door.

Jericho followed. “This is not our case. Someone hired that man to look into something for them. They didn’t hire us. And, the something wasn’t just out of our jurisdiction, it happened in a completely different state.”

“Chris Kendall died in our jurisdiction,” Paige countered. “That is our case.”

“And he died from a heart attack,” Jericho moved in closer, trying to get her attention. She was hidden behind the car door, setting her victim’s property on her back seat.

“It looks like he died of a heart attack,” Paige disagreed. “What if he was poisoned? What if he was killed because he was looking into something for someone?”

“What facts are you using to develop that theory?” Jericho demanded.

“I don’t know,” Paige slammed the door in frustration. “I just think I need to look into this a little more. Maybe he did keel over from a heart attack. Maybe this is a simple unattended death. But aren’t you the least bit curious? He uses lingo like a cop, his notes read like a cop, and now he’s dead. Don’t we owe it to him, a fellow officer, to find out for sure?”

“A possible former officer,” Jericho corrected. He settled next to her. “The burglary and the fraud happened in Idaho. The mayor blew a gasket over the amount of time we spent working that case for Vegas. This is going to look and feel like a repeat. He doesn’t have the power or authority over us that he would like, but he does have influence. I can give you one day, that’s it. And keep it quiet. Benny’s quick and he’s thorough. Once he rules natural causes, I have to pull the plug on this one.”

“The only reason the mayor’s causing a stink is because Lo arrested his nephew and wouldn’t drop the charges,” Paige grumbled.

“That,” Jericho agreed, “and because I got to Tolman before he did. Mayor Fowler knew he couldn’t take on the sheriff and the local DA — and win. He had to drop it.”

“I don’t know what he’s complaining about,” Paige sighed. “That high-priced attorney Fowler hired got the kid a sweet deal. Better than most could finagle. If the mayor’s nephew had consequences the first time, he may have refrained from stealing Elaine Parker’s SUV in the first place. And seriously, what was Lo supposed to do? He was stuck between our resident family law judge and the local mayor.”

“Lo did the right thing,” Jericho pushed away from the vehicle. “And I told him as much. Our budget is just paying the price in the short term. You have one day, Paige. Make it count.” He turned to leave but was stopped when Paige called out to him.

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“We still on for tonight?” Paige asked. “Dax is marinating the steaks and Carmen said she’d throw together a potato salad.”

“I’ll be there,” Jericho reluctantly agreed. Paige and Dax were determined to pull him into their circle. They seemed to think he was too much of a recluse and needed to socialize more. He was happier with a cold beer, his favorite lounge chair, and his trusted remote. “I’ll stop by the bakery and grab something for dessert.”

“Sounds good,” Paige headed back toward the open hotel door. She had a lot of work to do, and she only had one day to do it.

Paige was reading the transcript of a conversation Chris Kendall had with Charity Johnson for the second time when her phone rang. She absently reached for it but paused when a paragraph caught her attention. The phone rang two more times before she remembered it. “Deputy Carter.”

“It’s Benny,” the medical examiner informed.

“You finished the autopsy?”

“Just completed it,” Bennie admitted. “Jericho mentioned something about it maybe being a cop — or a former cop. I wanted to be thorough.”

“And?” Paige pushed back from the desk and settled further into her chair.

“Mr. Chris Kendall had an acute myocardial infarct. The mode was cardiac arrest.”

“Can’t you just say the man had a massive heart attack?” Paige wondered.

“No,” Benny dismissed that immediately. “He had a severe blockage in one coronary artery and another, slightly less restrictive, blockage in a second artery. It was only a matter of time and it appears his time simply ran out.”

“You didn’t find any indication foul play was involved?”

“I’m not sure I understand the question,” Benny considered. “I didn’t find any evidence this death was suspicious.”

Paige rolled her eyes but silently listened.

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“I have sent samples to the lab and I ordered a complete work up. If there was something in his system that shouldn’t be there, those techs will find it. I have to say, I don’t expect any surprises on this one. It appears to be a simple, natural death — well, if death can ever be considered simple.”

“I understand. Keep me posted,” Paige requested. “And I’m holding the body until I speak with his next of kin. I’ll let you know when notification has been made and what arrangements they prefer.”

“I’m going to hold him on my end until the toxicology report comes through,” Benny advised. “I’ll let you know when he can be turned over to loved ones on my end.”

“Sounds good,” Paige clicked off. She returned to studying the printout again. It appeared to be a casual conversation between Kendall and his suspect; one Kendall, or a secretary, had transcribed. She found the place where she’d left off and read the exchange one more time.

Kendall: You say Twin Falls is a temporary stop. Where do you call home, then?

Johnson: Actually, I said I wouldn’t be staying in Twin Falls permanently.

Kendall: How long have you been here?

Johnson: Close to two years.

Kendall: And before that?

Johnson: I spent some time in Omaha.

Kendall: Nebraska is a long way from Idaho.

Johnson: I was headed west from Chicago and made a few stops along the way.

Kendall: So you’re from Chicago? Originally?

Johnson: Sure.

Kendall: How long ago was that?

Johnson: I left eight years ago, but I don’t want to talk about it. Bad memories.

But Kendall had checked, and he couldn’t find a Charity Johnson that lived in Chicago — ever. A few pages later, Charity said she went to Thomas Kelly High School and lived in the Brighton Park area. Kendall actually flew to Chicago and interviewed former classmates that would have attended the school at the same time as Charity. Nobody knew her. Nobody ever heard of her. No wonder he thought something just didn’t look right. Nothing about Charity passed the smell test.

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Paige picked up the phone and dialed an old friend. She struck out and got voicemail. She was about to hang up but decided to leave a message. Trent would get back to her. The question was when. She was running out of time and every nugget she found led to a brick wall. She was frowning when Mike Lovato dropped into her visitor's chair.

"Bad day?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Paige sighed. "I suppose I should be happy. Benny ruled my unattended natural."

"But you smell a rat?" he countered.

"I do," Paige ran a frustrated hand over her face. "But I only have one day to prove it."

"I suppose that's my fault," Lo scowled. "Sorry about that. I'm not sure how I was supposed to handle that powder keg of political crap, but we're all suffering for my decision and I'm sorry for it."

"I'm not," Paige shrugged. "You did the right thing. The kids a nuisance at best, a delinquent on his way to a long career behind bars at worst. You had the guts to ensure, this time, he had consequences. I'd be annoyed if you caved."

"The choice wasn't all that difficult," Lo shrugged. "Judge verses Mayor, Judge won."

"I guess," Paige glanced at her phone and willed it to ring.

"Gage told me about the dead guy," Lo admitted. "Anything I can do to help?"

"I don't think so," Paige picked up a pen then began tapping it on her desk in frustration. "Chris Kendall was a PI investigating a burglary for a client. His prime suspect was a woman by the name of Charity Johnson."

"And he followed her here?" Lo asked.

"Looks like it," Paige agreed.

"Did you talk to her?"

"I can't find her," Paige admitted. "I can't find hide nor hair of a Charity Johnson in Manti, Laurel Bluffs, Ephraim... anywhere. I've fanned out to Gunnison and up to Nephi."

"Your suspect doesn't exist?" Lo frowned.

"She does," Paige admitted. "On a superficial level. She has an Idaho driver's license. She lived in Twin Falls for just under two years before the burglary occurred and she split. I'm not

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entirely sure how Kendall tracked her here. I'm hoping once I get through the rest of that, I'll find the trace."

"But?"

"Her records go back five years," Paige told him.

"Five years in Idaho?" Lo asked, confused.

"No," Paige said impatiently. "Five years, period. Before that? Nothing. Charity Johnson doesn't exist."

"Fake identity?" Lo wondered.

"I..." Paige paused and snatched up her ringing phone. "Deputy Carter."

"Paige Carter," a familiar voice greeted. "Sorry for the delay, I had to pull myself up off the floor. I was so shocked when I heard the message, I fell off my chair."

"How are you Trent?"

"Could be better, could be worse," he gave his usual response. "I know you didn't call to catch up and talk about the Cubs."

"I love the Cubs; but, no," Paige admitted. "I need a favor."

"I could be in the favor business," Trent decided. "How can I help my favorite agent?"

"How about your favorite deputy?" Paige corrected.

"Deputy works, too," Trent paused. "That's right, you left the Bureau and went to work for some small-town department out west. How's that working out?"

"Better than expected," Paige tried not to be impatient with the small talk.

"I also heard you went and got yourself married," Trent joked. "Say it isn't so."

"All true," Paige laughed.

"The fragile hearts of hopeful men are breaking all across the world, but you didn't call to talk about your love life. Tell me what you need," Trent understood Paige Carter and knew she'd be itching to get down to business.

"I'm looking for a woman," Paige began. "She's going by the name Charity Johnson, DOB eleven-sixteen-eighty-three."

"I'm assuming she's from Chicago," Trent surmised.

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“Says she was,” Paige evaded. “I don’t need a full background — not at the moment. I’m just looking for evidence she actually lived there. She claimed she grew up in the Brighton Park area and left the state about eight years ago. If the timeline is correct, she should have had a license until twenty-eleven, twenty-ten at least. She would have been in her late twenties at the time.”

“I’ll key it in and go with a few extra years on each end,” Trent decided. “In fact, let’s just use twenty-nineteen as the end date. It might take a bit longer, but sometimes it’s better to go wide.”

“I agree,” Paige handed Lo the transcript so he could be reading it while she waited. “How’s Marcy and the kids?”

“Marcy’s still too good for me and the kids are amazing,” Trent smiled. “And that man you married? He treating you right?”

“I have to admit, Dax is my better half,” Paige pointed a finger at Lo in warning. “Not that I’d ever admit that to him. You have nothing to worry about. He treats me better than I deserve.”

“Not possible,” Trent frowned at the results. “I’m sorry to report your girl doesn’t exist.”

“I’m not surprised,” Paige considered.

“Fake name?” Trent decided.

“Fake everything,” Paige corrected. “I doubt she ever lived in Chicago. I think it’s a diversion, a safe one.”

“Fake life,” Trent realized. “Well, you always did love a challenge.”

“This one is a little more complicated than usual,” Paige confessed. “Thanks for the help, Trent. Tell Marcy hello and don’t be a stranger. You have my number, call any time.”

“Right back attcha,” Trent said immediately. “I’m afraid I have to let you get back to that mystery of yours. The boss is calling, and I want to get home relatively close to quitting time. Jake has baseball tonight and I promised him I’d be there.”

“Thanks again for all your help,” Paige said again. “Talk to you later.”

“Another brick wall?” Lo deduced.

“Yeah,” Paige studied him. “If you really want to help, you can go through some of this stuff. I’m looking for anything that explains how Mr. Chris Kendall landed in Manti. It would also be nice if he jotted down the name Charity Johnson is using these days.”

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“Give me a stack,” Lo stood. “I’ll read through them at my desk.”

It was just after five when Jericho stepped from his office, spotted his two deputies hard at work, and frowned. He made his way to Paige’s desk. “Status?”

“Bupkis,” Paige admitted. “Charity Johnson doesn’t exist. Not here in Manti, not anywhere else prior to twenty-fourteen.”

“I admit, that’s odd,” Jericho glanced at Lovato. “But, it’s not criminal.”

“It might be,” Paige disagreed. “We know she’s a criminal. It’s a crime if she’s using one of the identities she stole in a burglary.”

“Did she use one of those identities here in Sanpete County?” Jericho challenged.

“Could have,” Lo answered. “We won’t know if we don’t solve the puzzle. How would it look if one of our innocent citizen’s got victimized by the dastardly Ms. Johnson also known as someone else, and word gets out our department knew we had a criminal in our midst but we just couldn’t be bothered to look into it?”

“Nice try,” Jericho turned and started for the door. “Go home. We’ll talk about it in the morning.”

“Thanks,” Paige stood and turned to face Lovato. She’d take the file home with her and give it a few hours after the barbeque was over and their guests headed home.

“No thanks necessary,” Lo also stood. “You have me intrigued. People don’t just disappear. I’m thinking we need to ask ourselves why now, and how. Was it an identity she stole? One she bought. Is she running from the law or just running? Did your dead PI get too close for comfort? I’m a puzzle guy and this puzzle has me hooked.”

“Don’t get too hooked,” Paige stepped through the open door. “Jericho will probably put the brakes on all of this in the morning.”

“There’s nothing that says I can’t work on it at home. My time, my choice,” Lo offered.

“Let’s see how things go tomorrow,” Paige decided. She planned to work on it during her off time as well, but Jericho wouldn’t be happy about that. He’d be furious if she pulled Lo into her insolent plan — so would the mayor.

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Paige was smiling when she climbed into her vehicle and started for home. She had one more ace up her sleeve and she was going to use it. She pressed the call button on the steering wheel and waited for her favorite general to answer.

“Hello, Paige.”

“Nathan,” Paige greeted. “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No,” Nathan smiled. Paige needed a favor. “I actually just pulled out of the lot and I’m headed for home. What can I do for you?”

“Who says I need something?” Paige asked automatically.

“Then you just called to say hello?” Nathan made a right onto the highway. “Some kind of pre-call to check in before I got home, settled down and made my routine nightly call to you?”

“Fine,” Paige relented. “I need something. Can I use Carmen?”

“I think you should probably ask her that question,” Nathan smiled. “And, if I were you, I’d also get the go-ahead from that overprotective ranger of hers. He might take exception to the idea of using the woman he loves.”

“I have no idea what that devious mind of yours is thinking and I’ve decided I don’t want to know,” Paige smiled. “I need her to run a background check for me.”

“On who?” Nathan sobered. “Is there more trouble out there?”

“No,” Paige assured him. “Nothing like that. It’s just... well, a man was found dead at one of the local hotels. The coroner ruled it a natural death; but, I think he was a former police officer turned private detective, and the case he was working has me stumped.”

“In what way?” She had Nathan’s interest now. Paige never got stumped.

Paige proceeded to explain the situation in detail. “So,” she added. “I need my technical magician to look into it for me.”

“Why are you asking permission?” Nathan wondered. “You usually just call to advise me Carmen is working for you as an afterthought to cover you both in case of trouble.”

“I’ve learned my lesson,” Paige teased. “I’ve seen the error of my ways and I want to stay on the straight and narrow — do things right this time.”

“You expect trouble,” Nathan grinned. “Witness protection maybe?”

“I’m leaning that way,” Paige admitted. “They created a false history but if the agent was sloppy, he might only go back five years and call it good.”

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“I agree,” Nathan considered. “Tell Carmen she has my blessing. I’ll find a way to justify it if asked. I know she’ll be careful, but make sure she knows this could blow up if the wrong person realizes we’re snooping.”

“Thanks,” Paige said sincerely. “I owe you one.”

“You owe me about a hundred,” Nathan corrected. “But who’s counting?”

“Apparently, you are,” Paige pulled into her driveway but didn’t shut down the car. “I just got home. Are you still planning on calling later tonight?”

“Do I need to?” Nathan wondered.

“How about I call you tomorrow if Carmen finds anything you need to be aware of,” Paige offered.

“I have meetings from thirteen-hundred to sixteen-hundred,” Nathan checked his schedule. “I should be free the rest of the day.”

“Love you,” Paige said in answer.

“I love you, too, kid. Be careful,” he added. “We have no idea what we’re dealing with here. You know how some of these guys get. You step on the wrong toes...”

“I know,” Paige interrupted. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight,” Nathan disconnected.

Paige glanced up and saw Dax headed her way. She pushed open the door and began gathering up the files she brought home.

“Let me help you with that,” Dax offered.

“Earlier today, I told someone you’re better than I deserve,” Paige admitted. “I think you just proved me right.”

“Nope,” Dax snatched up the files and headed for the door. “I just needed someone to stock the cooler.”

Paige laughed and followed him inside. “I need a minute alone with Carmen. I saw Zeus’ truck; I assume they’re on the back patio.”

“Five minutes,” Dax warned. “I’m starving and Jericho should be arriving any minute. No work tonight, you promised.”

“No work for a few hours,” Paige corrected. “But you already figured that out. You carried in my homework.”

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“Send Zee inside to help me,” Dax decided. “That should give you and Carmen the privacy you need.”

“See?” Paige wrapped her arms around his waist. “Better than I deserve.”

“By the time tonight is over,” Dax leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. “I just might agree with you.” He smiled and playfully swatted her butt. “Go talk to Carmen. Get the work out of the way so we can enjoy our evening.”

Several hours later, Paige was settled into one of the comfortable lounge chairs trying to enjoy the evening. Jericho approached, handed her a beer, then settled into the chair next to her.

“Thanks,” Paige accepted the bottle and took a sip before setting it aside.

“You look relaxed,” Jericho observed.

“I am,” Paige admitted. “Are you?”

“I am,” Jericho settled back and stretched out his legs. “I admit, I wasn’t looking forward to this shindig.”

“Because?” Paige wondered. *Maybe that’s why he was so grumpy this morning.*

“I assumed you asked me here out of pity,” Jericho admitted. “I thought it would be awkward and uncomfortable — that I’d feel like a fifth wheel.”

“But?” Paige pressed.

“I was wrong,” Jericho grinned. “Once I got here, I realized it was just a small gathering of friends. It wasn’t awkward at all. It was a nice evening, Paige. Thank you for including me.”

“Good,” Paige took another sip of her beer. “Maybe next time you won’t fight and complain so much.”

“Maybe next time,” Jericho looked out at the group, “we can hold the party at my place.”

Paige choked, coughed and spit out her beer. Jericho laughed. He was still laughing when Dax settled in behind Paige.

“You trying to kill my bride, sheriff?” Dax asked.

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“Just took her by surprise,” he sobered. “I was about to talk business with my stubborn employee. You going to give me grief if I do?”

Dax smiled and glanced at his watch. “I’d say tonight broke some kind of record between the two of you. Two and a half hours with no shop talk. It’s a miracle.”

“I’m going to take that as a no,” Jericho decided. “Tell me what’s bothering you, Paige.”

“I need more time,” she shrugged. “You know that already. What you don’t know is that I’m stumped. And, since you gave me a deadline, I enlisted Carmen to help.”

“Okay,” Jericho considered. “Carmen has assisted us in the past. That’s not the reason you’re worried.”

“It’s just something Nathan said earlier,” Paige admitted. “He approved my request to bring Carmen in, but he warned me to be careful.”

“Why?” Dax wondered.

“He mentioned witness protection,” Paige told them. “I already thought of that. The mystery woman can’t be in danger or she’d have a Marshal with her. But, witness protection is run by the FBI and they can be territorial.”

“No,” Dax said sarcastically. “Really?”

“Stop it,” Paige scolded. “I’m just saying Carmen has to be careful. And, even then, we might be invaded by the feds.”

“Why do you think the new identity is official?” Jericho wondered.

“Because if she’s this master burglar,” Paige began. “She would have money. That kind of money buys the good stuff. The criminals are better at this than we are. Plus, the setup seems sloppy to me. Most agents would take the time to create an elaborate, foolproof backstory. Whoever created this identity, they threw together five years’ worth of history and called it good. I think they never expected anyone to go looking.”

“Why would that say FBI?” Jericho wondered.

Carmen and Zeus joined them. “It could be a lazy tech guy,” Carmen added. “You have no idea how much grief I took from my colleagues whenever I set up a new life for one of our wits. They thought I was being excessive.”

“I thought they’d be thorough,” Jericho admitted.

“Most of us are,” Carmen agreed. “Most new identities are ironclad. That’s the whole point, right?”

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“But you have lazy agents, lackluster computer techs, overconfident analysts and uncooperative participants,” Paige added. “Combine just two of those on one case and you end up with a sloppy backstory. One that someone like me, or our dead PI, stumbles onto and it becomes obvious the whole thing just doesn’t look right.”

“Okay,” Jericho had to agree with her logic. “But, wouldn’t someone stop the woman from committing a felony if she was under protection?”

“Not if her obligation was complete,” Carmen told them. “I mean, not if she had done whatever they wanted her to do. Say she was testifying against someone dangerous. The Marshal’s office would have her under constant protection until she testified, or the trial was over. Then, the case would be turned over to the Bureau and they’d come up with a backstory and relocate her under a new identity. Once that happens, she’s basically on her own. They give her the necessary paperwork, fly her to a new place and wish her luck.”

“So,” Dax surmised. “If their witness is a criminal, like maybe a burglar, once she’s fulfilled her duty, she could return to a life of crime.”

“Right,” Jericho nodded. “And you think this woman, the one Kendall was chasing, was a burglar in her previous life.”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” Paige told him. “The job was a professional hit. She got in, took what she wanted and got out. The victim is rich, loaded actually. The residence has excellent security inside and out; yet, she was able to get in unnoticed, get the goods and get out. She was detected at the last minute, she tripped something climbing over a wall, but she still got away with the stolen property.”

“I know the mystery is intriguing,” Jericho began. “You’ve got my attention and you piqued my interest. Unfortunately, it doesn’t change the facts. The crime occurred in Idaho. You can’t prove the woman is even in Utah. You’re asking for more time, but you’ve exhausted all your leads.”

“I don’t have any other cases pressing,” Paige began. “And, there are still things pending on our case.”

“Like what?” Jericho asked.

“Notification,” Paige admitted. “I’m going to call Twin Falls in the morning. I still haven’t been able to reach anyone at his office. Someone might call me back tomorrow. Hopefully, they’ll call me back. Anyway, I’m not finding next of kin from here. Maybe someone up in Twin Falls can help me locate a spouse or another family member.”

“That should have been handled already,” Jericho scolded.

Peculiar Inquiry

“I know,” Paige accepted the criticism because Jericho was right. Chris Kendall probably had people in his life that loved him. They could be worried at this very moment, wondering why they hadn’t heard from him. And, that was all on her. “I got caught up in his case and neglected my own.”

“Not exactly,” Jericho disagreed. “You called his office. They didn’t return the call. It was the obvious choice. We had his business card. I’m just saying we need to call the locals up in Idaho first thing tomorrow. We can’t justify a longer delay.”

“I agree,” Paige relaxed. “I also want to call Kendall’s client.”

“The victim of the burglary?” Jericho realized. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll be careful,” Paige assured him. “I won’t interfere with the locals. I just have a few questions I want to ask, that’s all.”

“I’ll give you tomorrow morning to tie up loose ends,” Jericho decided. “Tread lightly, Paige. We don’t want a turf war with our neighbors.”

Paige held back her smile — barely. She just got what she wanted and she didn’t want her boss to change his mind. “Don’t worry, Sheriff. I’ve got this.”

“Hello,” Paige sat forward in her chair. “Is Trish Arrington available?”

“Who, may I ask, is calling?” the man on the other end inquired.

“This is Deputy Carter with the Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office,” Paige advised. “I have a few questions for Ms. Arrington. It will only take a moment.”

“Hold please,” the line went eerily silent.

“Hello,” a female voice came over the line. “Trish Arrington speaking. Can you tell me what this is about, please?”

“This is Deputy Carter from Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office,” Paige repeated.

“I’m sorry,” Trish cut in. “I’m afraid I don’t know where that is.”

“It’s in Utah, ma’am.”

“Oh,” Trish frowned. “I don’t think I know anyone in Utah.”

Peculiar Inquiry

“I’m calling in regard to a private investigator you hired,” Paige answered. “Mr. Chris Kendall. I believe he was investigating a burglary that occurred at your residence three months ago.”

“Oh, yes,” Trish relaxed. “Don’t tell me Chris has gotten himself into trouble. He’s a retired police officer, you know. He understands the law. I can’t imagine Chris doing anything that would involve the police.”

“You sound like a friend,” Paige observed.

“Cousin, actually,” Trish told her. “A close cousin. He’s more than a friend, he’s family.”

“Mrs. Arrington,” Paige began.

“Oh, you can call me Trish.”

“Trish,” Paige hated notifications, but she hated them more over the phone. “I’m afraid I have some bad news. I’m sorry to do this over the phone. I had no idea the two of you were related.”

“What is it?” Trish demanded.

“I’m afraid Chris Kendall suffered a heart attack yesterday. It was severe and he was alone in his hotel room. He was discovered a short time later, but it was too late. He didn’t make it. I regret to inform you, Chris Kendall passed away.”

“Oh, dear,” Trish held back the tears. They wouldn’t help Chris. “Do the girls know? Have you notified his daughters?”

“I’m afraid not,” Paige admitted. “I’ve been trying to reach someone at his office. We found a business card in the room, but I haven’t been able to reach anyone, and they haven’t returned my calls.”

“Chris is looking for a secretary,” she hesitated. “Was looking. He’s been a private investigator for nearly ten years now. He opened up the firm after Darla passed away — that was his wife. I think he just needed something to occupy his time and chase away the boredom. Anyway, Natalie quit a few weeks back. She decided to stay home after the baby comes and just be a mom. Sorry, you don’t care about that. The point I was trying to make is that Chris was checking the machine himself. He called in every night while he was on the road and planned to start interviewing candidates next week. This is going to crush those kids. How do I tell them they lost their father?”

“We’ll handle that, Trish,” Paige assured her. “Give me a few hours. Once we finish up here, I’ll contact the local authorities and have them talk to Chris’ children in person. Do you happen to have their names and the best way to contact them?”

Peculiar Inquiry

“Oh, yes,” Trish fumbled with her phone. “Let me see here. The girls are twins, Jasmine and Lilly. Okay, I have their information.” She provided Paige with their full names, their addresses and a phone number for each of them.

“I really appreciate your help with this,” Paige told her once she had the information. “Like I said before, give me a couple hours then you can contact the twins.”

“Wait,” Trish said, realizing the deputy was going to disconnect. “You didn’t realize I was a relative so can you tell me why you called? Originally?”

“I wanted to ask you about the case he was working,” Paige admitted. “But in light of your connection to Mr. Kendall, I don’t think the timing is appropriate. I’m going to let you go. I’m going to let you take some time to grieve the loss of your cousin.”

“No,” Trish objected. “Chris would do this for me. I’m okay. Ask me whatever it is you need to know.”

“Alright, but if things get too difficult, just let me know and we can talk later. Can you tell me about the case? Explain why you hired Chris to look into things. I assume the police are handling the burglary.”

“You probably know my husband and I are wealthy,” Trish began. “Brenton’s family — well, he comes from southern aristocrats. They didn’t take it well when he announced he was moving to Idaho. Initially they threatened to cut him off — from the family money. But once his parents understood he was following his own aspirations, they decided to support him. He was lucky. He had an inheritance from his grandfather. He used every penny to invest in his dream. We moved out here to Idaho where Brenton opened up a manufacturing plant where he builds and sells farm equipment. I couldn’t begin to explain it — all those computer generated components. Anyway, he’s done well for himself — for us.”

“You were targeted for your wealth,” Paige deciphered what the woman was trying to say.

“Exactly,” Trish confirmed. “We called the police immediately. They tried to help, but for some reason, they couldn’t. Maybe they’ll explain it to you, since you’re also a cop. They just said the prints came back to a woman by the name of Charity Johnson. Chris was able to get more from them. He said this Charity woman lived in Twin Falls, but after the break-in, she vanished. The police couldn’t find her and for some reason there was limited information on her past. The detective told me he couldn’t find any family connections, no friends either, basically nothing to follow up on. Their case is still open, but it’s inactive. They won’t work on it unless something new surfaces.”

“So, you hired Chris?”

Peculiar Inquiry

“Not exactly,” Trish sighed. “I tried to hire Chris, but the man was stubborn. I insisted on paying him, he wouldn’t have it. He took on our case because we’re family. I knew he wasn’t well. His doctor told him to check back in a week and they’d discuss his options. Was it his heart?”

“It was,” Paige confirmed.

“I knew it,” Trish said, clearly annoyed. “I told him to fire that quack and go to a specialist. But Chris was stubborn, and he didn’t trust easily. I think he was comfortable with his doctor but the man... sorry. You don’t need to hear this.”

“It’s okay,” Paige thought Trish was right. With the massive blockages, Chris Kendall should have been taken into surgery immediately. “I really am sorry for your loss.”

Trish Arrington went on to describe the theft and provided amazing descriptions of the property that was taken that night. The most valuable piece had monetary and sentimental value. It was a diamond and ruby jewelry set that had been given to Benton’s grandmother by Queen Elizabeth. Trish still had the provenance, which decreased the value for the burglar, but it was still worth a fortune.

“The fraud has been the biggest hassle,” Trish admitted. “The property, well that’s just stuff. My identity, that’s a nightmare. The woman has purchased twenty-two thousand dollars’ worth of property in my name. Benton has a business to run. He can’t have creditors and the police chasing his wife because she didn’t pay her bills.”

“Which is why Chris stepped in to help,” Paige realized. She’d dealt with a few large identity theft cases when she worked at the FBI. They could be a nightmare. She thought she might be able to help Trish navigate the system and protect herself and her husband’s company.

“He knew he could help,” Trish answered. “I think maybe I do need some time to myself. Thinking about Chris — emotionally, I’m barely holding myself together. Can we finish this up tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Paige gave Trish her number and told her to call back when she felt up to it. She also offered to help deal with the fallout from the fraud. Trish was grateful for the offer but by the time she hung up, Paige could tell she was distraught and not really listening. She had started to grieve the loss of someone she loved. With a sigh, Paige picked up the phone and called Twin Falls.

Peculiar Inquiry

Paige was leaning back in her chair, eyes closed, feet propped up on her desk when Gage dropped into her visitor's chair. She opened her eyes to acknowledge him but didn't move.

"I was thinking," Gage began.

"That's always dangerous," Paige dropped her feet to the floor and straightened in her chair.

"Well," Gage raised an eyebrow. "I suppose I could have been napping like my colleague."

"I wasn't napping," Paige objected. "I was sifting through what we know, trying to find another lead."

"I wonder what it says about my judgement," Jericho pulled up a second chair. "Knowing how much it terrifies me when I hear two of my best deputies have been spending time contemplating their current case and plotting."

"I've got nothing," Paige admitted.

"You looked wrung out, what happened?" Jericho demanded.

"Notification has been made," Paige shrugged.

"By you?"

"Sort of," Paige admitted. "Unintentionally. I called Kendall's client to ask a few questions. Turns out, she's his cousin. I didn't have a choice, I had to notify her over the phone."

"Not ideal, but it couldn't be avoided," Jericho gave her a nod to continue.

"That's when I learned Kendall's wife had passed away approximately ten years ago," Paige sighed. "But, he has twin daughters. I called Twin Falls, thinking maybe they could send out a detective to talk to the girls."

"Good plan," Jericho approved.

"And I was directed to Detective Tom Jones," Paige shook her head. "Turns out, Tom's father and Chris Kendall were partners — on the job — for years. Chris was like a second father to Detective Jones and I pretty much shattered his day as well."

"Again," Jericho said softly, "not ideal, but it couldn't be avoided."

"Right," Paige laughed. "I just got off the phone with Brenton Arrington, the cousin's husband. He called because his wife was too distraught to ask for the details. He explained that Chris was like a brother to him and he wants to make sure he's given a proper funeral. He was looking for the details on how to get the body transferred back to Idaho."

"Did you refer him to Benny?" Jericho asked.

Peculiar Inquiry

“I did,” Paige affirmed. “And I called Benny to let him know Benton would be contacting him.”

“So,” Gage let out a long breath. “Now what?”

“Now nothing,” Paige picked up the file she’d been studying, closed the folder, and dropped it on top of the large pile she’d collected from Chris Kendall’s hotel room. “Benton added a detail I didn’t know. After Charity was arrested — yeah, she was arrested for the burglary. After she was arrested, she went before the judge and bail was set — twenty-five thousand to be exact. Benton said there was a man in the courtroom during the hearing. He was clean cut, wore a black suit and strutted around like he was in charge or something. He paid the bail, in cash, and escorted Charity out of the building.”

“And?” Jericho asked.

“And,” Paige frowned. “It’s just another red flag pointing to FBI involvement. I think we can assume Charity was given a new identity for some reason, relocated, and released on society to pick up where she left off — burglarizing wealthy citizens. I’ve got nothing left to go on. You’re right, she hasn’t committed a crime in here in Manti, I can’t even prove she was ever in Manti. I think it’s time to close my case and move on.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Jericho smiled. “Because I’ve changed my mind. I want you to work this case for a few more days.”

“What about the mayor?” Gage asked.

“I don’t work for Mayor Fowler and neither do you,” Jericho said flatly. “We work for the citizens of Sanpete County. I can’t, in good conscience, ignore the fact we might have a professional burglar in the area. We have large, expensive homes in this community — many of which sit unoccupied for months. It’s our duty to protect this county and that’s what we are going to do.”

“Go sheriff!” Paige laughed.

“Don’t get cocky,” Jericho warned. “My actions might have just as many consequences as Mike Lovato’s did.”

“Understood,” Paige sobered. “I appreciate the support, but I don’t have anything more to go on. I’ve hit a wall, then another, then another.”

“Like I said when I got here,” Gage jumped in. “I’ve been thinking. We believe this Charity Johnson was a career burglar.”

“Right,” Paige agreed.

Peculiar Inquiry

“Then she may have been arrested,” Gage provided.

“Maybe,” Paige agreed again. “But, without a name, we can’t conjure a rap sheet.”

“No,” Gage waved his hand in dismissal. “But we have the media. We think she goes after the rich. The rich whine, louder than normal folks, when they get victimized. I was thinking we could start searching through newspapers for high profile victims that were burglarized.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jericho said in support. “Paige, you said she lived in Twin Falls for about two years. I think we can assume she stayed clean — in Idaho — before she did the Arrington hit. Let’s divide up the country and look for anything big that happened prior to that. Let’s start in twenty-seventeen and go back at least five years. She was probably active longer than that, but five years is manageable.”

They had just finished dividing up the country into sections when Paige’s phone rang. “Deputy Carter.”

“Paige, it’s Carmen.”

“Did you find something?”

“Sort of,” Carmen hesitated. “I kept hitting the same wall you did. Two years back and we’ve got plenty, then once you hit five — nothing. I decided to do a little digging with the Marshal’s but it’s tricky and we needed to be quiet about it.”

“Tell me you didn’t hack into their system,” Paige moaned.

“I did, but not deep,” Carmen assured her. “Nothing that would ring any bells. I can confirm they don’t have an active case concerning Charity Johnson. They do have a sealed case that looks like it could be related.”

“You didn’t take a peek?”

“I wanted to,” Carmen complained. “You have no idea how much I wanted to dip a toe in, but I know the guys that handle the big stuff over there. If I got within a hundred yards of that file, they’d get an alert.”

“Are you telling me Carmen Fennelly is afraid of the Marshal geeks?”

“No,” Carmen said quickly. “I respect the Marshal geeks, same as they do me.”

Peculiar Inquiry

“Okay,” Paige considered. “So, they probably had a case, but it’s concluded. What about the FBI?”

“I did a little snooping,” Carmen admitted. “The trail was leading me back to Quantico, so I backed off. I think you were right about witness protection; but, if I dig deeper, someone will get a hit and they’ll be able to trace it right back to me. You know how those guys are. What little I already did could have triggered an alert.”

“Don’t go any deeper,” Paige decided. “You’ve snooped far enough. I think you gave me what I needed, anyway.”

“I’ll call Nathan and let him know,” Carmen decided. “Just in case I did trigger something. He needs to be prepared. I could have hacked in and nobody would know I was even in there, but I thought I should take the official route. Nathan approved it, so we can fall back on that if we need to.”

“This way was better,” Paige agreed. “Thanks for your help. I’ll call Nathan in an hour or so.”

“Alright,” Carmen said, relieved. “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

“Gage had an idea,” Paige proceeded to explain his theory about the burglaries. “We’ve divided up the country and plan to start searching for newspaper articles on burglaries where the victims were mega rich.”

“I’ll program a run,” Carmen offered. “Between the four of us, maybe we’ll catch a break. Gotta go. I’ll get to work pulling your data on the media stories once I finish up with Porter.”

“Sounds good,” Paige disconnected then settled back in her chair to consider.

That’s how Mike Lovato found her. “Asleep again,” he dropped into her chair. “Married life seems to be interfering with your sleep, deputy.”

“How did he find her?” Paige said in answer. “There had to be a reason Chris Kendall came to Manti. There had to be a reason he extended his stay another three days.”

“He tracked the money,” Lo gave her a smug look. “So did I.”

“What?”

“Charity Johnson,” Lo began. “Currently, Felicia Stewart, is renting a small cabin just a few miles up the canyon.”

“Are you sure about that?” Paige questioned.

“Do the Irish drink whiskey?”

Peculiar Inquiry

“Probably not all of them,” Paige said absently, then smiled. “You up for a little stake-out?”

“Will the boss fire us?”

“We have his blessing,” Paige stood. “I’ll fill you in on the way. You drive.”

“Okay,” Paige said once they were inside the vehicle, headed toward the canyon. “I want details. *Follow the money* is a concept I understand. But how did following Charity’s spending lead you to this cabin?”

“Reach in the back and grab the top file on that stack,” Lo told her.

Paige grabbed the file, opened it and began to read.

“You found a gas charge in Burley before she left Idaho,” Paige nodded. “That was the last time she used the Charity Johnson identity.”

“Last I could find,” Lo admitted. “We thought she left immediately following her release. Not so. She holed up in a motel for a month and a half before she split. I was able to track her movement pretty well during that time. I’m guessing our PI did the same, maybe the records are on his computer rather than hardcopy. She was up to something, but I have no idea what. Can’t say if Kendall figured it out. Anyway, I contacted the station and they were able to clip out a section of video that showed her activity at the station.”

“Where you discovered the make and model of her vehicle,” Paige nodded.

“I also got the plate,” Lo told her.

“Then?” Paige wondered.

“Basic algebra, baby,” Lo grinned.

“Meaning,” Paige said, not amused.

“She was driving a red Nissan Altima. I did a little research and determined it was a 2015 registered to Charity Johnson.”

“Okay,” Paige nodded. “I assume that was in Idaho.”

Peculiar Inquiry

“You assume correctly,” Lo agreed. “That year, that model, that make, has an eighteen gallon tank. And, researching further, I discovered it gets between twenty-seven to thirty-eight miles per gallon.”

“Which means, she didn’t have to gas up until she arrived here in town,” Paige realized.

“Bingo,” Lo pointed his index finger toward Paige. “So, I just drove around to all the gas stations in the area and asked to view their surveillance video. I knew what day she arrived based on the last transaction in Burley. It was only a couple weeks ago, so most of them still had the footage.”

“And you found her?” Paige was amazed all that work paid off.

“I did,” Lo pulled off to the side of the road. The cabin in questions was about a hundred yards ahead.

“How many hours have you spent on this?” Paige wondered. “That’s a lot of video.”

“I didn’t view the entire day,” Lo told her. “I figured it took her about five to six hours to drive from Idaho out here to Manti. She bought the gas in Burley that morning around ten. I got them to give me a copy of everything for the following week, but I started with that day. I watched everything after three that afternoon until I found her.”

“And you were able to identify her,” Paige was amazed by that. “Her new identity, I mean.”

“She bought gas at the Chevron just before five that evening,” Lo nodded. “And I scored big time. She used a new credit card under the name Felicia Stewart.”

“Why didn’t you bring me in to help?” Paige wondered.

“You were busy,” Lo shut off the vehicle and slid his seat back to get more comfortable.

“But...”

“Paige,” Lo interrupted. “Gage helped make the calls. We contacted all the hotels and rental agencies. I actually hit on this cabin in the first hour. It wasn’t a big deal. And Gage went back to scouring newspapers.”

“Right,” Paige turned to look out the window. “I forgot about that.”

“You didn’t run your list?”

“I cheated,” Paige admitted. “Carmen offered to run it for me. I got distracted going through the rest of that file.”

“Did you find anything helpful?” Lo wondered.

Peculiar Inquiry

“Maybe,” Paige shrugged. “I mean, everything is helpful, right?”

“That’s her,” Lo straightened.

“Where do you think she’s going?” Paige watched as the woman in question climbed behind the wheel of a red Nissan Altima.

“Only one way to find out,” Lo turned the key and started the engine.

“We have to be careful,” Paige warned. “There’s not a lot of traffic up here. If we get too close, she’ll know we’re following her.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Lo grumbled. “Because, you know, I’ve never tailed a suspect before.”

“Sorry,” Paige said defensively. “I was just thinking out loud.”

Charity Johnson, now Felicity Stewart, headed out of town toward Ephraim. Paige and Lovato followed her all the way to Pawn Pro on Main. They continued to watch as the woman headed through the front door.

“You up for a little role playing?” Lo asked.

“What did you have in mind?”

Lovato opened his change drawer and pulled out a ring. He slipped it on his left hand and smiled. “For the next ten minutes you’re Mrs. Paige Lovato and we’re going shopping, dear.”

Paige snorted. “You sound like an eighty-year-old woman.”

“At least I don’t look like one,” he opened the door and climbed out of the car to wait.

The two of them walked hand-in-hand into the pawn shop. They spotted their target immediately. She was negotiating with the man behind the counter, trying to get far more than he was willing to give on a diamond and ruby jewelry set.

“Lady,” the man barked. “I don’t even know if that’s real. You want a quick sale; you get what I offer, or you leave.”

“This thing is worth at least ten — fifteen — thousand,” she insisted. “I’m only asking seven. You’ll double your outlay. It’s a bargain, one you shouldn’t pass up.”

“I don’t know,” Lo moved forward and held out his badge. “I’d pass it up if I were you.”

The woman now calling herself Felicity turned to flee and collided with Paige. In seconds, she was cuffed and secured against the glass counter. “That’s stolen property, by the way. Oh, and it’s a bargain at ten. Felicity here just forgot to grab the provenance. Without it, ten might be

Peculiar Inquiry

about right. With it... the appraisal Trish Arrington had suggested an insurance value of a hundred and twenty.”

“Thousand?” the pawn shop owner gaped.

“Thousand,” Paige nodded. “Not that you’d get that. Like I said, it’s stolen property and I’m seizing it for evidence.”

“You’ve got nothing,” Felicity growled. “Some guy sold that to me. I had no idea it was stolen.”

“Great,” Lo pushed open the door. “Then the prints taken in Twin Falls, Idaho when Charity Johnson was arrested won’t match the ones I’m going to take just before I throw you in a cell. Good to know.”

Felicity’s attitude changed at that point and she cursed, insulted and threatened the two deputies all the way back to the station.

“Paige,” Gage jumped up from his chair the instant he saw her step through the door. “I..”

“I need just a minute, Gage,” Paige followed Lovato and their prisoner into the back. Moments later, she was back. “What did you find?”

“You found her,” Gage said in surprise.

“Lo found her,” Paige dropped into her chair. “With your help, I hear.”

“Right,” Gage settled back into his own chair. “I have something else. I think I found her real name. Or, at least, the one she was using before she went into the federal protection program.”

“What did you find?” Paige wondered.

Gage held out a newspaper article, the front page of The Denver Post. “One Scarlett Harris of Denver, Colorado was apprehended in connection with the burglary of several homes in Cherry Hills Village. Sources say she is cooperating with police in exchange for leniency. To date we have not discovered what information Ms. Harris might have that would warrant an exchange. We will bring you additional details as they become available.”

“When was that?” Paige jumped up and moved to stand next to Gage’s desk.

Peculiar Inquiry

“A little over two years ago,” he handed her the printout. “There’s more.” He pulled out a second report.

“She testified against the Denver mafia,” Paige skimmed the new report. “She was burglarizing a high-level mobster’s home by the name of Rizzo Carlino when she witnessed a homicide... holy cow. She witnessed the execution style murder of Adalmar Ritter, a dignitary visiting from Germany.”

“Why was a German dignitary visiting the home of a top-level mafia thug?” Lo wondered.

“Because he was selling a painting,” Gage provided. “A stolen painting believed to be destroyed in Germany during World War II. Some rare piece of art painted by a guy named Gustave Courbet. According to history, it was destroyed in a bombing at Dresden Castle. Turns out, that was a lie. It was hidden away by a Nazi soldier and passed down through his family. A great nephew, or grandnephew, I don’t know the proper term — Adalmar Ritter. Anyway Ritter smuggled it to America. He believed he was safe because he had diplomatic immunity. According to court records, an argument broke out between the two men and Carlino accused Ritter of a double-cross.

“This is the world according to Charity?” Lo surmised.

“Right,” Gage agreed. “The mob guy shot the German in the back of the head. The cops believed our suspect with a dozen names made off with the painting. Unfortunately, it has never been recovered. She was caught inside another home in the Cherry Hills Valley area that same night — burglarizing the home of a wealthy tech mogul. He apparently had better security than our mobster and she was arrested inside the home. She had several stolen items in her possession at the time.”

“And then she offered up eyewitness testimony of a murder and walked,” Lo mumbled. “Gotta love the system of justice we have here in America.”

“It works,” Gage protested. “Most of the time.”

“If the locals thought she stole the painting,” Paige considered. “Why did they call in the feds before they got their answers?”

“They didn’t,” Gage shook his head. “The feds swooped in, took custody of Charity — Scarlett Harris at the time — and didn’t share anything further with the Denver cops. I called, by the way. I spoke with a detective that worked the case. That’s all they know.”

“What happened with the killer?” Lo asked.

“He was convicted and will spend the rest of his life behind bars,” Gage answered.

“Well, at least that worked out. What are we going to do with her?” Lo asked Paige.

Peculiar Inquiry

“Leave her for now,” Paige shrugged. “We can hold her for twenty-four hours. She was trying to sell stolen property. And, we found Trish Arrington’s credit card and fake ID with all of Trish’s personal information listed. We’ll conduct an interview tomorrow.”

“An interview with whom?” Jericho asked stepping from his office.

“Lo and Paige arrested our suspect,” Gage advised. “She was trying to pawn property she stole from Trish Arrington, Kendall’s cousin from up in Idaho.”

“You’ve confirmed it’s the same property?” Jericho asked.

“I did,” Paige assured him. “I got a detailed description from Trish when I spoke to her earlier. It’s a valuable diamond and ruby set. I’m sure she’ll be happy to get it back. She said it belonged to her husband’s grandmother.”

“She also had fake ID,” Lo provided. “I booked it, but in addition to Trish Arrington, she had a three-pack under the names Janet Langford, Susan Williams and Amy Robins.”

“Woman with a dozen names,” Gage said again.

“I want to leave her in back to stew overnight,” Paige advised. “I’ll pick it up in the morning. It’s after five and I’m sure you don’t want to pay us all overtime for this.”

Jericho shook his head in resignation. He’d give Paige one night, but he didn’t think it was going to help. The prison would demand a phone call, and odds were good she’d call her FBI handler to get her out of this mess. Paige was right, they could deal with this cluster in the morning. “Go home. All of you.”

Paige smiled and watched Jericho head out the back door. “We won that round. Let’s go home. We’ve all been working way too many hours on this case. I for one plan to have a glass of wine and a long soak in a hot bubble bath for at least an hour.”

“Thanks for the invite,” Lo smirked. “But I’m afraid I have to decline. I like my nose and I don’t think that new husband of yours would approve.”

“It was a statement,” Paige told him. “Not an invite.”

They continued to laugh and joke all the way out the door and into the parking lot.

Supervisor Special Agent Todd Gray settled in at his favorite table, in his favorite restaurant. He had worked a longer day than usual and couldn’t wait to get home, kick his feet up, and relax.

Peculiar Inquiry

The waiter had just set a glass of expensive wine on his table when a beep sounded on his phone. He glanced at the display and frowned. Within minutes, he was out of his chair and headed back to his office. Dinner would have to wait a little longer.

Gray was sitting behind his desk in Quantico, studying the screen in disbelief. Carmen Fennelly tried to access the files on Scarlett Harris. Why? There was only one explanation — she was pulling data for Paige Carter. But, that file was classified. This time, Carmen had gone too far. She had to pay. General Porter wouldn't be able to save the reckless hacker this time. He straightened in his chair, pulled up his letterhead and began to type out a referral to the DOJ. Carmen wouldn't just lose her job over this; she was going to be charged criminally.

The Department of Justice was sensitive about sharing classified information these days. The whole Clinton debacle and the lawsuit filed by the soldier was still a little too raw. Anyone leaking information these days, was punished to the fullest extent of the law. Gray smiled, served her right. If Porter had left the arrogant hacker in the basement, she wouldn't be in this mess. He continued to smile as he typed out his complaint. After reading through the details one last time, he had to admit, it was perfect. Carmen Fennelly would spend at least a decade in a cell — where she belonged.

He was whistling when he closed his door, rode the elevator to the executive parking garage and pulled onto the highway. The mistakes he made in the Harris case would stay hidden and Little Miss Busybody would rot in a cell. A long, frustrating day was concluding on a high note.

Paige rose early, showered, dressed and even had a relaxing breakfast with Dax before she headed for the office. It was time to interrogate her prisoner. She had just settled behind her desk when the front door opened and SSA Gray with two additional agents walked through the door. They made their way to Margie's desk, made some demand that was too low for Paige to make out and motioned for the Sheriff's door.

Margie disappeared into Jericho's office and returned with the boss. After a quick glance in Paige's direction, Jericho motioned them inside and shut the door. *What was that all about?* But she knew. Carmen's search had triggered an alert and Gray was here to complain. Maybe she should call Nathan. Just as she was having that thought, her phone began to ring. She glanced down, read the display and grinned.

“Speak of the devil himself,” Paige greeted. “I was just about to call you.”

Peculiar Inquiry

“Todd Gray is attempting to cause trouble,” Nathan had his *don't mess with me* tone this morning.

“I figured as much,” Paige confided. “He just arrived and is meeting with Jericho as we speak. Anything I should know?”

“He must have received an alert yesterday,” Nathan advised. “When Carmen went searching for your missing woman. He fired off a referral to the DOJ insisting they prosecute Carmen immediately.”

“For what?” Paige demanded, furious now.

“He said she leaked confidential and classified information to a civilian, that would be you,” Nathan added.

“I have a higher security clearance than he does — that would be thanks to you,” Paige added.

“Apparently, he didn't know that,” Nathan smiled. “Carmen is clear, don't worry about your favorite hacker. I simply showed the AG a copy of her clearance and yours and he dropped the referral immediately.”

“Then why is he here?” Paige wondered.

“I doubt he knows,” Nathan admitted. “I just got out of a meeting with the prosecutor five minutes ago. He's there to try to cause problems for you.”

“It won't work,” Paige relaxed. “Jericho's been involved in the case from the beginning. He knows I brought in Carmen and he was fine with it.”

“Don't let Gray push you around,” Nathan warned. “He'll try. And don't give him any more information than you have to. I have a feeling that man is going to be transferred to Butte, Montana before this is over.”

“Why?” Paige was confused about that.

“Because he took over the Scarlett Harris case himself,” Nathan said in amazement. “He arranged for protection and apparently, he also used federal funds to bail her out of jail in Idaho. The Director isn't happy that once she was free, she disappeared. Gray was supposed to keep an eye on her and he let her burglarize Benton Arrington's home. Benton is a successful businessman in Idaho and that's bad enough — but, his parents are George and Florence Arrington.”

“Why do I know that name?” Paige wondered.

Peculiar Inquiry

“Because they are close friends with Senator Glasgow from the great state of Georgia,” Nathan reminded her.

“Who is a golfing buddy of the President,” Paige realized. “Not a good move by Gray.”

“He’s going to have consequences on this one,” Nathan assured her. “I already talked to Director Mason this morning. He’s not happy Gray circumvented the system and sent a referral to the DOJ without his approval. Seems every step Gray takes, it’s the wrong one.”

“I should feel sorry for him, but I don’t,” Paige admitted. “He’s been out to get Carmen since she went over his head and helped his team catch the bad guy.”

“He’s not only after Carmen,” Nathan warned. “He didn’t have anything good to say about you in that referral.”

“You read it?” Paige shouldn’t be surprised, but she was.

“I did,” Nathan sighed. “Watch your back, he’s out for blood.”

“Gotta go,” Paige said when Jericho’s door opened, and he motioned for her to join them. “I’m being summoned to the lion’s den.”

“Call me back when you can,” Nathan requested.

“Will do,” Paige disconnected and made her way to Jericho’s office. Once inside she casually sat in the visitors chair closest to the door. The room remained silent for several seconds.

“Paige,” Jericho began. “SSA Gray here has flown out personally from his office in Virginia to file a formal complaint against you.”

“For?” Paige settled back in her chair.

“Accessing classified information,” Gray provided. “Insubordination and jeopardizing national security.”

“Really?” Paige glanced at Jericho. “All that. It would seem I’ve gone rogue.”

“This isn’t funny,” Gray chastised. “The complaint will hold, especially after your co-conspirator ends up in prison.”

Paige nodded. “Yes, I heard you filed a complaint against Carmen. Good luck with that.”

“So,” Gray smiled. “Nathan Porter has been notified. He won’t be able to save her this time. He won’t be able to save you, Paige. For the good of this department and the good of this country, resign now and avoid a public spectacle.”

Peculiar Inquiry

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Paige said softly. “I’m afraid I can’t comply with your request.”

“You’re going to regret this,” Gray insisted. “We’re dealing with highly confidential information here. You exploited your friendship with a top analyst in the Bureau to access restricted information for personal use. That’s a felony.”

“You said that already,” Paige shrugged. “I’m guessing you told Sheriff Walters the same thing in that closed door meeting you had prior to my arrival. So, why am I here?”

“I need to know what specific information Fennelly accessed and what she shared with you,” Gray glared at her.

Paige smiled. “I’m sorry, that information is classified. I’m unable to share anything with you due to the level of clearance you currently hold.”

“You are only making this more difficult for yourself,” Gray warned. “We both know you lost your clearance the instant you resigned from the FBI. There is nothing you know that is above my level.”

“I did lose my clearance,” Paige agreed. “But, unfortunately, you are wrong about the rest. If you have further questions, I suggest you take them to General Nathan Porter, chairman of the committee where Carmen Fennelly is currently assigned. He’ll extract the details your clearance allows and let you know what he believes you need to know.”

“Deputy Carter,” Gray seethed. “You are a local deputy in small-town Utah, working for a hillbilly sheriff — there is nothing you know that is beyond my clearance. Tell me what Carmen shared with you. It’s your only chance to come clean. Continue with these stall tactics and I will have your badge.”

“I believe that is the decision of the hillbilly sheriff,” Jericho objected. “And I have no intention of following your recommendation.”

“Last chance,” Gray focused on Paige and ignored Jericho.

“I can give you Nathan’s number if you don’t have it,” Paige stood. “If that’s all?” She addressed the question to Jericho.

Jericho also stood. “Gentlemen, I believe this meeting is over.”

“Mark my words,” Gray stood. “You will regret this.”

“I doubt that,” Paige exited the office and settled in behind her desk. She knew Jericho would need answers, but she wanted to keep up appearances. Her dismissal of Gray was going to infuriate him.

Peculiar Inquiry

Once the group was gone, Jericho settled into one of Paige's chairs. "Explain."

"My clearance is higher than his," Paige began. "He would know that if he bothered to look. The accusation is ridiculous and, he doesn't know it yet, but he's in hot water with the DOJ and Director Mason over this. He went over Mason's head. Gray doesn't have the authority to file charges with the DOJ without running it by Mason first. Nathan thinks the arrogant jerk is headed for Butte, Montana. I think he's right. And, I'm filing my own complaint against him. He has no right disrespecting you over what I did."

"I'll handle the complaint," Jericho demanded. "You stay out of this. I was well aware of your actions and I approved them. If there's blowback, I'll take the hit."

"Nope," Paige shrugged. "There won't be any blowback. But, he attacked me, he attacked you, he attacked our profession and he attacked Carmen. In his way, he also attacked Nathan. It's personal. You can file a complaint, but I'm adding my own to the mix. Neither one is necessary, he's already in trouble. Let me explain why." She proceeded to explain what Nathan had told her about the case, losing his subject and the connection to the president.

"You're right," Jericho smiled. "My complaint is redundant. So, what are we going to do with Ms. Scarlett Harris?"

"I can't believe he didn't ask about her," Paige shook her head. "I can't believe he didn't demand her immediate release into his custody."

"I don't think he realized we have her," Jericho provided. "She wasn't mentioned at all today. As far as he knows, she's still missing."

"I can talk to her," Paige offered. "With Gage, but I don't think she'll talk. She's been in the system too many times. She knows the drill and she'll lawyer up immediately."

"Or call Gray back to bail her out," Jericho agreed. "I'll call James and see how he wants it handled. He needs a heads up that the feds are in town and itching for a fight."

"Good call," Paige looked up when Margie approached.

"I hate to interrupt," she looked at Paige then Jericho. "But Steve Marshall is on the line, someone spray painted the side of his barn again. Is Paige available to handle it or should I call Lovato in?"

"I think we're done here," Paige looked at Jericho.

"We're done," he stood. "I'll turn this over to James and we can get back to business as usual."

"Hallelujah!" Paige called just before she disappeared out the door.