

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Emergency Assist
Season 5, Episode 2

by:

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“Right,” Dax reached over and took Paige’s hand.

Paige smiled in support, but she wasn’t feeling all that happy at the moment. Dax was about to head out of town. He was getting his marching orders from Retired General Nathan Porter. Worse, her husband was stressed about this particular mission and he couldn’t share the details. She knew she signed up for this, but she didn’t have to like it.

“I’ll contact Zee,” Dax pressed a kiss to Paige’s knuckles. “It’s a good plan but we’ll refine it once we get there. Will do. See you soon.”

“Guess the op is a go,” Paige watched Dax carefully.

Dax tossed his phone onto the coffee table and sighed. “It’s a go.”

“When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow. Early,” Dax shifted to study Paige. “Sorry I ruined your night off.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Paige shrugged. “You okay?”

“Me?” Dax frowned. “I’m heading to Washington to sit in a secure room with air conditioning and as much coffee as I can stomach. It’s the men I’m worried about.”

“And the Training Center,” Paige added. “I know you and the guys were working hard to develop a new course. You shouldn’t worry about that. Hawk and Vato will come through on the final planning and Wooly will handle any last-minute purchases from home. The course will be amazing.”

“Yeah,” Dax sighed and reached for his phone. “I have to call Zee, give him a heads up. He needs to be ready to head out at zero-dark-thirty tomorrow morning.”

“Call him,” Paige motioned to the phone. “Then I’m going to pamper you for an hour or so before you rush off to double check your luggage and pace the floor; worrying about what you forgot, and if Hawk and Vato will remember to include that special something only the amazing Dax Hamilton would think to add to the course plan.”

“You know me well,” Dax grinned. “Now, tell me about that pampering.”

Paige laughed when he tackled her. “Call Zeus,” she reminded him.

Dax picked up his phone and pressed a button. “It’s a go. Tomorrow, zero-six-hundred.” He disconnected the call, threw Paige over his shoulder and headed for the stairs.

“Nice briefing commander,” Paige twisted but couldn’t break free.

Dax tossed Paige onto the bed, then just stood there watching her.

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“What?” she was surprised at the sudden change in mood.

“Sometimes,” Dax settled onto the bed next to her. “I’m going along, living my life and everything is just moving forward. Then, suddenly, it hits me... how did I get so lucky? I hope you know you are the best part of my life. I’m not sure I deserve you, but I’m thankful I have you.”

Paige leaned in and gave her macho man a quick kiss. “You’re just feeling a little lost tonight. You’re headed back to Washington to oversee an important — and if I’m reading you right — dangerous mission. But, instead of being right in the thick of it, you’ll be safe and comfortable lounging in a cushy chair with our favorite general. He struggled, too. For a long time, he didn’t know how to deal with overseeing the danger instead of leading the boys into battle. Talk to Nathan, he can help. And, I wish I could tell you not to worry, that your men will be fine. I know I can’t predict that, so I’ll just say they are trained for this and if anyone can get through it — our Rangers can.”

“See,” Dax stretched out on the bed next to Paige. “I don’t deserve you, but I’m lucky to have you.” He reached out and ran a finger across her cheek. “I’m not sure there’s anyone else in the universe that could understand me as well as you do.”

“And...” she leaned back when he tried to roll them over. “Hawk knows the Center as well as you do. I’m not saying he doesn’t need you. I’m saying the two of you have spent hours discussing the new training course. He knows what you want, and he also knows you better than anyone in the universe — next to me. He’ll be fine, the course will be a hit, and you’ll be back before you know it.”

“I love you,” Dax shifted and pinned her beneath him. “And, I’m going to miss you.” He pressed a gentle kiss to the side of her neck.

“I won’t give you the chance,” Paige grinned. “I’m going to call you a million times and tell you all about the boring parking problem I had to deal with or the teenage burglar breaking into vehicles for a few coins.”

“Promise?”

“I swear I will give you all the boring details,” she shifted again and began to pamper.

The following morning Paige watched Dax slowly walk to his vehicle and drive away. He reminded her of a mighty warrior marching into battle. A feeling of apprehension and loneliness fell over her. She knew he had to do this, she supported him completely, but she was going to

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miss him terribly. She had just settled back into the kitchen for her second cup of coffee when her cell phone began to ring. *Jericho*. “Hey boss,” she said in greeting.

“I know it’s early, but I’m calling you in. We’ve got an emergency and I need you assisting me on this one.”

“Just tell me when and where,” Paige darted up the stairs. “I’m up, Dax just headed out of town. I can be out the door in five, I just need to know where I’m going.”

“Meet me at the mouth of Ephraim Canyon. We have a downed helicopter, went down last night. Once we get the details, we’ll call in Search & Rescue and I’ll get the rest of the guys to join us.”

“Why the delay?” Paige balanced the phone on her shoulder while she pulled on her boots.

“The initial call went to Emery County. They started the search last night. When they didn’t find the bird, they notified the sheriff. Trent’s crew resumed the operation this morning, but Trent realized the crash site could be in our grids; so, he asked me to head up and assist.”

“Trent who?”

“Sheriff Trent Peters,” *Jericho* advised. “The Emery County Sheriff. He’s out of town at the moment, but he checks in with his crew on a regular basis. Once he was apprised of the situation, he contacted me. Are you on your way?”

“I should be there in ten,” Paige affirmed.

Paige pulled in behind *Jericho*, then followed him up the main road that led to the top of Ephraim Canyon. Once they hit the top, they crossed over Skyline Drive and continued down the other side toward Joe’s Reservoir.

Emery County’s command post was parked in the picnic area near the lake. Paige and *Jericho* stepped inside and approached the man in charge. It was immediately obvious they weren’t welcome.

“Trent called me this morning,” *Jericho* approached the lieutenant. “Sheriff Walters from Sanpete County.”

“I know who you are,” Lt. Wilson didn’t even glance up. “If you could wait outside, I’ll be with you when I have a break. We’re a little busy at the moment.”

Jericho narrowed his eyes at the Incident Commander. “Is there someone that can give us a quick briefing? Once we know the basics, we can take it from there.”

Now he did glance up. “What do you mean by that?”

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“We’re operating on the border,” Jericho shrugged. “There’s no way to know if he went down in your county or mine. You continue the search in your area, we’ll deal with ours.”

“Again,” Wilson focused on the small desk in front of him, and the paperwork. “If you’ll wait outside, one of us will assist you as soon as we can.”

“Look,” Paige began but stopped when Jericho gave her a warning look.

“We’ll be outside,” Jericho motioned to the door and waited for Paige to exit. Jericho moved to his truck and dropped the tailgate.

“How long are we going to let that moron jerk us around?” Paige jumped up next to him.

“Not long,” he pulled out his phone and dialed the office. “Margie, get ahold of Clayton and Havilland. I need one of them to shuttle the command post up Ephraim Canyon and find somewhere to set up close to Joe’s Reservoir but make sure it’s on the Sanpete County side. Have the other one lead the way so he can scout the area and find a level spot to stage. I want a location where we can stage the motorhome overnight if we need to.”

“I take it that means we’re not waiting,” Paige grinned.

“We’re not waiting,” Jericho considered his options.

It was nearly an hour later when Havilland called Jericho over the radio.

“Go ahead Duncan,” Jericho answered.

“Command Post has arrived,” Havi advised. “It’s located in a large area slightly off the roadway below Forest Road 2348.”

“Copy,” Jericho answered. “We’ll head that way.”

“Incoming,” Paige whispered and motioned to Lt. Wilson who was now headed toward them.

“If you’re interested in helping,” Lt. Wilson said in greeting. “You can head up this road,” he pointed to a thin line on the map he held. “Search from this point all the way to the next ridgeline.”

“Actually,” Jericho glanced at the map then focused on Wilson. “I just need some basic information.” He glanced to the side and spotted a plume of dust in the distance. It was obviously coming from the same roadway the lieutenant had just indicated. He was trying to send them on a wild goose chase and have them cover an area that had already been cleared. He shifted and refocused on Wilson. “That roadway is in your grid. I’ll take my people and handle the area west of here. We just need the basics before we get started.”

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Wilson glared at Jericho for several seconds before he answered. “We received a call of a missing child near the campground. It was coming up on dusk, so we contacted Skybirds out of Provo to see if one of their helicopters was available for a contract flight. They had one of the TH55’s ready to go for a private rental but the company cancelled. They were about to close it down for the night when we called. Since the chopper was already cleared for a trip, they agreed to fly the area and see if they could locate the child.”

“Alright,” Jericho jotted down some notes. “What time was that?”

“Like I said, shortly before twilight, call came in around nineteen-forty hours. Chopper went out, set down over there,” he pointed to an open parking lot. “He immediately hooked up with mom and dad who advised they had just located the missing child. The pilot cancelled and said he was heading back to Provo.”

“And that’s the last you heard from him?” Paige asked.

“No,” Wilson focused on Jericho. “A short time later, he put in a distress call. Said he was losing power and would try to find a safe place to land. That’s the last we heard from him.”

“Do you have his last known coordinates?” Paige wondered.

“Joe’s Reservoir,” Wilson turned to look at Paige. “I thought that would be obvious.”

“Right,” Paige glanced at Jericho. “I’m going to head out, hook up with the guys. I have something I want to check before we brief.”

Jericho nodded and silently watched as Paige made her way across the parking lot. Wilson frowned. “What is she doing?”

“Investigating,” Jericho straightened. “Thanks for the information. If we find anything, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“That’s it?” Wilson scowled.

“Like I said, I don’t want to interfere with your operation. I’m just here to assist. We’ll cover our grid, you cover yours.” Jericho continued toward his vehicle.

Wilson turned and marched back inside his command center determined to resolve this before Sanpete County could interfere and take all the credit.

Jericho reached the command post and looked around. The boys had set things up nicely and the rig looked level enough. He glanced back and frowned when he couldn’t see Paige headed their way. He was still wondering what kind of trouble she was rustling up when he stepped inside and spotted Havilland and Clayton. “Looks good. Any word from Paige?”

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“I thought she was with you,” Gage slid into the passenger chair and glanced out the large front windshield. “Looks like her headed this way.”

Jericho spotted the vehicle and settled onto the couch to wait.

Margie emerged from the back office area. “Susie’s handling the office. I thought you might need my help up here.”

They all focused on Paige when she stepped through the door.

“Where’s the roses? The red carpet? The champagne?” She continued into the cramped motorhome and settled onto the couch.

“What did you find?” Jericho demanded.

“First, I spoke with the parents of the missing kid,” Paige shifted and pulled out her notes. “Their daughter was six. She loves animals and has a habit of chasing them into thick brush or dense forest. They didn’t call the authorities right away because they can usually locate her themselves. Cute kid and I think she calls the shots in that family a little more than she should. She had me for about five seconds before I realized the shy smile and the innocent eyes was all an act.”

“We know that much,” Jericho pushed.

“We do,” Paige nodded. “The Jackson’s were just settling in for the night when Tasha disappeared. Trinity, that’s mom, she was inside their trailer cleaning up and pulling out the beds while it was still light. Gabe was gathering wood so the kids could roast marshmallows and settle down a bit after an adventurous day. Gabe and his son, Anson returned and built the fire. Trinity joined them and realized Tasha was missing again. They all began to search. They couldn’t say how long, but it was a while. They finally decided to call the police.”

“And by that time, it was almost dark,” Jericho nodded.

“Right, it’s what made them start to panic,” Paige agreed. “They said it took a while for the chopper to arrive. They continued to search while they waited. Anson, he’s around ten, spotted the bird in the distance and ran to tell his parents. Gabe thought he heard something and was making his way into a stand of trees to investigate. He returned with his daughter just in time to see Skybirds land in the parking lot. They took Tasha with them to talk to the pilot, wanting him to see their daughter was fine and wanting her to apologize for wasting his time. Like I said, she’s a charmer. The mom was a little frustrated when her daughter batted her eyes, gave him a flirtation grin, and shyly said she was sorry. Mark Lopez, that’s the name of the pilot, was smitten.”

“Where did you get the name?” Havi wondered.

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“Little Tasha’s father is some kind of business wizard who never forgets a name,” Paige shrugged. “He remembered it even though he only heard it once when Lopez introduced himself.”

“How does all of that help?” Gage wondered.

“It helps us formulate a timeline,” Paige stood and moved to a large whiteboard. “I called Skybirds and spoke with a supervisor once I finished with the Jacksons. They said the pilot checked out at Joe’s at...” she paused when the door flew open and Sgt. Alva climbed inside.

“You made good time,” Jericho observed.

“No traffic,” Alva closed the door and moved to lean against the counter. “Tell me what I need to know.”

“Paige was just filling us in,” Jericho motioned for her to continue.

“Just you or will the rest of the team be joining us?” Paige wondered.

“Just me for now,” Alva advised. “I got the basics from Susie. From what little information I’ve gathered, I assume this is a search and recovery.”

“Most likely,” Jericho agreed. “We’re getting a late start. The chopper went down last night. It could be a rescue, but it’s more likely a recovery.”

Alva nodded. “Right. So, we can discuss the delay later in private. Right now, what I need from you to get my people started — is the last known.”

Paige glanced out the window and spotted several other Search & Rescue members gathered in the staging area. They were loading up packs with snacks, drinks, and medical supplies. “I was just about to get to that.” She glanced back at Jericho. “Once I finished speaking with the Jacksons and they confirmed the chopper left about fifteen minutes after arriving, I contacted air traffic control and obtained their last known trace based on radar.” She punched in the numbers and the map shifted. “That is the location the helicopter vanished from their screen.”

“Alright,” Alva moved forward. “Why is Emery County starting from Joe’s?”

“It’s that obvious?” Paige asked sarcastically.

Alva swung around to study her in confusion.

“Ignore Paige,” Jericho sighed. “We don’t know. I assume it’s because that’s the location they were last seen by this Jackson family.”

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That didn't make sense to Alva but he brushed it aside. "The TH55 is an older bird. He would have been using VFR," Alva said absently as he studied the map before him.

"I agree," Jericho stood. "If I had to guess, I'd say he was using this road to guide him down the canyon, Jericho pointed to the main dirt road that led back to Ephraim. "Probably using dead reckoning to determine exactly where he was at and how much further he had to go."

"Could you repeat that in English? What is VFR and dead reckoning?" Gage grumbled. "From now on, I think I'll just throw out random football terms in my briefings and see how you guys like it."

Paige laughed and even Jericho grinned. "VFR is Visual Flight Rules. He didn't have a fancy dash display to read things for him... digitally. He used line of sight to guide the way."

"Alright," Gage nodded. "So the main road makes sense. What was that other thing?"

"Dead reckoning is when a pilot navigates using familiar terrain or landmarks," Paige provided. "What? We worked with a lot of pilots when I was with the FBI."

"A lot of the pilots use Joe's as a landmark because it's a large body of water and easily identifiable. With some of the smaller lakes and ponds they use the body of water along with something else to determine where they are. For instance, they can tell they're at Pete's Hole because of the bridge."

"Basically, the same as we do in our vehicles," Havi nodded. "How does that help us?"

"I want to start at that last known Paige got from the tower," Alva decided. "Then, we fan out and cover this entire ridge line."

"Why that ridge?" Havi wondered.

"I'm not a betting man," Alva turned. "But I'd bet the farm that helicopter is either here," he pointed to a ridge that was covered in dense trees and brush. "Or, this one."

"Or somewhere between the two," Jericho sighed. "That's a large area. We can't cover both today. You sure about that one?"

"No," Alva focused sober eyes on Jericho. "But we start at the last known and fan out from there. That means this ridge is the most logical choice. If we strike out tonight, we start again first thing and look until we find him."

"I agree," Jericho focused on the map. It was a good plan. One that was going to be slow going and require a methodical and systematic approach. "I want Carter, Clayton, and Havilland to team up with SAR and work the grid. I'm also calling in Bridges and Reed. I'll send them your way once they arrive."

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“What about the regular calls?” Margie wondered. “I could take phone reports from here.”

“No,” Jericho disagreed. “I need you working on the maps, keep me updated on our progress. Susie can handle the phone reports and Lovato can handle everything else. If I had a phone, I could actually contact my people and give them direction.”

“Any word on the Sat phone?” Paige wondered. The mayor was resisting. Sure, having a satellite phone available would be expensive but with the lack of service up here in the canyon, it was essential. Maybe after this situation was over, he’d finally understand the need.

“No,” Jericho moved toward the door. “Margie, I need to drive up the canyon and find service to make a few calls. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“He’s pissed,” Gage observed.

“Yeah, can’t blame him,” Paige sighed. “Grab some snacks, I think we have a long, tiring day ahead of us.” She reached into the freezer and pulled out an arm full of frozen water bottles, then passed them around to her colleagues. “Let’s go for a hike.”

By two o’clock that afternoon, the entire group was exhausted, dirty and starving. Alan moved up next to Paige and held out a granola bar.

Paige shook her head. “I’m pretty sure if I see another one of those in the next seventy-two hours, I just might jump over that cliff back there.”

“Will you take your radio,” Alan wondered. “That way, if you spot the plane on the way down you can radio up and relay the location.”

“I hate you,” Paige smiled. “I’m such a dusty mess you could probably plant radishes in the creases of my jeans and they’d flourish.”

“I live for this stuff,” Alan shrugged. “I mean, all of us... Search & Rescue, we all spend hours out here hiking, snowshoeing, climbing. We can’t get enough, it’s why we’re so good.”

“Maybe,” Paige considered. “But I think I still hate you.” Just then her phone made half a dozen beeping noises. “Hold up. I think my phone just found a magic tower and I have service.” She scrolled through the notifications and frowned. Dax had called three times. “Gage!” she called, hoping her friend would hear the request.

Gage eyed the bark on a nearby tree and, for the hundredth time, wished he had thought to pack a sandwich before heading off in to the wilderness. When someone elbowed him, he thought he’s just gotten off track due to delirium brought on by starvation.

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“Gage,” Amy called. “Paige is calling for you.”

Gage frowned and turned around. He spotted Paige and his frown deepened. She was pointing to her phone, then she held up one hand and started to swing it back and forth.

“I think she’s telling you she’s going to make a call and we should keep going,” Amy provided.

Gage nodded at Paige then turned to face the young woman that was outpacing them all. “Since when do you speak Paige code? I’m pretty sure whatever she’s doing, it’s some highly classified top secret federal code that none of us are supposed to decipher.”

Amy shrugged then turned and made her way back to Alan. “Hey, it looks like we have service up here. We should probably take a break and let anyone make a call that needs to. It could be hours before we get another chance.”

“I agree,” Alan whistled and called his team to gather around.

“Is something wrong?” Paige asked when Dax answered her call.

“Not on my end,” Dax stood and moved to the other side of the room. “We’re in the dreaded waiting stage. The boys should touch down in an hour or so.”

“Oh,” Paige hesitated. “Then why the three calls? Sorry I missed you by the way. It’s been an interesting day.”

“How so?” Dax glanced at Nathan then turned away hoping for privacy.

“Dax?” Paige pressed.

“I’m alright,” he assured her. “I just... well, the waiting, the anticipation, the not knowing, it’s driving me crazy and I just needed to talk to you for a minute. I won’t keep you. I can tell you’re busy.”

“Not busy exactly,” Paige proceeded to tell him about the missing helicopter, the jurisdiction issues, and the uncooperative lieutenant. “I wanted to call sooner, but we just don’t have service up here. Jericho has complained to the mayor, tried to explain why it’s so essential to get us a satellite phone, but he’s not budging. Anyway, it wouldn’t help on this operation anyway. Did you talk to Nathan?”

“About?”

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“You already know,” Paige shook her head in frustration. “If you don’t take this opportunity... over the next hour while your men are safe, secure and enroute, I’m going to call General Porter myself.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Dax insisted. “I’ll get through this and I’ll be home before you even realize I was gone.”

“Talk to Nathan,” Paige said again. “Now, I have to go. We have at least another hour in this grid, then we need to clear one more, maybe two, before we call it due to darkness and resume in the morning.”

“Sounds like a late night,” Dax softened. “Did you eat anything?”

“A granola bar... yum,” she couldn’t even fake enthusiasm for the dry, slightly stale snack.

Dax laughed but sobered when he glanced at Nathan. “I have to go. Promise me you will be safe and get something to eat.”

“I love you,” she whispered. “Talk to Nathan.” She disconnected, knowing he was too stubborn to do what she asked.

“Paige from Command,” her radio crackled.

“Go ahead,” Paige responded.

“Have you finished up that last grid?” Jericho asked.

“About five minutes ago,” Paige advised. “We’re having a debate on where to go next.”

“Return to base,” Jericho ordered. “Navigate northeast about a mile. You should connect with an old logging road. I’m sending a vehicle up to get you.”

“What kind of vehicle is large enough to transport the entire team and still small enough to traverse that logging road?”

“I’ll worry about that, you just get the team to the road. I’ll see you within the hour,” Jericho answered cryptically.

“What did that mean?” Gage wondered, staring at his own walkie.

“No idea,” Paige shrugged. “Let’s go break the news to the superheroes. I can’t believe they’re all still so upbeat and happy.”

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“If I don’t get something to eat soon,” Gage turned and started toward the group. “I think I might have to start eating dandelions.”

“I hear that makes a pretty good tea,” Paige smiled and worked to keep pace with her partner. It was nice to know her fellow cop was just as miserable as she was. Maybe there was something to that whole misery loves company thing.

Twenty-five minutes later, the entire group ascended a hill and emerged on the overgrown logging road. Gage broke out in a huge smile. Paige frowned. The rest of the group followed the deputies to the waiting vehicles.

“What are you two doing here?” Paige demanded.

“Saving you from granola bar hell,” Hawk laughed. “Jump in. Margie’s arranging food back at the base.”

Paige climbed into the passenger seat and waited. There had to be a reason Hawk and Wooly brought their transport jeeps up to help and she was pretty sure that reason had a name — Dax Hamilton. “He’s in Washington, does he have to control the entire world?”

Hawk sobered. “You know he does.”

“What’s wrong?”

Hawk glanced to the back and shook his head. “Later.”

Paige was about to protest but stopped when she saw the look on Hawk’s face. “Fine, why is Wooly here? I thought he was still in Nephi with his family.”

“He headed back this morning,” Hawk shrugged. “With Dax and Zee gone, I needed the help.”

“Then why pull away to help us?”

“Because Dax asked me to.”

Paige was grateful for the food. She was grateful for the short break before they resumed the search. She was even grateful for the company. Plus, as an added surprise, Hawk passed Jericho one of the training center’s emergency Sat phones and insisted the sheriff keep it until they found their man. But, the biggest shock came when Hawk and Wooly insisted on joining the team as they headed back into the wilderness to resume the search for a stranger. Something was up and the possibilities were starting to terrify her.

Once they were all set up in the same location where they left off, Paige turned to Hawk and demanded an explanation. When he didn’t answer immediately, it almost pushed her over the edge. “He’s in some kind of danger, isn’t he?”

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“No,” Wooly and Hawk answered together.

“There’s something you want to tell me, but you’re hesitating. Just explain it. I can search and listen at the same time,” Paige insisted.

“He sent us here,” Hawk began. “Because it was something he could control. He could utilize us to make sure you’re safe and that your fed. He’s not himself. This mission, Porter never should have called him in.”

“Why?” Paige lifted a set of binoculars and studied a group of trees. She thought she’d seen something flashing a second ago.

“Beer can,” Wooly provided lowering his own binoculars. “Four o’clock, someone hung it in the tree and there’s a slight breeze. When the wind hits it just right, it sways.”

“I see it,” Paige lowered her own binoculars. “And if the sun hits just right, it creates a flash. I was hoping it might be the metal siding from the helicopter.”

“I can’t tell you where they are going,” Hawk picked the conversation back up. “I doubt I’m supposed to know.”

“But he told you?” Paige asked in surprise.

“Not exactly,” Hawk answered cryptically. “I asked him why this mission was getting to him. We’ve planned and executed a hundred just like it. Why this one? What had him so conflicted and... I don’t know, spooked.”

“His answer was the Shark,” Wooly didn’t look at Paige, instead he continued to survey the wilderness before them.

“What is the shark?” Paige wondered.

“Who?” Hawk corrected. “Scott Elliott.”

“Who is Scott Elliott?”

“Elliott was a difficult soldier,” Hawk began. “He had an attitude problem, resisted authority at every turn, and basically got moved around when things got hot.”

“Why?” Paige wondered. “The military is usually pretty good at dealing with problems.”

“Because he was good,” Wooly provided. “The brass was in denial, minimized the problem, sometimes even looked the other way, which only made the situation worse.”

“Again,” Paige was trying to focus her attention on the search, but what these guys were saying didn’t make sense. “Why?”

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“Because he was good,” Hawk repeated. “Those in charge thought the trade-off was worth it.”

“You didn’t like him,” Paige observed.

“I hated his arrogant, selfish guts,” Hawk turned toward her. “Nothing will ever change that, and I’ll never apologize for it.”

“What does this Elliott guy have to do with Dax or the stress he’s been under for the past week?” Paige wondered.

“Elliott did something on a mission,” Wooly provided. “Something serious enough the entire squad refused to work with him.”

“I don’t think the military reacts well to mutiny,” Paige answered.

“These were Rangers,” Wooly shook his head. “We have a little more leverage than the average soldier.”

“How did that happen?” Paige asked in surprise. “How did you have a Ranger that was also insubordinate?”

“He was good,” Wooly shrugged.

“Nobody’s that good,” Paige objected. Her dad was a Ranger, Nathan was a Ranger, she knew the code.

“The Major approached Dax and asked him to take Elliott onto our team and see what he could do. They didn’t want to lose such a valuable asset, but they were fed up with his antics.”

“Something bad happened,” Paige realized.

“You could say that,” Hawk grumbled.

“Tell me,” Paige insisted.

“We were in the final planning stages of another mission,” Hawk continued. “Dax was worried about the last-minute change, because this one was risky. It was a dangerous and volatile area. Ops in this particular zone frequently turned unexpectedly. We suspected a mole, someone passing intel to the enemy but we couldn’t prove it. So, Dax worried about the change, but at the same time he was grateful because we needed another man. Dax decided to plug him in on the backend, the periphery, where we needed more manpower. Elliott challenged the plan, insisted his amazing talents would be wasted in such an insignificant position and demanded Dax switch his assignment. Dax refused. Elliott was angry, but he dropped it. We all thought the conflict had been resolved.”

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“Until we were setting up,” Wooly picked up the story. “We were out there, all of us hanging out, hoping we didn’t end up dead. He walked right past his assigned position cocky as ever and settled into a spot closer to the frontline — the assignment he argued for and was denied.”

“What did you guys do?”

“There wasn’t much we could do,” Hawk told her. “We needed a man at the back and now we didn’t have one. Plus, Elliott was in a dangerous position. It was more likely he’d shoot one of us than the enemy.”

“Why didn’t he know that?”

“Because he wouldn’t listen,” Hawk provided. “Because he was arrogant and selfish. Because everyone he’d worked for in the past let him get away with disobeying orders and bullying his way through. Because throughout his entire career, when he pulled that crap, the team would adjust around him. We’re pretty good at improvising and Elliott had come to expect that response from everyone around him.”

“Not Dax,” Paige realized.

“Dax ordered him into position,” Wooly told her. He could see, even now, the events that unfolded were upsetting Hawk. No wonder Dax was on edge.

“He ignored it,” Hawk advised. “He challenged it, challenged Dax and his authority. I offered to knock him out cold, but Dax wouldn’t let me. Elliot was given one last chance to do the right thing. He made the wrong decision and it not only cost him his life, it cost another good man his legs.”

“What?” Paige stopped, realized where she was and that she was supposed to be searching, after a quick glance around, she rushed forward a few steps and reconnected with the line. “What happened?”

“Most of it’s classified,” Hawk shrugged. “The long and short of it? We were attacked. Our intel was sketchy, but we knew a small group of militants were operating in the area. We thought we could handle it. Get in, get out and nobody would even realize we were there. We were wrong. Instead of a small contingent, we were fighting off an army of nearly a hundred.”

“Elliott was separated from the rest of the team,” Wooly added.

“Which was the reason Dax and I had considered that location and rejected it,” Hawk growled. “We saw the danger, almost immediately. As much as you hope you can have a smooth and easy execution of the plan, you always have to expect the worst.”

“Elliott placed himself in danger and he paid a high price for that mistake,” Wooly sobered.

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“Unfortunately,” Hawk added. “So did Zinc.”

“That was the man who lost his legs?” Paige wondered.

Hawk nodded, but the two men remained silent, clearly lost in memories. “Sam Kazenski was a corporal on the team,” Hawk finally told her. “He’s a good man and was a good Ranger. Unlike Elliott, Zinc was a team player.”

“What happened?” Paige asked softly.

“We had an asset in the area,” Hawk began. “I can’t get into it further than that. I’ll just say she was valuable and irreplaceable.”

“She was the mission?” Paige realized. “An extraction, rescue, whatever?”

“Yeah,” Wooly agreed. “We got word she was being held in some caves up in the mountains. We had one shot so even though we knew the mission could be compromised, we had to go in and try.”

“And the last thing you needed was a team member playing cowboy.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Wooly disagreed. “Like we said, he was good. It’s the reason he got away with so much for so long.”

“Okay,” Paige relented. “Then insubordinate.”

“Yes,” Hawk agreed. “We...”

“Hold that thought,” Paige interrupted. She left the line and moved to stand next to a shallow gully off to the right of the ridgeline. She stood there for several seconds, surveying every inch of the thick foliage.

“Did you see something?” Wooly asked.

Paige rubbed her hands over her face in frustration. “I thought so, but no. This is worse than finding a needle in a haystack. We’re never going to find him.”

“Of course, we will,” Hawk put a supportive hand on her shoulder. “It’s just going to take time.”

“It’s nearly dark,” Paige glanced around. “Looks like tomorrow is another day of hiking. And, the chance of finding Mark Lopez alive was already slim to none. After another night alone, slim just left the building.”

“You can only do what you can do,” Hawk gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Now who’s trying to control the world?”

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“Not control it,” Paige sighed, “save it.”

“I think that might be worse,” Wooly decided. The group made their way back to the search line and continued walking.

“Finish the story,” Paige finally requested.

“There’s not a lot to tell,” Hawk shrugged. “We headed in to rescue the maiden and almost immediately we were ambushed. We’ll never know if things would have turned out differently if Elliott had taken up position where he was supposed to. He didn’t and before we knew it, there were too many militants to hold back.”

“Elliott was wounded within minutes,” Wooly picked up the story. “He was cut off from the rest of us and we couldn’t get to him.”

“Zinc decided to sneak around from the back and try to drag Elliott back to us where Doc could work his magic.”

“No man left behind?”

“Yeah,” Hawk nodded. “Plus, he was still alive. We had to do something. It was a good plan. Zinc headed off and the rest of us tried to give him cover. He was nearly to Elliott when the world exploded. An IED had been planted out of sight.”

“How did Zinc survive that? He had to be on top of it.” Paige asked, horrified.

“He wasn’t the one that set it off,” Wooly stared straight ahead, seeing the mountain, the battle, the carnage as clear as it had been that night.

“Elliott knew he was in serious danger,” Hawk told her. “He spotted Zinc and started to crawl toward him. He triggered the explosion — was basically on top of it when it exploded. Zinc was thrown backwards.”

“He landed a few yards away from where we set up to provide cover,” Wooly added. “Doc went to work saving him. In the chaos, it was easy enough to sneak in and retrieve the target.”

“You couldn’t retrieve Elliott’s body?”

“There wasn’t enough left to retrieve,” Hawk whispered. “We checked. What didn’t get obliterated when the device detonated was catapulted over the cliff. We couldn’t get to it and we were still taking fire.”

“How did you escape?”

“Doc called for a medical evac,” Hawk turned to face her. “Dax called in reinforcements. We hunkered down until the cavalry arrived.”

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“And Dax has never gotten over it,” Paige realized. “Leaving his man behind like that.”

“It’s more than that,” Hawk disagreed. “There is that, but it’s more. Dax blames himself. He’s always believed it was his failure — in leadership — that created the entire scenario. He thinks he should have been able to control his men. Elliott didn’t respect him, so he did his own thing, rejected the plan and went off the rails.”

“That’s on Elliott, not Dax,” Paige defended. “But Dax thinks he has to control the world.” She sighed, understanding why Dax was so out of sorts. “Are the men headed into the same location? The same mountain — on this mission?”

“They are,” Hawk nodded. “And it’s still just as dangerous. Dax and Zeus will come up with a plan. It won’t be a replay of before but...”

“But in his head,” Paige nodded. “Dax will see the past and it will take a bigger toll because he’s not there this time. He’s lounging in an air conditioned room sipping coffee with my favorite general. That will be worse.”

“Yeah,” both Hawk and Wooly said at once.

“I’ll call Nathan,” Paige assured them. “He can help. He’s walked a few miles in the same shoes, so to speak. What they do — are doing — it’s not easy. Nathan will help.”

“He won’t thank you for that,” Hawk warned. “Dax is...”

“I know,” Paige cut him off. “Doesn’t matter. It’s part of the contract. He’ll just have to deal with it because he’s the one that decided to get married.”

“You know,” Hawk grinned. “You’re good for him. You’re the yin to his yang. I know I got in the way, when I first arrived. I didn’t get you and I’m sorry for that. He needs you, in ways I don’t think he even realizes. I’m glad the two of you found each other.”

“The connection is mutual,” Paige said softly. “I need him just as much as he needs me. He grounds me in a way no one else ever has. I hope one day you find your yin, Hawk. You deserve to be happy.”

“Not likely,” Hawk grinned. “My yang is too obstinate.”

“On that note,” Wooly glanced to the side. “I think your leader over there just called it a night.”

Paige glanced up and spotted Alan addressing his team and Gage headed their way.

“Jericho called it,” Gage said as he approached. “Said to head to the jeeps and return to base. We’ll pick this back up at zero-seven-hundred.”

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“We have a conference call first thing,” Hawk advised. “If someone can give us a ride back, you can keep the jeeps for transport. We won’t need them for another week or so.”

“I’m sure we can find a way to get you home,” Gage glanced at Paige. “Paige should have room — I mean you are next door neighbors.”

“You can ride with me,” Paige agreed. “Let’s go. I need to call Nathan then I’m going to sleep like the dead.”

“Maybe you should sign up for one of our courses,” Wooly suggested.

“The exercise would do you good,” Hawk teased. “Improve your stamina and enhance your endurance.”

“Sure,” Paige grinned. “Right after you finish yoga for beginners.”

“You’re as bad as he is,” Nathan told Paige when she’d finished lecturing him on the reasons, he shouldn’t have pulled Dax into this one.

“Meaning?” Paige grumbled.

“Meaning,” Nathan said casually. “I already know everything there is to know about that mission. I also know how to help Dax cope with his unresolved feelings. Give me a little credit, kid. By the time he leaves Washington, the entire sordid mess will be a distant memory.”

Paige relaxed. “Okay, I get it. I should have trusted you. I do trust you. It’s just...”

“It’s Dax,” Nathan said in understanding. “I’m also a married man, Paige. I get the emotions and the need to protect. Dax doesn’t need your interference on this anymore than he needs mine. What he needs is perspective and I’m working on that. Now, it’s late and we both have an early start. Try to get some sleep. Things here are going according to plan and Dax should be home the day after tomorrow.”

“Goodnight,” Paige softened. “I don’t know why, you’re an obstinate dictator but I love you.”

“I don’t know why,” Nathan smiled. “You’re a petulant delinquent but I love you, too.”

Paige hung up, thinking she’d drop into bed and sleep for hours. Instead, she realized she was still revved. There were too many problems jumping around in her mind. She slid off the

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couch and slowly walked to the kitchen. After a cup of hot chocolate and an hour studying maps, maybe she'd be calm enough to sleep.

Two hours later, she had a new plan for the search in the morning and a strategy to convince Jericho and Sgt. Alva that she was right. They were going to find that pilot tomorrow if it killed her. She smiled as she ascended the stairs, headed for her room. It just might kill her, but she wouldn't give up. And, when Dax got back, they were implementing a regular hiking routine. It would help him in the training and after today, she realized she needed more exercise than she got from her treadmill."

Paige had just thrown together the necessities for the day and was headed for the door when her phone started to ring. She glanced down and smiled. "Hey stud," there was laughter and mischief in her tone. "I'm just heading out, but my husband is still thousands of miles away. He's not due back until tomorrow. Come over early, we have the entire evening all to ourselves — I'll provide dessert if you bring dinner."

"Hold on," Dax played along. "Bambi, I'm on the phone with my wife, I'll just be a minute. Oh, yeah — I love that one and wear those sexy black boots, they highlight those long, luscious legs of yours."

"Okay," Paige climbed into her work vehicle. "That's no longer funny."

Dax laughed. "Any luck finding the pilot?"

"Not yet," Paige started the engine. "I'm heading back up. Thanks for the food, and the men. Jericho also said he appreciates the borrowed phone."

"You guys really need to get one for yourself," Dax told her. "You spend a lot of time in the canyon and I'm not sure service up there could be any worse."

"Jericho is working on it," Paige insisted. "The mayor is resisting. Doesn't think the need justifies the expense."

"He would if it was his life on the line," Dax grumbled.

"You okay?" Paige heard the tone in his voice.

"Rough day," Dax shrugged that off. "I'll be fine."

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“Uh...” Paige hesitated. “You sent the men and it gets boring out there, walking the ridgeline all day.”

“They told you about the mission,” Dax realized.

“They did,” Paige admitted. “And I think we should talk about it when you get home.”

“It’s water under the bridge, Paige,” Dax brushed that off. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“I disagree,” Paige wasn’t about to let this drop. “Did you talk to Nathan?”

“That’s not necessary,” Dax sighed. “I didn’t call for a lecture. I called because I miss you and I wanted to wish you luck in the search today.”

“I’m heading up the canyon now,” Paige advised. “We only have a few minutes before I lose you. So...” she took a deep breath. “I miss you, too. I love you. And, I’m not going to let this drop. If you haven’t talked to Nathan by the time you get home, I’m sleeping on the couch until you do. You don’t get to control everything, Dax. Nathan has been there. Talk to him.”

“Says the woman trying to control everything,” Dax sighed. “I’ll talk to him. I promise.”

“I think I’m losing you,” Paige said when she heard crackling noises on the phone. “Good luck with the op and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Dax hung up and dropped his phone onto the conference table. He sat there, staring at the wall, lost in memories he wished he could forget. He was still mired in the nightmare when Nathan stepped into the room. Dax didn’t realize he was there until he settled into the chair next to him. Dax glanced up, about to greet the good general but stopped when Nathan began to speak.

“It was nineteen-ninety-three,” Nathan was the one staring aimlessly into space now. “We were headed out on a particularly messy and dangerous mission. It was one of those that lacked planning...”

Dax listened as Nathan detailed an event that was even more screwed up and chaotic than the one that cost Elliott his life. Maybe Paige was right, Nathan did understand, and he always had a way of putting things into perspective.

Paige entered the command post, prepared for battle. She’d convince this group she was right because she knew in her gut they were searching the wrong area.

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“Hawk was generous enough to loan us both the satellite phone and their transport jeeps for another day,” Jericho began. “Sgt. Alva, brief us on the progress we made yesterday and cover the plans for today.”

“Before you do that,” Paige stood. “Can I have a minute?”

“Alright,” Jericho frowned.

“I spent some time last night going over the data,” Paige moved to the computer and pulled up the map. “We know this was the last known location of the helicopter based on intel from air traffic control.”

“Right,” Alva said impatiently. “Which is why we started there.”

“I understand why we always start with last known,” Paige pushed. “But I think we need to move one ridge over.”

“We will,” Alva tried to brush her off. “Once we’ve finished searching this ridgeline.”

“Just hear me out,” Paige insisted. “This is the last known,” she marked the location with a digital pin. “We searched three quarters of this ridge. But, Lopez was still in the air when he made that call. He was going down. Most likely from here, as he flew to the right of the road to keep a visual for precise navigation.”

“I agree,” Alva moved forward and studied the map. “I get what you’re saying. He didn’t just drop out of the sky like a lead balloon. The helicopter kept moving. He probably made the call somewhere back here. Then, he dropped below radar here...” he pointed to the location Paige marked on the map. “So, as he continued to descend he would have done everything he could to land somewhere around here.”

“Right,” Paige nodded. “I think he was either trying to get back to the main highway where he could land on asphalt..”

“Or,” Alva studied the lines. “He was trying to get into a better position to land on this dirt roadway. That would shift his route and bring him above this ridgeline. I see where you’re coming from.”

“We could walk the rest of that ridge,” Paige pointed to the place they’d spent all of the previous day.

“Or,” Alva considered. “We could pick the search back up over here, clear this ridge and if we don’t find him, go back and clear the rest of this ridge before we move back here.” He pointed to another ridge further away and to the north.

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“I’ll support you,” Jericho continued to study the map. Paige, as always, had a good point. “No matter where you decide to start the search today, I’ll support it.”

“I think we should go with Paige’s theory,” Alva decided. “I don’t like abandoning an area once we get started, but she makes a good point. If we adjust our plan and account for an out of control descent, chances are high he went down somewhere in this sector. We’ll start there, cover it thoroughly and completely then fan out.”

They had just climbed into the two jeeps they planned to use for transport when they spotted half a dozen Emery County vehicles headed to a ridge closer to the county line.

“They’re following us,” Gage realized. “They spent the entire day yesterday scouring the area around Joe’s and continued east from there. Now, suddenly, they decided do a search to the west, practically on top of our team. Somebody gave them a heads up.”

“I don’t think so,” Havilland disagreed. “I think they were watching us and realized we knew something they didn’t. They want to locate the missing pilot, so they packed up and moved their operation as close to ours as they could get.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Paige decided. “The goal is to find the wreckage and recover the body or rescue the pilot if he somehow miraculously survived the crash and the elements.”

“We all know that’s not likely,” Alva stepped in beside them. “And I called Ryan last night, once I hit the valley, I filled him and suggested his team should pick up the search on that ridge this morning.”

“Because?” Gage wondered.

“Because this isn’t a competition,” Alva shrugged. “We all want the same thing. And having a team of highly qualified searchers looking for our victim in an area where there is zero probability he’ll be located doesn’t make any sense. The helicopter didn’t go down east of the reservoir. They need to search that ridge just in case he made it further than we think.”

“I agree,” Paige told the group. “The numbers don’t support the theory. I can’t see how the pilot could have made it that far, but we all know — sometimes people in crisis manage the impossible.”

“What do you mean the numbers don’t support it?” Alva asked.

“I calculated the distance,” Paige shrugged. “I used the information the Jacksons gave me and figured out what time he took off from the parking lot — give or take a minute or two. The kids were fascinated with the helicopter, so the family watched Lopez take off and head west. We know following the road would make the most sense because he was navigating with VFR. So, I used the time of take-off and the time of his last transmission when he informed dispatch he was having trouble. Then, I did the math and determined his speed. Based on that speed, I

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calculated the rate of descent. Probability is high, the helicopter went down somewhere on the ridge east of where we searched yesterday. Again, if he was an excellent pilot, it's possible he made it to the next canyon over — but, highly improbable.”

“How long did you work on this last night?” Alva asked, impressed.

“A couple hours,” Paige shrugged. “I needed to do something menial and analytical to settle before I turned in.”

“Looks like you found it,” Alva climbed behind the wheel of one of the jeeps. “Meet you at the top.”

Paige glanced at Havilland. “You drive.”

It was thirteen-twenty-four when Travis — a Search & Rescue member that had joined the team six years earlier — spotted the wreckage. He saw a brief glint in the distance. When he moved closer to the edge of the ridgeline, he could see the tail of the bird. It was sandwiched between the wall of the canyon and several large pine trees.

Paige and Havilland made their way to the side of the canyon. “They’re going to need climbing equipment to get down there,” Havilland immediately realized.

“Yeah,” Paige nodded. “If I had to guess, he was dead the instant the bird hit the side of that mountain. He’s lucky it didn’t explode.”

“I can’t see any part of this that points to luck,” Havilland disagreed. “The guy never had a chance.”

“It helps,” Paige watched three Search & Rescue members rig a complicated system and secure it to a nearby tree. “Knowing he didn’t sit out here, suffering, while we wondered around in the wrong area.”

“I guess,” Gage stepped up next to them. “But then again, dead is dead.”

“Jericho contacted Sheriff Peters,” Alva informed them. “Apparently, he’s now back in town and was coordinating their search this morning. Ryan’s on the way over with his team. We might need them. This is a technical area and the more manpower we have, the better.”

“It’s not technically a crime scene,” Paige decided. “But be careful. The collision site looks dangerous and the entire thing could come tumbling down if we move the wrong way and destabilize things down there. It looks a little precarious and unpredictable.”

“How about you do what you do,” Alva grinned. “And let us do what we do. My guys know how to deal with this. Trust them, I do.”

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“I trust you,” Paige assured him. “And them. I just don’t want to see anyone get hurt. We need to recover the body, but it’s not worth another life. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Understood,” Alva continued to watch his team carefully.

They had just reached the wreckage when Ryan and the Emery County Rescue Team arrived. Alva left, had a brief conversation with a tall man dressed in forest green cargo pants and a white tee. He had sun bleached blonde hair that fell just below his shoulders but was cropped to prevent any stray strands from falling over his face and impeding his sight. Paige recognized the small logo on the left breast of the t-shirt — Emery County SAR. It must be the man named Ryan Alva mentioned earlier.

“We need to move a few feet to the left,” Alva informed them when he returned. “Ryan and his team will be taking over operations up here on top. We decided it was best to let my guys continue the extraction since they’re already down there. That will free up Amy and Tom to head down and help stabilize things below.”

“Sounds good,” Paige mumbled. She continued to watch the activity below. Once the two additional SAR members reached the wreckage things seemed to move a little more quickly. By the time the Emery team raised the body, that was now securely strapped into an orange stokes, Jericho had arrived accompanied by Sheriff Peters.

“Hey boss,” Gage looked up and spotted Jericho.

“I don’t know if any of you have met Sheriff Trent Peters,” Jericho introduced the imposing man standing next to him. Peters was taller than Jericho and nearly as large as Gage.

“My boys have gone up against his son a time or two,” Gage grinned. “Jury’s still out but he’s a formidable opponent on the field.”

Jericho laughed. “And his father is a formidable force on the streets.”

“Used to be,” Peters corrected. “Now I spend my days riding a desk and hoping my men play well with others. Which I’m told, didn’t happen on this particular call.”

“We found our way through it,” Jericho assured him. “Now, as the helicopter ended up on my side of the line, I suppose I need to figure out a way to get it removed.”

“I’ve already started on that,” Peters assured them. “Lt. Wilson contacted Skybirds. They’ve been updated and, as Mark Lopez was assisting my department when he went down, we took care of notification to the Lopez family as well.”

“I’ll coordinate the removal with Skybirds,” Jericho offered.

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“They’re sending a specialized team up,” Peters continued. “They said they contract with some conglomerate that has the expertise and the skill to extract that thing from the trees. They should be arriving around five tonight. They wanted to give us plenty of time to do whatever we needed to do to close out our case then they’ll come out, survey the area and get a feel for the situation. I expect them to start the extraction sometime tomorrow.”

“NTSB will also be arriving sometime tomorrow,” Jericho informed him. “I’ll leave those details to you Trent. I don’t see any reason for us to be in the middle of any of this. If anyone has question, they can contact me directly, but once we clear here tonight — it’s all yours.”

“Such a tragedy,” Tent focused on the activity below. “We accept the risk the second we pin on that badge, but that man... he was a qualified pilot that came out one night to help a family desperate to locate their daughter.”

“He accepted those risks the second he slid into the pilot’s seat,” Paige disagreed. “Law enforcement isn’t the only career that comes with risks. He knew what could happen and he did it anyway.”

“True,” Sheriff Peters agreed. “I suppose that’s true. Doesn’t make the outcome any less tragic.”

Paige was thinking about Dax at the moment, not Mark Lopez. She knew, he’d be right in the middle of things at the moment. It was just after three. That meant it was after two in the morning in the middle east. She knew that’s where the mission was occurring. She might not know where, but she knew it had to be somewhere in that region. She also knew, tactically, it made sense to hit the target in the middle of the night when most people were sleeping. She prayed everything went according to plan and the good guys made it out alive — and without serious injury. After what Hawk and Wooly told her, she wasn’t sure Dax could handle another death or loss of limb. Not on this one.

The group waited while the medical examiner loaded the body into a large SUV and drove away. They gathered the evidence they needed from the ridgeline and photographed the crash site. Then, one by one, they piled into the training center’s jeeps and silently made their way back to the command post. The instant they came to a stop, the Search & Rescue members piled out, climbed into their own vehicles and drove away.

Paige remained on scene and helped Havilland clean up the area then followed him back to the office. By the time they got everything cleaned up, restocked and stored away, it was after six.

Jericho stepped from his office and focused on his two deputies. “You two head home. It’s been a long, depressing day and there’s nothing left here that can’t wait until tomorrow.”

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“I thought when we found the crash, somehow it would feel more — rewarding, I guess,” Paige admitted. “It doesn’t. I just feel empty and depressed.”

“We all feel that way,” Jericho assured her. “We did the job, found the body and gave that family closure. It has to be enough.”

“Is it?” Havilland wondered. “I mean, they can have a funeral, a celebration of life or whatever, but the man is still dead. I’m not sure you ever get closure after something like this. After the kind of death the three of us deal with on the job. It’s never natural — or at least, it’s rarely natural. We deliver the kind of news that destroys families. So yeah, we all feel empty and depressed. Still, each of us will show up tomorrow and do it all again.”

“Which is why the three of us,” Jericho began. “And, all the rest of the great cops out there should work hard to enjoy life, appreciate family, and experience love while we can.”

“And drive a fast car around the track every chance you get,” Havi grinned. “Which is exactly what I’m going to do tonight. See you tomorrow.” He headed for the door and never looked back.

“Hawk called,” Paige told Jericho. “He’s grilling steaks. Said to bring you by, you up for some of the family appreciation and life enjoyment?”

“I…” Jericho was about to decline but changed his mind. “Okay, we can take the jeeps. Make sure they get returned in time for the boys to use in that next course.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Paige tossed her boss the keys to one of the jeeps. “I’ve got the phone, so I’ll return that as well. Any luck with the mayor on that one? We both know the commissions won’t approve the expenditure if the mayor continues to resist.”

“He’s coming around,” Jericho pulled the door shut and locked it. “See you at the militia house in five.”

Paige was laughing as she pulled out of the lot. Dax wouldn’t appreciate the new name Jericho assigned his precious home. Serves him right. He’s the one that brought a macho band of ex-rangers to town. He could deal with the fallout. She sobered, for the hundredth time wishing Dax would call and tell her how everything went. She was worried about him. At least when he was home, she could give him a quick kick in the butt and force him out of a rut. She couldn’t do that when he was in Washington with Nathan. She grinned, she couldn’t do it — but the formidable General Porter would. That was good enough for tonight. It had to be.

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Several hours later, Paige had finally drifted off into a restless, edgy sleep. She moaned and tried to shift when she felt something heavy pin her to the mattress. Was this a dream? Another nightmare? She wasn't sleeping, but she wasn't quite awake either. A smile spread across her face when she felt familiar, warm lips glide over the side of her neck then move to her jawline and finally settle on her mouth.

"Oh, Fabio," Paige whispered breathlessly. "Don't stop. You either Axel, just move a little to the left."

Dax bit her lip then rolled away. "Sorry, I think I have the wrong house. I was supposed to meet Candy and her gorgeous sidekick Kitty. I do love me some..."

Paige tackled him, laughing. "Don't say it." She wrapped her body around his and resumed the kiss. When they broke apart, she continued to hold on. "I missed you. And, you had me worried. Why didn't you call?"

"I missed you," Dax sat on the edge of the bed and started to remove his boots. "All I could think of was getting home. Once the op and the debrief was over, I rushed to my room, threw my stuff in my bag and caught the first flight available. I nearly missed it; they were just getting ready to close the gate when I arrived. Once we landed, it was too late to call. Plus, I decided it would be more fun to surprise you." He slid back on the bed and pulled her against him.

"Did everything go okay?"

"Like a well-oiled machine. No problems, no injuries... well, Wolfe bugged up his knee on a protruding rock, but nothing too serious."

"And you're okay?"

"I'm better than okay," he leaned in and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Stop worrying about me."

"Never gonna happen," Paige pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. "I'm contractually obligated. Plus, I think protecting the people I love is in my DNA."

"I talked to Nathan," Dax admitted. "Well, he actually talked to me. I assume that was your doing, but I'll let you have your little denial. Anyway, it helped. You should know, we have a series of missions taking place over the next few months that might require my assistance. Nathan was so pleased with the way things went this time; he wants a repeat in a couple months. This time, I'll need to take Hawk back with me. He was my righthand man on a similar op and his memory and input will be invaluable."

"I understand," Paige sat up. "Well, I'm going to try to be understanding. But Nathan needs to understand that you have a business to run out here. He also needs to be reminded of the promise he made to me — and you. He said if you agreed to help him, you could do it from

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the comfort of your own home. From Utah. He insisted you wouldn't have to travel back and forth all the time. I plan to remind he made that promise and I'm going to hold him to it."

"Maybe you could bank the venom until morning," Dax ran a hand down her side.
"Tonight, I want something a little sweeter."

"I might be able to accommodate you," she barely finished the sentence before Dax showed her just how sweet he could be.