

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Genetic Impersonation

Season 5, Episode 3

by:

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Genetic Impersonation

Paige entered the building, crossed the open work area, and dropped into her chair with a long sigh. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, determined to block out the world and relax.

“Rough morning?” Mike Lovato asked, studying his colleague intently.

“You could say that,” Paige straightened and pulled her chair up to her desk, flipping on her computer. “If I have to respond out to Derek and Sophie Gibson’s place one more time, they’re both going to jail.”

“Another domestic?” Lovato nodded in understanding. “It’s a little early, isn’t it?”

“Normally, yes,” Paige agreed. “But since we’re experiencing a global pandemic and all... the two of them decided it was a magnificent idea to hop out of bed, conjure up a batch — or six — of Bloody Mary’s and get an early start. With each fresh drink the blood decreased, and the vodka increased. By the time I got there, the Gray Goose was cooked, and they were tossing items out the front window while having oral sex.”

“You lost me,” Margie frowned.

“F-you,” Paige grinned. “No, F-you and the horse you rode in on. I hate every F-ing thing you do...”

“Got it,” Margie shook her head. “The sayings you guys come up with are truly baffling.”

Paige was about to respond when Jericho opened his door and motioned for her to join him. Paige frowned, glanced at Margie, but only got a shrug. She made her way across the room and silently stepped into the office. Her boss immediately shut the door behind her and returned to his desk. Paige glanced around the room and spotted Dean sitting in one of the visitor chairs next to a gorgeous blonde. *What was this about?* She settled cautiously into a chair and silently waited.

“Dean and Miss Bentley have stumbled onto a delicate situation and they need our help,” Jericho began.

Paige glanced at Dean, turned to study the woman, then immediately focused on Jericho. She held back a grin. The atmosphere was tense, but to her it felt like two naughty children fidgeting on the couch while they admitted to a stern father they were pregnant. “What kind of help?” She finally asked.

“I’ll explain,” Dean sat up straighter but continued to hold the woman’s hand in support. “Cara is an amazing IT expert over at Snow College. She was recruited about a year ago and started her new job last fall.”

Genetic Impersonation

“Okay,” Paige settled into her chair, realizing this would be a lengthy explanation. She wanted to jump in, ask questions, and move the process along; but, she realized, that would make it seem like an interrogation, not a meeting with the boss.

“Before everything shut down,” Cara supplied. “I was working a lot of hours, tons of overtime, and I even took work home. The system needed a complete overhaul and I was really, really busy.”

“You know my schedule is also pretty hectic,” Dean provided. “Between the job and helping my parents at the track, it was hard to catch a few minutes to grab a quick dinner or sit down for a few minutes and have lunch.”

“But then everything shut down and you two had more time,” Paige said in understanding.

“I had too much time,” Cara glanced at Dean.

“I was still working and with a big race coming up, the track has taken up a lot of my free time,” Dean picked up the story. “I’m on a pretty strict training schedule and dad’s overwhelmed trying to get things organized to ensure the event runs smoothly. We need the revenue and now that things are opening up, we’re trying to have sanitation stations, offer face masks, limit seating so the fans are forced to social distance.”

“Right,” Paige nodded. “I understand. I’m sure it’s a huge undertaking.”

“I offered to help,” Cara added. “But my knowledge runs more toward fixing a carburetor than running an event.”

“You can fix a carburetor?” Paige asked, surprised.

Cara smiled. “My dad was in the military most of my life. We moved around a lot and mom drove an old beat up Toyota. It got great mileage but was constantly in need of repair. My dad taught me to troubleshoot when I was six. I rebuilt my first engine when I was twelve. He learned most of what he knew from his father.”

“Good to know,” Paige smiled back at her. “So, you had a lot of free time because Studley Earnhardt over there was training and working all the time.”

“Cara was bored and lonely without family around,” Dean told her. “I felt bad about the whole situation. We should have had more time together, but I was always busy, and she was just sitting at home binge watching Netflix.”

“Bummer,” Paige flashed Cara a look of understanding. “I know that can get old fast.”

Genetic Impersonation

“I bought two of those DNA kits,” Dean ignored the comment. “The ancestry ones, for Cara’s birthday a few months back. We did the tests together and, when I had time, we both started building a family tree.”

Paige frowned, realizing where this was headed.

“I love it,” Cara grinned. “I’m a geek at heart and researching my family line was so addictive. By the time I got the results back from the test, I already had a pretty big tree going. I knew my parents and my grandparents really well growing up. No matter where my dad was stationed, we always made sure we flew to Colorado for my mom’s annual family reunion. It was huge, with uncles, aunts, and a million cousins.”

“But when you got the results,” Paige said softly. “They didn’t match your tree?”

“Exactly,” Dean gave Cara’s hand a supportive squeeze.

“I called my dad,” Cara told her. “I asked him if they adopted me. He denied it. In fact, the question hurt him. He insisted I am his biological daughter and refused to discuss the problem any further.”

“How did he explain the test results?” Paige wondered.

“He said they must have made a mistake,” Cara sighed. “I don’t want to hurt my dad. We’re close. We always have been, but after mom died, it was just the two of us against the world.”

“Cara’s mom died of cancer when she was fifteen,” Dean provided.

“I’m sorry,” Paige said automatically.

“Dad was still a marine at the time,” Cara whispered. “He immediately retired, and we moved to Cedar City. Dad got a job at Southwest Tech in their Applied Technology Department. He soon became one of the leading instructors of the automotive technician program.”

“Makes sense,” Paige nodded. “Which is why you could rebuild an engine at twelve.”

“Cara’s an ace when it comes to mechanics,” Dean’s face radiated with pride. “But her dad is a wizard. He can diagnose any problem in seconds.”

“Is your dad still in Cedar City?” Jericho asked.

“For now,” Cara nodded. “He’s trying to sell the house so he can move up here. He wants to be closer to me and Dean’s father gave him an offer he can’t refuse.”

“Which is?” Paige wondered. It seemed like Dean and his family were quickly integrating this woman and her father into their family. She just hoped it wasn’t some kind of scam. She

Genetic Impersonation

hoped the dad really was a former marine and the dynamic duo was telling her friend the truth — about everything.

“Scott will help my dad part time,” Dean provided. “With mechanical stuff, setting up the booths, arranging the seats, you name it. I guess you could say he’s going to be dad’s assistant to everything.”

“How soon will he arrive?” Paige wondered. Maybe she had some time to check him out and make sure this family was who they said they were.

“He’s been trying to come up on the weekends,” Cara told her. “But he’s also trying to sell the house. I’m not sure when he’ll be able to come up again. The realtor insisted on an open house this Friday and Saturday.”

“Cara and her father are very close,” Dean provided. “If he can’t come this weekend, I suspect he’ll insist on a trip sometime next week.”

“You still haven’t said what you need help with,” Paige told them. “From me.”

“I can’t ask my dad about my lineage again,” Cara told her. “His health isn’t as good as it used to be, and I can’t upset him while he’s still in Cedar City and I’m up here. I asked Dean to look into it, but he’s hesitant to pry into my family. He says uncovering skeletons might put a strain on our relationship. I need to know but I don’t know how to get answers.”

“You have to know,” Paige warned. “If I start digging, I’m going to turn over all the rocks. You might not like what I discover.”

“Dean told me you are amazing at forensics and that you won’t stop until you find the truth,” Cara looked straight into Paige’s eyes. “I need answers. Why don’t I have any of my father’s DNA? Why does he insist I am his daughter and I wasn’t adopted? I have a cousin on my mother’s side who is also on the same ancestry site. I’ve known him my entire life, played with him at family gatherings, grew up believing he was family — but I’m not related to him. Not really. Why?”

“How do you know you don’t have DNA connected with your father?” Paige wondered.

“That’s why Dean brought this to me,” Jericho answered. “He obtained the results from the ancestry site and ran Cara’s DNA through CODIS to see if he could find a relative. There wasn’t a match. He then pulled the results from Scott Bentley, from his time in the military, and had both of them compared by an expert. They don’t match. Cara Bentley has no biological connection to Scott Bentley.”

“Bold move,” Paige glanced at Dean, then Jericho. She hoped her fellow officer wasn’t in too much trouble for using their official system for personal use. She’d pull him aside later and

Genetic Impersonation

tell him next time, he should come to her. She still had a few back channels she could tap into. Friends and acquaintances who owed her favors that would have been happy to help if they knew the backstory.

“Can you help Cara?” Dean asked. He already got a stern warning from his boss and notification the sheriff would put a letter of reprimand in his file for abusing the system. He didn’t care, if it helped Cara get answers, he’d take the reprimand and move on.

“I know you said you want to leave your father out of this,” Paige began. “I don’t want to upset him — or you — but that’s the most logical starting point. I have the time to investigate this. If you’re sure you want me to, that is.”

“Of course, I do,” Cara insisted.

“What if your dad committed a crime?” Paige warned. “If he says you’re not adopted — where did you come from?”

“If you are suggesting my father kidnapped me,” Cara said angrily. “Your way off base and Dean has seriously misjudged you.”

“Then how do you explain it?” Paige pushed.

Cara bit her bottom lip and hesitated for several seconds before she answered. “I don’t know.”

“We’ve talked about this,” Dean wrapped an arm around Cara in support. “I’ve talked to Scott myself. He’s not lying. He believes Cara is his biological daughter.”

Paige studied Dean. He was too connected to this family to make any kind of rational determination on that front, but she’d keep that opinion to herself. “You said your father was a marine,” Paige knew how lonely her mother had been when her father was out of town on mission after mission. “Is it possible your mother had an affair?”

“No,” Cara shook her head. “Plus, if I’m related to mom and not dad, Mark would have shown as a match — my cousin. Mark’s parents are Angela and James Colten. James and my mom are siblings. Dean keeps telling me DNA doesn’t lie. I know just accepting there was a mistake would be easier, but I’m a data girl. I trust science. I’m analytical and deductive in my reasoning. I know my parents aren’t my biological parents. I’ve accepted that — well, I’m working to accept it — even if my dad can’t. Now, I need to know why. Dad will always be my dad; nothing will change that. I love him no matter what. He’s always been my rock and he will continue to be my rock, and I will try to be his. But we need to know the truth. I need to know the truth.”

Paige turned to address Jericho. “And, you’re okay with me spending time on this?”

Genetic Impersonation

“Within reason,” Jericho nodded. “I’m approving you to work on it when we don’t have anything pressing. I wouldn’t want to deprive you of another visit to the Gibsons. Don’t neglect active calls, but yes... give it whatever time you need to help Cara and Dean get answers.”

“And if I stumble onto a crime?” Paige wondered.

“We’ll deal with that when and if it comes,” Jericho advised.

Paige took the next twenty minutes to gather information on Cara’s father, her mother, and any extended family members she had detailed information on. Once she was finished, she stood. “I will need to talk to Scott Bentley myself. Will you call me the next time he comes to town for a visit. I’ll do my best not to upset him, but if you want me to do this, I have to do it my way.”

“Alright,” Cara also stood. “Dean will let you know when dad comes up next time. He’s hoping to get away sometime next week.”

Dean stood and guided Cara out of the room. Paige watched until she was sure the two of them were far enough away, she could speak freely. “Have you checked them out yet?” she asked her boss.

“They check out,” Jericho nodded. “Cara is twenty-four. Scott Bentley retired from the Marine Corp in 2011. He was a Major at the time. He immediately moved to Cedar City and worked in the Applied Technology Department for the past nine years. He’s eligible to retire with a limited pension at the end of this year. The college has decided not to resume classes this fall so Mr. Bentley will be able to run his courses online. He’s going to see how things go but plans to retire once he qualifies. I didn’t check out the job with Dean’s father because, I assume, he’d know if his dad hired his girlfriends’ father to help out at the track. They appear legit. I know you’ll do a deeper dive, but I didn’t find anything that alarmed me.”

“You mean Margie didn’t find anything alarming,” Paige corrected. “I will look deeper, but I’m relieved to hear they come off as legit. I was worried this was some kind of elaborate con. Dean’s family has been through enough, they don’t need more trouble. Especially with the shutdowns and the economical strain they’re under right now.”

“I agree,” Jericho settled back in his chair. “Which is another reason I put you on this case.”

“Is it a case?” Paige leaned against the door jam.

“That’s what I want you to tell me,” Jericho grinned. “Keep me in the loop on this. I hope there’s an innocent answer to all of this, but we both know that’s unlikely. I want to be there when Dean learns the truth.”

Genetic Impersonation

“I can do that,” Paige pushed off the wall.

“Anything new with the Gibsons?”

“Nope,” Paige shrugged. “Just the usual. If they keep this up, I’m going to call Kathy over at the liquor store and insist she stop selling them Grey Goose.”

“Won’t work,” Jericho smiled. “They’ll just switch it up and start buying Smirnoff.”

“The entire Vodka isle is off limits until this deadly virus is under control or the world ends, whichever comes last,” Paige grumbled. “And no, I’m not kidding. I don’t know how, but I will find a way.”

“Just do it without getting me sued,” Jericho insisted. He watched Paige leave the room knowing Dean and his mystery were in good hands. He just hoped Cara and her Scott Bentley were exactly what they claimed to be. Because, with Paige digging up skeletons, if they had something to hide ... it wouldn’t be a secret for long.

Paige slid from her vehicle and slowly made her way to the front door of Cara’s modest rental home. So far, she hadn’t found any red flags in her background. She’d checked — thoroughly. Dean was falling in love with the girl and Paige decided, since she’d been given permission, she’d turn over every rock and search every closet for skeletons. She hadn’t been able to find even one.

The first thing she’d done was check CODIS and the independent results Dean had paid an expert to verify. There was no doubt, Cara was not related to Scott Bentley. The man might insist it was all a mistake, but Paige knew otherwise. Now, she had to find out if Scott Bentley was hiding the truth, if he could solve the mystery but didn’t want to, or if he was truly in the dark and just as baffled as his daughter. Dean insisted Cara’s father was honest, courageous and had just as much integrity as Dean. Paige was determined to judge that for herself. She rang the bell and waited. It didn’t take long. Within seconds, Cara was standing in the doorway. She was obviously nervous about the meeting.

“I promise,” Paige reached out to shake Cara’s hand. “I’ll be respectful. I just need to ask him a few questions.”

“I understand,” Cara took a step back in invitation. Once Paige was inside, she reached out, resting her cold, soft hand on Paige’s arm. “Can I be there? When you question him, I mean? Can I be there with him?”

Genetic Impersonation

“It would be better if I did this alone,” Paige gave her hand a gentle pat. “Trust me. This isn’t an interrogation. We’re just going to have a friendly talk.”

“Then why can’t I be in the room?”

“Because I want him to feel comfortable answering all my questions,” Paige explained. “There are some things he might try to hide to protect his daughter. Like if your mom did have an affair. That’s something a father wouldn’t want to talk about with his little girl in the room.”

“I’m hardly little,” Cara mumbled.

“To your dad,” Paige grinned. “You will always be little.”

“Okay,” Cara relented. “You’re right. There are things he won’t answer if I’m there. I agreed to do this your way. I’m going to trust you.”

“Good,” Paige followed Cara into what looked like a sitting room. The house was too small to have a formal sitting area or a den. The space was small, but somehow Cara was able to make it feel comfortable and cozy. She moved forward and stopped in front of a chair directly across from a tall, muscular man that was currently sitting on a small sofa.

Scott Bentley stood and held out his hand. “You must be Deputy Carter. I’m Scott Bentley.”

“You can call me Paige,” she settled into the chair and waited for him to return to his seat.

“Cara, baby,” his entire face softened when he turned to address his daughter. “Could you bring us something to drink?” He turned back to Paige. “We could make a fresh pot of coffee or there’s iced tea, I think we still have some orange juice and, of course, we have cola. I’m afraid my daughter only allows diet in the house but it’s cold.”

“Actually,” Paige shifted and glanced at Cara. “Ice water would be great.”

“I’ll take some juice,” Scott told her. “Whatever we have is fine.”

Paige waited until Cara had returned with their drinks, slid out of the room, and silently slid the door closed before she began. “I can see you two are very close.”

“We are,” Scott studied the closed door. “I don’t have anything to hide if that’s what you think. She’s my daughter. I can’t explain the DNA mix up. I know how accurate that stuff is. But Cara is my daughter, she has to be.”

“I’m not here to dispute that,” Paige decided to start easy. “Do you mind if I record this, so we only have to do it once?”

“No,” Scott motioned absently with his hand. “That’s fine.”

Genetic Impersonation

“Okay. Tell me about that time — when Cara was born. What was going on in your life? How was your marriage? Were you on a mission?”

“If you’re implying there were problems in my marriage, you’re wrong,” Scott took a deep breath and tried to remain calm.

“I’m not,” Paige said flatly. “Before we begin, let me tell you a little about me. I was an Army brat. I hope you won’t hold that against me. I know there’s a bit of a rivalry between the two branches.”

Scott smiled. “A bit.”

“My father was a Ranger and he was gone a lot,” Paige continued. “Mom tried to be strong, but I always knew she was really unhappy when dad was gone. For me, it was just the way it was. I didn’t know anything else. When I got older, I realized mom wasn’t just unhappy. She was constantly worried, and she was lonely. I’m just trying to get an idea of where you and your wife were emotionally, as partners, as people, when Cara was born. Was there a strain on the marriage because you were deployed? Were you on leave? Was it a time when you were living at the base waiting for your next mission? Run me through it, tell me about your life at that time.”

“Alright,” Scott focused on his glass and tried to remember what life was like during that time. “Cara was born in March of 1996. The conflict in the Persian Gulf was over — Desert Storm was considered a success in 1991, but I was still on leave until mid-1992. That was a difficult time for Nadia because she knew I was in a dangerous assignment. Once I returned, instead of getting a post here in the states, I was assigned to Okinawa Japan. Nadia went with me and both of us loved it there. We returned to the states in 1995. At that time, it felt like our marriage was stronger than it had ever been. Shortly after arriving back in the states, Nadia discovered she was pregnant. We were both thrilled and anxious to start a family. Originally, I was supposed to be stateside for the next couple years, but a situation arose that took me back to Kuwait.”

“How far along was Nadia at that time?” Paige wondered.

“About five months,” Scott took a sip of his juice before he continued. “She was upset that I’d be gone for the birth of our first child. To be honest, I was upset that I’d miss such an important milestone in our lives — and Cara’s. It couldn’t be helped, that was the life I chose. Before I shipped out, we packed up a few things and Nadia went to stay with her parents. They had a large ranch near Edwards, Colorado. It’s a beautiful place with a large home and property that borders a national forest. Nadia always loved it there because it was so peaceful. We thought it was her best option. I didn’t like the idea of her being alone those last few months of her pregnancy.”

Genetic Impersonation

“So,” Paige considered. “You were in Kuwait when your daughter was born?”

“I was,” Scott agreed. “What are you getting at?”

“Nothing,” Paige shrugged. “Just trying to get the big picture. How old was Cara when you returned?”

“I believe it was a six-month deployment, so Cara was about two months old when I returned,” Scott strained to remember, it was so long ago.

“Okay,” Paige made a note of the timeline. “So, you get home and then what happened? Did you stay in Colorado?”

“No,” Scott strained to remember. “I believe that’s when I was stationed in Texas.”

“And how long did you live there?”

“A little over three years,” Scott said slowly. “I think that’s correct. Our son, Micah was born.”

“How many children do you have?” Paige asked. She already knew, but she wanted him to relax again.

“Just two,” Scott told her. “Nadia easily miscarried. She had a hard time carrying our children full-term. Once we had two amazing babies, we stopped trying. It was just too hard on her. It was hard on both of us. The excitement, then the disappointment and the sorrow. We decided to be grateful for the children we had.”

That was interesting and the first Paige heard there may have been health complications with the mother. “Okay, Mr. Bentley, I’m going to be blunt. Is there any reason to believe your wife may have had another miscarriage and adopted a baby while you were away?”

“No,” Scott answered immediately. “First, she was careful. It’s the reason I insisted she stay with my parents while I was gone. Plus, she would miscarry in the first trimester. If she carried the child into the fifth month, the pregnancy was fine. I was there for my son’s birth and I know there weren’t any problems — not after those first three to four months.”

“Alright,” Paige considered. “Do you still have contact with Nadia’s parents?”

“We do,” Scott sighed. “I was hoping we wouldn’t have to bring them into this but I’m still on good terms with them and Cara has an excellent relationship with her grandparents. Cara’s grandfather, Liam Bennett, he suffers from Alzheimer’s, so I doubt he’ll be much help. Natasha, Nadia’s mother, she’s still sharp as a tack. If you need to talk to them, talk to Natasha; but, please don’t upset her. She has her hands full taking care of Liam.”

Genetic Impersonation

“I appreciate your time,” Paige stood, not answering Scott’s request. She couldn’t make any promises, so she planned to avoid the request altogether. Cara deserved to know the truth. “I’ll be in touch.”

Three hours later, Paige was sitting behind her desk, typing out a report. She’d been dispatched to a gas theft and an ungovernable juvenile on her way back to the office. She glanced up when Dean dropped into her visitor’s chair.

“Cara said you left without talking to her,” Dean accused.

“I did,” Paige settled back. “I know your girlfriend wants regular updates, but that’s not how I work. You know an investigation like this takes a lot of twists and turns before we uncover the real story behind the mystery. I won’t share anything until I’m absolutely sure it’s correct.”

“I do understand that,” Dean sighed. “Cara doesn’t. She’s not a patient woman, Paige. Give me something I can use to get her to back off and relax.”

Paige laughed. “You are in serious trouble, buddy.”

“Tell me about it,” Dean sighed again. “I keep telling myself I’m too young to get this serious, but when I start to back off, I miss her.”

“Then don’t back off,” Paige suggested. “Just take things slow. Let them develop the way things gradually progressed with me and my adorable neighbor.”

“Ha,” Dean shook his head. “Bite your tongue. I know what the two of you went through before you finally tied the knot. I seriously do not want to experience anything even remotely close to kidnapping, terrorist plots, B&E’s, ex-girlfriends...”

“Okay,” Paige laughed. “I get it. Bad suggestion. Just let things progress naturally and see where they go. You might be surprised. She seems like a really nice girl.”

“You seem surprised by that,” Dean narrowed his eyes at her.

“Not exactly,” Paige stood and gathered up her files. “Relieved, grateful, happy for you and your family. Not surprised.”

“You thought this was some kind of con,” Dean accused.

“I did,” Paige said unapologetically. “And I’m happy I was wrong.”

Genetic Impersonation

Dean thought he should be mad, but instead he was grateful. “Thanks.”

“For?” Paige slid the strap of her bag over her shoulder.

“Caring enough to check,” Dean shrugged. “Now, back to the case. What’s your next move?”

“I’ve been researching the grandparents,” Paige pulled open the back door. “Cara’s mother’s parents. They still live in Colorado. I want to get as much information as I can on them before I take a little trip.”

“You’re going to see them?” Dean asked, surprised.

“Maybe,” Paige dumped her gear onto her backseat and turned to face Dean. “At the moment, I’m looking for missing babies near Edwards, Colorado in 1996.”

“You talked to Scott,” Dean objected. “You can’t still think he abducted a child.”

“No,” Paige gave him a reassuring smile. “I believe him. I don’t think he had anything to do with this. I do, however, wonder if something happened to Nadia’s baby. The baby she was pregnant with when Scott was halfway around the world and she did something in desperation. Something she never even told him about.”

“That’s just…” Dean didn’t have a word to describe how messed up that sounded.

“I’m working on it,” Paige told him. “You told Cara to trust me. Now, it’s time for you to do the same. See you tomorrow.”

Paige stepped through the door and smelled something delicious. She dropped everything onto the couch, including her gun belt, then made her way to the kitchen. Dax was standing in front of the stove talking on the phone while he stirred something in a large pot.

Paige moved in behind him and started to reach out but had to pivot and duck when Dax turned abruptly. He hit the handle of the pot, scrambled to prevent their dinner from tumbling to the floor, dropped his phone — which skittered across the floor and crashed into the underside of the cabinet below the sink, cursed, then scowled when he realized Paige was doubled over, laughing.

“Laugh it up,” Dax flipped the heat off the pot of chili he was preparing and leaned over to snatch up his phone. “I’ll call you later,” he barked before disconnecting the line.

Genetic Impersonation

Paige moved to the stove, snatched up the spoon Dax had been using, and dipped it into the bubbling, spicy liquid. She scooped out a generous bite, paused to blow on the steaming beans and chunks of meat then slurped the contents into her mouth.

Dax watched her, grinning when she lunged for the fridge and pulled out a gallon milk. Clearly, her impatience came with consequences. “Now that you burned the roof of your mouth, want to tell me why you’re sneaking around in my kitchen?”

“I didn’t sneak,” Paige objected. “That’s amazing.” She pointed to the chili.

“It’s nearly finished,” Dax moved forward and wrapped his arms around Paige, pulling her against his chest. “If you’re going to sneak, I should at least get a ‘honey, I’m home’ kiss.”

Paige pushed up onto her tiptoes, pressed her lips to his then tried to back away.

Dax held on tighter and pulled her closer. “Nuh-huh.”

Paige laughed, but melted into him. The man had moves, and she could never resist a single one of them. Far too soon, Dax pulled back and stepped away. He moved to the stove and stirred his masterpiece. Paige watched him, silently. Sometimes, she was still amazed they were married, and this amazing man was her husband.

“Any progress on the mystery of Dean’s new flame?” Dax asked over his shoulder.

“Huh?” Paige asked before she pulled herself out of her daydream.

Dax dumped the chili into a serving bowl, glanced at Paige, and smiled. “Did dad do it? Did dad do it with the sexy military nurse? Oh, I know, did mom seduce the pool boy who had already gotten his stripper girlfriend pregnant? But she couldn’t care for her child because a famous Hollywood scout dropped into the private club where she worked and offered her the job of a lifetime. In desperation, she asked the nice lady that engaged in a little afternoon delight with her man to help a girl out of a bind.”

“Sure,” Paige settled onto one of the kitchen chairs. “Because hotshot Hollywood types always wander into seedy bars in Colorado to yank pregnant strippers out of poverty and into the limelight.”

“Who said the bar was seedy?” Dax set the chili on the table, then returned to the stove to pull the rolls out of the oven.

Paige laughed. “That was the only part that rubbed you the wrong way?”

Dax slid onto his chair smiling. “Why Colorado?”

Genetic Impersonation

Paige dished her plate and then gave Dax a recap of her interview with Scott Bentley. When she finished and Dax didn't say anything, she forced herself to wait a few more seconds. Finally, she couldn't take it any longer. "Well?" she scowled.

"Well what?" Dax considered.

"No words of wisdom?" she asked. "No King of the Intellectual advice on this one?"

"I love that you think I'm the King of the Intellectuals," Dax grinned. "I wonder if you meant to let that one slip."

"Shut up," Paige slugged him. "Tell me what you think."

"I'm just wondering why this is a police matter," Dax pondered all the angles.

"It might not be," Paige admitted. "On the other hand, it might have been an abduction that went unsolved for twenty-four years."

"Have you checked?" Dax asked. "How many abductions were there in Colorado during this time frame that involved newborn girls?"

"I haven't found any," Paige sighed.

"I figured that would have been your next step," Dax stood and dished himself another bowl of chili. "So, what's next?"

"I'm going to finish going through the missing child or possible abduction cases tonight," Paige warned.

"That should be fun," Dax dug into his meal.

"It shouldn't take too long," Paige told him, frustrated she wasn't getting anywhere.

"What's bothering you?" he knew how Paige operated. Running through the case with him helped her see things she missed on the first go around.

"I don't even know if we have a case," Paige admitted. "I'm basically helping a friend solve a mystery and I can't decide how I feel about that. Should I be using police resources to solve a non-police related family secret?"

"Sure," Dax shrugged. "Because it could be a crime. And if that's not reason enough, your boss told you to. Personally, as a citizen, I think you should use your resources to determine if a crime was committed. Once you are absolutely certain it was just a dark family secret, but no laws were broken — then you can stop. Or, you can continue and feel guilty because you're wasting taxpayer money."

Genetic Impersonation

“What crime was committed?” Paige pushed.

“I have no idea, I’m just the King,” Dax shrugged.

“Funny,” Paige sobered. “I’m serious.”

Dax reached out and took her hand. “I think you should stop worrying about why you’re doing it. Or if you should be doing it. Just solve the mystery and move on. Dean needs your help. For me, that’s reason enough. You said this girl seems perfect for him. That’s another reason this works for me. And, if that doesn’t cover it, Jericho asked you to.”

“But,” Paige began.

“And, you don’t know there wasn’t a crime. The woman could have been abducted from really great parents when she was an infant and she needs to know if that’s the case. If you don’t find any missing kids that fit in the Edwards area, fan out. She could have driven several hundred miles, snatched the kid, and returned to her parents with a ‘look ma, I’m a mommy.’”

Paige smiled and shook her head. “I doubt that. I think I want to interview Nadia’s mother. If anyone knows the truth, she does.”

“Probably,” Dax focused on the last bite of his chili.

“What?” Paige frowned. “I missed a step, what was it?”

“I’m not a cop, babe. I’m just the King,” Dax caught her arm when she tried to punch him and pulled her against him. “Want to go upstairs and discuss my next decree?”

“No,” Paige pulled her arm away, laughing. “What did I miss?”

“You may have already done it,” Dax stood and began clearing the table. “I’m just wondering if Cara has given you the information on her matches.”

“Her what?” Paige stood to help.

“She did one of those DNA kits to see who matched,” Dax explained. “We know she didn’t match with the family she was supposed to. Who did she match with?”

Paige stopped in the middle of the kitchen, she blinked once, then again as she stared at Dax. “I’m an idiot.”

“But you’re my idiot,” Dax wrapped his arms around her and kissed her before she could object. When she tried to pull away, he deepened the kiss.

“I have work,” Paige objected.

“Me too,” Dax smiled. “Let’s play hooky.”

Genetic Impersonation

The next day, Paige was sitting at her desk going through the last of the missing child reports in Colorado in 1996. She should have worked on this last night but once again, Dax distracted her, and she didn't get any work done. She was smiling when Dean stepped through the door and stopped in front of her desk.

"Morning," Dean settled into one of her chairs. "Anything new?"

"Not really," Paige pushed the printouts aside to focus on Dean. "I'd like to look at Cara's profile, on that ancestry site. I want to see who she did match with. We know she didn't match with the Bentley's or the Bennett's. Who did she match with?"

"Oh," Dean frowned. "Paige, will you be honest with me?"

"Sure," Paige waited.

"Do you think Cara was kidnapped as a baby?"

"I don't have any evidence to support that," Paige said truthfully.

"But you can't rule it out," Dean pushed.

"Not yet," Paige shrugged. "I know that's why you're so worried. I know it's the reason you didn't look into this yourself. Here's what I can tell you. I don't think Cara's father was involved. You were right about that. He comes across as truthful and sincere. And, if he knew Cara wasn't his kid... that man belongs on the big screen."

"So, what does that mean?" Dean stared out the large front window.

"It means I keep digging," Paige told him. "And I want to start by figuring out who she is related to. Then, I can run the name and see if there are any missing kids with that last name, who were kidnapped around that time."

"Cara should be home," Dean stood. "Let's go pay her a visit."

It took all morning, but with the help of Dean and Cara, Paige finally had a good idea what family Cara came from. It was impossible to narrow it down to one specific person. There were several brothers in the family. She did have a general idea, though. Now, she was back at her

Genetic Impersonation

desk, trying to locate records on the dad. Once she found him, she should be able to follow it down through each kid. One of them had to live around Colorado. Or they had at one time. She was positive she was on the right track.

Jericho stepped into the office, started for his door, pivoted, and settled into one of her chairs. “Any progress?”

“Maybe,” Paige ran him through what she had.

“If you narrow down the father, what are you planning to do with that information?” Jericho asked.

“I don’t know,” Paige admitted. “It’s tricky. The dad doesn’t always now he has a kid. You know that. Sometimes mom sees that double pink line and panics. She might have the baby and raise it herself, or she might silently put it up for adoption. We learned firsthand how far some parents will go to get a baby when Sean’s nephew disappeared. Nadia was having problems, experienced a lot of miscarriages. What if she lost the baby and bought Cara from a desperate mother? That’s not illegal. But if we start snooping around and dad finds out... he might not be all cordial and understanding when he learns something like that was kept from him all these years.”

“Keep tugging that line and see what you come up with,” Jericho decided. “Plan on heading to Colorado tomorrow. You can interview the grandmother and find out what she knows. Once you check off that box, we’ll sit down with Dean and discuss where to go from there.”

“You sure you want me to leave town tomorrow?” Paige wondered. “Gage is still out of town with the football team. That’s going to leave you shorthanded.”

“I’m sure we’ll find a way to manage without you,” Jericho stood. “Talk to the grandmother. If we’re lucky, she knows what happened and we can close this one out and give Dean, Cara and her father peace of mind.”

“Don’t count on in,” Paige mumbled once Jericho was safely inside his office. She went back to running names, hoping something would pop and she’d figure this out. It didn’t. When her phone rang, she absently answered, deeply lost in a long list of property that belonged to a family named Turner. “Deputy Carter.”

“King Hamilton,” Dax laughed. “I’m just calling to let you know it’s going to be a long night. Someone distracted me last night, so I didn’t get my work done. A minor bump has come up with one of the training sessions and we need to get it ironed out tonight.”

Genetic Impersonation

“You can try to blame that on me,” Paige grinned. “But it’s not going to fly. Anyway, I’m at the office sifting through records. I’ve got enough to do to last several hours, don’t worry about me. I can grab something for dinner on the way home if I don’t get a chance before that.”

“Make sure you get the chance,” Dax ordered. “I’ll try not to be too late. I’ll make it up to you tomorrow. Should be a light day on my end. I’d leave some of this until then, but it’s time sensitive and has to be dealt with tonight.”

“About that,” Paige grimaced. “It looks like I’m heading to Colorado in the morning. It’s about a five to six-hour drive one way. Add in interview time and I’m looking at a fourteen, maybe sixteen-hour day. Could be longer if Murphy stops by to visit.”

“You want company?”

“I thought you just said you’re busy,” Paige reminded him.

“Actually,” Dax smiled. “I said I’m busy tonight, but tomorrow is going to be light. If I hammer all of this out before I leave, I can tag along — no problem. And, I can make sure you eat something besides potato chips and coffee.”

“I never eat potato chips with my coffee,” Paige teased.

“Tell the boss you’ll have company,” Dax decided. “I’ll make it work on my end.”

“Alright,” Paige relented. “See you tonight.”

Dax pulled the vehicle up to the curb and parked a few feet before the driveway. “Looks like a nice place.”

“Yeah,” Paige unfastened the seatbelt. “Scott said his late wife loved it here because of the beauty and the peaceful feeling. I can see why. He made the right call. This had to be a great place to relax during the last few months of her pregnancy.”

“I’ll stay close,” Dax shut down the engine. “I’m just going to head up the sidewalk and stretch my legs.”

Paige pushed open the door and climbed from the truck. “I shouldn’t be long. Let’s grab something to eat once I’m done.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Dax said, stepping in next to her. He brushed a hand over her knuckles then leaned against the hood and watched her make her way to the front door. He

Genetic Impersonation

continued to wait until she disappeared inside before he pushed off the truck and strolled down the sidewalk.

“Mrs. Bennett,” Paige settled onto the large leather couch. “This shouldn’t take long.”

“Can I offer you something to drink?” Natasha Bennett asked.

“No, thank you.” Paige shifted. “I’m fine. I have just a few questions. Do you mind if I record this, so I don’t have to come back and bother you again?”

“Oh,” Natasha’s hand reached for the pearl necklace she wore, and she began to fidget. “I suppose that’s okay.”

“Thank you,” Paige switched on the recorder. “Mrs. Bennett, as I mentioned to you on the phone when I called yesterday, I wanted to talk to you about the time when your daughter came to stay with you and she was pregnant with Cara.”

“Please, call me Natasha,” she requested. “I do remember you saying that, but I don’t understand. Why are you here to talk about my late daughter and the birth of her first child?”

“When was the last time you spoke to Scott?” Paige diverted.

“Um,” Natasha stared at the mantle in concentration. “I’d say it’s been nearly a year ago. I’ve been so busy with Liam and Scott’s students keep him busy. Then, with that horrible virus... well, we haven’t wanted company. They say it hits those in our age bracket harder than most. I wanted to be careful, you understand.”

“I do,” Paige agreed. “So, did you see Scott a year ago, or just talk on the phone?”

“We don’t have a lot of interaction with Scott these days,” Natasha admitted. “We did when Nadia was here. We saw the kids several times a year. As you probably know, Scott was in the Marines. He traveled a lot and Nadia moved with him when she could. They spent three whole years in Japan. That was difficult, but Nadia flew home once a year to check on us and have a short visit. Now that’s she’s gone, it’s difficult but Cara tries to come by and every once in a while, Scott will call or if he’s in the area, he might drop in.”

“So, when was the last time you spoke with Cara?” Paige already knew the answer, Cara hadn’t called since she got the DNA results. She didn’t know what to say to her grandmother and she was afraid the perceptive woman might sense something wrong.

Genetic Impersonation

“I’d say it’s been... oh, maybe a month ago,” Natasha struggled to remember. “Now that I think about it, maybe two months. I think she called in April, just after all this crazy virus stuff began.”

“Alright,” Paige continued. “Cara is dating a man by the name of Dean Bridges.”

“That’s right,” Natasha smiled. “He’s that handsome young police officer. I spoke to him last Christmas. He seems like a very delightful young man.”

“Dean is a friend of mine,” Paige smiled. “I’ll tell him you said so.”

“Please do,” Natasha dropped the necklace and clasped her hands in her lap.

“I’m here because Dean asked me to look into something for him,” Paige was watching Natasha Bennett closely. The woman was nervous. “There are some questions, about Cara’s birth. Since Nadia was here, staying with you when Cara was born, I was hoping you might be able to fill in some blanks for me.”

“Oh,” Natasha glanced away. “What kind of blanks?”

“Scott said he was deployed to Kuwait when Nadia was about five months along,” Paige frowned at the way Natasha was fidgeting. “They thought, since Nadia had such a difficult time getting pregnant, the peace and quiet might help her during those last few months and she wouldn’t have to be alone.”

“That’s right,” Natasha glanced at Paige then immediately looked down at her hands.

“Do you remember how long Nadia stayed,” Paige asked. “I mean after Cara was born. I believe Scott said once he returned to the states they moved to Texas.”

“I think it was a month, maybe two,” Natasha continued to fidget and wring her hands.

“Mrs. Bennett,” Paige studied the woman carefully. “Why are you so nervous?”

“It’s just,” Natasha glanced around the room. “Well, you’re the police and I’m worried about Liam. I don’t normally leave him alone this long. I’m afraid we’ll need to cut this short. If you have more questions, please ask them. I need to go check on my husband.”

“Alright,” Paige considered. “Maybe, instead of me asking you questions, you could just describe that time to me. Tell me about Nadia, about her pregnancy, about her daily routine.”

“Before or after the baby was born?”

“Both,” Paige settled back to wait.

Genetic Impersonation

“Well,” Natasha took a deep breath then let it out. “Nadia was a fragile girl. She was always delicate that way but more so when she was pregnant. She spent most of her time relaxing out on the deck or inside, downstairs in our recreation area. We have comfortable couches down there and Nadia could put her feet up and relax.”

“Anything unusual with Nadia or the pregnancy?” Paige wondered.

“I still don’t understand why you are here asking these questions,” Natasha objected.

“I’m just trying to get a clear picture, that’s all,” Paige said calmly. “Scott said Nadia had several miscarriages during their marriage. I’m just wondering if Nadia was having problems with this pregnancy. Did the doctor have her on bedrest? Could she get around okay? Did she get tired easily?”

“Scott had no right to tell you that,” Natasha frowned. “That’s personal. It was private.”

“He wasn’t gossiping or criticizing,” Paige didn’t want to cause problems between this woman and her son-in-law. “He was explaining why Cara was such a miracle. Why they were both so happy to start their family. And, why they were careful. Why he asked her to come stay with you while he was away.”

“Oh,” Natasha shifted in her seat. “I suppose that’s okay, then.”

“So,” Paige pushed. “Did Nadia have medical issues before she gave birth?”

“She wasn’t on bedrest,” Natasha said sternly. “She did get tired, but our doctor said that was normal.”

“Can you tell me about the time after Nadia brought the baby home from the hospital?” Paige wondered.

“Nadia didn’t go to a hospital,” Natasha admitted. “She had the baby here.”

“She did?” Paige sat back. “Why was that?”

“We have a private doctor,” Natasha explained. “There was no reason for her to leave. We knew she’d be more comfortable here at home, in her own bed.”

“Did Nadia grow up here, in this house?”

“She did,” Natasha said proudly.

“And when she returned, to stay while Scott was on leave, did she reside in that same childhood bedroom?”

“Of course,” Natasha raised her chin a little higher. “She loved that room.”

Genetic Impersonation

Paige thought about her bedroom, in the house where she now lived. The last thing she'd want to do is have a baby in there. Her thoughts turned to the Master Bedroom. That was her private space, an intimate space she shared with Dax. She certainly wouldn't want to give birth in their bed — that was just... icky. She wondered how Nadia felt about going into labor and having a child in the bed she had when she was... well, a child. "Did she have a nursery for Cara or did the baby stay in the room with Nadia?" Paige tried to get the interview back on track.

"There was a small room that I used as a sewing room," Natasha continued, unfazed by the delay. "We put the baby in there. It was right next to Nadia's room, so it seemed like the perfect solution."

Solution? Did Natasha view Cara as a problem in need of a solution? "Did Nadia stay inside the house, or did she go out? Like for walks or a drive into town for lunch just to get some fresh air?"

"After the baby was born?" Natasha asked.

"Yes," Paige nodded. "Did she have a stroller she used to take Cara for walks, or did she spend time walking around the neighborhood or shopping for baby clothes?"

"Not really," Natasha shuddered. She remembered that time, right after Nadia gave birth. Her daughter had been depressed all the time. She wouldn't eat, wouldn't sit outside, she wouldn't even leave her room.

Paige studied the woman; something wasn't right here. She needed more information, but she wasn't going to get it from Natasha. "I don't want to keep you from Liam much longer," Paige offered. "Could I just get the name of the doctor, the private doctor you mentioned. The one that was here for the birth."

"Why?" Natasha looked at Paige in panic. "I mean, he probably won't remember. That was so long ago, and he's been retired for years. Why would you want to talk to him?"

"Just tying up loose ends," Paige stood. "Like I said before, trying to fill in some of the blanks for Dean."

"I don't think there are any blanks to fill in," Natasha disagreed. "Our private doctor's name was Brent Harris. He's obviously retired now, and I've heard he's in bad health. I hope you won't go over and upset him. He's a good man."

"I'm not here to upset anyone, Mrs. Bennett," Paige moved toward the door. "You should check on your husband and I hope you can enjoy the rest of your day."

Paige walked to her car, deep in thought. Once she reached it, she realized Dax hadn't made it back. She slid open the passenger door, secured her recorder inside the glove

Genetic Impersonation

compartment and straightened. Shifting so she could glance around and see if she could spot her husband. She smiled when she saw him and immediately headed that way.

“Now try it,” Dax waited for the boy to get a good grip on the bike before he stood.

Paige paused a few feet away and watched a grinning boy slowly climb onto his bike and cautiously press on the peddle. He slowly pressed the other one then, realizing his chain really was repaired, he stood up, peddled faster, and rejoined his friends. “Not bad for a city boy.”

“Whose calling me city?” Dax cocked his head to study Paige. “I’m guessing the interview didn’t go the way you planned.” He reached out to take her hand, but Paige jumped back.

“No way,” Paige shook her head. “You’ve got grease all over you and this is my good suit.”

Dax plucked an old torn, filthy towel off the ground and carefully wiped all the grease off his hands. “What do you say? Wanna ditch the ride home, find a cheap motel and get dirty?”

“Nope,” Paige turned and started to walk away. She laughed when Dax caught her around the waist with one arm and pulled her backwards. “Let’s find somewhere to eat,” he whispered in her ear. “I’m starving. And you can fill me in on the interview and what has you so worried.”

Paige was silent all the way back to the truck. Once she climbed into the passenger seat, she waited for Dax to start up the engine and pull away.

“Talk to me,” Dax took her hand and linked fingers. He lifted it to his mouth and brushed light kisses over her knuckles. “What happened?”

“She was nervous,” Paige looked out the side window. “Really, really nervous. I tried to help her relax, but it didn’t help. She knows something and my gut is telling me, whatever happened out here, in that ranch house, twenty-four years ago, it wasn’t a normal birth.”

“Are you saying... is it Nadia?”

“Yes,” Paige looked at him. “Nadia came here to stay with her mother while her husband was on a military mission of some kind. She moved back into her childhood room and gave birth on her teenage bed.”

Dax made a strange face. “Weird. I’ll give you that, but it doesn’t mean nefarious.”

“No,” Paige sighed. “But it does seem just a little too convenient. Nadia gives birth at home with a private doctor for the rich and years later, her daughter discovers she wasn’t really Nadia’s baby after all.”

“So,” Dax wondered. “You didn’t get anything you can use from the interview?”

Genetic Impersonation

“She gave me the name of her private doctor,” Paige shrugged. “It’s something, but Natasha said he’s ill and I may not be able to talk to him.”

“But you want to try?” Dax realized. “Before or after we eat?”

“I thought you were starved.”

“I am,” Dax grinned. “Just goes to show how much I’m willing to sacrifice for my wife. It must be true love.”

“After,” Paige decided. “I’m sure the second I left; Natasha was on the phone to her doctor. I doubt we’ll get anything from him.”

“Alright,” Dax pulled into the parking of a small café. “We eat, then we’ll head over and interrogate the doctor. Maybe this time I can watch.”

“You are so not funny,” Paige gave him a shove toward the door. Dax held open the door and motioned her inside.

Paige, Jericho, Dean and Cara were seated around the large conference room table.

“What are you saying?” Cara asked. “Be specific and spell it out for me.”

“I can’t be specific,” Paige gave her a sympathetic look. “I haven’t figured it all out, yet.”

There was a knock on the door. Margie stepped inside and glanced around the room. “There’s a man by the name of Scott Bentley here.” She glanced at Dean, then Cara. “He said he wants to speak with his daughter, and he wants to be included in the meeting.”

Cara stood. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Bring him in,” Paige decided. “I don’t think he knows what’s going on either and he deserves answers just like you do.”

“Are you sure?” Dean looked at her in surprise.

“I am,” Paige focused on Dean. “You interviewed him. What do you think? Have you changed your mind about him?”

“No,” Dean answered immediately. “I trust Scott. It’s just...”

Genetic Impersonation

“I don’t know him well enough to know if I trust him,” Paige cut in. “But I do trust my instincts. And, my gut is telling me that man has believed Cara is his daughter for the past twenty-four years. He’s just as upset and confused as she is and maybe, together, we can figure this all out.”

Scott and Cara Bentley entered the room. Cara settled back into the chair next to Dean. Scott took the seat next to her.

“Hello, Mr. Bentley,” Paige greeted.

“I prefer Scott,” he glanced at Jericho then focused on Paige. “Do you have any answers?”

“Not really,” Paige sighed. “I was about to go over my investigation so far and then I wanted to discuss where you want me to go from here.” She proceeded to tell them what she had done so far and relayed her conversation with Natasha to the group.

“You think my wife kidnapped a child,” Scott finally whispered. “I don’t believe that’s possible. I know the DNA tests prove that Cara wasn’t my child. I’m going to have to learn to deal with that. It doesn’t change anything, not for me, but it was a betrayal. Unfortunately, my wife is no longer with us so I can’t demand answers. I’ll find a way through the disappointment and the confusion, but I won’t believe Nadia kidnapped a child from another mother. She understood the love, how precious and rewarding it was to have children in the home. She never would have maliciously and callously taken that special gift away from another mother. Not by force.”

“I agree with my father,” Cara told them. “I don’t know what happened, but I do know, without a doubt, my mother, the kind and generous woman who raised me, she wouldn’t inflict that kind of pain on another human being.”

Paige flipped on the computer and a list of names appeared on the wall. “I believe one of these men is your biological father. I’ve followed this as far as I can through your mother’s side. Natasha isn’t going to give us answers. Well, she’s not going to give them to me. I’m not sure if Cara could get her to break, eventually. The doctor had a stroke and, although it is possible to speak with him, he’s very difficult to understand and he’s got an entire lifetime of doctor patient privilege behind him. He won’t talk, I’m sure of that.”

“What are you planning to do with those names?” Scott asked.

“That’s up to you,” Paige shrugged. “Or Cara. There’s also one other name that I’ve located.” She clicked a button and the screen went to the next page.

“I know that name,” Cara moved closer to Dean. “I think she came up as a second or third cousin.”

Genetic Impersonation

“Second,” Paige nodded. “I believe this woman is related to your bio mom.”

“You want to contact her?” Scott asked.

“I think the logical next step is to either contact this woman,” Paige pointed to the screen that read Amber Walker. She flipped the page backwards. “Or, I start contacting these men and see if any of them might have had a child in 1996.”

“Dad?” Cara reached out and took her father’s hand. “I need to know what you think.”

“It makes me nervous,” he admitted. “You are my daughter. I can’t stop feeling that way, but you might also be the daughter of one of them.”

“I am your daughter,” Cara gave his hand a squeeze. “That will never change. But don’t you want to know?”

“What if your mother did something terrible?” Scott focused on Cara. “What if she took you away from parents that wanted you. From one of those men and they have lived over two decades not knowing what happened to you?”

“I don’t believe that happened,” Paige answered immediately.

“Why?” Scott asked in wonder.

“Because I couldn’t find a report,” Paige focused on Scott Bentley. “I looked. I searched the entire state of Colorado. Then, I moved to Utah, up to Wyoming and over to Nebraska and Kansas. I even checked New Mexico. I can’t find a single child that went missing during the time your wife gave birth. I can’t find a baby girl that was snatched from a hospital. I can’t find an infant that was kidnapped or stolen during those two months after Nadia gave birth and before you returned from Kuwait. There are missing children, but none of the abductions happened during those two months in those areas and involved newborn baby girls.”

“What if she went somewhere else?” Scott pressed. “What if she took this precious little girl away from someone that wanted her, someone that loved her?”

“Do you think that’s what happened?” Paige asked. “Because just a few minutes ago you told me you were absolutely positive your wife didn’t do that.”

“No,” Scott whispered. “I don’t have another explanation, but I don’t believe Nadia would do that.”

Cara glanced at her dad, then she looked at Dean. “I think we should contact the woman. If I was an unwanted pregnancy, my bio mom might not have told the father I exist. But she wouldn’t be able to hide a large lump from family. That woman is related through my mother. If she doesn’t know anything, her mom might, or her grandmother might.”

Genetic Impersonation

“You were never unwanted,” Scott focused on his daughter. “Please, no matter what we find, you have to know you were always wanted.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Cara leaned in and gave her father a hug. “I know you wanted me. I know mom did. I’m just saying, what if my biological mother didn’t want to get pregnant. What if she just hooked up for one night and didn’t know who the father was. What if she was desperate and alone and she needed a way out. I could see mom stepping in to help. Can’t you?”

“Yes,” Scott swallowed hard. “I just wish I knew what happened to my baby. Nadia was pregnant when I left her. Where is my little girl or my little boy? I don’t even know if my child was a daughter or another son.” He jumped to his feet. “Excuse me, I need some fresh air.”

Paige watched him leave. “Will he be able to handle this?”

“Yes,” Cara moved to stand but Jericho stopped her.

“I think I could use a little fresh air myself,” he stood and silently left the room.

“He’s in good hands,’ Paige assured her.

“Yeah,” Dean pulled Cara into a hug. “You going to be okay?”

“I’m just worried about dad,” Cara stared at the empty doorway. “I didn’t stop to think how this was going to impact him. I just needed to know so I pushed forward. It was selfish of me.”

“I think it was smart,” Paige told her. “Right now, you are in a place in your life where you have people that can help you. I’m a trained investigator. I have access to systems and people that you don’t. It was smart to ask Dean for help and it was smart of Dean to refuse. This could get messy and it’s better that I was the one to uncover the truth. That gives Dean the opportunity to be your support system. And your dads.”

“Are you sure he’s okay?” Cara worried.

“Better than okay,” Dean smiled. “He’s with the all-knowing Jericho Walters. Trust me, the boss has seen everything, done everything and even got the t-shirt. He’ll know what to say to your dad.

Once Scott and Jericho returned, the group worked to develop a plan, a strategy of where to go next and who to talk to first.

Genetic Impersonation

“You sure you want to do this?” Paige asked Dean. “I can just go in myself and let you listen to the tape.”

“I’m here,” Dean reached out and pressed the button to ring the bell. “I’m going in.”

The door slid open and a woman that couldn’t be more than forty stood in the opening. “Can I help you?”

“My name is Deputy Carter, and this is my partner, Deputy Bridges,” Paige held out her badge. “Are you Amber Walker?”

“I am,” the woman answered in surprise.

“I was hoping we could come inside and speak with you for a moment,” Paige was careful to keep her voice flat.

“Is something wrong?” the woman started to panic. “Jimmy, is Jimmy okay?”

“As far as we know,” Paige reached out to calm her. “We’re not here about Jimmy. Can we have just a minute of your time?”

“Alright,” Amber stepped to the side to allow room for the two officers to enter. “My son, Jimmy, he’s with a friend. He’s just down the road but I thought…”

“I’m sorry about that,” Paige settled onto the edge of a chair. The room was cozy, but cluttered. Normal for a single mom with a rambunctious child. “How old is Jimmy?”

“He’s nine,” Amber settled onto the couch and pulled her legs beneath her. “I don’t want to be rude or anything, but can you tell me why you are here?”

“Deputy Carter is helping me with something,” Dean began. “It started out as a private matter, but now we’re conducting an official investigation to try and determine the facts.”

“How does that involve me?” Amber asked softly.

“I’m dating a woman by the name of Cara Bentley,” Dean began then paused. “You know her?”

“We’ve never met,” Amber evaded. “I did send her a message about a month ago, but she didn’t get back to me.”

“Can I ask why you tried to contact her?” Paige asked before Dean could continue.

“How are you involved?” Amber focused on Paige.

Genetic Impersonation

“Cara brought a situation to me,” Dean told her. “Because we are dating and because I’m a police officer. I took a look and decided it was better to get a neutral party involved. Paige is our neutral party.”

“You said this was now an official investigation,” Amber studied Paige then focused on Dean. “What are you investigating?”

“First,” Paige spoke up. “I’d like to know why you tried to contact Ms. Bentley.”

“I think she might be my niece,” Amber told her.

“Not a cousin?” Paige asked.

“No,” Amber shook her head. “I know the DNA said that, but I don’t have any cousins that are unaccounted for.”

“But you do have a niece?” Paige asked.

“I don’t think I want to give you any further information until you answer my question,” Amber decided.

“I think you already know the answer,” Paige said flatly. “We are investigating the circumstances around Cara’s birth and how she came to live with the Bentley’s.”

“She doesn’t know?” Amber asked, surprised.

“No,” Dean shook his head. “Until we did that DNA test, she had no idea the Bentley’s were not her biological parents.

“Why didn’t anyone tell her?” Amber asked, getting angry. “If I knew she was unaware of the connection, I never would have contacted her that way. I would have been more... I don’t know, cautious.”

“Who should have told her?” Dean asked.

“Her mother, of course,” Amber stood and began to pace. “She had to tell her father about it, so he could have told her. Someone. I don’t know. They were supposed to be a loving family. They promised my sister they would love that sweet little baby and give her a good home.”

“They?” Dean pushed. Was Scott involved in this after all?

“She,” Amber corrected. “I should have said she.”

“Amber,” Paige stood and moved to stand in front of her, blocking her path. “Cara’s mother passed away when she was a teenager. She didn’t tell her anything. Her father didn’t

Genetic Impersonation

know Cara wasn't his biological daughter. Nadia never told him. We are here to try to get answers for a family that is a little lost at the moment. I think you have those answers. I hope you will share them with us, so we can explain what happened and give a confused and baffled family the answers they desperately need."

Amber stared at Paige in disbelief. After several seconds she focused on Dean. "They didn't know?"

"They didn't," Dean said softly.

Amber sighed and returned to the couch. "Chloe, my twin sister, she was the wild one. Growing up, she was the girl that took all the risks. She was the one that convinced me to do things that I knew would get us into trouble. But Chloe had a way of talking people into anything."

"You were twins, so you were close?" Paige asked.

"Very," Amber nodded. "Chloe and I were inseparable until we turned fifteen. That's when I began to say no. I was tired of getting into trouble and I wanted more out of life. Chloe just wanted to party. So, when she started to hang with the troublemakers, I pulled away. I made new friends, went to school dances and football games. Chloe went to raves and underground kegers where she got drunk out of her mind and usually a little high."

"You took drastically different paths?" Paige offered.

Amber laughed. "That's one way to put it. Anyway, at sixteen Chloe was out of control. My parents basically gave up on her. They tried everything, but the more rules they gave her, the more fun it was to break those rules. I even tried to talk some sense into her. She was partying every night; she had no hope of graduating from high school let alone get into college, and she didn't seem to care about anything but her next fix. Her friends weren't friends. They used her, then ignored her. She hooked up with a guy named Donny or Darrell, I can't remember — I think it was Donny. He was a real jerk. He got her hooked on Jungle Juice and pot, then he dumped her.

There was another guy, he was nice enough and he seemed to treat Chloe well. I got the impression he just wanted to help. I actually felt sorry for the guy. I think he was her rebound guy. Chloe hooked up with him for a few months then dumped him the way Donny dumped her. I saw him about a week later and he looked crushed. Anyway, my sister was headed for disaster when she found out she was pregnant. That's when we all thought she was going to change. She did, until after she had the baby. Then, she went back to her old ways. She was supposed to be breast-feeding Luna, but she stopped abruptly and switched to baby formula.

The next thing we knew, she would get the baby to sleep, then sneak out the window. I did what I could to help when Luna woke up in the middle of the night, but I was still in high school.

Genetic Impersonation

I was just a kid, trying to get good grades and hang with my friends. I didn't want the responsibility that came with raising a kid. And I resented Chloe, what she was doing to our family, how she treated me and my parents. I helped some, but it was her problem, not mine. So, the brunt of it landed on mom but she couldn't stay up all night and function at work all day. Something had to give, and it did. Chloe took Luna shopping one day. She had dropped out of school by then and she was just hanging out, wandering aimlessly when she ran into her old gang. They wanted to party, but Chloe had a kid now. I can't tell you what happened after that. Chloe wasn't all that clear. I can guess. Chloe decided to ditch the kid and get high. I don't know if she gave Luna to the woman while she was sober or after she was high. She just came home alone.

Mom freaked out, wanted to know where the baby was. Chloe told her to chill out. She found a good home for Luna and the baby was better off — and so were we. Mom was livid. How can you go out shopping one morning and give your own baby to a stranger? She tried to retrace Chloe's steps, talked to shop owners, and even tracked down some of her friends, but nobody knew anything. Nobody saw Chloe with another woman. I tried to get answers from my sister but she either didn't have the answers or she refused to give us anything that would help. Finally, we just had to accept what happened and hope Chloe was right. I never stopped thinking about baby Luna, but I also knew we'd never find her. One night, just before Chloe died, she told me she gave her baby to a woman who really, really wanted a little girl. She said the woman was sad because her baby had just died. Chloe decided it was the perfect solution. She wouldn't be encumbered by a baby and the woman wanted to be a mother."

Paige just stared at Amber in disbelief. "You never thought to report the child as missing?"

"Was she missing?" Amber challenged. "Luna's mother found her a new home. One she believed was a good home where Luna would be loved and provided for. It was like an instant adoption without all the money and the paperwork. We searched; my mom never stopped searching. I think to this day, she still walks down the sidewalk and wonders, could that woman be baby Luna?"

Paige started to object. How could a woman give a baby to a stranger? How could the family just accept that decision and hope for the best? But Amber was technically right. The infant wasn't a missing person. Cara's mother had willingly given her baby to a stranger. "And now?"

"Now what?" Amber asked.

"You said Chloe died," Paige reminded her. "Can you tell us how?"

"Overdose," Amber whispered. "We lost Chloe to alcohol and drugs. We also lost Luna to the same thing because it was the drugs and the partying that made Chloe casually give her own

Genetic Impersonation

baby to a stranger. Chloe didn't make it to twenty. The cops found her body alone and discarded in a flop house."

"I'm sorry," Paige said softly.

"It was a long time ago," Amber cleared her throat. "Anyway, when I got that match with Cara Bentley, I wondered. So, I decided what the heck, maybe I could give this to Mom. She's struggled, a lot. She blames herself. Losing Chloe, we all basically knew that would happen if she couldn't get her life together. Losing Luna... that was something none of us ever really got over. I struggled with my own guilt, wondering if I'd helped out more, if Chloe wouldn't have felt so overwhelmed. Mom thinks she pushed Chloe too hard, and she just gave up and took the easy way out. The not knowing was the hardest. Was Luna still alive? Was she dead, buried somewhere as baby Jane Doe? Or, did she get lucky and land a good home with a good family like Chloe insisted?"

"She landed in a good home with a good family that loved her and cared for her," Dean told her.

"I'm glad," Amber brushed back a tear. "Will you ask her if I can meet her sometime? And Mom. My mom would really love to meet her. We've tried to accept what is and move on, but you never do. I can't tell you how much that would mean to Mom."

"I'll ask her," Paige gave Amber her card. "You can tell your mom we came and if she has questions, have her call me on that number."

Amber took the card.

"I have one more question," Dean waited for her to settle back on the couch. "Do you know who the father was?"

"Not for sure," Amber sighed. "I like to think it was that good guy and not Donny, I think his name was Mitch. He was really good to my sister. Chloe was horrible to him. She was still hurting after Donny tossed her aside for some new girl, but Mitch was there for her, in a good way. He tried to dial back the partying and he was trying to help her at least graduate from high school. I remember coming home one night. Mitch was sitting at the kitchen table doing Chloe's homework for her. I asked him why he bothered. He just said he could see Chloe's potential, even if nobody else could."

"Thank you," Paige stood. "That helps."

"You know which one it is," Amber realized.

"I do," Paige affirmed.

"Who?"

Genetic Impersonation

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for me to share that right now,” Paige held up a hand when she could see Amber was about to argue. “We had more than one possibility and you just answered that question for me. I won’t tell you who Cara’s father is before I tell her.”

Amber relaxed. “That’s fair. I hope she’ll tell me some day herself. Either way, I may be able to help her deal with the fallout.”

Dean stood, then paused and turned to look at Amber. “Thank you. I appreciate your willingness to tell us about your sister and her baby. I know Cara will be just as grateful.”

“So,” Paige turned to face Dean once they were back in the car. “Do we go talk to the father or do we let Cara do that?”

“I’ll talk to Cara,” Dean decided. “I think she’ll want to do that herself. If she doesn’t bring Scott with her, I’ll be there for her.”

“Alright,” Paige grinned. “Then let’s make one more stop before we head home.”

Dean snapped in his seatbelt. “Where are we going?”

“I have a few more questions for Natasha Bennett.”

It was late when Paige stepped into the house and made her way up the stairs. She dropped her gear in the closet and silently slipped into bed. Dax’s arms instantly went around her waist and he pulled her against him.

“Was it worth a second trip to Colorado?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Paige grinned. “Now, go back to sleep. I’ll explain everything in the morning.”

And, she did. Over breakfast, she relayed the story Amber told her and Dean about a drugged-out teenager and a woman who had just lost her miracle baby.

“So,” Dax sipped his coffee. “Did Natasha come clean on your second visit?”

“How did you know I went back to question Natasha?”

“Because I know you,” Dax shrugged. “Did she shed any more light on things or was it just confirmation of what Amber told you about her sister?”

Genetic Impersonation

“Mostly confirmation,” Paige admitted. “Once I started to relay the story, she caved. It went down basically the way Amber said it did. Chloe ran into her old friends while she was out walking. Cara’s mom, Nadia, had been called into the shop because some of the items she ordered for her own baby had arrived. She went downtown to see if she could get some of the money refunded and ran into Chloe. Basically, the girl just abandoned her kid to dart into an alleyway and get high. Nadia stepped in and cared for the baby until the mother returned. Chloe returned high, complimented Nadia, and told her she was a natural mother. Then, Chloe offered her baby to Nadia. She jumped on it and whisked Cara away before Chloe could change her mind.

Once Nadia got home, she told her mother what happened. Natasha paid Dr. Brent Harris to change the official documents switching the babies identities. That day, Cara Bentley was officially born, and Luna Evans was buried in the family cemetery on the edge of the property next to Natasha’s brother.”

“Wow,” Dax sat back. “That’s some story. How is Cara and her father taking the news?”

“I think it was a relief,” Paige stood to clear the table. “Even though both of them insisted Nadia wouldn’t kidnap an innocent child, I think they worried they were wrong. This gives them closure, I guess.”

“Will they connect with Amber and her mother?”

“Once Scott moves here permanently, they are planning a casual gathering,” Paige told him. “Cara said she wants Dean there and they’ll keep it informal and public. Like a picnic at a park or something like that.”

“What about the father?” Dax wondered. “How does Cara feel about him?”

“It sounds like she’s going to try to contact him,” Paige shrugged. “Amber seemed to think Mitch Tuner was a good guy. I guess only time will tell.”