

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Precarious Misadventure

Season 5, Episode 4

by:

Melanie P. Smith



MPSmith Publishing

Copyright © 2020 Melanie P. Smith

First Edition | Series: Paige Carter
Edited by LaPriel Dye

* * *

No part of this document or the related files may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the Author.

www.melaniepsmith.com

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. All trademarks are the property of their owners and are acknowledged by the proper use of capitalization throughout.

Precarious Misadventure

“Cilla,” Trish pushed her way down the crowded hallway as she made her way to her friend’s locker.

Cilla looked up from her phone and spotted her best friend. She glanced down and started to read the message again.

“You seriously won’t believe what Casey did!” Trish leaned against the bank of lockers, glanced sideways, and frowned when she spotted her ex-boyfriend. “He is such a jerk.”

“Casey?” Cilla asked absently.

“No!” Trish shoved Cilla’s shoulder. “Nick. He thinks he’s so cool but he’s just a bully.”

Noise erupted around them, the crowd was chanting and laughing as they gathered at the other end of the hallway.

Cilla glanced up just in time to see Nick pushing Kyle into a nearby garbage can. Before she realized what Trish was doing, her friend had marched forward and was shoving Nick up against the wall.

“Leave him alone,” Trish demanded.

“What’s your problem, Trish?” Nick shoved her hand away.

“You’re everyone’s problem,” Trish growled. “Picking on someone smaller than you... that’s just mean. It’s not cool.” She stood there, glaring at him, and blocking his escape.

Cilla pushed her way through the growing crowd and helped Kyle climb from the large plastic garbage can. As he began to stand, he tripped and they both tumbled to the ground in a tangled heap. Cilla’s phone slid across the slick floor and collided with Trish’s foot.

Trish leaned down, snatched up the phone and stared at the screen in shock. She whipped around and focused on Cilla. “Ben?”

Nick seized the opportunity, shoved past Trish, and joined his friends. “I can’t believe I ever dated you.” He called over his shoulder as he walked away.

“Let’s go,” Cilla grabbed the phone from Trish, gripped her friends’ hand, and dragged her into the bathroom.

“Cilla,” Trish said the instant they stepped inside the girl’s room. “What are you going to do?”

“We,” Cilla corrected. “What should we do?”

Precarious Misadventure

“He wants to meet you,” Trish giggled. “He’s so hot and he wants to meet you. Ben is so... well, not Nick. You have to go.” She grabbed Cilla’s hands and began jumping around, excited. “You are going to go, right?”

A few seconds later, Cilla sobered. “I can’t go.”

“You have to,” Trish grabbed her friend’s phone and held it out for Cilla to see the screen. “You totally have to go.”

Cilla remembered her parents lecture on being safe online and never meeting anyone she didn’t know. “But...”

“I’ll come with you,” Trish offered.

“How?” Cilla asked. “Your mom won’t let you go, either.”

Trish glanced at the message again. Cilla and Ben had initially connected through an app called Whisper. After exchanging secrets for weeks, Ben convinced Cilla to download another app called MeetMe. Trish helped her friend create a fake profile using a birthdate that fooled the system into thinking they were eighteen. Then, for weeks the two friends had tracked Ben’s location; giggling and fantasizing each time he got close to one of their houses or the school. That was the whole purpose of the MeetMe app. You could monitor each other and hook up with people who lived in your community.

Ben was a neighbor, he had to be safe. And he was super-hot; there wasn’t anyone in their school that even came close. And he wanted to meet Cilla. That was cool, and it would be okay if they went together. Maybe he had a hot friend. At first Trish was jealous that he picked Cilla, but now she was happy for her friend. Anyway, after breaking up with Nick, Trish wasn’t ready to hook up again. They were only fifteen. She had plenty of time to find her own hunk. Hopefully, she’d meet someone mysterious like Ben. Someone that made her smile and giggle, the way Cilla did when she got another message from her new guy. One day Trish would have a boyfriend that made her smile. She frowned as she once again, thought of Nick. He made her smile, at first. Then, he was just a big jerk. All he cared about was impressing his friends. She missed him, the old Nick, but she didn’t even like this new Nick.

“Trish,” Cilla asked, annoyed. “I have to tell him yes or no. How would we get out? How can we meet up with Ben without our parents finding out?”

“You tell your parents you’re coming to my house to study for a test,” Trish offered. “I’ll tell my parents the same thing. We’ll hook up with Ben, get to know him, and see if he has some cool friends. Nobody will ever know. We just have to get home before curfew.”

“That could work,” Cilla considered. “It won’t be unusual or anything. Plus, my parents are going out of town this weekend.” She glanced back at the phone. “What if I tell him I can’t on

Precarious Misadventure

Thursday, but I'm free on Friday. I'll check in with my aunt Friday after school, tell her we have to work on a project and I'm going to stay at your place. She'll know not to check in until Saturday and that gives us plenty of time to hang out with Ben. You tell your mom you're going to stay at my place."

"That won't work," Trish disagreed. "I'll just tell her we are working at your place, but I'll be home before midnight. Otherwise, she'll call your mom and we'll get busted."

"Right," Cilla gripped her phone and hesitated. "There's no going back. If I say yes, we have to go."

"Say yes," Trish nodded. "This is going to be so cool!"

"He said to meet him on the north side of the building," Cilla was trying to hide the excitement, but Trish could hear it in her tone. They were best friends and had been since... forever.

"Let's just go over and sit on the ledge of that cement wall thing," Trish offered. "We can see the doors and the parking lot from there."

"It's dark back here," Cilla frowned. "I wonder why he wanted us to meet on this side instead of over where the lighting is better."

"Maybe he wanted the first meeting to be a little more private," Trish offered. "You don't think he'll be mad, do you? That I'm here, I mean."

"No," Cilla shrugged. "And if he is, he'll just have to deal with it. You're my best friend, he has to like you for this to work."

"Thanks," Trish wrapped an arm around Cilla's shoulder in support. "It's going to be fine. He liked you enough to want to meet in person. Once he does, he'll recognize all your awesomeness and there's no way he could resist."

Cilla grinned. "Thanks for being here. You know I would have chickened out if it wasn't for you. I owe you one."

"Is that him?" Trish squinted at the bright headlights headed their way. "He drives a van?" she giggled a little and covered her mouth. She didn't want to upset Cilla. Maybe the van belonged to his dad or something.

"What's he doing?" Cilla asked when the van came to an abrupt stop. The side door slid open and a man jumped out.

Precarious Misadventure

“It’s her,” the guy called over his shoulder. “What’s it gonna be?”

“Grab them both,” the driver decided. A second man jumped from the back of the van. The two strangers lunged forward, each wrapping strong arms around one of the girls.

Trish screamed.

The man holding her tightened his grip with one arm and wrapped his hand through her long thick hair with the other. He gave it a forceful yank and put his mouth next to her ear. “Scream again and you die,” he growled.

Trish swallowed hard but remained silent.

“Did you leave your phone at home like you were told?” the man holding Cilla demanded.

Cilla nodded.

The man pushed her against the van and patted her down. “She’s clear.”

The second man shoved Trish up against the van next to her friend. “What about you?”

Trish turned and slid her phone into Cilla’s palm. Then she waited while the second guy searched her. Once he was satisfied she didn’t bring her phone with her, they threw both of the girls into the back of the van. Then, the men climbed in and the van sped away.

“Where’s Ben?” Trish finally asked. The van didn’t have seats, just a large empty cargo area. Trish had her back pushed up against the metal panel, one arm wrapped around a sobbing Cilla. She slipped the phone from Cilla’s hand and slid it into her pocket.

The driver laughed.

“Are you Ben?” Trish wondered.

“You’re not such a stupid girl after all,” the driver smirked. “I take that back, you two did fall for the fake photo and the name... I can’t believe you didn’t pick up on the name.”

The other two men joined in with their own cynical, menacing laughter.

“You said your name is Ben,” Trish pushed down the bile that was trying to rise up her throat. She had to remain calm. If she could keep them talking, they wouldn’t realize she was tracking their route.

“Yeah,” the driver laughed again. “Ben Dover, and this is my friend, Percy Vere.”

The men burst out laughing and shaking their heads.

Precarious Misadventure

Trish realized the names were fake. No use asking who the third occupant was. Anything they said would be dumb and made up just like the others. Instead, she concentrated on remembering their faces. The man in the passenger seat was at least thirty. Who did she know that was thirty? Her neighbor, Danny Broadbent. He said he was thirty-two. Trish focused on the men. They looked about the same age as her neighbor. Okay, three men, all in their thirties. Ben, the driver, was blonde but his hair looked dirty and messy. Was he related to the kid in the photo or did he just find a fake picture that resembled him? Once her parents realized they were missing, they might be able to find this Ben guy on Cilla's phone. They wouldn't find him, though. They'd be looking for a kid with blonde hair and blue eyes. They wouldn't be looking for this man or his friends.

"Shut that one up," the passenger they identified as Percy barked. "You know how much Niko hates the emotional ones."

Trish tightened her grip on Cilla and shifted closer. "You have to stop crying. We'll be okay. I promise, we are going to get out of this... somehow."

"I'm just saying," Paige shrugged. "We have enough problems in this country, celebrities from Hollywood, the NFL and the NBA shouldn't stoke the flames just for another fifteen minutes, that's all."

"But doesn't being famous mean they have a way to promote their views to the masses?" Gage asked.

"Sure," Paige agreed. "But it would be more beneficial to everyone if they did something productive, like use their platform to promote peace. They could tell those kids it's okay to believe different things and disagree. Independent thinking is what makes us human."

"I..." Gage stopped abruptly when a couple that was in obvious distress stepped through the front door. "Maybe we should finish this later."

"Good idea," Paige stood. "Like the next time we have to work on a Saturday while Havi and Dean enjoy their weekend racing expensive death machines around a track." She turned and made her way to the front desk. "Hi," she reached out a hand. "I'm Deputy Paige Carter, can I help you?"

"We need to talk to someone about..." the man swallowed hard and pulled the fragile woman closer.

Precarious Misadventure

“Our daughter is missing,” the woman closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then refocused on Paige. “Something is terribly wrong. We need your help.”

“Let’s head into the conference room,” Paige suggested and motioned for Gage to join her. Once they were settled around the large table, Paige took the lead. “Maybe you could start by telling us about your daughter. Just the basics, her name, her date of birth, when was the last time you saw her, that sort of thing.”

“Alright,” the man glanced at his wife. “I guess we should actually begin by telling you who we are. My name is Oliver Miles, and this is my wife, Reese.”

“Great,” Paige jotted down the names. “And this is my partner, Deputy Gage Clayton.”

“Our daughter is Trish Miles and she is fifteen years old.” Reese relayed her daughter’s birthdate, their home address, and their home phone number. “Trish also has a cell phone, but we’ve tried it at least a hundred times and she’s not answering. I know she’s a teenager and you’re going to say she just ran away, but she didn’t.”

“Before we get into that,” Gage soothed. “Tell us about the last time you saw your daughter.”

“Friday, after school,” Reese said immediately. “She said she had a school project and was going to spend the evening with her best friend, Cilla Walcott.”

“Have you talked to Cilla?” Paige wondered.

“She’s missing, too,” Reese admitted.

“Is it possible they went to a party,” Paige asked. “Or, maybe out of town for the weekend with some friends?”

“No,” the couple said immediately.

“Alright,” Paige sighed inwardly. “Have you spoken to Cilla’s parents? Maybe the girls are with them.”

“They were out of town,” Oliver provided. “I spoke with Noah. He and Skylar are on their way back. We didn’t want to wait any longer. We know you will wait before trying to search for the girls, so we wanted to make the report as soon as possible.”

“That’s not always the case,” Gage interjected. “So, Cilla’s parents are Noah and Skylar Walcott?”

“Do you know them?” Paige asked.

“I do,” Gage affirmed. “Noah works for ESPN.”

Precarious Misadventure

“Oh,” Reese gasped. “You’re that Gage Clayton.”

“I am,” Gage nodded. “So, you have ruled out the Walcott’s. Tell us about the encounter after school.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Reese began. “Trish came home from school, changed, and said she was headed over to Cilla’s to work on a project.”

“Did she arrive home on time?” Paige asked. “After school.”

“Oh,” Reese considered. “Yes. I was a little surprised when she immediately said she was heading to Cilla’s, but it was the beginning of the weekend and the girls are good students.”

“Those two have been inseparable since the first grade,” Oliver added. “There wasn’t anything unusual about Trish spending the evening with Cilla.”

“Did you expect her home that night?” Gage asked.

“Yes,” Reese nodded. “Trish said they had a lot of work to do, but she’d be home before curfew. I told her I love her and to make sure she got something to eat,” Reese pressed her lips together in an attempt to control the quiver, swallowed visibly then continued. “She hugged me, told me not to wait up and headed out the door. That’s the last time we saw our little girl.”

“And when she didn’t come home last night?” Paige wondered.

“We didn’t notice until this morning,” Oliver admitted. “The girls, they’re good kids. We’ve never had a problem. If Trish says she’ll be home before curfew, she’s always home. We decided to enjoy a rare quiet evening alone.”

“We had a little too much wine and both of us fell asleep just after eleven,” Reese admitted. “We got up, I made breakfast, and when Ollie went up to wake Trish to join us, he saw she was missing.”

“Her bed was empty,” Oliver told them. “It was obvious she hadn’t slept in it.”

“I called the Walcott residence but just got the machine,” Reese told them. “We tried calling Trish, but her phone immediately goes to voicemail.”

“The phone has to be dead or turned off,” Oliver added. “It rings once and then flips over to the message.”

“If the girls decided not to work on the school project,” Gage looked from Oliver to Reese. “If they decided it was Friday night and they wanted to head out and have a little fun, where would they go?”

“They wouldn’t...” Reese began.

Precarious Misadventure

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Oliver told them. “First, I want to say we’ve never had a problem with Trish. She’s always been honest with us. But she is fifteen and... well, we can all remember what it was like to be in high school.”

“Is there a place they would go,” Paige asked. “To party with some friends from school? Maybe a boyfriend she might meet?”

“They wouldn’t...” Reese began again.

“Sweetheart,” Oliver took his wife’s hand. “We did.”

Reese sighed. “I know. I just... I think she would tell me if there was someone. She hasn’t seemed interested, not since Nick.”

“Who is Nick?” Paige asked.

“Nick Garcetti?” Gage asked.

“Yes,” Reese frowned.

“Trish dated Nick for several months,” Oliver provided. “I don’t know what happened, but Trish was really upset about it when they broke up.”

“He broke her heart,” Reese nodded. “Since then, Trish hasn’t seemed interested in boys.”

“Is it possible the girls went somewhere with this Nick person?” Paige wondered.

“I doubt it,” Gage provided. “Nick has been going through some... growing pains, I suppose you would call them. He’s a good kid, just a little lost at the moment. He’s dealing with some family problems. His mom had to take a second job and Nick is the one caring for his younger siblings. He doesn’t socialize much outside of school these days. His only outside activity is football.”

“So,” Paige considered. “Last night, when the girls went missing, Nick would have been home caring for his siblings?”

“Exactly,” Gage considered.

“So,” Reese asked cautiously. “You will take a missing person report?”

“To be clear,” Paige didn’t answer the question. “Are you here to report your daughter missing, or will you be making a report about Cilla as well?”

“Both,” Oliver answered immediately. “If you need to speak with Noah, I can provide you the number. They should be here within the hour.”

Precarious Misadventure

Gage handed a notepad to the couple. “Can you take a minute and just jot down everything you can think of that might help?” He motioned for Paige to leave the room. “Give us Trish’s phone number, Cilla’s cell number if you have it, any friends you can think of, and their contact information if you have it. We’ll give you a few minutes to discuss it and jot everything down on that pad.”

“So, you can leave the room and decide how to handle this?” Reese asked.

“Yes,” Paige answered honestly. “Normally, we would take the report and wait. We need to decide if this situation is different.”

“It’s different,” Oliver assured them. “And, when you return, we’ll try to help you understand why those girls didn’t run away or decide to spend the weekend partying.”

Paige didn’t respond, she just turned and left the room.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Gage said before Paige could speak. “But I don’t think Cilla Walcott just headed off to a drunken party for the weekend. I do know her parents. I’ve met Cilla. She’s a good kid, smart, cautious and she wouldn’t make her parents worry this way.”

“But her parents were supposed to be out of town,” Paige argued.

“Which is why Cilla would have invited a few friends over to her place, maybe had a pool party that got a little out of hand, maybe a little wild, but she wouldn’t leave town,” Gage argued. “I have to go with my gut on this one, I think those girls found trouble.”

“How?” Paige smirked. “I thought they were doing homework, being good little girls on a Friday night.”

“Because they were being typical teenage girls on a Friday night,” Gage shrugged, undeterred. “I think they went out. But they went somewhere they believed to be safe and they found trouble instead. I don’t know their daughter, but I think I remember her. I’ve seen her with Cilla and with Nick. She’s a good kid, Paige. I need you to trust me on this one. I see these kids nearly every day. I know the troublemakers and I know the kids that avoid trouble. Cilla and Trish are good kids.”

“Alright,” Paige decided. “I’ll follow your lead on this one, but you have to convince the parents to give us full access to Trish’s life. We need to search her bedroom, her social media accounts, her diary if she has one... everything.”

“I can do that,” Gage smiled back. “Because if you haven’t noticed, those two are desperate and afraid. I think they’ll agree to anything if we convince them it will help find their daughter.”

“I agree,” Paige followed Gage back into the conference room.

Precarious Misadventure

“Will you start looking for Trish?” Reese asked the instant they stepped back into the room.

“We are willing to start our investigation,” Paige settled into a chair.

Gage sat in the chair next to Oliver and rested his arms on the table. “If we trust your instincts and treat this as urgent, we’re going to need your help.”

“Anything you need,” Olive said immediately.

“That means we search your home,” Gage continued. “We have full access to your daughters’ room, her belongings, her computer.”

“You’ll have it,” Reese agreed.

“If she has a diary, we need to look through it,” Paige added.

“She doesn’t,” Reese informed them. “But you will have access to everything. Whatever you need, we won’t get in the way.”

“Good,” Gage glanced at Paige.

“You said the Walcott’s will be here soon,” Paige glanced from one parent to the other. “Are they going straight home?”

“No,” Oliver frowned. “They were going to meet us here. I need to call them. Should I tell them to go home?”

“It would be better if they met up with us at your house,” Paige answered as casually as she could. If the girls last known location was the Walcott’s, there could be evidence in the home. If someone broke in and forcefully kidnapped them, the last thing she needed was hysterical parents mucking up her crime scene.

“I’ll make the call,” Oliver stood. “Then you can follow us home.”

Paige had finished the physical search of Trish’s room and was now focused on her computer. “Can you access her cell phone records from here?”

“Yes,” Reese assured her. “Trish’s phone is on our account. I just need to log in and I have access to all the phones.”

“Would you mind?” Paige motioned to the computer.

Precarious Misadventure

Reese opened up the internet and logged into her family account. Within seconds, she had all the data that pertained to Trish's phone displayed on the screen.

Paige stood and motioned for Reese to take the seat. "Can you pull up her app history? I need to know which social media accounts your daughter uses."

Reese hit a few buttons and a list of apps appeared on the screen. "I don't recognize some of those. We have access to her phone. We monitor her every few months and make sure she's not using anything dangerous. But, I don't recognize these three."

Paige did.

"And why did she need another calculator app?" Oliver wondered. "Her phone comes with a built-in app for that."

"It's not a calculator," Paige turned to Gage, but paused when she heard voices outside. "Sounds like the Walcott's just arrived. Before we go out to meet them, does Trish's phone have the GPS tracking system activated?"

"It does, but we tried, and it wasn't working," Oliver admitted. "Since it was going straight to voicemail, we tried to track her location using the phone finding feature."

"Do you mind?" Paige motioned to the computer. Reese jumped to her feet and offered the chair to Paige.

Paige settled in, maneuvered around the system for several minutes then gave up. Maybe she could get Carmen to help her with that later tonight. "Okay, let's go outside and talk to the Walcott's."

After a brief discussion, the group headed out to search Cilla's home and her electronics for clues.

Paige pulled into the driveway and shut down her engine. The house was enormous and tidy. She figured the couple had enough money to hire a gardner and a pool boy, maybe even a cleaning service. What would that be like? No more dirty dishes, no more sorting laundry. With a sigh, she joined the group at the front door. No sign of force, that was both good and bad. It meant the girls hadn't been kidnapped from here, but it also meant there was no chance she'd find evidence inside.

"Cilla's room is on the second floor," Skylar announced, then frowned. "Cilla left her phone, there on the table." She took a step forward but was stopped by Gage.

"Let us handle that," he told her. "It could be evidence."

"It could be the lucky break we need," Paige corrected.

Precarious Misadventure

“How so?” Noah Walcott asked.

“If she has the same apps that Trish does,” Paige held out a glove covered hand, “we might be able to track their location using Cilla’s phone.”

“I don’t understand,” Reese tightened her grip on her husband’s hand.

“Let’s go into the living room and I’ll explain,” Paige motioned them toward a room that contained a large couch and several chairs.

“Can I get anyone a drink or... anything?” Skylar asked, hesitantly.

“We’re fine,” Paige settled into a chair and pressed a button to turn the phone on. “Do you know her passcode?”

“One, zero, two, four,” Noah and Skylar said together.

“Well,” Paige glanced up. “At least it’s unanimous.” She punched in the code and the phone came to life. “It worked.”

“It’s her brother’s birthday,” Skylar advised.

“They were close,” Noah added. “Well, they still are but Travis joined the Army last year and he doesn’t get home much these days.”

“Makes sense,” Paige nodded. She pressed the calculator button. “This app isn’t actually a calculator. Trish has one on her phone, too. It’s a cloaking app.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Skylar admitted.

“It looks like a normal calculator,” Paige explained. “But it doesn’t work. You punch a code into the bar and hit enter. That opens up a secret section of her phone’s memory where she can store apps and information she doesn’t want anyone to see.”

“That’s...” Noah frowned. “Not like Cilla.”

“And Trish had one of those, too?” Oliver asked.

“She did,” Gage nodded. “Do you think she used the same code?”

“Probably,” Skylar decided.

Paige tried it, but nothing happened. “Any other ideas?”

“Two-thousand, fifteen,” Noah said immediately.

“Right,” Skylar nodded.

Precarious Misadventure

Paige punched it in, and a new screen appeared.

“The year our boys won the championships,” Gage smiled.

“Cilla was so proud of Travis,” Noah glanced at Gage. “She bragged nonstop for months.”

Paige blocked out the conversation. There was something off about the interaction between Cilla and a boy named Ben. She recognized the app they were using. It was called Whisper. People posted images with confessions and directed them at individuals they wanted to connect with. This Ben guy had directed an awful lot of messages to Cilla.

“What’s wrong?” Gage asked.

Paige glanced up. “Do any of you know a boy named Ben?”

All four parents shook their heads.

Gage frowned. “I can’t think of a single Ben that attends Manti High.”

“Let me see…” Paige trailed off as she tried to access the kids’ profile. Once she did, she knew it was fake.

“What’s wrong?” Reese demanded.

“Cilla was interacting with someone that called himself Ben,” Paige advised.

“What does that mean?” Skylar asked, worried.

“The name is fake,” Paige told them. “When I switched over to his profile, the name he used was Ben Dover.”

Gage rolled his eyes. Seriously? That was the best he could come up with.

“We don’t know him,” Oliver glanced at his wife.

“That’s because he doesn’t exist,” Paige insisted. “Ben Dover?”

“What has Cilla done?” Noah asked, understanding showing on his face.

“What?” Skylar demanded.

“Bend over,” Noah told his wife. “The name is fake and meant to be clever.”

“Oh my,” Skyler pressed a hand to her mouth.

“What do we do now?” Oliver demanded. “Can you identify this Ben guy? Can you locate him and find out if he took our girls?”

Precarious Misadventure

“We are going to try,” Paige stood. “I’d like to see Cilla’s room. Then I’d like your permission to take her phone. I have someone that can help me analyze it and see if we can track this Ben Dover’s location.”

“Whatever you need,” Noah stood. “Follow me, Cilla’s room is upstairs.”

“Are you okay?” Trish finally asked the lump lying in the far corner of the room. They had finally started moving. She wasn’t sure what time it was, but she knew they’d been here for hours. Light seeped through the tiny window on the other side of the room. It was daytime now. It was Saturday and her parents would know she was missing.

“No,” a female voice croaked. “Do you know where we are?”

“We’re a few miles up the canyon,” Trish said confidently, then frowned. Maybe this was a trick.

“What canyon?” the girl cleared her throat and tried to sit up.

Light shone through a tiny window and Trish gasped when she saw the teens face. It was bruised, her eye was swollen shut and she was holding her arm against her body protectively.

“Did they do that?” Cilla asked.

“Yes,” the girl pushed her body into a sitting position and pressed her back against the cement wall. All three of them were chained to large metal rings fastened inside the concrete. There was no way to escape.

“How long have you been here?” Trish wondered.

“We move around a lot,” the girl told them. “I don’t even know where we are.”

“Utah,” Cilla glanced at Trish then back to the girl. “I’m Cilla and this is my friend Trish.”

“I’m Audrey,” the girl told them. “I’m from Arizona. I think they’ve had me for months, but I’ve lost track of time. What month is it?”

“July,” Trish frowned. *Months? What were these guys up to?*

“Okay,” Audrey closed her eyes. “July. I was right, they took me from behind a movie theater on the seventeenth of May.”

“Two months?” Cilla screeched. “They’ve had you for two months?”

Precarious Misadventure

“Shh,” Audrey panicked. “They’ll come in here if they hear you.”

“Why did they beat you?” Trish asked.

“Because they can’t break me,” Audrey shrugged. “There were others. Girls that went along so they wouldn’t get punished like me. I won’t go along. They can kill me first. I will never go along.”

“Go along with what?” Cilla asked.

Trish waited for the answer, afraid she already knew. These guys were sex traffickers. They were kidnapping young girls and selling them to the highest bidder... or worse.

“You already know the answer to that,” Audrey focused on Trish. “I can see it in your face.”

Trish nodded. “So, when you don’t do what they want, they beat you?”

“And they can just keep on beating me,” Audrey said defiantly. “I won’t ever do what they want.”

All three of them froze when they heard keys rustling on the other side of the door.

“Don’t say a word,” Audrey whispered. “No matter what they say or do, no matter what they do to me, do not say a word. I’ll handle this.”

Trish watched the three men as they stepped into the room.

“We’ve decided we deserve a little sample,” the guy that called himself Ben grinned. “After all, I did have to listen to all that sniveling teenage nonsense for weeks.”

“I’ve listened to your nonsense for months,” Audrey glared at Ben. “And you’re not a teenager. I guess you’re just stupid.”

“Shut up,” Ben lunged for Audrey but was stopped by the guy they called Percy.

“Niko said we have to leave that one alone,” Percy reminded him. “He wants her to heal before the auction. She’s bating you on purpose. Focus on these two. They’re fresh and innocent.”

“And they’re not bad to look at either,” the third man said.

“We have strict orders,” Ben reminded them.

“Oh, look,” Trish smirked. “Mo speaks.”

“As in the three stooges?” Audrey wondered. “Larry, Curly and Mo?”

Precarious Misadventure

“Naw,” Trish shook her head. “I wouldn’t offend the stooges that way. I was thinking more along the lines of Mo Lester. Another stupid name that matches his friends.” She glanced at the guy that called himself Ben. “I’d be careful where I Ben Dover, if I were you. There’s a Mo Lester in the house and he looks pretty desperate.”

“And creepy,” Audrey added.

“You’ve got a mouth on you,” Percy backhanded Trish across the face. “You’ll want to shut your trap and do what you’re told. Ask that one in the corner,” Percy sneered. “You wouldn’t want your face to look like hers.”

“I don’t know,” Trish wiped blood from the side of her lip. “Maybe I’ll Percy Vere too, just like you.”

“Let’s go,” Ben decided. “We can come back later, after Niko has assessed the meat.”

The instant the door slammed shut, Audrey turned on Trish. “I told you not to say a word. They will attack you, the same as they did me.”

“Good,” Trish shrugged. “That was the idea.”

“Why?” Audrey frowned.

“Because I can see your face,” Trish softened. “And I know you’re in pain. The last thing you need is for one of those morons to slug you again. They can focus on me for a while. You need to be able to walk out of here... once I come up with a plan.”

“We don’t even know where we are,” Cilla objected. “And they have us chained to the wall.”

“We can’t pull the chains out of the concrete, but I might be able to pry one of the rings apart,” Trish considered. “And I know where we are. We’re a few miles up Ephraim Canyon. We’re in a cabin, so it has to be on private property, and we left the main highway and travelled left for almost two miles.”

“How do you know that?” Cilla wondered.

“Because I paid attention in girls camp,” Trish grinned. “We all have our strengths. Mine is tracking and navigation. Work on your chain Cilla. See if you can pry one of the links apart enough to slip free.”

Precarious Misadventure

Paige arrived home just after five. She changed out of her uniform, grabbed left-overs from the fridge and settled in on the couch. She was positive those girls had been abducted. Jericho agreed and approved her request to work a few hours from home. Dax was working late. He was with the guys up the canyon setting up a new course. She snatched up a cold chicken leg and took a huge bite. Then, she rested her head on the back of the couch and ran the case through her mind.

This Ben guy had basically stalked Cilla for weeks. He hooked up on the Whisper app, then once he had her attention, he convinced her to download another app. One called MeetMe. That app was dangerous. It allowed users to track the location of their prey. Ben knew every move Cilla made for the past week. But what he didn't realize was Cilla had also tracked him. Once she left the Walcott residence, her and Gage had followed Ben's movements around town. He'd spent hours at the park, lurked outside the theater and even walked past the high school every day... the creep. She knew where he went and when he went there, but she still didn't know where he was. Or where he lived. He must be turning his phone off to ensure his privacy. Too bad the girls hadn't done the same.

Paige finished her dinner and set the plate aside, skimming through all her reports, the data from the phone, her notes from the interview with Trish's old boyfriend — Nick, and this Ben guys activity, trying to match it up with the movements of the girls for the past week. She mapped out everything, pulled out Cilla's phone and scoured it for another app, a photo, anything that would tell her where she might be. Frustrated she couldn't locate any other clues, she decided to check in with Nathan.

"Hey, kid," Porter said in greeting.

"I thought I'd check in before it got too late," Paige crossed her legs and settled in for a casual conversation with her favorite general.

"You sound tired," Nathan observed.

"Frustrated, actually," Paige admitted. "I have a couple missing teens and every lead seems to stop at a dead end."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," Nathan said confidently.

"I hope so," Paige settled in. "Because I have a bad feeling about this." She told him a little about the case, about the new course Dax was building and about the upcoming training session they were preparing for. "He's really excited so don't pull him away this time. He needs to be here for the next few weeks."

"There's nothing on the table that requires his expertise," Nathan assured her. "I do want to talk to him about a cop I met. I think he'd benefit from one of the men's courses."

Precarious Misadventure

“Has he applied?” Paige wondered.

“No,” Nathan admitted. “I was thinking more along the lines of a scholarship. He works for a small department. I don’t think they’d agree to the expense, especially this year.”

“Right,” Paige sighed. “I wake up feeling like I’m living in the Twilight Zone. The pandemic is bad enough but the anti-cop hatred stuff, the ambush attacks, the rioting and looting, it’s just crazy and it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Be careful, Paige,” Nathan sobered. “I worry about you.”

“I am careful,” Paige assured him. “But we’ve been luckier than most. The protests and negativity haven’t really reached our department down here. Unfortunately, the budget cuts have. No citizen spending, no tax revenue, no extra money for training and equipment. I’m sure things are tough everywhere. I don’t think even Stephen King could conjure this nonsense and make it believable.”

“This too will pass,” Nathan laughed. “But maybe you could have that macho husband of yours give me a call when he has a few minutes.”

“I could do that,” Paige considered. “If you let me use Carmen for an hour tomorrow.”

“Brat,” Nathan smiled. “It’s a deal.”

“Thanks,” Paige relaxed. If anyone could find the missing girls through Cilla’s phone, Carmen could. She continued to talk to Nathan for another hour before they clicked off and she tried to get back to work. Her mind kept returning to the interview with Nick Garcetti. She felt sorry for the kid. It was obvious he still cared for Trish, a lot. He was just a sixteen-year-old kid, overwhelmed by his circumstances so he broke up with his girlfriend and focused on his family. A family in turmoil because their father had run off with a younger woman he met at the gym. Now, his mother was working two jobs and Nick had assumed the role of parent to his younger siblings. She knew immediately, he didn’t have anything to do with Trish and Cilla’s disappearance. He’d been home cooking dinner then cleaning up when the two of them went missing. She felt a little bad by the time she left the house. Nick was now even more stressed out. He wanted to find Trish as bad as her parents had.

With a sigh, Paige stretched out on the large couch. She drifted off to sleep — exhausted, lonely, and frustrated. Images of a sixteen-year-old boy that had to grow up way too fast dancing in her head.

That’s how Dax found her. He glanced at the mess scattered over the coffee table, focused on Paige, then resigned, settled onto the couch, and pulled her feet into his lap. After skimming her report, he picked up the phone and opened the hidden section using the code she listed in her

Precarious Misadventure

notes. He read through the messages in the Whisper app, then opened the app called MeetMe. He read the last message three times before he slid from the couch and headed for the back door.

“Seriously, Dax?” Hawk sat up and slid his legs over the side of the bed. “We just got home five minutes ago.”

“Which is why I knew you’d be awake,” Dax shrugged. “Look, there are two fifteen-year-old girls missing. I need your help with something.”

Hawk rubbed his hands over his face, snatched up his jeans and pulled them back on. “You owe me.”

“Okay,” Dax smiled. “Add it to my tab.”

“The tab is closed,” Hawk smiled. “How can I help?”

“She was using an app called MeetMe to communicate with the man that abducted her, or at least it looks that way. He’s gone silent, I was hoping you could wake up his phone and pinpoint his location.”

“Let me grab my computer and I’ll head over to your place,” Hawk agreed.

“Thanks,” Dax sobered. “They’ve been gone nearly twenty-four hours now. We both know what that means.”

“Yeah,” Hawk paused. “Sick SOB to grab a couple kids like that.”

“I’ll go wake up Paige,” Dax decided. “She may not be thrilled that I called you in. Police business, blah, blah... you know the drill.”

“Your wife,” Hawk smiled. “You’re problem.”

“What do you mean, Hawks on his way over?” Paige sat up and tried to rub the sleep from her eyes. “Why?”

“This,” Dax motioned to the paperwork spread across the table.

“Nathan said I could tap Carmen for an hour tomorrow,” Paige objected. “He wants you to call him, by the way.”

“I can’t do another mission this soon,” Dax grumbled.

“Not another mission,” Paige focused on the phone and realized Dax had messed with her evidence. “Dax, ever heard the term chain of evidence?”

“Sure,” Dax settled onto the couch next to her. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. What did Nathan want?”

Precarious Misadventure

“He’d like you to give a cop he met a scholarship to one of your courses,” she glanced up and saw Hawk in the doorway.

“Is it safe?” Hawk grinned.

“That depends,” Paige scowled at Dax then focused on Hawk. “Why are you here?”

“I may be able to activate the phone without that Ben guy knowing and use his GPS signal to track his location.”

“You can do that?” Paige asked, warming to the idea. If Hawk could find her suspect, she’d be able to arrest him tonight and maybe find the girls.

“It shouldn’t compromise the chain of evidence if you supervise everything I do,” Hawk settled onto the couch next to Paige. “I’ll walk you through everything I do so there’s no question if this thing goes to trial.”

“Alright,” Paige motioned to the phone. “She has that calculator app that creates a hidden compartment. The app is inside that masked area on the phone.”

Hawk accessed the area that contained the app and then plugged the phone into his laptop. He opened a program Paige had never seen before, punched in a few commands then sat back and waited. Within seconds a GPS coordinate popped onto the screen. “Your boy is currently residing at the Willow Creek Inn off Highway 89 in Ephraim. Looks like his room is on the southwest corner somewhere.”

Paige grabbed Hawk and gave him a quick kiss, then jumped to her feet. “You two coming or do you need your beauty rest?”

“I’ll come with you,” Hawk stood. “As long as you promise not to kiss me again. I don’t think your husband appreciated it and since he’s my friend and business partner —”

“He’ll get over it,” Paige grabbed Dax’s shirt and pulled him against her, pressing a hard kiss to his lips. “Thanks.”

Dax wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her in closer. He deepened the kiss, enjoying the feel of her for several seconds before he stepped away. “You’re welcome.”

Paige swallowed. How did he do that? Her heart was racing, and her mind was a jumbled mess. Would she ever get used to the potency of the man? She hoped not. “Let’s go. Can you two handle backup or should I call in Lo?”

“I think we can handle a sniveling pervert that kidnapped two young girls,” Dax turned to Hawk. “You got your gun?”

“I’ll meet you at the truck,” Hawk strolled out of the room and out the back door.

Precarious Misadventure

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Paige wondered. “If he’s there and the girls are there, you two might have to testify. I can call Lo and have him meet me in the parking lot.”

“And if he’s not there, or the girls aren’t there, you’d be pulling the graveyard guy away for nothing. I’m not worried about testifying if I need to. Hawk’s fine with it, too. Let’s go.”

Paige approached the lobby desk and set her badge on the counter. “I’m looking for someone, but I don’t know his name,” she began.

“I don’t know how...”

Hawk set a map of the hotel on the counter. “He’s in one of these rooms.”

“He’s either alone, or he would be with a friend,” Paige continued. “Most likely another man.”

The clerk began to tap on keys, pulling up each room in that wing. “Most of guests over in that section are families. Oh, here we go. I have a man by the name of Ben Holt. He listed one other guest.”

“Do you know which vehicle is theirs?” Dax asked.

“They show a Dodge van,” the clerk rattled off the license number before she focused on the map. “They should be parked over here. Exterior access is here,” she pointed to a door on the side of the building.

“Are they...” she glanced back at Paige and the badge she now had clipped to her waist band. “Should I be worried?”

“No,” Paige assured her. “Just stay in here, out of the way. Everything will be fine. I need the room number and a master key.”

“Oh,” the clerk gasped. “I don’t know if I’m supposed to...”

“I can get a warrant, but that will take time,” Paige pushed.

“I guess it’s okay,” the clerk programmed a key card and passed it to Paige. She pointed to the map and relayed the room number then watched, worried as the trio strolled confidently out the door.

Precarious Misadventure

The arrest was uneventful. Hawk covered the hallway while Paige and Dax entered the room as if they'd done this a million times before. Paige was at the side of the first bed, man handcuffed and swearing seconds before Dax did the same with the man sleeping in the bed at the far end of the room. Once the two men were secured, Paige called Deputy Lovato and asked him to respond and transport the men back to the station.

"I need my pants?" the blonde demanded.

"This is unlawful arrest," the dark-haired man insisted. "Where is your warrant? You violated my seventh amendment. No, my fourth."

"Maybe you could exercise your fifth and shut up," Dax suggested.

"I'll have your badge," the blonde barked and tried to spit at Dax.

"That will be difficult," Dax shrugged and grinned.

Paige was about to intervene when Lo entered the room. "Mind filling me in?" He glanced at Dax motioned down the hall toward Hawk. "And while you're at it, you can tell me why they helped in the arrest instead of me."

"I was working a hunch," Paige dismissed. "Let's get them to the car and I'll fill you in."

Once the prisoners were loaded into the back of the patrol car, Paige turned to Dax. "I'll ride with Lo. You and Hawk can head home and get some sleep. I know you have a busy day tomorrow. Don't wait up, this might take a while."

Dax pulled her in for a quick kiss. "Good luck, I hope you find those girls."

Paige watched him walk away, climb into his truck, and pull out of the lot. Then, she turned to Lovato. "Think we can get a warrant for the van?"

"Maybe," Lovato smiled. "I conducted a little Terry frisk on the blonde. Turns out he likes girly trinkets."

"What did he have?" Paige glanced at the cruiser then back to Lovato.

Lo held out his hand and a thin bracelet dangled from his fingers. "Guess what name is on the surface."

"Who?" Paige reached for it.

Lovato snatched it back and dropped it into an evidence bag. "Trish."

Precarious Misadventure

“Gotcha,” Paige smiled. “I’ll send the e-warrant through while you drive us back to the station. That van isn’t going anywhere. Not while we have those two tucked away at the office. As long as they don’t make any calls, I think we have some time.”

“The girls aren’t here,” Lovato pointed out. “That means they have someone else working with them. We have a little time, but I want that van towed immediately. We may not be able to access it, but I want it locked up tight until the judge signs off on our request. I’m calling Logan. He can sit on it while he waits for a wrecker.”

“Good idea,” Paige listened while Lovato relayed the information to Deputy Reed. She hit send on the warrant at the same time Lovato clicked off with his partner.

The group traveled in silence all the way back to the office. Once inside, Paige secured the dark-haired man in a cell and escorted the blonde into the conference room. She read him his rights and then just sat there, silently waiting to see if he would talk on his own.

When he didn’t, Paige slid a printout across the table toward him. “We’ve traced that cellphone to you. We know you lured those girls out Friday night pretending to be a sixteen-year-old kid. You kidnapped them from the theater, and you are now holding them against their will. The only way to save yourself, is to tell me where they are.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” the guy told her.

“Let’s just start with your name,” Lovato changed gears, hoping to keep the man unbalanced. “You’re real name this time.”

“Ben,” the guy told them. “Ben Holt.”

“Uh-huh,” Paige settled into her chair. “See, here’s the problem, Ben Holt. You don’t exist. We already have a warrant for the van and my colleague out there is working on a warrant for your phone. It’s only a matter of time. If the phone doesn’t reveal your true identity, I’m pretty sure those fingerprints we just processed will. Do yourself a favor, tell us where you took the girls.”

“What girls?” Ben smirked.

The door opened and Logan peeked inside. “Sean’s here.”

“Great,” Paige smirked. “Give him the phone and both sets of prints. Will you also let him know I’ll be out in a minute to fill in the details?”

Once the door shut, Lo turned to Paige. “I’m thinking we don’t need a few minutes,” he glanced back at Ben. “Now that the FBI is involved, we’ll have the answers we need in less than five minutes.”

Precarious Misadventure

“The FBI?” Ben swallowed. “How... why?”

“How?” Paige smiled. “I called them. Why? Because kidnapping is a federal offense and he has resources that I don’t. Like, easy access to your phone data, your GPS history, the evidence of how you lured those girls to the theater in the first place.”

“How did you know...” he stopped. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“He will also be able to track that phone to the manufacturer,” Paige continued. “Then, he’ll know where it was sold and who purchased it. We don’t need you to tell us your name. Sean will provide it to us. Maybe you should just sit there and quietly think about the mess you got yourself into.”

“Oh,” Lovato leaned back in his chair and crossed one ankle over the other. “He’ll have plenty of time for that... If I had to guess, I’d say twenty to life.”

“I...”

The door opened and Sean Wilkens walked in. “His name is Myles Baker. Mr. Baker has two outstanding warrants for his arrest. One out of Texas, the other in New Mexico. It seems Mr. Baker moves around a lot. I wonder why he never put down roots anywhere.”

“I’m guessing it might have something to do with kidnapping,” Lovato said casually.

“The warrants are for attempted kidnapping in Texas,” Sean continued. “They’re anxious to get their hands on your prisoners. New Mexico wants him for auto theft, simple assault and various other minor charges related to the same incident.”

“I want a deal,” the man who was now calling himself Ben demanded.

“Why?” Paige dismissed him. “I have what I need.”

“I know where Peter took those girls,” Ben began glancing around the room frantically trying to think of a way out. “I can identify the boss. If you get me a deal, I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“Here’s the problem,” Paige leaned forward. “You made contact with Cilla. You talked her into meeting you behind the theater where nobody would witness the abduction. You, Myles.”

“Ben,” he corrected. “I go by Ben.”

“You can call yourself Dracula for all I care,” Paige continued. “You still have a problem. There’s nothing linking Peter to the abduction. There’s nothing linking him to Cilla. There’s nothing that proves he was even there when the girls were kidnapped. If anyone gets a deal, I think the DA will offer it to Peter first.”

Precarious Misadventure

“Do yourself a favor,” Lo focused on Ben. “Tell us where the girls are being held. Then we’ll think about a deal. Once we know the girls are safe, we’ll talk to the DA. He’s reasonable and your cooperation will be rewarded.”

“I…” Ben hesitated. He almost gave them what they wanted but stopped. If he revealed the location of the girls, he wouldn’t have anything to leverage. No, he wasn’t talking until he got a deal.

“Suit yourself,” Lo stood and left the room. Paige and Sean followed.

“What am I missing?” Sean asked the instant they were back in the bullpen. Paige filled him in. “If we’re dealing with multiple states, it’s probably cleaner for you to take this. I don’t like it, but it’s cleaner and those two will get longer sentences with the feds.”

“I agree,” Lo sighed. “I’d like the arrest, but it makes more sense to hand it over to you. Do we have anything on that Peter guy?”

“I ran his phone, too,” Sean admitted. “I got a warrant for both and used the same intel. It will stick, I’ve done this before.”

“You have,” Paige agreed. “Did you get a name?”

“Peter Rawlings,” Sean glanced at his notes. “He’s not wanted as far as I can tell. The van is registered to him. I’m waiting for forensics to get back to me, but they found a hair in the back cargo area. If it belongs to one of your girls, we’ve got him.”

“Maybe,” Paige considered. “He could just say the idiot Ben borrowed his van. Then, we’ve got nothing.”

“They kidnapped two girls,” Lovato disagreed. “There’s no way one guy was able to snatch up two girls at the same time then drive them to a secret location and control them while he did it.”

“I agree,” Sean added. “We just tell him we know he was there and he’s facing a life sentence if he doesn’t cooperate. He might be scared enough to talk.”

“I’ll switch out our prisoners,” Paige decided. “Myles who wants to be called Ben can sit in a cage while we have a little chat with his buddy, Peter.”

Paige escorted Peter into the conference room and settled into a chair across from him. “We know you kidnapped two teenagers last night,” she began.

“What?” the man feigned surprise. “I never left my room last night.”

“The hotel has a camera system,” Paige informed him. “I’ll give you one chance to amend your statement and tell me the truth.”

Precarious Misadventure

“I did leave,” Peter admitted. Stupid cameras. He was going to kill Ben. That’s why you always stayed in a dive. A dumpy motel never had security. “I was upset. Ben took off and left me back at the room and I was bored. I wandered around town for over an hour before I spotted a local café. I had some pie and a few cups of coffee then I left, wandered back to the hotel and turned in for the night.”

“Right,” Paige glanced at her phone display when it began to vibrate. She stood and headed for the door. “I need to take this.”

“Dax?” she answered the instant she was out the door. He wouldn’t be calling unless it was important.

“When we got home,” Dax started. “We decided to see if we could help. Locate the girls, I mean. We did.”

“What?” Paige darted across the room and snatched up a pen and a pad of paper. “Where?”

“Trish’s phone came on then immediately turned back off,” Dax told her. “It was enough. Hawk traced it to an area up Ephraim Canyon. It looks like it’s not that far from Jericho’s cabin.”

Paige began to pace. It made sense. The hotel was just off Ephraim Canyon Road. They could enjoy the luxury of a hotel room and still have a direct shot to the girls. “Can you send me the coordinates?”

“Already did,” Dax told her. “Check your phone, the text should be coming through any second.” Just then her phone chimed.

“Got it,” Paige glanced at the numbers and smiled. “You’re amazing. I owe you one for this. Tell Hawk thanks for me.”

“Love you,” Dax sobered. “Be careful, that area is desolate and out of the way. There could be more than one guy guarding those girls.”

“Trust me, Dax,” Paige softened. “This is what I do. It’s what I’ve done for years. You deal with the big scary terrorists and I’ll take down the child abductors and perverts. It’s a win for everyone.”

“Call me,” Dax insisted. “I’ll be waiting up for your call.”

“You don’t have to…”

“Don’t argue,” Dax interrupted. “Just go arrest the bad guys and let me know when you have them.” He disconnected before she could object.

Precarious Misadventure

“I heard something,” Cilla whispered. Her fingers were raw, but she still hadn’t loosened the chain at all.

“It’s probably a deer or a bear,” Audrey shifted and pulled on her own chain. “I’m never going to get this thing to budge.”

“Mine isn’t bending either,” Trish admitted. “I was so sure we could slip one link from the chain and get free.

“There it is again,” Cilla insisted, louder this time. “I don’t think that’s an animal.”

“Be quiet,” Audrey scolded. “If they hear us, that monster Niko will come back. I can deal with anyone but Niko.”

“Yeah,” Trish agreed. “That guy was creepy.”

“And terrifying,” Cilla agreed. “I…” she let out a surprised scream when a loud boom erupted outside the door. The cabin walls shook and dirt particles from the old ceiling rained down on them. All three girls covered their eyes, nose, and mouth to keep out the dust. Once the air cleared, the entire room went eerily quiet.

Cilla screamed again when the door that led to the basement flew open and two shadows filled the opening.

“Cilla?” Paige called out. “Trish?”

The three girls held their breath, unsure if they should answer or not.

“I’m Deputy Paige Carter. Are you okay? Is it safe down there?”

“We’re alright,” Trish called out. “But we are chained to the wall. And there’s someone with us. Audrey Phillips and she needs a doctor.”

“I’m coming down,” Paige decided. She turned back to Lovato. “Cover me,” she whispered. “This could be a trap.”

“I don’t like it,” Lovato decided. “That’s a fatal funnel if anyone is waiting to ambush you.”

“Cilla?” Paige called out. “Your parents are worried about you. They said you played a game with your brother, Travis, before he went into the Navy. You called it apples and donuts. Do you remember.”

Precarious Misadventure

Cilla's head shot up and she understood what the deputy was asking. Travis made the game up and they played it to fool their parents for years. If she was telling the truth, she'd answer with a sentence that contained the word apples. If she was lying, she'd say something about donuts. The cops wanted to make sure it was safe to come down and help them.

"Cilla?" Paige called. "Are you okay down there?"

"I'm starving," Cilla answered. "I could eat an entire apple pie."

Paige relaxed. "It's alright. They're alone."

"How can you be sure?" Lo asked, not convinced.

"Because Cilla just told me," Paige cautiously made her way down the stairs and spotted Cilla then Trish chained to the wall next to each other. There was a third girl about the same age huddled in the corner. She was several feet away from the friends and she was obviously in bad shape. Paige moved toward her first. "You must be Audrey."

"Help them," Audrey demanded. "We've been trying to get the chains separated but they won't budge. Help them get out of there, then you can come back for me."

"How about we get all of you free at the same time," Paige suggested. "Lo, one of those guys has a set of keys that will open a padlock. I need it." She crouched down next to Audrey. "The links in the chains have been welded together. If you can't find the key, see if there's a set of bolt cutters in that small shed on the south side of the cabin."

"On it," Lo turned and headed for the prisoners. Moments later, he returned with a set of keys. One look at Audrey and he knew she had to be the first one he set free.

"No," Audrey objected when the male police officer headed toward her. "Get them first."

"Hush," Lovato soothed. "We're going to help all of you. You first, we have an ambulance waiting outside. Let's get you to the hospital."

Once Audrey was free, Lovato moved to Cilla then Trish. Paige wrapped an arm around each girl and Lovato lifted Audrey into his arms. The group slowly ascended the stairs, walked silently through the kitchen then out the back door. Once outside, two paramedics rushed over with a stretcher. They secured Audrey and headed for the ambulance.

"We'll come see you," Trish called out just before they lifted the stretcher into the back of the vehicle and slammed the door.

"Can we go home?" Cilla asked.

"Soon," Lovato promised.

Precarious Misadventure

“Your parents are waiting for you at our office,” Paige told them. “We need the details of how this happened, then your parents can take you home.”

“It’s my fault,” Cilla started to cry.

“It’s not,” Trish reached for her friend. “Can we tell you together? With our parents so we only have to go through it once?”

“Of course,” Paige motioned to the SUV parked on the dirt road ahead. “Are you sure neither of you have any injuries?”

“No,” Trish opened the back door and climbed inside. “We’re fine. I know my lip looks swollen and cracked, and I have blood on my shirt, but it’s not bad. I don’t need a doctor or anything. Just a fat lip.”

“Did one of them hit you?” Lovato’s eyes were cold and dangerous.

“Yeah,” Trish nodded and buckled her seatbelt then reached for Cilla’s hand. “But I’m okay. Really.”

“Which one?” Lovato demanded.

“We don’t know their names,” Cilla answered. “It was the guy they called Percy.”

“All the names are stupid,” Trish added. “Ben Dover and Percy Vere. They left but they’re two of the guys that kidnapped us. Them and the one I named Mo.”

“Mo?” Paige settled into the passenger seat, then turned to face the girls.

“Mo Lester,” Cilla grinned. “He didn’t like that name, which made it perfect.”

Paige smiled. “But Mo was still here?”

“Yes,” Cilla tightened her grip on Trish’s hand. “Mo and the evil, creepy one they called Niko.”

“We think the Niko guy was the boss,” Trish added.

“Alright,” Lovato shifted the vehicle into drive. “Why don’t the two of you try to relax while we drive back to Manti. We have a lot of questions and your parents are frantic. They’ve been worried about you.”

“We’re going to be in so much trouble,” Cilla told Trish.

“And we’ll probably be grounded for the rest of our lives,” Trish added.

The group traveled in silence all the way back to the office.

Precarious Misadventure

Sean was standing just outside the large conference room, impatiently waiting when the group stepped through the front door. “The prisoners are in the cells in the back. I called the hospital. They are going to keep Audrey Phillips overnight. She’s dehydrated and she has a broken arm, two broken ribs and they are monitoring the injuries to her face. Basically, she’s a mess.”

“Was she reported missing?” Paige wondered.

“Yes,” Sean motioned to the conference room. “Why don’t the two of you head through those doors over there. Your parents are waiting and there’s a young man inside that is anxious to see Trish.”

“Me?” Trish frowned. “Who?”

Nick stepped from the room and stopped just outside the door, not sure what to do or how Trish would react when she saw him.

“Nick?” Trish stared at him, confused. “Why are you here?”

Nick slowly made his way to her side and took her hand in his. “I’m sorry to intrude. I just...”

“I interviewed Nick yesterday,” Paige moved forward. “He’s been really worried. I asked your mom to call him once we located you and knew you were okay.”

“But I thought...” Trish glanced from Nick to Paige.

“You thought I didn’t care,” Nick slipped his hands into his pockets. “I lied.”

“Cilla,” Paige put a hand on Cilla’s shoulder. “Let’s head inside. Your parents are anxious to see you and I think Nick and Trish could use a little privacy.”

Cilla waited for a signal from Trish. When her friend nodded, she let Paige guide her into the large conference room. The instant she stepped through the door, her parents were there, pulling her into a huge hug.

“Oh, baby,” Skylar sobbed. “We were so worried.”

“This was all my fault,” Cilla told the room. She focused on Trish’s parents. “I asked Trish to come with me. Please, don’t be mad at her. It was all my fault.”

Trish stared at Nick, unsure what to say.

Precarious Misadventure

Nick moved forward and pulled Trish into a bear hug. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I thought...” he cleared his throat. “I thought you were going to die, and I wouldn’t get a chance to tell you why I did what I did. I didn’t mean any of it.”

“Nick?” Trish took a step back and studied him, confused. “What’s going on?”

“My dad left,” he blurted. “My mom had to get another job and I have to stay home and make sure Annie, Brandon and Mason get dinner and do their homework.”

“You broke up with me because your dad left?” Trish frowned. “I still don’t understand why.”

“I can’t be the boyfriend you deserve,” Nick glanced down. “It nearly killed me, but I had to let you go. I can’t ask you to live this way. I can’t ask you to date a guy that can’t hang out on Friday night, can’t chill with our friends at a football game, I can’t even take you to the prom.”

“You’re an idiot,” Trish finally understood. “None of that stuff matters. Not if we care about each other. Nick, you lied to me, though. That does matter. It matters that you didn’t trust me enough to confide in me,” she reached out and took his hand. “I think we can fix all of that though, if you want to try.”

“I want to try,” Nick linked his fingers through hers.

“I’m sorry your dad left, that sucks,” Trish whispered. “If I say I forgive you, will you go in there with me. Will you help me face my parents?”

Nick shifted, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and led her toward the conference room. “I don’t think they’re mad. I think they are just glad you’re okay. It’s going to be fine.”

Once Nick and Trish joined the group, after her parents smothered her with relieved hugs, the girls relayed their story.

Paige walked the girls through the events, pausing to get clarification and documenting the actions of each of the men that had abducted the girls then held them captive.

Sean took notes, asked his own questions, then left to arrange for transportation to a federal facility where the men would stay until they stood trial.

Once the group finished the interview and headed home, Paige dropped her forehead to the table.

“What’s wrong?” Lo asked. “It’s a good day, we found the missing girls and even added a third rescue as a bonus.”

Precarious Misadventure

“That’s what’s wrong,” Paige lifted her head and focused on Sean. “You’ll have to interview Audrey as soon as possible. If we get lucky, she’ll have names for the other missing girls.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Sean assured her. “I’ll head to the hospital first thing and talk to Audrey Phillips before her parents arrive from Arizona. I’m also going to interview the four thugs that abducted those girls. But I want to wait for Lew to arrive. Trafficking is his specialty and he’ll know how to handle them. He’ll be able to tell if they’re lying — hoping to cover their tracks, or if we can trust the information and act on it.”

Paige relaxed, Lewandowsky was a pro, the best in the business when it came to human trafficking. If anyone could find those missing girls, it was Sean and Lew. She’d just have to accept that as a win and hope for the best. “I’m heading home,” she turned to Lovato. “Thanks for the help. You too, Sean. I’m glad we brought you in. Just the addition of Audrey makes this federal, add in the others and I suspect you’re going to have your hands full.”

“Yeah,” Sean stood. “And don’t think it escaped my notice that you didn’t offer to break the news to Porter. “You owe me, Paige. And, I will collect one of these days.”

Paige laughed. “As long as it’s not today.”

Dax was waiting when she arrived home. She settled onto the couch next to him and filled in the details she hadn’t known when she called him earlier. As promised, she called him once the girls were rescued before they started down the canyon.

“You okay?” he pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head.

She sighed. “I don’t know. It feels....”

“Unfinished?” he offered.

“Right,” Paige sighed. “My part is over. I rescued my missing girls, reunited them with their parents; and, as an added bonus, I think I repaired a relationship that was on the rocks. All in a day’s work, so why am I so depressed?”

“Because you’re focused on the others,” Dax said in understanding. “But Sean will find them — if they can be found. And don’t forget, he’s got Carmen and those magic fingers and amazing hacking skills at his disposal. Porter won’t stand in the way of her helping. In fact, I think he’ll encourage it. I called him, by the way. We got that scholarship worked out. Matt Warner will be attending the training course we have scheduled in September. If Nathan’s right, he’s got talent. Shame he’s wasting away in a small town where nothing really happens.”

“That’s what people said about Manti,” Paige smiled. “Before I arrived.”

Dax laughed and pulled her in for a kiss. “You ready to head upstairs?”

Precarious Misadventure

“Beyond ready,” Paige stood and held out a hand to her husband.