

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Rapacious Blaze
Season 5, Episode 5

by:

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“Hawk,” Dax barked. “Hold back. That’s it, okay Vato do your thing. Hawk you’re good to go.”

Dax stepped away; confident his men would secure the structure they had just lowered onto the ledge in a matter of minutes. The actual structure was simple enough, the red tape it took to get permission to use it on federal land was a nightmare. They were adding a new wilderness course to the curriculum next month and they needed some kind of rough shelter for the plan to work. They searched the area for an open cave or dugout for months, but everything they found was boarded up and off limits. Wooly came up with this plan; and after about a hundred phone calls, several months, and a ton of paperwork, they finally had permission to install the temporary structure on the side of the mountain — as long as it was out of the way. He glanced around and spotted Zee on the other side of the clearing staring into the distance. He frowned and slowly made his way to his friend. “Spill it.”

“Huh,” Zee asked absently. “Oh. Hey, Dax.”

“Talk to me,” Dax pushed.

“It’s nothing.”

“Then it shouldn’t take long for you to explain it,” Dax persisted.

Zee glanced up and sighed. “When did you know?” he finally asked. “I mean, really know that Paige was it for you?”

Dax grinned. “That’s easy, when she pointed her gun at my ugly mug.”

“I’m serious,” Zee pushed.

“I can see that,” Dax sobered. “In a way, so am I. I told you the story. It was her first night back in Manti. I had no idea she belonged there. I saw the truck, spotted movement and... well, being me, I had to investigate. I was sculking around her place when she flung open the backdoor pistol in hand, and pointed it at my head calm as can be. I knew, in that instant, I wasn’t dealing with a typical woman.”

“I get that,” Zee sighed again. “But that’s not what I mean. When did you know?”

Dax shifted and now he was the one staring into the distance. “I’m not sure I could pinpoint the exact moment I knew. I was drawn to her the instant I met her. But love? I’m not exactly sure. Maybe it was the moment I realized she was in danger. I felt this overwhelming desire to protect her — even before the good general mandated my involvement. Maybe it was when that idiot Sheriff in Nephi did his best to come between us... my emotions were all over the place that weekend and I couldn’t deny my feelings any longer — I was in love with the fascinating woman. Maybe it was the long hours I spent secured to the wall waiting for the next

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torture session. By that time, I knew I'd fallen hard and fast, but I never told her. That didn't sit well."

"I get it," Zee nodded. "The two of you have been through way too much to pin it down to one moment."

"And I get you, Zee. You're finally serious about someone — really serious and it terrifies you. It's about freakin' time. Now, you're asking yourself if this is it," Dax said softly. "Is Carmen the woman for you?"

"But that's just it," Zee turned to Dax. "I don't think I have to ask that question. She is. I know she is. It's just..."

"You don't know if she feels the same?" Dax nodded. "I think she does. I think she's starting to ponder the future and, just like you, she's wondering if this thing is the forever kind of romance. It's just—" Dax frowned when he spotted smoke in the distance.

"What?" Zeus asked, alert now.

"Hold that thought," Dax turned and headed back to the ridgeline where his men were still working. "You ladies almost done down there? Stop chattering like a bunch of old women and get that thing secured. We don't have time for shenanigans. We've gotta move out — now."

Vato broke into a litany of curses — his typical colorful protest. Hawk snapped the last anchor in place and looked up, extending his middle finger out of principle but realizing immediately something was wrong. "We're done here. You spot trouble?"

"Fire," Dax glanced back at the smoke. "It's headed this way. We need to move."

"Maybe if you spent more time raising the gear and less time gossiping with Zeus we could be on our way," Hawk grinned and pointed to the large bag secured to the pulley.

Dax raised the gear, unsnapped the carabiner and lowered the rope, nearly hitting Hawk in the face — out of principle.

Vato checked the structure one last time, then began his slow ascent to the top of the ridge. He didn't need to wait for a lift from Dax.

Hawk rolled over the edge and quickly unsnapped the rigging before dropping it back down for Wooly. He stood and moved to stand next to Dax. "You sounded spooked."

Dax motioned to the east. He was concentrating on Wooly, impatiently waiting for the signal he was ready. "It looks like it's moving fast, and it's headed our way."

Hawk frowned and sprang into action. "Zeus, help me pack this up." He tossed the bulging bag of gear at his teammate. Zeus caught it and disappeared into the thick forest. Hawk moved

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to the large canopy they'd set up that morning and began frantically tearing it down. So much for good planning. They set the canopy up to secure the spot for the next week or so while they finalized the course. They also wanted to check on the structure to make sure nobody messed with it. He glanced at the approaching forest fire and frowned. *Best laid schemes of mice and men*, he thought before moving in next to Dax. "You think that thing will hold?"

Dax shrugged then grinned. Wooly had just reached the top of the ridge and he was goofing off — again.

"Hey," Wooly raised his arms in the air and leaned backward. "Look, no hands."

Dax glanced at Hawk and his smile widened when he got the nod. He gave the system a hard yank. Wooly lunged forward, arms flailing, panic written all over his face. His foot slipped and he tumbled forward, barely catching his weight with the palm of his hands before his face hit the hard-packed dirt and weeds.

Everyone laughed... well, everyone except Wooly. He rolled over just in time to see Vato casually fling his leg over the ridge and stand.

"I thought you sissies said we had to hurry," Vato straightened and began to brush dirt from his torso.

Dax glanced toward the smoke and sobered. "We do. You grab that end; I'll start back here. We need to take down the rigging and No Hands over there won't be a lot of help."

Now it was Wooly's turn to flip them all the bird. He rolled over and forced his body into a kneeling position. "I got the lower rope; you handle that one up there." He directed Vato to the rope secured in a nearby tree."

Zeus returned from his trip to the truck, gathered up the canopy and headed back into the trees.

The rest of the men worked quickly; and, with Vato's expertise, they had the entire system torn down and packed away in less than five minutes.

Dax slammed the back door and turned to make his way to the passenger seat when a small boy emerged from the forest. His face was red, sweat mixed with dirt and ran down his face leaving streaks of mud on his temple, his cheek, and his trembling chin. If Dax had to guess, he'd say the kid was around ten. "Hold up," he called to Hawk who was now revving the gas, sending an impatient message to the rest of the team.

"Come on over here," Dax approached the kid cautiously. "Zee, I need a bottle of water."

The boy frantically shook his head. "I... you have to save them. Please, you need to get back and save them."

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“Save who, kid?” Dax maneuvered him toward the vehicle. Instead of trying to coach him inside, he just reached down, gripped the kid’s hips and hoisted him onto the seat. He snatched up the bottle Zee was holding out to him and shoved it into the kid’s hand.”

“My grandparents,” the boy swallowed and looked at the bottle with intense longing.

“Drink up,” Dax motioned to the water. “Where are they?”

The boy flung out his arm at the same time he took a big gulp from the bottle, swallowed then wiped his chin with the sleeve of his shirt. “Down that trail. We were camped but grandpa got trapped. The machine fell on top of him. We were trying to load up — he was rushing, trying to get out before the fire reached us — and it fell.”

“Drink that water,” Dax ordered. “And stay here with Wooly. Ken, call this in. We need fire fighters up here... like yesterday. Once they get here, turn the kid over to them. They’ll get him to safety.”

“But...”

“Don’t argue kid,” Dax warned. “If you want me to help your grandparents, do what I say.”

The boy nodded then looked down at his hands, clearly unhappy.

“The rest of you come with me,” Dax ordered. “We don’t have a lot of time.” He glanced in the direction of the approaching fire and sighed.

Hawk moved up next to him once they were out of range of the kid. “You know they might already be gone.”

“We have to check,” Dax grumbled.

“Yeah,” Hawk agreed. “We do. I just hope the checking doesn’t kill us all.”

Dax glanced briefly at his friend then picked up the pace.

The instant the team emerged from the thick trees; it was obvious they were in trouble. The fire was so close, the air around them sizzled. Smoke filled the air, making it difficult to breathe. The couple looked to be in their mid-sixties. The man was on the ground, pinned beneath one of those large side-by-side ATVs that was tipped onto its side. The woman was trying to use a crowbar to pry the machine off her husband. Tears were running down her face, which was

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covered in sweat, dirt and probably soot from the fire. Every few seconds, she'd break into a severe coughing fit.

"Vato," Dax turned to his men. "You and Zee get her out of here. She's going to fight, so do it by force if you have to." He turned to focus on Hawk. "You up for this? It's your choice."

Hawk nodded. "Let's get this done, we don't have much time." Without another word, he pivoted and headed for the man... and the heat.

"We need to get you to safety," Vato barked.

"I'm not leaving him," the woman insisted.

Zee moved in behind her, lifted her off her feet and headed for the trail.

"Put me down," the woman screamed and began frantically kicking her feet.

Vato moved in beside his friend. "You're making this difficult. Dax and Hawk will take care of your husband. You're just making things worse for everyone. Settle down. Your grandson is scared, and he needs you. Focus on him and let those two do their job."

"Are you firemen?" the woman frowned and surveyed their attire.

"No," Zeus set her on the ground but didn't release his hold. "What's it going to be? Can I let you go, or will you bolt and get yourself killed in the process?"

"I can't leave my husband," she insisted.

"Nobody asked you to," Zeus said flatly. "We asked you to join your grandson. Once your husband is rescued from under that machine, our friends will carry him to safety. We'll all meet back up at our vehicle, and we'll get the lot of you to safety."

"You promise they won't leave him?" she asked skeptically. "No matter what?"

"If we planned to leave him, do you think they would still be risking their lives in that heat?" Zeus demanded; all patience gone now.

"We promise," Vato glared at Zeus. "Let's get you back to our car. We have water and the kid is terrified."

The woman glanced over her shoulder, sighed, then nodded. "Okay." The three of them made their way quickly down the trail.

"We're losing him," Dax warned. He hoped the man was just unconscious and hadn't succumbed to the heat or the smoke.

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“Here,” Hawk shoved a large log under the ATV. “Toss the crowbar, it’s not helping. On three just lift the thing off him. I’ll hold it in place while you pull him out.”

Dax studied the machine and decided Hawk was right. It was heavy and they’d only get one shot at this. The crowbar was a bust, it wasn’t long enough to do any good and they were running out of time. The fire hadn’t reached them yet, but it had to be close. The heat was unbearable, and the smoke was getting thicker making it impossible to breathe. “No counting, just lift,” Dax choked out, covering his face with his arm.

Hawk nodded and gripped the side of the machine. They both lifted, grunted in frustration, then let out an audible sigh in relief when it slowly began to rise. “See if you can grab him,” Hawk yelled.

Dax hesitated then slowly released his grip. Once he was sure Hawk could handle the weight, he dropped to the ground and shifted the log to help brace the machine off the ground. Not ideal, but hopefully it would work. With a nod to Hawk, he slid underneath, grabbed the man’s legs, and yanked. Nothing happened, the man’s shirt was tangled up in the machine. Dax slid forward and realized the guy was caught in the door. He tried to tear the shirt away, but it was wedged inside the jamb and twisted so tightly it wouldn’t budge. Dax studied the mechanism and realized the only way to get the guy free was to try to open the door — which was severely damaged and wouldn’t open. He gripped the metal roll bar and winced as the heat seared his palm, but he didn’t give up. He wrapped his hand further around the bar and yanked. The bar shifted, the door fell open and the man was finally free. Dax once again wrapped his hands around the man’s legs and tugged. This time he slid forward. Dax scooted backward and gave him another forceful yank. Finally, both of them were clear of the danger.

Hawk dropped the all-terrain vehicle and moved in next to Dax. “The fire is closing in fast, we’ve gotta move.”

They were rushing toward the trail, half carrying the man, half dragging him when disaster struck. The wind picked up, blowing intense heat in their direction. The dried needles of a beetle infested pine tree directly above them burst into flames. One of the branches caught on fire and plummeted toward them. They ducked. Dax shielded the unconscious man with his own body and tried to cover his head with his arms. He heard the thud and rolled to check on Hawk. His friend hadn’t been as lucky. The branch landed on Hawk’s shoulder, catching his shirt on fire. “Roll!” Dax jumped to his feet and rushed to help. Hawk was rolling around on the ground while Dax scooped up dirt and threw handful after handful on his friend. After what felt like a lifetime but was probably only seconds, the fire was out. Dax dropped to the ground in relief. “How bad?” he finally asked. “We need to move. You think you can walk?”

Hawk pushed his body into a sitting position, focused on Dax and frowned. “That’s gotta hurt,” he motioned to Dax’s palm.

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“Not as much as that will,” Dax stood, motioning to Hawk’s shoulder. “I’ll get him, you can’t use that arm.”

“I can use the other one,” Hawk disagreed. “Let’s go.”

They stumbled back to the man. Dax crouched to try to get a good grip on his arm but hesitated when the guy began to moan. “Do you think you can walk?”

The man opened his eyes in surprise. “Help me,” he croaked.

Dax and Hawk each wrapped an arm around the man’s waist and once again tried to drag him forward. The three of them slowly stumbled down the trail, hoping they’d make it to safety before the fire reached them.

Paige studied the report for several seconds before she responded. “I’m not sure why you think there’s more here.” She focused on Deputy Logan Reed and waited.

“The mom insists her daughter didn’t run,” Logan said, clearly frustrated. “She’s convinced the boyfriend did something to make her disappear.”

“The mom is in denial,” Paige said calmly. She pointed to her computer screen. “The girl has run away from home five times, and that’s just in the past year. She’s a problem child. Add her to the system and put it away, Logan. She ran — again. Once the information is uploaded we’ll all keep an eye out.”

Logan sighed and studied his report, not ready to drop it.

Jericho stepped into his doorway and glanced around. “Reed, I need you and Havi to head up Ephraim Canyon. Fire needs your assistance. They have a blaze up South Willow Creek near Jimmys Fork. They need the road shut down completely and they want that Baptist camp — Utibaca — evacuated immediately.”

Paige grabbed her phone and dialed Dax. When it went directly to voicemail, she jumped up, panicked. “I’m going with you.”

“Paige,” Jericho frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Dax and the team are in that same area setting up a temporary shelter for training next month,” She grabbed her keys and started across the room. “I can’t reach him. I’m going, don’t try to stop me.”

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“We’ll take my car,” Jericho turned to Margie. “Call me on the radio if you need me. That area doesn’t have cell service.” He turned back to Paige. “There’s no service, Paige. Don’t jump to conclusions. We’ll find them.”

They rode in silence, Paige fidgeting all the way out of town. She couldn’t sit still, her foot was tapping impatiently as she stared aimlessly out the window.

“Hey, kid,” Jericho reached over and patted her knee. “Dax is strong and he’s smart. His men are too. They would have noticed a large fire headed their way. I’m sure they got out of the way and they’re just helping the firemen evacuate or something.”

Paige swallowed hard but nodded. She hoped her boss was right. She had to believe Jericho was right. Dax was smart and he was protective. That’s what worried her. He’d never leave a man behind — no matter what. He’d risk his own life to save his men. But Hawk and the others, they’d risk themselves for Dax, too. She had to remember that. There was a code. They’d stick together. Together they were strong. Together they might survive.

The instant Jericho pulled into the clearing and slowed; Paige jumped from the car. She didn’t even wait for him to come to a complete stop. When her feet hit the ground, she ran. “Tony!” she called.

Tony looked up and frowned. “What brings you out, Paige. I only needed a couple guys and Reed and Havilland are down clearing out the camp.”

“Dax,” she swallowed. “Dax and his team are up here today. Have you seen them?”

Tony frowned and shook his head. “Do you know where?”

Paige studied the map, but she couldn’t concentrate. She barely noticed when Jericho moved in behind her.

“We’re about here,” Jericho pointed to a spot on the map. “What area are they setting up in, Paige?”

Paige focused on the spot Jericho indicated, trying to orient herself. “Here,” she finally pointed to a narrow road. “They could get the Expedition up this road.” She pointed to the spot where the main road took off down a side road.

“Barely,” Tony grumbled.

“They could only get the vehicle to about here,” Paige pointed to an area on the map. “Dax said there’s a clearing. Not a campsite, but a flat area where they can park the truck and walk in. If they cross through the trees here...” she ran her hand over the map. “He said it’s a straight shot to the ridgeline where they wanted to erect that shelter thing.”

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“There’s not a flat surface up there,” Tony objected. “Not anywhere large enough to erect some kind of shelter.”

Paige rolled her eyes. “They’re setting it up here,” she pointed again. “They have to be lowered about fifty feet over the ledge. Apparently, there’s a flat outcropping just big enough for the shelter.”

Tony just stared. “You’re serious?” he finally asked.

“As a heart attack,” Paige nodded then shrugged. “What can I say? They’re in demand. So, their antics must appeal to someone. How close is that to the fire?”

“Close,” Tony admitted. He turned and scanned the area. “James,” he called to a man a few feet away. “You up for an extraction?”

“We’re ready,” James started walking toward them. “Pete’s out. He got caught when the wind shifted, and he needs liquid and maybe twenty before he’s back online.”

“Take your team and PJ,” Tony decided. “She’s rested and if you need medical, she’s solid.”

“Where to?” James motioned to the map. Tony explained the situation and watched as James gathered his team and headed for the clearing.

Havilland pulled into the staging area and approached the group. “Camp’s clear. They’re mostly closed anyway. They decided to cancel all reservations due to the pandemic and use this season to make some repairs. There were only a couple staffers and the construction crew. They’re headed down the canyon and won’t come back until I call.”

“Good,” Tony glanced at Paige then focused on Jericho. “Maybe Havi and Paige could walk that trail and make sure we got all the campers evacuated.”

“Don’t treat me like a frantic, helpless wife,” Paige barked. “I’m staying and I won’t fall apart so stop worrying about me and just do your job.” She stalked away, terrified she’d never see Dax or his men again.

“She’ll be fine,” Jericho assured Tony. “Now, tell me what you didn’t tell her.”

“The fire started here,” Tony pointed to the map. “I’ve got a team on the backend and they tell me it’s arson. Damon will investigate but right now, they’re saying gasoline. Lots of gasoline. The blaze moved this way...” he ran his finger across the map. “That means...”

“In the direct path of Dax and his men,” Jericho finished. “Chances?”

“No idea,” Tony answered honestly. “They’re good. Even if they were working, I don’t think they’d be taken by surprise. I’m going to be optimistic until there’s a reason not to be.”

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Dax stopped, straining to listen.

“We need to keep moving,” Hawk warned.

“Did you hear that?” Dax shifted and tried to make out the sound.

“I don’t,” Hawk began. “Wait, I think those are footsteps.”

“Man, I hope so,” Dax tightened his grip on the man and started forward. “We could use the help.”

Seconds later James and his team rounded the corner and spotted the three men. “We’ve got a stretcher. The others are fine. We told them to head back down, but they refused. The woman and the kid... they won’t budge either. We need to get the three of you back to that vehicle of yours and then all of us need to get the hell out of Dodge.”

“I can get behind that,” Dax took a step back and let the firemen take the man’s weight. “Hawk is injured. He’ll need someone to look at that shoulder immediately.”

“PJ, our medic, stayed at the vehicle. The woman is suffering from smoke inhalation, so she didn’t want to leave her,” James advised. “She can do a quick check on your shoulder while we head back to camp.”

“And Dax needs someone to look at his hand,” Hawk added.

James studied the two men. “Looks like you came face to face with this beast. Glad you won that round. Once we get back to base, we’ll deal with both of you. Oh, and Dax... your wife is a stressed-out mess. I’ll leave that for you to deal with. The sooner the better, I think.”

“Great,” Dax moaned. He didn’t like making Paige worry, but this time it couldn’t be helped. “Does that radio work up here?”

“Sure,” James double checked the straps on the stokes then motioned for his team to head out. “I was just about to check in.”

They headed down the trail. Their progress was much quicker now that they were carrying the man instead of dragging him.

“Do you know the extent of his injuries?” James asked. “Normally we’d assess first, transport later but...” he glanced over his shoulder and frowned.

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“He was trapped under a large side-by-side,” Dax began. “He’s been going in and out of consciousness. We basically had the same idea,” Dax glanced at Hawk. “We got him free from the machine and just did our best to drag him out. I thought it would be best to get to the vehicle and assess his injuries on the way out.”

“Good plan,” James nodded. “Now, give me a minute to call this in.”

Jericho was standing next to Tony when the radio crackled, and he recognized James.

“I located the package,” James advised. “We’re headed back to the clearing and then we’ll use the vehicle to evacuate from there. We have several injured, so we’ll need medical ready. The most serious patient is a male adult, mid-sixties with multiple unknown injuries. He’s going to need a transport. We didn’t stop to assess and he’s unconscious but breathing at the moment.”

“Copy,” Tony turned. “Becky, you’re up. Call down and have Brent bring in the rig.”

Paige froze and focused on Jericho. He said something to Tony then headed her way. “Dax?”

“As far as I know he’s fine,” Jericho assured her. “They are bringing down an injured male.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know,” Jericho put a hand on her shoulder. “They said mid-sixties and he’s unconscious. I suspect the boys located a family in need and that’s the reason they’re still up on that ridge. Take a minute to settle. They should be back soon.” He gave her shoulder a fatherly squeeze before he nodded to a cooler. “Grab some water and take a minute. I’m going to see if there’s anything we can do to help Tony now that we located the men”

“He said arson,” Paige remembered. “I can help with that.”

“Let’s deal with the threat first and you take the time you need with Dax,” Jericho dropped his hand. “Get some water, we’ll talk about the investigation later.”

A few minutes later, the black Navigator came barreling down the trail. The instant it came to a stop, firemen jumped out and rushed a man on a stokes to the waiting ambulance. A woman and a small boy slowly climbed from the back seat and were escorted to a medical tent where the paramedics could evaluate them in private.

Paige held her breath until the passenger door flew open and Dax emerged. She closed her eyes in relief then ran. She didn’t care who saw her or what they thought. She didn’t care about anything but Dax. The instant she reached him, she lunged. He caught her but winced as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Paige jumped back. “You’re hurt.”

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“Just a little,” he reached out and wiped the single tear from her face with his good hand. She’d hate it if any of her co-workers noticed.

Paige grabbed his other hand and held it out, palm up so she could study it closely. “What happened? It’s so raw and blistered. You need someone to look at you.”

“I’m okay, Paige,” he carefully wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her against him. He used his wrist to hold her in place and rested his forehead against hers. “We’re all fine. Hawk and I will be benched for a week or two, but we were lucky.”

“Hawk?” Paige asked, not wanting to move.

“He had a little battle with a burning branch,” Dax pressed a kiss to her temple. He turned his head to get closer to her ear so only she could hear. “I love you, baby. I’m sorry I worried you. I can still feel your heart racing, try to relax. I’m okay.”

Paige nodded, but didn’t want to let him go.

Dax inhaled, knowing exactly what he’d almost lost and how it would impact Paige if he hadn’t survived. He waited a few more seconds then straightened reluctantly. “I need to make sure that pigheaded friend of mine sees a medic.”

“And I need to make sure that pigheaded husband of mine does the same,” Paige grabbed his hand again. “Tell me what happened.”

“Rescue injury,” Dax told her. “The man was trapped, and I had to grip a hot metal bar to set him free. It’s nothing. The blazing branch that caught Hawk was much worse.”

“What happened to Hawk?”

“We were standing directly underneath, and it broke free. Hawk couldn’t get out of the way fast enough because of the injured man. It hit him in the shoulder and his shirt caught fire.”

“Holy crap,” Paige glanced around searching for Hawk.

“He’s fine,” Dax assured her. “But he dropped to the ground and tried to get the fire out on his own. He was rolling around but it wasn’t working so I moved in and doused the remaining flames by throwing dirt on him. All’s well that ends well, but he needs someone to look at that shoulder. I’m sure it’s still burning and sore.”

“So, now your already injured hand has dirt and grime caked into the wound,” Paige realized.

“Yes,” Dax admitted. “Some, but it got the fire out, so I have to assume it was the right decision.”

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Paige spotted Hawk. He was trying to blend in with the other men, probably to avoid being seen by a medic. She grabbed Dax around the wrist and marched forward, grabbing Hawk with her other hand. She pulled both men toward the red paramedic truck and didn't stop until she found someone to help her. "They both have injuries and don't let them tell you otherwise. He needs his hand looked at," she gave Dax a gentle shove. "And his shoulder caught on fire so there's bound to be a lot of damage. Don't worry about their hard heads. Nothing could penetrate those stubborn skulls."

Dax and Hawk scowled; the medic laughed. "I'll take you first," she pointed to Hawk. "You, don't move," she warned Dax.

"Thanks a lot," Dax mumbled under his breath.

"You're welcome," Paige grinned. "Don't worry, I won't go too far. Not until I know how severe that is and what we need to do to prevent infection."

"Pampering," Dax grinned. "Lots and lots of pampering."

"Right," Paige rolled her eyes then gasped when Dax wrapped his arm around her and gave her a hard pull. Her body slammed into his. Before she realized what he was doing, his lips found hers. It was full of emotion and for a few seconds, Paige forgot where she was.

Dax pulled back and smiled down at her.

"I'm working," Paige growled.

"Me too," Dax's smile widened.

Paige stepped back and glared at him. Her scowl deepened when the medic stepped into the doorway of the tent grinning.

"You're up," the woman motioned to Dax.

He focused on Paige. "This should only take a minute then I'll be back and you can start on that pampering."

"Pampering my butt," Paige grumbled.

"Baby," Dax grinned, leaned forward and gave her another quick kiss. "I live to pamper your butt." Then he pivoted and disappeared into the tent.

Paige couldn't help it; she was laughing as she walked away.

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The following morning Paige accompanied Damon Bannon, the local arson investigator back up to the ignition point of the fire.

“The accelerant was your basic, garden variety gasoline,” Damon told her. “They used a lot of it, though. No chance it was just an accidental spill that caught fire in the wilderness. You’d have to come out here intentionally, off load several cans of the fuel, and then toss a match and run. It spread quickly with all the dead wood that’s accumulated the past couple seasons. The beetles have really done a number on our forests.”

“Right,” Paige began to slowly walk the area.

“I know you’re the evidence whisperer or some nonsense,” Damon grinned. “But if they left anything out here, it would have been destroyed in the blaze.”

“You do you,” Paige glanced up. “I’ll do me. Any idea what route they took in and out?”

“We can track the route the fire took,” Damon shrugged. “I think it’s safe to assume they took a different path.”

“Humor me,” Paige focused on him.

Damon shrugged and began glancing around. “The fire was intentionally pushed that way,” he motioned toward the ridge where Dax and his men were working. “I have to ask,” Damon hesitated. “Don’t get mad.”

“I’ve already asked myself the same question,” Paige stared at the structure the men erected the previous day and sighed. “But nobody knew they were coming out here yesterday. It doesn’t make sense for them to be the target.”

“You did,” Damon disagreed.

“Are you implying I’m the arsonist?” Paige asked flatly.

“No,” Damon said slowly. “But are any of the other men married?”

“Jaimie didn’t do this,” Paige said immediately.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Damon moved in close to her. “If it makes you uncomfortable, I’ll tug that thread.”

“It doesn’t make me uncomfortable,” Paige disagreed. “I considered the possibility they were the target, but it doesn’t track. Ken is the only other member that’s married, and he and Jaimie have a great marriage with a couple of great kids. They’re happy. She didn’t do this.”

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“We don’t always know what’s happening inside another house,” Damon insisted. “We have to check. This business venture, it has to be expensive. There could be money trouble. Problems that could easily be solved with a big insurance policy. It’s a lead, Paige. I’ll look into it and I’ll let you know what I find.”

Paige shrugged. “Do what you have to do but you won’t find anything.” Paige’s mind was reeling. She just hoped the men covered their tracks well when they used the secret funds. She didn’t know Damon Bannon well, but he had a reputation for being thorough. Thorough could be a problem for all of them. She moved forward to get a better look at an overgrown trail to the left. “Did you guys bring any vehicles down here?”

“No,” Damon answered immediately. “Too dangerous. A fire like this can turn on a dime. Vehicles just get in the way. Why?”

Paige pointed to what looked like fresh tracks in the sandy dirt. “Someone did.”

“You up for a walk?” Damon asked. “It could have been a couple of kids, or that elderly couple with their grandson. I think we should follow it, see where it leads.”

“I agree,” Paige darted to her police unit, pulled two bottles of water from a small cooler and handed one to Damon. “Lead the way.”

“I think you should go first,” he objected. “You have a rep when it comes to evidence and I wouldn’t want to accidentally destroy anything.”

“Alright,” Paige smiled. She had wanted to go first, but she was assisting Fire on this one. It wasn’t actually her case. She thought of her husband. Officially it wasn’t her case. Dax and all of his men could have been killed yesterday. Unofficially, that made this her case and she wasn’t going to stop until someone paid for putting them in danger.

They walked slowly up the trail but didn’t find anything of interests, other than the tracks. When they reached an intersecting trail, Paige hesitated and studied the ground carefully. “This way,” Paige finally said — motioning up the intersecting trail.

“Why?” Damon focused on the track but didn’t see her reasoning.

“Trust me?” Paige requested. “I am the evidence whisperer.”

Damon shrugged and motioned her forward.

They continued a few hundred feet before the tracks veered to the right, bumped over a slight grade and waded down the foliage, disappearing behind a large tree. Paige slowly walked the entire area.

“I guess it wasn’t grandpa and the kid,” Damon decided.

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“No,” Paige crouched and studied a dark liquid spot on the ground. “Their truck leaks fluid. Looks like tranny oil.” She reached down and rubbed the dark liquid with a slightly red tint between her thumb and forefinger.

Damon shook his head. “Okay, I’m sold. I always thought the stories were exaggerated but you just followed an obscure trail nearly a mile into the wilderness and found a small, insignificant puddle of transmission oil in a large meadow of weeds. What are the odds?”

Paige frowned. “It wasn’t that hard, and the puddle is significant. If we find a suspect, we can get a warrant to inspect their truck. If it has a transmission leak, we know we’re headed in the right direction.”

“That’s not…” Damon sighed. “Never mind. Now what?”

“Now,” Paige smiled at him. “You dig deep inside yourself and gather up all the patience you can muster because I need to walk this area and see if there’s anything else we can use to nail this guy.”

Damon’s phone rang.

“I thought there wasn’t any service up here.”

“It’s patchy at best,” he punched the button. “Bannon.”

Paige only half listened to Bannon’s end of the conversation. From what she could gather, someone wanted to start cleanup right away. He shut them down, said he needed at least forty-eight hours, but he’d advise. When he hung up, he was silent for so long, Paige straightened and focused on him. “What?”

“I don’t know,” Damon just stood there, looking around the meadow, then up the trail and back to Paige. “There’s something…”

“Talk me through what you’re thinking,” Paige suggested.

“Whoever did this,” he finally said. “They have technical knowledge of a fire.”

“As in they were trained?” Paige asked. “Like a fireman?”

“No,” he scowled. “Not a fireman.”

“Why?” Paige pushed.

“Give me a minute,” Damon walked further off-road, climbing over rocks and disappearing into the trees. “Paige,” he finally called. “Come back here, you need to see this.”

Paige frowned but complied. When she reached Damon, she frowned. “What is that?”

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“Fire break,” Damon looked up at her. “Not a fireman, but someone who has knowledge of fires.”

“Why?”

“They were protecting their truck, but it’s sloppy,” Damon decided. “Here’s my theory. They drove up here and off loaded some kind of smaller machine. One they could use to transport the gasoline to the ignition site. They created a fire break just in case the blaze didn’t go where they wanted it to go, set things up, tossed a match, and drove back here where they loaded up and headed home.”

“That sounds an awful lot like the actions of a fireman,” Paige decided.

“No,” Damon shook his head. “A fireman would have done pretty much everything differently. This was dangerous and this break... it wouldn’t have stopped the fire if it turned on him.”

Paige studied the ground in front of her. She didn’t know anything about fighting fires, so she’d trust him. He was the expert and he seemed confident he was right. “Washed out fireman? Someone who didn’t get through the academy? Someone who got fired before he completed probation?”

“Maybe.” Damon grinned. “Or a fireman’s wife.”

“Man,” Paige laughed. “You seriously have an issue with marriage.”

“Not marriage,” he disagreed. “Just unpredictable, vindictive women.”

“Recent split?” Paige asked in understanding.

“Not that recent, but memorable.”

“Okay,” Paige took a deep breath. “Let’s talk this through. You think disgruntled wife. But I’m not buying that, yet. How would a spouse know their fire fighter would be on this fire? Or even on the front line and not back at base like Tony was. They rotate through assignments just like we do. It’s a huge risk with astronomical odds they’d be successful. They go on the list, but they’re at the bottom... just above Jaimie.”

Damon smiled. “They’re on the list.”

“Who else?” Paige pushed. “What about a civilian that was fired from the department? They would know the basics but not how to implement them.”

“Maybe,” Damon considered. “I don’t think we’ve fired anyone recently, though. Washed out trainees top my list then maybe third-party contractors.”

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“Like your phone call?” Paige wondered. “What was that about?”

“Yes,” Damon agreed. “A fire like this one leaves a lot of damage, but it’s dangerous in high traffic areas. We get a lot of visitors out here. So, we contract with a company that has heavy equipment. They bring a crew in quickly, basically bulldoze the debris, and haul it off in a matter of days. The area is cleared and it’s safe.”

“No falling branches,” Paige said softly, thinking of Hawk.

“I’ll compile a list of contractors that would have been contacted after a fire like this one,” Damon offered.

“Are you backing away from the disgruntled wife theory?” Paige asked absently as she continued to walk around the area.

“No,” he shrugged. “But it would be risky and it’s more likely they’d fail than succeed.”

“They?” Paige wondered.

“I don’t think an angry wife could have set this up on their own,” he admitted.

“Why?”

“Well,” Damon took a few seconds to organize his thoughts. “First, she’d have to dig the fire break, which would have taken at least two days.”

“I could dig that out in a few hours,” Paige disagreed.

“She’d need to load the machine into the truck. It would have been easier on a trailer,” he considered.

“They used a truck,” Paige said with confidence.

“How do you know that?”

“Tracks,” Paige pointed to the road. “There’s only one set. A trailer would have left smaller marks that crossed over the trucks larger ones.”

“Right. How many women do you know that could load a large ATV into the back of a truck by themselves?” Damon asked.

“Most of the ones I know could do that,” Paige shrugged. “It’s not that hard.”

“It wasn’t a woman,” he insisted. “Not one that was acting alone. It could have been a disgruntled wife that was having an affair and she got her side-piece to help eliminate the dead weight. I’d buy that.”

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Paige grinned. “Damon Bannon, you are such a romantic.”

“I can’t count the number of women that have told me that very thing,” Damon grinned. “You’re not buying the disgruntled spouse theory either.”

“Nope,” Paige straightened, brushed her hands on her jeans and made her way back to Damon. “Since you’re running my husband and his team anyway, you might as well add the entire crew that worked this fire to the list. Let’s get them checked off and move on to the real suspects.”

“Who are the real suspects?”

“I have two theories but the evidence doesn’t point either way,” Paige admitted. “I lean toward a washed out or wannabe fireman, civilian that was fired recently or one of your contractors. The other theory is more disturbing. It could be a random, psychopathic arsonist that gets off on starting fire and decided to up his game.”

“Yeah,” Damon frowned. “I thought of that and I don’t like it any more than you do. Are we finished here?”

“Yeah,” Paige nodded. “I got photos of the tracks and the oil spill with my phone so we’ll have them if we need them.”

“I also saw you take a sample of that oil,” Damon grinned. “You are the evidence whisperer. Glad I got to see you in action. Now I know.”

“Know what?” Paige stepped back onto the trail headed back to ground zero.

“That you really can find the proverbial needle in a haystack.”

“Just wrestle around long enough and you’ll get stuck,” Paige smiled. They made small talk all the way back to their starting point.

“I’m going to stop at the fire station before I call it a day,” he told her. “I want to inspect the gear from yesterday and I need to advise the Chief that I’ll be doing a basic run on his men. He won’t bark if he knows what’s coming ahead of time.”

“Alright,” Paige glanced at her watch. “I think I’m going to call it a day. I’ll pick this back up in the morning.”

“Call me after lunch,” Damon decided. “That will give me time to run the backgrounds in the morning and we can decide how to proceed once we get some of these guys off the list.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she slid into her vehicle and headed for home.

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Dax was relaxing on the couch when Paige got home. His hands were still bandaged but she could tell he was grumpy and agitated. “How are the hands?” she asked, unsnapping her duty belt and dropping it into a chair before she plopped down on the couch next to him.

“Fine,” he grumbled.

She leaned in and placed a palm on either side of his face. “This too shall pass.” She brushed her lips against his intending the kiss to be quick and light. She had to discuss the financial check with him and they’d need to deal with any holes in the system. Dax had other ideas. By the time the kiss ended, she was breathless, and her brain felt fuzzy. “Why can you still do that to me?”

“I’m hoping I can always do that to you,” Dax said honestly. “Let’s head upstairs and I’ll show you what else I can do.”

“Not with the hands,” she shook her head. “Plus, we need to talk.”

“About what?” Dax sobered.

“I spent the day with Damon Bannon, he’s the arson investigator handling the fire,” Paige began.

“And you fell head over heels in love, ditched work, and spent the entire afternoon in a sleazy hotel room having an illicit affair?” Dax teased. “Now you’re too tired to pamper your husband and thought you’d use his injuries as an excuse because ‘I have a headache’ was too predictable?”

“Close,” Paige grinned. “You are so close, but we didn’t spring for a hotel. The wildness was so vast and empty we didn’t see the point.”

“Good point,” Dax studied her closely. She was worried about something. “Seriously, what’s up?”

“Inspector Bannon has a theory,” she began. “The fire was started out in the middle of nowhere. The only groups even close to that area was you and the elderly couple vacationing with their grandson.”

“He thinks it was aimed at us,” Dax considered. “I don’t see it. Nobody knew we would be there.”

“I did,” Paige told him.

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“If you were going to take me out, babe,” he kissed her temple. “You’d go for a more direct hit.”

“He wasn’t looking at me,” Paige admitted. “He’s looking at Jaimie.”

“What? Why?” Dax asked, completely taken by surprised.

“Disgruntled spouse,” Paige shrugged. “Husband is busy with a new expensive venture, wife is struggling, two boys that are getting older and more expensive...”

“He’s looking for an insurance policy,” Dax realized. “I’m sure Wooly has one and it’s probably fairly substantial. We all do.”

Paige was a little surprised by that but she let it go. “I know money was tight, for all of you, before you got that secret donor.”

“Is that what you’re worried about?” Dax finally realized the source of her stress. “Don’t. We’re careful. We were always careful, but Nathan’s helped... funnel the proceeds through legitimate corporations. As money laundering goes, he’s helped us develop a pretty good plan.”

Paige frowned.

“Kidding,” Dax pulled her closer and kissed her. “Sort of.”

“You guys are technically laundering money,” she sighed. “You’re sure it’s safe? I don’t know Bannon well, but I’ve heard he’s thorough. If he finds something...”

“He won’t,” Dax assured her. “Bannon can dig as deep as he wants, nothing will pop. He’ll find the insurance policy for Jaimie and the boys, but it won’t send up any red flags. Plus, Wooly’s had it for years. Our lives used to be a lot more dangerous than it is now. The Army encouraged us to invest wisely.”

“I’m not going to worry about that,” Paige decided. “He’ll tell me what he finds and I’ll think of a way to explain it if I need to.”

“Any other leads?”

“Nope,” Paige rested her head on his chest and walked him through her day.

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Paige fumbled around on the nightstand until her fingers collided with her phone. She snatched it up and tried to focus on the display. Jericho? She glanced at the clock. What could he want at this hour?

“Hello?” She said quietly shifting to climb from the bed.

Dax reached out an arm and stopped her. “Don’t leave, I’m awake.”

Paige listened intently to the brief instructions from her boss. “Tell Lo I’m on my way. Did anyone call Bannon?”

“Fire Chief notified him,” Jericho affirmed. “He’s enroute. Should be here any minute.”

“Assign the homicide to me,” she decided. “I’m sure it’s the same arsonist. I’ll work them as two incidents but one case.”

“Glad you agree,” Jericho smiled. “We need to catch this guy, Paige. Before anyone else ends up dead.”

“I agree,” she clicked off and climbed from the bed.

“Another fire?” Dax sat up. “I’ll get coffee, you grab a quick shower.”

“You don’t have to...”

“I know,” Dax moved to her and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Someone died?”

“He started an old, vacant cabin on fire this time,” Paige pulled a suitable outfit from her closet. “Only, it wasn’t vacant. A kid was squatting inside. He was only seventeen, Dax. His entire life was ahead of him and now he’s dead. His life is over because he had the bad luck to find shelter in a structure some idiot firebug wanted gone.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Dax said confidently. “You’ll find him, and he’ll rot in prison for what he’s done.”

Paige studied his hands. “I was going to change those today.”

“I’ll get Zee to help me,” Dax headed for the door. “Go, shower. I’ll have coffee and some kind of breakfast ready when you come down.”

Paige approached the scene. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and assume you obliterated my crime scene.”

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Bannon glanced up and smiled. “Nope,” he motioned to the firemen standing near the truck. “But they did.”

“Have you found anything we can use?” Paige asked absently as she glanced around the clearing then focused on the charred remains of the cabin. Her frown deepened when she thought of the body still trapped inside and wondered who the teenager was and what his life was like.

Bannon stood. “They found a metal suitcase inside. I have one of my guys going through it to see if we can identify the victim.”

“Jericho said teenage boy.” Paige said, confused.

“Yeah,” Bannon nodded. “That’s what we think, anyway. There was a wallet inside the suitcase. It’s either his, or he stole it. We ran the name through the system, nothing popped. We think it belonged to him — Dillon Turner, seventeen-year-old kid that hails from San Francisco.”

“So,” Paige sighed. “What is Dillon Turner doing holed up in an abandoned cabin in Manti, Utah?”

“Derek’s working on that,” Bannon shrugged. “Runaway maybe, or just a young kid following big dreams. We’ll figure it out. Right now, I want to walk you through what we know.”

“Alright,” Paige followed him until they reached the backside of the cabin.

“The blaze started here,” he pointed to the corner of the building.

Paige frowned. “How can you tell?” It all looked the same to her.

“Do you want me to get into burn patterns, residual shape and traces?”

“Nope,” Paige shrugged. “I’ll just trust you.”

“Good,” Bannon began walking the perimeter of the building. “He was thorough. Used the gasoline to circle the entire building this time, then tossed a match back there and ran.”

Paige silently studied the building, thinking. “Body still inside?”

“Yeah,” Bannon sobered. “I told Benny to wait over by the trucks with the rest of the men until you gave the okay.”

“I want to see it,” Paige decided. “Can you ask Benny to head over. I need to talk to him first. I should just take a minute, then he can transport.”

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Moments later Benny and Bannon joined Paige inside. They spotted Paige circling the small interior, frowning. “What?” Bannon finally asked.

“Why didn’t he see or hear the suspect? Why didn’t he dash out of the cabin before he was trapped inside?”

Bannon shrugged. “Maybe he was sleeping.”

“Maybe he was already dead,” Paige said flatly.

“I’ll check,” Benny moved forward. “It’s easy enough to determine. Once I start the autopsy, I’ll know if the death occurred as a result of the fire or if he was dead and the arson was meant to cover it up. The lungs don’t lie.”

Paige nodded.

Bannon frowned. “What are you thinking, Paige?”

“I don’t know,” she considered. “How certain are you that both fires were set by the same person?”

“Ninety-eight percent,” Bannon answered without hesitation. “I’d go with a hundred but there’s always that unforeseen anomaly that has to be factored in.”

Paige smiled. “Then why not ninety-nine?”

“I’m a rebel,” Bannon smiled. “Everyone goes with ninety-nine.”

Paige shook her head but smiled. She stepped outside and inhaled a deep, soothing breath.

“You ready to take a walk?” Bannon moved in next to her.

“Sure,” Paige glanced at him. “Where we going?”

“This way,” he motioned to the edge of the clearing just off the corner where he determined the fire started. They walked in silence for several minutes. Finally, Bannon spoke. “Do you really think that could have been a homicide? One the suspect tried to cover up using arson?”

“I don’t know,” Paige shrugged. “I’m just exploring all possibilities. He was a young kid, on his own, out in the middle of the wilderness. It’s quiet out here, especially late at night. Why didn’t he hear anything? Seventeen-year-old kid, at that age they think their Superman. He should have reacted and if he had, there would have been plenty of time to escape.”

“I can follow that far,” Bannon admitted. “But I’m having a hard time figuring out the rest. Do you think the first fire was a ruse? Or was that kid in on the first fire and his partner killed him for some reason and tried to make it look like another random arson?”

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“Could be either,” Paige admitted. “I’m just thinking out loud here. There’s nothing to support either theory at this point. There’s no evidence to support anything.”

“Not true,” Bannon pointed to a spot he marked earlier.

Paige moved forward, crouched, and slid her fingers into the warm liquid. “Transmission oil.” She glanced back at her new partner. “You said ninety-eight percent. If this doesn’t bump it up to a hundred, what would?”

“Well,” Bannon grinned. “You still have to match it to the previous sample. Maybe there’s another truck driven by another arsonists that just happens to leak transmission oil. I wouldn’t want to be presumptuous.”

“Ha,” Paige stood. “So, the same suspects but different arson. Did you find a fire break like last time?”

“Nope,” Bannon stepped up and stopped her when she tried to gather some oil with a napkin. “I already had my guys gather up a sample. It’s in a lockbox in my truck. Chain of evidence has been preserved and you can take the vile to the lab and have it tested against the first sample.”

“Thanks,” Paige tried to act grateful, but she was actually angry with herself. She never wandered away from a crime scene without her go-bag. She straightened and stared into the distance. “Was there any indication two people were living out of the cabin? You said you took a suitcase. Was there only one? Are the clothes the same size? What about dishes?”

“We just found the suitcase,” Bannon stopped her. “Everything else was destroyed. There was plastic, so I’m assuming some kind of cheap dishes but there’s no way to tell if two people were squatting in there or just one.”

“I didn’t get a chance to call before I went off yesterday,” Paige started back toward the cabin. “Any progress on the backgrounds?”

“As I’m sure you know,” Bannon frowned. “Nothing on Dax and his men. And by that, I mean nothing. I’m not sure how to take that. Either they have something big and horrible that the government is covering up or they’re clean.”

“They’re clean,” Paige grinned. “and the government wants to keep it that way. “Let’s just move on.”

“Do I have any other choice?” Bannon grumbled. “I’ve checked into the firemen that were on scene. Nothing popped there, either. Berkley’s in the middle of a divorce, but it’s more amicable than most from what I can gather.”

“You look disappointed,” Paige grinned. “Kind of destroys your angry ex-wife theory.”

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“So far,” Bannon shrugged. “The civilians and part-timers at the station also check out. We started on the contractors late in the day and decided to put it aside and pick it back up this morning.”

“I need to check in with Jer,” Paige said when they reached Bannon’s truck. “If you get that oil, I’ll drop it by the lab then head over to your office and help sort through the contractors. There’s not much we can do here until Benny determines cause of death.”

“Even then,” Bannon pointed out. “All we know is method, not motive or anything else for that matter.”

“Not true,” Paige disagreed. “If it was homicide with arson used as a cover, we can trace Dillon Turner, track his movement and hopefully discover a friend, partner or enemy.”

“And if he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“Then we’re back to square one,” Paige shrugged. “And we know it wasn’t personal, which brings us back to crazy, mad arsonists or a crime of opportunity.”

“Alright,” Bannon sighed. “I need about twenty before I can clear out up here. That should give you time to check in with the boss and drop by the lab.” He pulled open his back door, unlocked a small safe and handed over a glass vile. “See you when I see you.”

“Later,” Paige called over her shoulder as she headed for her car.

“You probably don’t know this about me,” Paige dropped back in her chair and ran her hands over her face. “But I absolutely abhor paperwork.”

“No,” Bannon grinned. “I didn’t know that. You hide it so well.”

Paige glared at him but before she could come up with a snide remark, her phone buzzed. She glanced at the display. “Benny.” She advised before answering. “You’re sure,” Paige questioned into the phone. “I know. Yes, I trust you. Of course, you’re the expert. I was just double checking; I didn’t mean to offend you. Thanks for the quick work, and the update.” She clicked off and looked at Bannon. “Homicide.”

“By fire or other means?” he asked for clarification.

“Other means,” Paige stood and began to pace. “He was dead before the fire destroyed the body. No smoke in his lungs or his throat, air passage, whatever. Benny hasn’t determined

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cause of death, yet. He said it will take another day at least and the tox report won't be back for at least forty-eight."

"But we know," Bannon decided. "We can stop scouring through this mountain of paperwork and focus on tracking Dillon back to Cali."

"Can your men continue with this?" she brushed a hand through the air, indicating the stacks of files covering the conference room table.

"Sure," Bannon shrugged. "Why?"

"Because I'm not ready to rule it out completely but I want to focus on tracking Dillon Turner. We need to focus on Dillon that is. I can call Jericho, ask if Logan can help with all of this," Paige offered.

"Alright," Bannon nodded. "I'll have Derek continue with the backgrounds and you send Reed over to help. You and I will see what we can do to track our victim."

Just then, Paige's phone rang again. "Margie, what do you have for me?" Paige listened, snatched up a pad and began to scribble. When she hung up, she turned to Bannon again. "Margie is emailing you a photo."

"Of what?" Bannon wondered, exiting the room and heading for his office.

"Who is more accurate," Paige dropped into his visitor's chair. "Dillon Turner."

"How does that help?" Bannon settled into his chair. "We already had his driver's license. In case you've forgotten, that means we have a photo and an address."

"Yes," Paige agreed. "But this photo is better. Nobody looks like their license photo, not really. Anyway, that's not the important part."

"I'm listening," Bannon settled back to give her his full attention.

"Turner left California three weeks ago," Paige glanced at her notes. "His grandfather, Alan Turner had a stroke three months back. That's when he was forced into a rest home but he didn't recover. Once he passed, Dillon left California and headed east."

"How do you know that?"

"Margie is golden," Paige grinned. "She's a miracle worker. She was able to track Dillon to San Francisco through an ambulance back report. When she contacted the hospital, they referred her to the rehab center where she spoke with Alan's nurse. The woman was concerned about Dillon. She said he was devastated after his grandfather passed away. He visited every day for over two months and she got to know him. He finally opened up, told her his parents

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were killed in a plane crash and his grandfather took him in and raised him. It doesn't sound like he has anyone, no next of kin to notify at this point."

"Rough," Bannon tapped a pen on his desk. "All before he reached eighteen."

"Yeah," Paige stretched out her legs. "He didn't mention a friend to the nurse. He told her he was heading to Nashville. Apparently he had an amazing set of pipes and wanted to try to make it sing for his supper — literally."

"He could have hitched a ride with the wrong person," Bannon considered. "Give me a minute." He stood and left the room. He didn't return.

Seven minutes later, Paige was just about to head out and track the annoying man down when he stepped into the doorway and asked her to join him. "I thought we were partners," Paige grumbled.

"We are," Bannon stepped into an office slightly smaller than his own. "This is Shirley. She's our resident tech expert and she's found activity on Alan Turner's credit card."

"How recent?" she moved forward, her gut telling her they just found a lead.

"Someone used the card last week," Shirley pointed to a line on her computer screen. "Gas station in Hinkley. The day before that, he made several purchases in Reno."

Paige looked at the charges and the amounts. "He hitched a ride. They travelled down US-6, stopped off in Reno, probably gambled and rested for the night then continued on to Manti."

"But why?" Bannon wondered. "Why Manti?"

"Maybe his ride has connections here," Paige considered. "You available to take a road trip?"

"Sure," he glanced at his watch. "How long of a trip?"

"I want to visit that station in Hinkley," Paige told him. "Shouldn't take more than three hours round trip."

"More like four," Shirley corrected. "Plus the stop, and then if you add in a quick dinner, you should plan on around five."

Bannon sighed. "I need to run this by the boss and you should call home. The last thing I need is your husband irate. He just might hunt me down and kill me and then the government will wipe that slate clean. Poof, no more Damon Bannon and the only one that would notice is my faithful dog, Chip."

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“You named your dog Chip?” Paige grinned. “Let me guess, you always dreamed of being a motorcycle cop?”

“Absolutely not,” Bannon scowled. “He loves potato chips, always has. He ate an entire bag the first day I got him. It made him so sick, he rolled around on the kitchen floor all night moaning and growling. Seemed appropriate and I couldn’t come up with anything better so it stuck.”

“He still eats chips?” Paige asked, surprised the experience didn’t traumatize the poor animal for life.

“Loves them,” Bannon moved to his desk and dialed his boss. After a brief conversation, he disconnected. “He says this better pan out because if not, he’s not paying overtime for a worthless road trip.”

“It will,” Paige assured him. “I need to call Walters, let him know the plan.”

“And then call home,” Bannon pushed.

Paige laughed. “Then I’ll call home.”

They had finished at the gas station, video of the two men in hand, detailed receipt and a clear picture of the truck but no identifying license. It was missing the front plate and never turned at an angle where the camera could catch it. *Was that by design?* Paige wondered. *Maybe.* It didn’t really matter, dumb luck or planning came with the same result. They had no idea who Dillan Turner had caught a ride with.

“Dinner now, or wait until we reach Nephi?” Bannon asked.

“Nephi,” Paige said absently then looked at her phone display when it began to ring. “Deputy Carter.”

“Paige,” Logan answered, sounding relieved. “I think I found something, but Derek says I’m way off base. I don’t think I am.”

“Tell me what you found,” Paige straightened and stared out the window as Bannon pulled onto the highway and headed out of town.

“There’s a contractor,” Logan began. “Heavy equipment driver. He has the contract to come in and clean up the area once Fire is finished. Basically, he makes the area safe again.”

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Paige frowned. “What’s his name?”

“Brian Rigby,” Logan answered. “And he’s had some financial problems. Problems that were instantly resolved once that fire was set and he was hired to come in and clear things out.”

“Was Brian Rigby the guy that wanted to start on clean up immediately following the first fire?” Paige asked Bannon.

“He was, why?” Bannon demanded. “He’s not involved in this. If your guy suspects him, he’s way off base.”

“That’s what Derek says,” Paige considered. “But it seems he had some serious money problems until he was conveniently called in to clean up the area.”

“It’s not Brian,” Bannon insisted. “Put him on speaker.”

“Logan,” Paige sighed. “Bannon wants to talk to you. I’m switching you over to Bluetooth so you’ll come through on the speaker.”

“Derek insists I do the same here,” Reed admitted. “He says he needs to explain why I’m wrong and Brian is innocent.”

“Paige,” Derek began.

“Wait up,” Paige insisted. “Bannon’s already barking at me and insisting we’re wrong. I want Logan to explain why he got a buzz on this particular guy.”

“It’s a couple things,” Logan began. “I’m not saying he’s guilty. I’m just saying we should check. You know, go out and talk to him, feel things out a bit. The financials popped first. That’s what made me look into this more. I contacted the bank and they admitted the Rigby’s were put on notice a week ago that if they didn’t pay at least three thousand by the end of the month, they’d have to begin foreclosure proceedings.”

“And I told you that’s irrelevant,” Derek growled.

“Sounds pretty relevant to me,” Paige disagreed.

“Derek’s right,” Bannon said softly. “I didn’t know the bank sent the notice. Brian didn’t tell me that. But it doesn’t matter. The mortgage will be paid in full by the end of the month so three thousand was nothing.”

“He’s a friend of yours?” Paige wondered.

“He’s a friend of the entire department,” Derek answered. “Sure, he fell on some hard times but that man is not capable of setting a deadly fire and he certainly isn’t a killer.”

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“I agree with Derek,” Bannon told Paige.

“Logan,” Paige glanced at Bannon and hesitated. “Send me the information. I need whatever you’ve got. It might be nothing, but I need to check. Can you let Jericho know I’ll be late getting to the office in the morning? I want to interview this Brian Rigby and decide if he is or isn’t capable of murder myself.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Logan assured her. “Do you want to know the rest? The other reason I think we need to talk to the family?”

“There’s more?” she looked at Bannon. He was frowning and he now had deep scowl lines etched in his forehead.

“Brian Rigby is married to a Megan Rigby,” Logan continued.

“Now Megan’s a killer?” Derek asked, clearly exasperated.

“Megan was a ward of the state until she turned eighteen,” Logan ignored his colleague. “She lived in a group home and was never adopted out to a permanent family. I’m digging, but the state is being difficult. I’ve discovered at least three males and two females that spent seven to ten years in the same home. I was thinking about that seventeen-year-old kid that didn’t have anyone.”

“And you realized it would be easy for another foster kid to make a connection with a desperate seventeen-year-old kid trying to act like an adult.”

“Exactly,” Logan agreed. “I’m not saying they had anything to do with this. I’m just saying we need to check it out.”

“I agree,” Paige glanced at Bannon again. “Thanks Logan. Go home, it’s late.”

“On my way,” Logan clicked off.

“I have to check,” Paige insisted. “It’s a good lead and I have to check.”

“You’re making a lot of assumptions,” Bannon insisted. “Most of them are wrong.”

“Then enlighten me,” Paige shrugged.

“Brian and Megan had a son,” Bannon didn’t take his eyes off the road. “He was a good kid. Everyone loved Mark, you couldn’t help but love that boy.”

“You’re talking in past tense,” Paige observed.

“He was born with a ton of medical issues,” Bannon sighed. “Expensive ones. And he dreamed of being a fireman. The kid was about eight the first time Brian brought him down to

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the station. He was in heaven and we all decided to make Mark an honorary fireman. He'd go out with his dad when he could... when he felt well enough to last an entire day that is. As the years went on, he got worse. I lost track of how many surgeries that kid endured. Finally, when he was fourteen, he lost his battle. That was last year. Brian and Megan have been struggling to survive ever since."

"Which makes him a legitimate suspect," Paige insisted.

Bannon ignored the comment. "We've been conducting fundraisers, the kids have been washing cars, wives have held bake sales, anything and everything just to help those two pay off their medical bills. We did it, too. The hospital, the doctors, the anesthesiologists, all of them have been paid in full."

"Then why the foreclosure?" Paige wondered. "If you guys were paying the medical bills, why couldn't they pay their house payment?"

"Our contributions were sporadic at best," Bannon said without emotion. "We did what we could, but they were desperate. They paid this bill one month, a different bill the next. They were juggling and we knew time was running out. I didn't know the bank called in the loan. But, like I said, it doesn't matter. The chief found a wealthy donor last week. We have a concert at the park scheduled for this Saturday and we planned to present the Rigby's with enough money to pay their mortgage off completely."

"But they didn't know that," Paige wasn't convinced.

"They did," Bannon disagreed. "Mayor Fowler stopped by and notified them himself two days before that first fire. Brian didn't do this."

"Then you shouldn't have a problem with me speaking to him," Paige argued. "If he didn't do it, I'll be able to determine that within minutes."

"That's not the point," Bannon fell silent for several minutes. Then, he turned to focus on Paige. "If you insist on doing this, I'm going with you. What time and where do you want to meet?"

"I..."

"Don't argue," Bannon told her. "If you won't share the details, I'll just stop in at Brian's house and hang out until you arrive."

"Fine," Paige sighed. "But if you interfere, I swear, I'll arrest you for obstruction. Then I'll go back and finish the interview my way, anyway. If I agree to let you join me, you have to let me do my job."

Bannon shrugged but didn't say another word.

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Paige pulled into the driveway, spotted the ancient pickup and frowned. She focused on Bannon and waited.

“That doesn’t belong to Brian or Megan,” he knew what she was thinking, but she was wrong. “Let’s go see if the clunker has a transmission leak.”

It did. “I need to run the plates and I need to start working on a warrant,” Paige studied him. “Can I trust you?”

“What exactly do you think I’m going to do, Paige?” Bannon asked in frustration. “I’m not worried about that truck. It’s not Brian’s and it’s not Megan’s. I have to assume they have company. Someone that’s using them”

“Using them?” Paige asked skeptically. “Using them how?”

“For a place to stay,” Bannon supplied. “Or, as cover for their bad deeds. If you don’t trust me, I’ll wait until you’ve finished before I head to the door.”

“I…” she stopped when the front door suddenly swung open and a slim woman that looked to be in her late thirties or early forties stepped onto the porch.

“Damon, is that you?” Megan called out.

“It is,” Bannon smiled at the woman, glanced at Paige then proceeded up the sidewalk.

“What in the world are you doing outside,” Megan wondered. “Come on up here out of that sun. It’s not even noon and it’s blistering already.”

“Megan,” Bannon leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “I’d like you to meet Deputy Paige Carter. Paige, this is Megan Rigby.”

“Deputy?” Megan glanced at Damon then back to Paige. “It’s nice to meet you, but I have to say I’m a little confused. Why did you bring a deputy to my home, Damon?”

“We need to speak with Brian,” Bannon maneuvered her to a patio chair.

“Oh, well Brian isn’t home at the moment,” Megan settled into the chair then focused on Paige. “Is Brian in some kind of trouble?”

“I hope not,” Paige said honestly. “Can you tell me who that truck belongs to?”

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“Oh,” Megan relaxed. “That old thing belongs to Clint. He’s my brother. Well, not really, I suppose. He’s my foster brother, I guess I should say.”

“You lived in the same group home as children?” Paige offered.

“Then you do know,” Megan’s shoulders visible relaxed a little more. “Most everyone around here knows I don’t have any real family. It’s not a secret and everyone at the fire station is aware. I just wasn’t sure...” she let the sentence hang, not sure how to finish.

“And Clint is staying here, with you?” Paige pushed.

“Oh,” Megan glanced at the truck. “Temporarily. Clint was always troubled, I guess you could say. Growing up, he’d act out and get restless. He never stays anywhere for too long.”

“How long will he be staying here?” Bannon asked gently.

“I’m not sure,” Megan admitted. “He came by ten days ago and said he was passing through and he really wanted to see me. He wanted to spend some time with me.”

“Have you had time to visit and catch up?” Bannon asked. He knew he was taking over the interview, but he was sure he could help Paige get what she needed.

“A little,” Megan glanced away. “Clint... well, he likes to drink and party a lot. I’m not one to spend time in bars. You know that. Anyway, he ate dinner with us last night and one or two other nights but mostly he just drinks late, comes back here and crashes, then wakes up around noon and putters around — mostly on that truck.”

“Is Clint here now?” Paige asked. “Maybe he’s still inside sleeping?”

“He’s not, no.” Megan glanced at the door. “Brian was getting frustrated. He told Clint to go into town and try to get a job to help pay for gas and insurance. Clint refused. He’s been pressuring me to help him. He won’t drop it no matter how many times I tell him no. I just don’t have the money to spare, not now,” she glanced to Bannon hoping to find understanding.

“I know,” Bannon reached out and patted her hand. “Did he threaten you or make you uncomfortable in any way, Megan?”

“Not really,” Megan sighed. “Clint, like I said before, he was always troubled. My parents were drug addicts. I was removed from the home but Clint, well... his parents didn’t want him. They said he was ungovernable and refused to let him live with them and his younger sister. I overheard Trish one time—”

“Trish?” Paige asked.

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“Oh,” Megan smiled. “Trish was my foster mom. She was a wonderful, loving person. I know people say the system is difficult, but that wasn’t my experience. Trish and Robert did their best to love us and they always taught us morals and the value of hard work.”

“What happened?”

“They died,” Megan lowered her eyes to stare at now shaking hands. “The month before I turned eighteen.”

Paige wanted to press her on that, it seemed too coincidental, but she’d look into it herself and follow up later if she needed to. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she finally said.

“It was a long time ago,” Megan tried to put the sorrow aside. “I don’t understand. What is this about? Why are you here Damon?”

“We need to speak to Brian,” Damon advised. “And we’d like to speak with Clint. Do you know when he’ll be home?”

“He’s working with Brian today,” Megan told them. “Brian took him up on the mountain. He insisted, really. Clint doesn’t understand that I don’t keep secrets from my husband. He was pressuring me for money. He asked me to pay his truck insurance that first night, right after he arrived. I talked to Brian about the situation and he decided if Clint would work for him, we’d find a way to compensate him. He’d have to work for his pay. I insisted on that and Brian agreed. We would have insisted even if we were rich. Clint needs to know he can’t use us. I’d like to think he really did come to see me just because he cares but I’m realistic enough to know he thought he could con us out of a few bucks. I consider him family. So, I wanted to help him out, but he had to earn it. Anyway, after Brian was contacted to do that job for the fire department, we both agreed that if Clint would work for it, we’d add a little extra. He’s being paid more than we can really afford. More than Brian would have paid another employee but the fire department pays well and cleaning up is such hard work... and, well — he’s family.”

Paige turned to Bannon. “Which one?”

“He has to be at the first fire,” Bannon pulled out his phone. “I haven’t released the cabin yet.”

“There was another fire?” Megan asked. “I hadn’t heard. Brian and I had a late dinner last night and when we got home, we went straight to bed.”

Paige glanced at Bannon, pointed to her phone then made her way back to her vehicle. She needed a warrant and she needed someone to keep an eye on her suspect. Once the warrant was signed, she contacted Frank Hopkins to tow the vehicle, arranged for Gage to head up the canyon to monitor Brian and Clint, then she returned to the porch.

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“Damon tells me you think Clint was involved in some criminal activity,” Megan focused on Paige. “He said you need to evaluate Clint’s truck. Can I give you permission for that? If he did something, if he broke the law, he needs to have consequences. He needs to pay the price for whatever he’s done.”

Paige glanced at Bannon then focused on Megan, surprised. “We think he started the fire up the canyon. The one he’s working with Brian to clean up. Has Clint ever had a problem with arson?”

Megan’s eyes went wide in disbelief. Then something, acknowledgement, horror, and finally sorrow settled in Megan’s eyes. “No.”

“Megan?” Paige tried to sooth. “I need you to tell me. You suspect something. Can you trust me to do the right thing? Can you tell me what has you so upset?”

“My foster parents were killed in a fire,” Megan admitted. “Clint wasn’t there but —”

“But he was close enough he could have done it?” Paige wondered.

“I don’t want to believe that but yes,” Megan admitted. “There was a boy, is the boy okay?”

Paige hesitated, looked to Bannon for approval and when she got his nod, she pulled out the image of Dillon Turner. “This boy?”

Megan covered her face and began to sob. “What happened to him?”

“He was killed in a fire,” Paige told her.

Bannon moved to sit next to Megan and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

“Brian!” Megan suddenly straightened, clearly panicked and worried. “He won’t hurt Brian, will he?”

“No,” Paige told her.

“How do you know?” Megan asked, not convinced. “Clint didn’t want to go this morning. He was angry, I could see he was angry, but I thought he needed to learn to work for what he wants. He was always so good at conning people into giving him everything so easily. I thought he needed to know he couldn’t do that with us. So, we made him get up early and go to work with Brian. Clint is unpredictable when he’s angry.”

“Brian is fine,” Paige said again. “Deputy Gage Clayton is on the mountain. He’s watching over Brian to make sure nothing happens to him. Do you know Gage?”

Megan nodded. “Alright, if Gage is there, Brian will be okay.”

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Paige spotted the tow truck and stood. “I have a warrant to take that truck. Once I’m finished, Gage is going to bring Clint down to the station so we can interview him. Is there anything else I need to know before I get started?”

“He doesn’t know Brian and I saw him with that boy,” Megan pointed to the picture. “They were in the park and it looked like they were arguing. He doesn’t know we saw him. We thought, well he was pushing me about the money and Brian is so protective. We both wondered why Clint was keeping the kid a secret and if they were involved or something. We also wondered why the boy didn’t get a job to help with expenses. They were both healthy and able. We knew if we brought it up, there would be an argument and we just didn’t want to deal with it.”

“Do you know what they were arguing about?” Paige asked.

Megan shook her head. “No, it was kind of hushed, but urgent. That’s the only way I can think to explain it.”

“Do you remember when this was?” Paige wondered.

“Um,” Megan considered. “Three... no, four days ago. Yes, it was four days ago. We saw them arguing and then the next day Brian heard about the fire up the canyon. We thought they might have been arguing over money or something and that’s when Brian decided to let Clint help with cleanup. We thought it would be good for him to earn his way. Plus, we wanted to get him out of the house. We thought if he worked all day, he might be too tired to party all night.”

“Okay,” Paige stood. “Thank you, Megan, you have been very helpful. I’m sorry we had to bring you into this.”

“Clint did that, not you,” Megan also stood. “I’d like to call Brian and ask him to come home for an hour or so... I need to talk to him over lunch. When can I call him?”

“I’ll call you and let you know once we have Clint in custody,” Bannon assured her. “Brian might call you first but I’m only a phone call away if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” Megan gave Bannon a weak smile before she disappeared into the house.

Two hours later, Paige and Damon Bannon sat across from Clint Fairfield. He was older than Paige pictured. She should have realized. Megan was thirty-eight so Clint had to be in the same ballpark. He was actually forty-one and he was hard, experienced, and cocky.

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“Don’t you need to read me my rights?” Clint smirked.

“No,” Paige told him. “Because we both know Deputy Clayton already took care of that.”

“Then,” Clint’s smile widened. “I want an attorney.”

“That’s fine,” Paige stood. “Clint Fairfield stand up but keep your hands where I can see them. You’re under arrest.”

“What are the charges?” Clint demanded. “I didn’t do nothing.”

“That I believe,” Bannon stood and moved behind Clint.

“I have a right to know what I’m being charged with,” Clint insisted.

“Arson,” Bannon said casually, watching Paige slip on the cuffs. “It’s a federal offense to start a fire in a national park.”

“What fire?” Clint’s eyes were dancing around the room as he tried to come up with a response.

“First degree murder,” Paige snapped the cuffs into place. “And a few lessor, insignificant charges that might add on another year or two.”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Clint’s eyes went hard and blank.

“Uh-huh,” Paige pulled out the photo. Not because she thought the man would confess but she wanted to see his reaction.

“I don’t know that kid,” Clint looked away.

“You’ve invoked your right to an attorney,” Paige reminded him. “So, unless you’ve changed your mind, I’m not at liberty to discuss that kid’s death.”

“I don’t know that kid,” Clint insisted. “Why would I kill someone I don’t know.”

Paige didn’t answer.

“Fine,” Clint shrugged. “I maybe don’t need an attorney. I’ll let you know if I change my mind. But I didn’t do nothing, so I don’t need a nosey attorney sniffing around.”

“Mr. Fairfield,” Paige glanced at the recorder to make sure it was still working. “You originally said you wanted an attorney. Now, you’ve changed your mind. Is that correct?”

“Yeah,” Clint said more confident now. “I don’t need no attorney. I didn’t know that kid and you can’t arrest me for killing someone I didn’t know.”

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“But you did know him,” Paige said softly. “We have witnesses who saw you at the park.” She pulled out a still shot of Clint and Dillon at the gas station in Hinckley. “The two of you were traveling together. Tell us why you killed him. Tell us what happened. Did Dillon attack you? Did he threaten you in some way? Maybe it was self-defense and you didn’t have a choice.”

Clint studied the wall for several seconds. Then he glanced down and tried to hide a sadistic smile that spread across his face. “The kid attacked me. He was gay or something and he wanted me to —” he smiled again. “Well, you know. He wanted a cheap lay. I told him I didn’t roll that way and he went nuts. He attacked me and I defended myself. I don’t know what happened, not really. One minute I was fighting off his violent attack, the next he was on the ground. He wasn’t moving, he wasn’t breathing. I panicked.”

“And you caught the cabin on fire,” Bannon provided.

“I —” Clint hesitated, considered and then obviously had a new plan. “Yeah, I panicked and set the place on fire. I heard there was a fire a couple days earlier and I thought you guys would think the same person set both of them.”

“The same person did set both of them,” Paige said flatly. “We can put your truck at both scenes. We’ve got you, Clint. We’ve got you cold. Is that what you were arguing about? At the park, when the witnesses spotted you? Did you want to set the forest on fire and Dillon said no? He was just along for the ride. He was on his way to Nashville to make something of himself and he didn’t want anything to do with you — or arson?”

“Who said that kid was headed to Nashville?” Clint wondered. “He was just drifting, like me. He stole money and cards from his family and he bolted. They didn’t understand him and he needed to escape.”

“Are you talking about Dillon, or yourself?” Paige wondered. “Your parents abandoned you as a child. They didn’t understand you. And your foster parents — always nagging, nagging, nagging. Teaching you morals and ethics, forcing you to work for everything they gave you, never just offering up what you wanted for free, always a price.”

“They got what was coming,” Clint grinned. “It was beautiful and so satisfying.”

“You killed them, too?” Paige asked.

“They died in a freak fire,” Clint shrugged.

“They were murdered,” Paige said flatly. “And you just said how beautiful and satisfying it was to kill them.”

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“I,” Clint glanced around then focused on Paige. “What if I did? It’s not your case. They closed that case a very long time ago. Accidental fire, resulting in the tragic but accidental death of the obnoxious, selfish owners. All the pathetic kids that were living there, they all fell for Trish and Roberts nonsense. Not me, I knew what they were doing. Free labor, that’s all they wanted. They pretended to love us but I knew better. I knew they were just selfish and pathetic. Now they’re dead.”

“And you started the fire,” Bannon pushed.

“Sure,” Clint shrugged. “I started it. So what?”

Paige grinned. He didn’t know they knew the details. The case wasn’t closed. Trish and Robert Cook had been tied to their bed and burned to death. Paige pushed the images from her mind. She couldn’t think of how painful and horrific their last moments must have been. She needed Clint to confess to killing Dillon. She wanted to know why he did it. “Just like you started the fire at the cabin. You killed Dillon and then set the place on fire to try and cover up his death.”

“Like I said,” Clint shrugged and settled deeper into his chair. “He came onto me, I fought back, he died. I admit, I panicked a little. I set the place on fire and headed back to have dinner with Megan and that worthless husband of hers. Brian,” he sneered. “He’s just like Robert and Megan is turning into a sad replica of Trish.”

“Walk us through the incident with Dillon,” Paige insisted. “You said he came onto you, but he was just a kid. You’re twice as big as Dillon, you’re stronger, and the two of you were seen arguing at the park. Tell us what you were arguing about.”

“He wanted to leave,” Clint glanced away. “I wanted to stay another day or two. Brian said if I worked with him to clean up the mess from that other fire, the one a day or so earlier, he’d pay me for the work. I needed the money, so I wanted to stay. Dillon wanted to leave. I told him fine by me, go on and leave but I was staying. He freaked out.”

“The witnesses said the argument was before the fire,” Bannon glared at Clint. “The argument wasn’t about leaving or staying to earn money. What was it about? Did you want to start the fire to get money and Dillon just wanted to move on, head to Nashville and follow his dream?”

“He was a kid,” Clint spat. “He knew nothing about real life. Nashville, that was a fantasy. We could stay here and make good money. Sure, I’d have to suffer through and tolerate that idiot, Brian. He insisted I had to work for my pay. But after four, five fires... we’d be rolling in it and we could move on. Dillon just couldn’t see how good we had it. We just had to reach out and take what we wanted.”

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“So,” Paige leaned forward. “You killed him. You took Dillon up to that cabin and made him understand what happens to stupid punk kids that don’t listen. He’ll never defy you again. He’d never argue and make demands. You got rid of the stupid kid and put your plan into action.”

“I—” Clint smiled, remembering how good it felt to kill the whiny brat. Joy rushed through him as he remembered wrapping his hands around the kid’s neck and breaking the sniveling idiot in two. Then, he sobered. “I think I want that lawyer.”

“We already know what you did,” Paige stood. “You can have that lawyer. We don’t need you to say another word. Now, it’s my turn to talk. You broke Dillon’s neck, Clint. You can’t pass that off as an accident or self-defense. He didn’t want to help you commit arson, so you lost it and you killed him. Or, maybe, it just made you angry that some sniveling kid thought he could say no to you. You, Clint Fairfield. Who did he think he was? He had nothing and you were offering him everything. All he had to do was reach out and take it. Instead, he refused. So, you killed the one and only obstacle that stood in your way and you took the rest for yourself. Can’t have a witness telling people what you did and the stupid kid couldn’t be trusted to keep his big mouth shut. So, you killed him. Now, you’re under arrest. And, once I contact the great state of Colorado and provide them with a copy of my interview, I suspect you’ll be charged with the murders of Trish and Robert Cook.”

“I’ll get this tossed,” Clint screamed.

Gage stepped into the room and escorted their prisoner to the back.

Bannon stared at the empty doorway. “I can’t believe he confessed. I can’t believe he fell for that.”

“He’s a narcissist and an idiot,” Paige shrugged. “He thinks he’s smarter than either one of us. He believed he was playing us, and he had to take a few minutes to brag. It wasn’t a clean confession, but it’s enough. Tolman can use what we got and expand on it. He’s good. Clint’s going away for the rest of his miserable life.”

“I’m going to head out,” Bannon stood. “I need to explain everything to Megan and Brian.”

“Will you tell her about Trish and Robert?” Paige wondered.

“Yeah,” Bannon sighed. “She’ll hear it all later. I think she’ll handle it better if it comes from me.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Paige nodded. “I know you were angry this morning. You were so sure they were innocent, and I was just picking on a couple of good, solid citizens that had already endured far too much. I’m sorry for that.”

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“I’m not,” Bannon smiled at her. “If you hadn’t followed that lead, Clint may have gotten away with murder.” He sobered. “Like he did years ago with Trish and Robert.”

“He didn’t get away with that,” Paige disagreed. “It took too long to catch him, but he’s caught, and he’ll go down for those, too.”

Paige watched Bannon leave the building, then she slowly made her way into Jericho’s office to bring him up to speed. As she settled into his chair, she sighed. So much had happened over the past few days. Dax could have been killed, Hawk too for that matter. A young kid and his grandparents were nearly consumed by the raging fire and the old couple lost their pickup truck, ATV, and an old travel trailer that held so many memories. Paige smiled; confident they’d make new ones. Dax and the boys saw to that. A brand-new truck, utility vehicle, and state of the art trailer had been delivered to the couple late last night — anonymously. Those two would be making memories with their grandson for many years to come thanks to her husband’s generosity and a ton of secret money.

That brought her thoughts back to Clint and a young boy who had his entire life ahead of him. A boy that had been killed for nothing. There had been so much pain, for what? Because Clint Fairfield was a sociopath that wanted an easy life and he was willing to kill to make it happen. He killed Trish and Robert Cook because he hadn’t wanted to work, then he killed Clint because he did. He needed a few raging forest fires to make enough money to move on and he didn’t care who or what he hurt in the process.

Jericho glanced up and silently listened as Paige relayed the facts. He could see she was trying to do it without expressing her emotions — but she failed. By the time she finished, he understood why, and he shared her anger, frustration and her determination to make the monster pay the consequences of his actions for the rest of his life.