

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Concealed Detection
Season 5, Episode 6

by:

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“Sir?”

Nathan looked up from the map he was studying and focused on the doorway. “What is it, Joanne?”

“There’s a man here,” she hesitated. “He insists he needs to see you. I told him you were busy working on something important, but he said he traveled to Virginia because his visit is important.”

“Did he tell you why?” Nathan frowned.

“No,” Joanne sighed. “But he did say he’s an old friend. His name is Oliver Hicks.”

Nathan’s frown deepened. He hadn’t seen Ollie in over thirty years. “Send him in.”

Ollie made his way down the long hallway and paused a few feet from the open door. Annoyed, at himself and the situation, he shifted his cane and tried to minimize his limp. He stepped into the enormous office just as Nathan rounded the desk.

“You’re looking good,” Nathan grinned. “For an old guy.”

“Humph,” Ollie settled into one of the expensive visitor’s chairs. He began slowly perusing the office. “I always knew you had potential,” he focused on Nathan. “Even I didn’t realize you’d make it this far.”

“I always had good mentors,” they exchanged a glance. Both of them knew he was referring to Ollie. “I’m surprised to see you, here. It must be important to bring you all the way to Virginia.”

“I need a favor,” Ollie admitted. “Did we dispense with the obligatory small talk and you’re ready to get down to business?”

Nathan smiled and wondered how far Oliver Hicks would have risen if not for the battle that took his leg so many years ago. “There’s no need for social rituals with me, Ollie. You should know that. What can I do to help?”

“As you know,” Ollie settled further into his chair. “I’m aware of the arrangement you had with Dylan regarding his daughter. I understand because I had a similar arrangement with Tim.”

“I remember,” Porter nodded.

“We went about it in a different way,” Ollie continued. “I failed Tim’s daughter.”

“I disagree,” Porter interrupted settling in the chair next to Ollie. “You were severely injured. By the time you recovered enough to check on Scarlett, she was already gone. You can’t blame yourself. Nobody could have prevented that tragic accident, not even you.”

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“That’s neither here nor there,” Ollie stubbornly disagreed. “This isn’t about me — it’s not even about Scarlett, not directly.”

“What is it about?” Nathan settled back to watch a great man that had experienced far too many disappointments in his life.

“It’s about Scarlett’s son,” Ollie told him. “He was just an infant when Scarlett was killed.”

“I remember,” Nathan tried to recall the details. “He was actually in the car with her that night. It was a miracle he survived. As I understand it, the driver was drunk and served time for vehicular homicide.”

“Right,” Ollie said absently. His mind was lost in memories — and regrets.

“So,” Nathan wondered what he could do to help Tim Anderson’s grandson. “Why are you here, Ollie?”

“It’s ironic,” Ollie said softly. “The way life turns out. I am here to see if Dylan’s daughter would be willing to help Tim’s grandson.”

“I see,” Nathan was intrigued. “How can Paige help — I’m sorry, I don’t remember his name.”

“Matt,” Ollie provided. “Matt Warner. His father, Daniel, immediately moved out to Swisher, Iowa to be close to his parents. They helped raise the boy. He’s now twenty-four and working for the Johnson County Sheriff’s Office.”

“A police officer, like Paige,” Nathan nodded, but still couldn’t connect the dots. How could Paige help a small-town cop working in Iowa?

“Right,” Ollie smiled. “Funny how things work out. Under the circumstances, even a pessimist like myself could accept the argument the universe is somehow connected.”

“You’re not a pessimist,” Nathan disagreed. “You’re a skeptic.”

“Anyway,” Ollie continued. “Paige is married to that boy that now works with you. The Hamilton kid, I heard he took his men out to Utah and started up a training center. It’s gaining quite a name — good reputation. Cops covet a spot, but most departments can’t afford the price tag. Johnson County can’t afford an expensive school like that. But if you could convince them to give Matt the small-town, family discount...” he trailed off.

“He might be able to attend,” Nathan realized. “Why? There has to be a reason you want him to attend the course.”

“It will give him an advantage,” Ollie admitted. “That boy has potential, but he doesn’t stand out. He wants to move out of Swisher and get a job in a larger city. Unfortunately, he’s just

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another cop in a sea of cops that comes from a small department. Jobs in Des Moines or Cedar Rapids, Davenport — any of the larger cities with better perks and better pay — they're competitive. He needs something to boost his resume. There are openings in a couple prime spots."

"And a certificate from DMA would give him the credentials he needs to stand out in a crowd," Nathan was still touched that the men had included Dylan in the name. They decided to honor both Paige's father and Maverick, their own fallen team member. Thus, the Dylan Maverick Academy was born, DMA for short. It seemed fitting somehow. "Let me talk to Dax, I'll see what I can do."

"I owe you for this one," Ollie stood. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help on this."

"You don't owe me anything," Nathan also stood and held out a hand. "Ranger's stick together. I should have an answer in a day or two. Will you stop on your way out and leave your number with Joanne? I'll let you know as soon as possible. The next course is only a few weeks away. Can he swing the time off, get the approval he needs, and be ready to head out that soon? If not, we can aim for January."

"If they won't pay the tuition," Ollie decided. "I'll find a way to do it myself."

Nathan nodded. If he got his way, there wouldn't be a fee. He wanted the kid to get one of DMA's highly sought-after scholarships. If the boys already awarded all the grants for this year, he'd just solicit a donation from one of his friends. All the contacts he'd acquired over the years should be good for something. "That's a generous offer but let me see what I can do first. I'll call you, and Ollie," he waited.

"Yes," Hicks paused in the doorway and glanced back over his shoulder.

"It was good to see you," Nathan said, genuinely meaning it. "I hope you'll stay in touch."

"I could make a promise I probably wouldn't keep," Ollie sobered. "I won't. I respect you too much to give you the casual platitudes I give everyone else. I will promise to try."

"I'll take it," Nathan grinned. "As long as you also promise to answer when I call you. Give your number to Joanne. I'll contact you in a few days and then I'm going to use that number to check on you now and then. Don't avoid me, I have people; and to be honest, those people are your people, too."

Ollie nodded, turned, and disappeared down the long hallway.

Nathan sat, silently remembering those early days. Ollie Hicks was injured by then. The Army promoted him to Colonel and gave him a desk job overseeing training for the Rangers. Nathan chuckled softly, remembering the antics he and Dylan engaged in under Ollie Hicks

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careful watch. The rough soldier wanted to be seen as rigid and uncaring, but Nathan knew — under the rough exterior — the man had a heart of gold. He snatched up his phone and dialed Dax.

Paige glanced up and set her book aside when Dax dropped onto the couch next to her. “Long day.”

“And they’re about to get even longer,” Dax sighed and slid beneath her feet, taking the right one in his hand as he began to rub.

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Funny you would ask that,” Dax shifted slightly and began to massage her sensitive arch. “Nathan called me today.”

“What did he want?” Paige frowned. If the general thought he was going to pull Dax away for another mission, he was going to be disappointed.

“He asked me to add a cop from some...” he hesitated, trying to think of another word.

Paige laughed. “It’s always amusing when you try to pretty up your language for me. I worked for the FBI, I’m a cop, I’ve heard it all, Dax.”

“I don’t know, let’s go with Podunk USA,” Dax shrugged. “I forget the name of the place but it’s out in the middle of nowhere. Iowa maybe — Nebraska — somewhere out in corn country. The kids green at best and I’m not sure he’s going to be a good fit, not with this course.”

“Did Nathan say how he knew this small-town cop from Podunk USA?” Paige wondered. “Doesn’t sound like they collided at a food truck in Virginia. How does Deputy Cornfed know the estimable General Porter?”

“I don’t think he does,” Dax hesitated, but knew he had to explain. “Sounds like it’s the kid of a kid of a guy Porter once knew.”

“Come again?”

“Porter knew a guy, served with a guy during his Ranger days. This guy made a promise to a dying friend. The friend had a daughter and the cop is her kid.”

Paige sat up and shifted, dropping her legs to the floor. “Like me?”

“Like you if you had a kid, I think,” Dax corrected.

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Paige stood and began to pace. “How problematic will it be to include him?”

“You want me to say yes?” Dax realized.

“I do,” Paige shrugged. “For Nathan, sure. It would mean a lot to him. I know that because he wouldn’t ask you to shuffle in another student if it didn’t mean a lot to him.”

“I agree,” Dax sat back and tried to jumble things to add one more participant.

“That would be enough for me. I’d be inclined to ask you to accommodate the small-town cop from Somewhere USA if there was any way that you could,” Paige admitted. “I’d ask you to try and make things work — for Nathan, because he’s done countless favors for both you and me.”

“Alright,” Dax agreed. “He’s in.”

“I’m also going to ask you to do it because of so much more,” Paige admitted. She settled back down on the couch and took his hand in hers. “Police in this country are under attack. They are being ambushed and killed, lured to fake calls, shot at on real ones, hit with frozen water bottles, firecrackers, and Molotov cocktails. Not for something they did, but simply because they put on a uniform and walked out the door to serve and protect their community. The current environment is hostile and dangerous. Every cop, no matter where they work, needs to know how to protect themselves, how to practice operational awareness on every call, to adapt to any contingency and have the training they need to go home at the end of their shift. Your course will teach this guy all of that and more.”

“I worry about you,” Dax admitted. “Every time you walk out that door, I worry. Life is getting crazy out there and it’s not just the big cities that are dealing with the threat.”

“True,” Paige leaned in and gave him a soft, but quick kiss. “It hasn’t reached us here, yet. It could, but it hasn’t. That’s why I’m asking you to help this kid. It doesn’t matter where he serves, he needs all the training he can get. He needs tactical knowledge, combat knowledge, training and experience he can only get from you and your band of militants — especially if he comes from a small town. It might be the only way he’ll have the opportunity to learn the skills he needs to survive.”

“I agree,” Dax sighed. “I’ll find a way to make it work. I just worry that we’re dropping him into the deep end before he learns to swim.”

“The upcoming course is advanced?” Paige asked.

“It is,” Dax nodded. “I tried to explain that to Nathan, suggested we get him into the next basic course at the beginning of the year, but he wouldn’t have it. He claims this kid is a sharpshooter and can hold his own. He insisted it had to be this course for some reason but he’s not saying why.”

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“He has a reason,” Paige defended. “If he insisted, there’s something he’s not sharing but it’s important.”

“I already came to that conclusion on my own,” Dax studied her for several seconds. “Does it ever bother you?”

“What?”

“Knowing Porter stepped in to give you a boost now and then,” Dax wondered. “We both know, eventually, you would have made it on your own. Does Porter’s help tarnish that at all, for you?”

“No,” Paige settled back and considered. “It used to. At first, I was furious because I wanted to do it on my own. I wanted to prove that I could be as good at something as my father was — and I didn’t need anyone to help me.”

“What changed?” he wondered.

“Sophie,” Paige smiled. “She pulled me aside and asked me to let him help now and then — for him. She said it made the pain and the loss a little more tolerable every time he helped Dylan’s daughter. She was so sincere, I figured there had to be some truth behind the request. The next time he stepped in, I went to him like I did all the times before. But, this time, I just said thank you. He was so shocked, that alone was worth it. It’s not often anyone can shock General Nathan Porter. But, I also recognized the joy, and I mean pure joy was radiating from his face. I knew I’d never hassle him again — not over his support anyway. Why do you ask?”

“I’m trying to decide what to tell the kid,” Dax admitted. “He’ll know, eventually. The other guys attending this course, they’re brutal. They won’t be kind if he screws up. They may demand an explanation — of why he’s there. I won’t tell them, but that will only provoke them. When they don’t get answers from any of the instructors, they’ll confront the kid. He may know, he might not. But the not knowing will push him to find out. We can’t hide it, because Porter also asked us to award the kid a scholarship. Being from a small department, they could never afford the tuition. I was just trying to gauge how he’ll react.”

“I should have realized Nathan would ask. I was just about to make the same request,” Paige admitted. “Small departments have limited funds. When money’s tight, extra training is one of the first things to go. A scholarship is probably the only way this kid would be able to attend.”

“I already talked to the others,” Dax assured her. “We all agreed, he’s got the scholarship. The only thing we can’t agree on is which course.”

“Thank you,” Paige said. “That means a lot to me. It will mean the world to Nathan. But, it’s going to mean so much more to the cop. Now, back to your original question — about his

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reaction. Everyone is different,” Paige considered. “What if I talk to him, what’s his name? It feels strange to call him the kid.”

“Matt Warner,” Dax smiled.

“I could talk to this Matt guy and get a feel for things,” Paige offered again. “It might help if he knew the same thing happened to me. If he saw that, even with the occasional nudge that sometimes gave me an unfair advantage, I turned out okay.”

Dax grinned. “Are you sure about that?”

“Positive,” Paige tackled him. “You think I’m perfect. Now, stop talking and let me show you how grateful I am that you’re doing General Obstinate a favor. Then, you can show me how grateful you are that I’m willing to step in and help with the details.”

“I think we should both show our gratitude — together,” he stood, scooped her up, and threw her over his shoulder.

“Alright,” Paige slapped him. “I’ll play *the fireman rescues the damsel* tonight if you play *Madeline conquers the marine* next time.”

“Bite your tongue, woman,” Dax slapped her on the butt. “We never say the M-word in this house.”

Paige pinched him just as he tossed her onto the bed.

Deputy Matt Warner was the first to arrive at DMA’s training room. He knew he was early, but he also knew this was the chance of a lifetime. An opportunity some secret donor had stepped up and offered him — no strings attached. So, he was tethering his own strings to the gift. He would ace this course and show all of them the generosity hadn’t been wasted. His thoughts returned to home. Des Moines had an opening in their department, but applications had to be submitted by the end of November. If he could get through the course and add it to his resume — this time, he might have a chance.

He still didn’t know who his guardian angel was. Oh, he had one. He knew that much. This wasn’t the first time someone stepped in and provided that tiny nudge he needed to help him achieve his goals. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that; but, at the moment, he was just going to accept the gift and be grateful he’d been offered such an amazing opportunity. He could deal with the rest later. He looked up in surprise when a group of men entered the room. He had

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expected stoic and serious. They were laughing and joking in that brotherly way you do when you're close. He tensed. How would they feel about a guy that was forced on them at the last minute, because some rich donor bought his way into their course? This might be harder than he originally believed.

"Look guys," Zeus motioned to the man sitting at the far end of the table. "Dax has a brother from another mother."

Matt watched as the entire group turned and focused on him. He felt like a bug under a microscope. Were they looking for weakness? A reason to explain his late entry into their elite course? Their expressions didn't change so he had no idea what they were looking for — or, what they found.

"What's your name?" Dax stepped forward.

"Deputy Matt Warner," Matt tried to sound confident.

"It's just Warner, starting now," Dax advised. "Rank has no place in this facility."

"Did you know that?" Vato asked Hawk.

"Lodge a complaint at the next staff meeting," Hawk grinned. "But he's referring to them, not us. I will always out rank you."

Dax rolled his eyes at his men then turned back to Warner. "You're early. Orientation doesn't start for thirty-five minutes."

"I wanted to get an early start," Matt shrugged. "Get the lay of the land so to speak, see what I could learn about the academy and the instructors."

"Did you succeed?" Hawk wondered. He'd been worried about adding this guy to the course. He still wasn't sure they'd made the right decision; but, so far, he was impressive.

"Not really," Matt smiled. "You have this place locked down pretty tight. I'm sad to say, most of my knowledge came from a map."

"Story of my life," Zeus mumbled.

"And the academy?" Dax asked.

"What about the instructors?" Vato wondered.

"I believe you are the instructors," Matt said cautiously. "I discovered your also family."

"We are that," Hawk agreed. "If you head back to the front foyer, on the north wall, we have a brochure that talks about the academy, the courses we offer, and our mission."

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“Mostly what you need to know is the pecking order,” Zeus offered. “Trainees are all equal and they occupy the bottom. Rank is irrelevant. Doesn’t matter if you’re a captain in the Coast Guard or a deputy for a small department. Equal standing, equal expectations.”

“After that comes the instructors,” Vato added.

“Except Dax,” Hawk pointed to a man they would always consider their leader. “His omnipotent power transcends the rest of us. If this guy tells you to do something, you do it.”

Paige stepped into the room and studied the single man sitting at the far end of the long table.

“Except Paige,” Zeus added when he noticed her. “Paige’s power reigns supreme — it even trumps Master Hamilton.”

“Can I get that in writing?” Paige wondered, moving up next to Dax.

“You’re early,” Dax told her.

“I figured,” Paige glanced back at Warner. “If he’s half the man Nathan hopes he is — he’d arrive early to check things out. I was right.”

“I guess that’s why you reign supreme,” Dax leaned in and kissed her then wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her against his side. “The rest of you clowns get started. You have about ten to fifteen before the new group arrives.”

“I’ve got this,” she pulled away from Dax. “Let me have a few minutes alone.”

Dax studied her, nodded, then headed out to join his men.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Matt said when Paige pulled out a chair and settled in next to him. He studied her uniform before he continued. “I don’t know who you are. Obviously, you’re a cop but do you run this place too?”

“No,” Paige smiled. “Forget that part about me being in charge. I’m just a deputy like you — one that has an amazing guardian and mentor that watches out for me. And please, call me Paige. When I hear the word ma’am, I think of an old English teacher I had in the tenth grade.”

“Alright,” Matt frowned. How much did this woman know about the circumstances that brought him here?

“Do you know who is helping you?” Paige hesitated. “Can I call you Matt? Or would you prefer Warner?”

“Either is fine,” Matt studied the woman closely.

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“If your life has been anything like mine,” Paige continued. “Someone has stepped in — maybe once, maybe more than that, but always when you needed it the most — and gave your career a little boost. Probably just a slight nudge, but enough to get you noticed at a time when you needed to stand out in a crowd. Am I right?”

“I don’t know —” he began.

“I know, I’m a stranger and I’m asking you questions that are personal and probably sensitive,” Paige pushed. “I have a good reason for it. You can trust me with this. You can trust me, because I experienced that same little nudge. In the beginning, it annoyed me. Later, I came to cherish and appreciate it. I think I can help you understand if you’ll open up a little and let me.”

“And if I have?” Matt asked. “Had a nudge here and there?”

“We’ll just operate under the assumption that you have,” Paige decided. “Do you know why? Do you know who is doing the nudging?”

“No,” Matt decided there was no reason to deny it. She clearly had more information than he did.

“Do you want to know?” Paige wondered.

“I do,” Matt nodded. “More, I’d like to know why.”

“I like to think of my mentor, Retired General Nathan Porter, as my guardian angel,” Paige admitted. “Your guardian angel is a man that was close friends with your grandfather — on your mother’s side. Coincidentally, I think your grandfather may have been friends with my father as well.”

“Is that why I’m here?” Matt wondered. “Did your dad ask you to do this as a favor because he knew my mother’s dad?”

“No,” Paige studied him. “My father was killed a long time ago. How much do you know about your mother and her father?”

“Not much,” Matt admitted. “My mom died in a car crash when I was just a baby. Dad moved us to Iowa to be close to his family. My grandparents helped raise me so dad could continue to work.”

“Your grandfather’s name was Tim Anderson,” Paige told him. “I didn’t know him. I don’t personally know anything about him. Everything I know comes from my mentor, my father’s best friend, Nathan Porter. Nathan has watched over me for years because my father asked him to. Just before he died, dad begged Nathan to be there for me because he couldn’t. Dad was killed on a top-secret mission. One that was being carried out by an elite squad of

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Army Rangers. Your grandfather died on a similar mission. He too was a Ranger that belonged to an elite squad of soldiers.”

“I don’t know if you’re right,” Matt admitted. “Dad said mom was killed by a drunk driver only a couple years after her father was killed overseas. I don’t think dad knew much about his father-in-law.”

“Your grandfather, Tim Anderson, had a very good friend that was also an army ranger,” Paige continued with her story. “This fellow Ranger’s name is Oliver Hicks. He was seriously injured in the same mission that killed Tim. Ollie lost one of his legs then suffered from a serious infection. He was in the hospital for a little over two years. When he got out, he tried to look up your mom. You see, he’d made a promise to Tim. He swore he would protect your mother and watch out for her. A promise that was similar to the one that Nathan made to my father just before he died. You saw how my husband and the others interacted. That’s because they’re family... a Ranger family. You’re also family, Matt. It doesn’t matter that Dax, Hawk, and the others never met your grandfather. Ollie asked Nathan for a favor and DMA was in a position to step up. So, they did. It’s that simple. You’ve been given the chance of a lifetime. You can learn a lot from these guys. Ollie called in a favor and provided the tiny nudge that got you into the course. The rest is up to you. You can benefit from the chance you’ve been given, or you can waste it.”

“And you’ve been given similar chances?” Matt wondered.

“I have,” Paige agreed. “Before I came to work for Sanpete County, I was an FBI Agent. My career was on a fast track to management. Along the way, Porter gave the right people a gentle nudge and I found myself at the top of the pile for preferred assignments, training opportunities, and positions on elite task forces that catapulted my career faster than even I expected,” Paige grinned. “The retired general is a powerful man with a lot of friends — most of them owe him favors.”

“Did you resent the help?” Matt wondered, hoping he didn’t sound ungrateful.

“At first,” Paige admitted. “But I know my mentor. I got to see how happy it made him to help out the daughter of his best friend. I couldn’t resent something that was done out of love. So instead, I decided to work harder and make sure I deserved the opportunities I’d been given.”

“How did he feel when you left the FBI?” Matt thought that might have been an issue after all the effort this Nathan Porter guy had put into Paige’s career.

“He didn’t understand at first,” Paige admitted. “Now he can see how happy I am, and he supports the move.”

“I guess I can understand why this Tim guy would want to help my mom,” Matt considered. “And why Porter would step in and help you. It sounds like he took the time to get to know you.

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I don't understand why a man I've never met would transfer that obligation to me. He's not responsible for my career. He's not responsible for me. Any duty he had to mom should have been over once she died."

"Because your family," Paige stood. "Now, the others should be arriving soon, and I need to get to work. I hope you'll accept the gift and know it was offered out of love. Don't resent the opportunity, embrace it, and use it to make your life a little better. I was eventually able to see that, and it made the gifts I received even more special because of it."

Matt watched the woman leave the room. He was more confused now than he'd been before. He was also more determined to make the most of the chance he'd been given. He'd honor the memory of his grandfather and his mother by graduating at the top of the class. Then, he'd head back home and hope it helped him secure a spot with the Des Moines police department.

Matt sighed and stepped away from the group. They would never accept him, he understood that now. It was the third day of training and the other members in the group resented him. Well, not all of them. Most of these guys just ignored him. They realized immediately he hadn't been to a DMA training course in the past, which meant he hadn't earned his way into this advanced course like they had.

It didn't matter that he'd just shot another perfect score. It didn't matter that he could outshoot every one of these guys without any effort at all. They didn't respect him because he hadn't earned their respect. He made his way down the line, retrieved his target, and headed back to Hawk.

"Another good day," Hawk observed. "We need to change things up, give you a little challenge to hone the skills you have and improve on them. You think you're up for it?"

Matt glanced back at the others. If they pulled him aside, that would just make the rift bigger. If the entire group had to compete on a more difficult course, the resentment would fester and make things worse. It was a no-win situation so he might as well accept the challenge.

"Trust me," Hawk suggested. "By the time this course is over, they'll be lifelong friends."

"Doubtful," Matt sighed. "But I accept your challenge. I'm here to learn and improve."

"Good answer," Hawk nodded to Dax.

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“Is it okay if I take a short walk? I won’t go far, just a few feet into the woods over there,” Matt advised. “When it’s time to start the next course, call out and let me know. I’ll be close enough to hear.”

“Alright,” Hawk agreed. “You have about fifteen. Once they’ve finish up, everyone will need a few minutes down before we start the next round.”

Matt slowly made his way into the thick forest. He wanted a minute to clear his head and enjoy the crisp clean mountain air. He needed the solitude before he returned to the jeers and rude comments. For some reason, the men in this group wanted to make him feel inferior. Like he was an amateur and they were all professionals. He wasn’t. He could admit they had more training and experience than he had. He was also surprised to learn this was an advanced course, not their entry level training session. But, it didn’t take long to realize a lot of what they were doing was just common sense. As long as he paid attention and reasoned out the problem, he could hold his own in the tactical courses — even in this crowd. With his natural ability at shooting, his firearms scores more than made up for any mistakes he made during the other exercises. He inhaled a long, deep breath then let it out. If the other men didn’t despise him so much, this experience might actually be fun.

He was wandering through a thick section of quaking aspen when he spotted the carving and smiled. His mother would love this. He didn’t hesitate even an instant, just pulled out his phone, crouched to get a better angle, and began snapping photos.

Chances were slim to none — and slim just headed out to lunch — that this was an authentic signature from Ted Bundy himself, but that didn’t matter. His mother, well, technically his stepmother, was obsessed with true crime novels and this was the kind of thing Christy Warner lived for. He knew she’d get a kick out of the images, so he didn’t care if they were forgeries.

“Look Shep,” a man nicknamed Fester — because his last name was Addams — called out. “The rookie thinks he stumbled onto a clue — one that’s been hidden since the seventies, apparently.”

Matt spotted the trio and sighed but continued snapping photos. He wouldn’t let the three musketeers ruin his find. He couldn’t wait to see his mom’s face when he showed them to her. It was something they shared, always had. She loved to lose herself in a good crime novel, he worked the mysteries in real life — on the job. His dad didn’t understand the connection, or the intrigue. His sisters thought they were deranged. That made the connection even more special in Matt’s mind. He was about to stand when Shep — the ringleader of the group — moved forward and shoved him. In his crouched position, he lost his balanced and toppled onto his back. Watson, the third member of the trio, rushed to stand on the opposite side, blocking Matt in so he couldn’t get up.

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“Back off,” Matt warned. He stood up but Shep shoved him further into the forest. Matt nearly went down again, but at the last second, he regained his footing. He glared at Shep and wanted to punch him more than he wanted anything at the moment. Instead, he reined in his temper and turned to head further into the trees.

The trio followed. They’d only gone a few feet when Shep shoved him again. This time, Matt did go down. He stumbled, tripped over a log and landed on his butt in a sort of meadow filled with tall grass and wildflowers. “You’re gonna wanna back off,” Matt growled.

“Or what?” Shep demanded. “You plan to shoot us? That’s the only way you can beat us, and we all know it. But, starting right now, that’s going to change.”

“Somehow,” Matt shifted and was about to stand when his hand caught on something. He glanced down and saw a broken, rusty chain. He frowned but didn’t move. Turning his head to focus on Shep, he grinned. “I doubt that.”

Shep moved forward and crouched, invading Matt’s space so they were nose to nose. “Tomorrow,” he forcefully shoved a finger into Matt’s chest. “When we qualify, you’re going to drop one.”

“Again,” Matt slapped Shep’s hand away, “I doubt that.”

Shep leaned even closer. “You will drop a round or you’ll regret it.”

“You drop a round,” Dax pushed off the tree he’d been leaning against — observing. “You go home — all four of you. And, you’ll never attend another training course again.”

“You three,” Hawk growled, emerging from the shadows. “Come with me.”

Watson and Fester scowled at their friend as they rushed past Dax, eager to smooth things over with Hawk. Shep shrugged, trying to act cocky and nonchalant as he slipped past Dax — but he couldn’t quite pull it off.

“You okay?” Dax moved forward and held out a hand.

“I’m fine,” Matt glanced at the old chain again. “But what do you make of this?” He held his hand up a couple inches so Dax could see the ancient jewelry.

Dax frowned and crouched to get a better look. He glanced over his shoulder at the carving in the tree, then focused on the chain. “There is seriously no freakin’ way that’s legit.”

“I realize you’re the expert here,” Matt told Dax. “But I’m the cop. I think we should be extra careful until we can investigate further. Let me get clear of this chain, then we’ll take a look around.”

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Dax studied the area carefully. If they just stumbled onto a crime scene, Paige would have his head if he contaminated it. Once Matt was free from the chain, Dax reached out and helped him to his feet. Then, the two of them slowly took a step backwards.

“Let’s head that way,” Matt pointed to the large open meadow. “Maybe ten, fifteen feet. We’ll see if there’s any indication this could be a dump site.”

“I think we should call in the locals,” Dax decided. “I don’t want to disrupt the area if this is a crime scene.”

“We don’t know what we have here. That’s quite a leap and this could be nothing. We need to be careful but I’m not ready to make an official report.”

“I am,” Dax disagreed. “We don’t want to contaminate the area any more than we need to.”

“What about your wife?” Matt asked. “Is she any good? We could start by calling her.”

Dax grinned. “In every way possible.” He reached for his phone and tried to speed-dial Paige but nothing happened. He didn’t have a signal.

Matt watched Dax move away and wondered what he just got himself into. He took a minute to stop and think. If he were home and just arrived on this call, what would he do? He had to get back into cop mode, street cop — not tactics. Okay, he’d walk the area and see if there was any disturbed dirt or other indicators that a body could be buried here. He headed out past the location of the chain and started to walk a straight line. It didn’t take long. A few feet further into the clearing and about six feet to the right, he found what he was looking for. “Dax?”

“Yeah?” Dax answered absently. He was wandering around, trying to get a signal but so far, hadn’t found one.

“I’ve got bones,” Matt advised.

“What?” Dax whipped around to stare at the man. “Explain what that means — exactly.”

“Not a full skeleton,” Matt frowned. “The bone is sticking partially out of the ground, like something was digging here but suddenly gave up for some reason.”

“Something or someone?” Dax wondered.

“I think it was an animal,” Matt decided. “I think a fox, or a coyote — something was digging here and got spooked.”

“Alright,” Dax took a deep breath and tried to come up with a plan. “You stay where you are. Don’t disturb anything. I can’t get a signal up here, but if I head back down to where we set up the firearms course, I can make a call from there. In the meantime, while you wait for me to

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return, don't touch anything. My wife is very particular, and she won't be happy if anything is moved or disturbed in any way."

"Got it," Matt agreed. He might come from a small town in Iowa, but he knew how to preserve a scene — he was a cop. Once Dax disappeared, he let his mind wander. It was possible Bundy had dumped a body out here. He hunted in the area and even admitted he discarded some of his victims in this same mountain range. But, it was more likely someone else had spotted the carved name in the tree and decided it would be funny to use this as their dumping ground.

That's if this was a crime scene. The chain might just be a chain. Some girl could have dropped it years ago while she was out looking for a secluded spot to neck with her boyfriend. And the bones? Well, maybe they came from a pioneer or a trapper that roamed the mountains a hundred years ago. He was letting his imagination get the better of him. Thinking of his mom and her reaction to his find was creating mystical fantasies in his mind and he needed to start acting like a cop instead of a crazy person. The best way to do that was to focus on procedure. He'd move away and make sure nobody else entered the area. He paused to get his bearings, made sure he could find this spot again, and made his way back to the overgrown trail a few yards away. He'd stand guard and wait for Dax to return with his wife — and crime scene tape.

"Hey Dax," Paige tried to chew and talk at the same time. "Don't tell me you're calling to ask the little woman to grab you lunch. I'm in the middle of a delicious double cheeseburger and a large, ice cold Pepsi at the moment."

"I need you to head up and meet me," Dax told her. "I'll be at the spot I showed you last week, where we're holding the firearms competition."

Paige instantly went on alert. She dropped her feet from her desk and sat up a little straighter. "What happened? Is everyone okay? You didn't have an AD or anything, did you?"

"No," Dax sighed. "My people do not accidentally discharge their weapons. It's nothing like that. One of the guys — well, actually the one Nathan convinced me to include in this session, Matt Warner—"

"What about him?" Paige interrupted, worried now. She stood and reached for her jacket.

"He found something I need you to take a look at," Dax evaded.

"Found what, Dax?" Paige demanded.

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“I don’t want to say,” Dax decided. “I want you to see this fresh and form your own conclusion once you see it.”

“You’re being awfully mysterious,” she complained. “I’ll head out, but if my burger gets cold for a pile of bear scat, you’re going to pay dearly. I swear, you will pay for the rest of your natural life.”

“I’m willing to chance it,” Dax assured her. “I’ll be anxiously awaiting your arrival.”

Paige frowned at her phone. Something was up. Dax was acting strange and he just hung up on her, without his usual goodbye.

“You want company?” Lovato asked. “I’m free and I’d love to head up the canyon for a bit.”

“It might be a wild goose chase,” Paige warned.

Lo shrugged. “Don’t care, if it gets me out of this stuffy office.”

“You drive, then,” Paige decided. “We’ll ride up together.”

Lovato exited the vehicle and approached Dax. “Whatever you told her, made her jumpy. She’s been on edge the entire ride up.”

“What is this about,” Paige glanced around the area. “And where is Warner?”

“If you called her up here to make a report,” Tracy Shepherd began.

“You,” Dax turned on him. “Shut it. Hawk, load all these guys up and take them back to the center.”

“On it,” Hawk turned to the group of men lounging around a picnic table. “Load up. We’re heading out.”

“You keeping Warner?” Zeus asked.

“Yeah,” Dax sighed. “Did Hawk talk some sense into the troublemaking trio?”

“He tried,” Zeus frowned. “I’ll pull them aside once we get back and have a talk with them. They’re not bad, just competitive. Shep’s having a hard time with the entire situation. They

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know Warner didn't attend a beginner course so the three of them just can't accept that boy's got game."

"Either, you deal with it," Dax warned. "Or I will."

"And by that you mean they get a refund and an invitation to head home," Vato stepped up to join them. "You know that will ruin their career. We're all set, by the way. The men are loaded and Hawk's ready to head out." He turned to Zeus. "You going back or staying up here?"

"Headed back," Zeus glanced at Dax. "There are three men that need to learn what it means to function as a team."

"Tell Hawk I'll call once I know what we've got up here," Dax watched his men cross the clearing and climb into the van. He continued to watch as Hawk put the vehicle in gear and started down the canyon.

"Where is Warner?" Paige demanded.

"Let's head back here," Dax motioned her forward. "Just walk down that trail until you spot him."

"Is he always like this?" Lo stepped in beside Paige and the two of them started up the trail.

"No," Paige scowled. "And I'm trying to figure out what he's up to." It only took a minute before she spotted Warner standing in the middle of the trail. "Matt?"

"Paige," Warner nodded. "Glad you could make it."

"You want to tell me what we're doing up here?" Paige demanded.

Matt glanced at Dax in surprise.

"I wanted her to see what we saw — come at it fresh, like we did. I didn't want her to have any preconceived notions before she arrived," Dax provided.

"Good idea," Matt nodded.

"First," Paige looked from Matt to Dax. "Why did that guy ask if I was here to take a report?"

"There was a tiny incident between your boy here and Tracy Shepherd," Dax admitted. "I suppose, if Warner was so inclined, he could make a complaint."

"I'm not so inclined," Matt said quickly. "Let's just deal with the real issue. I can handle Shep and his two sidekicks."

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Paige studied Matt, then focused on Dax. “What kind of complaint?”

“Simple assault,” Dax said without emotion. “He shoved Matt and then threatened him.”

“Why?” Paige was getting confused. “Never mind. What did you want to show me?”

“Walk this way,” Dax smiled when Paige rolled her eyes. She hated it when he quoted eighties songs.

“Don’t think I’m gonna give you a kiss,” Paige said over her shoulder.

They were several feet away from the tree when Lovato spotted the carving. He immediately started to laugh. “Tell me you didn’t call us up here to discuss Ted Bundy. There have to be a hundred of these things scattered around these mountains.”

“Bundy?” Paige moved forward a few more steps and spotted the tree. “I read about these.” She hurried forward to get a better look. “Most of them are forgeries but it’s fascinating anyway. All those people wandering around the woods selecting the perfect tree to carve the name of a sadistic psychopath.” She reached out and ran her hand over the letters. “It seems strange to actually see one in real life. I studied Bundy; everyone does that works for the FBI. But I studied him carefully for a case I was working. Another psychopath that was out killing people for fun. He was also a master chameleon, he had the same ego, had the same depraved sense of entitlement, and he loved to con people through manipulation,” she answered absently... lost in memories.

“Dax,” Lovato pushed. “Did you bring us up here to look at a tree?”

“It’s not just any tree,” Paige disagreed. “Anyway, you actually invited yourself so if this is boring you, don’t blame Dax.”

“I wonder if Jericho would let us chop this thing down,” Lo considered. “We could prop it in the corner of the bullpen. Might be a great conversation piece.”

“Sheriff Hayward did that,” Paige said absently. “I have a newspaper clipping with him standing there, pointing to the carving. He chopped down the tree and kept a huge chunk that had Bundy’s name on it if I remember correctly.”

“And he kept it in his office,” Lo remembered one of the old-timers telling them about that. They had a case in the city that crossed over into the county’s jurisdiction and the detective had to brief Sheriff Hayward on the details. “Right there, on the credenza behind his desk. I’m sure anyone that stepped foot in there asked about it.”

“He did?” Warner grinned. “I guess, if your brother was responsible for catching a serial killer, you’d want to brag a little. What better way to accomplish that, than to have a section of tree prominently displayed on the desk in your office?”

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“I’m calling Jer,” Lovato decided. “I want that tree.”

“Not just yet,” Dax disagreed. “First, you won’t get service — not up here. You have to head back down to the vehicles to call this in. Plus, there’s more.”

“What does that mean?” Paige narrowed her eyes at Dax. When he refused to answer, she returned to Bundy. “There’s something else I remember. In 1989, just before he was executed, Bundy admitted he dumped bodies in Manti. He met with a Detective Couch, I believe, and provided information about the girls he killed here in Utah. They actually found remains in the area — here in Sanpete County. Once the bones were analyzed I remember hearing they belonged to one of Bundy’s victims. What was her name?”

Nobody answered for several minutes. Finally, Lovato spoke. “I think it was Debra Kent. But it could have been Nancy Wilcox.”

“No,” Paige shook her head. “It was Kent. Bundy said he disposed of the Wilcox girl near Capitol Reef National Park. They never found her body, or any remains.”

“So,” Lovato grinned. “That’s a no on heading back to the truck and returning with an ax?”

“It’s a no,” Paige glared at him. “The authorities searched a sixty-five-mile radius — right here. It was a huge effort. Search and Rescue teams from Bountiful to Vegas traveled in to help scour the mountain region looking for clues. They found trees like this one, what they called ‘Bundy trees’ — all over the place. Around a dozen of them were discovered near the burial site. The place they actually discovered a bone from one of his victims. The Sanpete County Sheriff at the time — which was not Jericho Walters — thought most of them were copycats, but he firmly believed at least one was done by Bundy himself.”

Dax and Matt glanced at each other, then tried to mask their expressions but Paige caught it. “What haven’t you told me?”

“Let’s move this way,” Matt decided. He slowly made his way toward the clearing where he found the chain that looked like it came from a woman’s necklace.

“What is this?” Lovato asked, glancing around a field of wild grass and flowers. It looked like every other clearing in the La Sal’s.

Matt crouched and pointed to the chain.

“Wait,” Paige demanded. She reached into her ‘go bag’ and pulled out three sets of rubber gloves. She glanced at Dax, then handed one pair to Matt and the other to Lovato before she pulled on her own set.

Dax nodded in agreement and took a step back.

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Paige focused on Matt. “You found this. Do you mind if I try to retrieve it?”

“I’m off duty,” Matt shrugged. “And I think this is just slightly out of my jurisdiction. Go for it.”

Paige glanced at Lovato, once he gave her a nod, she pulled a pair of tweezers and a small brush from her pack. She carefully gripped the chain with the tweezers then began to brush the dirt away from the surface. It took longer than any of them would have liked, but finally Paige had the necklace free. She tightened her grip with the tweezers and held it up for all of them to see. Light caught the metal and tiny beams shot out from the surface of a small heart-shaped charm attached to the chain.

“Definitely a woman’s,” Lovato sighed. “I think we should consider calling in the Sheriff. You know how he gets when he misses out on stuff like this.”

“We have one more stop,” Matt objected. “Then I agree, you should really call in your boss.”

Paige stood, then pivoted when she felt a tap on her shoulder. As she turned, she spotted the evidence bag Lovato held out. Frowning, she dropped the necklace into the bag. “I’m the one that came prepared. I don’t see a detectives pack flung over your shoulder, what gives?”

“When you work in the big city,” Lovato grinned. “You always have an evidence bag in your pocket. You never know when you might need it.”

“The big city?” Matt wondered.

“Lo comes to us from the booming metropolis of Salt Lake,” Paige informed him. “Not as big as New York or LA, but big enough.”

Matt focused on the man. “Do you miss it?”

“Not at all,” Lovato assured him. “It’s better here, trust me you’re not missing a thing.”

The group headed for the area where Matt found the remains. “Before we go any further,” he glanced at Lovato then focused on Paige. “We are entering what is likely to be a crime scene. Tread carefully, I haven’t done a thorough search. Once I found remains, I backed away immediately.”

“Remains?” Lovato jerked his head up. “What kind of remains?”

“Take a look for yourself,” Matt pointed to the disturbed ground and waited.

Paige cautiously moved forward until she could clearly see the bones. “They’re human.”

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“Looks like it could be a shin or a small femur,” Lovato agreed. “I’ll head down, call the boss. I’ll also grab a roll of tape. Let’s get this place secured. It’s going to be a long night.”

Paige moved to stand in front of Dax. “You don’t have to stay. I know you have a training session to complete and this will hamper that progress significantly. If you want to head down and deal with the others, I’ll arrange to meet with you later. Just don’t mention Bundy yet. I’d like to keep that under wraps as long as I can.”

“You want to keep the kid?” Dax focused on Warner. “Might be good practice and if this is Bundy — well, he does have a legitimate claim on that find.”

“If it won’t interfere with his training, yeah,” Paige nodded. “I could use him. And, like you said it would be good practice. He’ll get his training. It just might be in forensics and investigation rather than firearms and tactics.”

“He’s all yours,” Dax spotted Matt headed their way. “If he agrees. I won’t make him stay if he wants to head back.”

Before Matt had a chance to say anything, Paige addressed him. “I could use your help on this. I can’t say if it’s one of Bundy’s victims or if someone else used this as a dumping ground because they thought it would be cute to dispose of a body next to a Bundy tree.”

“I—” he looked to Dax for direction.

“I approved it,” Dax put a hand on his shoulder. “If that’s what you want. It won’t jeopardize your standing in our course. If it takes you away for more than a day or two, you will have to make a few things up, but we can work around it.”

“Then,” Matt looked from Dax to Paige. “I think I’d like to stay. I’m intrigued and leaving feels... I don’t know, like I’m abandoning something important.”

“Then you stay,” Dax turned to Paige. “I’ll head down, wait for the good sheriff to arrive and bring him back. Then I’m going to take off. I do have a couple things I need to follow up on. I’ll call you once I’m clear and see if you need anything. If nothing else, I can swing by and bring the crew dinner.”

“I won’t get the call,” Paige warned. “You know we don’t get service up here and I’ll be stuck at the scene until we clear for the night.”

“Hold that thought, I’ll be right back,” Dax headed to his truck, snatched up the satellite phone from the backseat, and flipped the power on. Once it warmed up, he punched in a code and made sure it was working. As a test, he called Hawk.

“Yo,” Hawk greeted.

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“Wow,” Dax grinned. “It’s so rewarding to know all that professionalism I’ve drilled into you for decades finally took. Did you get the situation resolved with Shepherd?”

“It’s been handled,” Hawk assured him. “Why are you calling on the sat phone?”

“I’m leaving it with Paige,” Dax admitted. “Phones don’t work at the scene and I’m heading back to base. I wanted a way to call when I clear for the night.”

“So,” Hawk settled back in his chair. “This is a big deal?”

“Maybe,” Dax admitted. “I’d like to have a meeting with the entire team once I arrive. Can you make that happen?”

“They’ll complain,” Hawk warned. “But they’ll stay. What’s your ETA?”

“I’m just waiting for Jericho to arrive, then I’m headed back.”

“Sounds good,” Hawk relaxed. Dax should make it back before the others were finished for the day. On the way back to the office, the instructors decided to switch things around and pivoted into classroom exercises this afternoon. They could pick up firearms again in the morning — if they had a place to set up, that is. They didn’t need that particular spot. It was just ideal and fit the course they’d developed. Maybe he should work on an alternate plan. “I’m going to revamp the course, see if we can fit it into that other spot over by Joes. I’ll run it by you when you get back. See you when I see you.”

Dax had just disconnected when he spotted Jericho’s truck. *Good timing*, he grinned. He’d lead the boss back to the scene, say goodbye to his wife — which she’d scold him for — and get back to work. They might just salvage this day after all.

Jericho sat in his portable folding chair, watching Paige methodically unearth another bone. He knew word would eventually get out and the media mob would descend and demand answers — again. He was running out of deputies that were willing to deal with the nonsense. At the snap of a twig, he glanced back and spotted James Tolman. Smiling, he stood. He’d just dump the chaos on the local DA. Tolman could handle the mob, he’d hide in the mountains.

“On the way up the canyon,” Tolman moved in beside Jericho and shook his hand. “I decided our only option is to fire that woman.”

“Never gonna happen,” Jericho settled back in his chair and waited for Toman to set up his own chair.

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“I miss the old days,” Tolman continued. “A time when we arrived home just after five and never had to worry about all-night excursions that included dead bodies, kidnapped girls, and marijuana farms.”

“True,” Jericho shrugged. “But now, you have better stories to tell at those stuffy parties you have to attend.”

“I like those parties,” Tolman objected. “And you should be glad I do. Otherwise, you’d be representing our humble community and I know how much you love social events.”

“We’re all better off the way things are,” Jericho growled.

“What’s the status?” Tolman sobered when he realized Paige just retrieved another large bone.

“There might be enough to identify the victim,” Jericho glanced back and spotted Dax. “We’re keeping this close, but the girl appears to be missing her skull.”

“I thought Bundy discontinued that practice after he left Washington,” Tolman glanced around, then continued. “Do you really think it’s possible?”

“Possible?” Jericho accepted the sandwich wrapped in white paper that Dax handed him. “Sure. Probable? Now, that’s a different story altogether. About the other thing, I think the practice was sporadic. I vaguely remember a decapitate victim in Colorado.” He glanced at Dax. “You didn’t hear that.”

“You want anything?” Dax asked Tolman, smiling. “I’ve got ham, turkey, or a combo.”

“I’ll take one of the combos,” Tolman decided. “It looks like we could be here a while.”

Dax handed him a sandwich then provided chips and a bottle of water for each of them before moving on.

“Who is that?” Tolman noticed Matt and was sure he’d never seen the kid before. “The new kid.”

“Cop out of Iowa,” Jericho took a sip of water. “He’s the one that stumbled onto all of this. First, the tree. He said his mom’s obsessed with true crime stories. He thought she’d get a kick out of seeing the carving.”

“Vacationing?” Tolman wondered.

“Attending a course from DMA,” Jericho admitted. “Dax is keeping the rest of the group in the dark for now.”

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“I thought the point of their training was learning to operate as a team,” Tolman frowned. “Why don’t they know all about this already?”

“Long story,” Jericho decided to skip the drama. “Matt wandered out, discovered the tree and ended up finding the necklace and the bones as well. He’s got talent and a good head on his shoulders. From what I’ve seen tonight, he’s a good cop.”

“And he’ll keep it quiet?”

“He will,” Jericho nodded. “Obviously, I’ve only known the guy for a few hours, but I think he’s solid.”

“We won’t be able to contain this forever,” Tolman warned.

“I know,” Jericho settled back in his chair. “Hope you’re prepared for the vultures. After all the dead bodies, kidnapped children, and marijuana farms — this time around, it should be easy.”

“Thanks,” Tolman sighed. “Don’t worry, I’ll handle it.”

“Do I look worried?”

“No,” Tolman focused on Jericho. “You look entirely too relaxed.”

Dax crouched and placed a hand on Paige’s shoulder. “Take a break.”

“I’ve got...”

“And all of that,” he motioned to the ground and the remaining bones. “Has been there for a few decades. Twenty minutes won’t matter. Not to the victim, but it will matter to you — and me.”

Paige was about to refuse but reconsidered. Dax was right and she was starving. “Alright.” She stood and let him take her hand to lead her away from the scene. “Where are we going?”

“To my truck,” Dax informed her.

Paige came to an abrupt stop. “Dax, I can’t just leave. I have to protect the scene, I have to make sure we have a chain of evidence, restrict —”

“There’s nobody up there but Tolman and a bunch of cops,” Dax turned and stepped toward her until he was crowding her space. “We are going to the truck. Either you can join me willingly, or I’ll just pick you up and carry you there kicking and screaming. Your colleagues

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might enjoy the latter option, but we both know you'd hate it. I need a few minutes with my wife, alone. I don't think that's too much to ask under the circumstances."

"What's wrong?" Paige finally realized Dax was upset about something.

"Nothing I can't handle," Dax evaded.

"I'll agree to join you at the truck," Paige considered. "If you agree to tell me what upset you."

Dax glanced over his shoulder, spotted Matt, and nodded.

Paige walked silently the rest of the way to the truck. This had something to do with Matt Warner. She just didn't understand why. Once Dax carefully arranged their dinner, Paige settled onto the edge of the tailgate and waited.

Dax chuckled. "Do you have any idea how loud you are screaming with that intense stare of yours?"

"Spill it," Paige didn't smile.

"I knew Warner would take a little heat for not attending the beginner course," Dax sighed. "I didn't realize it would cause the tension it has."

"Why?" Paige wondered. "I mean, sure those guys excelled in your beginning course, but I didn't think that was a prerequisite for attending this advanced course. You said you left that open because a member of SWAT or a special forces guy wouldn't need the first class and should be able to drop into the advance course without a problem."

"True," Dax settled next to her and took her hand. "You have a point, a valid one. I think it's a combination of things. Warner is not on SWAT. He works for a small department in the middle of nowhere. These guys are professionals and they expect perfection."

"He's struggling?" Paige wondered. He'd been amazing tonight; she couldn't imagine him flunking out of training.

"He's the best marksman in the group," Dax disagreed. "I think that might add to it, at least for Shep. He's used to being the best and I'm not sure he's ever had to work for it. Now, this inexperienced kid comes along and outshoots him. He's struggling to accept that and he's poisoning the others."

"Hawk's a marksman," Paige considered. "Can't he do something?"

"He tried today," Dax admitted. "Then Zee threatened the entire class to shape up or ship out."

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“Would you really send them home?” Paige asked, surprised.

“Of course,” Dax shrugged. “This is a tactical course, but a big part of that is working as a team. If Shep can’t put his petty jealousy aside and focus on the goal, I don’t have a choice. He’ll have to go.”

“Matt would hate that,” Paige leaned against Dax and took a huge bite of sandwich. “Oh man, I was so hungry.”

Dax wrapped his arm around her. “I take it you never finished that double cheeseburger?”

“No,” Paige took a sip of water, then took her time replacing the lid. “What are you going to do?”

“Give him one more shot,” Dax admitted. “I would send him home, but it will ruin his career. If I send Shepherd back, I’d have to boot Addams and Watkins, too. I’d rather not put that mark in their file.”

“But if they don’t work as a team, you’ll have to send them home,” Paige realized.

“I will,” Dax sighed.

“I have an idea. Since I’m partially at fault — well, me and Nathan — can you give me a day to arrange things before you decide anything?”

“What are you planning?”

Paige took another bite of sandwich to give her time to formulate her plan. “Before I say anything, is this Shep guy police or military?”

“Military,” Dax waited, anxious to hear what she was plotting. When she remained silent he continued. “He just finished ranger school and he’s being groomed to move into the marksman unit.”

“Good,” Paige nodded. “I’m surprised Hawk wasn’t able to get through to him, but Nathan called this morning. He was curious about Matt. He wanted an update, to see how he was doing. I told him you were worried and there were a few complications because he was dumped into an advanced course when he hadn’t attended the beginner’s course.”

“And he said anyone that didn’t like it could go pound sand?” Dax grinned.

“Basically,” Paige sighed. “The two of you are so sensitive and understanding. The men are lucky to have you.”

“They don’t have General Porter,” Dax narrowed his eyes at Paige. “Do they?”

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“Well,” Paige cringed. “He’s heading out tomorrow. He wanted to check on Matt. He made Ollie a promise and you know Nathan.”

Dax considered. “Everyone knows Porter, well everyone in the army — especially anyone that wants to be a ranger — has heard of General Porter. They know he’s retired in name only and he still consults on the most dangerous operations. If Porter shows an interest in Matt, that might hold weight.”

“I was thinking of a little more than that,” Paige studied Dax. “I want Nathan to challenge Matt to a shooting competition.”

“Matt will win,” Dax warned. “I don’t think Nathan would like to get his tail kicked by a rookie.”

“Nathan won’t mind,” Paige said confidently. “And if Nathan has respect for Matt, the rest of your participants might change their opinion as well.”

“You’re hiding something,” Dax accused.

“I’m going to ask Nathan to stop by and see if Oliver Hicks will join him,” Paige admitted. “I just don’t know what he’ll say.”

“Some of these guys may have heard of Hicks, but most of them probably don’t know who he is.”

“Matt didn’t know,” Paige admitted. “But he’s a cop. We don’t really know war heroes. We do know the famous — or notorious — cops. I assume the military is the same.”

“Mostly,” Dax agreed. “If you can get Ollie here, I’ll introduce him. Some of the men will recognize the name.”

Paige popped the last of her sandwich into her mouth, took a long gulp of water then jumped to the ground. “Break time’s over, I’ve got to get back to it.”

Dax reached out and pulled Paige forward. He wrapped his arms around her and leaned forward. “Thanks for dinner.”

“I should be thanking you,” Paige gave him a quick kiss. “Thanks.”

“Thanks for taking the time to have dinner — with me,” he added, then gave her a longer, deeper kiss. “I was upset and worried. I don’t want to send Shep and his buddies home, but I couldn’t come up with another option. You came to the rescue and I appreciate it. Let me know if Ollie agrees to join Nathan. I think I have the perfect competition, and it will allow the men to have a little fun. Can you spare Warner tomorrow? You look like you still have a lot of work to deal with up here.”

Concealed Detection

“I was going to talk to you about that,” Paige pulled away. “I was hoping if I gave him back to you tomorrow, you’d be able to spare him the following day. Tomorrow’s just more digging and searching for evidence. Once we have things cleared — up here, I’ll need to start investigating. I think it would be good practice for him. I’m bringing in Sean. Jericho approved that just before you arrived. He can help, but I could use Matt if possible.”

“I think that would be great training for the kid,” Dax agreed. “We’re moving the shoot to another location, about a mile from Joe’s Reservoir. Matt needs to qualify with the rest of the class, but the following day we’ll be working on preserving evidence in a crisis.”

“Seriously?” Paige laughed.

“We preserve evidence. Think about any of the missions launched to take out terrorists,” Dax told her. “We went in, conducted the raid, but once the target was safe and clear, we searched for evidence — mostly intel, but we designed this class to work for cops and military. We have to preserve the evidence so when we turn it over to someone like you, we don’t get reamed for destroying your crime scene.”

“Good point,” Paige decided. “So, I’ll teach Matt how to process a scene and preserve evidence and you can teach him the rest. Deal?”

“Deal,” Dax tossed the garbage into a large bag in his truck and slammed the tailgate shut. “Let’s head back. I want to talk to Jericho before I head home.”

Nathan glanced at Ollie, his friend was unusually quiet. “You nervous, old man?”

“Were you nervous the first time you met Paige?” Ollie countered.

“The hardest day of my life, I think,” Nathan nodded. “It will be fine.”

“Maybe,” Ollie stared out the side window. “What if he resents me... for helping? What do I say to that?”

“Tell him to suck it up and deal with it,” Nathan laughed at the expression on Ollie’s face. “I’m serious. You stepped in when he needed it and everything you did, was done with love. Tell him that and then tell him to be grateful he had someone that was willing to help.”

“Is that what you told Paige?”

“Only about a dozen times,” Nathan smiled. “After that, she finally understood and accepted the things she couldn’t change.”

Concealed Detection

Ollie laughed and shook his head. “I actually think you’re serious about that.”

“As a heart-attack,” Nathan pulled in behind the vehicles and shut off the car. “You up for a little competition?”

“That. I’m actually looking forward to,” Ollie shoved open his door. “Let’s get this over with.”

The group grew quiet the instant Nathan and Ollie entered the clearing.

Dax glanced up, spotted the two men and made his way toward them. “Welcome, I’m glad you could both make it. We still have a couple guys completing the course. Once that leg is finalized and scored, we’ll move onto the bowling pin shoot.”

“It’s been a long time since I participated in that particular event,” Ollie admitted.

“I have no doubt you’ll take us all,” Dax held out a hand. “It’s an honor to meet you in person,” he spotted Hawk headed their way. “I’ll introduce both of you to Matt, but first I think Hawk would like a word.”

“Oliver Hicks,” Hawk held out his hand. “It’s an honor.”

“I hear you’re the guy that beat my best score,” Ollie took his hand. “The honor is mutual.”

“Only one of them,” Hawk corrected. “The other two still stand. Probably will for the next two hundred years or so.”

The group laughed.

“You ready?” Nathan asked his friend.

“As I’ll ever be,” Ollie nodded.

“Dax,” Nathan glanced at Matt Warner. “Would you mind brining Matt to us? I think this first introduction would be better in private.”

“On it,” Dax turned and left the group. Moments later he returned. “Gentlemen, I’d like you to meet Matt Warner. Matt, this is General Nathan Porter, retired. And this is Oliver Hicks.”

Matt studied Ollie for several seconds before he reached out a hand. “I believe you’re the man that’s been watching over my career for the past several years. I don’t understand the reason you did it but thank you for the help.”

Nathan raised a brow, then smiled. This had to be Paige’s doing.

Concealed Detection

“I wasn’t sure you’d be happy about that,” Ollie admitted. He rested a hand on Matt’s shoulder. “Your grandfather was a great man and an even better friend. I wish you had a chance to meet him. If you had, that’s all the explanation you would need for my actions.”

“Maybe now that we’ve met,” Matt offered. “You can tell me about him sometime.”

“It would be an honor,” Ollie blinked several times then focused on Dax. “You plan to stand around gossiping all day or are we going to shoot something?”

Dax laughed. “Gather around,” he called to the men. “Nathan, you and Ollie take those chairs. I’ll introduce you in a few minutes.”

The men rushed to join Dax and the others.

“Hawk is going to explain the next phase of this competition,” Dax began. “But before we get started, I want to introduce two distinguished guests that have joined us this afternoon. First, we have Retired General Nathan Porter.” He waited while Nathan stood, nodded, then returned to his seat. “And he brought a special guest with him today,” Dax continued. “I’d like you all to meet Retired Colonel Ollie Hicks.”

“No way,” Shep said in awe.

“I can see some of you recognize the name,” Dax smiled. “For those of you who don’t, Oliver Hicks is an army legend. He still holds the record in the PPC and the International Sniper Competition. We’re lucky to have him with us today.”

“Okay,” Hawk stepped forward. “This next competition is just for fun. We have two tables set up, each has five bowling pins. You will be using a three-fifty-seven revolver that contains six rounds. You have to shoot all the pins off the table, not just tip them over but knock them completely off the table. It’s a timed event. Winner remains in the competition, the loser — and don’t read too much into that label — is finished. Once we cycle through the entire group, we’ll line up and go again until the last man is standing. Any questions?” When nobody asked anything, he continued. “Alright, get into two lines and let’s get started.”

The group competed, laughed, joked, and cheered. Finally, it came down to two shooters — Matt and Shep. Nobody was surprised. Hawk blew the whistle; the shooters began firing and the crowd silently watched Matt easily win the round. Everyone cheered and congratulated Matt — well, everyone but Shep and Fester. The group continued to laugh and joke for several minutes.

Dax waited for the right moment before he addressed the group. “Now, for the fun part. The winner gets to shoot against Retired General Nathan Porter.”

“Uh…” Matt glanced at Nathan.

Concealed Detection

“You’re not going to deprive me of a little fun, are you?” Nathan stood. “If you dare, let’s see who wins.”

Matt stepped up to the table and took one last glance at Nathan before he loaded his weapon and prepared for another round. When he finished, he turned to the cheering crowd and was surprised to see the chants and applause were for him.

“Sorry General,” Dax grinned. “The clear winner is Warner. Guess you can’t intimidate your way through this time. You’ll just have to accept defeat.”

Nathan held out a hand to Matt. “Well done, son,” he glanced back at the group. “You belong in this course, even I can see that. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“You’re up,” Nathan turned to Ollie. “Show him how it’s done.”

Ollie stood and moved to take Nathan’s spot. Once the guns were reloaded, Dax blew the whistle. The crowd went instantly silent. Every one of them realized they were witnessing a true legend. Ollie won, but it was close. Matt only took a few extra seconds.

Once Hawk officially announced the winner, Ollie moved to stand next to Matt. “I wish Tim could be here to see you now.” He swallowed hard. “Thank you. You brought joy to an old man that hasn’t experienced true happiness since he lost his best friend. You’re a lot like him. He was a decent shot too, in his day. I was better —”

Matt laughed. “Of course, but I think he’d be even more proud if I won.”

“I had an advantage,” Ollie admitted. “They made you shoot with a revolver. Young kids today are accustomed to autoloaders. Me, I prefer my trusty six-shooter. It fits me like a glove, better fit than this new leg they gave me. But, all is fair—”

“Right,” Matt laughed.

“Now, I think we’ve taken up enough of your time today,” Ollie glanced at Nathan. “You ready to head out?”

“We’re done for the day,” Dax declared to the group. “Pack up and head back down. Classroom at zero-eight-hundred sharp.” He turned and nearly collided with Nathan. “Was there something else?”

“I was wondering,” Nathan maneuvered Dax to the side. “If you’re finished anyway, would you be willing to show me where Paige is working? I’d like to drop by and spend some time with her this afternoon.”

“Of course,” Dax motioned for Zeus. “I’m going to drive Nathan up to see Paige. Could you take Ollie with you?”

Concealed Detection

“I’d like to join you, if you don’t mind,” Ollie interrupted. “I’d like to meet Dylan’s daughter.”

“Can I come, too?” Matt asked hesitantly. “If we’re finished, I’d like to head back up and help with the search.”

“Alright,” Dax glanced around. “Matt, you drive the rental. Nathan can ride with me. I think Ollie might like to join you, if you don’t mind.”

“I would,” Ollie agreed.

“I think I’d like that,” Matt told him. “We’ll follow you.”

Dax was almost to the car but hesitated when he saw the look on Shep’s face. He wasn’t sure what that look meant, but he hoped it meant Shep had a change of heart and he would no longer harass Matt. He was grinning as he climbed behind the wheel.

“What?” Nathan demanded.

“I was just thinking this plan Paige came up with may have worked,” Dax admitted. “And, if it did, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Nathan laughed. “You got that right.”

The group spent several hours with Paige on the mountain before Ollie had to admit he was getting tired. Nathan was also ready to head back to the house. They agreed that both men would stay with Dax and Paige for the night. Nathan announced he’d be staying in the room downstairs and Ollie would occupy the guest room on the main floor.

Dax was approaching the front door when he spotted Hawk lounging in one of the patio chairs.

“I need a minute,” Hawk stood. “Sorry for the interruption but it’s important.”

“Just let us in,” Nathan instructed. “I’ll make sure Ollie gets situated before I turn in for the night.”

“What’s up?” Dax settled into a second patio chair.

“The men know there’s something up,” Hawk admitted. “We haven’t told them what, which only makes the cops more suspicious. They know it’s big and they want in.”

“Meaning?” Dax frowned.

Concealed Detection

“If Paige can use some extra hands,” Hawk began. “I think we should let the cops accompany Matt tomorrow and we’ll keep the military guys with us.”

“I’d have to run that by Paige,” Dax warned. “But, after that competition today—”

“Sending the cops off to work as a team might solidify things and help them finally create a cohesive unit,” Hawk agreed. “That’s what I was thinking. Plus, once they finish gathering evidence, we both know the next step is trying to identify the victim. There has to be a ton of missing persons cases to go through. These guys can help, they want to help. I think they’ll want it more if they realize this could be one of Bundy’s victims.”

“We don’t know that it is,” Dax argued.

“But we know it might be,” Hawk stood. “Now, I’m tired and I have a busy day ahead of me. I’ll have to adjust the schedule just a bit if we’re losing half our class.”

It was nearly two in the morning when Paige finally arrived home. She slid open the door and silently removed her jacket. As she turned, she spotted Dax sitting on the couch.

“Why are you still up?”

Dax set the file he was working on aside and stood. “I was waiting for you, of course.”

“What are you working on?”

“Nothing important.”

Paige focused on the file then turned back to Dax. “You should have gone to bed.”

“I know,” Dax took her hand and led her up the stairs. “Our guests are sleeping soundly; your plan seems to have worked, so we’ve achieved peace throughout the land, and I got some extra work done. Now, while you get ready for bed, I need to run something by you.”

“That sounds ominous,” Paige dropped onto the bed and started to remove her boots.

“The other cops want in,” Dax climbed into bed and waited.

“In on what?” Paige locked her gun in the safe, changed into an oversized shirt, and climbed in next to him.

“They know Matt’s been helping with something and the fact I won’t tell them what it is, has their interest piqued. They’ve decided it’s something big and they want in,” Dax explained.

Concealed Detection

“I should have realized that,” Paige considered. “Any good cop would smell a cover up immediately.”

“We can split off and work with the military guys if you can use the cops to help research, run down leads, whatever,” Dax offered. “We’ll just call this course a joint operation with the local police.”

“I could use them,” Paige sighed. “I’ll need to get the okay from Jericho, but we can’t hide this forever.”

“You think it could really be one of Bundy’s?” Dax asked, a little surprised.

“I know you heard Jericho talking to Tolman,” Paige admitted. “You know we didn’t find a skull.”

“Animals could have taken that portion,” Dax offered.

“True,” Paige shifted. “But Bundy did remove some of the victim’s heads with a hack saw. We also didn’t find any clothing. None of Bundy’s victims had clothing. He tossed them out the window as he drove down the highway on his way to dispose of the remains.”

“Okay,” Dax considered. “But that’s not unique to him. Other killers have done the same.”

“I dropped the skeletal fragments we discovered off at the lab earlier today,” Paige admitted. “I wanted them to get started on what we have. The anthropologist I spoke to confirms the bones are between forty and fifty years old. Not the victims age, but the amount of time the remains have been in the ground. That girl died forty or fifty years ago. That means —”

“She died around the time Bundy was killing girls in Utah,” Dax nodded. “It adds up, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Paige nodded. “Then throw in the fact we know he disposed of someone else up those canyons, and the Bundy tree, the way the body was discarded... it all fits so far.”

“So, what’s next?”

“I had Margie and Susie pull all missing persons cases in the area. Tomorrow I’ll start skimming through them while I wait to see if they can extract DNA from the bones,” Paige closed her eyes and exhaled. “It’s going to take forever. First I have to find out if the person is still missing, then I have to try and track down next of kin and see if — by some miracle — they still have an item we can use to extract DNA. Speaking to that many people is bound to get the media’s attention, which will become a circus almost immediately. So, if you can spare the police officers attending your class — I can use them. I just need an hour to convince Jericho they can be trusted.”

Concealed Detection

“Will that be difficult?”

“Shouldn’t be,” Paige reached over and shut off the lamp. “Of course, there can be leaks. You always hear reporters quote an unnamed source at the police department. But, for the most part, cops are suspicious and untrusting. They don’t blab, they know it can destroy an investigation. Jericho knows that. It’s just a little risky bringing in so many people we don’t know. If one of them talks to his wife and his wife tells her friend and she tells two friends...”

“Got it,” Dax pulled her against him. “For what it’s worth, I trust them to keep it all confidential. If Jericho says go, I’ll remind them of that before I release them to you.”

“That should help,” Paige said through a yawn.

“Go to sleep,” Dax whispered next to her ear.

“Goodnight,” Paige relaxed for the first time all day.

“Goodnight, baby,” Dax kissed the back of her head. “I love you.”

“Me too,” Paige said, half asleep already.

Dax stood in the front of the room waiting for the men to get situated. “Alright, let’s get started. We completed the firearms portion of this course yesterday. Other than the final evaluation, the shooting is behind us. It’s now time to move onto evidence collection and scene preservation.”

“As you know,” Hawk picked up. “The way we process a scene is different for law enforcement than it is for the military.”

“The concept is the same,” Dax added. “The process may take a different route. For that reason, we’ve decided to partner up with the local Sheriff’s Office for this portion of the course. We’ll be splitting into two teams — the military and the police. All of the cops will head over and assist the police on a local case, the rest of you will remain here with us.”

“Does this have anything to do with the secret Warner’s been hiding?” Watson asked.

Dax ignored the question. “Everyone move, split into teams. The soldiers stay, the cops head out to the foyer. Each group will be given individual instructions on how we are going to proceed for the rest of the week. You’re on the clock until Saturday evening. Sunday is another down day. Any questions?” When nobody asked a question, the cops stood and left the room. Dax and Hawk followed.

Concealed Detection

“Today and for the next three days, you belong to Sanpete County,” Dax began the instant he reached the group. “They are working a case, one that will need to stay confidential. I’ve assured them, that won’t be a problem. Don’t make me regret it. I see you’re nodding, but I need to know you understand. You do not speak to anyone. Not even the guys you left back there in that room. This case is sensitive and I’m trusting you to keep it that way. Give it the same respect you would give a case that was assigned to you back home.”

The group mumbled promises and assurances.

“Alright,” Hawk stepped forward and handed Matt a set of keys. “You are leaving this facility, but you will continue to operate as a team. That doesn’t mean you argue with task force assignments. It means, unless otherwise assigned by one of the local cops, you arrive as a team and you leave as a team. If one of you works late, the rest of you stay behind to help.”

Dax focused on each man then nodded. “Last thing, if any of you want to stay behind and continue the course with the other group, you can. Just say the word. Otherwise, you belong to the locals for the rest of the week.”

They waited, but nobody backed out. “Alright, you’re dismissed. Get over to the sheriff’s office. They’re waiting for you.”

There were seven police officers, including Matt. When the group stepped into the conference room everything went instantly quiet. Jericho stepped forward. “Gentlemen, take a seat.”

Matt settled into a chair to wait. He knew Paige and Lovato, had met Sheriff Walters, but he didn’t recognize the other two men.

“Dax assured me he’d be speaking to you before he sent you over to me. I’m the sheriff around these parts. My name is Jericho Walters. You can call me Sheriff. You can call me Walters. But, I prefer Jericho. My department may be a little less formal than the department you work for. We’re all friends here and we tend to address one another by name rather than rank and position. Most of you have met Paige, she’s the case agent and will be in charge of this task force. Mike Lovato has also been working the case from the beginning. Today they will be joined by Duncan Havilland and FBI Agent Sean Wilkens. And the two women standing in the doorway will serve as your support team. Anything you need, just ask Margie or Susie. Any questions?”

“I have one,” a man at the far end of the table spoke up.

Concealed Detection

“The next step was going to be introductions,” Jericho motioned to the man. “Since we haven’t reached that point yet, will you introduce yourself then ask your question.”

“My name is Travis Reed, and I work for Newport Beach PD in California. During this course the group just calls me Reed, so I’ll stick with that,” Reed decided. “My question is for Duncan Havilland. I’m just wondering if you are Havi the race car driver.”

“I am,” Havi grinned.

“Any questions relevant to work?” Jericho corrected. When nobody responded, he moved on to introductions. There were men from various departments of various sizes throughout the west. All of them seemed solid and competent. “Okay then, I’m going to turn this over to Paige.”

Paige stepped forward. “I’m going to repeat what you’ve already heard this morning. Being a part of this task force requires total confidentiality. I’m asking that you do not speak about the case to anyone outside this room. Not your wife, not your mother, not your priest. If we’re going to solve this mystery, I need to be able to speak freely, you need to be able to bring up questions, leads, or concerns. That only works if communication is open and we trust the team. If you don’t think you can work that way, I understand but I can’t use you on this.”

“Paige and I have spent a fair amount of time discussing the best way to present this case to the group,” Lovato stepped forward. “We decided to take a road trip. We want you to see the scene, see where the evidence was recovered and develop your own conclusions.”

“Matt,” Paige called out. “Did Dax loan you the van?”

“He did,” Matt nodded.

“Okay, all of you will load up and Matt will drive. Once we arrive at the staging area, gather together, I want to walk in as a group,” Paige hesitated when she spotted the files. “Margie and Susie have been working hard to gather those files. Each one is an independent case on a missing person. Once they obtained the original case, they worked to refresh the data and add anything new they found. There are nineteen cases. Once we return, each of you will be assigned a case.”

“We’re searching for a missing person?” Kyle Morgan from Boise, Idaho asked.

“Not exactly,” Paige said cryptically. “I could see the curious looks on all of you and knew you were wondering what the stack of files were for. I don’t want to say anything more until you see the scene for yourself. Then we’ll head back down and jump right in.”

“Fair enough,” Morgan agreed. “I prefer to walk into a scene cold. It helps me work through the evidence so I can develop my own theory on what happened.”

Concealed Detection

“Exactly,” Sean jumped in. “I’m with the FBI, so by the time we arrive, several investigators have already sifted through everything and decided on a theory. I like to go in cold. Sometimes, I even discover things the others didn’t because my experience and training is different than yours. Sometimes I miss things that the locals catch because their training and experience is unique. Keep that in mind today.”

“I know you guys have been in tactical mode the past week,” Paige stepped out the door and paused to make sure they were following. “The focus has now shifted to investigations. Dax told me this was supposed to be evidence gathering and scene preservation. I’ll cover a little of that, but mostly we’re going to work an investigation and you will see firsthand why it’s so important to focus on evidence. The smallest thing can crack a case, if the scene hasn’t been preserved correctly, a good defense attorney will get it tossed in a heartbeat.”

“Paige is being humble,” Sean told them once they reached the parking lot. “She works for Sanpete County now, but she was the best forensics expert we had at the Bureau. You can learn a lot from her, I suggest you take advantage of this opportunity every chance you get.”

“Load up,” Paige bumped shoulders with Sean as they walked to her vehicle. “Now they’re going to feel weird asking me questions.”

“I doubt that,” Sean slid into the passenger’s seat. “They strike me as tough, competent cops. Nothing intimidates them. Now they’ll know they’re in the presence of greatness.”

“Are you referring to you, or me?” Paige laughed.

“Take your pick,” Sean smiled. “I wanted to get up yesterday to see the scene for myself but I got tied up on another case. Nathan said if you hit a snag and need to use Carmen, don’t hesitate.”

“Good to know,” Paige started up Manti Canyon Road. It didn’t take long for them to reach the meadow where this all began. It was obvious the group recognized the location.

“I’m going to turn things over to Matt,” Paige smiled when he shook his head no. “Before I do that, I want to give you a little background. The other day, when you were all up here qualifying, Matt discovered something suspicious. He brought it to the attention of Dax. The two of them investigated further, careful not to disturb anything if this was in fact a crime scene. Once they determined the gravity of what they’d located, they called in me and Lo. I’m sure you remember being escorted back to the training center by Hawk and the other men. Matt and Dax stayed on scene to preserve chain of evidence and guide us in.”

They spent twenty minutes discussing chain of evidence, the preliminary investigation and how to conduct a thorough search without destroying the crime scene.

“Matt you’re up,” Paige finally said, motioning to the trail.

Concealed Detection

“I was wandering around, thinking and clearing my head,” Matt began. “That’s when I came across that,” he pointed to the carved tree.

“It’s a Bundy tree,” Morgan took a step forward and stopped. “Are you finished up here? Can we get closer?”

“Yes and no,” Paige smiled at the annoyed looks. “I have processed the scene, but I brought this group up to check my work. You are officially on the task force now. If you locate something we missed, your name will be on that — officially. Tread carefully, but feel free to take a closer look. Morgan, can you explain to those who may not know what a Bundy tree is?”

“Sure,” Morgan took a second to get his memories straight. “There are believed to be dozens of them in this mountain range. Nobody knows for sure if Bundy carved any of them himself or if they are all forgeries. I believe Pete Hayward had one chopped down near the site where they located human remains.”

“He did,” Lovato agreed. “He kept it in his office for years.”

“There’s been a long-standing debate on whether Bundy would mark a tree, directing authorities to the bodies. Some say there’s no way, he was a criminal mastermind and wouldn’t want to lead the authorities to the bodies. Others say he was narcissistic enough to think he’d get away with it and he’d probably get a kick out of manipulating the cops that way.”

“I don’t think they found any Bundy trees in Washington,” Randy Baker added. “I’m from Richland, which is only about three hours away from Sammamish where two of the girls went missing from the lake. I don’t think any carved trees were ever found. That doesn’t necessarily mean they didn’t exist. Back in the seventies, logging was less regulated. Someone could have chopped down the tree and used it for firewood.”

“And that’s why there’s still a debate,” Sean added.

“I don’t remember hearing about Bundy trees in Colorado either,” Chris Barnes added. “Everyone in Colorado Springs knows about Bundy. He escaped from our fine Aspen facility — twice. I don’t think any trees were found near our victims either. Again, that doesn’t mean much. Aspen is full of trees and if someone found one that had Bundy’s name carved into it — I’m sure they would have cut it down and considered it a novelty.”

“Are you guys seriously suggesting you found the remains from one of Bundy’s victims?” Axel Smith from San Antonio, Texas asked.

“I’m not suggesting anything,” Paige motioned for them to move to the next location. “Gather around. As you can see, the dirt has been disturbed in this area. Matt found a woman’s necklace partially buried here. It was old and rusted and it had a tiny heart-shaped pendant attached.”

Concealed Detection

The group remained silent, but Paige could see they were analyzing the information in their minds.

“The last stop is over here,” Matt directed the group.

“This is the main crime scene,” Paige warned. “Tread carefully.”

“What did you locate here?” Brad Miller from Fresno, California asked.

“Partial remains,” Paige admitted.

“By partial, what do you mean?” Reed wondered.

“I have recovered several large bones,” Paige told him. “Unfortunately, it appears the body was contaminated by animals at some point. At a guess we have most of the larger leg bones, I believe we recovered all the bones for one arm and most of the bones that make up the other. We have what I believe to be seventeen ribs and at least three of them were cracked. I have experts looking at those to see if the victim was beaten or if the damage occurred post mortem.”

“What about the skull?” Barnes asked.

“Missing,” Paige waited for a follow up.

“Is there any way to know if an animal took the head or if it was severed by a saw?” Baker asked.

“Not at this time,” Paige admitted, impressed Baker knew one of the ways Bundy removed body parts from his victims.

“Did you locate any items of clothing?” Miller wondered.

“No,” Paige glanced around. “I’ve searched the area pretty thoroughly, but you’re welcome to take another look.”

“No clothing but a necklace,” Smith mused and began to study the distance from where the remains were located and where the jewelry was found. “Was there a necklace mentioned in any of the reports — the nineteen you plan to assign?”

“I haven’t looked into any of them that deeply,” Paige admitted. “I’ve spent the past two days up here, collecting evidence and searching for anything I missed.”

“Okay,” Smith finally said. “Can we just take a step back. I’m still not convinced this is one of Bundy’s. Did that anthropologist determine the age of the bones?”

“She’s only provided a prelim on that,” Paige told the group. “But she believes the victim died between forty and fifty years ago.”

Concealed Detection

“Fits,” Morgan glanced at Matt. He’d been pretty reserved during this whole thing. “And you found all of this?”

Matt shrugged.

“There might just be hope for you yet,” Reed grinned.

“Were do you want to start?” Paige asked the group.

“I’d like to have some time to just walk around and take everything in,” Barnes requested. “It’s a lot to take in and, like you said, as a group we are generating a theory but we don’t have all the facts.”

“Does anyone know how many victims are still missing?” Miller asked.

“No,” Paige and Sean said together. “He confessed to thirty, but experts believe the count is much higher than that.”

“I think he confessed to killing a hitchhiker in Idaho,” Morgan provided. “She’s never been identified or found.”

“We had a victim in Washington that’s never been found, too. I think her name was Monson,” Baker provided.

“In Utah,” Paige told them. “Bundy told detectives he disposed of Nancy Wilcox near Capitol Reef National Park, but she’s never been found. Smith, the daughter of the Midvale Chief was located in Summit County, Aime was located in American Fork Canyon.”

“There’s definitely a pattern,” Reed observed.

“Yes, but there is a little-known fact regarding Smith and Aime,” Sean said in disgust. “He went back. Described a postmortem ritual of shampooing their hair and applying makeup. He didn’t mention those two specifically, but just before he was executed, he admitted to an FBI profiler that he was a necrophiliac. He did admit to visiting one of the Colorado victims’ weeks after her death.”

“In October, he attempted to kidnap DaRonch but failed,” Paige didn’t want to get into disgusting details of the Bundy cases, so she changed the subject. “A few hours later, he abducted Debra Kent in Bountiful. Then, he drove all the way down here to dispose of her remains.” Paige paused to let that sink in. “What I’m trying to tell you, is that the nineteen cases we located from our area —”

“That could just be the beginning,” Smith realized. “If Bundy did dump that body, the girl could be from anywhere.”

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“Now you see why I need all the help I can get,” Paige shrugged. “Free labor is always a plus.”

“To continue with those still missing, I believe there were six from the general area if you count Kent,” Sean informed them. “Four from Colorado and two from Utah. In regard to Kent, they found one kneecap in this mountain range that was confirmed by DNA to belong to Kent.”

“Did you find a kneecap?” Miller asked.

“Yes,” Paige affirmed. “Two of them.”

“Guess that rules out Kent, then,” Smith sighed.

“There are also several victims who investigators believe are likely Bundy victims,” Paige told them. “That suggests there could be victims out there that haven’t been linked to Bundy because their remains were never located. The twelve experts believe he committed are documented because the remains were found. He also gave directions to another Utah woman’s remains moments before his execution, but the directions were later proven to be inaccurate. The problem with Bundy is you never knew if he was telling the truth or just messing with you because he was a manipulative narcissist and a psychopath that enjoyed the game.”

“If you want to spend some time scouring the area,” Lovato stepped in. “You need to get started. The sun goes down around nineteen hundred hours up here in September. It’s nearly noon already.”

The group disbursed to walk the area and search for clues.

“You know they won’t find anything,” Sean stepped up next to Paige. “If you didn’t find it, there’s nothing to find.”

“The practice is good for them,” Paige shrugged. “We told Dax we wouldn’t just work these guys to death, we’d teach them the tools of the trade. This is teaching.”

“Right,” Sean grinned. “And sending your kids out to play in a field is biology.”

“Could be,” Lo laughed. “But seriously, I always learn best by doing. If they spend a few hours carefully looking for clues, even if they don’t find anything, it’s a good lesson.”

“I think you should discuss leads,” Paige told him. “You helped me figure out which ones to focus on and which ones to set aside for later. Plus, you forced me to leave the office and chase a couple down. The break helped keep me focused. It’s a good tip.”

“Alright,” Lo agreed. “How long do you think the racer will wander around aimlessly before he joins us?”

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“Havi is meticulous,” Paige watched her colleague focus on the same places she had. “He’s not as meticulous as me—”

‘Nobody on earth, or anyone that has ever walked the earth, is as meticulous as you are Paige,” Sean laughed.

“Shut up,” Paige glared at him. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“I put it in the plus column,” Lovato decided. “Unless it’s lunch time. Then, Paige and her techniques definitely land at the top of the minus pile.”

“No respect,” Paige complained. “Instead of complaining, you should all be grateful. If I handle forensics, that leaves you free to handle whatever it is you do best.”

“And what is that, Paige?” Lovato asked.

“For you?” Paige smiled. “I’m pretty sure it changes by the minute.”

Several hours later the group was gathered around the conference room, hot pizza in hand, as they listened to Paige present her findings.

“You’ve got a pretty good circumstantial case,” Reed admitted. “But nothing concrete. Could be Bundy, sure. It could also be some lunatic that got his kicks out of jerking us around by dumping a body near a Bundy tree.”

“I agree,” Paige said truthfully. “At this point, we don’t know what we have. We need to dig into each of these missings,” she pointed to the stack of files. “And determine if they’ve been located. Were they runaways that surfaced years later and had a normal life with a family, a job, and a white picket fence?”

“You said the women,” Barnes scowled. “I can’t remember their names. Susie and Maggie?”

“Margie,” Paige corrected.

“Right,” Barnes nodded. “You said they did a fresh background on each of those cases. Did they find two-point-five children and a picket fence?”

“Nope,” Lovato shook his head. “They couldn’t find anything. That’s how they made it in the final nineteen. We started with dozens and whittled it down to this. Those files are women that went missing between forty and fifty years ago. All of those cases are still open today. The women were between the ages of fourteen and thirty when they went missing. They all had a

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promising future and there was no indication they left on their own, that doesn't mean it's been ruled out. It just means the report doesn't indicate that was likely. We narrowed it down this way because those are the parameters Paige decided on."

"We can change the parameters if we need to, but I'd have to have a good reason," Paige added. "I came up with a short list of criteria based on the evidence we have available and information from the forensic anthropologist. You might be interested in knowing that all but two of the files are women between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four. Fourteen of them are young girls who are very pretty, had long straight hair parted down the middle, with a very slim build. Don't get stuck on that, though. We still don't know if this girl was killed by Ted Bundy."

"So," Baker considered. "Can we work this any way we want, or do you have a system you want us to follow?"

"What did you have in mind?" Paige wondered.

"I thought I'd focus on locating family," Baker decided. "Parents may not be around or could be in a home or whatever, but siblings, cousins, uncles — anyone that might be able to provide more detailed and personal information could be available. I thought I'd look for someone that knows the details that might not be in those reports."

"That's a good start," Sean told him. He grabbed the file off the top and tossed it to Baker. "Go ahead and get started."

"Can you pass those around and we'll all get started," Morgan suggested.

"While Sean distributes the first round of files, keep in mind some of these will be easier to verify than others. We have nineteen files and only eleven investigators. If you can eliminate a case, prepare a detailed account of what you did and how you concluded they are not feasible victims, and then set it aside and grab another. Once we get through them all, we'll decide on our next step."

The group worked until twenty-one hundred hours. That's when Jericho appeared, demanded they all go home, and disappeared.

"He's acting a little strange lately," Havilland observed.

"He is," Paige agreed. "Do you think we should worry?"

"Naw," Lovato snatched his jacket from his chair. "Maybe he just found a good woman."

"Jericho?" Paige choked on her water.

"Find a bone?" Lo teased.

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“There are so many things you could mean by that,” Paige slid into her jacket. “Instead of analyzing your response, I’m going home. See all of you back here bright and early.”

“I’ll lock up,” Havilland offered.

It was eleven o’clock on Thursday morning when Lovato stood, stretched and glanced around. “I have a lead I want to follow. Anyone else have field work that wants to join me?”

“A real lead or are you just making excuses to get out of the office?” Reed wondered.

“First,” Paige focused on Lo. “I want you to explain the ups and downs of working leads and why it’s important to take a break from the mundane drone work and chase something down when it hits, even if it seems weak.”

“Alright,” Lovato described his philosophy and gave a couple examples demonstrating why the strategy has worked for him.

When he was done, Morgan stood. “I have something. Can I join you?”

“Absolutely,” Lovato agreed. “One thing we haven’t discussed is the restrictions.”

“What kind of restrictions?” Barnes wondered.

“None of you are certified in Utah,” Paige advised. “That means, when you go out in the field, you always have one of us with you. I should have explained that earlier. Nobody investigates a lead alone. We go in teams. No matter how small or insignificant it seems, you never go at it alone. And, because of the certification issue, partner up with one of us.”

“I have a small lead I’d like to look into,” Smith admitted.

“Havi,” Paige turned just in time to see him stand.

“Let’s go,” Havilland motioned to Smith. “There’s a house I want to stop at and see if this girl’s sister still lives there.”

Sean paired up with Matt, which left Paige, Reed, Baker and Miller.

“There’s three of us and only one of you,” Reed observed.

“Actually,” Baker spoke up. “I’m in the middle of something and I’d like to stay here if that’s okay. I could use a little assistance by the two women you said were support members. It might take a while, so go ahead and leave without me.”

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“And then there were two,” Paige grinned.

Gage stepped into the room. “I just finished up a report and there’s nothing holding. If anything comes in, Dean can grab it. Do you need another hand?”

“Gage Clayton is actually offering to help with paperwork and research?” Paige looked at him in surprise.

“I was hoping there might be something else I could do, but if that’s where you need me,” Gage shrugged.

“I’ll take him,” Reed spoke up.

“No talking football,” Paige warned. “Get him up to speed on what you have and then head out. Miller, that means you’re with me. Let’s go I also have a house I want swing by and see if a cousin still resides there.”

By the time Paige got back, Lovato and Havi had returned. Gage and Sean were still out in the field.

Baker glanced up. “I cleared one and grabbed a second. Just started, so I’m not sure what I have yet.”

“Cleared how?” Paige settled in next to him.

“Well, there was a name handwritten at the bottom of the case file,” Baker told her. “I tracked the woman down, she’s seventy-six now and resides in a rest home.”

“Was she related?” Paige wondered. “First, was she coherent enough to tell you if she’s related?”

“I spoke to her nurse,” Baker assured her. “They wouldn’t give me details but said Nelly’s problems were physical not mental. She was sharp and she confirmed that the missing girl was her best friend years ago. She admitted that Tanya Whittle ran off with her boyfriend. Nelly claims Tanya’s father was physically abusive, and Tanya just wanted to get away. Apparently the two women kept in touch. Tanya changed her name to Tammie White and lived a fairly good life. In fact, she married a doctor. He retired and the couple traveled to Japan last October, where they got stranded. Typhoon Hagi... something hit, and they were both killed. Nelly thought it was romantic. I tend to disagree. Anyway, she’s been located. Tanya Whittle was not murdered by a sadistic serial killer.”

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“Could you confirm any of that?” Paige wondered. “I’m not questioning your work, but we need to confirm everything.”

“It’s confirmed,” Baker assured her. “I called the hospital where Tanya’s husband worked, and they sent me a photo.” He held it up for Paige to see. “No doubt this is our girl.”

“Why did they have a picture of Tanya? I thought the husband was the doctor,” Paige frowned.

“Small town,” Baker shrugged. “They like to keep things personal. They have photos of all the spouses and the children.”

“Did she have any?” Paige wondered.

“As a matter of fact,” Baker grinned. “When I called her son, Dr. Hoyte the second, he confirmed his parents were killed in a typhoon last year. He also admitted they knew his mom had been reported missing and that she was hiding from her parents. It was one of those family secrets they didn’t talk about. There’s no doubt, Tanya Whittle became Tammie White, got married and lived happily ever after.”

“Good,” Paige decided. “Put that file over there. We’re going to create a ‘no longer missing’ pile so we know what cases are definitely closed and which ones can still be worked.”

The rest of the group returned, and they all worked well into the evening again. By the time Paige closed down for the night, three more cases had been closed. At this rate they might work through all nineteen in just a few days. Unfortunately, that meant the parameters would have to be expanded to include all of Utah. Once they worked through those, they’d move to Idaho missing persons, then Colorado. The list could go on forever as she expanded across the country.

Depressed and exhausted, she locked up the office and headed home.

Saturday morning, Paige rolled over, groaned, and pulled the covers over her head. She didn’t want to go to work today. Suddenly, her eyes flew open and she bolted upright. “Bacon.” She shoved off the blankets pulled on an old pair of sweats and flew down the stairs. There was Dax, in the kitchen making breakfast.

“I think I died and went to heaven,” Paige grabbed the mug Dax held out to her and rushed to the coffee pot. “Yep, this must be heaven.”

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“Only for an hour,” Dax set a covered plate on the table. “Then you have to head into the big bad world and prove whether or not that girl was one of Bundy’s.”

“Don’t remind me,” Paige growled. “I’m relaxing on a fluffy cloud, sipping my morning magic, and dreaming of a lazy day relaxing at home.”

Dax took the mug of coffee from her, grabbed her hand, and led her to a chair. “Sit and eat, the eggs are almost finished.”

“Why the royal treatment?” Paige lifted the lid, scooped up three pancakes, and grabbed several slices of bacon. She dumped about a ton of syrup on the pancakes and shoved a huge bite into her mouth. “Good,” she mumbled past her food.

Dax grinned and slid two eggs onto her plate. He returned to the stove and began cooking his own eggs. “You’ve been heading into work early and staying late all week,” he provided. “I wanted some time to sit down and discuss your progress over breakfast. Like we used to do. It’s been awhile since we had breakfast together.”

“That’s because you’re always on your way out the door when I get up,” Paige accused.

“That’s going to change,” Dax promised. Moments later, he slid his own eggs onto a plate and joined her at the table. “Tell me how the men are doing and if there’s been any progress. You’ve been able to keep things under wraps longer than I thought you could. I’m not surprised the men are acting like professionals. I am surprised the people you’ve talked to didn’t run to the newspaper to get their fifteen minutes.”

“They don’t know,” Paige swallowed a bite of egg and took another sip of coffee. “They know we found remains. They have no idea they could be one of Bundy’s victims. I think if Bundy did this, once we identify the body, that family member will know.”

“Makes sense,” Dax glanced at Paige’s plate that was now swimming in syrup and shook his head.

“What?”

“I’m not sure why I work so hard to ensure perfection when you’re just going to drown the entire breakfast in sticky, liquid sugar,” Dax set down the bottle and took a large bite. “Perfection.”

“Because you love me?” Paige smiled, she missed this.

“You seem pretty confident you identified the killer,” Dax pointed out. “How sure are you?”

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“Not any more than I was before,” Paige shrugged. “We need to identify the victim. Once we do, we can talk to the family and see what the circumstances were on the night she disappeared.”

“And if it fits Bundy’s MO, then what?” Dax asked. “I mean, you can never positively state, without a doubt, this woman was killed by Bundy.”

“No,” Paige agreed. “But we can say that we believe, with a high degree of confidence that it was. That might have to be enough. We’ll never close the case, but we can inactivate it.”

“So,” Dax hesitated. “How are the boys doing?”

“They’re men,” Paige scolded. “But if you’re asking how they’re getting along with Matt Warner, the answer is great. They seem to be working well together, the entire task force is for that matter. Maybe better than any team I’ve ever worked with.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Dax handed her the last piece of bacon. “Are they learning anything? The departments that paid for training will expect those guys to come home with new skills and investigative techniques.”

“They’re learning,” Paige assured him. “Don’t worry. The departments will get their money’s worth. We’ve been taking turns, depending on the situation. Lo taught them about sifting through and working leads. I provided some information about forensics. Sean covered serial killer cases he’s worked in the past. Havilland covered race car driving and Gage answered all their questions about the NFL.”

“Glad to see their working hard and have their priorities straight,” Dax shook his head.

“I agree,” Paige sat back, stuffed but alert. “Thanks, you achieved perfection. Now, I need to shower and head into the office. The men will be waiting for me if I don’t hurry.”

Dax watched her leave and smiled. He was definitely going to change his schedule so they could do this more often.

Matt gathered up his file and moved to sit next to Paige. “I have something I need you to look at.”

“Alright,” Paige pushed her own file away and focused on Matt.

“I’ve been working on locating this missing person,” Matt pushed the file toward Paige.

“No luck?” Paige asked pulling the file closer.

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“Nakisha Fierro was twenty-one when she went missing,” Matt began.

“November 21st,” Paige noticed it was in 1974. “So, what’s the snag?”

“Says she attended a concert at Snow College on the night she went missing and was never seen again,” Matt continued.

Paige frowned. This one fit Bundy’s MO to a tee.

“I tried to locate her parents,” Matt continued. “I wasn’t having any luck. Then I skimmed through the data Margie provided. The updates, I mean.”

“Okay,” Paige wondered where this was going.

Matt flipped through the paperwork until he found the report he wanted. “It lists Aurora Fierro Donovan as a sister.”

“Did you contact her?” Paige wondered. “There’s a number listed.”

“I did,” Matt confirmed. “She won’t talk to me. She told me not to call her again and hung up.”

Paige frowned. “Is there an address listed?”

“Last known on this report is an address in... Monroe, Utah. But I have no idea where that is.”

“Monroe is about an hour south of here,” Havilland provided. “Why don’t the two of you head that way and check it out?”

“Is that an hour the way you drive?” Paige asked. “Or an hour the way normal people drive?”

“I’m normal,” Havilland objected. “But, at your snails pace, you might want to tack on another twenty minutes.”

“Bite me,” Paige frowned. “You have your computer up, run the sister and see if she has a driver’s license and what address is listed.” She relayed the information and waited.

“Valid license,” Havilland told them. “And she’s still in Monroe. I printed out the details. Do you show the house on one hundred West?”

“Yep,” Paige stood. “Let’s go. This lead is going to take at least two hours. If she agrees to talk to us — longer than that. If Jericho drops in, will you brief him and tell him to call if he needs anything from me. Margie said he’s unavailable until noon.”

“Right,” Havi nodded. “I’ll take care of it.”

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A little over an hour later, Paige pulled into the driveway of a well-cared for, modest home.

“Paige?” Matt looked up from the file.

“What?”

“This address is on the report,” Matt glanced up at the house. “It says Nakisha’s aunt and uncle lived here at the time. Apparently, her Aunt Skylar was the last person to speak to Nakisha before she left for the concert.”

“And now her sister lives here,” Paige shut off the car and pushed open the door. “Let’s go see what sister Aurora knows.”

“What if she doesn’t answer?” Matt wondered.

“I’ll knock again,” Paige shrugged. “And I’ll keep knocking until she does. That’s another lesson, Matt. Keep pushing until you get what you want.”

Matt nodded, but didn’t think that always worked. Sometimes, pushing just got you a trip to Internal Affairs.

Paige ascended the stairs and pushed the button for the doorbell. It was a nice rambler with a basement that was partially above ground. They didn’t have an actual porch, just a landing at the top of the stairs that would only accommodate one person. Matt remained two steps below her. At first nobody answered. Paige rang the bell again and suddenly the door flew open and an annoyed woman in her sixties filled the open space.

“Yes,” she said impatiently.

“Are you Aurora Donovan?” Paige asked.

“Yes,” she said, clearly still annoyed.

“My name is Deputy Paige Carter, and this is Deputy Matt Warner,” Paige began. “I believe you spoke to my partner on the phone earlier today.”

“And I told him I had nothing to say about my sister’s disappearance,” Aurora barked.

“As much as I understand your reluctance,” Paige pushed. “This is important. It will only take a few moments of your time. Could we please come inside where it’s a little more comfortable and speak with you?”

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“If I say no, will you stop pestering me or will you keep this up until you get what you want?” Aurora asked.

“I’ll keep it up,” Paige admitted. “Like I said, it’s important.”

“Very well,” Aurora took a step back. “Come in.” She led them to a small sitting room a few feet from the front door.

“First,” Paige settled onto a couch. “I do realize this conversation might be painful. But I assure you, it is necessary.”

“Just ask what you came to ask so you can leave,” Aurora sighed.

Paige looked at Matt, hoping he’d get the message and take the lead. She was supposed to be training him, after all.

“Ma’am,” Matt began. “I have read the original report and I think I’m fairly clear on the basics. Your sister…” he glanced at the report. “Your older sister left that evening to attend a concert of some kind at Snow College, is that correct?”

“Why are we going over this again?” Aurora demanded. “My family has suffered for more than forty years since the loss of Kisha. Why do I have to go through it all again?”

“We located skeletal remains in Manti Canyon,” Paige provided. “They appear to be female and our forensics anthropologists indicated the individual died between forty and fifty years ago. We don’t want to bring up old memories, but we are trying to identify our victim.”

“We are contacting all of the families that reported loved ones missing during that time period,” Matt added. He should have started with that. Jumping in and asking the questions he wanted answers to was not the way to deal with this woman.

“I see,” Aurora stood and moved to stand in front of the window. “How likely is it that the remains belonged to my sister?”

“Likely enough we drove all the way out here to talk to you,” Paige provided. “We’ve narrowed down the information we have and her case remains one of the possibilities.”

Aurora stared out the large front window for several minutes before she spoke. “I think I’m understanding this correctly,” she finally said. “You are here to try to determine if the remains belonged to Kisha.”

“Yes,” Paige agreed. “And to see if there is anything you can tell us that’s not in the report.”

“Do you know who killed her?” Aurora asked.

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“We don’t know for sure that we have located your sister,” Paige corrected.

“Right,” Aurora turned to face them. “Can you extract DNA from what you found?”

“Yes,” Paige assured her. “We’re waiting for the results as we speak.”

“Then I think I can help you,” Aurora returned to the chair she had vacated but instead of sitting, she practically collapsed and tumbled onto the surface.

“You were close?” Matt could tell he was right.

“We were,” Aurora nodded. “You wouldn’t think we’d be that close because there were six years between us. When I was little, I think she just saw me as a pest. As we got older, we became best friends.”

“I’m sorry,” Matt said sincerely. “I’d love to hear anything you could add, but first can you tell us why you asked about DNA?”

“Kisha was so excited that night,” Aurora said softly. “She was meeting a man at the concert. It wasn’t a date, not entirely. But she’d been interested in this guy for months and he finally asked her to attend the concert with him. He had a class that night, so he asked her to meet him in front of the library. She spent hours getting ready and called Aunt Skylar at least half a dozen times to ask about clothing, jewelry, perfume — you name it, she asked.”

“That’s why the report indicates your aunt was the last person to speak with your sister?” Matt wondered. “It looks like this used to be your Aunt Skylar’s home.”

“Yes,” Aurora focused on him. “She tried to stay here. She had two kids of her own and they loved their school and their friends. She didn’t want to uproot them and force them to start over. They were traumatized enough with the loss of Kisha.”

“But eventually she had to,” Paige said in understanding. She’d done the same thing.

“Yes,” Aurora nodded. “They remained here, in this home for another five years. By that time, I was working for a local mortgage company. My salary was decent at the time. I had also been dating Ben, my husband, for about a year by then. When Ben proposed, we decided we needed a place to live. I approached my aunt to feel things out a little and see if they were serious about moving. They were and we purchased their home — this home. They moved out of town, ended up in St. George and her kids still live down there.”

“Sounds like it worked out for both of you,” Matt observed.

“It did,” Aurora gave him a weak smile. “About the DNA. I asked because I think I may have preserved some of Kisha’s.”

“How so?” Paige wondered.

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“We were all devastated,” Aurora told her. “My parents were never the same after that. I was never the same. Aunt Skylar blamed herself. I never understood that, but she did. It’s the reason she couldn’t stay here, I think. Anyway, my mother memorialized Kisha’s room. Nobody was allowed inside. Not even my father. Dad was more like a walking zombie than human for years. At first, he tried to hold out hope that Nakisha would return but then he just gave up. It’s awful to see a strong, vibrant man lose hope the way he did. Three and a half years after my wedding, dad had a massive heart attack and we lost him, too.”

“I’m sorry,” Matt knew he was getting too involved in this story. You had to hold back, keep a distance, and not get too involved; or, the job would destroy you. He couldn’t, not this time. This family had endured so much. All of the families they were contacting had. The loss of a loved one, especially one so young with their whole lives ahead of them was devastating and created such a ripple effect that withstood the test of time.

“Mom remained in the house,” Aurora continued. “She actually stayed there until four years ago when she fell and broke her hip. She had to have it replaced and the doctor’s said she couldn’t return home to live alone. I had to move her into an assisted living center.”

“Is that the first time you were allowed into your sister’s room?” Matt wondered.

“Yes,” Aurora nodded. “I went through her house, gathered up the heirlooms and left Kisha’s room for last. I had to sell the home to pay for mom’s care.”

“And you think there was something inside that room that might contain DNA?” Paige pushed.

“I have a small box of items that I think could contain Kisha’s DNA,” Aurora corrected. “I’ve never dealt with anything like that, so I just kept anything I thought might help,” she looked from one deputy to the other. “I mean, if someone like you ever came knocking on my door trying to determine if they finally found my sister’s body.”

“If you are willing to give us the box,” Paige reached out and touched Aurora’s arm. “And I know how difficult that will be. If you’re willing, I’ll personally go through it and see if we can find DNA on any of the items. If we do, regardless of the outcome, I promise, I will provide you with the results. That means, we test the objects and create a DNA profile. From that profile, experts will be able to determine if future remains belong to your sister.”

“I’ll get you the box,” Aurora stood, then hesitated when a man stepped through the door that lead to the back of the house.

“Rory?” he focused on Matt and Paige. “What’s going on?”

“Come with me, Ben,” Aurora instructed. “I’ll explain it to you while I retrieve Kisha’s box.”

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“Kisha?” he studied Paige and Matt. “Did you find her?”

“Come on,” Aurora took Ben’s hand and disappeared down the hallway.

When they returned, Ben was carrying the box and gripping one of Aurora’s hands. It was obvious she’d been crying. Ben set the box on the coffee table then pulled his wife into his arms. “That box is all she has. I understand why you need to take it, I’ll just ask that you bring back as many items as you can. She has a photo album and a porcelain figurine that Kisha cherished, but the girl was just getting started and didn’t have much.”

“I understand,” Paige stood.

Matt also stood, but hesitated. “One last thing before we go.”

“Yes?” Aurora whispered.

“Do you know if your sister was wearing any jewelry the night she went missing? Did she have a favorite ring or a special bracelet she wore to impress her date?”

“My father gave her a necklace,” Aurora brushed away a tear. “She never took it off. It was a silver chain with a delicate heart pendent that had intricate carving on the top but the back was smooth.”

“Thank you,” Matt stepped forward and shook Ben’s hand. “Thank you for the time and thank you for your willingness to speak with us.”

“We should have the results back in a few days,” Paige added. “One of us will contact you as soon as we have answers.”

“Thank you,” Ben followed them to the door.

They waited to speak until they were in the car, headed back to Manti.

“She described that necklace in detail,” Matt said the instant they were back on the highway.

“She did,” Paige agreed. “I think our victim is Nakisha Fierro.”

“We’ll have to question them again,” Matt glanced at Paige. “I know there were a lot of things we needed to ask them, but she was already upset. I didn’t think it was the right time. Especially since we have to contact her again with the DNA results.”

“I agree,” Paige nodded. “I saw a few things in that box I think we might be able to test. We’ll have to go through it once we get back to the office, but I did see a hair brush and an envelope. If Nakisha licked the envelope, we might get lucky.”

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“Or unlucky,” Matt countered. “Which is worse, not knowing what happened to your sister or knowing she was killed by a sadistic serial killer?”

“We don’t know that yet,” Paige warned.

“The more we discover, the more this looks like Bundy,” Matt insisted. “Waiting on the steps of a college library — definitely Bundy’s style. And did you notice the photo on the mantel?”

“I saw it,” Paige agreed. This was looking like Bundy’s work. “She fits the image but we already knew that. We had a photo in the file.”

“True,” Matt agreed. “But the one I just saw was Nakisha all dressed up. She was pretty and elegant, exactly the type of girl Bundy targeted.”

“I’m not saying it wasn’t Bundy,” Paige relented. “I’m just saying we can’t jump to conclusions yet.”

“So what’s our next move?” Matt wondered. “After we get back, go through the box and pull out anything that might contain DNA. Then what?”

“Then we pull the rest of the team in,” Paige decided. “I think the lead is good enough that it’s worth pursuing. We need to fenagle a list of students that would have been enrolled at Snow College in November of 1974. Then, we should also find out if there’s any record of who used the library that night.”

“Like a sign in?” Matt frowned. “I never had to sign to use the library.”

“No,” Paige agreed. “But you had to use a card to check something out.”

“That won’t capture everyone,” Matt sighed. “We’ll miss at least half of the students that way. A lot of kids go to the library to study. They don’t take anything with them when they leave.”

“We catch the ones we can,” Paige insisted. “We do the leg work, walk the beat, engage in the gumshoe detective work and see what we find.”

“I’m not complaining,” Matt assured her. “I’m just pointing out we’re going to miss a lot of potential witnesses this way.”

“Do you have a better suggestion?”

“Nope,” Matt admitted. “I was hoping you might.”

It was after seven and just getting dark when Brad Miller hung up the phone and stood. “I think I just found a witness.”

Concealed Detection

“Tell us,” Paige looked up from the list she’d been creating.

“A woman by the name of Allison Hopkins was working in the library that evening. She said she cleaned up early because she planned to attend the concert. As she stepped through the front doors, she spotted an attractive man wearing nice clothing. She can’t remember if he had on a suit or just a button down and slacks. Anyway, he had his arm in a cast and was asking another young woman if she could help carry his books to his car. The woman appeared to agree, but just then she was joined by a fellow student — a guy. Allison knew the guy, but she didn’t know the girl. His name is Cody Thomas. She doesn’t have any way to reach him, but they are friends on social media. She’s going to send him a private message and ask him to call us here at the office.”

“Just then, the phone rang,” Paige answered.

The entire room grew silent in anticipation. It was clear she was speaking to this Cody guy. She listened, jotted down a few notes, asked him a few questions, then hung up.

“The girl’s name was Jackie Butler,” Paige announced to the room. “I have a number for her. Cody and Jackie have remained close friends over the years, but he says Jackie is visiting her sister in Florida and won’t be home until tomorrow night or Monday morning.”

“So, we wait?” Matt wondered.

“On that lead,” Paige agreed. “It’s late. Let’s call it a night and pick this back up on Monday morning. You guys have the entire day off tomorrow.”

“Can we work?” Morgan wondered. “I’d like to make a few more calls. I think Sunday might be an ideal day to do that. I realize we’re talking about people who are now in their sixties but not all of them will be retired. They could be at work Monday morning. I’d like to get through my list tomorrow.”

“Me too,” Axel Smith agreed.

Reed glanced around the room. “I think we all would.”

“Give me a minute,” Paige stood and left the room. She settled into her chair and called Dax. Once she explained the situation, she told him the men were asking to work in the morning.

“Does that mean you’ll be working, too?” Dax wondered.’

“It does,” Paige said with regret. “I know you wanted to veg all day and watch movies. You can still do that, you’ll just have to do it without me.”

Concealed Detection

“Kind of defeats the purpose,” Dax disagreed. “I’ll agree to working the men tomorrow on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“I get to come, too,” he told her. “I want to spend the day with my wife, even if we’re investigating serial killers.”

“Deal.” Paige laughed. “But I never said this was the work of a serial killer.”

“True,” Dax agreed. “I did. How much longer tonight?”

“I think we’re going to break for today and pick it back up in the morning,” Paige was planning to work a little longer, but at the moment she just wanted to go home.

“Good. See you when you get here.” Dax disconnected before she could answer. She sighed, knowing that was by design. He didn’t want to give her the opportunity to change her mind.

“Tomorrow’s a go,” Paige said from the doorway. “Clean up and head out. I’ll see you bright and early but not before nine.”

Once the men filed out, Havilland approached Paige. “Are you calling the sheriff?”

“I’ll make the call on my way home,” she assured him. “You don’t have to work tomorrow. It’s supposed to be your day off.”

“Jericho approved overtime,” Havilland dismissed that. “I’ll work. Lo’s in, too. I’ll see you at nine.”

The following day, the group gathered in the conference room and continued to make calls. They decided Dax wouldn’t actually call anyone, he worked in the background checking off names and jotting down new ones. When they discovered a student that had been in the library that evening, they asked for additional names. Having a concert that night made it easy to jog the student’s memories. They found two more women the charming man with a cast on his arm approached that night. The first one, Sally Mortensen, almost helped him but at the last minute she got a bad feeling about the guy and made up an excuse then ran back into the library. The second woman, Danielle Bergstrom, actually started down the sidewalk with the man but was joined by two of her girlfriends. The man suddenly changed his mind and told her he could manage on his own. They all remembered him as charming, good looking and very apologetic for needing help because of the broken arm.

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It was shortly after eleven when Jackie Butler called. She relayed basically the same story with one added detail. She was sure the guy had dark hair, freshly shaven and was dressed very well. She didn't think he was wearing a suit; she was pretty sure he had on dress slacks and a button down shirt. She remembered his face because she thought he was attractive, but would have been even more appealing if he grew a tight beard and had a mustache. She also said when Ted Bundy was all over the news in the eighties, just before he was executed, she remembers thinking he looked an awful lot like the man from the library that night. She listened carefully but when there was no mention of victims near Snow College, she decided it was a coincidence or her mind was playing tricks on her and she only thought that because she was looking at the image of an attractive man."

"I think we should take a break and grab lunch," Havilland suggested.

Everyone agreed.

Once they were in the car, Dax took Paige's hand. "You okay?"

"It was him," she turned to face him. "I keep telling myself I can't prove that, but it was him."

"It was," Dax agreed. "I don't see how you could ever prove it, not with certainty — not definitively. But it was him. How will you handle that?"

"You said you needed the men back tomorrow," Paige began.

"If you need them, you can keep them one more day but after that I will need them back for Tuesday training. We can discuss further scheduling after that."

"I could use them tomorrow," Paige admitted. "I want Matt to go with me back to Monroe and I should have the DNA results back by tomorrow. It's Lakisha. I can't notify the family without proof, but it's her."

"I agree with that as well," Dax pulled into the parking lot and shut off the car. "I'll talk to the men before we eat. See if they want to stick. They won't bail, but I'd like to give them that option."

"That's fine," she knew they wouldn't bail. Cops had a habit of seeing things through. It was the reason they were all working on their day off.

"You do realize, after all the calls you made today and yesterday, the media is going to learn about this," Dax warned.

"I'm hoping they won't put it together," Paige admitted. "But yeah, we're going to be invaded again."

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“Who won’t put it together? The media or the people you spoke to?” Dax asked.

“Both, I guess,” Paige admitted.

“That’s what I love about you,” Dax laughed. “You’re such an optimist. If only I could join you in that world of unicorns and rainbows.”

“Shut up,” Paige scowled.

“Reporters aren’t stupid,” Dax continued. “If that woman you just spoke to doesn’t put this all together I’ll be shocked. She told you she thought she saw Bundy and you were asking about a night that a girl went missing. It doesn’t take a whole lot of brain power to put that together.”

“I’ll call Jericho,” Paige relented. “Let’s order, then I’ll make the call.”

“Good plan,” Dax settled onto a chair. He glanced around the table. “Lunch is on me today. Consider it a small thank you for your sacrifice.”

The men cheered. Paige returned, frowning.

“What now?” Dax asked the instant she settled in next to him.

“Jericho is on his way,” Paige sighed. “I told him I had everything under control, but he insisted.”

Dax glanced behind him and got the attention of the waitress. “Could we add one more chair, Sheriff Walters will be joining us.”

“I’ll take care of it,” she rushed off to find an empty chair.

“You know what I love about you?” Paige asked Dax.

“Everything?”

“Well, there is that,” Paige agreed. “But you always just go with the flow. Nothing seems to faze you. I say Jericho is on the way, you shrug and get another chair.”

“Thank you,” Dax stood and took the empty chair from the waitress, positioning it next to Paige.

Jericho joined them and they had a lively and relaxing lunch. Once it was over, they all headed back to the office to work on more phone calls.

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Monday afternoon at precisely thirteen twenty three, the first media call came in. Margie referred them to the media liaison from the District Attorney's office. After that, the phones went nuts.

"Ignore them," Jericho told Margie. "James put out a press release and told every network from here to Timbuctoo how to reach his office for a statement. They're just trying to subvert the system and scoop their competitors."

"What if it's important?" Margie argued.

"I guess they'll have to call the emergency line," Jericho shrugged. "Anything really important and they'll call 911."

"I guess," Margie didn't like letting the phone ring, but she also didn't want to talk to another reporter.

Paige was in the conference room, trying to organize the information in a logical, easy to understand manner when her cell phone rang. She glanced at the display and answered immediately.

"Results are in," Ann from the lab informed her. "It's a match. Your victim is Nakisha Fierro. There's no doubt the DNA found on the items you provided are a definite match to the skeletal remains you brought in the other day."

"Thank you," she hung up and dropped into her chair.

"Well?" Lovato demanded.

"That was the lab," Paige looked up. "It's a match. We located our victim. Nakisha Fierro has been located."

"Now you have to tell her sister," Morgan realized. "Do you think she'll be relieved or devastated?"

"Probably a little of both," Matt provided. "Losing Nakisha devastated that family but knowing — actually knowing your sister was killed by Ted Bundy... that's going to be hard to digest."

"There's another problem," Paige admitted. "We can't conclusively say she was killed by Bundy. We can only present the evidence, explain our findings, and tell her we are fairly certain it was Bundy and we will be inactivating the case. Then once Brook is finished with her analysis of the bones, we can turn them over to the family so they can have a proper burial. It's all we can do at this point."

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“You don’t think that will be enough?” Miller asked. “I mean, you have a room full of cops with varying degrees of experience and every one of us came to the same conclusion. That has to count for something.”

“I believe it will,” Matt told the room. “Now that we have the results and we’ve contacted everyone on the list, what’s our next step?”

Paige focused on him. “We take the results back to Aurora and Ben. Then, we request a final interview. Once we’re confident Aurora has answered all the questions she can, provided all the details she knows, we run her through it. After that, the only thing left is notification once the lab is finished with their analysis and they release everything to the family... well, actually a mortuary. We can’t release human remains to a family.”

“I’ll update James,” Jericho announced and left the room. He had only gone a few steps when he stopped. “Paige, take Matt out and interview the sister. Let’s get this closed out as soon as possible. She’s waited long enough to know what happened that night.”

“Alright,” Paige turned to Matt. “You started this, it’s only fair that you finish it. The rest of you don’t have to wait. If you want to head back to the training center, I can drop Matt off when we’re finished.”

“We’ll stay and try to organize everything,” Barnes decided. “If we get finished before you get back, we’ll take the van over to the training center.”

The room was silent for several seconds as Paige and Matt gathered their things and left the room. Paige was almost to the door when she heard one of the men, Axel Smith maybe, declare “holy freaking cow, we solved a Ted Bundy murder.”

“I still want that tree,” Lovato stood. “And I’m going to convince Jericho we should have it before someone else discovers it and the thing mysteriously disappears.”

“We could deem it evidence,” Chris Barnes suggested. “Yeah, it’s evidence and therefore must stay here, at the Sheriff’s Office, until the case is closed.”

Paige and Matt pulled into the driveway but both of them just sat there. Finally, Paige turned to Matt. “You ready for this?”

“No,” Matt pushed open his door. “But, let’s go handle it anyway.”

The instant Aurora opened the door, she knew. You could see it on her face. “Ben?” she called out. “I need you in the sitting room.”

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Ben appeared and escorted his wife to a chair.

“First,” Paige held out the box. “I want to return this to you. We only used what we needed.”

“We don’t have the official paperwork on the DNA yet,” Matt added. “We have the official word, but not the paperwork.”

“The lab called me personally,” Paige provided. “It was a match.”

Aurora gasped and gripped her husband’s hand even tighter. “I thought I was prepared,” she cleared her throat, then accepted the handkerchief Ben handed her. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Matt assured her. “We understand this is an emotional time for you. You take whatever time you need.”

“I wanted to let you know,” Paige continued. “Right away. I didn’t want to wait another day or two for the actual report before I gave you the news.”

“What happens now?” Ben wondered. “Can we have access to the remains so we can give Nakisha a proper funeral?”

“Eventually,” Paige looked at Aurora. “Our forensic anthropologist isn’t finished with her examination and analysis of the bones. Once she has concluded her assessment and evaluation, she’ll release everything to the mortuary of your choice. Obviously all we have are skeletal remains. You’ll want to have a closed casket.”

Aurora frowned. There was something these two cops weren’t telling them.

“Aurora,” Matt began. “Do you think you’re up for an official interview?”

“Why?” Ben asked.

“Now that we know who the victim is,” Matt answered. “We would like to get as much information as we can from Aurora. We need to know everything you can tell us.”

“You already have the report,” Ben insisted. “That should be enough.”

“It’s not,” Paige answered. “There are some additional facts we need to share with you. Before we do that, we need to interview Aurora and find out if there’s anything she can remember that she hasn’t told us or that may not be included in the original report.”

“Do you know who did this?” Aurora asked quietly.

“We think we do,” Matt affirmed. “Can you run us through what you remember?”

“I don’t —” Ben began.

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“It’s alright, Ben,” Aurora put her hand on his arm. “Let me do this. Let me try to close out this chapter so we can put the past where it belongs — behind us. It’s dominated too many years of my life. Let’s put this behind us and try to move forward.”

“If that’s what you want,” Ben took her hand again.

“Do you want to ask me questions,” Aurora asked Matt. “Or should I just tell you what I remember?”

“Why don’t you start and I’ll stop you if I need you to clarify anything,” Matt suggested.

“Alright,” Aurora closed her eyes, inhaled a deep breath, then focused on Matt as she exhaled. “Like I said...”

“Let me start the recording first,” Paige suggested.

“Oh, right,” Aurora nodded.

Paige turned on the recorder, went through the details, citing the date, the time and the case number then turned it over to Matt.

“Aurora, go ahead and relay what you remember about that day. The day your sister Nakisha went missing.”

“It was November twenty-first, nineteen seventy-four,” Aurora began. “It was cold that day. I remember it was a windy day, but we didn’t have any snow. I remember that because Kisha didn’t wear her winter boots. She said she didn’t need them to attend the concert because she didn’t have to walk through snow, and she’d be inside.”

“Nakisha was attending a concert,” Matt prompted. “Did she go alone?”

“Yes,” Aurora settled a little. They already covered this part. “There was a guy she liked. I don’t remember his name. She noticed him, in her English class, months earlier. She desperately wanted to get his attention and he finally noticed her. He invited her to the concert at the college, but admitted he had a class that night and it let out just before the concert was scheduled to start. He asked if she could meet him at the library and then they’d head over together. Kisha agreed. She didn’t mind. She had a reliable car and she was used to driving in the winter weather. Plus, like I said the forecast wasn’t calling for snow.”

“So, she took some time to get ready,” Matt asked.

“Yes,” Aurora smiled. “She was frantic, trying to pick just the right outfit, apply her makeup so it looked perfect, select shoes that looked good, but fit the season... just typical girls stuff when they’re preparing for an important date.”

“Did she talk to any friends or family before she left?” Paige asked.

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“Yes,” Aurora nodded. “She called our Aunt Skylar several times. They were close. Skylar was the youngest and mom was the oldest. There were oh... I forget, nine years difference in their age. So, I’d guess Skylar was in her thirties at the time.”

“And how old was your sister?” Matt asked.

“Twenty-one,” Aurora answered immediately. “She had boyfriends before but I never saw her this excited over a boy before. I think she really liked this guy and she wanted the night to be perfect. Aunt Skylar was the last person to talk to Kisha. I helped her for a while, but I left about an hour before she did. I was meeting some of my friends to have a girl’s night. I was fifteen at the time so none of us could drive, yet. I walked to my friend, Lydia’s house and was supposed to spend the night. When Kisha didn’t come home, my parents panicked and drove over to make me go home.”

“Okay,” Matt looked at Paige, not sure what else she wanted to know. Then he remembered the necklace. “Can you describe what your sister was wearing that night?”

“Oh, let me think,” Aurora focused on the picture prominently displayed on the mantel. “Looking back, the styles were pretty silly back then. But if I recall, she wore a pair of orange bell-bottom slacks with a flowery button-down shirt and pair of yellow and black platform shoes that she loved. She always wore her hair long and straight, parted down the middle. Some of the girls wore pins to pull their hair out of their face, but Kisha didn’t like them so she usually wore it without headbands or braids or anything. She didn’t like to wear earrings because her friends all wore those big loops and she said they hurt her ears. The one thing she always wore was a silver necklace my father gave her on her eighteenth birthday. It had a little heart pendant with intricate carving on the front and it was smooth silver on the back. Sometimes she wore a ring of stacked bracelets around her left wrist, but I can’t remember if she had any that night.”

“Is there anything else you want to add?” Paige asked.

“I can’t think of anything,” Aurora considered for a moment. “No, most of my strongest memories are after that day. I have good memories before, but our world changed the day Kisha disappeared.”

Paige concluded the interview and shut off the tape. “Now, I have some things to tell you. I need to warn you, they’re going to be difficult to hear.”

“I need to know,” Aurora gripped Ben’s hand.

“I know you do,” Paige understood the need, better than most. She wasn’t sure Aurora understood what she was asking, though.

“You’re going to hear things,” Paige began. “The media has already picked up on this story so you will hear things — unpleasant things, if you turn on the news over the next few days.”

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“What kind of unpleasant things?” Ben demanded.

“We believe your sister was murdered by a notorious serial killer,” Paige provided.

“Ted Bundy did kill Kisha,” Aurora whispered.

“You suspected Bundy?” Paige asked.

“Our family talked about it,” Aurora admitted. “We knew girls had gone missing in other parts of the state during that time. We knew a lot of them were abducted from colleges, at various events just like Kisha. Mom wouldn’t discuss it, but I talked to Aunt Skylar. Bundy’s picture was everywhere in the eighties when he was executed, and the stories were on every channel. Skylar was the one to suggest it, but I always thought it made sense.”

“Was it Bundy?” Ben knew what that could mean for them. Rory wanted this all to be over, but the media would hound them until they got their story.

“We believe it was,” Paige admitted.

“Can you tell me why?” Aurora asked. “Or are the details too horrific?”

“Some of them are,” Paige warned. “I need to know how much you want to know.”

“I—” she looked at Ben.

“As much as we need to know so we’re prepared,” Ben decided. “Nothing more. It’s bad enough to know that monster killed Nakisha. Neither of us need to hear the gory, disturbing parts of the case.”

“There is one thing you need to know,” Paige hesitated. “When we discovered the remains, the grave looked like an animal had been digging up the bones.”

“She’s not all there,” Ben realized. He was trying to remember the details of the Bundy murders. “Was her skull missing?”

Paige glanced at Aurora then focused on Ben. “Yes.”

“Oh my,” Aurora’s hand shot to her mouth as she gasped. “He decapitated her.”

“If he did,” Paige reached out and took Aurora’s hand. “She was already dead by then. I know it’s horrible, but you need to know we can’t conclusively say it was him and if it was, she didn’t feel it.”

“Alright,” Aurora swallowed. “That helps. Did he... I know his pattern but was the assault brutal like some of the others. If I remember correctly, they were all assaulted but some were violent and just horrible.”

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“We can’t know that,” Paige glanced at Ben then looked back at Aurora. “There’s just no way to know at this point. We did find damage to several ribs, which is also consistent with Bundy. It was typical for him to physically assault his victims as well. I can stop,” Paige told her when Aurora closed her eyes.

“No, continue,” she opened her eyes. “I need to know and I want to hear it all at once.”

“Is that what led you to believe it was Bundy?” Ben asked.

“Partially,” Paige ran them through the injuries they could detect on the remains, the lack of clothing, the eyewitness accounts that described a man with a broken arm and the timing. Bundy was in the area when Nakisha vanished from a college on her way to a well-publicized event.”

“What happens now?” Ben asked. “I agree, everything points to Ted Bundy. But, he’s dead. What happens with the case now?”

“Since we can’t prove definitively that it was Bundy,” Paige explained. “We will inactivate the case but leave it open. That way, if we discover something that points in another direction, we can bring it back out and work it. I have to tell you that we had an entire task force working on this case. There were eleven full-time investigators — our conclusion was unanimous. Confidence is high that your sister was killed by Ted Bundy. I don’t know if that helps or makes things worse but that’s the conclusion we all came to.”

“I understand,” Aurora leaned into Ben when he wrapped an arm around her. “I think it helps, or will eventually. Right now, it’s just a lot to take in.”

“Is there any way to protect our identity from the media?” Ben asked. “I know that’s not entirely in your control, but we’d appreciate anything you can do.”

“I’ll do my best,” Paige promised. “But, the media is resourceful, and I can’t guarantee they won’t try to contact you directly. Just remember, you don’t have to answer the phone.”

“Whatever you can do would be appreciated,” Ben said in understanding. “Now, if you don’t mind I think my wife needs some time to digest everything she’s learned today.”

“We’ll let you grieve in private,” Matt stood. “Again, I am so sorry for your loss.”

“If you need anything,” Paige pulled out a card and handed it to Ben. “Call anytime. If I can help, I will.”

“Thank you,” Ben walked them to the door.

Once they reached the car, Paige turned to Matt. “So, it’s back to training for you.”

“I don’t mind,” Matt decided and settled into the seat. “I followed this one to its natural conclusion and it’s time to move on. I wanted to say thank you. To you for helping me accept

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the assistance Ollie gave me and to Nathan for stepping up and calling the training academy to get me in. I also want to thank Dax and the others, but I'll do that in person. I'm not sure I'll see General Porter again. Would you tell him I'm sincerely grateful for his assistance the next time you talk to him."

"I will," Paige assured him. "But it's not necessary. What's next for you?"

"Well," Matt glanced out the window. "If I pass this course, I plan to apply for a bigger department. Des Moines has a couple slots they need to fill and I hope this course will help me land one of them."

"And the case," Paige smiled. "Be sure to mention the case and if they ask for references, I hope you list me as one of them."

"You'd be okay with that?"

"More than okay," Paige assured him. "I'd be offended if you didn't."

"Thanks for that, too," Matt turned and focused out the window. The two of them rode in silence the rest of the way back to Manti — each lost in their own thoughts.

Paige pulled into the parking lot of the training center and spotted Dax and the rest of the group on the side lawn, engaged in some kind of hand-to-hand battle. She got as close to group as she could before she shut off the engine.

Matt jumped out, turned and hesitated. "Will I see you again?"

"I'll make a point to stop by on the last day of class if I haven't seen you before then," Paige promised.

"Good," Matt grinned. "Later then." He ran forward and was surrounded by the entire class.

The cops flanked him in a protective way that telegraphed a warning to the others. Paige grinned. Mission accomplished. Matt wasn't only accepted, he'd made some new friends for life.