

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Packaged Deal
Season 5, Episode 8

by:

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“Hey, Dax,” Zeus settled into the chair across from his oldest and best friend.

“Hey, what’s up?” Dax frowned; Zee looked nervous.

“I was wondering,” he began. “Well, since we’ve slowed down and the holidays are just around the corner, would you mind if I took a few days and headed out of town?”

“No,” Dax frowned and settled back against the chair. “You don’t work for me, Zee. If you want a few days off, take them. But, will you tell me where you’re going?”

Zeus sighed. “I still think of you as the boss.”

“Well, stop.”

“Easier said,” Zeus glanced at the door, slid forward and locked eyes with Dax. “I want to take Carmen somewhere special for a few days. I want to... it’s time.”

Dax grinned. “Passed time, buddy. She’s going to say yes. Well, if you bought her the most expensive ring in the joint, she’ll jump at the chance to make this permanent.”

“I hope so,” Zeus focused out the window. “I know what I want but Carmen — she’s more, I don’t know, carefree and relaxed about these things. What if she says no?”

“Then you have a romantic weekend away and come back ready to work,” Dax sobered. “I don’t think she’ll say no — In fact, I’m confident enough about this that I’d place a bet — and you know I don’t bet on anything. But, as you know, Paige said no. Sort of. It was a blow, I won’t lie about that, but I realized if she wasn’t ready, I could wait for her. You’ll wait for Carmen. The woman is in love — she’ll never find a better man, and she knows that. If she isn’t there yet, take a step back, regroup, and ask again later when you’re sure she is ready.”

“Sound advice but—”

“But it feels impossible,” Dax shrugged. “I’ve been there, I understand. Just have faith and, no matter what happens, remember how much you love her and don’t forget she loves you, too.”

“Thanks, Dax,” Zeus stood. “I’ll get out of your hair. I need to finish making those adjustments we discussed on the lesson plan for next month before I go.”

“Go now,” Dax disagreed. “There’s time for that later. I’m nearly finished with this,” he pointed to the paperwork on his desk. “I’ll skim through what you’ve got this afternoon. Go finalize the plans, pack, and convince your woman she deserves to be pampered for the next few days. Then, you get to call Porter and convince him you’re right.”

“I...”

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“Didn’t think of that, did you?” Dax laughed. “Go, I’ll deal with Nathan.”

“I owe you,” Zeus called as he disappeared down the hall.

“I’m going to hold you to that one,” Dax mumbled. He jotted down a few notes so he wouldn’t forget where he was going with the changes and dialed his favorite General. He should probably complete his own plans and see when the Porter’s would arrive for the holidays.

Paige was just climbing back into her vehicle when Margie called over the radio.

“Can you handle a theft call?” Margie wondered. “Gage is checked out on a domestic and he’s going to be awhile.”

“Sure,” Paige snapped her seatbelt and stared the engine. “Send me the address and show me en route.”

Paige took less than two minutes to arrive. She climbed from her car and was halfway to the front porch when the door flew open and an angry woman marched toward her.

“It took six weeks for that package to arrive,” she greeted. “Six weeks. I’ll never get another one in time for Christmas!”

“I understand,” Paige tried to sound sympathetic. “Could we move to the porch, or inside to a table where I can get some information from you?”

“Fine,” the woman turned and stomped away.

“Great,” Paige mumbled and followed. She found the woman sitting impatiently in a chair on the front porch. She settled into the chair next to her and pulled out a notepad. “I understand you had a package stolen, but can you walk me through it? What was stolen? Do you have security cameras? Did you see anyone that didn’t belong in the neighborhood? That sort of thing. And, before I leave, I’ll need your personal information for the report.”

The woman relayed her name, date of birth, phone number and address. “It’s not worth anything, not to anyone outside our family.”

“Okay,” Paige sat back. “What did they take?”

“A quilt,” Nancy sighed. “Boyd, that’s my husband, his mother is in a care center. Gifts are difficult because she doesn’t have room for anything really and figurines or bobbles get taken by the other guests. Things disappear. I don’t think there’s any ill-will, just childlike behavior, you know?”

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“I do,” Paige nodded.

“So, I saw this ad for personalized quilts,” Nancy continued. “I sent a bunch of pre-cut squares and they put it together into a nice, warm quilt Nina could put on her bed. I got the material from her place. It was old stuff. The jersey Boyd wore in Little League. Ann’s dress — the one she wore at her first piano recital. Things like that.”

“Okay,” Paige assumed Ann was a sister or granddaughter. “So, you gathered up some personal family memorabilia and sent it off to be made into a nice quilt for mom-in-law. Was that the only thing stolen?”

“Yes,” Nancy glanced away. “I had to order it weeks ago, and I finally received an email saying they had shipped it with the approximate date of arrival. I’ve been watching every day. I had just pulled into the school to pick my son up when I got a text notifying me they had delivered the package. I was so excited and couldn’t wait to see how it turned out. When I got home, there was nothing there. I called the company and the person I spoke to said the driver made a note he put it on the front porch next to a large bush. As you can see, he had the house right. They told me they couldn’t do anything without a police report. Even with that, all they could do was make another one, but I’d have to send them the new material, and it definitely will not arrive before Christmas. Now what am I supposed to give Boyd’s mother?”

Good question, Paige thought. “I’ll do my best to locate the package, but I have to be honest, there is a high likelihood your quilt is gone for good. We may never recover it. I promise I will try, but you need to understand it may never be recovered. I’m sorry.”

“I already knew that,” Nancy admitted. “That’s why I’m so upset. I have more, other clothes I cut into squares and didn’t use. I could order another, but it wouldn’t get here in time.”

Paige stood and held out a card with the case number written on the back. “That should be all you need for a refund and to file a claim with the delivery company. They can call me if they have any questions. Otherwise, I’m sorry you have to deal with this. Call me if you think of anything else.”

Nancy watched the cop leave, sighed, and stepped into the house. She had snacks to make and she would need to find another present for Nina.

“That was amazing,” Carmen reached out and took Zeus’ hand. “I’ve never been to a show in Vegas. It’s a lot like New York, but different. Thank you so much for dragging me away. I needed a break. With Nathan clearing things up so he can head to Utah for Thanksgiving, I was sure he’d say no.”

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Zeus leaned in and kissed her temple. “Let’s head back to the hotel. I have something I want to give you.”

“What?” Carmen frowned. It wasn’t an anniversary, or her birthday, or anything. What could Zeus want to give her?

“It’s a surprise,” Zeus smiled. He held open the large glass door and waited for Carmen to enter the casino. He guided her to the elevator, ushered her in and waited impatiently for the tiny box to reach their floor. Once the door slid open, he pulled her down the hallway, swiped the key, then opened the door to their suite. He was anxious, worried, and his stomach was doing this fluttering thing that he’d never experienced before.

Carmen stepped inside, halted, then whirled around and wrapped her arms around Zeus. “We’re having room service. Just you, me, and something that smells incredible.” She leaned in and kissed him.

Zeus took her hand and led her to the chair. “I wanted tonight to be enchanting and memorable.”

“It is,” Carmen reached for the tail of a shrimp that was swimming in butter. She slid it into her mouth and smiled. “You ordered everything I love. It’s all so amazing, I don’t know where to start.”

Zeus dropped to a knee in front of her chair and took both of her hands. “Then let me start.”

“Zeus?” Carmen asked, a little niggle of panic formed in the pit of her stomach.

“I love you, Carmen Fennelly, and I think you love me, too.”

“I do,” Carmen frowned. Note to self — There will be no saying *I do* while vacationing in Vegas.

“Will you make me the happiest man alive and agree to marry me?” he pulled out an expensive diamond ring with tiny, smaller diamonds encasing it. It sparkled and shimmered in the light when he flipped open the lid and held it out to her.

“I—”

“I know it might be unexpected,” Zeus gripped her hand tighter. “I know we didn’t discuss this first, but it’s time, Carmen. You know it’s time to take that next step.”

“Yes,” she grinned and held out her hand.

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Zeus slipped the ring on her finger, let out a long sigh of relief, then plucked her out of the chair, lifted her off her feet, and held her against him. “I was so afraid you’d say no,” he whispered next to her ear.

Carmen closed her eyes, trying to hide the fact she almost did.

Paige climbed from her vehicle, glad to be home. The days were getting shorter, but her workdays were getting longer. 'Tis the season. She draped her bag over her shoulder and headed for the front door. She needed food before she settled in for a relaxing night watching stray dogs and a few cats roam the neighborhood. She hated watching video from home security cameras, but it couldn't be helped. It might be the only way to find their porch pirates.

She was mentally organizing the rest of her evening as she ascended the stairs.

“You look annoyed,” Carmen said from the large swing at the far end of the patio.

Paige jumped, mumbled under her breath, and focused on Carmen. She was so caught up in silently complaining about the rest of her evening, she hadn't even seen her friend sitting there. “You look,” Paige hesitated to consider. She immediately spotted the large diamond resting on Carmen's left hand. “Engaged and unhappy.”

Carmen shrugged. “Engaged and trying to be happy about it.”

Paige slowly moved forward, lowered her bag to the small table and settled into a chair. “Let me guess,” she smiled, remembering the mess she'd made of things when Dax proposed. “You got caught up in the charm and excitement of the moment, said yes, and now that you're home, away from the amazing man that wants to commit an entire lifetime to you — being Carmen Fennelly — your feet have started to itch, and you're trying to decide how fast you can run?”

“My feet don't itch,” Carmen frowned. “But my head's about to explode.”

Paige reached out and took Carmen's hand in sympathy. “I'm the last person who should give advice when it comes to engagements and appropriate responses.”

“I know,” Carmen sighed. “What if that's the reason I said yes? I saw what you put Dax through, I don't want Zeus to feel — unwanted.”

“I deserve that,” Paige decided. “Is Zeus unwanted?”

“I—”

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“Don’t answer with your head,” Paige warned. “Answer with your heart. Do you love the adorable maniac?”

Carmen smiled. “I do. And there I go again. I swore I wouldn’t use those words anymore, not out loud. Well, not unless I—”

“When you stand at the front of a church and accept a life, and an uncertain future, with a wonderful man,” Paige finished. “Deep down, you know you love Zeus. You know he’s the best man you’ve ever met. You also know you will never love anyone the way you love Travis Boudin.”

“I think I know that,” Carmen corrected, surprised Paige was using Zeus’ actual name.

“You know it,” Paige said with confidence. “You’ve just perfected the art of running.”

“I’m not running,” Carmen insisted. “I’m sitting right here, aren’t I?”

“And yet,” Paige grinned. “Your feet are starting to itch.”

“I can see this was a mistake,” Carmen moved to stand.

“I’m not trying to upset you,” Paige tightened her grip on Carmen’s arm. “Don’t go. You know I’m right and you need to think about this. What has you worried? Specifically?”

“I love him,” Carmen settled back against the swing. “I know that. He’s so — well, everything I’ve ever wanted in a man. It just feels too perfect. I wake up every morning wondering when my world is going to collapse around me. I go to sleep at night, worried about what the following day will bring. My work, our work, you know I’ve seen things, helped stop things that are unimaginably—”

“Horrible,” Paige nodded. “We both have. Which is the reason we need to grab onto happiness every chance we get. You know I understand. You know I nearly messed things up with Dax. Don’t let fear stand in the way of being happy, Carmen. Don’t let what happened with Brian complicate or destroy your future. It’s different with Zeus. You know that. You never loved Brian, not this way. You cared for him, you thought about loving him, then he was murdered. You’re mixing up genuine feelings for the feelings you tried to force but never could, and that has you spooked. Zeus isn’t a cop. He’s not in danger that way, and comparing the two is your way of taking a step back because you’re afraid.”

“How did you know?” Carmen wondered. “I mean, truly know that Dax was it for you? When did you realize you wanted to marry him, be with him forever, have the house, the dog and the whole crazy dream?”

“Immediately after I messed things up,” Paige considered. “We were standing there, in the dark, deserted hallway of the hospital, and once the words escaped my lips, I saw how much I

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hurt him. The guilt hit first. Then I was angry — because of my fear, and I turned that anger on him. How dare he try to change something that was so perfect already? How dare he try to move forward when I was comfortable exactly where we were? Then, I realized I might lose him because of fear and stupidity. I faced my fears and said yes. Then there was the whole second guessing and knowing he was hiding something fiasco. I let my imagination get the better of me, but that was also nerves and part of the fear. I knew that, deep down I knew, and I had to ask myself what my life would be like in five, ten, fifty years without Dax in it. I couldn't imagine it. Then, I asked myself what it would be like if I accepted his love and tried to have faith in what we had built together. Could we also build a permanent life together? I saw that, almost immediately, and I wanted it. Marrying Dax was the best decision I ever made. I think the same is true for you and Zeus, but you have to believe that. Maybe you should try to do the same. Be honest with yourself. Can you imagine life without Zeus?"

"No," Carmen stood. "I don't think I can. You're tired and, from the size of that bag, it looks like you have work. I'll let you get to it."

"I'm glad you stopped by," Paige stood. "Sleep on it and if you need to talk, you know where to find me."

"You need any help with that homework?" Carmen paused.

"No," Paige lifted her bag and swung it over her shoulder. "Just a porch pirate stealing packages before the owners can retrieve them. I had two today, Gage had a third. It's that time of year, I suppose."

"Just yell if you need anything," Carmen headed for the stairs.

"You know," Paige called from the front door. "There's one more thing you can add into the plus column if you marry Zeus; technically, I think that makes you a Goddess."

Carmen laughed. "I already am. I'm the Goddess of technology."

"Well," Paige pushed open the door. "There you go. Match made in heaven if I ever saw one."

Carmen waved, climbed behind the wheel, and drove away.

Paige watched her friend leave and hoped Carmen wouldn't struggle with commitment and marriage as much as she had. There was no doubt Zeus was a good man. There was no doubt they were in love. But, for some reason, the idea of settling down had always scared Carmen Fennelly. Paige was pretty sure it could be traced back to her childhood — more precisely, the day her father walked out on his family and never looked back. With a sigh, she dropped everything onto the couch and went to find her husband.

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Paige set her plate into the kitchen sink and, with a deep sigh, headed for the couch to spend the next several hours skimming through video.

Dax rinsed his plate, then hers, and loaded both of them into the dishwasher. He was shaking his head as he left the kitchen. Apparently, Paige thought they had magical housekeeping fairies that swooped in while they slept and cleaned up after her. When he saw she was working, he decided to let it go. “Do you want me to grab my computer and help?”

“What?” Paige glanced up. “That’s okay. You don’t need to spend your time on something like this.”

“I can’t think of a better way to spend my time than sitting with my wife,” Dax settled onto the couch next to her and immediately began rubbing behind her neck. She had about a million knots. “I didn’t ask about Carmen because — well, Zee. Is that what caused all this bottled up tension?”

Paige dropped her head onto the back of the couch. “She’s just — it’s complicated. I don’t know how much she’s talked to Zeus about this, and it’s sensitive.”

“We don’t have to talk about it, Paige.”

“I think we should,” Paige took his hand. “My father died when I was pretty young. It was hard on me but worse on mom. At least, that’s what I told myself. I had to cope because mom needed me. I didn’t really deal with the loss, I just set it aside and got through one day at a time. It was years later when I realized that when dad died, it was still a form of leaving and I struggled to deal with all the emotions. So, I sort of understand Carmen. Her father left — voluntarily. One minute, Carmen was his favorite princess, the next — poof, he was gone. She didn’t hear from him for years. Then, one day, out of the blue — he surfaced. Carmen thinks he found out she was a hacker and wanted to use that for some selfish scheme he cooked up.”

“What did she do?” Dax continued to rub her neck and shoulders.

Paige grinned. “She walked out on him.”

“Good for her,” Dax smiled in approval.

“She says she got over it,” Paige frowned. “I don’t think she really did. I thought I was over my father’s death, too. It wasn’t until I connected with Nathan, talked to him about dad, and developed a genuine, strong relationship with him, that I knew I still had unresolved issues. He helped me work through them and still—”

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“When I proposed, you panicked.”

“Yeah,” Paige sat forward. “I’m sorry about that. Since you’re stuck with me for life, that one was it for us. It was the one and only proposal either of us get for an entire lifetime, and I spoiled it.”

Dax took her hand in his. “Now that I’ve had time to think about it, I have to admit my timing was off. I took you by surprise, gave you a shock, and then walked away when it didn’t work out the way I hoped it would. Let’s put that behind us and focus on the wedding — that was pretty amazing.”

“It was perfect,” she rested her head on his shoulders. “Do you have any idea how much I’m dreading watching this video tonight?”

Dax pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I’ll get my computer and we can watch it together. If I see anything, a car drive by, a kid walking a dog, a cat darting across the road, anything — I’ll point it out and you can take a look. You know we’ll mainly be fast forwarding through with nothing to see.”

“I—” she was going to object but changed her mind. “Alright, and then tomorrow night we’ll settle back here and have a movie night. You get to pick.”

“And popcorn, with lots and lots of butter?”

Paige smiled. “It’s a date.”

Dax returned with his own laptop, silently settled in next to her, and began to skim through video. They sat like that for hours, watching the world fly by on triple speed and making small talk when they could. At one point, they paused to laugh at two boys and a rambunctious dog who were clearly up to no good. Then, they moved on and absently watched the world go by one frame at a time. One hour turned into four and Paige considered stopping for the night. She was about to suggest they quit when she suddenly sat up straighter, rewound her video, slowed it down to normal speed, and watched it carefully frame by frame.

“Did you find something?” Dax wondered, stopping his own video to watch hers.

“I don’t know,” Paige watched the video carefully, then rewound it and watched again. There wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, not really. The car was just driving down the road, same as all the other cars, so why did it slow down? And where did it go? She brought up the second tape, the one on the house at the end of the street. As she watched, she paid close attention to the time. One minute, then two passed, then three. The vehicle never appeared on the second camera system.

“Okay,” Dax caught on. “Maybe they live in the area. Maybe they turned and went in the opposite direction or took a side road to see a friend. I couldn’t make out the plate, did you?”

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“No,” Paige minimized that clip and pulled up another. She slid the bar to the time she wanted and then sat back and watched. Again, one minute passed, then two. She was about to give up when the same vehicle came into view but made a left turn onto a sideroad and disappeared. She skimmed through the rest of the footage from that area, but the car was gone.

“Talk to me,” Dax draped his arm over the back of the couch. “There’s something I’m missing because to me, that just looks like a car driving through a neighborhood — coincidence at best.”

Paige grinned. “Coincidence is hooley.”

“Now, you sound like Duncan Havilland,” Dax frowned. He’d heard that saying from the racecar driving cop a million times since he’d met him.

“It’s one of his favorites,” Paige agreed. “But he’s not wrong.”

“So,” Dax absently rubbed a lock of her hair through his thumb and forefinger. “Now what?”

“Now,” Paige jotted down some notes and closed down her computer. “We set all of this aside and head upstairs. I’ll drive through the area tomorrow and see if I can locate the vehicle.”

“What if somebody owns one,” Dax shut down his own computer and stood. “But they already left for work?”

“I have a few systems I can run, see if I find a vehicle that matches in that area,” she also stood. “If not, Carmen offered to help, and I’ll see what she can find.”

“That’s a lot of work for a vehicle that might be stopping to pick up little Johnny from piano lessons,” Dax took her hand and headed for the stairs.

“That’s the job,” she wrapped her arms around his neck once they reached their bedroom. “This is personal,” she leaned in and gave him a quick, gentle kiss. “Thanks for the help.”

“I’m pretty fond of personal,” he scooped her up and tossed her onto the bed.

“Thanks for agreeing to meet me,” Dax slid onto the chair across from Jericho. He needed coffee. Helping Paige skim through video last night had put him behind. He rose with the sun and arrived at the office early. He needed to finalize the details on a new donation some wealthy trust fund kid wanted to give the training center — custom made with about a million strings. Most of which Dax rejected.

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“You look like you need this more than I do,” Jericho slid a cup of coffee across the table. “Sally should be back with cream and sugar.”

Dax took a long sip of coffee and tried to relax.

“So,” Jericho studied Dax for several seconds. “What’s up?”

The waitress approached the table with a second coffee mug and a full pot. She topped off Dax’s mug, poured one for Jericho, and tried to hand Dax a menu. “No,” Dax held up a hand. “Just the coffee.”

“You look haggard, kid,” Jericho observed. “Maybe you should eat something.”

“I’m fine,” Dax settled back. “Things are a little hectic but manageable. Once we get through this upcoming session, I’ll relax, and I’ll be refreshed just in time for the holidays. Which is actually what I wanted to speak to you about.”

“If you’re here to finagle time off for Paige,” Jericho began.

“Wouldn’t think of it,” Dax cut in. “As you know DMA budgets for several scholarships throughout the year. We’ve already completed the roster for our last course, and we ended up with a little extra. The boys and I were talking, and we thought we could use that money to help our neighbors, maybe help spread some Christmas cheer.”

“Like a sub-for-Santa type thing?” Jericho considered.

“Not exactly,” Dax leaned forward. “I casually mentioned this to Paige a while back, but she said it was above her paygrade. You, in coordination with the rest of your crew, would be in a better position to know who needs the help. I started thinking about those kids, the ones Paige rescued after their mother abandoned them. She said they’re thriving now, but it all started with a shoplifting call. Your department sees things, your deputies recognize when someone is struggling and could use a little extra help, but most of the time you’re limited in what you can do for them.”

“Why didn’t Paige just handle this herself?” Jericho wondered.

“She said she could,” Dax admitted. “But she also said she’s just one deputy, and it would be better if everyone had a chance to toss in a name. She’s not the only one that deals with single mothers that can’t afford a Christmas tree or a father on medical leave that won’t be able to afford presents for his kids this year. If giving us the personal information makes you uncomfortable, we can provide the funds — or the gifts — and someone from your office can deliver them. It just seems like a good time for DMA to give back to the community that gave all of us — and our business — such a warm welcome.”

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“Let me think on it,” Jericho decided. “It’s a good idea. Give me a few days to work out logistics.”

“I can do that,” Dax took another sip of coffee, then glanced up when a woman approached their table.

“Jericho? Jericho Walters?” she asked in surprise. “Is that really you?”

“It is,” Jericho studied the woman. She looked familiar, but he couldn’t place her.

“And, you don’t remember me,” she said in understanding. “Well, that’s disappointing.”

“I’m sorry,” Jericho continued to study her. “I meet a lot of people in my line of work.”

“Right,” she said, trying not to sound too disappointed. “It’s just — well, I always wondered if you were the one that got away.”

Jericho frowned, what did that mean?

“Anyway,” she cleared her throat, clearly embarrassed. “I’m Harper Wellington. We attended high school together for a few months. Actually, we went to prom together just before my family had to move again. I always wondered about you. I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“That’s right,” Jericho was beginning to remember. “Your family bounced around a lot. Didn’t your father’s job keep you on the move?” Jericho asked.

“It did,” Harper smiled. “I realize now I had an amazing childhood full of adventure. At the time, I dreamed of staying in the same place for one entire school year. Funny how your perspective changes. Anyway, I’m glad I bumped into you, Jericho.”

“It’s good to see you again, Harper. Are you visiting family for the holidays?” Jericho wondered.

“Oh, no,” she smiled. “I actually moved here last month. I always had fond memories of Utah. When the opportunity came to relocate, I jumped on it immediately. I think Manti is even more charming than Nephi.”

Jericho grinned. “I enjoyed growing up in Nephi; but I have to admit, I have become partial to Manti.”

“Well,” Harper took a step back. “I’ve taken up enough of your time. Sorry to interrupt your—” she looked at Dax and didn’t know how to finish.

“Coffee break,” Dax gave her a friendly smile then focused on Jericho. He was watching her closely as she walked away. “Experiencing a little nostalgia?”

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“I was a junior that year,” Jericho was lost in memories. “Harper was a sophomore but, at the time, she seemed mysterious and worldly. When she says her childhood was adventurous, that’s the way I always saw her. It never occurred to any of us she might be unhappy or long for stability.”

“If she just moved here,” Dax glanced toward the corner of the café where Harper was sitting alone. “She probably doesn’t know anyone. You should invite her to Thanksgiving dinner. We have plenty of food and space for one more.”

“Maybe,” Jericho glanced at Harper then back to Dax. “I like your idea. I’ll get back to you in a few days and we’ll discuss the best way to implement it.” He stood and dropped some cash onto the table.

“Jericho,” Dax put a hand on his arm to stop him. “If you don’t invite that lady to dinner before you leave, I’m going to. I think it’s only fair to give you ample warning.”

“Why?” Jericho frowned. “You don’t know her.”

“I was new and alone here once,” Dax shrugged. “She seems interesting and nice enough. She shouldn’t spend the day alone when she could spend it reconnecting with an old friend and making a few new ones.”

Jericho glared at Dax for several seconds. When Dax just silently stared back, Jericho sighed, turned, and headed for Harper’s table.

Dax was still grinning when the stoic Sheriff silently walked out the front door.

Paige sat back, frustrated and annoyed. She needed a break. She rubbed her eyes and tried to think. Continue to watch video of leaves blowing across the lawn or take a drive? Simple decision — drive won by a landslide.

As soon as she pulled into the neighborhood, Paige slowed and studied the area. She drove past her first victim’s home and continued down the path the vehicle she believed was suspicious took. Once she reached the sideroad, the one that didn’t have video, she pulled over and shut down her vehicle. This part, she needed to do on foot.

Paige had walked several blocks up the roadway, turned around and was headed back down the other side when a woman that looked about eighty flagged her down. The elderly woman met her at the top of the driveway.

“Can I help you?” Paige wondered.

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“Oh, yes,” the woman sighed. “I just discovered a theft.”

“Package on the front porch?” Paige wondered.

“Yes, how did you know?” the woman frowned.

“There were other thefts in this area,” Paige admitted, pulling out her notepad to jot down some notes. “Why don’t we head inside? You can relay the details in comfort.”

“Alright,” the woman turned and headed back inside, Paige followed.

“Who do you think did this?” the woman asked.

“I’m working on that,” Paige glanced up. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Oh, Gladys,” she said. “My name is Gladys Chilcott.”

“Can you give me a description of the items stolen? Approximately what time it happened, and any other information you think might help in my investigation.”

Gladys went on to explain the package contained her husband’s medical supplies. She wasn’t in a serious bind. She said, with the police report, she could just place a new order. The delay would be minimal, and Harold always placed the order before he needed it, just in case something was delayed.

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience,” Paige said once she had the details.

“Why would anyone steal Harold’s medical supplies?” Gladys wondered.

“I don’t think they knew what they were stealing,” Paige advised. “I think they just saw the package and decided to take it.

“Well,” Gladys frowned. “That’s just stupid.”

Paige smiled. “I agree. I’ll get this filed and if you remember anything you think might help, call me immediately.” She handed Gladys her card.

“Can I ask what the other victims lost?” Gladys said, reluctantly.

“I don’t think—”

“I just, well it’s Christmas time,” Gladys focused out the window. “If I can help the others, I’d like to. Harold and I — we don’t have a lot, but we could help someone.”

“That’s kind of you,” Paige began. “But the things that disappeared either can’t be replaced or, with a police report, they are already being replaced as we speak.”

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“Somebody lost something priceless?” Gladys wondered.

“To her,” Paige closed her notepad. “She had a handcrafted quilt made from items of clothing that belonged to her family members — things they wore on special occasions. She provided the quilt squares, and a company compiled them into a quilt she planned to give her mother-in-law for Christmas. She’s pretty devastated.”

“Could you give me her name?” Gladys asked.

“I’m afraid that would be unethical,” Paige moved to the door. “It’s thoughtful, but the details are protected.”

“Right,” Gladys considered. “Could you give her my name? That wouldn’t be unethical if I was the one requesting it.”

“Why?” Paige considered and decided there shouldn’t be a problem with that.

“I’d like to contact her,” Gladys straightened. “I’ve made more quilts in my lifetime than I could count. I also have some free time before Christmas. If she can come up with alternate material, I think I could put something together before Christmas and her mother-in-law will still get a nice blanket for the holidays.”

“You can quilt?” Paige asked, amazed.

Gladys laughed. “I would hope so, I’ve been doing it all my life.”

“Then I’ll give Nancy your information,” Paige agreed. “She just might get her Christmas miracle after all.” She stepped onto the front porch and hesitated. “Gladys, do you recognize this car?” She pulled an image she’d taken from the video and held it out.

Gladys took the paper, studied it for several seconds, then handed it back. “The only person I know who owns a silver car that looks like that is Clark’s wife—Ashley.”

“Do you know their last name?” Paige asked.

“Of course,” Gladys frowned. “It’s Vayner.”

“How do you know them?” Paige wondered. “Do they live close by?”

“Close enough,” Gladys studied the picture. “I think they’re up on Chestnut Drive, just a few blocks up and then to the left. Why? You don’t think Ashley did this?”

“If I did?” Paige wanted to get a response.

“I’d say you’re never going to get answers,” Gladys sighed and handed the image back to Paige.

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“Why do you say that?” Paige couldn’t let it drop.

“Ashley is the Relief Society president,” she huffed. “She helps people, she doesn’t steal from them.”

“Relief Society?” Paige asked.

“Yes,” Gladys crossed her arms over her chest, then narrowed her eyes at Paige. “You’re not LDS, are you Sugar? You’re not a Mormon?”

“Oh,” Paige should be used to this question by now. “No, I’m not.”

“Well,” Gladys looked at her in pity. “That’s too bad. The Relief Society is all of the adult women in the church, everyone over eighteen who attends that particular ward. They help people, take them dinner when they’re sick, provide support after the loss of a loved one, arrange for dinners to be delivered to a family after the birth of a child — that sort of thing. With all the good Ashley does, I just can’t take anyone seriously that thinks she’s sneaking around stealing packages off other people’s porch.”

“Well,” Paige held out a hand. “Thank you for your time, Gladys. Just give the medical supply company that case number and they should ship out new supplies immediately. Feel free to give them my number if they need to contact me.”

“Thank you,” Gladys tucked the card into her pocket. “And don’t forget to talk to Nancy. I really can help with that quilt.”

“I’ll let you know what she says,” Paige promised before she climbed into her vehicle and pulled away. She just got another lead. Maybe Gladys Chilcott could dismiss Ashley as a suspect, but Paige wasn’t deterred. She wanted to know all there was to know about Ashley Vayner, wife to Clark Vayner. That should be enough for her to get started.

Paige was sitting at her desk, running a detailed background on Mrs. Ashley Vayner and her husband, Clark when Gage approached.

“We had two more,” he dropped into her visitor’s chair. When he spotted the driver’s license file on Ashley Vayner, he frowned. “Why are you running Mrs. Vayner?”

“Because I think she might be our porch pirate,” Paige punched in the information and hit send. She glanced up when Gage didn’t respond. “What?”

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“Your way off on this one,” Gage decided. “I know her, a little. Everybody knows her. She’s a sweat lady that goes out of her way to help others. That woman is a saint. She wouldn’t steal from all these people — she’d help them.”

“Maybe,” Paige shrugged. “I’ll chase my leads, you chase yours. Oh wait, you can’t because you don’t have any leads.”

Gage smiled, “Actually, I do.”

“Care to share?” Paige wondered.

“If you can pull yourself away from harassing the pure and innocent,” Gage grinned when she scowled. “My latest victim had a good camera system. We spotted a truck, even got a good shot of the plate, the driver was suspicious. I want to head out and talk to him. You available to back me?”

“Absolutely,” Paige gathered up the information on Ashley and shoved it into a folder. She’d pick it up later if Gage’s guy wasn’t the thief.

“Why do you think this is your guy?” Paige asked once they pulled onto the highway.

“He just struck me as suspicious,” Gage shrugged. “He was driving around the neighborhood like he was looking for something and he turned down one road then doubled back and drove past the same houses again. He did it three times before he made a right and disappeared.”

“Okay,” Paige nodded. She couldn’t dismiss the lead, not when she was looking into a woman Gage thought was Mother Teresa on less. The two of them discussed the new cases and the property that was missing as they drove down a narrow sideroad and headed further away from town. Paige studied the area, it was a collection of farmlands, with houses situated off the roadway, and acres of property separating them. She turned to face Gage when he pulled onto the shoulder and parked in front of a modest and ancient home. “Are you sure you have the right address?”

“Positive,” Gage studied the house carefully but couldn’t tell if it was occupied or vacant.

The house itself was neglected. The wood siding was so weathered and faded, some of the panels were nearly white. Large trees surrounded the structure, with bare limbs that hung so low you’d have to duck just to walk to the front door. There were bushes lining the property a few feet from the road — if you could call them that. They too were neglected and seemed to be growing wild, they were so large and out of control they looked like mangled miniature trees. The grass was long gone, in its place was hard packed dirt and some kind of yellow weeds. A picket fence ran along the front of the house. At one time it was probably charming, now it was worn with several of the panels either missing or dangling precariously by one nail.

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Paige studied the fence and wondered if it had started out as the proverbial white. “Should we venture to the front door?”

“The place looks haunted,” Gage sighed. “Let’s go.” He shoved out of the vehicle and waited for Paige to join him. The two of them walked the short distance to the door and knocked loudly. Nothing happened. No dog barked, no curtains rustled, nothing.

“Either nobody is home,” Paige turned to look around, “or the place is vacant.”

“Which only makes this more suspicious,” Gage frowned.

“Let’s take a walk,” Paige motioned to the house across the street. “Maybe the neighbor can shed some light for us.”

The two of them walked across the street and made their way onto the front porch of a small, white home. This house also looked old, but unlike their neighbor, it was clearly well cared for.

The door slowly slid open a few inches and a petite woman peered at them with wide, timid eyes.

“Hi,” Paige said in greeting. “Sorry to bother you, but could we ask you some questions about the house across the street?”

The woman relaxed — a little. “David’s place?”

“David?” Paige pushed.

“Yeah,” the woman frowned. “David Sullivan. He owns that house, the one you asked about.”

“And does he live there?” Paige wondered. “It seems—” she let the sentence hang.

“Oh,” the woman smiled. “Right. Well, David works long hours. He’s a handyman. You know what they say, mechanics never work on their own cars, and carpenters neglect their private homes. David works a lot. He rarely has time for upkeep on his own place.”

“You seem to know him well,” Gage observed. “Do you know what kind of vehicle he drives?”

“Sure,” the woman nodded. “He has a white flatbed truck. He uses it to haul equipment when someone needs yard work or repairs. Has David done something wrong?”

“Why do you ask?” Paige evaded.

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“Well,” she looked at Paige then Gage. “It’s not every day we have two deputies knocking on our door. I can’t see Dave doing anything bad, not on purpose. He’s a good kid. A really good kid. His momma was sick for years before she passed last year. Dave took care of her right up to the end. It was hard on him when she finally passed. I think that might account for some of the clutter at his place, you know. It was just too hard to be here once his mom was gone. Why are you looking for him?”

“He was seen driving around a neighborhood where some items were taken,” Paige decided to try honesty. She wanted to see how this woman would react.

“Oh,” the woman relaxed. “I’m sure he was working a job there. David, well he’s not good with addresses. One day, he offered to take me into town to look at a new dresser — well, new to me. I found it in the classifieds. Anyway, I swear we drove around that neighbor at least ten times before he made the right turn, and we found the house. That boy couldn’t find north if his life depended on it.”

“Do you know when David gets home from work?” Paige asked, pretty sure this was not their guy.

“Oh, it varies,” the woman said. “It just depends on how many jobs he as lined up. Usually not until near dark, though.”

“Thank you for your time miss,” Gage hesitated. “I’m sorry, we didn’t get your name.”

“Ella,” the woman told them. “Ella Hovey. If you want, I can tell David you need to talk to him.”

“That’s okay,” Gage told her. “I think you provided what we need. If not, we’ll track David down later. Thank you for your time and have a good day.”

Once they were back on the highway, Paige turned to Gage. “You sure you want to write him off? It was a good lead.”

“I’m just putting him on the back burner for now,” Gage decided. “My gut says he’s not our guy. I think he looked suspicious because he was lost and couldn’t find the address he was looking for. It fits with what I saw on the feed.”

“Then we’re back to Ashley Vayner,” Paige sighed.

“Why would Mrs. Vayner steal from people in need when she spends all her free time helping those in need?” Gage argued.

“Good question,” Paige smiled. “Maybe we should ask her.”

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Paige stepped into her house tired and annoyed. She dropped her gear onto the couch and headed to the kitchen. She needed a glass of wine — a big one. She stopped when she spotted Dax closing the oven. That's when she noticed the scrumptious aroma of pizza. "You cooked."

Dax moved to her and pulled her into his arms. "You look grumpy. Is something wrong or just a rough day?"

"Both," Paige sighed. "Neither. I don't know. I think I found a suspect, but nobody believes me."

"You identified the owner of the car?"

"I did," Paige pulled out a wine glass then studied the bottles. Finally, she selected a white Pinot Grigio and pivoted to find a corkscrew.

Dax gently took the bottle from her hand and opened it for her. "Who is your suspect?" he asked absently.

"A woman by the name of Ashley Vayner," Paige dropped onto a chair. "Gage thinks I'm harassing a saint and Jericho threatened me with serious discipline if I accused this Ashley woman without solid proof. Then Dean came in and basically called me a bully."

"The community loves Ashley Vayner," Dax filled her glass before he settled in next to her. He took her hand and weighed his words carefully. "If you think Vayner is your thief, you have to pursue it. But you should do it carefully, and you need to be subtle about it until you're sure. Jericho is threatening you because he knows how serious the fallout will be if you're wrong. However, I didn't hear you say Jericho told you to back off."

"No," Paige took a long sip of her wine. "He didn't go that far. He wouldn't. The others, well I guess they'll just have to deal with it if I'm right."

"Speaking of Jericho," Dax leaned forward and gave her a gentle kiss. "He's going to have a plus one for dinner on Thanksgiving."

"What?" Paige looked at him in shock. "Who?"

"Does that bother you?" Dax wondered. "If he starts dating again, would that bother you?"

"Of course not," Paige said immediately. *Would it?* She didn't think it would bother her as long as the woman was — good enough, kind enough to date her boss.

"Uh-huh," Dax grinned. "Well, get used to it. I'm hoping he gives this one an honest chance."

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“What are you up to?” Paige narrowed her eyes at him.

“Nothing,” Dax shrugged. “She just seemed nice, and I’d like to see Jericho find happiness. He’s been alone far too long. I think he’s ready, whether or not the stubborn fool realizes it.”

“What did you do, Dax Hamilton?” Paige demanded.

“I just gave him a little push,” he explained what happened at the café.

“And he went over and invited her?” Paige wondered. “Just like that?”

“Yep,” Dax smiled.

“You might be right,” Paige settled back in her chair. “He might be ready to date again. And I am fine with it. As long as she—”

“She what?” Dax laughed. “Passes the Paige Carter seal of approval?” The timer beeped, indicating their dinner was ready. Dax stood and dished up two plates. When he returned, Paige was scowling.

“First,” Paige glared at him. “That’s Paige Hamilton to you.”

Dax grinned. “I’m glad you remember.”

Paige ignored that. “Is that wrong of me? I want him to be happy, but I don’t think I could sit by and watch if he didn’t find someone that deserves him.”

Dax reached out and took her hand. “It’s not wrong. And, for what it’s worth, I liked her, and I think Jericho did, too. I don’t know how much was nostalgia and how much was interest, but I thought Thanksgiving dinner was a good time to find out.”

“I’m not going to worry about it,” Paige decided. “I’m going to focus all of my energy on destroying the life of a saint, and then I’m going to figure out how to win over the hearts and minds of the locals after I do it.”

“If she’s guilty,” Dax linked his fingers with hers. “She’s not the woman the town thinks she is and the people screaming the loudest right now, will be the first to apologize once it’s over.”

“Maybe,” Paige took a bite of pizza and groaned. “I just realized I skipped lunch and I’m starving.”

“You still up for movie night, or do you need to reschedule?” Dax took a bite of his own pizza.

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Paige's eyes grew wide. "I'm an idiot. I completely forgot. Let's move this out there. What happened to all that buttered popcorn?"

Dax snatched up the pizza in one hand and his wine in the other. "Popcorn will have to wait. I was hungry. You sure you have time for this?"

"Absolutely," Paige dropped onto the couch. She should be working, going over every detail of the Vaynor's lives, but she could set it aside for one night. She glanced at Dax. She needed more balance in her life. She needed to spend more time being a wife. More time helping Dax out around the house. "Do you ever feel — resentful?"

"Huh?" Dax looked at her, completely confused.

"I spend a lot of time feeling guilty because I don't help around the house as much as I should. I get caught up in my work or my plans for the day and I just leave it all to you," Paige admitted. "I know I shouldn't, but I know you'll take care of it so I take advantage, then the guilt sets in and swear I'm going to do better — then, I don't."

"Your work is important," Dax took her hand and kissed her knuckles.

"So is yours," Paige insisted.

"Yes," Dax agreed. "And I do my work. But, for the most part, my job is an eight to five deal. Your job is a twenty-four-seven deal. You save the world and I'll do the dishes."

"See," Paige pointed at him. "That, why don't you resent that? You have work, you train the guys that save the world, but you don't mind cleaning up when I forget or when I get distracted."

"That's the point," Dax pulled the lever to recline. "I don't mind. Now hush, we have a movie to watch and then, if you still feel guilty, I know how you can make it up to me."

"One track mind," Paige stretched out on the couch and rested her head on his thigh. They really should do this more often.

"Where are we going?" Carmen demanded.

"Just wait," Zeus took her hand and began rubbing his thumb over her palm.

Carmen shivered and frowned. Last time Zeus had a surprise for her, she'd nearly hyperventilated before he was done. She would not overreact this time. Surprises were good —

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great, actually. She loved surprises — but she didn't, never had. In her experience, surprises were always bad.

Zeus pulled off the road and parked. He was halfway around the front of the truck when Carmen pushed open her door and climbed out.

"It's beautiful up here," she whispered, amazed by the view. "We're not that far above town but it's enough to see all the farms to the west and look," she pointed to the south. "That's Palisade's Reservoir."

"Do you like it?" Zeus stepped in behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"I love it," Carmen glanced over her shoulder. "But why are we here?"

Zeus hesitated several seconds, trying to get his thoughts straight. "I love you. I never thought it was possible to love someone the way I love you."

"I love you, too," Carmen whispered.

"And because I love you, I can see my proposal isn't making you happy. I want you to be happy."

"I am," Carmen insisted. "It just — I think it just took a few days to get used to the idea, that's all."

"Maybe," Zeus shrugged. "I don't know. I do know, I was trying to push you. I wanted you to catch up to my timetable. Instead, I should have relaxed and joined you on yours."

"I don't know what you mean," Carmen pulled free and turned to face him. "Are you saying you don't want to get married? And why did you bring me out here to tell me you're taking it all back?"

Zeus reached out and pulled her back into his arms. "First, I'm not taking anything back. I love you, remember. I'm just putting our future in your hands for a while. You want to wait, we wait. You want a long engagement, that's what we'll do. I love you and I'm not going anywhere. The next move is yours, Carmen — that's all I'm saying."

"And why here?" she asked again.

"I own this land," Zeus admitted. "I bought it a few months back. It's close to Dax and Paige and an easy drive to DMA. I was hoping we could build your dream home right over there," he pointed off to the side. "Whatever you want, the sky's the limit."

"You own it?" Carmen just stared at him. "You bought all of this?" she raised her hands into the air and spun in a circle. "And, you want us to build a house together. And I can have

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whatever I want, right? Because we're building the house ourselves. I can have a huge office. A large theater room. An amazing kitchen."

Zeus laughed. "You can have all of that and more. If you agree, we can meet with an architect and have him draw up the plans. Once the weather breaks in the spring, we'll start the construction."

Carmen flung her arms around him. "I love you. I love this place. I can just see us, sitting on the porch having coffee each morning, watching the sun set each night from our comfortable porch — we can have a comfortable porch that faces west, right?"

Zeus held her tight. "You can have anything you want, baby."

"Wait," Carmen tried to push away, but he tightened his grip. "I have a couple things I want to say. Let's get the easy one out of the way first. What about Ms. Ledbetter? Pearl needs my rent to pay for the care center where she lives. If we move—"

Zeus reached out and placed a hand on either side of Carmen's face. "You're amazing you know that? I'm standing here offering you a chance to build your very own dream home, and you're about to turn me down to help an old woman you don't even know. It's no wonder I love you so much."

"Zeus," Carmen sighed. "I want the house, more than you know, but I can't just leave Pearl in a bind like that. It's a small town, the house will take time to rent, if it rents at all."

"I already talked to Dax about the house," Zeus pressed a soft kiss to her nose and frowned. "You're cold. Let's move this back to the truck where we have heat."

Carmen let Zeus take her hand and lead her back to his truck. Zeus climbed into the passenger seat then held out his hand for Carmen to join him. She hesitated then climbed into his lap. He slammed the door shut and started the engine. Warm air blasted from the vents.

"Explain what you mean when you say you talked to Dax already," she wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Dax is negotiating with Diane Pembroke," Zeus told her. "She's the official property manager now that Ms. Ledbetter is in a care facility. He's made her an offer — to buy the place. DMA will own it and we can remodel and use it for overflow housing."

"You already have housing at DMA," Carmen wondered if this was just another altruistic plan to take care of an elderly woman who didn't have any family willing to step up and take care of her themselves.

"Yes," Zeus agreed. "And the attendees will still use those rooms. The house will be for our more prestigious guests. Porter can use it when he comes out to visit Paige. I'm sure Sophie

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would like a little privacy and it might encourage them to visit more often and stay longer. We want to bring in guest speakers, but at the moment we don't have anywhere to house them. If we brought someone in, they'd have to stay in a motel and we have little control over the amenities offered."

"Okay," Carmen sat up. "That makes sense. I want to ask if you're doing this just to take care of Pearl but I'm selfish enough to tell you, it doesn't matter. I want that house. Right here. I want to start my life with you. The house, the view and most of all — the amazing man. So, are you still going to marry me or what?"

"Are you sure?" Zeus pushed. "We could extend the engagement. Say at least a year. That would give you time to get used to the idea."

"I'm already used to it," Carmen disagreed. "I want to get married in June. Does that suit you?"

"June?" Zeus said in surprise. "Uh, I don't think we can get the house built by then."

"Then we stay in Pearl's little house until it's done," Carmen shrugged.

"Carmen," Zeus began.

"No," Carmen shook her head. "I nearly messed this up as bad as Paige did. I'm not going to do that. You know I have some abandonment issues, because of my father. I realized I'm letting his issues interfere with our happiness. I'm going to stop doing that. I want to marry you. I want this house and I think I want a dog." She slid forward until her mouth was nearly touching his "you think you can handle all that, stud?"

"That I can handle," Zeus kissed her. When they finished, he grinned, "handle you? That's an entirely different story; but, I look forward to spending a lifetime trying."

"Good answer," Carmen laughed.

"Hey, Carmen," Paige said, recognizing the number on the display. "I was just about to call you. How are you feeling?"

"Happy," Carmen admitted. "You were right. I got spooked. I won't say my feet were itching because, well that's just gross and conjures images of disease and fungus."

"Not really a visual I needed this morning," Paige scolded. "You sound happy."

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“I am,” Carmen said without hesitation. “We were wondering if you and Dax were free tonight. Zeus wants to cook up some of his famous chili and I thought we could have a double date at my place. Just a relaxing evening where we eat too much and catch up.”

“Alright,” Paige frowned. Was Carmen up to something?

“Great,” Carmen relaxed. “Now that we’ve settled that, why were you going to call me?”

“I need your super Carmen powers on something, if you have time,” Paige grabbed the paper with Ashley’s information on it and relayed the details. “I’m not finding anything, but there is a sealed juvie record. I want to know what’s in that file, but there’s no way I have enough to convince a judge to go for it.”

“I’m shocked deputy,” Carmen said flatly “Are you asking me to break the law to satisfy your own personal curiosity?” She added a little fake gasp for effect.

“I’m asking you to get me everything you can on the woman,” Paige corrected. “Using any means necessary. I know how much you like being thorough.”

“Right,” Carmen laughed. “Are you seriously trying to pin this on me?”

“No,” Paige sighed. “Just get me what you can. Nathan would tan my hide if he found out I led you down a dark and illegal path that rejuvenated your compulsion to hack into the secret lives of the enemy. He’s convinced you gave up your old, wicked ways for the greater good.”

“I’ll call you when I’m done,” Carmen promised then disconnected.

Paige sat back. Carmen seemed happy, but she was definitely up to something. She was still trying to figure out what when Havilland approached her desk.

“I’ve got another one,” he admitted. “Same neighborhood. You game?”

Paige jumped to her feet and grabbed her coat. “Right behind you.”

An hour later they were sitting in the conference room, watching more home security video.

“Stop,” Paige sat up straighter. “Rewind. Yeah, there. Do you see that car? That’s the same silver compact I saw before. I want to talk to Ashley Vaynor. She has to be involved in this. What are the odds she’d be driving by — twice — when packages in the area just happened to come up missing?”

Margie stepped into the doorway. “Paige, Carmen Fennelly’s on line two.”

“What’d you find?” Paige demanded.

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“Hey, is this the amazing digital Goddess of all things,” Carmen laughed. “Thank you for calling me back so quickly. I sure do appreciate your hard work on my case. Especially since the details were a little — sticky.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Paige tapped her pen on the table. “All that and more. Thank you, thank you, thank you. As always, you’re amazing. What did you find, Carmen?”

“Ashley Vaynor had a little shoplifting problem,” Carmen advised. “The first time she got caught, she was fourteen. She went about six months before her next stint in juvie. There’s a break for nearly a year before the little klepto stole again. She just turned seventeen at the time of her last arrest. That’s it. Somehow, she stopped cold turkey — pun intended since it’s almost Thanksgiving. No additional charges as a minor, nothing as an adult. The file is sealed as part of a plea deal and it will remain that way unless she’s arrested again. Plus, I think the statute of limitations is up. I don’t think they’ll reverse the seal at this point even if she is your porch pirate.”

Paige sat back and considered. “That has to be what... nearly thirty years. What triggered the relapse?”

“If there was a relapse,” Carmen said automatically. “And yeah, she’s the most likely suspect. Especially considering all this. Could be holiday stress or financial problems that just cropped up this year. It could be anything. You won’t know until you talk to her.”

“Right,” Paige focused on Havilland. “Thanks, Carmen. All kidding aside, I really do appreciate your help on this.”

“Happy to do it,” Carmen grinned. “I do need to polish my skills now and then.”

“Don’t tell Nathan,” Paige told her before hanging up.

“Ashley Vaynor?” Havi sighed. “Sometimes, I think you want to get me fired.”

“You can step away,” Paige offered. “Stay here, watch more video while I go talk to Ashley Vaynor alone.”

“Naw,” Havilland stood. “My feelings on the subject aren’t as strong as the rest of those guys. Sure, she might be a pillar of the community and all — but, that doesn’t mean she can’t also be a thief.”

“That’s what I love about you,” Paige pulled on her coat. “Always practical and unemotional. Even when your livelihood is on the line. How do you do it?”

“It’s a gift,” Havilland laughed. “Tell me what you found so when Jericho grills us, I’m prepared.”

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Paige slid into his passenger seat and relayed the information she just got from Carmen.

“Viable,” Havilland decided. “So, how are we going to play it? Nice and sweet — hoping for some help? Or, fast and hard — take her off guard and see if she breaks?”

“Nice and sweet would be safe,” Paige offered. “Jericho might be happier with that tactic.”

“I vote for hard and fast,” Havilland disagreed. “Let’s take her by surprise and see how she reacts.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Paige grinned.

“Mrs. Vaynor?” Paige asked when the woman opened the door.

“Yes,” she glanced from Paige to Havi and back to Paige. “Can I help you?”

“We’re here about some thefts in the neighborhood,” Paige stared at the woman, careful not to let any emotion show on her face. Because she was so focused, she saw it. A shocked flicker of fear, then it was gone. “Can we come in and talk to you, or would you rather take this down to the station?”

“I—” Ashley swallowed, terror gripped her throat, and she couldn’t speak for several seconds. “Come in.” She pushed open the door and took a step back. How did they know? She was so careful. Every time, she’d been careful.

“First,” Paige watched Ashley crumple onto the couch, and she knew she had her thief. “We need to ask you some questions regarding stolen packages reported by your neighbors. Before I do that, I need to read you your rights. You have the right to remain silent.” Paige went through the entire warning. Ashley surprised them both when she agreed to speak with them. “Ashley,” Paige glanced at Havilland. “Your car was captured on video at the time of the theft, at more than one crime scene. Can you explain why you were there at the exact time the theft was occurring?”

“I—” Ashley’s eyes darted around the room, looking for an escape. She knew she’d get caught, deep in her gut, she knew. But, she’d stolen those things, anyway. “I was trying to help,” she finally admitted. Tears streamed down her face. “I know it was wrong, but I was just trying to help.”

“Can you explain that?” Havilland tried to sound compassionate.

“I’m not a bad person,” Ashley began. She let out a sob, grabbed a tissue off the coffee table and blew her nose. “I spend a lot of time helping people, mostly families in our ward, but

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sometimes others. Anyway, I was at Ann Gallows home one morning, trying to comfort her. Ann's husband deserted her and the four children nine months ago. She's destitute and her oldest was just diagnosed with diabetes. The prescription is so expensive, but he has to have or he'll die. So, she was crying, telling me how she won't even have the money to buy the kids little things for Christmas this year. I offered to coordinate a sub for Santa event. She refused. Her pride won't let her accept charity from anyone. She's embarrassed, and she thinks it's her fault that no good Carl left her and the kids with nothing. So, I sat with her and let her cry until she was all cried out. Then, I stepped outside and just inhaled the fresh cool air. That's when I saw the UPS truck — again. The driver dropped two large boxes at the Jenkins home, then he immediately made another stop at Nancy and Boyd Miller's place. I can't explain why I did it, I know it was wrong, but I glanced around to make sure nobody would see me, avoided the camera at old man Dwyer's place and snatched the package off Nancy's porch. On the way back to my car, I couldn't resist taking one of the boxes from the Jenkins as well. I decided to take them home, wrap them, and leave them on Ann's doorstep Christmas morning."

"What did you do with the things you took?" Paige pushed.

"The package I got from Nancy was a quilt," she admitted. "I knew I couldn't give that to Ann. It looked custom made, and I didn't want anyone seeing it and accusing Ann or her kids of stealing. I dropped it in a donation box in Gunnison.

"And what did you get from the Jenkins home?" Havilland asked. They didn't have a report from that house.

"Toys," Ashley admitted. "I still have those. I re-wrapped them and planned to leave them for the kids."

"We're going to need you to get them," Paige sighed. "Not yet," she added when Ashley started to stand. "First, we need to talk about the other items you took."

Ashley ran them through everything. She claimed she only took things from people she knew could afford it. She never stole from families that were struggling. Somehow, the woman thought that made it all okay. Once she finished confessing, Paige realized there were several items that hadn't been reported. Ashley still had most of the stuff. The only exceptions were the quilt she donated in Gunnison and Harold's medication — which she dropped off at the local clinic once she realized what it was.

"Did you ever consider returning the items you took?" Paige asked, anger seeping through despite her best effort to hide it. "Did you see Harold's medical supplies and realize he might need those things to survive and consider dropping them back off where you found them?"

Ashley furrowed her brow. "I," she hesitated. "Not really. It was risky enough to take them in the first place. I'd get caught for sure if I tried to return them."

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“So,” Havilland frowned. “Your focus was on making sure you didn’t get caught, not taking care of Ann and her kids?”

“No,” Ashely fidgeted on the couch. “I couldn’t help Ann and the kids if I got caught. So, I had to make sure I didn’t get caught.”

“You did get caught,” Paige said flatly. “Now, I need you to take me to the items you stole. I will be impounding them as evidence at this time.”

“Are you going to arrest me?” Ashley cried harder and her entire body started to shake.

“I’m going to screen charges with the District Attorney’s office,” Paige decided. “If you voluntarily surrender the items you stole, and you cooperate with the prosecutor, you might not spend time in jail — or not much time. That’s out of my control.”

Havilland stood. “You should think about hiring an attorney, Mrs. Vaynor. You’re going to need one. Now, can you show us where you stored the stolen property?” He turned to address Paige. “I’ve got this. You should go outside and call the boss.”

“Right,” Paige sighed but agreed.

Three days later Paige was snuggled against Dax on their couch. The house was full of friends and family. Sophie was doing her best to keep Nathan honest as he told an outrageous story that may or may not have truly happened. You never could tell with Nathan. The men joined in, putting their own spin on the tale, adding in anecdotes from their own experience. The entire thing was getting out of control.

Carmen settled in next to Paige on the couch. “Another successful holiday. You should be proud and relieved it’s all over.”

“Proud of Dax,” Paige smiled up at him. “He did most of the work. And yes, relieved we have another one behind us. I love getting together, but it is a lot of work.”

“Maybe next year we’ll have our place finished and we can hold Thanksgiving in our new home,” Carmen offered.

“You seem happy,” Paige observed. “I mean, truly happy.”

“I am,” Carmen admitted. “You were right. I got scared now I’m not. I have an amazing man, with a crazy bunch of friends and to top it all off — I have you, Paige. The best friend anyone could ask for. Life is good.”

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“What about the intolerable general?” Paige asked clearly not meaning it.

“I know Nathan is like a father to you,” Carmen sobered. “But, well — he’s special to me, too. He saved me, in more ways than one. I’ll always be grateful to him for that.”

“It’s okay,” Paige reached out and took Carmen’s hand. “Nathan can have more than one daughter. And you’re his, Carmen. Trust me, I can see it every time he looks at you. I don’t mind. He is truly one of a kind.”

“Thank you,” Carmen stood and headed back to join Zeus.

“You plan to talk to Jericho at all tonight?” Dax leaned in and bit her earlobe.

“I thought I’d leave that up to him,” Paige decided. “Behave.”

“Go on,” Dax laughed and gave her a little push. “Go make up.”

Paige stood and headed for the kitchen. She needed a minute before she took on Jericho. Before she had a chance to come up with a plan, he stepped into the room and settled onto one of the sturdy chairs.

“I like Harper,” Paige settled in next to him.

Jericho silently studied Paige but didn’t respond. He didn’t know what to say to that. He liked Harper, too. How much? He wasn’t sure, but he was grateful Dax insisted they include her tonight. “She’s grateful you invited her. She was planning to spend the night alone.”

“We had room,” Paige shrugged. “And anyway, you invited her.”

“I owe you an apology,” Jericho frowned when Paige shrugged. “No, let me do this. I’ve lived in this community a long time. I know these people, most of them have been friends or acquaintances for decades. I thought I knew Ashley Vaynor. I was wrong and I put my personal feelings ahead of the job — ahead of your instincts. You didn’t, Duncan didn’t. And the two of you did the job knowing you might not have my support. That won’t happen again. I need you to know I’ll back you. I will always stand for you when you’re right, regardless of the consequences. I already talked to Duncan. He told me he went into this believing I’d cave to pressure from the community if the going got tough. He was wrong, but I can understand why he thought I would.”

Paige blinked then shook her head. “I can’t believe he told you that.”

“That’s my point, Paige,” Jericho reached out and placed his hand over hers. “You and me — we have history. It’s complicated and not always pretty, but that’s family. You are my family, and I will always be here for you — personally. That holds true for the rest as well. I might not always agree with you, but if you do the job, I’ll have your back. You can trust that.”

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“I know,” Paige turned her hand to grip his. “You are family, Jericho. For so many reasons. And I admit, I’m not that great at dealing with those complicated family issues. You’ve been angry, so I just avoided you.”

“I’m not angry,” Jericho corrected. “I was, but not for the reasons you think. Mostly, I was angry with myself. I threatened you but you pursued justice anyway — damn the consequences. Because of that, because you held true to who you are, you caught the person responsible for those thefts. Ashley will come out of this a little singed, but she won’t do jail time. She’ll have about a year’s worth of community service and I can live with that. I can’t live with you hiding things from me because you don’t trust me.”

“I do trust you,” Paige sighed. “Okay, I didn’t. Normally, I would have briefed you on the plan before I went out to talk to the suspect. I avoided you because I didn’t know what you would say or how you would react. That was also unprofessional and wrong. For that, I owe you an apology. So, I’m sorry.”

Jericho stood. He hesitated, then pulled Paige in for an unexpected hug. The man rarely showed affection and it took Paige by surprise.

“What’s this?” she returned the hug and realized it felt right. Jericho was her father in so many ways — just like Nathan. It didn’t matter that he never married her mom, Chaya Carter had brought them together in death more than she ever did when she was alive.

“My life has been complicated and so very lonely since I lost your mother,” Jericho didn’t let go. “I didn’t know what would happen when you returned. I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to handle it. I was sure having you here, was going to make my life even more difficult. Instead, you’ve brought me nothing but joy. You are family, Paige and you always will be. And since today is a day for giving thanks, I want you to know how thankful I am that you’re here and your mine.”

“Nothing but joy,” Paige tried to lighten the mood. “Even when I chase suspects over a cliff into the river, stumble onto a baby stealing ring, leave you to handle the violent members of a Mexican drug cartel—”

“You’re right,” Jericho laughed and stepped back. “Did I say joy? I meant your a nuisance and a pain in my—”

“And here we were,” Paige interrupted. “Having such a tender moment. While you’re in such a giving mood, I want to know how you feel about Harper. Tell me the truth, do you like her?”

“I don’t know yet,” Jericho said seriously. “I’m not ruling it out.”

“Well,” Paige bumped her shoulder to his. “I like her, and I think that’s a good first step.”

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“Right,” Jericho laughed and headed for the door. “Because the world does revolve around you.”

“I’m glad we finally cleared that up,” Paige was smiling when she settled back in next to Dax. Carmen was right. Life was good, and she planned to relax and enjoy the rest of the evening. She glanced around at the people she loved. She had a lot to be thankful for, they all did.