

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

***Smoke and Mirrors***  
***Season 5, Episode 7***

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*by:*

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Paige absently reached for the ringing phone as she skimmed through the report she'd just written. "Deputy Carter."

"Paige Carter," a male voice greeted. "It's been a while. Calvin Wright here. How are you?"

"Wow," Paige grinned and settled back in her chair. "That's a blast from the past. I'm great and you?"

"Can't complain," Calvin told her.

"You still giving orders in the freezing metropolis of Green Bay?"

"Actually," Calvin hesitated. "No. That's actually the reason for my call. My wife's father passed away nearly ten years ago. Her mom was still pretty self-sufficient — until recently. She fell last year, broke her hip. It took a couple hours before a neighbor found her and called for help. I decided it was time to retire and move to Des Moines. We packed up, bought a decent sized place, and moved Sheila's mom into the basement. It didn't take long for me to get bored. So, I took a job at the local department conducting backgrounds for new hires. It's part time, but it gets me out of the house."

"Congratulations, I think. Sorry about the fall and the hip."

"I'm calling because the Chief here was contacted by a..." he checked his notes. "Looks like a guy by the name of Blaze Hawthorne. He said he works at an elite training center out there in Manti, with a man named Dax Hamilton. I was told you went and tied the knot — and this Hamilton character was the guy that finally convinced you to take the plunge."

"Hawk called?" Paige sat back and considered. "Is this about Matt Warner?"

"As a matter of fact," Calvin admitted. "He applied for an opening here in Des Moines. He's got a few years with Johnson County, but that department is small. The application is pretty basic — other than an advanced course through DMA. This Hawthorne guy claims to be a marksman, said he retired from the military. He also said we'd be crazy not to snatch Warner up while we have the chance."

"He's right," Paige agreed. "What do you need from me?"

"You're familiar with Warner?"

"He came out last month," Paige told him. "Attended a course at my husband's facility. You can research the training center, but it's top notch. There's a waiting list just to get into a course at DMA. All the instructors are retired from the military — special forces. They train both military and law enforcement. Warner attended their advanced course and aced it. He's a natural marksman. And, as far as Hawk goes — I've never seen a better sniper. The fact Hawk

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called you, speaks volumes. If you need more on that, you can call General Porter. He'll vouch for Hawk — and Warner, for that matter — without hesitation.”

“Your word is enough,” Calvin assured her. “He really aced the course?”

“He did,” Paige didn't hesitate. “What did Hawk say when he called?”

“He somehow finagled his way over to our SWAT Commander,” Calvin admitted. “Told him to convince the brass to hire Warner before he gets a better offer. He also highly recommended the kid for our tactical team. Seems Hawthorne was seriously impressed with Matt Warner and thought we'd want to look at him for SWAT as soon as Warner met the requirements.”

“We all were,” Paige told him who Hawk was, how Matt had competed against Ollie and Nathan, and then concluded with a run-down of the case they worked together. “The department would be lucky to have him. You won't find a better shooter, and his instincts are sharp when it comes to investigations as well.”

“I'll pass your recommendation along,” Calvin assured her. “We don't know Dax or this Hawthorne, but I know you. He wouldn't have the Carter seal of approval if he didn't deserve it.”

“He's got it,” Paige assured him. “Now, tell me how the kids are doing. I heard they're both in college. Do they plan to follow in dad's footsteps, or moms?” They talked for nearly an hour. The conversation was nearing a natural conclusion when Margie stepped up to Paige's desk.

“Havilland could use your help,” Margie set a note on the desk in front of Paige.

“Gotta go,” Paige straightened. “Duty calls, but it was great catching up. Keep in touch and if there's ever anything I can do for you — don't hesitate to call.”

“Same goes,” Calvin said before disconnecting.

She slid into her jacket and headed for the door.

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Paige approached the scene and immediately understood why Havi called for backup. The roadway was completely obstructed with vehicles — and people. A red SUV was blocking the roadway, and an EMT was working on a patient sprawled out on the highway. Unfortunately, with all the cars, the ambulance couldn't reach their patient. Paige snatched up her microphone, switched over to the internal bullhorn, and pushed the door open as wide as she could. Then, she

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stood in the doorway, balancing herself with the open driver's side door and the rooftop, and took charge. "Listen up," she began. "We need to clear the way for the ambulance. To start, I need this green truck and the red Toyota gone immediately. If you witnessed the crash, stay. You can pull over there, on the side of the road and park on the shoulder. If you didn't see the actual collision, leave the area immediately. Once those two cars are moved, I need this white SUV out of the way. Hurry, people. I've already called for a tow truck. Either you move them out, or I'll move them for you." That got their attention. Within minutes, the path was cleared, and the ambulance had snaked its way through the remaining vehicles and was loading their patient into the back.

Paige approached Havilland. "What else do you need?"

"Thanks for that," he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and began cleaning away the blood that was covering his hands and forearms. Once he cleaned off most of it, he glanced around then moved in closer. "I've got two in critical condition. I'm not sure the driver of the truck is going to survive. The other one is stable — for now. Once we get the second driver transported and out of the way, I can start working the scene. In the meantime, can you take a look in the bed of that truck over here? The guy might not make it, but we'll need answers either way. I need a second opinion."

Paige frowned, unsure what that was all about. "Let me guide in medical, then I'll take a look." Once the second ambulance was in position and the patient was being loaded, Paige took a few seconds to survey the area. Still too many rubbernecks but, at least for now, they were out of the way and wouldn't interfere with the scene. With a sigh, she turned and made her way to the truck. Her eyes widened in surprise the instant she spotted the cargo area, but she quickly masked her reaction. *Blood — lots of blood.* Too much to be explained away by this accident. What in the world had they stumbled onto?

"I can see your reaction was the same as mine," Havilland stepped in next to her once the second ambulance pulled away. "What I need to know is whether it's human or animal blood. And, if it is human — who does it belong to?"

"I agree," Paige ran her hand through her hair. "Call Jericho. Tell him you need a guard on the owner of this vehicle. Then, you handle the report and I'll deal with the truck. I'm going to have it towed back to the office and lock it down tight in an evidence bay."

They both glanced up when another vehicle pulled in behind Paige.

Havi grinned. "I'll have Gage work on getting these people out of here. Maybe he can separate the actual witnesses from the curious gawkers."

"Good idea," Paige pulled out her walkie and contacted Margie.

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An hour later, Havilland had the scene diagrammed. Gage had traffic under control and Paige had the vehicle in question locked up at the office. Once the first car was secured, she returned to inspect the second vehicle involved in the collision.

“I think I’ve got everything I need here,” Havilland studied the second car and wondered if Paige had found anything useful. “According to the witnesses, this BMW was speeding and tailgating the truck. A third vehicle, maybe black, maybe blue, maybe freakin’ purple according to one woman — maybe a Ford, maybe a Camry, maybe a spaceship from Mars for all I know—”

“In other words, your average, every day, typical, eyewitness accounts,” Paige smiled.

“Right,” Havilland took a deep breath. “Anyway, the unidentified vehicle pulled onto the highway, and barely missed the right front bumper of the truck. The driver of said truck, swerved and slammed on his breaks — probably hoping to avoid a collision. The driver of this BMW,” he pointed to the car Paige was inspecting. “He was driving too close and smashed into the back of the truck. But, after swerving to avoid the first car, the truck was now at an angle. When the BMW clipped the right fender, it struck with enough force that the truck began to spin and ended up in oncoming traffic. That’s when the cement truck broadsided him.”

“We’re lucky the cement truck didn’t roll,” Paige observed. “Otherwise, we’d be out here all night trying to scrape a ton of concrete off the pavement.”

“I guess there is that,” Havilland sighed. “I got his information, had Heidi do a blood draw, and released him fairly quickly. He had cement to deliver and it was clear, almost immediately, that he was just collateral damage in all of this. I didn’t need him to stick for the diagram and other than the front fender, his vehicle barely had a scratch.”

“We can talk to him later if we need to,” Paige agreed. “I can wait here; Frank should arrive any minute. I’ll deal with the tow if you want to head to the hospital and get an update.”

“Thanks,” Havilland paused and turned back. “Gage got another call and had to bolt, so it’s just you. Can you handle the rest of this? Oh, and let Jericho know I’m at the hospital. I’ll probably be there at least another hour, maybe two.”

“I’ve got it,” Paige assured him. Once Havilland left, Paige opened the passenger door and began rifling through the glove box.

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Paige shut down the engine, slid from behind the wheel and approached the large glass revolving doors. With an inward sigh, she decided she spent entirely too much time in hospitals these days. After a quick glance around, she approached the desk.

It took some finagling, but she finally got the information she needed. Minutes later she was stepping from the vacant elevator into the halls of the third floor — which were eerily quiet at the moment. Following the directions the receptionist gave her, Paige made her way to a large waiting room.

Noise erupted the instant she pushed open the door. The room was packed. There were at least a dozen people of various ages mingling inside. A teenager was huddled in the corner, focused on his phone. A young boy of about five was sprawled on the floor, thick coloring book open and about a hundred crayons spread out around him. A young woman in her twenties was standing near the window, rocking back and forth, and murmuring to an infant. Paige swept the room quickly. When she realized Havi wasn't there, she turned to leave.

She'd only taken two steps toward the door when it flew open and an elderly couple shuffled in, followed by Deputy Havilland. He spotted Paige immediately and headed her way.

"Is there somewhere a little more private we can talk?" Paige asked.

"Let's go out here," Havi turned back to the elderly couple. "Violet, Jack, you two just settled in over there on that couch. I'll be back in a few minutes. Hopefully, the doctor will be back with an update by then."

The instant they were out of the room, Havilland motioned to an open door down the hall. "I see you met the Hanson's."

"Not really," Paige stepped into the small room and settled into one of three chairs. "The blood is not human. I sent it to the lab for a full analysis but —"

Havilland settled into the chair next to her. "It's elk."

"Makes sense," Paige nodded. "The driver of the truck was a hunter, I presume."

"Yeah," Havilland ran a hand over his face. "He's still in surgery. It's bad. Last update was pretty devastating for the family."

"They're all here for the truck?" Paige wondered.

"They are," Havi affirmed. "I haven't been able to contact anyone connected to the driver of the BMW."

"Meaning?"

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“The registration comes back to Amelia and Charles Glover,” Havilland told her. “When I couldn’t find a listing, I asked Margie to do a little digging. It seems both Amelia and Charles are deceased.”

Paige frowned. “Stolen?”

“Nope,” Havilland sighed. “Margie checked. Amelia passed three months ago; Charles has been gone for six years.”

“How old are they?”

“Charles was eighty-four,” Havilland glanced at his notes. “Amelia was eighty-five when she passed three months ago.”

“Could be a family member that inherited the car,” Paige was watching Havilland. There was more.

“I asked Logan to respond to the address,” he continued. “The place has been cleaned out completely.”

“What does that mean?” Paige wondered.

“The Glover’s had money,” Havilland told her. “The house is one of those large, two-story monstrosities up on the hill. There’s a realtor sign on the front lawn. Logan was wandering around, getting a feel for the place, when a neighbor strolled over. The woman said Amelia was heartbroken after Charlie died. She got through the day working in her enormous garden out back. Apparently, Amelia Glover had quite the green thumb. Anyway, when Reed asked about the house, the neighbor said Amelia had a stroke a few weeks prior to her death. She let a younger man, a guy by the name of David, move in to help her. The neighbor was suspicious. Said Amelia Glover seemed to get worse, not better once the man moved in. Then, suddenly, she was gone. A week later, David had sold everything. One day Kate — that’s the neighbor — was attending the funeral of a dear friend, the next a large truck was in the driveway hauling out the elaborate furniture and the expensive paintings. Now, the house is on the market at a reduced price — no less. She said it’s clearly marked down to move it quickly.”

Paige frowned. “Do you have a way to reach this David guy?”

“Not yet,” Havilland stood. “I need to check on Watson, see if he’s out of surgery. Logan jotted down the information on the realtor and I’ll contact her in the morning. You might as well head home, there’s nothing much we can do here tonight.”

“You leaving?”

“Once I determine the status of Carl Watson, yeah.”

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“How’s the other driver?” Paige stood. “Our John Doe that was driving the BMW?”

“Recovering,” Havilland shrugged. “His injuries were serious, but I’m told he came through surgery without any major complications. He’s still out cold from the anesthesia they used, and he’ll be incapacitated until morning. I asked the nurse to call me the minute he wakes. Maybe he can explain how he ended up in a vehicle that belongs to the recently deceased.”

“You need any help with the family?” Paige motioned toward the waiting area that was filled with Carl Watson’s loved ones.

“No,” Havilland shook his head. “They’re good people and seem like a close nit family. All of them are avid hunters. They were camping up the canyon. Hunting was the excuse, but I think it was mostly a chance to get away and spend a week or so enjoying the wilderness. Carl tagged an elk and wanted to get it down the mountain and to the processing plant immediately. He was supposed to drop it off and head back up to finish the trip with the others. When he didn’t return, they got worried and here we are. I’ll check in with them, get an update, then head out. We can pick this back up in the morning.”

“Sounds good,” Paige put a hand on his shoulder before she turned and slowly made her way back to the parking lot.

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Paige was nearly an hour late getting home. She walked through the house, confused when she didn’t spot Dax. Once she entered the kitchen, she heard laughter next door. Dax must be hanging with the neighbors. She should have called, but she lost track of time and it took longer than expected at the hospital. After rushing upstairs to change, she stepped onto the back porch and slowly made her way across the manicured lawn.

The entire group was there, including Wooly and Jaimie. “I think you lost your Mini-Me’s,” Paige said, settling onto the edge of a lounge chair.

“Ken’s mother agreed to keep them,” Jaimie slowly sipped a glass of red wine. “I needed a night away and Hawk promised to make his amazing sirloin tips in that secret magic sauce of his.”

“I’m always game for magic sauce,” Paige smiled at Hawk. “Did you make enough for one more?”

“Of course,” Hawk turned the steak like an expert.

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“You’re home late,” Zeus pointed out. “Hot case?”

“Crash that turned weird,” Paige admitted. “Then it wasn’t and now I think it might be something else entirely — fraud, maybe.”

“What do you mean it was weird, then it wasn’t?” Ken asked.

“I headed out to help Havi on a serious crash,” Paige began.

“You guys had the road blocked off for hours,” Vato grumbled.

“Two were transported, one might not make it,” Paige ignored him. “Anyway, there was a ton of blood in the bed of the truck.”

“Blood?” Carmen scrunched up her nose. “Human?”

“No,” Paige shrugged. “We had to know for sure, but I tested it as soon as I towed the vehicle back to the office. Came back as a member of the hoof variety. I sent it to the lab to make sure, but the family confirmed it was from an elk and Havi verified it was all legal.”

“That must have been a shock,” Jaimie mumbled. “You arrived thinking you’d be dealing with a simple accident and found a truck bed covered in blood. I realize it’s October, but still.”

“It was interesting at first,” Paige admitted. “We were busy, so my focus was getting the vehicle out of there and secured, but it threw me for a minute.”

“So,” Dax wrapped an arm around Paige and pulled her against him, stretching his legs on either side of her body to hold her in place. “Where did the fraud come into play?”

“When I got to the hospital,” Paige accepted the glass of wine Zeus handed her. “Thanks. The victim’s entire family was there. They were all together — hunting up the canyon as an excuse for a family reunion of some sort — and, when the driver didn’t return, they got worried. Why don’t any of you hunt?”

The men exchanged looks, but nobody answered.

“You should understand better than most,” Carmen finally said. “Like Hemingway said, there is no hunting like the hunting of men.”

“And you guys don’t care for anything else,” Paige nodded. “Makes sense.” She focused on Hawk. He looked more uncomfortable than the others.

“When you’ve been forced to kill,” he turned the steak without glancing up. “You appreciate the beauty of life. An elk is majestic and magnificent from his rack to the distinct bugle of his mating call — he’s impressive and regal. I have no interest in killing something that stately for sport.”

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“If we needed to hunt,” Vato added. “For food, like they did a hundred years ago, that would be different. We all work in the wilderness because we appreciate the vastness and the wonder. There’s nothing like coming around a corner and spotting a huge bull elk scraping the felt from his antlers or witnessing a large moose sloshing around in a shallow pond.”

“I agree,” Paige took another sip of wine. “And I’m glad you guys respect nature the way you do. But enough about that, I dampened the mood and didn’t mean to. I was just curious. Anyway, plasma mystery solved, I headed over to the hospital to help Havi. That’s when I learned the other driver — the one that was the prime contributor to the crash — wasn’t the registered owner of the expensive BMW he was driving. Both of the RO’s are deceased and we have no idea who the man is. He didn’t have a wallet on him, and I didn’t see one in the vehicle when I inventoried the contents.”

“Mysterious,” Jaimie agreed. “So, you think he was running some kind of con? Based on that? Maybe he just stole the car.”

“There’s more, but enough about my day — what did you guys do?”

The group allowed the subject change. After such a long difficult day, they all wanted to enjoy the company and comradery, not discuss local crime. It was late when Dax and Paige finally headed home.

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Paige was already at her desk when Havilland stepped into the bullpen. She glanced up, was immediately distracted by the large tree trunk in the corner, and frowned. “I’m never going to get used to that thing.”

“You’re in early,” Havilland settled into her visitor’s chair.

“I wanted more details before we cornered the realtor,” Paige admitted.

“Did you find anything?”

“Not really,” Paige sighed. “Logan said the man was going by David Bennett. I found a marriage certificate for David Bennett and Amelia Glover. The happy couple tied the knot three and a half months ago. Only one week after Amelia had a stroke. It was apparently a private ceremony, David hired a pastor to perform the ritual right there in the home — it was a five-minute, romantic bedside service. No fuss, no frills, just say ‘I do’ and sign on the dotted line.”

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“Convenient,” Havilland stretched out his legs and crossed one ankle over the other. “Marr-wage. Marr-wage is what brings us togedder today,” he shook his head at her blank look. “You might be some bigshot FBI hero, but you are seriously lacking when it comes to culture. The Princess Bride is a classic.”

“That’s a movie, right?” Paige stared at him.

Havilland shook his head in disgust. “Seriously lacking, Paige. You should do something to rectify that; but, in the meantime... do you have anything further on this David character?”

“Nope,” Paige admitted. “Because he doesn’t exist. The social security number he provided is bogus. The date of birth indicates a man in his mid-fifties — fifty-four to be exact — and there’s no record of a David Bennett from Kentucky being born on that day. He’s a fraud and the identity’s as fake as Honey Stewart’s double D’s.”

“I’m crushed,” Havilland grinned and pressed his hand to his heart. “She swore those things were natural.”

“Uh-huh,” Paige rolled her eyes. “I scheduled a meeting with Janice, but we have to meet her at the realtor’s office. She has a client dropping in this morning to sign some paperwork and she can’t miss him.”

“Let’s go,” Havilland stood.

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It took less than ten minutes to realize Janice knew even less than they did. The only useful information they got from her was the name of the auction house that contracted with David Bennett to sell Amelia’s property. They also discovered David Bennett matched the description of the BMW driver.

“You want to stop in at the hospital first,” Paige asked. “Or head straight to the auction house?”

“They’re both in Gunnison,” Havilland punched the address into his phone. “Let’s start at the hospital. John Doe — AKA David Bennett — should be awake by now.”

The moment they entered the room, the man demanded an explanation. What happened? How did he get here? Who was going to pay for it?

“We were hoping you’d explain the details to us,” Paige answered.

“I’m Deputy Duncan Havilland and this is my colleague, Deputy Paige Carter. Can you tell us what you remember about the crash?” Havi asked.

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“Crash?” David turned and focused out the window. “That’s right. I was traveling on —” he frowned. “I’m sorry, I’m not from around here, so I don’t know the name of the road. It’s the main highway that leads through town.”

“You were traveling on Highway eighty-nine,” Paige provided, handing the man a bottle of water.

“Right,” he took a slow, deliberate sip before he continued. “And that truck in front of me suddenly slammed on the brakes for no reason. I think he might have been one of those people that deliberately cause an accident. You know, for the insurance money.”

“Witnesses at the scene said you were speeding then riding the bumper of the black truck,” Havilland challenged. “They said he slowed for another vehicle and you struck him from behind, pushing his truck into oncoming traffic.”

“That’s a lie,” David insisted. “They must be in on it. You know what it’s like. I was driving an expensive car. They probably think they can get insurance money and damages from me as well.”

“The man is fighting for his life,” Paige scowled. “He isn’t running a con, Mr. —” she waited, wondering what name the man would provide.

“Bennett,” he said absently. “David Bennett.”

“Mr. Bennett,” Havilland moved to stand next to the bed. “We didn’t find any identification on you. The vehicle is registered to a Charles and Amelia Glover. The insurance card in the glove box was listed under the name of Amelia Glover. The address listed is a vacant house that used to belong to Amelia and Charles, but the couple is now deceased. Can you tell us how you came to be driving a vehicle that did not belong to you?”

“Amelia was my wife,” David told them.

“She’s at least thirty years older than you are,” Paige observed.

“Right,” David glanced away. “Charles died several years ago. Amelia was lonely and we met at the senior center. I lost my wife three years ago. She suffered from early onset dementia, and I spent a lot of time at the senior center back home. It was the place I felt most comfortable.”

“Where is that?” Paige asked, not buying this for a second.

David frowned. He didn’t want to give up too many details. The cops could check details and if everything didn’t match up perfectly, they’d detain him while they dug further. He looked down at his hands, trying to appear distraught. “New Castle... Colorado.”

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“So,” Havilland frowned. “You lived in New Castle with your wife, who contracted early onset dementia and you put her in a home rather than caring for her yourself?”

“I —” David scowled. “I cared for her as long as I was able. Then, I was forced to ask the professionals for help.”

“We understand,” Paige stepped forward. “And three years ago, your wife passed on — is that correct?”

“Yes,” David nodded and set the bottle on the small table next to his bed. “Nancy was the love of my life. It broke my heart to see her like that. By the time she died, she didn’t even remember who I was.”

“Can you give us the name of the facility?” Havilland wondered. “Where your wife was — at the time of her death?”

“Why?” David pushed up in the bed. “What does my late wife have to do with the crash that nearly killed me?”

“That’s what we need to find out,” Havilland shrugged.

“We just need to verify who you are, Mr. Bennett,” Paige added. “Unless you have official identification you can give us. We understand this is a difficult time, but you were driving a vehicle that doesn’t appear to belong to you. We just need to make sure your story checks out. I’m sure you can understand.”

David considered. “The vehicle does belong to me. Amelia and I had an instant connection. We — well, I know this is going to sound odd because she was so much older than I was, but we just clicked. We could sit and talk for hours and hours. Mostly, we reminisced about Charles and Nancy. We were married, approximately three months ago. I’m still working through the legal red tape and that’s why the vehicle hasn’t been transferred into my name.”

“Three months, you say?” Havilland asked.

“That’s right,” David nodded. “Our marriage should be recorded — here in town. You should be able to confirm that yourself. Amelia and I were legally married three months ago.”

“It was closer to three and a half,” Paige corrected. “I already checked. And, you must have terrible luck, Mr. Bennett. It appears Amelia died approximately one week later. I suspect that’s the reason you’re having to deal with all that red tape.”

“Oh, good,” a nurse stepped into the room. “You’re awake. I need to get you down to radiology. The doctor has ordered an MRI this morning.” She turned to look at Paige and Duncan. “I was under the impression Mr. Bennett didn’t have any living relatives. Who are you?”

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Paige pulled out the wallet that contained her badge, Havi just pulled back his jacket to reveal his badge fastened to his belt.

“Oh,” the woman glanced at David then back to them. “I’m not sure if it’s okay for you to be here.”

“I’ll help you get David into the chair,” Havilland offered. “Then we’ll get out of your hair.”

“That’s really nice of you,” the nurse said as Duncan pivoted to block her view.

Neither David Bennett nor the nurse noticed when Paige slid the water bottle from the table and dropped it into an evidence bag. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Bennett,” Paige stopped in the doorway. “We’ll be back to speak to you later.”

Duncan moved to the reception area and asked to speak with David’s doctor. Once they were confident the patient wouldn’t be released without their approval and they had a commitment from the staff to notify the office immediately if David got a visitor — they headed out to contact the auction house.

The supervisor wasn’t happy, but he agreed to suspend all sales for two days. That would give Havilland time to get a warrant to seize the property until ownership could be verified. Randy Gibbs insisted ownership had already been verified, but he reluctantly agreed. They stopped and dropped the water bottle at the lab before returning to the office.

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The following day, Paige was sitting at her desk, organizing her notes from care centers in New Castle, Colorado. She was trying to find the facility where David’s wife, Nancy had been housed. So far, she wasn’t having any luck. She glanced at the phone when it rang, sighed when she remembered Margie was out for lunch, and answered. “Deputy Carter.”

“Oh, yes,” a female voice said in greeting. “I, well my name is Candice Templeton and I’m looking for the police officer that is handling a traffic accident that occurred two days ago. The driver of one of the vehicles should be Donald Franklin.”

“Do you have a case number?” Paige asked.

“Well, no,” the woman admitted. “I — well, I think my fiancé may have been injured, but the hospital doesn’t have any record of him at their facility. I — well, um... Donny called me from the hospital and said he was okay, but they were keeping him for a few days. I forgot to ask him about a notice I received yesterday and called back immediately. They informed me no one by that name is housed in their facility. None of this makes any sense at all. I don’t know, I

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thought if I contacted the police, they could help me sort all of this out. I know it probably seems like a strange request, but I didn't know what else to do."

"You said Donny called from the hospital," Paige tried to clarify. "Can you tell me what hospital he called from?"

"The phone display said Gunnison Valley Hospital," the woman answered. "Can you tell me where that is located?"

"In the city of Gunnison, ma'am," Paige frowned. "In Utah. Can you tell me where you are calling from?"

"Oh, sorry," she sighed. "Like I said, my name is Candice Templeton and I'm calling from Mesquite, Nevada."

"Could you describe your fiancé for me?" Paige began to take notes.

"He's fifty-five years old," she began. "With dark brown hair and a little gray showing around the edges. He's about six feet tall, I would guess, and—"

"I'm going to stop you there," Paige motioned for Havi to join her. "I need to put you on speaker. I believe my colleague is handling that case.

Havilland frowned but settled into Paige's chair.

"Deputy Havilland has now joined us, Ms. Templeton," Paige began. "And I believe the man you know as Donald Franklin is going by the name of David Bennett."

"Why would he do that?" Candice exclaimed. "Oh fiddlesticks, my granddaughter was right, wasn't she?"

"About what?" Havilland asked.

"Cortney met Donald," Candice explained. "It was a lucky accident, I guess you could say. She's attending Dixie College and decided to visit Las Vegas with some friends. They all stopped in for a visit. That was probably two months ago, maybe a little longer. Anyway, with the pandemic, the college is holding classes on that internet thing and the group of them headed to the city for a little fun before the weather turns."

"And she didn't like Donald?" Paige smiled.

"Oh, not really," Candice admitted. "She said she didn't trust him. Cortney thought he seemed — cagey, I think was the word she used. He wasn't happy when she showed up. Cortney is very protective, and she interrogated him a bit, I suppose. Donny was angry and left early that night. Cortney asked me to be careful. She said she didn't trust him, and she wanted me to take things slow with him. Can you imagine, a woman of my age taking things slow?"

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“How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking,” Paige held her breath while she waited for the answer.

“I’m seventy-eight,” Candice sighed. “Other than creaky bones when I crawl out of bed, I feel like a spry sixty-five.”

Paige laughed. “You sound spry to me.”

“Is Courtney right about Donny?” Candice asked reluctantly.

“I’m afraid she is,” Havilland admitted. “I’d like to speak with you about Donald, Candice. I’d like to do that in person, but I have to run this by my boss before I can head down to you. Could you give me a number where I can contact you once I get this all sorted out?”

“Oh, sure,” Candice provided her phone number, her address, and her full name.

“What do you need to run by your boss?” Jericho asked from Margie’s desk.

“Can I drive to Nevada to interview a witness?” Havilland requested.

“Why?” Jericho frowned. “I think both of you better join me in my office and bring me up to date.”

Once his deputies had finished laying out the facts of the case, Jericho leaned back to consider. “Paige, can you work with Carmen and see if the two of you can determine who this man is?”

“I’m already doing that,” Paige told him. “I’m just waiting for the lab results to come back on the water bottle and they’re still running the fingerprints. She’s running what little we have, but she’s going to need more details if we want to find verified answers.”

“Alright,” he glanced at Havilland. “It sounds like the crash investigation is complete. Do you plan to charge this David Bennett character with a traffic violation?”

“Yes,” Havilland answered immediately. “Witness statements put him as the primary contributor. The black truck didn’t contribute as far as I’m concerned. He evaded a third vehicle that made an illegal turn in front of him then was hit from behind by the BMW being driven by Bennett. The witnesses said Bennett was speeding for at least a mile before the crash. Once he closed the distance between him and the truck, he was right on our victim’s bumper. I want to stop by the hospital for an update before I screen anything with the DA. If Carl Watson doesn’t make it, I’m going to file charges for manslaughter or vehicular homicide.”

“File what you have,” Jericho ordered. “We don’t know who this guy is, and we don’t want him sneaking out and vanishing. Stan can amend the charges later if we need to. Charge him with reckless driving now and tell Stan you want a warrant immediately. Once it’s served, I can

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post an officer at the door of the hospital to make sure he doesn't go anywhere. Close out the crash and focus on the fraud. I'm going to approve the trip to Mesquite. Take Paige with you. It's close enough, you should be able to make the trip in one day. If you don't have enough time today, leave first thing in the morning."

"I'm going to call Candice back and tell her we'll be there tomorrow," Havilland decided. "I'll complete the paperwork and screen the charges with Stan before I head to the hospital." He turned to address Paige. "Can you be ready to go by eight?"

"Do you want to leave earlier than that?" Paige considered. "I think it's about four, maybe four and a half hours away. That's at least eight hours of drive time, maybe nine. I can be ready by seven."

Havi grinned. "Closer to three, I'm driving."

"I better not get a call from Highway Patrol or any other department about my deputies and their unprofessional driving."

Havilland nodded and waited for Jericho to step into his office. "You notice he didn't say no speeding."

"I noticed," Paige grumbled. "But I might."

"I don't work for you," Havilland moved to his desk. "Your demands are merely suggestions in my world." He was still smiling when he walked out the door.

Paige watched him leave, then turned to snatch up her ringing phone. "Deputy Carter."

"Paige," Carmen said in greeting. "It's Carmen."

"Did you find him?" Paige demanded.

"Sort of," Carmen sighed. "I tracked the David Bennett identification down. The real Bennett is technically missing but presumed dead."

"What does that mean?"

"He was a recluse that loved to hike," Carmen provided. "He went backpacking in the Alps eight years ago and was never seen again. A storm came in that took everyone by surprise. Add that to the fact the mountain range in question is vast and rugged —"

"And he may never be found," Paige finished.

"Right," Carmen agreed. "They searched for over three days, but never found the man, a body, or even the slightest sign David Bennett actually went hiking where he said he was going."

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It's a mystery, but the family always thought he'd go out that way, so nobody is really pushing for answers."

"They already have them," Paige considered. "So, our suspect chose an identity that couldn't be challenged and wouldn't appear that suspicious if anyone went looking. How hard was it to find the information?"

"Any detective with decent skills would have found it," Carmen frowned.

"I think that's by design," Paige decided. "Anything else?"

"Maybe," Carmen hesitated. "David Bennett was originally from Alaska."

"So, he's used to remote," Paige mumbled.

"He would be, yes," Carmen agreed. "That's not the intel, though. He moved to Montana about eight months before he went missing."

"Okay," Paige settled into her chair and waited for the real news. She knew Carmen well enough to know there was something else.

"He settled in a small town called Fairfield, just north of Helena."

"You have a point, Carmen. What is it?" Paige pushed.

"Bennett was living with a great aunt at the time," Carmen continued. "A woman by the name of Joyce Taylor. Joyce died two months after Bennett disappeared."

"Died how?" Paige sat up.

"Poisoned," Carmen told her. "Ethylene glycol, to be precise. The authorities suspected Bennett at first but once they realized he was dead, or likely dead, the case went cold. They found antifreeze mixed in with the cream Joyce used in her tea. They concluded, whoever poisoned her had to be living in the home at the time, or close to the time, of her death. The case is still open, but inactive."

"You concluded it wasn't Bennett?" Paige asked.

"I don't conclude," Carmen disagreed. "I gather evidence and give it to the hotshot detectives who conclude."

"Fair enough," Paige laughed. "I'll conclude it wasn't Bennett. Could they put anyone else in the house at the time?"

"That is inconclusive," Carmen grinned. "A couple neighbors thought they saw a man, a stranger but they couldn't be sure. A third neighbor claims to have met a man who said he was

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staying there. They all insisted it wasn't Bennett, but the police couldn't find another relative that might have been visiting."

"How about a stranger?" Paige wondered aloud. "Is there any possibility that my suspect killed both Joyce and her nephew, then stole David's identity to use later?"

"At this point," Carmen sighed. "Anything is possible."

"I need those DNA results," Paige grumbled.

"You know you could send them to the FBI," Carmen began.

"I'm not going to do that," Paige decided. "I'm going over to the lab to sit on the technicians until they give me the results."

"You're not actually going to sit on them, right?" Carmen laughed. "Because you do know that will hamper any progress they might make while processing your evidence."

"Funny," Paige shook her head. "Let me know if you find anything else."

"Will do," Carmen disconnected.

Paige debated — head over to the lab to put pressure on the techs, or start a thorough background on Joyce Taylor and David Bennett? "Background," she decided. Driving over to the lab would only annoy them. Worse, it would get her on Debbie's bad side. As things stood, Debbie Strong, the lab supervisor, was pushing for quick results and promised to call Paige with an update before the end of the day. She could be patient and focus on Joyce and her reclusive nephew.

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Nearly two hours later, Paige was on the phone with Detective Brad Grant from Fairfield, Montana.

"As you can see," Det. Grant said. "Misty indicated she met this strange man briefly a few weeks prior to Joyce's death."

"I'm not sure where you are," Paige admitted. "I only had a few minutes to skim through this report before you called. Can you tell me what page you are referring to?"

"It's the witness statement I obtained from Misty Lancaster," Grant advised. "She was walking her dog one day and saw the man pull into Joyce's driveway. She stopped to see if he needed help. Joyce was in her late eighties and Misty knew it was difficult for her to answer the

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door. She thought he must be a salesman or something. The man identified himself as Dirk Bixby and said he was staying with Joyce for a few days.”

“What’s with all the names that start with ‘D’?” Paige wondered. “Dirk, David, Donald—”

“Good question,” Grant agreed. “I didn’t have the others, but it’s a pattern. I think if we figure out the why, we’ll figure out who.”

“Or the other way around,” Paige located the witness statement he was referring to and quickly skimmed through it. “Her description is vague but matches our suspect in general.”

“Yeah,” Grant sighed. “It’s not enough, though.”

“Wait!” Paige straightened. “This says he had a tattoo. The incident occurred in the summer and he wasn’t wearing a shirt. Who sees a shirtless man and thinks salesman? Never mind. This is exactly what I needed to make a connection.”

“There has to be a million guys that match what we have,” Grant warned. “Dark hair, mid to late forties, around six feet tall. You’ll never get a warrant to inspect his chest.”

“No,” Paige agreed. “But I don’t need one.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s in the hospital and the nurses love to poke and prod,” Paige smiled. “I just need one to assist me in the poking and prodding. Then I need her to fill out a statement describing the man’s Celtic tree of life tattoo on his left pectoral area that just happens to have half a dozen birds flying towards his shoulder.”

“If he has one,” Grant warned. “And that’s a big if, but it would be unique and difficult to dispute.”

“He has one,” Paige said confidently. Her gut was telling her David Bennett was Dirk Bixby roughly eight years ago. That meant, he’d been operating this scheme for over eight years, there had to be more victims.

“I could talk to the witnesses again,” Grant offered. “Someone might remember something they forgot to report.”

“Alright,” Paige picked up a pen to jot down the new name. “Keep us posted. This is actually Duncan’s case, but you can talk to either of us. I’ll fill him in on the new developments.”

“I’ll call your office tomorrow after I interview the strongest prospects,” he decided.

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“No,” Paige stopped him. “We’re taking a road trip in the morning. Call my cell.” Once she relayed her number, they disconnected.

“What new developments?” Jericho demanded.

Paige told him what Carmen found then explained the connection with the homicide in Montana.

“I’ll call Benny and have him track down a tox report on the late Amelia Glover,” he decided. “If we get lucky, he can tell us if someone poisoned her with antifreeze the same as Joyce Taylor. Most killers stick with what works if they get away clean. Get this information to Duncan then go home. It’s late and tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

“Alright,” Paige stood. “But he didn’t exactly get away clean. There’s still an open cold case on the murder. He may have changed his MO.”

“I’ll work on that tomorrow while you’re dealing with our victim in Mesquite,” Jericho followed her to the door. “Good work, Paige. I’m going to get grief from James on this one, but it looks like you stumbled onto another killer.”

“Don’t even start with me,” Paige warned. “This isn’t my case. Havi stumbled onto another killer. I’m just the girl standing in the background.”

“I’ll be sure to relay that little tidbit when Tolman starts in on firing you again,” Jericho grinned.

“What?” Paige whirled around. “He wants you to fire me. Because I’m good at my job?”

“It was a joke, Paige,” Jericho pulled open her car door. “Lighten up. He appreciates how thorough you are, same as I do.”

Paige continued to scowl as she climbed behind the wheel and headed for home.

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“You just cost me a hundred dollars,” Paige grumbled. “I hope you’re happy about that.”

“That depends,” Havilland pushed open his door and climbed from the vehicle, stretching a little before grabbing a large notepad.

“On what?” Paige slammed her door shut and walked toward the enormous front porch.

“On the details,” Havilland studied the mansion looming in front of him and shook his head in disgust. “You know this woman is going to end up dead in a few months if we don’t stop this

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maniac. She's clearly loaded and David, Dirk, Donny, Dipshit doesn't seem to waste much time between jobs."

"We'll stop him," Paige said confidently. "I expect a call from Nurse Tracee any minute. And the bet was with Dax regarding your driving."

"Never bet against a soldier," Havilland laughed. "Especially when it comes to my driving. Who is Tracee?" Havilland paused.

"Nurse Ashlie Tracee," Paige corrected. "And she's the nurse that is going to check and see if your reckless driver has a tattoo of the Celtic tree of life."

"You don't think Ms. Candice Templeton knows?" Havi rang the bell. "They are engaged."

"I doubt it, but we'll ask," she was about to say more but the door flew open and an attractive woman that could be seventy-eight stood in the opening. She actually looked to be sixty-something. She was breathing hard and looked pale. "Candice Templeton?"

"Yes," she reached out and gripped the side of the door. "Sorry, I'm feeling a little dizzy today for some reason. You must be Deputy Carter, come in."

"Ma'am," Paige took the woman's arm. "I think maybe we should take you to the closest hospital or clinic."

"Oh," she waved that off and started toward a large sitting room. "There's really no need. It's just a little dizzy spell. I think I may be getting the flu."

"Are you also feeling nauseous?" Paige pushed.

"Well, yes," Candice admitted. "But it's nothing serious, I'm sure."

"Headache?" Paige continued. She shook her head once when Havi narrowed his eyes at her.

"Not really," Candice settled onto a fancy couch.

"Does that mean yes?" Paige sat on the couch next to Candice.

"It's very slight," Candice insisted. "Mostly I just have an upset stomach."

"Either you let us drive you to the clinic or I'm calling an ambulance," Paige shrugged. "Your choice."

"Oh, alright," Candice put a hand to her forehead. "But I think you're overreacting."

"I don't think so," Paige stood.

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“Paige?” Havilland blocked her exit.

“I think Candice may have been poisoned,” Paige whispered. “She has all the symptoms.”

“Antifreeze?” Havilland studied the woman intently.

“Yes,” Paige stepped away and moved to the front door. “We’re not familiar with the area, Ms. Templeton. Can you tell us how to get to the closest hospital?”

“Oh, call me Candice,” she pulled on a jacket and followed the deputies out the door, pausing to lock up. “I really don’t think this is unnecessary.”

“Humor us,” Havilland took her elbow and helped her down the stairs. “We’re just being cautious.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” Candice wondered.

“Let’s just get you to the doctor,” Paige opened the back door and waited for Candice to slide in. “We’ll talk once the doctor has a chance to speak with you.”

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“I ran the tests you requested,” the doctor said twenty minutes later. “You were right. I need to speak with Ms. Templeton.”

“So, speak,” Paige motioned toward the woman who was now visibly upset.

The doctor moved to stand between Paige and his patient. “Ma’am, would you like this police officer to leave while we speak about your condition in private?”

“No,” Candice glanced around him to focus on Paige. “Please stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Paige assured her.

“Are you sure about this?” the doctor pushed.

“She told you to talk,” Paige stood and moved to stand next to the bed. “I’ll get you started.” She reached out and placed a hand on Candice’s arm. “I asked him to test your blood and see if you were poisoned. The test came back positive.”

“Poisoned?” Candice shifted her attention to the doctor. “With what?”

“Ethylene glycol,” the doctor answered.

“Antifreeze,” Paige corrected. “Seriously?” she glared at the doctor.

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“Antifreeze,” the doctor agreed. “It appears you’ve been exposed to very small amounts. A nurse will be in shortly to hook up an IV with an antidote. We’re also going to put you on oxygen as a precaution. The damage appears to be minimal, but I want to run a few more test to check your kidney for damage. Can you tell us how long you’ve been suffering from flu-like symptoms?”

“I’m not sure,” Candice admitted. “Off and on for about two weeks now. What do you mean, you are giving me an antidote?”

“We will administer ethanol as an antidote to clear your system of the toxins,” the doctor was focused on a chart. “You should feel significantly better soon.”

“Can you be more specific?” Paige asked Joyce. “What do you mean by off and on?”

“Oh,” Joyce frowned and considered. “One day I’ll feel extremely ill, the next day I feel better. A few days later I might feel queasy again.”

“Just nauseous and woozy or have you vomited during these episodes?” the doctor asked.

“Just the upset stomach and weak,” Candice focused on Paige. “Sometimes I feel dizzy like I’ve had too much to drink, or I get headaches that make it difficult to think clearly. You think Ronny did this?”

“I know he did,” Paige said flatly. “I just need to figure out how.”

“But he’s out of town,” Candice objected.

“Exactly,” Paige shrugged. “Seems like a perfect alibi doesn’t it?”

“I will have to call the authorities and report this,” the doctor informed them. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Go ahead and call,” Paige nodded. “Ask them to respond and speak with us here.”

The doctor exited the room and seconds later Havilland entered. “I updated Jericho. He said he’s calling the locals.”

“The doctor just left to do the same thing,” Paige advised. “Now, Candice, we need to figure out how Donny is poisoning you. Can you think of anything you ate or drank on the days you felt ill?”

“I…” Candice frowned. “I don’t know.”

“Do you drink coffee or tea?” Havilland asked, thinking of the victim in Montana.

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“I do,” Candice admitted. “Not every day, but I do like a cup of hot tea on chilly mornings.”

“Did you have tea this morning?” Havilland asked.

“I did,” Candice frowned. “Yes.”

“And how do you take your tea?” Paige asked. “Do you flavor it with honey or add milk or cream?”

“My guilty pleasure is hazelnut creamer,” Candice admitted. “I usually add sweetener and a bit of cream to my tea. Do you think that’s how he did it? In my tea?”

“It’s possible,” Havilland told her. “We’ll wait for the local cops to arrive, but do you mind if we search your residence to see if we can find what’s poisoning you?”

“Of course not,” Candice glanced at the door. “I think maybe I should call my granddaughter. Is it okay if I ask Cortney to come down and sit with me while I’m here at the hospital?”

“That would be fine,” Paige assured her. “I can see you’re shaken by this news. I want to assure you; Donald will not be a threat after today. He’s been charged for the crash already and if we can prove he tried to poison you, we’ll add attempted murder.”

“Don’t you have to convince the local police to charge him here?” Candice asked. “Since it happened in Nevada, not in Manti?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Paige patted her leg. “I know you said you wanted to get up and go for a short walk, but I think you should relax for a bit. Just settled back on the bed until your granddaughter arrives.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Candice lifted her legs onto the bed and settled against the pillows. “I’m feeling a little sick at the moment.”

“Sick as in heartsick,” Paige asked. “Or sick as in your symptoms are getting worse?”

“Emotionally sick,” Candice assured her. “I’ll be fine. I just need a little time.”

“Can I ask you a question before we go?” Havilland stepped forward; not sure this was the right time, but he needed a few answers.

“Of course,” Candice shuddered. “Thank you,” she told Havilland after he covered her in a thin blanket.

“You said you and Donald are engaged,” Havilland glanced up when a man in a suit stepped into the room. “Have you set a date for the wedding?”

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“Oh,” Candice frowned. “It would not be anything big. We decided to go to Vegas and do the quick chapel on the Strip thing. We’ve both been married before, so we didn’t want to waste all that money again. We planned to be spontaneous as soon as he got back from his business trip.” She frowned. “I guess that was a lie as well?”

Paige smiled. “I know many, many women who would completely freak out if they heard you say all that money was wasted.”

“I didn’t mean —”

“I know,” Paige smiled at her. “It looks like you have a visitor,” she turned to address the newcomer. “Would you like to introduce yourself?”

“Detective Joel Anderson,” he held out a hand to Paige. “Your sheriff called my boss. I assume you’re Deputy Carter and you must be Deputy Havilland.”

“Is there somewhere we can talk in private?” Havilland motioned to the door. “Candice has had a rough day, and she’d like to contact her granddaughter.”

“There’s a room just around the corner the nurse said we can use,” Anderson followed them out. Once they stepped inside the small break room and closed the door, he turned to address the deputies. “I have the basics, but maybe you could give me the details.”

“We’re a little sketchy on details,” Paige admitted. “Havi will explain our case, then I’ll tell you what I know about the case in Montana.”

“At some point,” Anderson looked from Paige to Duncan. “You know we’ll have to call in the Feds. We’re already talking three states and it sounds like we might be missing victims.”

“We’ll get to that,” Havilland explained his case then Paige picked up and filled him in on Joyce from Montana.

“Which is the reason you asked the doctors here to check for poisoning,” Anderson realized. “Have they given you the results?”

“Positive,” Havilland and Paige said together.

“I’ll need to get a warrant,” Anderson began to pace. “We need to search her house.” He glanced at his watch and frowned.

“She gave us permission,” Havilland advised. “If you have a consent to search form, Candice will sign it.”

“Is there any chance this Donald guy will return before we get started?” Anderson asked.

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“No,” Paige answered. “He’s been arrested on the reckless driving and our boss arranged for a constant guard until he’s transported to jail. He’s not going anywhere.”

“That helps,” Anderson pulled out his phone. “I’ll get the form, but I still want a warrant. Consent will make it easier, but I don’t want any loopholes. If this guy tried to kill Ms. Templeton, our case needs to be solid.”

“Because she’s rich?” Havilland wondered.

“Because she’s loved in this community,” Anderson corrected. “Give me ten, then we’ll get Candice to sign the forms. I want to secure her house immediately.”

“When you go back in there,” Paige moved toward the door. “Can you ask Candice if Donald had a tattoo and, if so, have her describe it?”

“Because?” Anderson paused before hitting send.

“The mystery man in Montana had one,” Havilland stepped in behind Paige. “We want to see if she describes the same markings on Donald.”

“And you’re not going to tell me what it was or where it’s located?” Anderson asked.

“Nope,” Paige pulled open the door. “Not until you meet us at the Templeton estate with a warrant.”

“I believe that’s called extortion,” Anderson followed them into the hallway.

“No,” Paige considered. “Not really. Maybe bribery if I didn’t have a good reason for it.”

“Which is?” Anderson pressed.

“It’s cleaner,” Paige shrugged. “If you don’t know what the tattoo is, nobody can accuse you of leading your witness.”

“Nobody would accuse me of that, anyway,” Anderson turned toward the room where Candice was waiting. It surprised him to see Paige and Havilland walking in the opposite direction. “Where are you going?”

“We have some calls to make of our own,” Paige informed him. “We’ll meet you at the house. I assume you have the address.”

“Your assumption is correct,” Anderson scowled and wondered what those two were up to.

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“What calls are we making?” Havilland asked once they settled back in the car.

“Jericho first,” Paige advised. “I need him to get those DNA results over to Carmen.”

“I think he already did that, but we can check,” Havi hit speed dial and waited for his boss to answer. “And then who?”

“Agent Sparrow,” Paige was scrolling through her contacts.

“Jack?” Havi grinned, then sobered when Jericho answered.

“Zach,” Paige corrected. “Put him on the car system.

“Hey boss, let me switch you over to the speaker,” Havilland advised.

“Duncan said you sent the DNA results to Carmen,” Paige said in greeting.

“She’s had them for about an hour,” Jericho affirmed. “Heidi ran the fingerprints through AFIS, nothing on file there. Debbie is also checking CODIS on the DNA — she’ll call if anything pops.”

“Carmen will be faster,” Paige pondered. “The locals are working on a warrant, but we already know Candice was poisoned. Additional charges will help keep the elusive predator behind bars, but we need more. I’m calling in the Feds.”

“I already talked to Porter,” Jericho admitted. “He can’t spare Sean for this.”

“I was thinking of someone closer,” Paige answered. “Agent Sparrow, he works out of Vegas. Utah, Nevada... that’s his area. I think technically Butte would handle the Fairfield case, but they’ll make an exception if Sparrow is already on this.”

“You trust him?” Jericho wondered.

“With my life,” Paige didn’t hesitate. “He’ll work with us, not trample over us.”

“Then call,” Jericho agreed. “We could use the help. I’m confident there are additional victims, probably in multiple states. Carmen’s been working on the financials. The guy is loaded, but he spends money like it’s going out of style. He’s going to need an infusion soon if he can’t sell the house here in town soon.”

“Did we get an injunction on that?” Havilland wondered.

“Stan finalized it with Judge Potter just before you called,” Jericho advised. “The house, the paintings, everything at the auction house, it’s all frozen for now. Margie thinks she identified a niece, but she lives in Casper, Wyoming and hasn’t returned my calls.”

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“Good,” Duncan glanced at Paige. “Candice has a granddaughter on the way, and she’ll cooperate. We’ve got a lot of circumstantial, but we need to pin down this guy’s true identity.”

“I’ll call Carmen after I talk to Zach Sparrow,” Paige decided. “I’m sure she has something, even if she’s still digging.”

“I’ll continue to work this on my end,” Jericho told them. “If there’s something under a rock I turn, he’ll follow through from here. Keep me posted.”

“I’ll call Zach,” Paige said once the call disconnected. “You head to the house. I want to be there when Anderson starts searching.”

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An hour and a half later, they were still searching Candice Templeton’s home. It was large and Paige was being meticulous. The front door swung open and a tall man in his forties stepped inside. He was wearing a black suit, a grey shirt and a dark gray, pin striped tie.

“Looks like your Fed just arrived,” Duncan whispered.

“Hey Zach,” Paige moved forward to greet her old friend.

“You always did know how to pick ‘em, Paige,” Zach glanced around.

“Blame him,” she pointed a finger at Duncan. “This is his case. I’m just—” Paige stopped abruptly and sprinted out the back door.

Zach looked at Duncan, who appeared just as confused as he was. Both men instantly broke into a run, following Paige out the door, past the outdoor swimming pool, and stopping at a large block.

Zach laughed once he dropped from the wall to the other side. “Man, I’ve missed that woman.”

“You’re going to destroy that fancy suit,” Duncan dropped to the ground next to him.

Zach shrugged. “It’s worth it. I haven’t had this much excitement since the last case I worked with Paige. There’s never a dull moment. Where do you think they went?”

“That way,” Havilland pointed to the thick trees. “Do you know what’s out there?”

“A whole lot of nothing, I think,” Zach started jogging toward the forest. “Until you hit the Virgin River.”

“Any idea what she’s chasing?” Duncan asked, careful to keep pace with the Agent.

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“Nope,” Zach grinned. “But I’m sure it will be entertaining.”

Moments later, they broke through the trees and found themselves on the edge of a large, sandy expanse of nothingness. Near the river, Paige was wrestling with a woman.

“Told you it would be entertaining,” Zach started to jog toward the women but slowed significantly in the soft, deep sand.

“Now,” Duncan laughed. “You’re going to ruin those shoes. Paige might be entertaining, but the cost of admission is going to be high.”

“And you guys say us Feds are soft,” Zach studied Duncan’s attire. Tennis shoes, jeans, casual shirt, and jacket. “I don’t know why you’re complaining. Those shoes will survive the sand.” They stopped a few feet away from Paige.

Paige was getting tired of this. She’d just sprinted through a forest of thick cedar and sagebrush. She had a bleeding gash on her shin, sand in places she didn’t want to think about, and now the woman was trying to scratch her face off. Enough was enough. She pivoted, kicked out and was taken by surprise when the woman kicked her in the stomach. Paige went down, but so did her opponent. The woman regained her balance first, tried to stand and was stopped when Paige gripped the back of her flimsy pink halter-top. Material ripped, the shirt fell to the ground and the woman, who was now naked from the waist up glared at Paige in surprise, which quickly turned to anger.

Before she regained her composure, Duncan lunged forward, pushed her to the ground, and cuffed her hands behind her back.

Zach reached one hand out to Paige to help her stand. In the other, he held the florescent pink top. “Welcome to Nevada, kid.”

“Sorry to interrupt the joyful reunion,” Duncan was trying not to laugh. “But maybe Paige could get that thing back on the hysterical woman thrashing around on the ground and explain why she was chasing her in the first place.”

Paige snatched the miniscule cloth from Zach’s extended hand, marched over to where the woman was now sitting upright at Havilland’s feet and dropped to her knees. Within seconds she had the top tied around the naked woman. It wasn’t perfect, with the tear, but it should hold. She jumped to her feet and jabbed Duncan in the ribs. “Pervert.”

“I didn’t see a thing,” Duncan laughed, rubbed his side, but leaned over and helped the woman to her feet.

“I thought I saw someone in the trees earlier,” Paige gripped the woman’s arm and started back toward the house. “Then it was gone. She was sneaking past the pool once Zach arrived,

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probably wanted to get a better look. When she realized I spotted her, she tried to flee. I gave chase.”

“Have you ever lost a suspect, Carter?” Zach wondered.

“Nope,” Paige shrugged. “Now, let’s get her back to the station and see what she has to say for herself.”

They were approaching the thick trees when Detective Anderson emerged. “Who is she?” he demanded.

“Don’t know yet,” Duncan shrugged. “Maybe you can help figure that out.”

Anderson studied the woman, then focused on the FBI agent and settled on Paige. “You’re hurt. I’ll call a medic and you can explain what just happened. I leave the room for five minutes and come back to this...”

“I don’t need a medic,” Paige disagreed. “I need an interrogation room.”

“We can set something up back at the house,” Anderson decided. “That should give you time to fill me in on the details.”

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The group was gathered around the kitchen table, discussing their next move. Paige had explained what happened, Anderson had retrieved a first aid kit from his vehicle and a forensic analyst had finished fingerprinting the woman. They were waiting for the results after the tech ran the prints through the system to see if there was a match. Everyone looked up when the petite woman stepped back into the room.

“Her name is Veronica Leatrice Shaw,” Brandy Terrell told them.

“Thanks Brandy,” Anderson stood. “I appreciate the quick work.”

The analyst nodded, dropped her findings on the table and focused on Anderson. “Anything else? We’ve got another call over at the lake. They could use my help if I’m done here.”

“Yeah,” Anderson nodded. “Go, I’ll let you know if we need anything else later on.”

“There’s a lake close by?” Paige wondered.

“Lake Mead,” Zach said absently, studying the printout Brandy left. “Veronica has a record. And she’s new to town. Looks like she was locked up for shoplifting up in Wyoming

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last year.” He settled into a chair and began working on his laptop. “And she has a warrant out of Colorado for fraud.”

“We can work with that,” Paige decided. “Now, we just need to agree on who will interrogate her.”

“I vote for Paige,” Duncan cut in. “She’s the one that caught her and that will throw her. She’s figured out this guy’s a hot shot in a suit. If Paige goes in, with him, or in his place, she’ll think our track star has juice.”

“I hate to admit it,” Anderson settled into a chair. “But I agree. Now, we just have to figure out who goes in with her.”

Paige rolled her eyes. “It’s not a competition and it’s obvious.”

“Not to us,” Zach disagreed. “We need to set up a camera system to record the interview and hook it to a monitor where the rest of you can observe. Anderson, you come in to begin with. If she blocks, Zach, you waltz in acting all important and bring out the elite snob act.”

“Is it an act?” Anderson wondered. Everyone ignored him.

“Throw around big words and look down your nose at me,” Paige smiled. “Play it the same way you did with Weixel.”

Zach smiled. “Good plan and it should work. She’s not as sophisticated or as savvy as Weixel. She’ll fall for it.”

“Are you following this?” Anderson asked Duncan.

“Nope,” Havilland shrugged. “But I don’t need to. I’ll find a way to hook our camera to that big screen over there. Maybe Caroline has some popcorn. Give me ten, I’ll get this set up. Too bad beers out, this sounds like it’s going to be entertaining.”

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Detective Anderson and Paige stepped into the room and settled into the chairs set up across from their suspect. “I’m Detective Anderson with the Mesquite Police Department and this is Deputy Carter from Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office.” Anderson began.

Paige was watching Veronica carefully, so she saw the surprise before the woman masked it.

Anderson switched on a recorder in addition to the video. “This interview will be recorded. First, let’s get the technical stuff out of the way.” He relayed his case number, the time, and read

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Veronica her rights. Once she agreed to speak to them, he asked the first question. “Can you tell us your name for the record?”

“Justine La Fontaine,” she said without hesitation.

“And your date of birth?” Paige asked.

Veronica gave a fake birthdate.

“She’s probably used that alias before,” Zach said through the earpiece. “There’s a record under that name. Let me check the details.”

“Alright, Justine,” Paige ignored the look she was getting from Anderson. “Tell us why you were lurking in the backyard at the Templeton estate.”

“I wasn’t lurking,” Veronica objected. “I’m staying with Candice and I locked myself out of the pool house. I was trying to see if there was a key inside the house. When I saw all of you inside, I got scared and ran. I thought you might be burglars or something.”

“That’s twice you’ve lied,” Paige said flatly.

“I’m not lying,” Veronica insisted. “Ask Ms. Templeton.”

“We have,” Paige shrugged. “She doesn’t know anyone named Veronica.”

That got her attention. She panicked, looked at Anderson then focused on Paige. “Who is Veronica?”

“You are,” Paige opened a file. “Your name is Veronica Leatrice Shaw. I’m sure you just got confused when we asked for your name earlier. You’ve been in and out of jail nearly two dozen times,” Paige continued.

“Did you really think, after Brandy took your prints, we wouldn’t discover your identity?” Anderson pushed.

Veronica shrugged. “It was worth a shot.”

“You have been arrested under the La Fontaine name, but it was a fake and it’s been linked to your real name now. Oh, and did we forget to mention you have a slight matter of a warrant out of Colorado?”

Veronica glared at Paige, not so cocky now.

“Let’s try this again,” Anderson cut in. “What were you doing at the Templeton home?”

“I was looking for Donny.”

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“Who is Donny?” Paige masked her surprise that Veronica had given him up so quickly.

“I don’t have to talk to you,” Veronica decided. “You can book me on the warrant and see if Colorado will extradite but I ain’t saying nothing.”

The door slid open and Zach stepped inside. He glanced at Paige, then focused on Anderson. “I’ll take it from here.”

Anderson frowned and reluctantly left the room. The displeasure with the change was clear, and it wasn’t fake.

“Pull up a seat,” Havilland motioned to a comfortable chair. “This is about to get good.”

“It doesn’t bother you?” Anderson settled in next to Duncan. “This is your case and she just took over.”

“Naw,” Havi shrugged. “If we get the bad guy, that’s all that matters.”

“You respect her,” Anderson realized.

“Of course,” Havilland turned up the volume.

“Ma’am,” Sparrow gave a soft grunt of displeasure as he settled into the chair next to Paige. “I’m Agent Sparrow with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

Veronica sat up a little straighter, clearly intrigued.

“I asked these local cops to wait for me to check a few things before we began but…” he shook his head. “Well, you know how these things work. They wanted to rush the process, pressure you into talking to them and walk away before I could offer you the amazing deal I’ve been negotiating.”

“What kind of deal?” Veronica demanded.

“I’ve been speaking with Colorado,” Sparrow steepled his hands in front of his face. “I think we’ve nearly reached an agreement. They just need to know you’ll make restitution for the merchandise you stole.”

“With what money?” Veronica narrowed her eyes at the agent.

“You mentioned Donny,” Sparrow shrugged. “Can’t he pay the debt for you. He’s loaded, after all.”

Paige straightened and slapped a hand to the table. “I told you about Donny in confidence and you’re going to use that against me to cut a deal?”

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Sparrow glanced at Paige then returned his attention to Veronica. His entire demeanor was that of a patient parent dealing with an uncooperative child. He reached into a file and pulled out a sheet of paper. "I was able to access Donny's financial accounts. Take a look for yourself. He should have more than enough to help you out."

Veronica took the paper determined to ignore everything these cops told her. She changed her mind when she saw just how much money Donny actually had. "What do you want from me?"

Zach took the paper back. "I don't believe Donald Franklin is his real name. I'm hoping you can tell me who he really is. You do that, and I can offer you a deal."

"The warrant goes away out of Colorado?" Veronica pushed.

"I can arrange that," Zach assured her. "What's Donald's real name?"

"I want it in writing," Veronica decided. "You give me something in writing that assures me I won't go to jail on that warrant out of Colorado and I'll tell you who Donny really is."

Zach turned to look at Paige. "Can you check on that?"

Paige stood and left the room.

"Alright," Zach leaned forward. "Now, it's just you and me. Give me something. You have my word the warrant in Colorado will be dealt with. What can you tell me about Donald?"

"You promise?" Veronica asked again.

"You have my word," Zach nodded. "Deputy Carter should have the official paperwork within minutes. Who is Donald?"

"His real name is Trent Howard," Veronica told him. "But I'm not saying anything else until I know the warrant is gone."

Paige called Carmen. "Get me everything you can on Trent Howard. I don't know where he's from yet, but David Bennett is Trent Howard."

"I'll get started on that, send me when you get when you get it and I'll dig deeper," Carmen disconnected.

"I can't believe that worked," Anderson handed Paige the paperwork the federal prosecutor out of Vegas maneuvered. "Here's her written guarantee. How will you get around the last part?"

"I'm not giving her the document," Paige shrugged. "I'm giving it to Zach." She stepped back into the room, handed Agent Sparrow the paperwork then settled back in the chair.

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“I have a note here from Mindy Warren,” Zach told Veronica. “She says she can work a deal, but she needs to speak with you. Give me just a minute to contact her.” He dialed the number and then put the phone on speaker. “Okay, Mindy. You’re on speaker with Veronica Shaw.”

“Ms. Shaw,” Mindy came across loud and clear. “I’ve made arrangements for the charges in Colorado to be dropped if you cooperate with Agent Sparrow completely. You need to answer all of his questions completely and truthfully or the deal is invalid. Do you understand?”

“The Colorado cops can’t arrest me for what happened with that old guy?” Veronica asked.

“If you are referring to the fraud charges,” Mindy clarified. “No. They have eradicated those charges in exchange for your cooperation.”

“Alright,” Veronica spoke to Sparrow. “I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

“Thank you, Mindy,” Sparrow disconnected. “Tell us about Trent Howard.”

“I went to high school with Trent,” Veronica began. “He always had a thing for me, but he was a math nerd and not worth my time, goofy looking too. Anyway, I didn’t pay much attention until I flunked a test and was facing summer school — again. That’s when he said he could fix it. He did and we sort of agreed to an arrangement.”

“What kind of arrangement?” Paige asked.

Veronica sighed. She didn’t like the woman, but she agreed to talk, and she wanted the warrant to go away. “An intimate one. He’d fix things for me and I’d give him what he wants when he wants it.”

“Have you been in contact with Trent since high school then?” Sparrow wondered.

“Mostly,” Veronica admitted. “I moved away for a few years, then got married. After that, there were ten or so years that we didn’t have contact on account my no-good husband at the time didn’t like him.”

“Can you walk us through the timeline,” Sparrow asked. “Start after that ten years or so when you reconnected. Where did you live, where did Trent live?”

“First,” Paige interrupted. “If my calculations are correct, that means the two of you reconnected when you were in your mid-thirties, is that correct?”

“Yeah, about that.” Veronica agreed.

“Alright then, walk us through what happened then,” Sparrow prompted.

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Veronica went through a timeline that covered the past twenty years or so. In the beginning, they engaged in small cons. Mainly, she'd pick up a guy that looked wealthy, drop a little Ambien in their drink, and coax them to a room rented under a fake name. Once he passed out, Trent would come in and they'd sift through the guy's wallet, steal his watch, jewelry, and anything else of value — then bolt. That worked for several years but one night the guy didn't pass out completely. When Trent tried to steal his wallet, the man attacked, nearly beating Trent to death in his rage. That's when they decided to change things up a bit.

Trent got the idea to visit care centers and steal anything lying around that had value. That didn't last long because there wasn't much to steal. But, victimizing the elderly gave him an idea. He developed a new plan, a way to con lonely old people out of their savings. She thought they were living pretty well during that time and everything was finally going their way. Then, he took things too far. He began a courtship with a woman in Montana.

Paige and Zach knew she was talking about Joyce Taylor, but Veronica claimed she didn't know the woman's name — only the outcome. A relative came to town and needed a place to stay. The woman, who was in her eighties, let this relative stay with her. The man's name was David Bennett, Veronica knew that for sure. She said Trent stopped by to surprise the woman one night, but instead encountered this David guy.

Trent was furious and went ballistic. He realized he overreacted, but it was too late. David had seen Trent's true character and could ruin everything. Veronica claimed she didn't know what happened, exactly. She just knew Trent called her and ordered her to bring the car to the woman's house. When she arrived, Trent loaded up a dead body into her trunk and then made her drive his car back to their hotel while he took her car and the dead man to dispose of the body.

“What did he do with the body?” Paige asked.

“I don't know,” Veronica insisted. “I really don't. I didn't want to know, so I didn't ask. Trent can be scary, sometimes he acts crazy, I didn't want to know. He did tell me he tried to subtly spread the story he went hiking in the Alps.”

“But he didn't,” Sparrow asked. “He never had plans to go hiking at that time?”

“Not that I know of,” Veronica shrugged. “As far as I know, Trent made it all up to explain his sudden disappearance.”

“Then what happened?” Veronica looked away.

“You want that deal, don't you?” Paige pushed.

“He killed her,” Veronica swallowed hard. “He told me he put antifreeze in her coffee cream. He said he watched a show on TV where a woman did that and killed two husbands and

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almost killed her daughter that way. He told me it was undetectable and since the woman was old, everyone would think she just died of old age.”

“And what did you do?” Paige asked, furious at the casual way Veronica described the death of another human being.

“Nothing,” Veronica shrugged again. “I didn’t have any part of that. He told me about it, but I wasn’t involved. One night, he came to the hotel and said it worked, the old lady croaked. I wanted to leave, that town was boring. Trent said he needed a little time. He said he found a guy, a forger that would make up some documents saying Trent and the woman had married. He thought he’d get everything once things settled.”

“Did he?” Sparrow wondered.

“He got some,” Veronica admitted. “I don’t think she had as much as he believed she did. He seemed frustrated, sulked for days after that, then he bounced back and said he’d just do it again. This time he got married.”

“Where was the next con?” Paige demanded.

“Jackson Hole, Wyoming,” Veronica considered. “I think her name was Alice. She was the daughter of some gold miner and she had loads of stuff — gold nuggets and jewelry everywhere. We hit it big time that year. Trent snuck stuff out nearly every day. He had a contact that would buy the gold and the jewelry. He took a couple paintings, too but I don’t know if he ever sold those.”

“And,” Sparrow tried to keep her on track. “Eventually the two of them got married?”

“Right,” Veronica nodded.

“How did she die?” Paige pushed.

Veronica dropped her eyes and focused on her hands that were folded in her lap. She sat that way for nearly a minute before she finally looked up. “I didn’t ask, but I think the same way. I didn’t want to know, not really. We had a good thing going and if I asked too many questions, I worried I might be next. So, I went along, fenced the goods he took, and tried to enjoy our good fortune.”

“Then what?” Sparrow wondered.

“Once Alice died, Trent inherited everything,” Veronica told them. “He had to use some of the money to fight off her kids — she had two of them, but he produced a notarized letter giving him full control of everything. He was angry he had to waste some of the windfall on attorneys but eventually he won.”

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“Was the court case in Jackson Hole?” Paige wondered. If she knew where it was, she could track down the true heirs and try to get them some of their money back. Sparrow already had a colleague back in Vegas working on freezing the assets held under David Bennett’s name. They would find more.

“Yeah,” Veronica answered. “We had to stay there until it was all resolved, and I hated it. The climate was too cold.”

“I can see how that would be your biggest concern,” Paige said dryly. “What name did he use?”

“Oh,” Veronica closed her eyes and scrunched up her face. “Dylan, I think. Dylan Wicks.”

“What is the significance of the letter ‘D’?” Paige wondered. “Why does he always pick a name that starts with the letter D?”

“His brother’s name was Damien,” Veronica confided. “He died when he was fifteen. Trent told me they would sit for hours and fantasize, daydreaming about leaving town and striking it rich. He said every job he did, he did it for Damien.”

“How did he die?” Sparrow asked, curious now.

“I don’t know,” Veronica told him. “He never talked about it, not even to me. I asked once, but he went nuts. I think he broke a rib, maybe two but he wouldn’t let me see a doctor so I’m not sure.”

“He beat you because you asked about his brother?” Paige asked. “And you stayed with him? Did you ever think he might kill you? That you could be his next victim?”

“All the time,” Veronica shrugged. “That’s why I never pressed. If I went along, didn’t ask too many questions, and did what he asked, he took care of me.”

“How often did he beat you?” Sparrow pushed.

“Only when I got out of line and asked too many questions,” Veronica said with defiance. “So, I stopped asking. Problem solved, no more beatings.”

“Alright,” Paige decided that topic wasn’t going to get them anywhere. “So, you left Jackson Hole and moved where?”

“We had money, so we traveled a little but eventually we ended up in Idaho.”

“Do you know how long after you left Wyoming that you moved to Idaho?” Sparrow asked.

“About a year,” Veronica decided. “Yeah, a year, no more than eighteen months. When the money started to run out, we headed back to work the con again.”

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“So, this was what?” Paige asked. “Five, six years ago?”

“Five maybe,” Veronica considered, then nodded. “Yeah, about that.”

“Where in Idaho?”

“Some Valley,” Veronica said. “That’s right, Sun Valley.”

“And do you remember what name he used there?” Paige asked.

“Duke,” Veronica said slowly. “Yeah, Duke Littlefield or Littleton, something like that.”

“And did he find an elderly woman to con there?” Sparrow asked.

“Of course,” Veronica laughed. “We never stayed if he didn’t find a mark.

“He was asking for a name,” Paige growled. She knew Veronica had some valuable information, but she was getting more and more disgusted with her attitude by the minute.

“Ruth something,” Veronica was on a roll now. She knew Trent would kill her if he ever found out she was the one that told these guys about the cons, but she couldn’t help herself. She was having fun and for once, she was the one in charge.

“Ruth what?” Paige asked.

“Hum,” Veronica pretended to ponder. “Thompson? No, Thomas. Ruth Thomas.”

“And was that another marriage?” Sparrow could see Paige was fed up with the games, but he’d play a little longer. They were getting good information.

“Yeah, he married them all after the first one,” Veronica admitted. “He said it made things a lot easier and they were all old, so they didn’t expect affection or kissing or anything.”

“So,” Paige sat forward. “He was never intimate with any of them?”

“Ooh, no,” Veronica jerked backwards. “Gross.”

“Did Ruth Thomas die as well?” Sparrow held back a grin.

“They all died,” Veronica scoffed. “That’s how Trent got the money.”

“Is there anything more you can tell us about Ruth?” Paige nearly sighed. Veronica was a sociopath, and it was clear she was enjoying this. She thought she was in charge.

“No,” Veronica shrugged. “She was just another rich old bat, but she had more money than we thought. We lived off that score for over two years before Trent found another mark.”

“Where?” Sparrow wondered just how many people Trent Howard had killed.

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“Colorado,” Veronica frowned. “That’s where he met that younger woman. She was younger than us, but she had some mental disorder or something.”

“Early onset dementia?” Paige was alert now. Maybe she’d find Nancy after all.

“That’s the one,” Veronica pointed at her. “He said she couldn’t remember anything. It made cleaning her out easy, but I didn’t like all the attention he gave her. We fought a lot while we were there and that’s when I got arrested and stuff.”

“That’s why you have the warrant for fraud out of Colorado?” Sparrow clarified.

“Yes,” Veronica pouted. “Trent was never around. He was living in that big house with that woman that didn’t know anything, but he wouldn’t let me stay with him. I decided to go out and try working alone.”

“What was her name?” Paige held her breath, knowing in her gut it was Nancy.

“Nancy Pennington,” Veronica practically spat. “I hated her, hated the job, hated that Castle place. Trent said it was a sign, a castle for a king. But I wasn’t the queen, was I? No, Nancy was.”

“Did Trent have to put Nancy into a care center?” Paige tried to get her back on track.

Veronica laughed. “That would be a waste of money and Trent never wastes money.”

No wonder she couldn’t find a patient named Nancy anywhere in New Castle. “And Nancy died the same way?”

“Sure,” Veronica shrugged.

“Are you sure about that?” Sparrow could see Veronica was lying. Was she responsible for this death?

“I’m sure she did,” Veronica shrugged. “I told you, we never talked about it. But the antifreeze was working so well, I don’t see why he’d change his method.”

“What did he put the antifreeze in?” Paige could tell she was lying.

“You’d have to ask Trent,” Veronica shrugged.

“I will,” Paige assured her. “Where did you go after that? Actually, did Nancy have money?”

“Some,” Veronica frowned. “Trent said she didn’t have much, but I think he lied. After I saw that report you showed me,” she turned to Sparrow. “I know he’s been lying and keeping money hidden.”

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“Where did you move?” Sparrow repeated.

“Casper, Wyoming,” Veronica sighed. “That’s where I got arrested again and I had to spend some time in jail. I hated that. Trent promised I’d never have to sleep in a cell again. Which is why I was so mad that he didn’t pay the fine and help me get rid of that warrant.”

“Who did he con in Casper?” Sparrow asked.

“Becky... no, Betty James,” Veronica nodded.

“When was that?” Paige wondered. Amelia’s niece, the one she couldn’t track down lived in Casper, Wyoming.

“Last year,” Veronica shrugged. “We finished up there and moved to Manti.”

“Why Manti?” Paige tried to sound casual.

“Trent met another woman,” Veronica pouted again. “Some girl he met at Betty’s house. She had some money, but after she left, Betty told Trent the girl’s aunt was loaded. When he finished with Betty, he started dating Theresa — he said it was business but I’m not sure. Anyway, she dumped him, said he was too old. That got to him and he didn’t like it. He’d been conning old people all his life and now he was becoming one. He nearly killed Theresa for that, but he decided to head to Utah and see if he could get his revenge by conning her aunt Glover.”

“Amelia Glover?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” Veronica sighed. “And that’s it. That’s all of them. Well, all of them I know about. Like I said, if Trent kept the money secret, what else did he hide from me?”

“What about Candice Templeton?” Sparrow pushed.

“Oh, right,” Veronica scowled. “He was supposed to offload that house in Utah then move down here to hook up with Templeton. He promised I could keep her house. He said he’d give it to me for being so loyal and helping him out all this time. He wanted to move on, but I like it here in Mesquite. I like the warm weather and the casinos. I think this would have been the last job we did together. Now it is for sure because of you guys and all. I probably won’t even get my house. I mean, no marriage, no house — right?”

Paige just blinked at the woman in shock.

“Why were you at the house?” Sparrow was curious about that.

“Trent called, asked me to keep an eye on the woman,” Veronica shrugged. “He said he was in the hospital for a day or two and he needed me to make sure she didn’t do anything that would mess things up until he got back.”

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“Did he ask you to do anything else?” Paige pushed, there was something Veronica wasn’t telling them.

“Not really,” she looked away.

“Did he ask you to put the antifreeze in her creamer?” Sparrow realized that was the only thing that made sense.

“No,” Veronica shook her head. “I didn’t have anything to do with the antifreeze. Well, not on purpose.”

“What does that mean?” Paige demanded.

“He asked me to sneak in and put the creamer in her fridge. I had no idea it was poisoned. I swear, he didn’t tell me why. I didn’t ask,” Veronica insisted. “I told you, I never asked questions. Trent didn’t like me to ask too many questions. As long as I did what he asked when he wanted it, everything was good between us.”

“He had the creamer all made up and he asked you to break into Candice Templeton’s home and leave the creamer in the fridge where she would find it?” Paige asked for clarification and to trap Veronica into confessing.

“Exactly,” Veronica smiled. “He said she liked the stuff, and he needed me to make sure she didn’t run out. He had another bottle in the fridge, at the hotel.”

“You still have another bottle?” Paige couldn’t believe it was this easy.

“Uh-huh,” Veronica nodded. “He left it in the small fridgie thing in the room.”

They worked her for another forty minutes, going back over each of the women and the elaborate cons they perpetrated on each victim. Veronica stuck to her story, not deviating a bit as they covered each of the women, the areas and the amount of money and property they absconded with. Finally, Sparrow decided they had all they were going to get.

“I think we’re finished here,” Paige stood. Sparrow also stood. When Veronica started to stand, Sparrow stopped her. “Not yet. There’s someone else you need to speak to.”

Veronica watched them leave and wondered who wanted to talk to her now.

Detective Anderson returned. “Veronica Shaw, you are under arrest. Stand up and put your hands behind your back.”

“You can’t arrest me,” she screamed. “That FBI guy said the warrant was no longer good. He said I wouldn’t be arrested for all that stuff in Colorado.”

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“You are not under arrest for the warrant,” Anderson cuffed her hands behind her back. “You are under arrest for the attempted murder of Candice Templeton. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say...” he recited Miranda, walked her out of the house and shoved her into the back seat of a waiting patrol car. Once they pulled away, he turned to focus on Paige.

“I guess that means you two are headed home to interrogate Trent Howard?”

“It does,” Havilland held out a hand. “It was a pleasure. If there’s ever anything we can do for you, don’t hesitate to call.” He passed Anderson his card then turned to focus on Sparrow. “You headed to Manti or will you be going home to Vegas?”

“Manti,” he smiled at Paige. “It was good to see you again, but you’re not ditching me yet. I want to see this one through to the end. If my calculations are correct, Trent Howard is responsible for at least seven murders, six women and David Bennett.”

“The case is yours,” Paige glanced at Havi for confirmation.

“She’s right,” Havilland agreed. “We’re talking at least five states and seven women. If that’s not federal, I don’t know what is.”

“I need to head back home, pack a bag and then head to your neck of the woods,” Sparrow told them. “Can we pick this back up tomorrow?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Paige turned to Anderson. “Will you take care of Candice? Give her the details you can, and let her know Veronica and Trent will be locked up for the rest of their lives?”

“I’ll head to the hospital now,” he promised. “Drive safe and thanks.”

When Paige got home that night, Dax was already in bed sleeping soundly.

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The following morning, Paige relayed the story to Dax over breakfast.

“Sounds like you have a busy day ahead of you,” he picked up the dishes and moved to the sink. “Anything you need me to handle on the home front?”

“Not really,” Paige considered. “Have you heard from Nathan lately? He hasn’t called for the past two days. I’m wondering if they plan to continue the tradition and spend Thanksgiving with us here in Manti.”

“He called,” Dax told her. “He said he couldn’t reach you and you didn’t return his call.”

## Smoke and Mirrors

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“Did he leave a message?” Paige frowned.

“He did,” Dax smiled and turned to face her. “I told him you were traveling across the Nevada desert and probably didn’t have service. Sophia is counting down the days until Thanksgiving, so yes, we will be preparing a huge family feast that day. Don’t worry, I’ll help, so will the guys. We can plan that later, get to work. See if you can get another serial killer to confess.”

“I don’t think he’s as gullible as his girlfriend,” Paige slid into her jacket. “I’ll be surprised if he says anything.”

“Sounds like Agent Pirate might make the trip for nothing,” Dax tossed the towel onto the counter and pulled her in for a kiss.

Paige shook her head and tried not to laugh at the image that popped into her head of Zach as a pirate. “Zach, not Jack funny man.”

“And still,” he leaned in and kissed her neck. “Every time you mention him, I get this visual in my head of a man with one patch over his eye, a parrot balanced on his shoulder and a sword strapped to his belt where his gun should be. Oh, and the suit. I always see this pirate character in a black suit.”

“Go to work,” she snatched up her keys. “You have one more session to plan and I have a killer to interrogate.” She was laughing as she walked to her car.

She wasn’t laughing when she stepped into her office. Sparrow was already there waiting. So was Havilland and Jericho.

“Yo ho, the gangs all here,” Paige grinned at Sparrow’s frown.

“If I had a quarter,” Sparrow grumbled.

“The prisoner has been transferred to the conference room,” Jericho announced. “Decide who will be interrogating him and let’s get this started.”

“I think we all should,” Paige spoke up. “Let’s walk in together and see how he handles it.”

“I’m game,” Havilland agreed.

Sparrow nodded and the three of them walked into the room, shutting the door behind them.

“I demand to know what this is about,” Trent AKA David slammed a hand on the large table. “I told you I’m a victim here.”

“Uh-huh,” Paige settled into the chair across from him.

## Smoke and Mirrors

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Havilland started the recording, read him his rights, and cited the case number. Then, he listed the names of the four people taking part in the interview. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way, are you willing to talk to us today?”

“Absolutely not,” Trent pounded a fist on the table. “I demand to know what this is about.”

“Before we get to that,” Paige said causally. “Do you prefer to be called David or Trent?”

The man went sheet white. “What? Who?”

“I’m Agent Zach Sparrow from the FBI,” Zach cut in. “Let me explain the charges, then we can get back to that.” He listed off seven counts of murder, fraud, conspiracy to commit fraud, attempted murder, and the various interstate theft charges. “I may have missed a few, but we’re still investigating. I should probably let you know that all of your assets have been frozen until we can sort out what was ill-gotten gains and what belongs to you, personally.”

“You can’t —” he screamed.

“That means the financial holdings of Trent Howard, David Bennett, Dirk Bixby, Dylan Wicks, Duke Littlefield and Dalton Green,” Paige glanced at Sparrow. “I emailed Carmen last night, she called me with the information on my way in this morning.”

Sparrow nodded. “We know there is at least one more, and we will find it, I guarantee it. Now, you need to decide where we go from here.”

“I want a lawyer,” Trent growled. “I want a lawyer, now!”

“Sure,” Paige stood. “Oh, and you should probably know the homicide charges, they include Nancy Pennington. I’m pretty sure Veronica actually committed that one, but she insists it was you. I have to say, a jury will probably believe her — what with all those others hanging over your head, what’s one more that you didn’t commit.”

“I want a lawyer,” he repeated.

“I’ll contact jail transportation,” Havilland stood. “They can arrange for a ride back to your cell. Let them know you want your phone call, I’m sure they’ll arrange for it.”

“You have to get me a lawyer,” Trent objected when an officer stepped into the room. “You have to find me a good attorney.” He tried to pull away when the officer reached out and pulled on his arm.

“No,” Paige smiled. “We don’t. You can hire your own, or you can inform the court you want a court appointed rep. Either way, you’re no longer our problem. Good luck with that.”

Once everything was finalized, Paige walked Sparrow to his car.

## Smoke and Mirrors

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“As always,” he stopped before pulling open the door. “It was a pleasure.”

“You know,” Paige took a step forward. “Vegas isn’t that far away. You know where to find me if you ever want to grab a beer and meet Dax and the boys. I think you’d like them.”

“I might take you up on that,” he pulled her into a hug. “Take care and be safe.”

Paige stepped back. “Always — and ditto.”

“Call me any time Carter,” he called before he pulled the door shut and backed away.

Paige watched, expecting to feel a twinge of envy. Zach was still working high-profile, dangerous cases. She gave that up for shoplifting, traffic accidents and crop symbols. She smiled, not so bad — Paige. And that traffic accident had led to the arrest of a serial killer, his psycho girlfriend, and the seizure of lots and lots of money. Money that belonged to the grieving relatives and would soon be returned to the rightful owners. Not a bad week if she did say so herself.