

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Identical Proxy
Season 5, Episode 9

by:

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Paige stepped through the back door and immediately stripped out of her coat. It was a blizzard out there. The roads were a mess and she'd spent the past forty minutes standing next to Frank as he pulled a car from the creek. She still had no idea what that couple thought they were doing up the canyon in the middle of winter — without snow tires or four-wheel drive.

Once she'd removed her coat, her gloves, and her hat, she began to stomp her feet — trying to knock the snow from her boots.

“Paige,” Margie said, amusement evident in her voice.

“Yeah?” Paige didn't look up; she was focused on her boots and her sopping wet feet. Maybe she could just take off the boots and run around the office in her wet socks.

“This lady has been waiting to speak with you or Gage,” Margie continued to watch Paige, not entirely sure how she would handle her dilemma.

“What?” she glanced up and saw the lady sitting patiently in Margie's visitor's chair.

“Oh, right,” Paige moved forward and held out her frozen, slightly damp hand.

The woman shook it, then dropped it immediately. “You should get some coffee or something. It will help warm those up.”

“Sorry about that,” Paige rubbed her hands on her thigh. “Rough morning. How can I help you?”

“I realize you probably don't remember me,” the woman began. “I'm Ella Hovey. We spoke a few weeks ago, at my place. You were looking for David.”

“Right,” Paige nodded. “I remember. We closed that case just after we spoke. I don't need to speak with David now, he wasn't involved. I hope you didn't drive all the way in here, through a blizzard, just for that.”

“No,” she glanced at Margie then back to Paige. “I need to talk to you about something else.”

“Alright,” Paige motioned her forward. “Come on over to my desk and you can tell me what brought you in on such a miserable morning.”

Ella looked at the chair, glanced back at Margie and settled onto the edge. She didn't really want to do this with an audience.

Paige settled into her own chair and focused on the timid, but attractive woman. She was petite with straight, dark brown hair that flowed over her shoulders. She had the front pinned up in a fancy pink butterfly barrette that matched her sweater. She wore jeans and winter boots that went all the way up to her knees. Stylish but not overly so. The woman seemed relatively

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normal, but extremely skittish. “Would you like some coffee or hot chocolate while we talk?” Paige offered.

“Oh,” Ella considered. “Hot Chocolate would be nice if it’s not any trouble.”

“No trouble,” Paige stood and moved to the counter that ran the length of the room behind her. She prepared the chocolate, poured herself a cup of steaming hot coffee, and headed back to her desk.

“Thank you,” Ella said, taking a tiny, tentative sip.

“I can see you’re nervous about something,” Paige began. “And you drove all the way into town on terrible roads. I have to assume whatever brought you here must be important. Can you tell me why you came into the office today?”

“I don’t know how to explain it,” Ella sighed. “No matter what I say, you’re going to think I’m crazy. I’m not. I’m as grounded as they come, but it’s going to sound crazy.”

“Okay,” Paige smiled. “Now that we got that out of the way, tell me why you’re here.”

“There’s something wrong with my husband,” Ella said softly.

“As in some kind of medical issue?” Paige wondered. “Does he need an ambulance?”

“No,” Ella said abruptly. “No, not a medical problem. He’s just not Jordan anymore.”

“I don’t understand,” Paige admitted.

“I know,” Ella shook her head. “I sound like that woman in the movie *Men in Black*. Here I am telling you — I know Jordan and that isn’t Jordan. But that’s how I feel. I could easily follow that up with the same comment as the movie — It was like something was wearing an Edgar suit, or in my case a Jordan suit. And now, you look exactly like Tommy Lee Jones. I know I sound ridiculous. I know you want to make fun of me. I guess, at least, you’re too professional to laugh. Although, I suspect when I leave, you and your colleagues will crack a few jokes.”

“No ma’am,” Paige grinned. “We at Sanpete County don’t have a sense of humor we are aware of.”

“I’m not crazy,” Ella insisted. “It’s just — Jordan looks like Jordan, but he doesn’t act like my husband.”

“Can you be more specific?” Paige couldn’t decide what to think of this woman. She seemed normal, but a Jordan suit?

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“Jordan went out of town,” Ella explained. “He got home nearly five weeks ago. That was normal, even in the winter. He was looking for a new mustang to breed with a mare he acquired last year. He wanted the mustang to be settled and the mare used to him and ready to mate come spring. Anyway, he came home without the mustang. When I asked him about it, he acted confused. Then, he just told me to mind my own business. Jordan would never speak to me that way. He avoided me for two full weeks, then one night he came home drunk. Jordan never drinks. He despises it. He told me once, his father was a mean drunk. He loathes alcohol, wouldn’t even have a glass of wine with dinner. I didn’t mind, I’m not really a drinker myself. But now, Jordan drinks every night and he’s mean.” Ella wiped a tear from her face. “He —” she swallowed.

“Did he assault you?” Paige asked softly.

“He tried to,” Ella took a deep breath then focused on Paige, resolve showing in her eyes. “I don’t know why I came here. There’s nothing you can do to help me. I’m sorry I wasted your time.” She stood and took a step toward the door.

“Not so fast,” Paige held up a hand. “Sit back down and finish. Please? You’ve come this far; you might as well tell me the rest.”

Ella hesitated. After a few seconds, she turned and looked at Paige. “Is this just a waste of time?”

“I don’t know,” Paige said honestly. “I can see you’re upset, and you believe what you’re telling me. I’d like to hear it all, then we’ll see if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Ella continued to stand in place and debated. *Well, I already made a fool of myself, I might as well finish this out.* Elle settled back into the chair and pulled out two photos. She handed them both to Paige. “The one on the left was taken about six months ago. The one on the right, that one I took last week. He didn’t see me take it. You can see the difference in his eyes. Jordan, the one with him laughing last summer — his eyes are bright and loving. The second photo, the one from last week, that man’s eyes are cold and hard. It’s like he’s become Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He’s the same person, just good and evil or two drastically different sides of the same coin. That’s the best way I can describe it.”

Paige studied the images. Ella was right. The men were identical, but one looked like a loving, happy guy in his thirties. The other one looked like a hardened criminal. How was that possible? “Does Jordan have any siblings?” Paige considered. “A twin maybe?”

“No,” Ella shook her head. “He doesn’t have any family. He said he was an only child and his parents died years ago.”

Paige raised an eyebrow. “Have you met anyone from Jordan’s past? Grandparents? Cousins? Aunts? A best friend, maybe?”

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“No,” Ella shook her head again. “Nobody. He said there wasn’t anyone.”

“I find that extremely unlikely,” Paige considered. She’d have to run this by Jericho and see what he thought but her spidey sense was tingling and something about this situation didn’t smell right. “Can you get me anything you have on your husband? A birth certificate, a marriage license, his social security number, where he went to college, did he graduate from high school, a yearbook from that time — anything?”

“I’ll look,” Ella studied Paige for a long time. “Why are you acting like I don’t sound batshit crazy?”

“Oh,” Paige smiled. “You do.”

Gage stepped into the room and began to remove his coat. “Crazy is Paige’s specialty.” He dropped into his chair and began to log into his computer.

“I don’t understand,” Ella frowned.

“Ignore him,” Paige scowled at Gage. “I can’t decide what I think. It does sound totally bonkers and you know that. You warned me it would before you started. Which makes me wonder. If you were nuts, I don’t think you’d walk in and warn me that you’re going to sound nuts. Plus, the pictures are compelling. The guy looks the same, has the same build, the same hair, the same face, but at the same time — he seems different. I want to look into this more thoroughly and I need that personal information on Jordan to do it.”

“He didn’t have much,” Ella warned. “I thought it was weird at first, but he just said it was a difficult time in his life and he didn’t want stuff around to remind him. I have the social security number now and I can tell you he has a driver’s license here in Utah. I assume you can access that once I give you his information. I can also tell you his birth date and he said he grew up in Tennessee. I can’t remember what town. I’ve never seen a yearbook and I’ll have to go through some stuff when I’m alone to find his birth certificate. The marriage license is easy, I have that with my stuff. I’ll have to be careful and then, once I find what you need, I’ll need to sneak out to get it to you. Once I get away, is it okay to leave anything I find with the secretary?”

“I have a better idea,” Paige knew Ella wasn’t going to like this. “Call me when you’ve found everything you can, and I’ll drive out and pick it up.”

“Oh,” Ella’s hand flew to her mouth. “I don’t think Jordan would like that. Not the new Jordan. My Jordan wouldn’t have cared.”

“What will he do?” Paige wondered.

“I don’t know,” Ella bit her bottom lip. “I — he hasn’t abused me. Not really. I mean, there was that one time when he was drunk and tried to force me to — you know. But I got

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away and locked myself in the loft above the barn. My arms were bruised, but he didn't hit me or anything. Since then, I've tried to stay out of his way, and I basically moved out to the loft. That's where I sleep every night and I always lock the door. He hasn't tried to bother me."

Paige frowned. "Leave the details to me. I'll make up some excuse to justify my being there. He won't know you called the office or came in to see me. But I need to see him. I need to speak to him and get a feel for his behavior and mannerisms myself."

"Like the time you came asking about David?" Ella asked.

"Exactly like that," Paige agreed. "I'll show up with questions about something else. You can slip me the documents and I can talk to Jordan to see how he reacts to me."

"Alright," Ella stood again and tentatively took the business card Paige held out to her. "I'll call as soon as I can."

Paige was frowning as she watched Ella leave the building.

"What's your gut telling you?" Margie asked. "It sounds ridiculous on the surface but when you dig down—"

"Yeah," Paige agreed. "Once you crack the surface something doesn't sound quite right. Did you see these pictures?"

"No," Margie shook her head. "She didn't tell me about them. She didn't really tell me anything except she needed to talk to you or Gage."

"Why?" Gage moved to stand behind Paige's desk. "That's the same guy but... different."

Margie moved to join them. "It's the eyes, like she said. The eyes are dark and brooding in this one. Like that guy's lived hard and even in the picture you can feel the attitude. The other guy, he's light and happy."

"How many years did it take to turn Mr. Sunshine into Mr. Dark and Broody?" Gage wondered.

"This picture was taken last summer," Paige told him. "This one, last week."

"No way," Gage disagreed. "There's just no way that guy changed like that overnight."

"I agree," Paige pondered the possibilities. "So how do you explain it?"

"No idea," Gage looked at Margie. "Why did she ask for me or Paige?"

"We met her a few weeks back," Paige reminded him. "She lives in the house across from David the handyman."

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“Right,” Gage moved back to his desk. “So, what do you plan to do with that? You can’t open a case, what would you call it? The man’s not missing.”

“Are you sure about that?” When he didn’t answer, Paige sighed. “I don’t know. I need to talk to Jericho.”

“He’ll be back after lunch,” Margie advised. “Weather permitting.”

“And,” Paige settled in to finish her coffee. “There’s no guarantee we’ll still be here. Not if that storm intensifies as predicted.”

“You want me to brief him for you?” Margie asked. “I can, if you’re tied up when he gets back.”

“That would be great,” Paige decided. “Then ask him to call me. I need his take on the situation before I decide how to handle it.”

“And I want to go with you,” Gage put in. “When you head out to her house to talk to this Jordan dude, I want to be there.”

“You think I need backup?” Paige frowned.

“Maybe,” Gage shrugged. “You could also use a second opinion. I want in.”

“Then you’re in,” Paige flipped on her computer determined to get the reports from this morning out of the way. Once that was done, she could think about Ella Hovey and her husband, Jordan in the Edgar suit.”

Paige stood on the side of the road, waiting for Frank to hook up the second vehicle and tow it away. She was soaking wet and frozen all the way to the bone. She hadn’t felt her toes for at least an hour and silently wondered if she’d ever feel them again. Her hand was shaking uncontrollably making it impossible to write even basic case notes. She just hoped she’d be able to decipher her scribbles later. She glanced up when she heard a vehicle approaching and spotted Jericho. He slid from his truck, paused to take in the scene, then headed straight for her.

“Sheriff,” Paige greeted. It came out something that resembled Sher —click, click — iff. She wondered if he understood the greeting through her clattering teeth.

“You need better winter gear,” he studied her. “Get in my truck and warm up. I’ll finish this for you, then we need to talk.”

Well, crap, Paige thought. Was she in trouble — again?

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Paige's legs had finally stopped bouncing involuntarily when Jericho returned and slid behind the wheel.

"At least your lips aren't still a vibrant shade of blue," Jericho turned up the heat and adjusted the vent so it would push the hot air toward her. "Why hasn't that husband of yours helped you get proper gear?"

Paige scowled. "I don't need Dax to buy me gear."

"Touchy," Jericho laughed. "So, he bought the gear already and you just refuse to wear it. If you continue to let that stubborn pride of yours get in the way, you might lose a few toes."

"I'm not —" Paige stopped. "Never mind. Did Margie talk to you about Ella? Is that why you're here?"

"She did," Jericho nodded. "We don't have time to babysit a woman who belongs in a psych ward."

"That's a bit harsh," Paige frowned.

"The truth hurts sometimes," Jericho growled. "Why did you tell her to gather up her husband's documents? You're giving her false hope and we can't help that woman."

"I don't have anything pending," Paige focused out the front window and considered. "I'm not neglecting anything pressing. When the calls started coming in, I headed out. I'd like to investigate this, in my free time. I'd like to satisfy myself her husband isn't a wanted fugitive hiding out with an innocent woman who is a little naïve, isolated, and vulnerable."

"What makes you think he's a fugitive?" Jericho pressed.

"I don't think he's a fugitive," Paige corrected. "I want to make sure he's not."

"Because?"

"Something just doesn't feel right," Paige admitted. "I don't know what but I'm sure Margie showed you those photos. He looks the same but — different. How did he go from the happy loving husband to a hardened criminal in only a few months?"

Now Jericho looked through the windshield and considered. "I'll allow it," he decided. "You can look into this on your down time. If I hear you neglected an actual case for this, I'm shutting it down. And, while you're looking into the husband, I want you to also look into this Ella woman. See if she has a history of problems or if anyone in her family has a history of mental issues. I also want to know if she's ever made a similar report — to us, or any other police department. Be thorough, Paige. Don't just run a quick background and call it good. I want to know everything there is to know about that couple."

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“I can do that,” Paige relaxed. She knew she was in for a fight; this was actually easier than she thought it would be.

“Keep me updated,” Jericho added. “I want to know if you find anything, or if you don’t. I’m giving you the time to investigate but I expect you to close this down quickly if you don’t find anything suspicious.”

“Alright,” Paige agreed but didn’t move.

“Was there something else?”

“No,” Paige sighed. “I was just trying to stall while I figured out a way to get from here over to there without making my toes fall off.”

Jericho smiled. “I’ll drive you. Get some decent boots, Paige.”

“I like these boots,” she complained.

“Do you like your toes?” Jericho pulled up next to her car.

“Fine,” Paige pushed open the door. “You win. But if I wear the boots Dax bought me, tomorrow I’ll have blisters on my blisters by three o’clock. Then, I won’t be able to walk and I’ll have to sit at my desk and look into the mysterious Jordan in an Edgar suit.”

“I’ll risk it,” he was laughing when she slammed the door on him. He’d call Dax and explain the situation. That husband of hers would make sure Paige wore proper footwear. The guy was more protective than a momma grizzly defending her cubs.

“Why don’t these hurt my feet?” Paige demanded.

Dax glanced at her feet then took another sip of coffee. “I told you they were comfortable and warm. If you listened to me, your toes wouldn’t still be numb from yesterday — I’m surprised they didn’t fall off.”

“Who said—” Paige narrowed her eyes at Dax when he just raised an eyebrow at her. “Jericho called at ratted me out.”

Dax ignored her.

“First Nathan, now Jericho,” Paige grumbled and doctored her coffee. She dropped into the chair and reached for a donut. “I’m a grown woman. I don’t need a bunch of men protecting me.”

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“They wouldn’t have to if you took care of yourself,” he leaned over, slid his hand behind her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. “Morning, sunshine.”

“Funny,” Paige growled.

“I realize you had a long day yesterday, but what’s with the attitude?”

“Just a case I’m working,” Paige took a huge bite of donut and glanced away.

“You didn’t say you caught a case,” Dax frowned. “Is this one difficult? Stressful? Heartbreaking?”

“No,” Paige sipped her coffee and tried to decide how to present the case without sounding idiotic.”

“Tell me about it,” Dax softened. He could tell this case had her on edge.

“A woman came into the office and reported her husband was acting strange,” Paige began.

“That describes half the population on a normal day,” Dax laughed. “It is the holiday season; people tend to act strange and keep secrets around Christmas.”

“Right,” Paige rolled her eyes. “This feels like more than holiday surprises. The longer she talked, the odder things appeared. I’m just a little off today. I don’t know how to investigate this; I don’t even know if I should investigate this.”

“What convinced you to look into it?” Dax took her hand and kissed her palm. “Walk me through it. We haven’t had a crime stopper breakfast for a while. I think I miss it.”

Paige smiled then explained the woman, the strange behavior and the photos. She told him everything she knew.

Dax considered. “So, her husband comes home from a business trip and doesn’t act like himself. Is it possible he had a stroke while he was gone?”

“I don’t think so,” Paige considered. “I think it was the photos that pulled me in. Last summer he was a happy, clean-cut husband with love and laughter in his eyes. Last week, he was dark and sinister. It’s hard to explain.”

“Did he develop a craving for sugar water?”

“Not funny,” Paige punched him. “But that’s how she explained it. She knew she sounded crazy. She flat out told me she felt stupid, like she was telling me the man that returned was wearing an Edgar suit.”

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“Well,” Dax grinned. “You are the best of the best of the best... with honors. I have faith you’ll figure it out. But, if you discover Jericho is an alien, I want to be the first to know. And Nathan, will you make sure our favorite General isn’t a zybot from planet Yothea — that would explain so many things.”

“There’s no planet named Yothea.”

“Sure, there is,” Dax grinned. “It’s located in the Centauri Nebula galaxy.”

“I’m trying to take this seriously,” Paige sighed. “But it just seems so strange. I’m not sure I can. I don’t even know how to investigate something like this.”

“The same as you investigate any crime,” Dax said absently.

“I use forensics to solve cases,” Paige disagreed. “This case doesn’t have any forensics. It’s just all weird psychological stuff.”

“I think any case has forensics,” Dax disagreed. “You just have to find it. Once you do, you can analyze it. Then you’ll use what you find to solve the mystery — if there is a mystery to unravel. You’re stressing because you think you have to change the way you work and approach it from a completely different angle — one you’re not comfortable with. Investigate this situation the way you would any other case. If there’s something to find, you’ll find it.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Paige frowned.

“No,” Dax pulled her in for another kiss. “You make it look simple. We both know it’s not. But it’s an interesting job you guys have.”

“Go to work already,” Paige tried not to smile. “I’ve had enough *Men in Black* quotes the past two days to last me a lifetime.”

Dax laughed, but stood. “I might be late getting home tonight. We ran into a snag and I need to change things up for this last session.”

“Anything I can help with?” Paige stood and followed him out of the kitchen. “I don’t have much going on. If another storm hits, we’ll get hammered; but, other than that, all I have going is a stranger in a Jordan suit.”

“Thanks, but we’ve got it,” Dax slid into his coat. “Wear the leather coat I bought you. It’s not storming, but it’s freezing out there.” He pulled her against him and kissed her until her head felt like it might explode. “See you tonight and be careful.” He pulled open the door, then glanced over his shoulder. “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” once the door was closed securely behind him, Paige closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath. The man had moves and he was always blindsiding her with them. She

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wondered if she'd ever get used to his antics — if she'd ever get used to the man. She opened the closet, reached for her usual coat, hesitated, and pulled out the new heavy leather monstrosity Dax bought her. She smiled once she had it zipped — comfortable and toasty warm. She swung her arms to one side, then other, crouched, pivoted, and reached for her gun. Flexible too. She could get used to this. She was grinning as she locked the door and headed into work.

Another storm hit just before lunch. Paige dealt with crashes from minor fender benders to more serious injuries for the rest of her shift. When things finally settled down, an hour after shift, she headed home. When she pulled into the drive she expected to see Dax's truck, but the driveway was empty. Dax said he'd be late, but seeing an empty house still surprised her. Her husband always got home before she did. Once inside, she headed straight for the bedroom to change. She plopped down on the bed and pulled off her boots, expecting to find blisters, but her feet felt fine. How did the man do it? If she asked, he'd just give her that mysterious smile of his and leave her guessing. So, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of asking.

Once she changed into comfortable clothes, she headed to the kitchen. Maybe she'd make him dinner tonight. She rummaged around in the fridge until she spotted a package of chicken breasts. She could work with that. Now, something to go with it. She pulled out a head of lettuce, a tomato that had definitely seen better days — but it would work, and an avocado. She was about to shut the door when she spotted a bag of flour tortillas. Scratching her original plan, she decided to make fajitas. She rummaged around in the pantry and surfaced with one onion. Perfect. She sliced the chicken and tossed it into a pan with olive oil then started to work on the onion. Once she had it sliced, she added it to the chicken, sprinkled on some seasoning, and started to chop the veggies.

She was almost finished when she sensed him — Dax was home. Seconds later his scent filled the kitchen. The subtle aroma was distinctive. She'd recognize the unique mixture of his cologne, the woody smell of wilderness that came from working outdoors, and the tantalizing, sexy fragrance of man anywhere. Her man. She turned and collided with his chest. Surprised to find him so close, she dropped her knife. Dax wrapped his arms around her waist and laughed.

“Sorry,” Paige tried to take a step back, but he tightened his grip.

“I like coming home to find my wife busy in the kitchen,” he leaned down and nipped her bottom lip. “And she tastes good, too.”

Paige couldn't decide if she was annoyed or charmed. She took a deep breath and decided she'd go with charmed. She snuggled in closer and inhaled just below his ear, enjoying the intoxicating scent.

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“You’re in a mood,” Dax laughed. “But I think you’re burning dinner.”

Paige jumped back and rushed to the stove. Not burnt, thank goodness. She stirred the meat then turned down the heat, determined to make this dinner perfect. She rarely cooked for Dax and she wanted to pamper him for a change.

“What’s the occasion?” he asked absently, moving to select a bottle of wine that would go with the meal.

“No occasion,” she finished chopping and set the cheese and the veggies on the table. She returned to the stove and dumped the chicken and onions onto a plate. When she looked up, Dax was staring. “What?”

“I’m just wondering what I did to earn a home cooked meal,” he came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “With the storm, you guys had to be busy today. You didn’t have to cook. I was planning to order in.”

“Obviously, your day was just as hectic as mine,” she added oil to the pan and began frying the first tortilla. “Did you get everything rearranged and ready to go next week?”

“We did,” Dax poured two glasses of wine and settled in at the table. “How about you? Did you get time to work on the mysterious husband case or did the storm keep you busy?”

“Mostly the storm,” Paige dropped the tortilla on his plate and returned to fry one for herself. “I did have time to think about the case.” She settled in next to him and began to build a fajita... chicken taco? Something. Whatever it was, it smelled so good her mouth watered. “Mmm, I was starving, and this is excellent if I do say so myself.”

Dax reached out and took her hand. “It is excellent. Thank you.”

“Anyway,” Paige said, a little uncomfortable. It was just dinner, but Dax was looking at her like she’d just given him some expensive gift. Who knew cooking a simple meal would give her marriage points?

“Anyway,” Dax took a huge bite.

“I was thinking,” Paige sat back. “As soon as I have time, I’m going to run a deep background on Ella and Jordan. I’ll play it by ear after that, just follow anything I find to its natural conclusion. Jericho insisted I run Ella and check for mental issues. I don’t think she’s going to have any, though. I know her story sounds crazy, but she seems pretty solid.”

“What are you looking for?” Dax wondered. Maybe Hawk could help if she hit a wall.

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“I don’t know yet,” she admitted. “I need to find out where Jordan came from. You’re not close to your parents, but I’ve met them. I wasn’t close to my family either, but you met my cousin and my uncle. Everyone has family somewhere.”

“And what will that tell you?” Dax finished his fajita and moved to the stove to brown another tortilla.

“It will tell me where he came from,” Paige decided. “Why he left. Maybe it will tell me if he’s running from something or if he’s a wanted fugitive.”

“If you think he could be,” Dax turned to focus on her. “Will you take Gage or Dean with you. I know you’re going to check out the farm, and the man, at some point. Will you take backup, just in case?”

“Gage already insisted on going,” Paige shrugged. “I don’t expect any trouble, though. I’m not going out to confront him. I just want to talk to him, see if I get a vibe.”

“But you promise you won’t go alone,” Dax pushed.

“I promise,” Paige was about to snap at him; but, when she saw the concern on his face, she dialed it back. She could give him this. She knew he worried about her. He handled the stress of being a cop’s spouse so well, she often forgot how difficult it was for him. Dax understood the danger and the risks of the job and still supported her without question. There was no need to cause him undo stress — especially since Gage already insisted on going.

“Thank you,” he kissed the top of her head before he settled back into this chair. “Is there a way to get something from him? Like DNA or something?”

“Maybe,” Paige sighed. “But that’s not going to help unless we have DNA that was taken at least two months ago — before he left on his trip.”

“Right,” Dax considered. “What about fingerprints? Would that tell you if he was in the system?”

“I thought of that,” Paige sat back. She was stuffed. “And I might try for that later. I want this first meeting to be casual. I don’t want to spook him if there is a reason he’s hiding. I need time to figure this out and they’re predicting another storm tomorrow. Are you guys working at the center or do you need to head up the canyon again?”

“Mostly at the center,” he drank the last of his wine, stood and dropped the plates into the sink. After rinsing them, he decided clean up could wait. He took Paige’s hand and led her to the couch. “Think aloud. I want to hear where you’re going with this.”

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“I’m not really sure,” Paige admitted. “I can’t analyze the evidence until I have evidence. And, the rational part of my brain keeps asking me what I’m thinking. Am I just creating a problem when the obvious answer points to a delusional woman?”

“What are your instincts saying?”

“That there’s something to this,” Paige admitted. “But I have no idea what.”

“Then, I say follow your instincts.”

“You always say to follow my instincts,” Paige smiled.

“And I’m always right,” Dax declared.

“About that one specific thing — maybe.”

Dax kissed her lightly then stood. “I think it’s a perfect night for a fire. Give me a minute and I’ll create a little atmosphere.” He began to strategically pile wood into the fireplace. “By the way, did you like the coat?”

“I did,” Paige watched as he expertly stacked kindling and lit a match. The fire caught immediately. “I also loved the boots. I know, you told me so. I’d ask how you did that, but I know you won’t tell me.”

“Did what?” He settled back onto the couch and pulled her against him.

“Broke them in so they didn’t cause blisters,” she snuggled in closer and pulled a blanket over her legs. It could get chilly in this room. She wondered if Dax would fix that. He was planning a complete makeover once the holidays were over.

“First,” Dax pulled her closer, knowing his body heat would keep her comfortable until the warmth from the fire filled the room. “I bought good quality footwear. You always buy those cheap fake leather boots that hurt your feet. Then, I conditioned them with mink oil and added a wooden boot stretcher. Once they sat for a week, they were perfect. I knew they wouldn’t give you blisters. How are your frozen toes, anyway?”

“Not frozen,” Paige frowned. “It was really that easy?”

“It was,” he grinned. “And the coat?”

“Perfect,” Paige admitted. “Maybe that’s why you got a home cooked meal tonight. You took care of me; it was my turn to take care of you.

“You can take care of me any time,” he smiled and pulled her onto his lap.

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It snowed the next two days. The third day, the storms had receded, but the temperature dropped below freezing. Paige and her fellow deputies stayed busy, spending most of their time up the canyon. The locals were anxious to enjoy the snow packed hills. Unfortunately, that meant sledding accidents and cars sliding off the road or getting stuck in a snowbank. Too many drivers were unprepared for the ice and slick terrain.

After a long, cold, hectic morning, Paige settled behind her desk and wondered if the weather would ever give them a break. She had just flipped on her computer, hoping to get caught up on reports, when Ella called. She found Jordan's birth certificate in the closet. She also found a file she didn't recognize hidden near the back. It had receipts and other documentation that appeared to be from New Mexico. As far as she knew, Jordan had never been to New Mexico. The file confused her, and she didn't know what it meant but she agreed to give everything to Paige if she got it back.

Paige wanted to rush out and retrieve the documents immediately. Instead, she impatiently waited for Gage to arrive; a promise was a promise. He entered the building and made a beeline for the coffee counter. Paige watched, silently urging him to hurry up already. When he started tapping the sugar packet against the edge of the counter, she lost it and called his name.

"What?" he said, more grumpy than usual.

"Ella called," Paige studied her friend. "You up for a ride out to the country?"

"The entire county is part of the country, Paige," he dumped the mug into a go cup and motioned for the door. "I'll drive."

"What's wrong?" Paige asked as soon as he pulled onto the highway.

"Nothing," Gage took another sip of his coffee.

"Come on, Gage," Paige wasn't going to let this drop. "I know you. Something's going on."

"My sister," Gage finally told her. "She's got this bright idea that I'd be perfect for some girl she met at yoga."

"And?"

"And what?" Gage grumbled. "Yoga, Paige. Do you think I have anything in common with someone that does yoga? What's next a strict diet of spinach and tofu?"

"So?" Paige frowned. "This isn't the first time Christy tried to set you up with one of her friends. There has to be more to this."

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“Normally, I can head her off,” Gage admitted. “Not this time. She invited the woman to Christmas dinner with my folks. We both know what a disaster that will be. I’ll make it clear I’m not interested; Christy and her friend will get offended, and mom will scold me for not being a gentleman. She’s going to ruin the entire holiday.”

“Hmm,” Paige considered. “You could hang with Hawk and the guys on Christmas. We’re doing dinner later that night and you’re welcome to join us. I have plans that morning that I can’t change. I promised Dax we’d take the snowmobiles out for an early morning ride. Things have been hectic lately and we haven’t had a lot of time for just the two of us. Anyway, you could hang with Hawk and the guys, then head over to our place for dinner. Just visit your parents on Christmas Eve. Your mom won’t mind.”

Gage considered, then broke into a huge smile. “I just might do that if you’re sure they won’t care. I don’t want to crash some secret military team building exercise.”

“They aren’t in the military,” Paige punched him. “They won’t mind. And you’re family. They’ll be happy to spend the day with you.” Paige was going to make sure of that. “Tell your mom something came up and spend Christmas Eve with her and your dad. Let Christy show up with her friend and wonder where you are. She can deal with the fallout this time. That girl never has consequences for her actions. Its time she learned a good lesson.”

“I’ll talk to my mom,” Gage decided. “Enough about that, we’re here. How do you want to handle this?”

“I’ll look around the property and see if Jordan’s outside. If he is, you go to the door and get the documents from Ella. I’ll keep Jordan busy and in the dark until you’re done,” Paige decided.

They stepped from the vehicle and spotted Jordan immediately. He was walking across the field, anger radiated from his entire body.

“Yeah,” Gage moved in next to Paige. “I don’t like the look of that. I’m not going anywhere. We’ll just have to find another way to get the stuff from Ella.”

Paige turned to glare at Gage but jerked back around at the sound of something hitting the ground at her feet. She jumped backwards, then focused on Jordan.

“I said,” Jordan fumed. “Get off my property.”

“Did you throw a shovel at me?” Paige asked in disbelief.

“No,” Jordan clenched his hands, but that was the only sign of anger that remained. “I dropped the shovel so you couldn’t lie and say I used it against you.”

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“You know,” Paige studied him. “You don’t act like a friendly farmer that’s never been in trouble with the law. In fact, you’re acting like a thug that knows his way around the system. Care to explain that?”

“What do you want?” Jordan forced his body to remain perfectly still. He was blowing this but seeing the cops in his driveway had surprised him. He forgot who he was for a minute. Now he had to dial it back, act like Jordan, and get them the hell away from his house.

“We’re looking for a vehicle,” Gage stepped forward. “A white Explorer, newer model. It was last seen heading this way. We just stopped to see if you noticed it driving by, since you were out in the yard and all.”

“Sorry,” Jordan clenched his teeth. As if he’d tell them anything — even if he did notice the vehicle they were hunting — which he hadn’t. “Didn’t see a thing. Now, if you don’t mind, I have work.”

“Thank you for your time,” Paige held out a hand and wondered if he’d take it.

Jordan hesitated, locked eyes with Paige and took her hand. He gave it one shake, then dropped it. “Have a nice day,” he sneered before he turned and walked away.

Paige glanced at Gage, shrugged, and headed for their vehicle. The instant they reached the front of the house, Ella flagged them down. She was standing on the front porch, wringing her hands. When Paige broke off and headed toward her, Ella glanced nervously toward the backyard.

“Here’s everything I could find,” she shoved an envelope toward Paige. “Please, go quickly. He’ll notice if you stick around for long and I won’t be able to lie.”

Paige focused on the woman’s face and spotted the heavy makeup and the bruise. “He hit you?”

“Yesterday,” Ella nodded. “I’ll press charges, I promise I will. I just need to find out what happened to my husband. Jordan would never hit me. Never. That man is not Jordan. I don’t care if he looks like Jordan. I don’t care if he says he’s Jordan. I know my husband and that man is not the man I married.” She glanced toward the back and relaxed when she saw the man who was supposed to be her husband climb into the truck and head for the back field.

“I’ll write up a basic report,” Paige decided. “The next time we talk, I’ll need the specifics for a follow up.”

“This is such a mess,” Ella brushed away a tear. “That’s not Jordan, but if I divorce him, I still lose. I lose the man I love along with the man I hate.”

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“I’m going to help you, Ella,” Paige promised. She didn’t care what Jericho said. Something was not right in this household and she was going to figure out what that something was. “Trust me,” Paige reached out and patted Ella’s hand. “I’m going to go now. You call me if anything else happens. I’ll find a way to help you, but you have to call me.”

“Alright,” Ella watched Paige walk back to the truck and climb inside. She wondered how bad things were going to get before she got answers. She straightened her shoulders and inhaled a long, soothing breath. Whatever happened, she’d deal with it. She’d survive and she’d find out what happened to Jordan. If she was right and that man was an imposter, then Jordan was out there somewhere, and he needed her. Or he was dead. She couldn’t think about that. She’d just believe he was out there, counting on her to find him and fix this. He couldn’t be dead, she needed him.

“Hey, Sean,” Paige said the instant he answered her call. “I need a favor, you busy?”

“Actually,” Sean hesitated. “I’m swamped at the moment. What do you need? If I can’t help, I might be able to find someone to assist you.”

“That’s okay,” Paige considered. “I’ll tap someone else.”

“Carmen might be just as busy,” Sean warned. “Is it a data thing or something else?”

“Mainly a data thing,” she admitted. “I’ll bug Carmen, if she can’t juggle me in, I’ll hit Hawk up for some help. Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

“If you hit a wall, tag me back. I’ll find someone to help,” he promised before he disconnected.

Paige debated — call, or stop by? She decided to stop by. That way, she could see how busy the guys were before she asked for a favor. If Hawk was still swamped, she’d tag Carmen. Her best friend would slip her in, no matter how busy she was. Paige just didn’t want to use a friend that way unless it was necessary.

She pulled into the parking lot and saw the men had cleared the entire area. They were preparing for another winter survival course next week but clearing the entire lot seemed futile to her. Another storm was headed this way. She wondered why they plowed the snow if they were just going to transport the students into the wilderness the instant they arrived. Not her problem, she decided. Paige yanked open the large front door and came face to face with the man she was looking for.

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“Your old man’s in the back,” Hawk grinned. “You know, it’s been difficult, trying to remember we’re all on equal footing around here. I just figured out why that is. I think your bossy husband might be spending entirely too much time with that daddy general of yours.”

Paige snorted out a laugh. “Cute. So, if you’re ignoring all edicts from the man that’s not your boss, does that mean you have some free time?”

“You need help with something?” Hawk sobered and studied her closely.

“I need help running a background,” Paige admitted. “I’m not getting anywhere because I don’t think this man really exists.”

“I’m surprised you came to me,” he narrowed his eyes at her. “Unless you asked Carmen and she said no.”

“I asked Sean,” Paige told him. “Dax has been so busy, I assumed you wouldn’t have time, either. Sean was a no-go and he said Carmen is also swamped with some top-secret project Nathan’s running. I decided to take my chances with you before I interrupt Carmen. If you don’t have time...”

“I actually do have a little time,” Hawk pivoted and headed for his office. “You better tell your man hello before we get started. Otherwise, we’ll both be in the doghouse. I’ll be in my office.”

Paige smiled and made her way to the back. She paused in the doorway and just watched Dax work. He was frowning and every few seconds he’d rub his eyes or his temple. It was obvious he had a headache. “You should take something for that before it gets any worse.”

Dax glanced up and smiled. “Did you tell me you were coming by today?” He rubbed his temple again and tried to remember.

“No,” she moved across the room, around the desk and stopped next to his chair. She studied him for several seconds, pulled out the top drawer and snatched up the bottle of pain killers he stored there. “Take two,” she dumped them into his hand. “Don’t argue.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he popped the pills into his mouth and dry swallowed.

“Seriously?” Paige shook her head, moved to the hallway, and got Dax a paper cup full of water from the dispenser.

“Thanks,” he took it and swallowed the contents in one gulp. “You didn’t say why you’re here.”

“I need to use Hawk on something,” she admitted. “He says he has time. Can you spare him for an hour?”

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“Sure,” Dax dropped his head back and closed his eyes. “It just suddenly hit for no reason. Sorry.”

Paige pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “Don’t move, I’m going to shut the door and turn out the lights. Don’t argue with me, mister. Take twenty minutes and let the medication work. Anything you have pressing can wait that long.”

He reached out, took her hand, and kissed her palm. “Thanks.”

“I’ll grab something for dinner on my way home,” she decided. “Maybe you could handle what’s pressing and go home early. You didn’t sleep well last night, and you could probably use some rest.”

“I’m fine,” he opened one eye. “Nathan’s project has all of us on edge. I... well, I think a guy I know might be in trouble. Hope I didn’t keep you up. I’m just a little worried about the whole situation.”

“Is it a friend?”

“No,” Dax sighed. “I met him, never worked with him, but he seemed solid enough. Sean may have to head out of town if Nathan can’t get the go ahead for a specialized team to handle it.”

“I assume that’s your way of warning me the mission will be dangerous,” Paige focused on the window. “I’m not going to worry about that because it’s out of my control. But, if you talk to Nathan, tell him I expect him to find someone I trust to watch Sean’s back.”

“I suspect the next time Nathan calls; he’ll be looking for you.”

“Then I’ll tell him myself,” Paige paused at the door. “Forget all of that. Save it for later. Set the prep work for the upcoming course aside, too. Just relax for twenty. I’m going to be here at least an hour. If something comes up I can handle, I’ll give it to Hawk, we’ve got this.”

Dax just nodded, dropped his head back against the chair and closed his eyes again. Paige knew that meant the headache was severe. She wondered what he planned to do about it before she arrived. Probably nothing. The stubborn man hated to take pills. He’d rather suffer in silence and make life miserable for everyone around him.

“You get Dax straightened out?” Hawk asked when he spotted Paige.

“He’s got a headache that’s on a fast track to an explosion if he doesn’t do something about it,” she admitted. “I gave him a pill, shut out the lights, and closed the door. Can you make sure nobody interrupts him for at least twenty?”

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Hawk pulled out his phone, typed out a short text and slid it back into his pocket. “Now, tell me how I can help the great and powerful Deputy Carter.”

Paige ran him through the basics, told him what she had and described the wall she hit while trying to determine Jordan Hovey’s real identity.

“Did you bring the documents?”

Paige pulled out a file and handed it to Hawk.

“Marriage certificate looks legit, but he used a fake identity to get it, so it won’t hold up.”

“Yeah,” Paige settled into a chair. “I came to the same conclusion. I’m going to wait on that, though. The wife is already stressed about divorcing evil Jordan and losing angel Jordan in the process.”

“You do know how crazy this all sounds, right?”

“How do you explain it?” Paige wondered.

“Could she be an embarrassed battered wife?” Hawk wondered. “Maybe things have gotten worse and she doesn’t want to admit she put up with the abuse all this time? Maybe, now that she wants out, she concocted a story because she’s ashamed she took it so long.”

“I can’t rule that out,” Paige considered. “But I don’t think so. Especially after I confirmed Jordan Hovey is not legit. He might be a sweet and loving husband, but he’s a fake. Now, I just need to find out if he’s a fake that finally let his true personality out or if he’s a fake that met with foul play so another fake could pretend to be him.”

“That’s a complicated explanation to something that could be straightforward and ordinary,” Hawk shifted and began typing on his computer. “What’s that theory, I think it was Einstein that said the most probable answer is the easiest solution.”

“Occam’s razor,” Paige nodded. “It actually says the simplest solution is usually the correct one. And it wasn’t Einstein, it was a theologian named — wait for it, William Ockham of the English philosopher variety.”

“You just love to show off your brainiac side, don’t you?” Hawk laughed. “Consider me corrected and let’s move on to Jordan Hovey of the Hancock Hovey’s.”

“What?” Paige lunged forward. “You did not just find my mysterious fake husband.”

“Okay,” Hawk pushed away from the computer. “If you say so.”

“Hawk,” Paige practically whined. “Tell me.”

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“I don’t have much — yet. I recognized the documents. Mainly the birth certificate. The forger, he has a tell. I’ve dealt with his work before,” Hawk admitted. “Meaning I’ve hacked into his system and extracted the data I needed before.”

“Which made it easy for you to get in again,” Paige realized. “And what did that tell you?”

“Not a lot,” Hawk admitted. “It’s only the first step. I can tell you Jordan Hovey AKA Hancock had money at one time. Had to. The forger in question doesn’t come cheap. I can also tell you his name, which I already have. He’s using the same birthdate he just changed the month.” Hawk slid the birth certificate across the desk. “That says his date of birth is February twenty-third. It is actually May twenty-third, same year.”

“Easy to remember,” Paige nodded and studied the birth certificate. “He might know someone that has a birthday in February. Makes for an easy switch. What else?”

“That’s about it for now,” Hawk held up a hand to stop her. “I’m working on it. I need a few to dig deeper. Why don’t you go somewhere and get us lunch? And by us, I mean the whole motley crew. Once the vultures smell anything worth eating, they’ll swarm like a bunch of starving rats.”

“Don’t you need me to stay here and help?”

Hawk just stared at her.

“Right,” she stood. “Pizza or burgers?”

“Pizza’s easier,” Hawk decided. “Track down Wooly. He knows what and where and he can get you the cash to pay the bill. Oh, and pull that door shut on your way out. I need a little uninterrupted time to work on this.”

“I hope the world doesn’t come to an end in the next hour,” Paige headed for the door. “Otherwise, I’ll get blamed for taking the two top honchos that run this fine establishment out of commission.”

“The world won’t end,” Hawk remained focused on his computer. “And if it did, those guys out there know how to handle it. We run a top-notch facility here at DMA, even with the two head honchos out of commission.”

“Good to know,” she pulled the door shut and began her search for Wooly.

Paige slid open the door and silently made her way across the room. Once she reached the desk, she twisted the chair to the side and crouched between Dax’s legs, resting her palms on his

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thighs. “Hey, babe.” She didn’t even see it coming. One minute she was crouched in front of her husband. The next, he had whisked her up and settled her onto his lap.

Laughing, she studied his eyes for several seconds. They were now clear and full of mischief. “Guess the head feels better.”

Dax grinned. “That’s what she said.”

Paige slugged him.

“Oh,” Dax laughed. “You meant my other—”

“Not funny, Dax Hamilton,” Paige warned. “Do not finish that sentence. I brought you lunch but now I’m rethinking that decision.”

Dax pulled her in for a kiss. “Thank you, for everything. Was Hawk able to help?”

“Sure,” Paige rolled her eyes. “If he ever stops long enough to brief me on his findings.”

“Awe,” Dax let her stand up and followed. “You might as well accept his methods. You won’t get a thing from him until he’s ready to share. I’m speaking from years of experience here. You’ll never break through the shield when Hawk’s in cyber mode. The man is a geek to the core.”

“Carmen’s a geek,” Paige argued. “I can get her to stop long enough to report.”

“Yes,” Dax followed her into the break room. “But Carmen worked for the feds. She’s used to interruptions and impossible demands. Hawk, he’s a military man and he’s perfected the art of silence.”

“Right,” Paige dropped into a chair. “I just need something. We’ve been lucky so far. I’ve been monitoring the calls and there’s nothing pressing. But, if I hang out here much longer, Jericho’s going to send a search party — with a cattle prod.”

“Are those standard issue in these parts?” Dax grinned.

“No,” Paige slid a slice of pizza onto a plate. “Those are issued directly by Jericho when he wants to make a statement.”

“Let’s enjoy lunch before the mob arrives,” Dax settled in next to her. “Then I’ll get Hawk to share what he found. The guys should have things finalized for the upcoming course by now. Hawk can dedicate the rest of the day to your project and I’ll make sure he fills me in before I head home.”

“Thanks,” Paige glanced up when the door swung open. She was hoping for Hawk. She got Vato, Wooly and Zeus.

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“Dig in,” Dax snatched up another plate, filled it with several slices of pizza and left the room.

“Is Hawk working on something big?” Zeus slid onto the chair next to Paige. “He has to be tied up or he would have beat us here.”

“He’s working on something for me,” Paige took a second slice. She knew these guys. If she didn’t take what she wanted now there wouldn’t be anything left, and she was hungry.

“Anything the rest of us can help with?” Wooly offered.

“I don’t think so,” Paige considered. She didn’t know what Hawk found, so she couldn’t be sure. “I’ll let you know.”

Hawk stepped into the room carrying the plate Dax had fixed for him. “I might need something from you, Wooly. I’m still working a lead, but if I can’t break through myself, I might need you to contact Bull.”

“Now I’m intrigued,” Vato settled in at the end of the table. “If you’re calling in the big dogs, that means whatever you’re working must be well hidden — it’s the only reason you’d need the Bulldog.”

“Who is that?” Paige wondered.

“Bull is another hacker,” Dax settled back onto the chair next to Paige. “He’s relentless — thus the name. There’s nobody more blood-thirsty than Bull when he’s working a job — especially if you give him a challenge. Well, if you can get him to bite. Bull is far more selective these days than he used to be.”

“Because his reputation proceeds him?” Paige wondered. “Or because he hacked into a greedy Wall Street tycoon’s bank account and helped himself?”

“Yeah,” Dax evaded. “He’s selective, but one of the best.”

“I can probably just ask Carmen —”

“Don’t,” Zeus cut in. “She’s got her hands full right now and the last thing she needs is a distraction.”

Everyone in the room focused on Zeus. When he didn’t elaborate, they took the hint and started talking about the upcoming training course.

“Paige,” Hawk nudged her arm. “I know you have to get back to work, but before you go, I need a minute.”

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“Alright,” she studied him for some sign, but the man was a steel vault when he wanted to be. “Once we’re done here, we can head back to your office.”

Twenty minutes later, Dax, Hawk and Paige gathered in Hawk’s office.

“What I have so far is extremely sketchy without a lot of details,” Hawk warned.

“That’s fine,” Paige settled into a chair. “Tell me what you did find.”

“Like I said before,” Hawk began. “The man had money. I don’t know where it came from, not yet. Maybe an inheritance of some kind. I know he didn’t get it from his parents. His father was a drunk — a mean one by the looks of it. He spent more time sleeping off booze in a drunk tank than he did at home from what I’ve found. Mostly due to fights he instigated.”

“Jordan was honest about that,” Paige told them. “He told his wife he never drank because his father was a mean drunk. Now, he drinks all the time.”

“Anyway,” Hawk continued. “He didn’t get the money from his parents. They were dirt poor. His mother, Diane Hancock, spent most of her life working minimum wage jobs and barely paid the bills. Bryce Hancock, died of cirrhosis of the liver at the ripe old age of fifty-four.”

“Was Jordan an only child?” Paige wondered.

“Still trying to determine that,” Hawk admitted. “That’s why I might need Bull. Jordan’s buried his lineage nice and deep. I haven’t even found a record of the birth. There’s nothing there, just a big black hole. I’m shoveling through other sources and I might be able to uncover what I need from here. If not, I’ll get Bull to help.”

“What if he says no?” Paige looked at Dax.

“Bull won’t say no,” Dax assured her. “Well, he will. That’s kneejerk. But he’ll cave and give Hawk whatever he needs. Wooly knows how to work it. Don’t worry, we’ll get answers.”

“What can you give me now? Paige asked Hawk, deciding to trust Dax. “I need something I can work, a lead I can follow.”

“I know our guy was born in Tennessee or Nebraska,” Hawk told her. “He’s listed both. Tennessee on some documents, Nebraska on others.”

“I think Tennessee,” Paige decided.

“Why?” Dax looked at Hawk, but he just shrugged.

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“Because Jordan told Ella he was from Tennessee,” Paige admitted. “I know you think he lied and that means he’s from Nebraska. But, he told her about his drunk father. I think he was giving her as much truth as he dared.”

Hawk studied her. “Are you convinced — I mean, truly convinced — we’re talking about two different men?”

“The more I work this case,” Paige asked. “Yeah. I think Jordan was running from something. I would have guessed his drunk father, but he’s dead. No reason to keep up the fake life if the threat is no longer a threat, right? I also think his past caught up to him. Do you know what happened to his mother?”

“She’s living in New Mexico with a sister,” Hawk snatched up some papers off his printer. “I’ve been working the parents in hopes of hitting on something that will help with the son. Mother’s clean. Never been arrested. Once the deadbeat drunk passed, her life got a lot easier. She was working two jobs up until then, after Bryce died, I could only find one. She got a job at a local department store and stayed in the same place for several years. And yeah, she lived in Tennessee. Moved around a lot before Bryce passed, but they never left the state. Once hubby croaked, she landed in Nashville and never left. Not until seven years ago, when she moved to New Mexico to room with a sister.”

“Seven years?” Paige stared at Hawk.

“Yeah,” he scowled. Clearly, he was missing something.

“Did you notice the date on Ella and Jordan’s marriage certificate?”

“No,” Hawk began digging through the papers. “I was focused on the early years and didn’t get to the marriage part of the program.”

“I bet they got married seven years ago,” Dax said, reading Paige.

“You’d win that bet,” Paige nodded.

“New Mexico is closer to Utah than Tennessee,” Dax considered. “You think he kept in touch with his mother all this time?”

“I know he did,” Paige thought of the receipts from New Mexico.

“That’s dangerous,” Hawk frowned. “And reckless after he paid all that money for a new identity. Safer to cut all ties and move on.”

“Hawks right,” Dax agreed. “Why pay such a high price and go into hiding but still keep in touch?”

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“You do,” she gave Dax a sympathetic look. “You’re not hiding, but your situation is complicated. Still, you never go longer than a month without checking in with your parents.” She focused on Hawk. “It’s the same for all of you. Jordan’s mother took care of him and provided for the family. She worked long hours, worked two jobs, and made sure they always had a place to live. I think any son would appreciate the sacrifice and he’d want to keep track of her. I don’t know if he did it from a distance or if the contact was up close and personal, but I bet he always knew what was going on in her life.”

“Mysterious trips to purchase mustangs?” Dax wondered.

“Maybe,” Paige shrugged. “I wonder if he moved to Utah to be closer to his mother or if she moved to New Mexico to be closer to him.”

“Why don’t you go back to work,” Hawk suggested. “I’ll keep digging and see if I can get the answers to some of those questions.”

“Alright,” Paige stood and turned to Dax. “I guess I’ll see you at home.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Dax also stood.

“Jericho,” Clark Anderson said in greeting. “Don’t tell me you have federal agents after you again.”

“Not this time,” Jericho assured him. “I need a background on a woman. Do you have time?”

“Maybe,” Clark considered. “For you, probably. Who is she?”

“Someone I knew in high school,” Jericho admitted.

“Really?” Clark laughed. “And you’ve been carrying a torch all this time. Let me guess, you want to look her up and see if the flame is still burning on her end?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jericho grumbled. “She moved to Manti and every time I turn around, that woman is lurking around the corner.”

“You think she’s stalking you?” Clark asked, unconvinced. “That would be rather stupid, wouldn’t it? Since you’re the sheriff and all.”

“Do you have time to check into her or not?”

“Sure,” Clark grabbed a pen. “What do you know?”

Identical Proxy

“Her name is Harper Wellington,” Jericho provided her age, her address, and her phone number. “That’s all I can give you for now.”

Paige sighed and moved away from Jericho’s door. When she turned, she saw the look on Margie’s face. “I —” how to finish that statement? She’d just been caught eavesdropping.

“There’s no need to say a thing,” Margie sighed. “I told him not to call in Clark, but he won’t listen. He’s going to ruin his chances with that woman before he decides if he wants a chance.”

“Will you tell him —”

“Paige,” Jericho called. “Get in here.”

“Ever feel like you’re voluntarily walking to the gallows?” Paige asked over her shoulder.

Margie laughed.

“I assume you’re here to give me an update,” Jericho greeted. He was standing in front of the window with his back to her.

Paige silently made her way across the room and stepped in next to him. When he didn’t turn, didn’t react, she leaned against the windowsill. “I have a couple things I want to say to you.”

“If it’s not about your case, I don’t want to hear it.”

“Too bad,” Paige gripped the sill with both hands and continued. “First, I want to say you’re making a mistake. You know Harper’s not some psycho stalker. She’s just a girl asking a boy to love her.”

“What are you talking about? I have no idea where you get these things,” Jericho scowled.

“There are these things called movies,” Paige teased. “They have what’s commonly referred to as one-liners — you know, phrases that stick with you sometimes. Never mind. I’m just saying I think Harper is open to the idea of reconnecting. You should give that a real shot before she finds out what you did and refuses to speak to you.”

“I got luckier than any man deserves with Chaya, things didn’t end the way I hoped,” Jericho said in dismissal. “Some people only get one chance at happiness.”

“I’ve thought a lot about mom and our life here,” Paige said cautiously. “She was happy, really happy. You need to remember that. Mom was finally settled and ready to move on.”

“Paige, drop it,” Jericho warned.

Identical Proxy

“When my dad died, mom was a mess. I’m not sure she would have survived if she didn’t have me — if she didn’t have that responsibility. She loved my father with all her heart. Dylan Carter was her world. Losing him, nearly broke her.”

“I’m aware of that,” Jericho glanced at her then looked away.

“I know you are,” Paige said casually. “I’m not sure you realize she loved you just as much. I can see that now. I was a stupid teenager, and her happiness was something I recognized in the background, but I had my friends and my own life. I never really paid attention to what was going on with mom. Not back then, anyway. If I’d been more in tune with my surroundings, I would have realized the two of you had a thing going.”

“That’s easy to say now,” Jericho disagreed. “She didn’t want you to know. Probably because she wasn’t serious about us, not the way you mean.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Paige insisted. “You know how I know that?” She waited when he didn’t respond, she answered. “Because she kept you a secret.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Jericho frowned.

“Sure, it does,” Paige shrugged. “Mom kept you from everyone because you were important. I lived with her, before the secret mission that took dad’s life — and after. Mom was a little silly and completely open and carefree when I was little. Then, the military showed up and changed our world. Things were never the same for us after that. Mom changed, she closed up completely and rarely laughed. It was hard for her, the grieving process. I remember it was the hardest when people tried to be supportive. We’d be doing something simple and mundane like grocery shopping or walking through the park, and a neighbor or casual acquaintance would stop us. It was always the same. They’d say they heard about dad, tell her how sorry they were, and ask how she was holding up. She’d struggle through it, but the instant we got back home, she’d lock herself in her room and break down; sobbing uncontrollably for the rest of the night.”

“Paige,” Jericho warned.

“We got through it somehow and, after we moved here, mom opened her heart to someone new,” Paige continued, undeterred. “She fell in love totally and completely — with you. She was happy again, really happy. I was oblivious, but even I could see how living here opened her up and changed her. She laughed all the time, after all those years, she was finally living again. You gave her that, Jericho. She loved you. I believe she hid that love, and insisted you had to go along with her insane demands, because she was afraid of losing you. If she let other people see it, if she shouted her feelings to the world, she feared fate would step in and take you away too — the way it did with dad.”

“This is a futile conversation,” Jericho decided. “Neither one of us will ever know if you’re right.”

Identical Proxy

“I already know,” Paige insisted. “Because she was my mom, and I knew her better than anyone. I lived through the hard times and I saw the joy and the love in her eyes after we moved here. You can reject it, but that doesn’t make it any less true. Mom loved you. Denying that, disrespects her love. Mom lost my father in a violent, sudden, and unexpected tragedy. She grieved, she suffered, then she opened her heart and let herself love again. You lost my mom in a violent, sudden, and unexpected tragedy. Now, you need to do the same. Harper may not be your future, but there’s no reason she can’t be a part of your life right now.”

“That’s not the way I do things,” Jericho moved away from the window and settled into his chair. “Now, tell me about your case.”

“I said a couple things,” Paige didn’t move. “You never had the chance to grieve, not really. You internalized all of it. You’ve let it fester for years. Nobody stopped you in the grocery store to extend condolences. Nobody offered you sympathy and support. You suffered in silence. You were denied the opportunity to break down, to show the world how much losing mom hurt you — how it nearly destroyed you. The only outlet you had was the investigation. Now that the killer is dead, you’ve been left with nothing. Just more pain and loneliness. I’m here for you, but you won’t even let me in — not completely. Instead, you’ve shifted all that heartache and sorrow, all the energy you released by tracking her killer, all the frustration and the anguish — into guilt. Mom’s death wasn’t your fault. Nothing could have prevented it — not even you.”

“You’re wrong about that. If she trusted me, I could have protected her,” Jericho insisted. “Instead, she was ashamed of what we had.”

“Maybe you could have protected her,” Paige sighed and moved to one of the visitor chairs. “But maybe not. Mom was reckless in her pursuit of the truth. That’s because she had something to prove. To you, sure. But she needed to prove to herself she was worthy of your love. She was so dependent on dad that, after he was gone, we were both vulnerable. I remember too many times when asking for help put us in more danger than the problem she was trying to solve. She brought strangers into the house to help because she was ashamed and embarrassed. She never wanted friends or family to know just how helpless she really was.”

“She never told me that,” Jericho considered.

“Like I said, she was ashamed. She told me she would never be that helpless and dependent on anyone again,” Paige explained. “She couldn’t do that again, not even for you. She hated feeling weak and vulnerable. She also told me, when I was older, that I needed to learn how to be independent.”

“You clearly took that to heart,” Jericho grumbled.

Identical Proxy

“Mom looked back on those early years and realized she was never dad’s equal. Dylan Carter was always in control of our castle. I was just a kid and I could see that. You loved her, so you wanted to protect her. But she loved you, so she had to prove to herself you didn’t have to protect us. It was the only way she could move to that next level with you. Plus, you know she loved you and she finally decided to tell the world about your relationship. You read her last letter, same as I did. Nothing that happened was your fault and you need to stop blaming yourself for all of it. Mom was killed by a spoiled, pathetic, coward. He was selfish and depraved — end of story. Together, you and I — well, mostly you — we got justice for mom. Let that be enough.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jericho evaded.

“You need to do more than think about it,” Paige smiled. “Unless you want these talks to become part of our daily routine.”

“Yeah,” Jericho scowled. “That will never happen.”

“You should also know that avoiding me and refusing to give me a commitment won’t get you out of Christmas dinner at my house. We expect you by four at the latest. If you pull a no-show, we’ll track you down and drag you to the table kicking and screaming if we have to.”

Jericho started to say something, stopped, and just nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“Good,” Paige settled back in her chair. “While we’re being all open and candid. We need to set aside some time to do the whole Christmas delivery thing. Dax and the boys have a ton of stuff piled in the back storage are at the training center. They also bought dozens of gift cards and a secret donor dropped off around fifty cards for the market, so whoever we give those to has to buy food.”

“Your group has been busy,” Jericho realized. “Gage and Havilland want to help with the deliveries. So does Margie. Dean said he’ll participate next time — if we do this again. He’s heading home to spend the holidays with his family and Lovato will be headed up north next week.”

“Yeah,” Paige smiled. “Lo said he’s skiing with friends. You know, taking advantage of the greatest snow on earth.”

“I was thinking we’d all meet up early in the day Christmas Eve, organize everything, then make the deliveries later that night.”

“Works for us,” Paige grinned. “Don’t look now, but the stoic, antisocial sheriff just might be living again. Now you just need to call off the PI, and invite that woman to Christmas dinner.”

Identical Proxy

“I can’t,” Jericho sobered. “I need to know. It all seems just a little too convenient. Clark will be discrete but thorough.”

“I think you’re going to regret this,” Paige warned. “But, it’s your mistake to make.”

“It is,” Jericho studied her but didn’t back down. “You think we could actually talk about your case now. I’m pretty sure the good citizens of Sanpete might expect us to do a little work for our paycheck.”

Paige filled him in on the developments and told him Hawk was still digging. She was sure she’d have a lot more after Dax got home tonight.

“What’s your next move?” he finally asked.

“I’m going to see what I can find in Tennessee,” Paige decided. “I’d like to locate school records for Jordan Hancock, maybe some hospital records — if his dad was a mean drunk there could have been little accidents over the years — if I bomb there, I might be able to locate a little league team, or a neighborhood gang that remembers Jordan as a kid.”

“What will that tell you?”

“I need to know more about his family,” Paige insisted. “I need to know what he’s hiding from — or who. I need to know if Jordan was a decent kid or if he was a problem child.”

“I agree,” Jericho agreed. “There’s more to this story. Keep digging and see what you find.”

“Does that mean you changed your mind? Since this started you’ve been pushing me to close this out.”

“I support you, Paige,” he paused to make sure she was listening. “I always did. I’ve learned not to question your instincts. Keep working this until your satisfied you have the answers you need.”

“Thank you,” she said, grateful he wasn’t shutting her down.

“One more thing,” he added when she started to stand.

“Yeah?”

“I have let you in,” he admitted. “Completely. I haven’t made a decision about Harper but you, Dax, and that team of vagabonds he calls friends — you’re all family. I might be reluctant, but that’s only because I’m used to being alone.”

“Well,” Paige stepped to the door. “Get unused to it.”

Identical Proxy

“I don’t think that’s a word,” he called to her back.

Paige stepped into the house, anxious to see what Dax had for her. She’d spent all afternoon on the computer and making phone calls but didn’t find anything helpful. She knew Jordan had to attend school in Tennessee, if she was patient and thorough enough, she’d find his records. She stepped into the kitchen and the succulent aroma hit her immediately. “Holy cow,” she moved to the stove. “That smells amazing. When did you have time to cook stew?”

“We decided if we kept messing with the course, we’d mess it up so thoroughly it wouldn’t be fixable,” Dax admitted. “Zeus headed home to see if he could help Carmen, and Wooly wanted to get an early start and miss the traffic back to Nephi. Hawk rushed home, still engrossed in solving the mystery you dropped in his lap and Vato has a date. I figured I’d head home and thank you for pampering me this morning.”

“I’ll take it,” she moved to the cupboard and started pulling out what they needed to set the table. “Please tell me that’s ready. I’m starving.”

“Did you make any progress?”

“Not on the case,” she admitted. “I guess eliminating possibilities could be considered progress. I didn’t hit on anything new, though. I’ll pick it back up tomorrow.”

“Did you have a chance to talk to Jericho about the deliveries?”

“I actually did,” Paige glanced at him. “I had the chance to talk to Jericho about a lot of things.”

“Uh-oh,” Dax dished up two heaping bowls of stew. “What does that mean?”

She told him about their conversation and finished with the plans for Christmas Eve and assured him Jericho would be attending Christmas dinner.

“You think he’ll bring Harper?” Dax was still digesting everything Paige just told him. “You do realize, she’s not going to be happy when she finds out he had her investigated.”

“I do,” Paige settled in and started on the soup. “I told him that. He won’t call it off. At this point, all we can hope for is damage control.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” Dax decided. “Once the training course is over, I’ll have the guys help me sort through the stuff in that storage room. If we develop some kind of system, it will be easier to coordinate on Christmas Eve.”

Identical Proxy

“That sounds like a good plan,” she sat back and studied him. “And the other stuff? Do you have deep thoughts on any of that?”

“Not really,” Dax considered. “You’re right, but Jericho has to figure that out for himself. I think if he finally gives Harper a chance, they might be a good fit. She’s caring but tough. That came through loud and clear on Thanksgiving and at the diner the day I met her. She’s a good match for the obstinate lawman. I’m holding out hope he’ll see that himself and give her a shot.”

“Well, I said my peace. Now, I guess all I can do is wait and hope for the best.”

“I brought a few things home for you,” he admitted. “After we eat,” he demanded when she started to stand. “Hawk couldn’t find high school records either. He eventually capitulated and had Wooly contact Bull — who is also digging into your mystery tonight. It might take a couple days, but I think we’ll eventually stumble onto something that will help.”

“I hope so,” Paige sighed. “Ella needs answers and I’m worried she’s in danger.”

“Because he already hit her?”

“Yeah,” Paige sighed. “Then, there’s the real Jordan. If he’s still alive he could be vulnerable, injured or just exposed to the elements.”

Jordan leaned his head back until it collided with the hard wall. He wished he knew how long he’d been locked up inside this musty cellar. It had to be weeks, not days. He glanced in the corner. Counting the cans would give him an idea, but he didn’t have the energy. Conserving the few supplies Joey left him kept him alive, but it wasn’t enough to sustain him forever. He was so tired, and the cold temperatures felt like they penetrated every inch of his body and soaked straight through to his bones. Sorrow engulfed him and he had to admit, he was running out of time.

Ella had to be worried. He knew she’d never give up; she’d search for him until she found him. Too bad he had no idea where he was. It took effort, but he forced his body forward, away from the cold concrete wall. Once he no longer had the solid surface to support him, his body tipped to the side. He caught his weight with the palms of his hands and instantly curled into a ball on the hard dirt floor. He felt a trickle of damp liquid slide onto his wrist and knew his hands were bleeding again. He should get up, pry open a can of soup, and prepare for another freezing night in misery — but he couldn’t do it. Not yet. He’d just rest here for an hour, maybe two. Then he’d gag down another meal of cold soup and have a little water.

Identical Proxy

Satisfied he had a plan, he tried not to think about the futility of his efforts. Unless someone discovered him, he'd be dead soon. He might last another week, two tops but then he'd run out of food and water. Anger surged through him. How did his brother find him? That hacker he hired to create a new life, promised nobody would ever uncover his identity or his location. He'd paid a fortune to reinvent himself, to hide from the sadistic man he always feared. And still, here he was locked in a cold, dark cellar, on the verge of death because someone did find him. Joey found him and his brother wanted him dead. If he survived, he was going to track down that incompetent con man and demand a refund.

He laughed at that. He'd never get out of here. The walls were comprised of a thick layer of concrete that ran from floor to ceiling. The floor was hard packed dirt, and the heavy door was made of steel and locked from the outside. There was no escape. His only hope was for Ella to find him and figure out a way to pry the door open. He wondered if that was even possible without the key. The door was heavy metal and solid. He knew, he tested it — several times. He felt a pain in his ribs and wondered if that was real or imaginary. He was pretty sure he had a couple of broken ribs. Apparently, that's what happened when you broke into a dead run and tossed your body into a solid metal door. At the time, he thought it was worth trying. Now, he knew it only made his situation worse.

Once again, his thoughts turned to Joey. He always believed the man would catch up to him, someday. That's the reason he spent his entire inheritance on a new life, a new name, and a new start. He knew it was worth it the instant he met Ella. She was worth it. He also knew she wouldn't understand. She believed he was alone and didn't have anyone but her. She didn't know he had a family. A dysfunctional, pathetic, and dangerous family — but it was still family. She didn't know anything because he lied to her. He told himself he was protecting her; but now, in the face of death, he had to admit he was only protecting himself. Ella had a right to know the truth and now she never would. Exhausted, depressed and utterly miserable, he let the fatigue overcome him. His eyes drifted closed and he passed out.

Paige glanced up when she heard the brisk knock. She spotted Hawk just before he pulled open the door and stepped inside. "Tell me you found something," she demanded.

"Tell me you have coffee," Hawk countered.

"Plenty," Paige motioned toward the pot. "You're killing me here. What did you find?"

"Not me," Hawk doctored his coffee and joined Dax and Paige at the table. "Bull found something."

Paige just stared at him.

Identical Proxy

Hawk laughed. “Jordan Hancock, son of Bryce and Diane Hancock, twin brother to Jonathan Hancock, was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee.”

“Yes,” Paige slapped the table. “He does have a twin. Anyone want to bet Jonathan is now hiding out in Manti, Utah — a case of the evil twin impersonating the good twin?”

“How do you prove it?” Dax wondered. “I thought twins had identical DNA.”

“They do,” Paige considered. “First, I need to figure out why Jonathan needed to become Jordan.”

“I can help with that,” Hawk shoved a paper across the table.

“He’s a wanted man,” she jumped from her seat and grabbed the front of Hawk’s shirt, planting a big kiss on his lips.

“Hey!” Dax objected.

Hawk laughed. “Consider me compensated.”

“I’ll give you compensation,” Dax warned.

“This says Jonathan Hancock killed a man, tried to make it look like he was the one that died, and escaped nearly two months ago,” Paige ignored Dax and his objection.

“Where?” Dax asked. “Not Utah or you would have put it together on your own.”

“Louisville,” Hawk answered.

“How did he get from Kentucky to Utah?” Dax wondered. “How did he even know to come to Utah for that matter?”

“And where did he stash Jordan?” Paige wondered, worried he didn’t stash his brother, he stashed his brother’s dead body. If she was right, Ella was going to be devastated.

“You think he’s dead,” Hawk realized.

“I think it’s likely he’s dead,” Paige corrected. “He’s wanted for murder. What’s one more body if the result is freedom?”

“How will you break it to the wife?” Dax took her hand.

“I’m not breaking anything to her,” Paige told them. “Not until I have a body and I’m sure. You never make notification on a guess.”

Identical Proxy

“Sound wisdom,” Hawk finished his coffee. “I’m still looking into something, but I won’t have access to the personal stuff. Not with my resources here. I’d get more if I flew out to Tennessee, but that’s not possible with the course starting in a few days.”

“No,” Paige shook her head. “You’ve done more than enough. Thank you for this. I don’t expect you to fly halfway across the country to track down leads for me. I’ll work the system from the inside. With this new information, I should be able to find a school administrator that can fill in some of the blanks.”

“Most of them have probably retired,” Dax warned.

“Or died,” Hawk offered before he pulled the door open.

“Such pessimists,” Paige scolded. “Why don’t the two of you go back to training and I’ll focus on investigating.”

“You’re certainly chipper this morning,” Hawk smiled. “I’m going to take credit for your good mood, and I think I’ll take your advice. I’ll finish the run I started this morning, then I’m heading into the center to finalize the schedule and double check supplies. I’ll leave the detective work to you.”

“What’s the run?” Paige called before he shut the door.

“Medical,” he said just before it clicked shut.

“That’s illegal,” Paige told Dax. “There are laws against —”

“Hacking?” Dax laughed. “That didn’t bother you yesterday when you needed his help.”

“Never mind,” Paige stood and poured a second cup of coffee. “I don’t want to know. I can’t be responsible if I don’t know.”

“I think that’s called accessory,” Dax teased.

“Technically,” Paige considered. “It would be accessory after the fact but if I don’t know about it, that means it never happened.”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Dax stood and boxed her in between his body and counter. “If an arrest is necessary, can I be the one to cuff you?”

“No,” Paige pushed him away. “Stop it, I don’t have time for funny business this morning. I have work.”

“Spoil sport,” Dax called after her.

Identical Proxy

Paige hung up and sat back in her chair. The Warden promised to send her everything on Jonathan — AKA Joey Hancock — and the prison break, but she now had a pretty good idea of how it happened. It was actually a brilliant plan — cold, calculating and sadistic, but brilliant. And he nearly got away with it. Would have gotten away undetected, long enough to disappear, if he hadn't made that one mistake. But the man was in his thirties, and he hadn't qualified for conjugal visits. Clearly, finding a woman took priority over distance and freedom in Joey Hancock's short sided mind.

The prostitute saw blood on the man's pants and what she recognized as prison shoes. She notified a friend, who notified a friend, who just happened to be a detective. That got the ball rolling and, within days, the perfect crime unraveled completely. Then, there was the fact that the actual dead guy had a wife that loved him. It was only a matter of time before someone noticed that dead Joey wasn't really Joey at all.

She still hadn't solved the mystery of Utah, though. Why did he come here? How did he find his brother? And what did he do with Jordan? Time was running out and she needed to figure it all out soon. With the freezing weather, another storm headed this way, and the danger to Ella — Paige had to act quickly. She just needed Jericho to stop in and give her ten minutes ... fifteen tops. She'd fill him in, get the okay, and arrest Joey on the warrant. She held out little hope that the hardened criminal would direct them to Jordan — especially if they were looking for a body, but she had to try.

The door swung open and Paige was out of her chair, across the room and following Jericho into his office. It only took eight minutes to lay out the details. Jericho agreed to the arrest but insisted on joining her. When Paige pulled into Ella's driveway, Jericho parked directly behind her.

"You go to the door," Jericho decided. "I'll go around and watch the back. If he suspects anything, he might try to run."

"Right," Paige watched her boss until he disappeared around the back corner of the house before she made her way to the front door and rang the bell.

"Can I help you?" Ella asked politely but her eyes were full of panic.

"My name is Deputy Paige Carter," Paige pretended not to know the frightened woman standing in the doorway. "I'm here because I need to speak with your husband, Jordan Hovey. Is he available?"

"I—" she glanced over her shoulder. Before she had a chance to answer, Joey Hancock shoved Ella aside and filled the open doorway.

Identical Proxy

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“There’s been a complaint. I just have a few questions and we should be able to clear things up.”

“What kind of complaint?” he demanded.

Paige motioned for him to join her on the porch, away from Ella. “If you could step outside, I think it will only take a minute to resolve this.”

Joey shot Ella a threatening glance before he marched outside and slammed the door shut behind him.

The instant the door was closed, Paige pounced. She shoved Joey against the heavy metal railing and had him cuffed before he recovered from the shock and realized what was happening. “Jonathan Hancock, you are under arrest.”

“Guess you didn’t give him a chance to run,” Jericho emerged and joined Paige. “Let’s get him in the car.” He grabbed Joey’s arm and shoved him toward the stairs.

“This is false arrest,” Joey spat. “Release me immediately you no good, filthy pigs.”

“Yeah,” Paige shoved him into her car. “I’ll get right on that.”

“I’ll follow you in,” Jericho climbed into his car and backed out of the driveway, waiting on the side of the road for Paige to proceed him onto the highway. He thought about this case and wondered how they would have handled it if Paige never came to town. Would Gage have recognized it as suspicious? How about Dean, or Logan. The kid was good, but he was still green. Jericho liked to think he would have recognized the problem but he’d kept Paige on a tight leash from the beginning. Didn’t matter, she was here. She insisted on investigating and now they had a deviant criminal in custody. That was the easy part. The hard part would be locating the real Jordan Hovey. Jonathan Hancock was a hardened criminal. He’d never confess, never reveal the location of his brother willingly. Jericho sighed and wondered if this was going to be another all-nighter.

“I can sit here all night,” Paige sat back and studied Joey.

“I don’t understand,” Joey insisted. “I told you, my name is Jordan Hovey. I don’t know anyone named Jonathan Hancock.”

“Uh-huh,” Paige glanced at Jericho. The sheriff was looking awfully annoyed at the moment. “We have your fingerprints, Joey.”

Identical Proxy

“Jordan,” Joey corrected.

“We’ve matched them to your prints in Kentucky. You’re in the system,” Paige shook her head. “I don’t know why you insist on playing this stupid game. You can’t win. We know you’re a wanted fugitive.”

“You’ve made a mistake. My name is Jordan Hovey. I don’t know anything about Kentucky. I’ve never even been to Kentucky. I’ve lived here, in Utah, for years. You can ask my wife, she’ll tell you. Maybe this Joey guy is my... what is it called when someone looks just like you? That must be it... some other guy that looks like me is who you’re looking for,” Joey insisted. “It has to be a mistake, that’s the only explanation. I don’t understand what’s happening here. Am I under arrest for something? If not, I’m sure my wife is worried. I really need to get home.”

“Yes,” Jericho answered. “That’s what you’re under arrest means, followed by handcuffs and the Miranda warning. But, since you’re a frequent flyer you already know that.”

“I think I’d like to talk to a lawyer,” Joey decided. “I’m really confused. Maybe a lawyer can explain things.”

“Put him in the back,” Jericho ordered before he stood and left the room.

Paige studied Joey. “Get up.”

“I—” he frantically glanced around.

Once Joey was locked in a cell, Paige settled in at her desk. It was clear the guy was never going to talk. She would need to find answers some other way. To start, how did he find his brother? She pulled up his rap sheet and began with his most recent arrest. Joey was convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to five to ten years in prison. He served three of them before he murdered a fellow prisoner and escaped. Prior to that, he had two cellmates — John Martin and Roger Clark. She ran each of the roommates, didn’t find a thread, and moved to the next arrest. She was halfway through the list when her phone rang. “Deputy Carter.”

“Umm,” a female voice answered. “It’s Ella. Can you tell me what’s happening?”

“Ella,” Paige sighed. “I don’t have any concrete answers yet. But, since you called, I do have a few questions.”

“Alright.”

“I know Jordan — the new Jordan — has been living with you for several weeks. I’m wondering if you have anything that might have the old Jordan’s fingerprints. Something that he hasn’t touched since he returned from scoping out the mustang.”

Identical Proxy

“I don’t know,” Ella considered. “Wait. He gave me a card and this little glass horse figurine for my birthday. I’ve touched both of them, but they might still have his fingerprints. I read the card and then placed it in a cedar box. The figurine is in my cabinet. You’re welcome to test them or whatever you guys do. Should I bring them to the police station?”

“No,” Paige decided. “I’m going to send Heidi out to your house. She’s our forensics technician. She’ll check for prints while she’s there. If she finds something, she’ll have to take them. If not, she can leave them with you.”

“Okay,” Ella agreed. “Will I get them back? They mean a lot to me. I’d really like to have them back.”

“Yes,” Paige assured her. “I’ll make sure of it. Heidi will be there shortly.”

Once she hung up, she retrieved the information on another arrest. This time Joey was in prison for dealing drugs. His cellmate was a guy named Frankie Sanchez. When she ran his record, she discovered Frankie was originally from Utah. “Okay, now we’re getting somewhere.” Upon further investigation, she realized Frankie was currently housed in the Gunnison prison. She glanced at the clock, there was time. After a quick phone call to arrange a meeting, she headed for her car. She was leaving the parking lot when Gage pulled up.

“You get a call,” he stopped to ask.

“I’m headed to the prison to talk with an inmate.”

“I’m free,” Gage grabbed a bag off his passenger seat and tossed it in the back. “Hop in, we’ll go together. You can explain everything on the way.”

“Alright,” Paige nodded. “Give me a second to park.”

“Jonathan Hancock,” Paige said once Frankie was secured to the table. “Tell me what you know.”

“What did Joey do this time?” Frankie wondered.

“Is he a friend of yours?” Gage wondered.

“Joey doesn’t have friends,” Frankie shrugged. “He has people he uses, guys he protects if there’s something in it for him, and guys he scares into doing his dirty work. Nobody crosses Joey.”

“And if they did?” Paige wondered.

Frankie shrugged. “They’d probably disappear.”

Identical Proxy

“Joey killed a man in prison and tried to make it look like he was the one that died,” Paige informed him.

“He escaped,” Frankie laughed. “He always said he’d do that... if he ever got caught and was facing more time than he was willing to serve. You lookin’ for him?”

“No,” Paige said casually. “We have him.”

“You want something then,” Frankie realized. “I ain’t saying nothing. Joey will kill me.”

“You answer our questions, and nobody has to know,” Gage offered.

“You can’t make me testify,” Frankie insisted. “I don’t know nothin’.”

“We don’t need you to testify,” Paige said flatly. “We just need information. Joey is going back to prison in Kentucky. He killed a man. He’ll be extradited and he’ll stand trial for murder. They have a solid case. He’s never getting out.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Answers,” Paige shrugged. “Why did Joey come to Utah?”

“I don’t—” he paused, and his eyes grew wide.

“Tell us,” Gage insisted.

“He...” Frankie looked away.

“What?” Paige asked.

“He must have believed the stories,” Frankie whispered. “Thought he could use the farm somehow.”

“What farm?” Paige demanded.

“There was a guy,” Frankie focused on the table. “He had stories.”

“You have a name?” Gage pushed.

“Silas Pembroke.”

“Tell me about Silas,” Paige requested.

“Syes stories were dope,” Frankie focused on Paige. “He said his family spent a lifetime throwing shade with the cops. Hiding stuff, getting away with stuff, and making them all look stupid. Sye loves attention and his stores were blown up for fun, you know? Don’t get me wrong, he’s solid, just hit on hard times and got desperate. The cops hammered him for nothing.

Identical Proxy

He didn't belong in prison. And one guy, Sye got on his nerves. He was mean and bored, I guess. Sye became an easy target. Me and Joey stepped in, had Sye's back for a few months in Tennessee. Sye kept up with the stories, talked about anything — made stuff up about everything. Most of it was bull, but he could tell a story."

"And he told a story about Utah?" Gage wondered.

"Yeah," Frankie nodded. "That was the family stuff. His great, great grandfather or something... he had a farm out here. Sye's granddad was one of those moonshiners, bootleggers, something. The booze police was out to get him, always on his back, harassing him day and night. The way you guys do."

"He had a place to hide," Paige realized. "Somewhere he stashed the alcohol so the revenuers wouldn't find it."

"He built an old cellar out of sight on the farm," Frankie admitted. "Said it was hard to find and hidden beneath one of those grain thingys. The man had stories and Joey — he was obsessed. Couldn't get enough to be honest. I never thought he'd actually come here. He's crazy. Joey is crazy, don't forget that. If he's in Utah, he's got a reason."

"Where is the farm?" Gage asked.

"Does the Pembroke family still own it?" Paige asked at the same time.

"Out here in Podunk," Frankie grinned. "A few miles out in a little town somewhere. And yeah, the family still owns the farm. Sye said it's vacant, nobody goes near the place. Some redneck farmer leases the place from his uncle or cousin or something. They work the back field. But the house, the barn, it's trash."

They talked for nearly an hour. Paige pressed but Frankie didn't know anything else. Once she was confident they wouldn't get more, they left.

"Found it!" Paige exclaimed as they were passing Sterling. "You have time to stop and check it out?"

"Where is it?" Gage asked.

"In that farming area south west of town," Paige glanced up. "It's on the way. Shouldn't take long. I need to do this, Gage. If you're busy, drop me off and I'll just head out alone."

"Right," Gage scoffed. "Hope you brought your walking boots."

Identical Proxy

They left the highway and pulled onto a dirt and gravel driveway. The ruts were deep, and the weeds were tall. Paige grabbed the handle over the door and closed her eyes when the backend of the vehicle slid, nearly out of control.

“Great idea,” Gage barked once he had the vehicle back under control.

“Stop!” Paige called.

“What?”

Paige pointed at some tire tracks. “Where did those come from?”

Gage frowned. “Good question.” He brought the truck to a stop and shut down the engine.

Paige jumped out and began to follow the tracks on foot. They led across a vacant field. The weeds were at least three feet high in some places. It would be easy to believe nobody had ventured out here for decades — well, it would be if it weren’t for the two straight lines made from a large truck that ran down the middle of the field.

“Pretty confident, don’t you think?” Gage moved up next to Paige and they continued across the field. The ground was covered in snow making it difficult to traverse. “He didn’t even try to hide it.”

“He never believed we’d catch him,” Paige stopped at the edge of the field and studied the surrounding area. “He must have parked the truck here and walked the rest of the way.” The tracks made a circle at the tip like Joey turned around and followed the same tracks back out.

“Now what?” Gage focused on the next field over. “That place is vacant.” He glanced to the left. “That one is active, less so in the winter.” Gage moved several feet to the left and started in surprise. “Paige?”

“What?” she moved in next to him.

“Is that what I think it is?”

Paige pulled a small set of binoculars from her bag. “If you think that’s Ella’s house and her barn,” Paige lowered her binoculars. “Then yes. That is what you think it is.”

“I’ll never buy this as coincidence,” Gage insisted. “Joey had to know Jordan was here. It’s just too... I don’t even know.”

“Yeah,” Paige agreed. “Coincidence is hooley. Joey found out Jordan was in Utah. Maybe that’s when he remembered Sye’s stories. We might never figure out how he knew. Jordan paid a lot to keep his secrets.”

Identical Proxy

“It’s possible he got something from his mom’s place in New Mexico,” Gage offered. “He paid for a new life, but he couldn’t leave the old one behind. That never works.”

“Right,” Paige agreed. “Once he knew where Jordan was, he might have remembered Sye’s stories and the hidden moonshine room. He may have thought this would be the perfect place to — whatever he did.”

“I can buy that,” Gage agreed. “He might have gotten lucky with the location, but I’ll never believe he didn’t know before he arrived. Probably scoped it out and realized it was the perfect solution to his problem.”

“Let’s head this way,” Paige decided, guess was getting them nowhere. “If we can get past this ditch, I want to see what’s on the other side of that field.”

“You sure?”

“What are you thinking?” Paige turned around to face Gage.

“Just,” he inhaled a deep breath and let it out. “You know we might be looking for a body. And if Jordan isn’t among the living —”

“He could be in the ditch,” Paige agreed. “Maybe they never got to the hideout. Alright, let’s follow the ditch for a while and see if we spot anything unusual.”

They walked for several yards before Paige found a footprint. When she looked closer, she realized the ground around them was disturbed. Someone had taken the time to try to smooth out the prints. She crouched to study the ground. Several minutes later, she stood. “We need to go this way,” she followed the ditch a few more feet before she found a place to cross easily.

“There’s nothing out here,” Gage moved in behind her and looked around. “Frankie said we’re looking for a grain silo.”

“A dilapidated old silo,” Paige corrected. “The hidden cellar is under the silo but the actual building may have collapsed. Let’s look for a building that’s no longer standing.”

“There’s a pile of old wood and tin over there,” Gage pointed toward the west. “Let’s go check that out.”

They circled the area, pulling the wood and the tin aside. It could be a grain silo, or an old stable, or an outhouse, or anything. The ground was littered with debris but there wasn’t enough standing to identify the original structure.

Finally, Paige growled. “I was so sure we were onto something.” She kicked a barrel in frustration. It toppled over and rolled several feet away. Paige watched it roll across the snow-covered earth and collide with a large rock poking up above the weeds.

Identical Proxy

“Paige?” Gage pointed to the area where the barrel had been. “What is that?”

“A secret entrance,” Paige realized. “She moved forward and studied the flat metal square with a study ring attached to one side. You in the mood for an adventure?”

Gage reached down and yanked on the metal door that used to be hidden by the barrel. Once opened, it revealed a set of uneven, rudimentary stairs. “You think Joey had a partner or is he the type that works alone?”

“I think alone,” Paige decided. “Frankie said he doesn’t have friends, only people he uses. I doubt he’d want anyone else to know about this one.”

“Alright,” Gage pulled his gun and cautiously took one concrete step at a time.

Paige pulled her own gun and followed. The stairs were large and steep, but there were only about a dozen of them. The air shifted and grew cooler with each step. At the bottom there was a large metal door with a padlock.

“Now what?” Gage wondered.

Paige focused on the door then glanced around the small, dark space.

“I have bolt cutters in the truck,” Gage turned and headed back up the stairs.

“Jordan?” Paige called. She pounded on the door but there was no response.

“Got ‘em,” Gage returned. They cut the lock off and cautiously shoved the door open.

Paige immediately spotted the body in the middle of the room. She glanced around to make sure they were alone and realized there were empty soup cans piled in the corner. She took a tentative step forward and saw an old bucket Jordan must have been using as a bathroom and several empty water bottles. He had done his best to make the small space as sanitary and bearable as he could. She rushed forward and dropped to the ground. After a quick glance at Gage, she rolled Jordan onto his back and tentatively reached out to check for a pulse. With a relieved breath she straightened. “He’s alive but he needs a doctor.”

Gage tried his radio but couldn’t get a signal. “You stay with him; I’ll head up the stairs and call for medical.”

“We need Heidi,” Paige called. “I need her to take Jordan’s fingerprints immediately.”

“You know,” Gage called over his shoulder. “This is only the beginning. If he doesn’t survive, there’s no way to prove he’s the real Jordan and Joey is the evil twin. We’ll never prove Joey kidnapped his brother and left him here to die.”

Identical Proxy

“Trust me,” Paige removed her coat and used it to cover Jordan’s torso. The man had to be freezing. She spotted the blood that covered his hands and realized it had to be from prying open the soup cans. Somehow, he’d found a way to survive against all odds — smart man and resourceful. Joey wasn’t going to be happy about that.

Jericho made his way down the hidden stairway. He waited while the paramedics loaded the man onto a stretcher before he approached Paige. “So, what’s the plan?”

“He’s in bad shape,” Paige turned to face him. “He might not make it.”

“As I understand it,” Jericho glanced around. “Twins have the same DNA. I’m not a geneticist, but I believe those two are identical. That means we can’t prove Jordan is Jordan and Joey is our wanted fugitive that killed a man in Kentucky.”

“I’d say being locked up in this cellar is pretty good evidence,” Paige disagreed. “He might die, but that’s just another homicide.”

“Or,” Jericho countered. “Joey continues that nonsense about being Jordan and claims his violent brother attacked him and tried to kill him. All he has to say is that he feared for his life. A jury will believe him, Jordan spent a lot of money to go into hiding. He can just say when Joey brought him out here to murder him and take his place, Jordan panicked and locked him away in self-defense.”

“There’s just one problem with that defense,” Paige grinned. “I can prove Joey’s the bad guy. I can also prove that’s Jordan on his way to the hospital. Then add in the premeditation with the canned food and your defense scenario goes out the window.”

“How can you prove that?” Jericho followed her up the stairs.

“Fingerprints,” Paige shrugged.

“If they have the exact same DNA, wouldn’t they have the same prints?” Jericho frowned.

“Nope,” Paige smiled. “No two people have the same fingerprints. Not even twins. They are usually similar, but your prints develop based on unique factors. Genetics or DNA is only part of the equation. Other factors are blood flow, access to nutrients, and the position of the fetus in the womb to name a few. All of these factors differ. That’s true for all of us. The fingerprints on your left hand are different than the prints on your right hand. Your ring finger is different than your pinky. You get the idea.”

“Okay,” Jericho hadn’t thought of that.

Identical Proxy

“Prints patterns develop somewhere between thirteen and nineteen weeks. The twins are growing side by side, but not in the exact same spot, with the exact same nutrient absorption, blood flow, and rate of growth. All of which determine the swirl design that makes up the prints. All I need are Jordan’s fingerprints, which Heidi already obtained, and I can prove which twin is Jordan and which is Joey. We booked Joey on the warrant. We have his prints and they have prints from his arrest in Kentucky. Those two matched, Heidi already confirmed that. Now, once Heidi processes the new prints and compares them to the ones she got off that birthday card Ella had — we have indisputable evidence that will prove which twin is which.”

“Huh,” Jericho glanced back at the hole in the ground. “Guess I did make the right decision when I took a chance on the hotshot forensic genius out of Virginia. You’re a royal pain sometimes, but I guess we’ll keep you around a little longer.”

“You should,” Paige grinned. “Because I make the obstinate sheriff look good.”

“Let’s head to the hospital,” Jericho started walking toward his vehicle. “Then you get to notify Ella. I’d start with the good news.”

“That her husband is alive?” Paige wondered. “Or that Joey was arrested on the warrant and will be heading back to Kentucky for the rest of his miserable life?”

“No,” Jericho smiled. “That her husband wasn’t an only child. He had a twin brother, which proves he wasn’t possessed by an alien in an Edgar suit.”

“That reminds me,” Paige stopped next to his car door. “Dax wanted proof you’re not an alien from some obscure planet. Do you actually have proof your human?”

“Sure,” he pulled open the door. “I let you live, didn’t I?”

Paige smiled and followed her boss to the hospital. It was going to be a long night, but a good one.

Several days later, the group was gathered around the living room. Christmas dinner was over, presents had been exchanged, and they were now relaxing and enjoying the company of friends. Paige looked at Dax in surprise when the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Dax offered but Paige followed him to the door.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” Sean stepped into the crowded house. “But I found something, and I need to make sure you get it.”

“Sounds serious,” Dax realized. “I guess it must be if you couldn’t wait until morning.”

Identical Proxy

“I’m leaving in the morning,” Sean focused on Dax and the two men exchanged a knowing look. “Early.”

“I take it Blackridge said no,” Dax asked, worried now.

“Can we take this somewhere a little more private?” Sean requested.

“Sure,” Paige turned but Sean stopped her. “Before we head back, can you ask Jericho to join us? This is something he should hear.”

“Alright,” Paige looked at Dax then back to Sean. “I’ll meet you two in the kitchen.”

Once Paige and Jericho settled in at the table, Sean pulled out a file. “Nathan asked me to tie up any loose ends before I fly out just in case.”

“In case you don’t return,” Paige frowned. “That better not happen.”

“In case this takes longer than we originally believed,” Sean corrected.

“Who is going with you?” Paige demanded.

“I’m going alone,” Sean held up a hand to stop Paige from erupting. “I can’t tell you much, but just understand I agreed to this. I’m going in as an aid worker and I’ll be joined by a British counterpart. He’s posing as my colleague. I’ll be fine, but enough about that.”

Paige frowned. Nathan was being more secretive than usual about this mission.

“As I was saying,” Sean pushed the file across the table. “I was tying up loose ends and I came across the file on Jericho’s shooting... the one that involved Daniel and your mother.”

“That case should be closed,” Paige objected.

“It is,” Sean sighed. “Well, it was. I was just checking all the boxes, so I obtained a subpoena for Daniel’s phone records. I didn’t see them before today so the secretary must have slipped them in the file when they arrived.”

“There was something in the records?” Jericho wondered.

“Had to be,” Paige agreed. “There’s no other reason for this late night, holiday visit.”

“I discovered that Daniel made several phone calls to the District Attorney’s office,” Sean advised. “They started shortly after you arrived, Paige. When I took a closer look and tracked down the other numbers, I realized the man that killed your mother,” he focused on Paige then turned to Jericho “and your girlfriend, was in regular contact with Stan Donaldson.”

Identical Proxy

“That doesn’t make sense,” Paige objected. “I mean, it sort of explains his attitude toward me, but Stan is younger than me. He was probably in junior high when mom died. And her death goes back to when mom was in high school. He wasn’t even alive then. What’s the connection?”

“Could it be a coincidence?” Jericho wondered. “Maybe Daniel was contacting Stan about banking.”

“I’ve put together a timeline,” Sean disagreed. “The calls came in after hours, on weekends, and the day your patrol car was stolen. I think it’s worth looking into, but I can’t follow up on this. I’m turning it over to the two of you and I trust you to handle it. Whatever you decide is fine with me. Just shoot a copy of your report to the office so it can be added to my file before it’s archived.”

Paige frowned.

“Now,” Sean stood. “I still have a few things to deal with before I turn in. Merry Christmas, Paige.” He pulled her into a hug. “Stop scowling. I’ll be fine and I’m sure I’ll be home before you have time to miss me.”

“Be careful,” Dax slid a card in Sean’s pocket. “Just think of that as a backup plan. If you get into trouble, call the number.”

“Thanks,” Sean nodded, knowing the person on the other end of that number was a secret contact and only to be used in the case of a real emergency. “Do I need my secret decoder ring?”

“No,” Dax walked Sean to the door. “My name will suffice. I’ve notified them. They know if you call, it’s important.”

“Thanks,” Sean gave Paige another quick hug. “See you on the flip side.”

Paige stood at the window and watched Sean leave. She thought she was prepared for him to head out on one of Nathan’s dangerous, top-secret missions but this was Sean. He was like a brother and over the past couple of years she’d come to rely on him for backup. She leaned back and closed her eyes when Dax wrapped his arms around her.

“He’s in good hands,” Dax whispered. “Nathan’s watching, and I still have friends. Sean might not realize it, but he does have backup and not just some Brit posing as an aid worker.”

“It’s Christmas,” Paige decided, glancing around the room. The mood had changed from festive and fun to somber and worried. “Let’s try to enjoy it.” She turned to Jericho. “What’s your take on the Stan situation?”

“I think I need to sleep on it and study this file,” he decided. “We’ll sit down after the holidays and decide what it all means.”

Identical Proxy

“Alright,” Paige let Dax take her hand and lead her to the couch.

“Did I ever tell you guys about the time Dax rode a camel across the desert as a favor to the Saudi prince?” Zeus asked, trying to lighten the mood. “Our illustrious leader promised his royal highness he’d get the spoiled heiress — and her fifty goats — to a remote village in time for his cousin’s wedding to a local tribal leader.”

Dax sighed in resignation and shifted on the couch. He was curious what outrageous tale Zeus was about to spin. The only thing he knew for sure — the man was going to bend the truth so far, it would nearly snap in two.