

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Malevolent Intent *Season 6, Episode 1*

by:

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Paige stepped through the door and settled into Jericho's visitor's chair.

"Thanks Clark," Jericho said flatly. "I understand. I have a meeting but give me a call if you uncover the answers." He disconnected and focused on Paige.

"Don't tell me he's still looking into Harper," Paige frowned.

"No," Jericho sighed. "He finished that weeks ago. He's digging into Stan Donaldson."

"Did he find something?" Paige wondered. "I've turned over every rock there is, and I can't find a single connection between Donaldson and Daniel Owens. Not even the tiniest link."

"Not exactly," Jericho frowned. "Stan has a juvenile record that's been sealed. Clark's having a hard time getting answers."

"Do you want me to..." Paige began.

"No," Jericho cut her off. "We do this right. Eventually, we'll need to bring James in on this and everything we present to him has to be legit. Nothing can be in the gray — no hacking. Stan works for Tolman and he won't be happy when he learns we didn't come to him immediately. I don't want anything to muddy the waters on this."

"Right," Paige considered. "How will Clark get answers?"

Jericho didn't answer because there was a knock on the door. Margie poked her head in. "Sorry to interrupt but Gage called. He's out at Warren Doyle's place and he's requesting help from Paige if she's available."

"What's going on with Warren?" Jericho demanded.

"Someone shot a bunch of his sheep," Margie advised.

"We'll have to put that other issue on the back burner for now," Jericho ordered. "I need to make a phone call, then I'll meet you out at Warren's farm. Get out there and see what you can do to help Gage find the person that did this."

"Paige," Gage greeted the instant she stepped from her vehicle.

"Tell me what you know," Paige demanded. "Oh, and Jericho is on the way."

"Why?" Gage wondered. "Never mind. Warren was awakened last night at around midnight to what he thought was gunfire. But, when he investigated, he didn't find anything."

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He said, once he got up, the noise stopped. He went back to bed and woke to find a field full of dead sheep.”

“Can you take me to the scene?” Paige wondered.

“I was just about to take Gage up there when you arrived,” Warren advised.

They heard gravel crunching and looked up to see Jericho pulling into the driveway.

“Just in time,” Paige announced. “Mr. Doyle was about to escort us up to the field so we can evaluate the situation.”

“Warren,” Jericho approached and held out a hand. “Sorry about the trouble. I know the timing couldn’t be worse.”

Paige looked at Gage, but he just shrugged.

“What doesn’t kill you, right?” Warren sighed. “Guess my sheep can’t say the same. Let’s head up and deal with this so I can figure out the next step.”

Jericho held out a folded note. “I called a friend, he put me in touch with someone interested in getting out of the business. I talked to him, that’s his information,” he pointed to the paper. “He’s willing to work out a deal if you take his entire flock. He wants out. His wife just retired, and they’re ready to hang it up and do some traveling. He’s expecting your call.”

“Thanks,” Warren slipped the note into his pocket then motioned to his upper field.

The group made their way up a fairly substantial hill that led to a grazing area where Paige counted seven sheep that were obviously deceased. She surveyed the field and realized the rest of the flock, the live sheep, had seriously messed up her crime scene. “Is there any way to move the rest of those animals to another location?”

“Sure,” Warren glanced around. “I’ll get Molly. It should only take a minute.” He turned and headed back down the hill.

“Molly?” Paige asked Jericho.

“His herding dog,” Jericho answered absently as he moved forward to crouch next to the nearest carcass. Patches of white peeked out from the mud-stained wool. The entire left side was covered in reddish brown dirt. A stream of blood, that was now dried had caked into clumps, clung to the sheep’s coat. On the ground, next to the body was a large puddle of congealed blood.

“Entry wound is smaller than I expected,” Paige crouched next to her boss. “Will the dog clear my scene or destroy it?”

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Jericho straightened and glanced around. "I think it's already been destroyed. We'll clear out the herd and see what we see. It's all we can do at this point. Look for casings but if I had to guess, he used a .223."

"I agree," Paige also stood. When she looked up, she spotted Gage talking with Warren. The ranger now had a beautiful Border collie standing next to him. "Molly, I presume."

Jericho nodded and left the field.

Paige followed.

Once the rest of the sheep were cleared from the area, Paige began her investigation. She moved from one sheep to the next taking pictures, measuring the wounds, and searching for clues. She was starting to get discouraged when she approached a sheep on the far edge of the property. She started to crouch, then frowned when she noticed something odd. She stood and began to walk the area.

"Did you find something?" Gage moved in next to her.

"I'm not sure," Paige crouched and studied a small red spot on the ground approximately three feet from the carcass.

Gage studied the dead animal, then estimated the distance from the body to the small pool of blood and frowned. "There's no trail, how did the blood get all the way over there?"

"I need my UV light," Paige decided. "I'll be right back,"

Jericho moved in next to Gage. "Where's she going?"

Gage explained the anomaly to Jericho and waited to see if his boss had a theory.

Jericho carefully studied the body of the sheep, moved to the area where Paige found blood, then straightened and slowly surveyed the area. They were on the edge of the field where the grazing area connected with a forested section that ultimately led up the canyon. Several yards away, he spotted what looked like wallowed down grass below the trees. He took several steps in that direction, then paused when he noticed another small patch of blood. "Gage, see if Warren has something we can use to mark this area."

"Will bailing wire work?" Warren called out. "I've got cutters handy, too." He moved to an old tractor and began rummaging around underneath the seat. "And a roll of electrical tape."

"That'll do," Jericho nodded.

Gage rushed over, retrieved the items, and made his way back to Jericho.

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“Cut a piece of that wire, bend it over and then wrap the end with that tape,” Jericho instructed.

Once Gage had a section of wire prepared, Jericho took it and carefully slid the marker into the ground next to the first blood spot. He moved to the next one, the one he just located, and repeated the process. He had inserted four markers by the time Paige returned.

Paige jogged back to the field, spotted Jericho and Gage and slowly moved forward to see what they were marking. “This should make the process move quicker.” She flipped on the light and slowly ran it over the ground, following Jericho’s original trail toward the tree line. Within a matter of minutes, they were standing on the edge of the field where it turned to dry grass and trees.

“That wasn’t a sheep,” Gage observed. “What do you think it was?”

“A human,” Jericho turned and studied the field again.

“I agree,” Paige continued to focus on the ground where the grass and weeds were compacted. She spotted what looked like a footprint in the soft sand and reached for her camera.

“It’s small,” Gage observed. “Do you think it could be from a woman?”

“Or a girl — it’s too small for a man,” Paige snapped several photos. “Can you mark this, too? The way you did the blood. I want Heidi to get a cast of that shoe print.”

Gage slid the wire into the soil. “The boss looks a little baffled.”

Paige glanced at Jericho, then returned her attention to the soil. She was pretty sure they were all baffled. She spotted what could be another partial print and moved further into the trees to get a better look. That’s when she spotted something pink. She made her way, slowly and methodically, toward the object and realized it was a cellphone. She slid on a pair of gloves and carefully retrieved the phone, dropping it into an evidence bag.

“Amy?” Gage wondered. “Hey, Jericho. Can you ask Warren if he knows anyone named Amy?”

Jericho turned, spotted the phone and the large name printed across the back of the pink phone case and nodded. He moved back to the field where Warren was standing just a few feet away and off to the side. “My deputies found a phone with a bright pink case that says Amy on it. Does that mean anything to you?”

Warren frowned and furrowed his brow. “No. No, I don’t think I know anyone named Amy. What’s going on here, Jericho?”

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“I’m not sure,” Jericho considered. He glanced to the side when Paige and Gage joined them. “Either someone was out here shooting at your sheep and one of the bullets hit a bystander, maybe an accomplice —”

“Or someone was out here shooting at a girl named Amy and your sheep got in the way,” Paige offered.

“You think somebody got shot — up here, in my field — last night?” Warren asked, horrified. “And I just went back to bed?”

“There was no way you could have known,” Jericho put hand on Warren’s shoulder. “Why don’t you head back up to the house? We’ll take things from here. You head back up and check on Sally. I’ll drop by the house when we’ve finished. Oh, and just so you know, I will be impounding some of the sheep.”

“Why?” Warren wondered. “I mean, that’s fine, but why?”

“I want to take any of the carcasses that don’t have an exit wound,” Jericho advised.

“You want to see if you can extract a bullet,” Warren nodded. “Alright,” he inhaled a deep breath, glanced around his field, and nodded. “I think I will head back to the house. Let me know when you’re done.”

Paige watched the distraught sheep owner walk away. “The phone has a passcode,” she told Jericho. “I’d like to call 911 and see what information comes across to Margie.”

“I’ll let her know,” Jericho sighed. “I’ll also have her contact Pete. Once we determine which sheep to take, he can transport them to the lab. Gage, while Paige deals with the phone, I’ll need you to figure out which animals have exit wounds and which don’t. I’ll be over there on the other side of the field. I believe the shots came from that direction.”

“On it,” Gage headed for the first body. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and find the casings.”

Jericho did get lucky. He found three casings that confirmed the shooter was using a semi-automatic rifle with .223 rounds. He searched the area thoroughly but didn’t find any other clues.

Gage located four sheep that didn’t have exit wounds. They impounded the bodies and he remained with them while they were transported to the lab for evaluation.

Jericho moved in next to Paige. “Any idea what happened to the girl?”

“Nope,” Paige sighed. “I’ve walked this area three times. Once she landed here, it’s like she disappeared. I followed that tiny game trail but there’s no sign of blood. I’ve searched for broken limbs, disturbed dirt, crushed grass — there’s no sign of anything out here. I’m starting to think the shooter caught up to his wounded victim and carried her out. I did find another shoe

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print. Over there,” Paige pointed to the side of the clearing. It’s obviously larger than these. I’m pretty sure it’s from a male and my rough guess is a size twelve.”

Jericho moved to study the shoe print. “I agree. We’ll cast that as well. I need to stop by the house before I leave. You hang out and wait for Heidi. Once she’s collected what we have, I think we’ve done all we can do out here. I’ll meet you back at the office.”

Paige was hunched over her desk, reading the data they’d dumped from the phone. There was a lot of data and she had to keep flipping back and forth to make sense of it all. To be honest, it was giving her a headache.

“What’s the status?” Jericho stepped from his office.

“The warrant came through, and I was able to get a full data dump on the phone,” Paige motioned to the large stack of papers on her desk. “Now, I just need to figure it out. We need a tech guy to decipher this nonsense. I know, it’s not in the budget. I’m just saying it would be helpful on a case like this. I’m muddling through, it’s just going to take time.”

Jericho settled into her visitor’s chair. “Anything unusual so far?”

Paige handed him the top page of the report and frowned. “The phone belongs to Amy Rhodes and I think she was being stalked.”

“Because?” Jericho wondered.

Paige dropped page after page onto her desk. “Look how many times that one number called.”

Jericho picked up the top page and skimmed through the listing. “Maybe it’s a boyfriend.”

“I don’t think so,” Paige continued to skim the records. “The calls are five seconds, ten seconds, eight seconds. Two seconds. There’s never a real conversation. Most of these show as missed calls and there are several dozen in a matter of minutes.”

“What about text messages?” Jericho wondered.

“Yeah,” Paige flipped through several more pages and stopped on the one that contained text messages. “This guy is definitely stalking her. Listen to this. *Amy, answer the phone. You can’t hide from me. And this one, You’re mine, stop fighting this, we’re soulmates. We will be together. This is destiny, I will have you or nobody will.* He just keeps getting more and more creepy. Like this, *You are mine for eternity. Our fates are one, you are my destiny. Return my*

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love, answer the phone. Answer me, Amy, or your ending will be a tragedy like Juliet. I think that's a threat. A reference to Romeo and Juliet."

"Why didn't she come to us?" Jericho dropped the documents onto the desk.

Paige continued to skim through the messages. "I want to talk to this friend. There are messages to another number. She sent things like *He's out of control* or *He just won't stop*. If we figure out who this number belongs to, they might be able to shed some light on what was happening in Amy's life."

"What do we know about this Amy Rhodes?" Jericho asked.

"I ran her name through the system," Paige told him. "She's nineteen. Her driver's license shows an address in Redmond. Where is that?"

"South of here," Jericho said absently. "On the way to Richfield. Sevier County, I believe. So, how did she get to Manti and end up in Warren's field?"

"She's nineteen," Paige reminded him. "Maybe she was attending college."

"Find out who that girlfriend is," Jericho decided. "I want to talk to her."

"I called the office," Paige advised Jericho. "They said Tammy Byrd should be in a creative writing class during this hour."

"If she's in class," Jericho glanced around at the students and immediately felt old. They looked like they belonged in junior high, not on a college campus.

They entered a brick building and easily found the classroom. "You wait here, and I'll go talk to the instructor," Paige offered.

Jericho watched Paige make her way to the head of the classroom. She had a brief discussion with the instructor, then approached a young girl in the middle row on the left. He continued to watch as the two women made their way to the hallway.

"The instructor said we can use his office," Paige informed Jericho. "It's this one here on the right."

"Is this about Amy?" Tammy demanded. "Is she okay?"

Paige shut the door and turned to address Tammy. "Can you tell us why you asked that?"

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“She didn’t come home last night,” Tammy’s eyes began to water. She immediately reached up and brushed the tears away. “I notified campus security this morning. They took the information, but I know they thought it was nothing. The guy even told me I was overreacting and things like this happen all the time. He said she probably just had some fun and she’d be back in a day or two.”

“But you didn’t think so,” Jericho pushed.

“No,” Tammy answered vehemently. “Amy went to work; she wasn’t out having fun.”

“What do you think happened?” Paige asked.

“I think he took her, or he killed her,” Tammy whispered.

“Who?” Jericho asked.

“Dave,” Tammy sighed.

“Who is Dave?” Paige wondered. “Do you know his last name?”

“No, just Dave. That’s all I know. He’s this creepy guy that won’t leave her alone,” Tammy admitted. “We met him at a football game one night. He came and sat next to us and just started talking like we were old friends. Amy was nice, but we both thought it was weird. Then it started to get creepy.”

“Creepy how?” Paige asked.

“He was always there,” Tammy told them. “We’d go to the grocery store and he’d be there hanging out in one of the aisles. We’d go to a football game and he’d be there. Amy would leave work, and he’d be there. Then the calls started. In the beginning it was just once or twice a day. Then, they increased to twenty, then fifty. It got so ridiculous. If she didn’t answer, he’d send text after text. At first, they were just annoying and persistent. Mostly he asked her out to football games, concerts, and romantic dinners. Then, he started acting like they were dating, even though they’d never been on a single date. It was like he was living in this fantasy world where they were romantically involved.”

“Why didn’t she report it?” Paige was truly curious about that.

“She didn’t take it seriously,” Tammy sighed. “I told her to be careful and she’d just laugh it off. It did bother her once the texts became threatening and his calls became... inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate how?” Jericho asked.

“Um... Tammy glanced away, clearly embarrassed.

“Intimate?” Paige offered.

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“Yeah, he started to get vulgar and — just gross. I urged her to at least report it, even if she didn’t pursue it. She said he was just a lovesick puppy and eventually he’d move on. She brushed all of it off as a desperate attempt to get her attention. I nicknamed him Gumby after that first night at the football game because he was tall and skinny and a little goofy. I came to regret that because it made him seem safe, like a sad and pitiful cartoon. I think that gave Amy the illusion he was harmless — and a little pathetic. I guess I thought so too — at first.”

“But?” Jericho asked.

“But after a while it got creepy and a little scary,” Tammy admitted. “I mean, he was always there. And the messages and texts became threatening — and just tacky and gross. There were so many of them. He’d say things like you’re mine and I’ll never let you leave me. The obsession was getting out of control.”

“So,” Paige considered. “When she didn’t come home last night, you got worried.”

“Yes,” Tammy agreed. “Um, can you tell me why you’re here? I mean, if you don’t know where she is, why did you come looking for me?”

“We located her phone,” Jericho wanted to see how Tammy would react to that.

“Where?” Tammy asked. “Amy never went anywhere without her phone. Where did you find it?”

“In a field,” Paige glanced at Jericho. “On the outskirts of Manti.”

“Dave didn’t live here,” Tammy sat up straighter. “I mean not here on campus. He didn’t live around here, in the student housing apartments like most of us that attend the college. I started to wonder if he even went to school here. I know he didn’t live close, though. He said something one time and I found it odd. What was it exactly?” Tammy closed her eyes for several seconds. “Something about a romantic evening at his place where they could watch the stars. Then he made a comment about how the stars were so much brighter from his back porch because he was surrounded by acres and acres of field. You know, so there weren’t any lights to interfere with the sky.”

“Did he give you any idea where this house was?” Jericho glanced at Paige and waited for the reply.

“No,” Tammy said slowly. “Not really. I got the impression it was close, though. Like somewhere in Manti or Ephraim even. Somewhere that made it easy for him to be here all the time, but out away from the lights and the noise.”

“Is there anything else you can think of that might help us?” Paige was pretty sure they’d gotten all they were going to from Tammy.

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“I don’t —” Tammy frowned. “Wait. I think he drove a truck. He was pretty careful about that. We usually just saw him walking or standing and watching in that creepy way he had. But there was this one time, maybe two weeks ago, I drove Amy to work. She was starting to feel uncomfortable and didn’t want to go anywhere alone. I offered to drive her to work but I had an appointment, so I had to take her early. I pulled into the back lot and I swear I saw him. He was in a newer model Dodge truck. It was green... like, a dark forest green and it had one of those big bar things in the back.”

“Like a roll bar?” Jericho asked.

“Yes,” Tammy pointed at Jericho. “But instead of being silver like metal, it was painted all black. Plus, the bed was short, not the normal length like a regular truck.”

“You’re sure it was him driving?” Jericho pushed.

“Yes,” Tammy nodded. “Amy didn’t see him, and she insisted I was just imagining it, but it was him. The instant he saw me he sped away and squealed around the corner and out of sight. The next time I saw him, he kind of glared at me. Like he was warning me or something. I got the impression he was mad that I saw him. I don’t know why, he knew I saw him all the time — his obsession wasn’t a secret, not from me.”

“Anything else?” Paige asked. “Anything you think might help us find him?”

Tammy frowned but shook her head. “Do you think Amy is okay?”

“We hope so,” Jericho stood. “Thank you for your help, Tammy. We’ll let you get back to class.”

Tammy stood. “Will you tell me if you find something? And can I call you with questions?”

“Here’s my card,” Paige held out a business card. “One more thing, do you know where Amy worked?”

“Oh,” Tammy nodded. “She worked the night shift at Yakidel”

“Yakidel?” Paige frowned.

“It’s a café,” Jericho advised. “Sort of. It’s more like a college social club that serves bad food.”

“It’s not so bad,” Tammy disagreed. “It’s cheap and better than Top Romen seven nights a week.”

Jericho laughed. “The joys of college living.”

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“We’ll be in touch,” Paige headed for the door.

Jericho pulled into the parking lot of Yakidel. “I’ll find a manager, you mingle with the kids, see if anyone saw anything suspicious last night.”

“I never realized teenagers made you nervous,” Paige pushed open the door.

“Not nervous,” Jericho climbed from behind the wheel and joined Paige in front of his vehicle. “Old. Those kids make me feel old.”

Paige was still laughing as she pulled open the door and stepped inside. Jericho wasn’t kidding. The place was packed, and the noise level was off the charts. Yakidel was a social club on steroids.

Paige pulled up a photo of Amy on her phone and approached the nearest table. “Hey, I’m wondering if any of you know this girl.”

“Sure,” an attractive guy with dark hair and a killer smile nodded. “That’s Amy. She’s a waitress here but I’ve never seen her work the day shift. I mostly see her at night, why?”

Paige ignored the question. “Have you ever seen her with anyone?”

“Just her friend,” a blonde girl tentatively spoke up. “I think her name is Terri.”

“It’s Tammy,” a blonde guy corrected. “Why are you asking about Amy?”

“What about people that weren’t friends,” Paige pushed. “Did you ever see anyone bothering her?”

“Just that guy,” the dark haired guy frowned. “Did he do something?”

“Why would you ask that?” Paige wondered.

“Well,” he studied her for several seconds. “You’re a cop and you won’t answer our questions, but you want to know if someone was hassling Amy. It follows that something happened, and that guy was strange.”

“Can you explain what you mean by strange?”

“He was just always — there,” the blonde guy provided. “We come here a lot. It fits our budget, and we like to hang. We come here a lot, mostly at night. Amy’s cool and she’s sweet. We noticed when — uh, what was his name? Don, maybe.”

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“Dave,” the brunette provided. “He made her uncomfortable.”

“And he was always here,” the blonde girl added. “He would just stare at Amy all night long. I told these guys it would freak me out if he did that to me. He’d just pick a booth and spend hours watching everything Amy did.”

“The manager finally busted him last week,” the brunette put in. “That Dave guy was sitting there for nearly three hours before the manager gave him the boot. I heard him say he needed the table.”

“How did he react?” Paige wondered.

The blonde guy shrugged. “He left, grumbled some but he left.”

“I saw him in the parking lot,” the girl added. “He was sitting up by the road in a dark truck, a Dodge, I think. They have those lights that look like a ram. I saw him, like he was waiting or something.”

“Do you remember when that was?” Paige glanced around the table. They were all shaking their heads.

“Last week,” the brunette finally shrugged. “Actually, I think it was more like two weeks ago.”

“Alright,” Paige slid her phone back in her pocket. “Thanks for your help.”

“Is she okay?” the girl asked.

“I hope so,” Paige moved to the next table to start another round of questioning.

Jericho knocked on the side of the door and stepped inside. “I’m looking for the manager.”

“You found him,” a man in his early forties looked up. “Manager, owner, glutton for punishment at your service.”

Jericho moved forward. “Sheriff Jericho Walters,” he held out a hand.

“I know who you are,” the man stood and took Jericho’s offered hand. “Carson Yates. What can I do for you, sheriff?”

“I understand Amy Rhodes is an employee here,” Jericho pulled out a photo and set it on the desk.

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“I don’t need the picture,” Carson settled back in his chair. “Amy’s one of my best waitresses. What happened?”

“We believe she’s missing,” Jericho settled into a chair. “We’re trying to locate her.”

“Have you talked to that Dave character?” Carson wondered. “They guy that’s been stalking her?”

“I find it interesting,” Jericho settled further into the chair. “People keep telling me a guy was stalking this young girl and harassing her. Yet, nobody bothered to call our office and report it.”

Carson frowned. “I told Amy to call you. She brushed it off. Said she could handle it. I’m her boss, not her father. I honored her wishes.”

“I noticed you have security cameras,” Jericho let that go. “Any chance I’ll see Dave if I watch the footage?”

“It’s doubtful,” Carson sighed. “I haven’t seen him since I gave him the boot. Told him he was welcome to stop in and grab lunch or dinner. He was even welcome to stay if he socialized like the rest of the crowd, but I didn’t want him harassing my employees. He hasn’t been back since.”

“Any chance he paid with a card?” Jericho wondered.

“I have no idea, why?” Carson studied the sheriff. “You don’t know who he is.”

“We’re working on it, but so far everyone just knows him as Dave,” Jericho admitted.

“I can help with that,” Carson opened a drawer and pulled out a file. He tossed it across the desk in front of Jericho. “I don’t know his name, but what I have in there should get you the answers you need.”

Jericho flipped open the file and stared at a forest green Dodge truck with a black roll bar. “Did this come from your security feed?” It was clear, not blurry like most still shots from a camera.

“No,” Carson ran his hand over his face. “I was concerned. He was always there, lurking in the shadows, watching Amy. It’s the reason I ordered him out. Amy was getting twitchy, and I didn’t like it. He came back, the next day. He parked across the street and just watched from there. There was nothing I could do about it. I don’t own the road.”

“And still, you didn’t call,” Jericho pointed out.

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“And say what?” Carson demanded. “There’s a guy that I don’t like sitting on a public road across from my café, please make him go away. You know as well as I do, the dispatcher would have explained it’s a public road and he has a right to park there.”

“Probably,” Jericho admitted. “So, these photos?” He flipped over the first one to study the second. It was a clear shot of the back of the truck... and the license plate.

“I figured what’s good for the goose,” Carson shrugged. “It’s a private road. Dave hung out for a while. It was busy that day so I couldn’t say how long, but several hours. When I saw him climb from the truck and head up to the corner — to the gas station — I walked over. I took a few shots and filed them away — just in case.”

“In case what?” Jericho frowned. Everyone knew this young girl was in trouble, but nobody bothered to notify the police.

“In case you ever came calling — asking about Dave,” Carson shrugged.

Jericho stood. They could do this all day, but it would be futile. He couldn’t change the past. “Can I keep these?” He held out the file.

“Sure,” Dave stood. “There’s a pretty good one toward the back of the kids face. Dave’s face. Most of these kids are teens or early twenties. I pegged him at around thirty or so. He stuck out and that’s before you added in the obsession nonsense.”

“I appreciate your assistance,” Jericho reached for the door.

“I like Amy,” Carson stopped him. “She’s a good kid. I hope you find her and if... well, if she needs anything, will you let me know? I’d like to help if I can.”

Jericho held up the file. “You just did.”

Gage returned to the office and found Jericho and Paige in the conference room going over paperwork. “Not that I mind boss,” he settled into one of the chairs. “But why are you working this case?”

“Any luck?” Jericho glanced up.

“Three were fragmented,” Gage pulled out an evidence bag. “One was usable.”

“That’s a miracle,” Paige focused on the bullet. “I figured we might get a partial at best. That’s completely intact.”

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“Smaller caliber,” Jericho nodded. “Faster, but smaller. Chances were pretty good we’d get at least one.”

“What’s all this?” Gage snatched up the paper on the top of the stack.

“Information on David Patrick Watts,” Paige sat back. “He was stalking Amy.”

“Do we have enough to arrest him?” Gage set down the document and picked up another.

“Tolman just sent through the warrant,” Jericho advised. “I handled it because I knew you were busy.”

“Which brings me back to my original question,” Gage focused on his boss. “Why are you working this case?”

“Warren’s a friend,” Jericho admitted. “Not a close one, but we’ve known each other a long time. His wife has cancer. She’s in the middle of chemo and it seems to be working, but it’s hard on Warren and his son.”

“How old?” Paige set the document she’d been reading aside and focused on Jericho.

“Lance is twelve,” Jericho frowned. “Maybe thirteen. Young enough that he should be out enjoying his childhood. Instead, he’s helping to care for his mom and run the ranch. With all the medical bills, money is tight, and the last thing Warren needed was some obsessed maniac killing off his stock. I’m afraid he won’t be able to replace them. If he can’t, it could mean the difference in keeping the farm and foreclosure.”

Paige considered. She needed to get that name; the one Jericho passed to Warren. If she could find a way to do it without her boss knowing, Dax could make the man an offer he couldn’t resist. And she would need to do it anonymously.”

“Alright,” Gage nodded. “So, what do you need me to do now? If you have an arrest warrant, should we go knock on his front door and see if he answers?”

“We already did,” Paige admitted. “Margie gave us the information and we stopped on the way back to the office. The place looks vacant.”

“We did learn one thing,” Jericho added. “He lives two farms down from Warren Boyd.”

“Do you think he kidnapped her, took her to his home, and she escaped?” Gage considered. “If he recaptured her, they could be inside the house, maybe in the basement or something and just not answering the door.”

“His truck wasn’t there,” Paige shook her head. “I couldn’t begin to guess if Amy was in the house, but I don’t think Dave was.”

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“We have an arrest warrant,” Gage focused on Jericho. “We have evidence he was stalking our missing person. Do we have enough probable cause to get a search warrant for his home?”

“I think so,” Jericho pulled out his phone. “With the stalking and the threats, then add in the shooting, it should be enough. Let’s see if Tolman agrees.”

Paige pulled into Warren’s drive and approached the door. “I’m sorry to bother you,” she said when he finally opened. Sitting around waiting for the warrant was driving her crazy. She decided to do another run though the scene while they waited.

“It’s no bother,” Warren stepped onto the porch. “What can I do for your Deputy Carter?”

“It’s just Paige,” she sighed. “I was wondering if I could go back up to your field. I just want to walk the entire area again and make sure I didn’t miss anything.”

“I’ll drive you up,” Warren pulled the door shut. “I was going out anyway. We can use the tractor.” He led her to the side of the house where an old tractor was parked. He climbed in and waited for Paige to join him. “Hold on, it’s going to be a rough ride.”

Paige gripped a metal bar and thought about the lost sheep. If she could figure out a way to get the information Jericho gave him, Dax could contact the man that wanted to retire and make him an offer he couldn’t refuse. But, how to get the number? “Were you able to reach that man with the sheep?” Paige finally asked. “The one Jericho gave you?”

“No,” Warren parked the tractor, reached in his pocket, and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. “I’m glad you reminded me. I don’t want to lose this.” He reached under the seat and pulled out a clipboard. After clipping the small paper on top, he slid the clipboard back under the seat. “Go ahead and do whatever you need to do. If there’s a possibility I might get more sheep, I need to get those pens back there cleaned out.”

Paige started for the field. She pretended to study the ground as she waited for Warren to disappear into the long, thin building. The instant he was inside, she rushed back to the tractor, pulled out the clipboard and snapped a picture of the name and number scribbled inside. She glanced at the long, narrow building, satisfied herself Warren hadn’t seen her and headed back to the field. Once she reached the second sheep, she pulled out her phone. “Hey, I need a favor.”

“Okay,” Dax drawled. “Hey, you guys keep it down. I can’t hear. What’s the favor?”

“I need you to buy some sheep,” Paige told him.

“Come again,” Dax frowned. “It sounded like you said you want sheep.”

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“I don’t want sheep,” Paige grinned. “I want you to buy someone else some sheep.”

“You want me to buy sheep for who?” Dax sighed.

“I always knew that girl was too good for you, but seriously man — she’s leaving you for a sheep?” Zeus joked.

“Funny,” Dax flipped him off. “Explain what you’re asking.”

“Maybe you should put this on speaker,” Paige decided. “Uh, is this a private conversation between me and your men?”

“You want me to leave?” Dax flipped it to speaker.

“Of course not,” Paige rolled her eyes. “Is it just you guys?” she pressed.

“Yes,” Dax said impatiently. Paige wasn’t making any sense. “Explain what you’re asking.”

Paige proceeded to tell them about the shooting, the dead sheep, Warren’s wife and his financial problems. “Jericho talked to a guy who has a flock of sheep, but he’ll only sell them if Warren buys the entire flock. His wife retired and they want to travel. But if money is tight, he may not be able to afford the whole herd. Jericho says if he doesn’t replace the seven that were killed, the lost revenue could result in foreclosure on his farm.”

“So, you want us to take care of it,” Hawk said in understanding. “I’m game. We’d have to negotiate delivery into the price. I wouldn’t know how to herd sheep. Cats? I feel like I do that every day with these clowns, but sheep — not a clue.”

“That’s a good idea,” Paige agreed. “Have the guy deliver everything and tell him you want to remain anonymous. Convince him it’s a neighborly gift for a man that fell on more than his share of hard times. Then we won’t have to explain anything.”

“Text me the information,” Dax decided. “Hawk will take care of it.”

“Thanks,” Paige said, relieved. “By the way, I’m working late. I have no idea what time I’ll be home tonight. Don’t wait up.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Dax considered. If they finished up here, he might have time to stop by the office and have a quick dinner with his wife.

“Later,” Paige disconnected and got to work. She moved toward the area where the wild grass was trampled but was stopped by her ringing phone. It was Gage, notifying her the warrant came through. She agreed to meet them at Dave’s house.

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Paige reached the target before her colleagues. They were coming from the office; she was only a couple farms away. Once they pulled in, the group headed for Dave Watts front porch — warrant in hand. She was a little surprised Jericho brought Logan with them until he explained the deputy was there to transport the prisoner, while the rest of them conducted the search. Gage reached out and pounded on the door. When they didn't get a response, he knocked again, waited a few seconds, and turned to Jericho. "You ready to kick it in?"

Before he could answer, the door swung open, and Dave emerged.

"David Watts?" Gage asked.

"Yeah, what's this about?" Dave took a step back.

"You're under arrest," Gage reached out, grabbed Dave's arm, and secured it behind his back. Once he was cuffed, he turned him over to Logan. "Read him his rights and transport him to the station."

"On it," Logan took control of the prisoner.

"What are they doing?" Dave demanded.

"They have a warrant to search your house," Logan pulled open his back seat. "Where is your vehicle?"

"I don't think I have to tell you that," Dave decided.

"You don't," Logan climbed behind the wheel. "Doesn't matter. We'll find it."

"What are you arresting me for?" Dave kicked the back seat.

"Stalking," Logan pulled onto the highway. "And harassment, I think the DA also included deadly threats. There could be other charges as well. Depends on what they find once they execute that warrant." Logan turned on his recorder and read David his Miranda warning.

"We've searched the entire house," Paige descended the stairs that led to an unfinished basement. "There's no sign of Amy Rhodes."

Jericho held up a hand. "Thanks, James. Just send it over to Gage once you have it." Once he hung up the phone, he turned to focus on Paige. "Tolman's getting a warrant so we can take that rifle and test it. If ballistics match, we'll charge him with animal cruelty for killing Warren's sheep."

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“Logan called. The minute he read David his rights, he requested an attorney. That’s a dead end, we can’t get anything from him unless he changes his mind,” Paige advised. “We need to find Amy and there’s nothing here.”

“We need to find the truck,” Jericho glanced around. “Let’s head up.”

The trio stepped onto the front porch and stared in amazement when Lovato escorted a dark green Dodge truck into the driveway.

“Okay,” Paige called. “I’ll bite. Where did you find it?”

“This is Scott Taylor,” Lo introduced the man driving the truck. “He’s in the process of moving and borrowed Dave’s truck for the day. He doesn’t really know Dave, it’s just the friend of a friend. When I told him about the warrant, and the missing girl, he agreed to return the truck so we can go through it.”

“We appreciate it,” Jericho moved forward. “Sorry, I know losing the truck probably put you in a bind.”

“It’s fine,” Scott shrugged and glanced over his shoulder. “If that thing was involved in a crime, I don’t want anything to do with it. I had a friend rearrange things and he’s got a truck. In fact, that’s him. Can I just leave the keys with you?”

Paige held out a hand. “Good luck on the move,” She watched the man walk away, climb into a waiting truck, and disappear down the highway. “Lucky break. I want to get started on the truck. What’s the plan with your prisoner?”

“I had Logan transport him to the jail,” Jericho told her. “He’s not talking so he might as well get used to his new accommodations.”

Paige spent nearly two hours on the truck. She retrieved prints, found three strands of blonde hair, and gathered up some dirt particles from the floorboard. She finally shut and locked the door, then headed back to the office. She had just finished booking the keys into evidence when the front door opened, and Dax walked through. “What are you doing here?”

“You said you’re working late,” he dropped a bag onto her desk. “I brought dinner. You can explain your case while we eat.”

“Okay,” Dax considered. “You have the stalker in custody but he’s not talking. So, how will you find the missing girl? If she’s injured — and I agree she is — locating her is a priority, right?”

“Right,” Paige sighed. “I want to go back to Dave’s house. He’s only a few farms away from Warren’s place. I need to see if I can find any clues before it gets dark.”

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“Then let’s go for a walk,” Dax dropped the remnants of dinner into the garbage and stood.

“You don’t need to stay,” Paige frowned. “Don’t you have super-secret course plans to develop?”

“Nope,” Dax stared at her. “Time’s wasting and a girl’s life might depend on you. We can stand around discussing my schedule, or we could head out and find your missing victim?”

The instant Dax shut down the engine, Paige was out of the truck and walking around the back of the house. He found her slowly wandering every inch of the yard, looking for clues. Dax stood back and watched her work, partially because he didn’t want to get in her way. Also, because she fascinated him, and he was always intrigued how her mind worked. When she suddenly stopped, crouched to get a closer look at something, then headed toward the field — he decided to follow.

“This might be a long walk,” Paige glanced at him when he moved in next to her. “You sure you want to do this?”

“Sure,” Dax grinned. “I always wanted to be out standing in my field.”

Paige rolled her eyes. “This isn’t your field.”

“A field, my field — it’s all the same.” He reached out and took her hand.

When they finally reached Warren’s field, Paige stood on the edge of the property where Jericho found the casings. “He stopped here and started shooting.”

Dax glanced around. “Why? It would have been a lot easier to follow her across the field.”

Paige frowned. “Good question.”

“Walk me through it,” Dax requested. “Show me where each of the sheep dropped.”

“Alright,” Paige agreed. Once they reached the edge of the property where the forested area began, they stopped. “This is where I found Amy’s phone.”

Gage turned and focused on the field. “He was worried the owner might come out and catch him. I bet Warren knows this Dave guy. He was taking precautions, so he wasn’t seen. It’s the only reason he’d stop where he did. See that night light over there?”

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“It’s not that bright,” Paige considered. “But it would have been at midnight. That’s when Warren said he heard the shots. He stepped out onto his patio, looked around, but he couldn’t see anything. Plus, the shooting stopped so he just went back to bed.”

“Exactly,” Dax nodded. “I know you already caught your shooter, but this is just more proof he’s familiar with the area. He was using that old barn as cover so the property owner didn’t see him.”

“Where did she go?” Paige sighed. “I thought he took her, but we searched his house. Gage even opened up the tiny access point and searched the rafters.”

Dax moved to the area where the ground was disturbed. He crouched and studied the soil and plants more closely, then he moved further into the trees. “This continues into the forest.”

“Right, but there’s no indication she went that way,” Paige insisted.

“Actually,” Dax continued further into the wilderness. “She did.”

“What are you seeing that I missed?” Paige demanded.

Dax crouched and motioned for Paige to join him. “You can see the ground right here has been disturbed.”

“Are you talking about that line right there?” Paige pointed to an indentation in the ground that was about an inch wide.

“Yeah,” Dax stood. “That was made from a shoe. She’s limping.”

“I have no idea how you know that,” Paige stood but continued to study the marking.

“What’s wrong?” Dax asked when he saw her face.

“Where’s the blood?” Paige glanced back and focused on the ground.

“I can’t be sure,” Dax moved further up a slight slope, paused, then veered to the left. “I think she must have wrapped it and applied a tourniquet.”

“With what?” Paige rushed to catch up. “She was walking home from work.”

“I couldn’t begin to guess,” Dax paused, carefully studied the ground, and moved forward a few more feet.

Paige stood back and watched her husband. She had no idea he was a human tracker. She should have — he was an army ranger. Of course, he could track the slightest clue better than a wolf on the hunt. She stopped to watch him work. Sometimes she forgot how amazing he was. She was meticulous and could normally find the tiniest clue. Even she had missed what Dax

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spotted almost immediately. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. She didn't like the fact she missed something Dax found.

"Stop pouting," Dax laughed. "We need to head up this way. I don't suppose you know if there's any kind of shelter around here, do you?"

"No idea," Paige caught up. "But I don't think Amy would know, either. She's not from around here. She grew up in Redmond, which is south and a little west towards Richfield. She moved to the area to attend Snow College."

They continued further up the mountain, occasionally stopping so Dax could read the invisible signs that only he could see. Finally, they crested a hill and emerged to find a large meadow — and a cabin.

"It looks like it's been here for about a hundred years," Paige brushed dirt from her pants. "How did she make it all the way out here. How did she even stumble onto this place?"

"Divine intervention?" Dax took her hand and started across the meadow.

The instant they reached the front porch, Paige saw clear evidence someone had recently been here. If she had to guess, Amy collapsed onto the porch the instant she arrived. The patio was covered in dirt and leaves, leaving a large smudge mark just above the steps. There was also a pot to the left of the door that was knocked onto its side, dark potting soil littered the area indicating the spill was recent.

Dax reached out and tried the door. "Locked."

"We're going in anyway," Paige decided. "Let me walk around the back and see if there's another way in."

"I'm shocked," Dax grinned. "I thought you needed a warrant for that. Has my rule abiding wife finally gone rogue?"

"Ever heard of exigent circumstances?" Paige tried a window on the side of the cabin, then continued around back.

"Sure," Dax moved to a window, pulled off the screen, and smiled. "I can get you into this window if you want. Oh, and exigent circumstances — story of my life. Me and the boys basically wrote the book on that concept. It was standard operating procedure in my world. Well, technically, it still is. But these days, the General handles the explanations. That man can justify anything."

"Uh-huh," Paige studied the window. "Can you get it opened without breaking it? I need to secure the cabin once we leave."

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“Of course,” Dax moved forward and within seconds had the window popped out.

“It’s terrifying that you can do that,” Paige glanced around to find something to stand on. “It’s even more terrifying that it took less than a minute to do it.”

“Plenty of practice,” Dax linked his fingers and held out his hands. “Step in.”

“I’ll open that side door and let you in,” Paige slid her right foot into his palm. Once she climbed through, she dropped inside, then silently made her way to the door to let Dax inside. They slowly made their way through the small cabin. They found Amy passed out — or deceased — on an old couch in the front living area.

Dax moved forward, checked for a pulse and was relieved to find one. “We need an ambulance.”

Paige pulled out her phone and called for medical. As soon as she hung up, she dialed Jericho. When she turned back around, she saw Dax was checking Amy’s wound. It was obvious she’d been shot in the leg. Paige also realized Dax was right, Amy had wrapped a fabric belt around her thigh as a tourniquet. She also had what looked like a silk scarf wrapped around her wound. It was hard to tell because the cloth was completely soaked in blood. She must have stopped to care for the wound on the edge of Warren’s property before she escaped into the wilderness. *Smart girl.*

“I’d say she knew she had to escape and was running toward the wilderness,” Dax stood. “Once she was shot, she cared for the wound the best way she could. Then, she carefully made her way through the forest. I think she was being careful not to leave a trace the shooter could follow. That’s why you didn’t see any sign of her leaving.”

“Hopefully, she can tell us herself.” Paige stopped because she heard a vehicle pull up the barely discernible dirt road. She stepped onto the front porch and spotted Jericho’s truck followed by Gage. “How in the world did you guys find us?”

“I have a stretcher in the back,” Jericho stepped from the vehicle and ignored the question. “The ambulance couldn’t get down that road.”

Paige watched two men exit Gage’s vehicle, move to Jericho’s truck, and retrieve the stretcher.

“Can you take the medics inside and show them where Amy is?” Jericho glanced around. “How did she find this cabin in the middle of the night, with a gunshot wound?”

“I asked the same thing,” Paige waited for the medics to step onto the porch. “Dax says it was a miracle,” she called over her shoulder before she led the medics inside.

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“I have to agree with that husband of yours,” Jericho murmured. He watched Dax appear in the doorway and settle onto the top step. Jericho moved forward and joined him. “Rough night. Thanks for your help. Paige said you’re the one that found the trail. I guess you’re pretty adept at tracking.”

“I guess,” Dax shrugged. “She’s barely alive,” he admitted. “She has a pulse but it’s weak. She might not make it.”

“And you’re worried about Paige?” Jericho realized.

“She’s blaming herself,” Dax admitted. “She’s upset that she didn’t see the signs and follow the trail hours ago.”

“She’ll get over it,” Jericho stood to clear the path for the medics.

“I’ll transport them down to the truck,” Gage advised Jericho. “Paige said she’s going to stay and gather evidence, then she’ll head out for the night. I don’t know what she thinks she’ll find. It looks like the girl stumbled through the door, locked it behind her and dropped onto the couch.”

Jericho glanced at his watch. It was nearly ten o’clock. By his calculations, Paige had been on duty for nearly fifteen hours now. It was time for her to go home. “Dax, go get your wife and take her home. She saved the girl, we arrested the bad guy, and once Amy wakes up, her statement will tie things up nice and tight. She’s done enough.”

Dax agreed. He moved inside, had a heated discussion with Paige, threatened to remove her by force if she didn’t come willing, and grinned but followed when she stomped outside.

Jericho laughed. “Didn’t mean to land you in the doghouse.”

“Like you said,” Dax glanced at Paige. “She’ll get over it.” He reached out and took Paige’s hand. She tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t let go. “Goodnight, Jericho. My wife and I need a peaceful, relaxing walk through the woods.”

Jericho watched the couple make their way across the meadow and disappear into the darkness. He smiled. Paige couldn’t have found a better partner. They were perfect for each other. He moved to the front door, pulled it shut and locked it. Once he was sure the place was secure, he slid the key they found still gripped in Amy’s right hand into his pocket and headed for his vehicle. He’d have Margie research the cabin in the morning. Once they located the current owners, he’d explain what happened and let them know he had their key.

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Paige groaned and rolled over when Dax settled onto the edge of the bed.

He set a cup of coffee on the nightstand and pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. “I have to get to the center. An issue came up last night, and I need to iron it out before the clients arrive. Have your coffee. I’ll leave the pot on when I leave.”

Paige sat up, knowing he was behind, and it was her fault. He helped her instead of working on a pressing problem of his own. “Sorry. I know you set your stuff aside to help me last night. I appreciate it,” she raised her arms in the air and stretched, yawned, and glanced at the clock. It wasn’t even six o’clock. The problem must be serious. “I’m not sure we would have found Amy in time if you hadn’t helped. And I’m sorry for the rest. I was tired and grumpy, and I guess you were handy.”

“You made it up to me once we got home,” Dax leaned in and gave her a kiss. “I love you, babe. See you tonight.”

“Love you, too. Is there anything I can do to help resolve that unexpected issue? The one that has you running off before the sun has even come up?”

“No,” Dax stood. “We’ve got it under control. Anyway, you need to head over to the hospital and talk to Amy this morning.”

“Is that your way of telling me to get my butt out of bed?” Paige threw off the covers, swung her legs over the side of the bed, and reached for the steaming cup of coffee Dax left her.

“If the shoe fits,” Dax called over his shoulder as he left the room.

Two hours later, Paige pulled into the parking lot of the hospital. She was supposed to meet Gage inside, but she didn’t see his vehicle. She approached the front desk, got Amy’s room number; and, when she turned, nearly collided with Gage. “Hey, we need to head up to the third floor and check in with the nurses station.”

They rode to the third floor in silence. Once they stepped out into the empty hall, Gage sighed. “I waited until I could talk to a doctor last night. They said they were taking her into surgery, but she was lucky. The bullet hit a tendon but missed her main artery and they didn’t think it hit a nerve.”

“Let’s go see if she’s awake,” Paige pushed open the door and stepped into the private room.

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“Amy,” Gage followed Paige inside. “I’m Deputy Clayton and this is Deputy Carter. Do you think you could answer some questions?”

“Okay,” Amy fumbled with the controls on the side of the bed until upper portion raised slightly, helping her sit. “I assume you want to know who did this.”

“We already know,” Paige pulled a chair up next to the bed. Gage settled into the chair on the other side. “We arrested David Watts yesterday.”

Amy closed her eyes in relief. She inhaled three deep breathes then opened her eyes, blinked away the tears, then focused on Paige. “Thank you.”

“Can you walk us through what happened?” Gage asked. “I mean, we know he’s been stalking you. We talked to your roommate and your manager at the café. We’d like to hear about the situation from you, though.”

“Just start at the beginning and run us through the best that you can,” Paige added. “Take your time. I know this is difficult, but we need as much information as we can get.”

“I met Dave at a football game,” Amy began. She walked them through the initial meeting. It was basically the same story Tammy told them. “I honestly didn’t think I’d see him again. We didn’t exchange numbers or anything. I wasn’t interested, not at all. So, when he showed up at my work the following week, I was surprised. I told myself it was a coincidence. I mean, a lot of the students hang out there, and it’s a popular place to socialize. Then he showed up again, then again. It started to make me uncomfortable, but it wasn’t unusual. I mean, a lot of the students habitually hang out at Yakidel. There are some groups I see every night.”

“So, what made you uncomfortable?” Gage wondered.

“He would show up, order something, then just sit there watching me for hours,” Amy shuddered. “It was creepy. Then, he started calling. I have no idea how he got my number. At first, he would just ask me out. He’d call one day, then wait a day or two and call again. Before long, it was every day. I finally told him not to call me again. That’s when the calls turned creepy. Sometimes, he’d just call and breath into the phone. You know, like the strange heavy breathing they always do in the movies. I knew it was him, I mean seriously, my cell has caller ID. He kept doing that, but then he started saying all these intimate, erotic things. He would tell me what he wanted to do to me on our date. I told him I wasn’t going to date him. I tried to explain I wasn’t interested, it didn’t matter. He wouldn’t stop. If I didn’t answer, he’d call like fifty times.”

“Why didn’t you report him?” Paige wondered.

“I don’t know,” Amy looked away. “Now I know I should have. I just thought he was this tall, skinny, geeky guy that didn’t know how to interact with girls. He seemed awkward and

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uncomfortable in social settings. I guess I felt sorry for him. Plus, I really didn't think he was a threat."

"And when he started sending threatening texts?" Gage wondered.

"I didn't believe him," Amy swallowed hard. "I should have. I know that now, but I thought he was just trying to get my attention."

"Can you walk us through the night of the shooting?" Paige asked.

"I went to work," Amy focused on the window. "Um, my boss basically kicked him out of the café about two weeks ago. He told him to leave, and he could only come back to eat, but if he lingered, Carson told Dave he'd ban him permanently. Dave never came back after that. I was actually starting to think the problem was solved."

"He did come back," Paige notified her. "He watched you from his truck across the street."

"Tammy thought she saw him, but I didn't want to believe her," Amy focused on Paige. "I know I was stupid. I know I was just in denial and it's embarrassing now that I look back on everything, but I just —"

"You were living on your own for the first time, and you didn't want to believe the situation was as serious as it was," Paige offered.

"Yeah," Amy shifted and nodded. "Anyway, I thought he stopped coming to the café. I felt safe, so I wasn't paying attention like I should have. I closed up and started to walk home. Before I even knew he was there, he pulled in behind me, grabbed me from behind and zip tied my hands behind my back. I took a couple steps, thinking I could run, but he just grabbed the ties and pulled them upwards and used his other hand to cover my mouth. I couldn't get away, it hurt too much. I couldn't scream, I had to do what he wanted. He lifted me into the truck and seat belted me in. I fought, but there was nobody around to help. He took me to his house and forced me into the basement. I was terrified. I knew he was going to do all those things he told me he would do on the phone. Instead, he just left me there and went upstairs. I knew he's come back and I had to escape."

"We searched his house and didn't see any evidence you were there," Paige frowned.

"The basement is unfinished," Amy told her. "He used a huge zip tie and secured me to the wall. I was in that large open area and attached to a board, part of the unfinished framing."

"How did you escape?" Gage wondered. Clearly, she had, that's why he shot her and Warren's sheep.

"I watched a show once where someone cut through duct tape with a nail," Amy continued. "I kept scraping my wrist on a nail that was sticking out of the two by four. I thought it was

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worth trying and eventually it worked, I was able to break the plastic tie. It took forever but I was finally free. Then, I had to wait until I was sure it was safe to escape. Everything was so quiet, I thought he went to bed. That's when I ran up the stairs, threw open the back door, and ran. He must have heard me, because he came out onto the back porch and started yelling at me. He was threatening to kill me if I didn't come back. I hid behind an old rusted out truck, terrified he was going to find me. Instead, he went back into the house; so, I ran. I knew he wasn't giving up, but I was shocked when he came back with a rifle and ran after me. I had a head start and I aimed for the wilderness. We were out in the middle of nowhere and it was the middle of the night. There was nowhere to hide so I just kept running, and he followed me. When I reached the field with the sheep, I tried to use them for cover." Tears began running down her face.

"It's not your fault," Paige assured her.

"Those poor sheep died because of me," Amy sniffled. "I am so sorry. I didn't believe he would actually shoot at me. He shot the first sheep and I panicked. I moved toward another one, slowly making my way to the trees. I was darting between sheep, trying to get away, trying to find a place to hide. I don't even know how many he killed."

"It doesn't matter," Gage assured her. "It wasn't your fault. You did what anyone would have done in that situation. Tell me what happened next."

"I was almost out of that field when he hit me," Amy sighed. "I could barely walk, it hurt so much. My leg stung and it felt like it was on fire; but I knew if I didn't make it into the wilderness, he'd kill me. I crawled to the tall grass and fell onto the ground. I was so sure he'd follow, but he didn't. I was confused, maybe he thought I was dead or something. Since I didn't know what he was doing, I knew I couldn't stay there. My leg was bleeding, so I used my belt as a tourniquet and then I wrapped a scarf around the wound. I tried to stop the bleeding. I don't think I left a trail, but the blood soaked through and saturated the scarf. I always brought a scarf with me to work and I was so grateful for it that night. I hated walking home in that shirt and the scarf made me feel more fashionable, I guess. It was stupid but anyway, I didn't want to leave a trail and I knew I was losing too much blood."

"Then you escaped into the wilderness," Paige offered.

"I did, but I was careful. I didn't want Dave to follow so I worked hard to make sure I didn't leave a trail," Amy admitted. "There was a small, hard packed area animals use... I think it's called a game trail," she paused. "I didn't use it because I didn't want to leave prints. I walked where I wouldn't leave a trace and slowly made my way further into the trees. When I reached that hill, I thought it might kill me, but I struggled to the top and found myself in a huge meadow. There were a lot of stars and the moon was bright, so I spotted the cabin immediately. I fell halfway across the meadow and couldn't get up. I crawled part of the way, dragged myself several feet and finally made it to the patio. By that time, I was so weak and I think I might have passed out in that field, I'm not sure."

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“You struggled onto the porch and collapsed,” Paige offered.

“How did you know that?” Amy demanded.

“The dirt on the front porch was disturbed,” Paige explained.

“I was afraid the door would be locked, and I’d get stuck on the front porch,” Amy told them. “I was terrified, if I couldn’t get in, I was sure Dave would find me and kill me. There was a large pot by the door, I tried to use it to stand up, but just knocked it over. That’s where I found the key. I think it took twenty, maybe thirty, minutes but I finally pulled myself up, unlocked the door, and slammed it shut. I braced my body against the closed door and flipped the lock. Then, I stumbled to the couch and collapsed. That’s the last thing I remember. The next thing I knew, I woke up here.”

The two deputies took the time to fill Amy in on what she missed. Paige explained how they found her. Then they explained what would happen next and made sure she knew she might have to testify at his trial.

“Will he stay in jail?” Amy wondered.

“He’s going to have a bail hearing,” Paige explained. “The DA will ask the judge to keep him in jail, but there’s a chance he could get out. If he can come up with the money, he could get a bond. Once you’re released, we can help you get a protective order. That way, even if he gets out, he won’t be able to come near you. He won’t be able to contact you. If he does, you call one of us and we’ll arrest him immediately. We’re going to keep you safe, Amy. I know it’s scary, but Dave will be charged with attempted murder. He also has the stalking charges, and ballistics came back, he’s going to be charged with a felony for shooting Warren’s sheep. Dave Watts is headed to prison.”

“By the time he gets out,” Gage added. “You’ll be long gone. You’ll have graduated from college and moved on to bigger and better things. Concentrate on that. Once you get through this, put Dave Watts in the past where he belongs and focus on moving forward.”

“Alright,” Amy sighed. “I can testify if I need to. I want him to pay for what he did.”

Paige arrived home to an empty house. She stepped onto the back porch and found Dax next door relaxing with his men. She headed over to join them, dropped into a chair and prayed Hawk was making dinner. She was starved.

“Were you able to tie everything up?” Carmen asked.

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“Yeah,” Paige accepted the beer Dax passed her. “She has a long road ahead of her. Amy has the physical recovery to deal with in the short term, but this will leave permanent scars emotionally.”

“She learned a very hard life lesson,” Hawk agreed. “By the way, I took care of that sheep problem.”

“The man agreed to your terms?” Paige asked. “Did it cost a fortune?”

“Naw,” Dax settled into the chair next to her. “His price was reasonable, and Hawk talked him into including delivery in the original price. Everyone will walk away from this happy.”

“Great,” Paige relaxed.

“To our very own superhero,” Carmen raised her glass of wine into the air. “Fighting crime and saving the world.”

“Not even close,” Paige laughed but raised her bottle. “Enough about me, what’s for dinner, I’m starving.”

“There’s this thing most people call lunch,” Dax said flatly. “If you stopped to have more than a cup of coffee — or ten — you wouldn’t come home famished every night.”

“I like my coffee,” Paige kicked back in her chair. “And anyway, I know my amazing husband will take care of me. So, when does the pampering begin?”