

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Up in Smoke *Season 6, Episode 2*

by:

Melanie P. Smith

Copyright © 2021 Melanie P. Smith

First Edition | Series: Paige Carter
Edited by LaPriel Dye

* * *

No part of this document or the related files may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the Author.

www.melaniepsmith.com

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. All trademarks are the property of their owners and are acknowledged by the proper use of capitalization throughout.



MPSmith Publishing

Up in Smoke

“I agree.” Dax tossed the application on the desk. “Send the letter.”

Zeus studied his friend. “What’s wrong? The decision was unanimous. That man’s not qualified to attend our course.”

“I said I agree.” Dax sighed and leaned back in his chair.

“But?” Hawk frowned.

“But nothing.” Dax stood. “He doesn’t meet the minimum qualifications. Let him know if he wants to apply for a beginner course, he’ll need to submit a new request.” Then he turned and walked out the door.

“Anyone know what that was about?” Vato glanced around the room.

“Zeus?” Hawk focused on the one man that was sure to have answers.

“Maybe.” Zeus stared at the empty doorway. “A few years back, there was an incident. The Sheriff of Juab County thought he was some kind of cowboy Casanova — and he made a play for Paige.”

“And yet, he lives,” Vato said, amazed.

“What happened?” Hawk practically whispered.

“Dax broke his nose,” Zeus shrugged. “Paige stepped between them, and the rest is history.”

“That’s the second time we denied a guy from Juab County,” Wooly realized.

“It’s not personal,” Vato insisted. “Neither one was qualified for the course they wanted to attend. If we make an exception now, we’ll have to make another one later. If we do that, why have qualifications at all. We might as well change everything to first come first served.”

“We saw firsthand what a disaster it was when we made an exception to accommodate Porter,” Wooly added.

“We made an exception to accommodate the grandson of a fellow Ranger,” Hawk corrected. “And he was qualified for the course he attended, but I get your point.”

“Maybe I’m missing something.” Vato glanced toward the door again. “I’m just wondering why this is a problem. We deny applications all the time.”

“Image,” Hawk shrugged.

“Integrity,” Zeus added. “And perception.”

Up in Smoke

“You think the sheriff will make a stink and our decision will be hard to justify?” Vato wondered.

“I don’t,” Wooly answered. “Like you said, we’ve denied guys who had more experience and better qualifications than that guy.” He pointed to the desk and the paperwork. “Applicants like that one is the reason we developed the questionnaire in the first place. He’s the kind of guy we wanted to weed out. Any of us could explain the reason for that rejection. Who cares if he makes a stink? We can weather it.”

“But can Dax?” Hawk sighed.

“If Paige doesn’t understand, that’s her problem,” Vato began.

“Which makes it a problem for Dax.” Hawk stood. “Let’s not borrow trouble. We’ll deal with it if and when we need to. Right now, we have work.”

“It’s okay, baby.” Julia ran a soothing hand down the beautiful black stallion’s neck.

The majestic horse huffed out an annoyed breath and pawed the ground with his left front hoof before he stomped and shifted his weight. Dust billowed up in a thick cloud, filling the tiny stall.

“What’s wrong gorgeous?” Julia tried to sooth. Instead of calming the horse down, Condor suddenly kicked the back wall with his hind leg and violently shook his head.

Julia rushed out of the stall and secured the gate. When Condor continued to shake his head and stomp his foot, she moved to the large window that faced the house and the driveway. Something was wrong. Condor was agitated and getting worse by the second. The instant she spotted the large man, her breath caught and she froze in fear. The panic came next. She frantically looked around the barn, desperate to find an escape. How did he find her after all these years? Terrified, she darted for the tack room. Her hand was shaking so hard she could barely turn the knob.

Julia slid inside the small, dimly lit room and quietly closed the door behind her. She twisted the lock, hoping it would hold at least long enough for her to sneak out the tiny window. She glanced up, wondering how she was going to reach it. Worse, how was she going to climb through without being discovered. She couldn’t let it stop her. If she hesitated, even a minute, she’d be dead. Right now, that was the only thing she knew for sure. She reached out and gripped the back of the small chair she always stored here. Her hand was still shaking uncontrollably from fear — and a desperate sense of urgency. She did her best to ignore it, slid the chair beneath the window, and climbed onto the seat.

Up in Smoke

Julia gripped the wall to help her balance as she teetered on her tiptoes and reached for the latch to unlock the window. It didn't budge. She tried again, using even more force this time. Her hand slipped and the edge of her palm slid across an old, jagged nail — slicing a chunk out of the side. Blood was dripping from the side of her palm, but she had to try again. Finally, the latch released. Frantic now, she shoved the window open and gripped the wooden frame, pulling her body upwards with her hands as she scrambled up the wall with her feet.

She jumped and nearly lost her grip on the window when she heard the distinct sound of a gunshot. *What in the world was he shooting at?* She couldn't stop to find out. She was running out of time. She shoved her body upward, braced her feet against the wall, and forcefully pushed her weight through the opening. Her body lunged forward, through the window, and she dropped to the ground with a loud thud. At the last second, she reached out just in time to catch herself with her hands. Unfortunately, her palms took all her weight, and now tiny rocks were embedded in her palms. Dry dirt mixed with the blood that was still sliding down her right arm. She was a mess, but she had to get away.

She scrambled forward and ducked behind the small tractor, desperately searching for a way to travel across the extensive field without being seen. If she could just reach the cornfield, she could disappear into the huge stalks. That's when she smelled it — fire. She glanced back and realized Panelli must have doused the building with something before he lit the barn on fire. Smoke and flames filled the air. Julia slid out of the light jacket she was wearing and covered her face before she stood, then froze. She glanced over her shoulder and studied the barn, horrified at the thought of what would happen to the horses. She wanted to go back, needed to save the helpless animals, but if she did — he'd kill her. It was her life, or the life of the horses. Well, that wasn't actually true. Once Panelli killed her, he'd let the horses die out of spite. Going back was futile and wouldn't save anyone. The only thing that kept her moving was her powerful will to survive.

Julia was crying as she slipped between the tall stalks of corn and zigzagged her way through the symmetrical field. Once she reached the back fence, she scrambled over, rushed to the enormous irrigation ditch, and dropped inside. It was large enough she only had to crouch slightly to remain hidden. Once she was sure it was safe, she ran. Tears were streaming down her face. Sorrow, fear, desperation, and an overwhelming sense of grief consumed her. Her heart hurt, for the horses, for the life she had to leave behind; and mostly, for the family she would never see again.

They wouldn't understand because they would never know the truth.

Up in Smoke

“I hate arson cases,” Paige told Bannon in greeting. “You know how much I hate it when someone disrupts my crime scene. And those guys,” she pointed to the firefighters milling around, “they obliterated it.”

“True,” Bannon grinned. “But they saved the barn.”

“You call that saved?” Paige focused on the charred building. The front of the structure had extensive damage. She was pretty sure the only thing that saved it was the tin roof and the metal support beams that were now exposed.

“Sure.” He flung a pack over his shoulder. “It’s still standing, isn’t it?”

“Barely,” Paige followed.

They moved around to a side entrance. Once inside, Bannon pointed to a stall toward the back of the barn. “It looks like he’s the only fatality. Mr. Wilson, the property owner, was able to get the others out. They’re injured, but still alive.”

“Smoke inhalation?”

“You’d think so, but no. Gunshot to the head,” Bannon sighed.

“They shot one horse in the head and then caught the barn on fire? Why?” Paige glanced around the scorched barn. “Do you think the other horses, the ones that were injured but survived, were just collateral damage?”

“Maybe,” Bannon shrugged. “At this point, any theory we come up with is pure speculation.”

“There’s nothing here,” Paige sighed. “If there were any clues, putting out the fire erased them all. I’m done in here. I need to focus my attention outside.”

“I figured as much,” Bannon turned to leave. “I’ve ordered an autopsy on the horse. I want to know if he was shot before she started the fire or after.”

“She?” Paige stopped abruptly and turned to focus on Bannon. “You already have a suspect?”

“Sorry,” Bannon sighed. “I didn’t get to that, yet. The family is over there.” He pointed to a man and three children sitting off to the side of the house. The kids were crying, and the man was trying to comfort them.

“Looks like someone’s missing,” Paige observed.

“Julia Wilson,” Bannon agreed. “She’s the wife and mother.”

Up in Smoke

“Is she actually missing?” Paige wondered.

“Yep,” Bannon agreed. “Her husband, Tyler Wilson, said his wife was in the barn working with Condor. He thinks she was kidnapped.”

“Condor or the wife?” Paige headed toward the back of the barn.

“Condor is the dead horse,” Bannon explained. “And he’s a stallion worth about half a million.”

“Why does Mr. Wilson think Julia was kidnapped?” Paige rounded the corner. “Doesn’t look like anyone’s been back here.”

“No reason to,” Bannon followed. “The fire started up front. An accelerant was used but I haven’t identified it, yet. I have a theory, but I want to wait for the results — should be in by tomorrow. Response was quick, and the boys were able to contain it and neutralize it before it reached the back and took the entire structure down.”

Paige held up a hand to stop him. “Do you know if anyone came back here at all?”

“I can check, but I don’t believe so,” Bannon pulled out his phone and made a call.

“Ask about the father — Tyler, is it?” Paige crouched. “Ask him if he came back here today.”

Bannon disconnected. “That’s a negative — on both. What did you find?”

Paige straightened and glanced up at the open window. “Someone, probably Julia, escaped out that window. There’s blood, so I’m guessing she cut herself somehow — or she was shot.” Paige reached into her bag and pulled out an evidence marker. She placed it next to a footprint left in the soft dirt. Then, she moved forward and placed a second marker. “I have two different footprints. One is smaller, likely a woman. The second is larger, I’d guess around a size twelve. I’ll need to talk to the husband, check to see what size he is, but chances are high the man who left those prints also shot the horse and started the fire.”

“Or,” Bannon studied the ground as he moved closer, careful not to destroy any evidence. “There’s blood on the tractor,” he announced before he focused on Paige. “Julia could have had an accomplice. One of them shoots the horse, the other sets the fire, and she sneaks out the back, meets up with the guy, and they disappear through the cornfield.”

“Maybe.” Paige put a marker next to the tractor. “There’s also blood on that window. I’ll have the tech retrieve it. Heidi’s usually my first choice, but I think Noah might be better on this one.” She pulled out her phone and dialed Margie. Once she disconnected, she turned back to Bannon. “Before he arrives, I want to see where that window leads. Let’s go back inside and see if we can find it.”

Up in Smoke

“There was a locked room,” Bannon advised. “Initial team had to break it in. There’s nothing in there. It’s just a tack room. Some storage, but mostly saddles, lead ropes, bridals, that sort of thing.”

“It was locked from the inside?” Paige stepped back inside.

“Right,” Bannon considered. “You think Julia locked herself inside and tried to escape out the window?”

Paige stepped into the tiny room and glanced around. There was a chair positioned just below the window. She spotted a sliding lock on the bottom of the window and a nail just below it that was covered in blood. “Looks that way. I don’t know why she went out that window, but there’s no doubt that she did. Could be she set the fire and used that as an escape. Could be she was fleeing from someone else that started the fire. It’s too soon to tell.” Paige placed a marker on the seat of the chair.

“Was she abducted? Fleeing from someone? Or just staging the scene so she could escape her husband and run off with the stable boy?” Bannon wondered.

Paige stepped back outside and glanced around. “I need to take a walk. You want to join me? It’s not every day you get to meander through a corn maze.”

“I’ll join you,” Bannon decided. “I’m guessing that means you don’t know either?”

“Too soon to tell,” Paige shrugged. She began at the tractor and followed the signs into the maze. It was difficult, but she was able to track the footprints as they zigzagged through the field and emerged at the back of the property next to a ditch.

“Now what?” Bannon stopped next to her. “Do we follow the ditch or head back to the house?”

“Follow the ditch,” Paige decided. She stood on the bank and immediately spotted the footprints. They followed them south for several yards before the prints disappeared. There was clear evidence the woman had climbed the embankment and disappeared. She could have taken the gravel road that led east, followed the river south, or caught a ride out of town with Mr. size twelve. The trail had gone completely cold.

“There was only one set of prints,” Bannon observed. “Where’s the guy?”

“I don’t know,” Paige admitted. “Let’s head back, talk to Tyler Wilson, and see what he can tell us.”

He couldn’t tell them much. He insisted his wife was kidnapped. According to him, there was no other explanation for her disappearance. They questioned him for nearly an hour but got next to nothing from him. He did have information on the horses and a plausible explanation for

Up in Smoke

why Condor had been shot. He was their most valuable asset, a racehorse that injured his leg and had to be retired. They planned to breed him with one of the mares, Kisha, once she was ready. She was the daughter of a champion but didn't inherit her father's talent. They were hoping speed and agility skipped a generation; and, when mated to Condor, they'd produce another champion. Kisha was valuable, but only a fraction of what Condor was worth. The other horses were thoroughbreds, but unremarkable.

Paige wondered if Julia ran off with a new lover and shot Condor to ease her guilt. Could she abandoned her family, but wanted to leave knowing they'd be provided for. Maybe she shot the horse, or she convinced her boyfriend to do it for her, before they fled. It was a theory, not a particularly good one, but a theory — which was all she currently had. She left Tyler Wilson and his family — frustrated, tired, and more than ready to call it a night and head home.

“Sounds interesting.” Dax leaned back and took another sip of coffee. “What's your next move?”

“I need to look into Julia Wilson,” Paige finished her eggs. “I want to know everything there is to know about her, starting with the day she was born.”

“Will you look into the recent past, or start at the beginning?” Dax wondered.

“Recent.” Paige picked up their plates and headed for the sink. “The first thing I want to know is if she had a boyfriend. Her husband said no, but I have to look — see if I can rule it out.”

“Would he know?” Dax stood and began clearing the rest of the table.

“I think he would,” Paige shrugged. “She'd be distant, increase her time away from home, spend more money, that sort of thing. Tyler Wilson insists none of that happened, but there's evidence that proves there were two people at the crime scene.”

“Which leaves two options,” Dax nodded. “She left willingly, or she was forced.”

“That's the first question I need to answer,” Paige decided. She turned, grabbed a dish towel, and dried her hands. “I need to head out, get an early start on this. I might be late getting home.”

“Yeah, I was going to talk to you about that,” Dax sighed. “It's gonna be a late night for me as well. Don't wait up. We hit a snag on that location we arranged for the upcoming course. I need to find another venue and get the details ironed out today, or we'll have to reschedule the entire course. Once I resolve that problem, I still need to finish analyzing that mission plan and

Up in Smoke

finalize my changes for Porter. It can't wait. He's meeting with the team first thing. I could probably swing an hour if you want to hook up for lunch."

"Can't," Paige turned to face him. "If Julia was kidnapped, every minute counts. I'll just grab something and eat at my desk. See you when I see you, I guess."

Dax moved forward and gripped her waist. "Watch your six," he leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss. "Love you."

"Me too," Paige was smiling as she walked out the door.

Later that morning, Paige sat at her desk and stared out the window. Something didn't add up, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She needed answers, and the only person who might have them was Julia's husband.

Fifteen minutes later, she was standing on Tyler Wilson's front porch.

"Deputy Carter," Tyler greeted. "Do you have news?"

"Not yet," Paige put a supportive hand on his arm. "I was wondering if you have time to talk. I have a few additional questions."

"Come in," he stepped back and held the door for her.

Once they settled onto the couch, Paige began. "I guess I'd like to start this with a request. Would you be willing to show me some of Julia's personal items?"

"Like what?" Tyler wondered.

"Nothing specific," Paige admitted. "I'd like to see her personal space, see if she has photos of childhood friends, old boyfriends, high school activities, hobbies other than the horses, that sort of thing."

"You still believe she left willingly," Tyler accused. "You're wasting time."

"I'm investigating," Paige corrected. "To do that, I need to get to know your wife, see her space, get into her head. Then, I might be able to determine if she left willingly or if she was abducted as you insist. If she was taken, I need to look for clues — to determine who might have taken her and why. I'm just asking for a few minutes in her space, that's all."

"Okay," Tyler stood. "I'll show you to her office."

Up in Smoke

Tyler remained in the room for a few minutes but eventually left, leaving Paige alone to look through his wife's keepsakes. Paige was grateful when he finally slipped out the door. She skimmed through an old photo album but quickly realized she wouldn't find anything within its pages. Julia kept old photos, but only images that gave nothing away. There were several with a childhood friend, but nothing that would identify the location. There weren't any photos in front of a school, a shopping center, or a park. None with road signs, businesses or landmarks. They were all generic pictures in a backyard or in front of a bush or a tree. At this point, tracking down the friend would be impossible. The same was true of her siblings. There were two — both were brothers.

She abandoned the album and moved to skim through Julia's bookcase. The high school yearbook caught her attention immediately. After a quick glance at the door, she pulled it off the top shelf and skimmed through the individual photos. It didn't take long to find the image of Julia. Her name was listed as Julia Morse. Paige studied the image, then set the book aside. She'd ask Tyler for permission to take it and study it closer back at the office. She pulled out an equestrian book and frowned when a postcard dropped to the floor. Paige placed the book back on the shelf and retrieved the card. It had an image of Old Faithful on the front. Paige flipped it over and read the text 'Mom, I'm OK. D.' What did that mean? She slid the card into the yearbook and headed for the door. There was nothing inside this room that would solve her mystery.

Once Paige got approval from Tyler to take the book, she slowly made her way back to the office. She was still thinking about Julia and that card when she pulled into her usual spot and shut down her car. She slammed the door shut, still wondering why Julia would write a cryptic note telling her mother she was okay — then never send it. When she glanced up, she spotted him. Sheriff Dusty Hawkins was in town. "What brings you to my humble home, sheriff?"

"I need to talk to you," Dusty approached her. "You look good, by the way. Can I buy you lunch?"

"I'm busy," Paige tried to move around him.

"It's important," Dusty moved forward to block her escape. "Just lunch. You listen to my dilemma and see if you can help me. If you say yes, I'll owe you one. No? I climb back in my truck and head home."

Paige studied him and sighed. "I can only give you an hour. I want pizza so meet me over at Main Street."

"I'm not a local Paige. Where on Main Street?" Dusty asked, annoyed.

"Main Street Pizza," Paige corrected. "Just follow me."

Up in Smoke

Dax stepped through the door and froze. He just stood there, staring at Paige — and the cowboy sheriff — not entirely sure what to think of the scene before him. It was a horrible kind of déjà vu — one he thought he left in his past.

“I’m not eating pineapple on my pizza this time,” Vato insisted. “We get at least one all meat pie or I’m ordering my own — and I’m not sharing.”

“What—” Zeus frowned when he spotted Paige. “I’m sure there’s a simple explanation.”

“I’ll meet you guys back at the office,” Dax held the keys out to Hawk.

“Maybe he’s a suspect,” Hawk offered.

“He’s the Juab County Sheriff.” Dax dropped the keys in Hawk’s palm and turned to leave.

“Nephi?” Wooly studied the man. “So, that’s Sheriff Dusty Hawkins. I have to say, the man doesn’t measure up to the hype.”

Hawk watched Dax exit the building and disappear on foot down the sidewalk. “What does that mean?”

“It means we’re going to make sure Paige knows we’re here.” Zeus walked purposefully across the room and settled in at the table across from Paige.

“The Cowboy Casanova,” Vato realized.

Hawk silently followed Zeus, but remained focused on the tall, lanky cowboy.

Paige glanced up and spotted the men. “Where’s Dax?” She glanced around but didn’t see him.

“He just left,” Hawk glared at Paige, making a silent accusation.

“Yeah,” Zeus settled further into his chair. “Guess he lost his appetite.”

Paige frowned. “Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Wooly pulled out a chair.

“I need to talk to him.” Paige stood, dropped some cash on the table then paused. “I’ll call you and let you know.” Then she headed for the door.

Once Paige was gone, Zeus stood. Hawk followed. They moved forward, blocking Dusty’s exit. “You’ll want to be careful, cowboy,” Zeus warned.

Up in Smoke

“I’d advise the same,” Dusty slid on his cowboy hat. “And you’re gonna want to move out of my way.”

Hawk crossed his arms over his chest, but didn’t say a word.

“It sounds like Paige is a friend — or at least an acquaintance,” Dusty stood his ground. “It would be a shame if I had to arrest you.”

“You could try,” Vato said casually from his seat. “You’d fail but go ahead — give it your best shot.”

“Everything okay here, boys?” Sadie placed a hand on Hawk’s arm. “You need me to call Jericho?”

“Naw,” Hawk never took his eyes off the sheriff. “He was just leaving.”

Sadie watched Dusty shove past the two large men and practically stomp to the door. Once he was gone, she turned to address Vato and Wooly. “You ready to order, or do you need another minute?”

“We’re ready,” Vato jumped in, eager to order and avoid pineapple and olives.

Paige studied the parking lot, but didn’t see Dax. She moved forward to glance up and down the sidewalk. She couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw her husband walking briskly toward his office. She jumped into her car, determined to chase him down. Once she reached him, she rolled down the window and called his name, hoping to get his attention.

Dax heard Paige calling for him and glanced over, then immediately looked away. He was in no mood to deal with her right now.

Paige was fuming. First, her husband punished a poor kid because Dax had some irrational grudge against a man he’d only known for five minutes. Now he was ignoring her. She revved the engine, sped forward, then swerved to block the sidewalk.

Dax simply walked around her vehicle.

“We need to talk,” Paige insisted. “Get in, I’ll drive you back to the training center.”

“I’d rather walk,” Dax said over his shoulder and continued up the sidewalk.

Paige considered. She could just drive over to the office, wait for him, and force him to listen. Wouldn’t do any good, she decided. Not when he was this angry. And why was he angry? He was the one that punished an innocent guy. He denied a fellow cop an opportunity for

Up in Smoke

advancement, just because he was holding onto some macho resentment over a stupid kiss. It was irrational and stupid. And, she realized, she was also too angry to have this conversation. They both needed to cool off before she confronted him. She shoved the car into reverse and sped away. She needed to get back to the office and work, anyway.

“Stupid, pigheaded, annoying, man,” Paige grumbled and pounded her hand on the steering wheel. She didn’t have time for this. She needed to find Julia. Which meant she had to put marital discourse aside and focus on the case. She’d deal with Dax when she got home. That’s when it hit her. Dax was working late. Dax was dealing with a crisis. Dax asked her to have lunch with him, and she told him she didn’t have time. Then, he headed off to lunch with his men and spotted her — having lunch with Dusty Hawkins. Apparently, she had some explaining to do, too. But that would have to wait. She had a woman to find.

It was after nine when Paige pulled into her driveway. She was no closer to finding Julia, but she had a better picture of who the woman was. Sort of. She climbed from the vehicle and just stared at the empty house. So, Dax was still working. Maybe that was better. They could discuss the situation over breakfast, like rational adults. Maybe sleep and a little distance would give her clarity — and time to calm down. Because the longer she thought about what Dax did, the angrier she became. She understood the grudge against Dusty, but to punish one of his men just to get back at him — that was inexcusable.

She flipped on the light, re-locked the door, and headed upstairs. She needed to change, have an enormous glass of wine, and relax. Then, she’d do a little research into that yearbook. There was something she needed to check.

An hour later, she was sprawled out on the bed, documents scattered everywhere, an empty wine flute discarded on the nightstand. She zoomed into the image that currently filled her laptop screen and considered. She was right, she knew she was, but how could she prove it? Maybe she’d talk to Carmen in the morning. She glanced at the clock, nearly eleven and still no Dax. Frustrated and a little worried, she shut down the computer and shoved everything she’d found into her bag. Once the room was cleaned up, she stepped into the bathroom, washed her face and prepared for bed. Dax said he’d be late. He was working, that’s all. Nathan had a dangerous op in the works and Dax needed to get his assessment of the mission completed and sent back to the general before he came home. She climbed into bed, shut off the light and just stared at the ceiling. She was angry with Dax, but in her gut, she knew she was the one that made the bigger mistake.

Up in Smoke

“You heading home soon?” Zeus leaned against the office door.

“Nope,” Dax stood and moved to study the digital screen on the wall more closely.

Zeus stepped forward and joined him. “There’s a hole here,” he pointed to a spot on the map. “And they could use another man here.”

“Yeah,” Dax considered. “I already mentioned that.”

“What has you worried?” Zeus continued to focus on the screen, wondering what he missed.

Dax sighed. “This,” he pointed to a shadow about fifty yards away from the target. “Satellite is grainy, and they were focused on this range. Whatever it is, it’s out of place, analyst thinks it’s just an abandoned shack.”

“That’s not a shack,” Zeus disagreed. “Look, here,” he pointed to a small object. “That’s a portable launcher. You’ve got hostiles at your back door. They need to position a team here to the rear while they advance. Otherwise, they’ll be sitting ducks and won’t know what hit them.”

“I agree,” Dax turned to his closest friend. “Go home. I got this.”

“And the rest?” Zeus wondered. “You can’t avoid her forever.”

“I’m not discussing that,” Dax decided.

“We both know there’s an explanation,” Zeus pressed. “Paige isn’t cheating. You have to know that?”

“Do I?” Dax settled back in his chair.

“You should,” Zeus moved forward and leaned against the corner of the desk facing Dax. “I know it feels the same, but Paige isn’t Piper. Catching her having lunch with another man doesn’t automatically mean illicit affair.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dax shrugged. “It’s still a betrayal.”

“Explain exactly what you mean by that,” Zeus was starting to worry now.

“It doesn’t matter what her intentions were,” Dax stared at the map on the wall. “She knew what his were — and she lied.”

“What was the lie?”

“I told her I had to work late tonight,” Dax debated, how much to reveal? “I suggested we meet for lunch. She turned me down, said she couldn’t take the time because she’s working an urgent case and every minute counts.”

Up in Smoke

“So,” Zeus considered. “Either she lied to you this morning because she already had plans with the cowboy, or she made time for Dusty after she brushed you off. I get it, and I agree it was a betrayal. I don’t think it’s the crisis you’re making it, though.”

“One time, a hundred times,” Dax turned to his friend. “How many is too many?”

“And again,” Zeus pushed off the desk. “I’m going to remind you that Paige is not Piper Weber. Sure, she messed up. I get that, but I’m sure she had her reasons.”

“His motives play into this,” Dax added. “He came here to attempt an end-run, to use Paige to get to me, because we rejected his man.”

“I didn’t get that far,” Zeus admitted. “But yeah, he’s here to cause trouble. I’m wondering if you plan to let him.”

“We’re not changing our decision if that’s what you’re asking,” Dax shifted and slid the hard copy of the map in front of him. “Go home, it’s late and I have work.”

“When you finish,” Zeus moved to the door. “You need to go home. Don’t stay here and stew all night. Go home, get some sleep, and deal with the rest tomorrow.”

When Dax didn’t answer, Zeus remained in the doorway staring at his friend.

“Fine, I promise I’ll go home.”

“Better,” Zeus flashed him a smile and headed out.

Paige heard the crunching of gravel and glanced at the clock. Two o’clock in the morning. Was Dax working all this time or did he stay out later than necessary to make sure she was sleeping when he returned? She heard the front door close, and the noisy deadbolt click into place. Her body tense and she braced herself for another confrontation. But, instead of heading up the stairs, she heard his footsteps move across the hardwood floor. Then, she heard the soft thud of the guest room door. There wouldn’t be an argument because Dax wasn’t coming to bed.

Paige pulled the pillow closer to her body, it smelled like Dax. That normally comforted her when he was away, but not tonight. Tonight, it just made her sad. She was even more worried now than she’d been before. This was not like Dax. She was the one that got angry and combative. She confronted, accused and ranted until she vented her grievance and moved on. Dax was the stoic, solid, dependable Ranger. Dax was controlled and rational. Dax always forgave her, always accepted her apology, and moved forward — no matter what they were fighting about. Dax didn’t stay out late and sleep in the guest room.

She tossed and turned all night, amazed she’d gotten any sleep at all. The following morning, when she heard the door shut, she jumped out of bed and ran to the window just in time to see Dax’s truck backing out of the driveway.

Up in Smoke

“So,” Bannon dropped into Paige’s visitor’s chair. “Are you any closer to solving the mystery?”

“Maybe,” Paige turned away from her computer to focus on the arson investigator. “Julia Wilson is hiding from something, or someone.” She retrieved the postcard and tossed it on the desk in front of Bannon. “I think she ran before. She disappeared and was deciding if it was safe to reach out to her family — probably to let them know she was still alive.”

“Or, it was a code to let her mother know she was leaving,” Bannon dropped the card back onto the desk. “Maybe she was escaping an abusive relationship and wanted her mom to know she was okay now, she left, and she’d see her soon.”

“There’s no sign there was ever abuse,” Paige disagreed. “Plus, there’s the yearbook. It’s a fake. A good one, but a fake.”

“The school’s a fake or the book is?”

“The book,” Paige pulled up the official yearbook the school had posted on their website and turned her monitor so Bannon could see the display. “Someone duplicated the entire book, added fake ‘good luck on your future’ messages, and deleted this photo,” she tapped the screen, “to add a phony one of Julia.”

Bannon grabbed the yearbook and began skimming through pages. “What makes you think these messages are fake?”

“The first thing that caught my attention was the lack of cards,” Paige explained. “You know, those pre-printed name cards that seniors order with their graduation announcements and then attach to the yearbook with some stupid message about how *it’s been fun* and *hope you make a million chasing your dreams*.”

“I can see you have fond memories of your high school days,” Bannon turned another page. “Okay, I get what you’re saying. This was her last year, so there should be at least a few of those cards. There’s not even one.”

“And the messages are strategically random,” Paige continued. “Plus, they’re all blue and black ink. Where’s the colorful notes? Where’s the girl that wrote in green to stand out — or pink, or purple? Where are the little hearts in the place of dotting an I, or the swirly design under the name to be creative and unique? There’s nothing unique about any of that. It’s certainly random but calculated.”

Up in Smoke

Bannon frowned. Now that she pointed it out, the messages were strategical and deliberate. “This must have cost a fortune to replicate.”

“If I’m right, it didn’t cost a dime.”

“Right about what?” Bannon looked up.

“I think Julia, or whatever her name is, went into hiding for some reason. But, you can’t hide unless you have a fake ID. Once she got one, she could move around freely but at some point, she realized she needed to shore things up. I think this is the work of a man the FBI calls The Ghost.”

“Because he floats in and out without being caught,” Bannon wondered.

“Because he haunts the Bureau but there’s no proof he really exists,” Paige corrected. “And, once I confirm this is his work, I don’t think we should waste time trying to track him. Better agents than me have already tried and failed. We focus on why our missing woman needed to disappear and try to figure out who she really was. Because if The Ghost is involved, she’s not Julia Wilson, or Julia Morse.”

“How did she find this Ghost?” Bannon wasn’t willing to let it drop.

“He probably found her,” Paige sat back. “That’s my theory, anyway. I think The Ghost has feelers out, and he glides in when he’s needed then glides back into the shadows. It’s the reason he’s never been caught or identified. There’s no connection to his clients. No previous knowledge or contact.”

“So,” Bannon grinned. “He’s a modern day, digital Robinhood?”

“Something like that,” Paige shrugged. “He doesn’t steal from the rich, but all the clients I know of, were desperate and struggling. I suspect he’s rich and — in his way — he’s helping those in need.”

“Then more like Batman,” Bannon sat back. “So, if we’re going to ignore Bruce Wayne, what’s our next move?”

“I need to talk to my computer expert,” Paige decided. “If she confirms I’m right, we focus on the incident and look for similar crimes. Maybe we can figure out who she’s running from.”

“The horse was dead before the fire started,” Bannon provided. “Autopsy was conclusive. There was no smoke in Condor’s lungs. We’ve analyzed various burn materials I collected at the scene and determined the accelerant used was jet fuel.”

“Jet fuel?” Paige frowned. “That’s expensive — and it’s our first good lead. Few people would have easy access to something like that. Can we check for similar crimes in the past?”

Up in Smoke

“I already have my people looking,” Bannon admitted. “I wanted to touch base with you this morning, but I need to get back. I have a couple contacts I want to tap and see if they’ve come across anything similar.”

“How about you go work your angles, I’ll start working mine,” Paige suggested. “Give me a call if you hit on anything, I’ll do the same.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Bannon stood and headed for the door.

Once he was gone, Paige dialed Carmen. When her favorite tech geek didn’t answer, she decided to just drive over and get a confirmation in person.

Paige sighed when she found herself driving into the parking lot of the training center. She pulled into a slot at the front of the building and just sat there, watching Dax work through the window. He looked tired. She continued to watch, debating with herself. Suddenly, he looked up and locked eyes with her. They both sat there for several tense seconds, watching each other. Paige realized he didn’t just look tired, he looked sad. *What was that about?* She was about to get out of the car when he abruptly stood and left the room.

She waited, thinking he’d come and talk to her. He didn’t. She continued to sit there for another ten minutes before she backed out of the lot and pulled onto the highway. She needed to talk to Carmen. Marital issues would have to wait.

“I’m busy,” Carmen said when she opened the door.

“Are you mad at me?” Paige asked, stepping into the house.

“Yes,” Carmen leaned against the wall. “Why are you here, Paige?”

“Why are you mad, Carmen?” Paige countered.

“I’m not willing to sit by quietly while you hurt that man again,” Carmen told her.

“You’ll need to explain that,” Paige glared at her friend.

“I don’t care why you had lunch with the man-whore,” Carmen pushed off the wall and dropped into her chair. “It wasn’t right, and you should have said no.”

“Man-whore?” Paige frowned. “I had lunch with a colleague.”

“I think you might actually believe that,” Carmen sighed. “I really am busy, Paige. There was a reason you came by. What do you need?”

Paige studied Carmen for several seconds then reached into her bag. She pulled out the yearbook and the other details she’d discovered. “I think my missing person is hiding and The Ghost fortified her new identity. I just need you to verify that I’m right.”

Up in Smoke

Carmen held out a hand for the documents. She studied them silently, then pivoted and started typing on her computer. Finally, she looked up. “It was The Ghost.” She held the documents back out to Paige.

“I resent your accusation,” Paige took the documents. “It was a professional lunch, nothing more. He wanted my help — to convince that stubborn husband of mine to back off. Did you know Dax has denied the applications of two Juab County deputies? They applied to attend a course from DMA, and because Dax is holding a grudge against Dusty Hawkins, he rejected them.”

“Is that the world according to the man-whore?” Carmen asked flatly. “Because I suspect, the other side of the story is a little different.”

“So, what’s the other side of the story?” Paige wondered.

“Ask Dax,” Carmen turned back to her computer and began to work.

Paige got the message. Carmen had shut down and no amount of coercion would get her to change her mind. She picked up the yearbook and let herself out.

Ten minutes later, she was still sitting in Carmen’s driveway. How had her life become so messed up in such a short amount of time? She was still debating how to fix it when her phone rang. “Carter.”

“Bannon,” came the reply.

“You found something?” Paige grabbed a pad of paper and a pen.

“Maybe,” Bannon told her. “We found two arsons that have a similar MO. In both cases there was a shooting, followed by a fire.”

“And the jet fuel?” Paige pressed.

“Yep,” Bannon affirmed. “That’s how we stumbled onto them. Both cases are still open. Both are cold. The investigators tracked every lead they could, but they hit a wall and couldn’t get around it.”

“Can you send me the files?” Paige tossed the pad back onto the passenger seat. “I have a stop I need to make, then I’ll be back in the office. I want to study the cases myself.”

“I’ll have them sent over,” Bannon promised. “There are a couple things I want to look into myself. You want me to meet at your office first thing?”

Up in Smoke

“Sounds good,” Paige disconnected and backed out of the driveway. Moments later, she was stepping through the front door of the training center. She marched past Vato without acknowledging him and made her way to Dax’s office. He was back at his desk. She stepped inside and slammed the door behind her. “This has gone on long enough.”

Dax looked up, then refocused on the paperwork on his desk — clearly, his attempt at a dismissal.

“You’re acting like a petulant child,” she accused. “Shutting me out, staying at work all night to avoid me, sleeping in the guest room, then sneaking out first thing. I get it, you’re angry. But that’s your fault. If you’d given me ten minutes, I could have explained the lunch thing. It was nothing. Dusty cornered me at the office and needed my help. In fact, that lunch was your fault. I can’t believe you would be that petty and vindictive. Seriously, you’re denying two innocent cops a chance to attend your course out of spite? That incident happened years ago. Get over it already and do the right thing. Call Sergeant Hogan and tell him a spot just opened up. Let him attend the course, Dax. You know you’re being unfair.”

“No,” Dax glanced up. “Anything else?”

“No?” Paige moved closer and leaned over his desk. “You are actually going to punish that man for his bosses mistake?” When Dax didn’t answer, she kicked his desk. “That’s it? No explanation? No discussion — just, no?”

“I’m glad you understand,” he stood. “Now, I have work. Is there anything else?”

Paige just stared at him.

“I’ll take that as a no,” he turned and left the room.

Paige dropped into his chair and lowered her head to his desk. She sat there for several minutes before she sighed, stood, and ambled back to her car. When she arrived at the office, the files were already on her desk.

“Paige,” Jericho called from his office. “Take a break. We’re going for a ride.”

“Where are we going?” Paige pulled the passenger door shut and waited for an answer.

Jericho silently pulled out of the lot. They continued to drive in silence for over a mile. Finally, he pulled over to the side of the road and shut down the vehicle. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Up in Smoke

“On the case?” Paige shifted in her seat. “Well, we have two similar, previous cases. Both have very few leads. Both are cold but match perfectly. I’m—”

“Not the case, Paige,” Jericho said, annoyed. “What’s going on with you?”

She proceeded to tell him how she was ambushed by Dusty, admitted Dax caught them finishing lunch, and all the rest. “He’s being so stubborn and rejecting those guys just because they work for Dusty isn’t right.”

“I agree,” Jericho studied Paige. “Which is why I suspect it wasn’t the reason for the rejection.”

“But Dusty said—”

“Paige,” Jericho cut her off. “Never start a sentence with ‘Dusty said,’ not with me. We’re going to have a different conversation, later, about the incident that occurred years ago. I’m going to expect an explanation for why you didn’t tell me about it back then. But that’s a problem for another day. Did Hawkins tell you the name of the guy that applied for one of DMA’s courses?”

“Um, ya...” Paige frowned. “Sergeant Reid Hogan.”

“Did it ever occur to you that the boys denied Hogan’s application because he didn’t qualify to attend the course?” Jericho studied her and knew immediately that possibility hadn’t occurred to her.

“You know Sgt. Hogan?”

“I know enough,” Jericho shook his head. “That man has his nose so far up Hawkins’ behind he can’t take a breath unless the good sheriff farts.”

“That’s descriptive,” Paige scowled. “And disgusting.”

“But true,” Jericho grinned. “What class did he apply for?”

“I don’t know,” Paige admitted.

“Tell me if I have this right,” Jericho raised an eyebrow. “You ditched your husband to have lunch with Sheriff Gigolo. A man that has a history of trying to come between you and Dax. Then, you took said gigolo’s word over your husbands, confronted Dax, accused him of being unethical without bothering to get the details or his side of the story, and then you demanded he change his mind and let someone — who may or may not qualify for a course — attend, anyway. And you did all of this because Sheriff Hawkins asked you to. Does that pretty much cover it?”

“Now you’re mad at me, too,” Paige sighed. “Everyone seems to be mad at me today.”

Up in Smoke

“In my world,” Jericho started the engine. “That’s what I call a clue.”

“Really?” Paige whispered. “I call it a coordinated attack.”

“Before we get back to the office,” Jericho pulled back onto the roadway. “Tell me about your case.”

Paige filled in all the details, explained her theory, then added Bannon’s theory.

“What’s your next move?” Jericho asked.

“I need to spend more time analyzing the old files,” Paige decided. “I think the clue to who is after Julia might be in one of them. If I can pin down who, I might be able to figure out why. If we can stop the killer and build a solid case, Julia will be safe. She can return to her family.”

“If she’s not involved,” Jericho warned.

“The more I look into this,” Paige stared out the window. “The more positive I am that Julia was running. I just need to figure out why.”

“She’ll need a new identity,” Jericho suggested. “We could look for known forgers in the area.”

“If she got The Ghost to clean things up, and I’m fairly confident he did, she has another identity. He always provides a backup. It’s an added layer, a failsafe, I guess. She has everything she needs to disappear and start a new life, documents that are ready to use if things got hot. We won’t find her that way.”

“You’re sure it’s not a witness protection situation,” Jericho asked hesitantly. The last time they looked into federal protection, he got a personal visit from Agent Gray.

“I checked,” Paige finally smiled. “Through official channels. There’s no record of Julia Wilson or Morse in their system. She’s hiding, but it’s not official.”

“Keep looking into the old cases,” Jericho decided. “In the meantime, I have an idea. I’ll let you know if anything comes of it.”

“Meaning?”

“I’ll let you know,” Jericho repeated. “Maybe you should take off early, go talk to that husband of yours, and see if you can clear the air.”

“I tried that,” Paige shook her head. “He’s not ready to talk. I’ll deal with it later tonight.”

Jericho parked the truck and, together, they stepped into the office.

Up in Smoke

Three hours later, Paige was working through names on their second arson victim when everything clicked into place. The first victim was a bank manager at a branch in San Diego. Henry Pickett was divorced with two adult children at the time of his death. He told friends he was going sailing for the day and was discovered shot in the head on his yacht, or what was left of it after the fire was extinguished. His family insisted he didn't have any enemies and couldn't explain why someone would kill him.

The investigator thoroughly vetted every member of the family, every friend and everyone he worked with. Once they were all eliminated, he requested a list of Pickett's clients. Nothing stood out at the time. Now, for Paige, there was one name — or more specifically a company — that connected the bank manager to the second victim.

Wyatt Healey was working for Manu-Gen as a security guard. He preferred the graveyard shift and had been employed with the company for years. One night, he left work, arrived home in the early morning hours and was shot in the head a few feet from his front door. The home was then set on fire and jet fuel was used as an accelerant. The only thing Paige could find that connected the two victims was Manu-Gen. Wyatt Healey was a guard, Henry Pickett the bank manager that oversaw their financial accounts. So how did Julia play into this?

She looked at her phone and considered her options. Nope, she'd just have to muddle through this one on her own. If she called Carmen, the spunky hacker would probably ignore her again. With a frustrated growl at the entire situation, Paige started digging through her own computer systems. When she didn't find anything helpful, she tried the internet. She stared out the window and tried to decide what search would give her the results she needed. "Maybe I should start with the company," Paige mumbled. She typed Manu-Gen and skimmed through the listings. One caught her attention.

It was a newspaper article. She clicked on it and began to read.

Dawn Morrison was last seen leaving Manu-Gens corporate office at five-twenty-six. It is generally believed; Dawn left the office and was on her way home. Witnesses who live at her apartment complex insist they saw Morrison pull into the parking garage around six-fifteen that evening. That's where the story gets confusing. One tenant insists she sped away, out the back entrance, and was never seen again. He claims Morrison never got out of her vehicle. Another tenant insists she rode on the elevator with Ms. Morrison that night and Morrison exited on the third floor, just like she always did.

While police can't confirm either account, one thing remains certain — Dawn Morrison is missing. Anyone with information should contact Detective Tim Elliott with the San Diego Police Department.

Up in Smoke

Paige studied the attached image. There was no doubt, Julia Wilson's real name was Dawn Morrison. And, she'd gone missing, after leaving her job at Manu-Gen nearly seven years ago. She looked up the phone number for San Diego PD and waited to be connected with a detective.

"Why is a deputy out of Utah asking about a missing person incident that happened years ago in California?" Tim Elliott asked in greeting.

"Glad your dispatcher filled you in," Paige decided. "Saves me the time." She proceeded to explain the situation and requested everything he had on Dawn Morrison and Manu-Gen.

"I looked at them," Elliott considered. "Manu-Gen, that is. Didn't connect the dead security guard to Morrison. No reason to. Wyatt died two, maybe three years before that girl vanished. We always assumed Healey caught a burglar or was into something he kept hidden. We had the arson and I'm sure it's still open, but from what I heard the fire destroyed everything. What makes you think they're connected?"

Paige told him the woman now known as Julia was missing and there was a fire that fit the same pattern as the fire that destroyed Wyatt Healey's home.

"Jet fuel," Elliott considered. "I never had heard that detail, but you know how it is. The investigator always holds something back. I don't remember the bank manager, you said Pickett?"

"Yes," Paige grabbed the report. "I have the details. Oceanside Police Department handled it. It looks like Mr. Pickett lived in Point Loma Heights, wherever that is."

"Makes sense," Elliott told her. "Point Loma's an upscale neighborhood in San Diego. It's basically your midpoint between the bank and Oceanside where he likely rented a slip for his yacht."

"Okay," Paige made a note. "That helps."

"So," Elliott considered. "You think all three cases connect and the common thread is Manu-Gen? Why? Adrian Rolando is loaded. Manu-Gen is a multi-million-dollar corporation. They're on the cutting edge, experimenting with all that genetic stuff and DNA advancements. Why would he off an accountant, a security guard, and a bank manager?"

"I can't answer that," Paige admitted. "Not yet. Would you be willing to send me the report? On Dawn Morrison. Anything you have would be appreciated."

"I can do that," Elliott jotted down Paige's email address. "I'll want something in return."

"Something more than closure?" Paige wondered.

Up in Smoke

“Naw,” Elliott grinned. “If you solve the case, let me know so I can close it out. This one has bothered me for years. That girl just vanished. I hope you’re right and you find your missing woman so we can let her family know she’s still alive.”

“You have my word,” Paige promised.

“It looks like you found something,” Jericho shut his office door and approached Paige’s desk. “Before you fill me in on the developments, I have reason to believe your missing woman is on her way to Durango, Colorado.”

“What?” Paige jumped to her feet. “How did you discover that?”

“I have contacts,” Jericho dropped the information on Paige’s desk. “I used one.”

“And this contact is reliable?” Paige pushed.

“My contact,” Jericho paused. “Let’s just call her Gina. She’s involved in a network of... volunteers, I guess you could say. They basically run an underground web of people that want to help women in need.”

“Domestic abuse victims that finally decide to run,” Paige had encountered similar groups a couple times when she worked for the FBI. “They provide a new identity, new location, new life. Sort of the civilian version of witness protection.”

“Exactly,” Jericho agreed. “It took a lot of convincing, but she finally told me Julia is on the run. She didn’t know much, but she did say a man by the name of Panelli fired a shot and set the barn on fire.”

“I haven’t come across that name,” Paige skimmed her notes. “Not on either of these cases.”

“You connected something,” Jericho realized. He listened while Paige explained the connections.

“Sounds like a solid lead,” Jericho agreed. “Brief Bannon. Call him on your way home and let him dig into Manu-Gen. All three cases are homicides, but they’ve been classified as arsons. Our fire belongs to Bannon. The missing person is our primary concern. I want you to head to Durango in the morning. Track down Julia and convince her to come home. We can protect her and if this Panelli guy is still in town, we’ll find him. Once he’s behind bars, the threat to Julia — or whatever she wants to be called — will be neutralized. If Bannon wants your help, I’ll give you the time to finish it out.”

“What if this Gina woman warns her and Julia has moved on by the time I get to Colorado?” Paige wondered.

Up in Smoke

“I have a promise from Gina she won’t interfere,” Jericho dismissed that. “She said Julia arrived tonight. She plans to stay in Durango for a week to ten days before she moves on. She needs the time to lie low and make sure nobody followed her. Take that husband of yours with you, spend the night in a hotel, and approach Julia the following morning. She’s not going anywhere and that will give me and the boys time to look for Panelli.”

Paige wanted to argue, but Jericho was right, so she just nodded in agreement. Her priority had to be tracking down Julia and convincing her to come home. Once she was back in Manti, she’d help Bannon bring down Manu-Gen. She gathered up her files and headed home. There were still a couple things she wanted to work on tonight. She disconnected with Bannon just before she pulled into her driveway. The house was dark again. Where was Dax? Frustrated, she shifted into reverse and headed for the training center.

The instant she pulled into the lot, she knew Dax wasn’t there. The center was completely dark. She continued across the empty lot and stopped in front of the large building. She left the engine running as she jumped out and tried the front door. Locked. She walked down the sidewalk and stopped in front of Dax’s window. His office was dark and empty.

Paige hopped back into her vehicle and instantly knew where she had to go next. If Carmen was angry, Zeus had to be furious with her, but she didn’t have a choice. “Where is he?” she demanded when Carmen answered the door.

“He’s not here,” Carmen answered.

“That’s not what I asked,” Paige pushed her way into the house. “Where is he?” she glared at Zeus.

“He needs some time to himself,” Zeus shrugged. “When he’s ready, I’m sure you’ll be the first to know.”

“Again,” Paige stood her ground. “Not what I asked.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him you stopped by,” Zeus offered.

“Look,” Paige took a step forward. “I know you think you’re helping. I get it. You’re protective of him. But, you don’t need to protect him from me.”

“I need to show you something,” Carmen cut in. “Follow me.”

Paige watched her friend walk out of the room. She focused on Zeus, sighed, then followed. She found Carmen sitting at the kitchen table with a folder in front of her.

“Take a seat,” Carmen motioned to a chair.

“If this is some kind of stall tactic,” Paige began.

Up in Smoke

“Just sit down and read,” Carmen insisted.

“Fine,” Paige dropped onto the chair and grabbed the folder. She flung it open and stared at the top page. It was an application to attend a DMA course. She took a closer look and read the name, Reid Hogan. She focused on Carmen. “Why are you showing this to me?”

“You told me Dax rejected that man because he’s holding a grudge,” Carmen shrugged. “I wanted you to review the application yourself and see if you can tell me why he was rejected. Pay special attention to the course he wanted to attend.”

Paige scowled and focused on the application. “He tried to get into an advanced course,” Paige mumbled, surprised. She continued to read. When she got to the questionnaire, her frown deepened. Finally, she looked up. “Where is Dax? I need to talk to him.”

“He’s at our house,” Zeus answered from the doorway. “Before you leave, I need a minute.”

Paige was about to object but she realized Zeus was serious. “Okay.”

“I have something I need to take care of,” Carmen stood and left the room.

Zeus settled into the chair Carmen just vacated. “I’m not sure how to start.”

“Just say it. Tell me what you need me to know,” Paige reached out and covered his hand with hers.

“I know you have an explanation for that lunch,” Zeus began. “I don’t need to know what it was. You love him.”

“I do,” Paige never took her eyes off his.

“He knows you love him,” Zeus assured her. “He’s confused, and he’s letting past betrayals cloud his judgement.”

“I hurt him,” Paige admitted. “I didn’t think — Hawkins ambushed me, and I mostly gave in to get rid of him.”

“Dax didn’t love Piper,” Zeus began. “I’m not sure he even liked her, but he was loyal to her. He always remained faithful. She didn’t. He suspected she was cheating but I don’t think he cared enough to look into it. Not really. Then, one day, we headed to our favorite café. We walked through the door and there she was, having dinner with her other boyfriend.”

Paige closed her eyes and finally understood what she’d done.

Zeus reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys and set them on the table. “He needs you. He thinks he needs to be alone, but that’s the last thing he needs.” Zeus stood and walked out of the room.

Up in Smoke

Paige snatched up the keys and rushed to her vehicle. She broke about a dozen traffic laws on her way, but she was finally standing on the front porch of Zeus and Carmen's unfinished new home. After taking a long, deep breath, she pushed open the door and stepped inside. It was dark and smelled of saw dust and some kind of oil — must be from the power tools. She could also tell the framing was nearly complete. She started for the bedroom but pivoted when she saw movement.

Within seconds, she was slipping through the beautiful French doors that led to the rear deck. Dax was sitting on the unfinished platform, his body leaning against the wall, his head tipped back, and his eyes closed. He had a half empty bottle of beer in his hand. She glanced around and realized the other five full bottles were still in the cardboard carrier. At least he wasn't drunk.

"I knew they wouldn't be able to keep their promise," Dax didn't open his eyes.

"Then you shouldn't have asked them to," Paige settled in next to him. "I know you're mad and you think this is the answer, but it's not. I hurt you and I'm sorry." She stared into the darkness. "Then, I think I hurt you again when I came to your office. Is this your way of punishing me?"

Now he did look at her. "It's not a punishment."

"I was wrong," Paige reached out and took his hand, a little surprised that he didn't pull away. "Dusty ambushed me. I was lost in my head, in the case, and he was just there, outside the office. He insisted he needed my help. I should have known he was up to something, but I honestly had no idea. I assumed it was a legitimate request from a colleague. It was knee-jerk. He was a fellow officer, and he was asking for my assistance. I joined him for lunch to get rid of him. I didn't have time to do him a favor, to do anyone a favor. I wanted to find out what he wanted and send him on his way so I could get back to my case and find Julia. I'm sorry, I know how that must have felt. You asked me to spend some time with you over lunch and I said I didn't have time. Then you walked in and there I was spending time with Sheriff Hawkins. That made it worse, I understand that, too."

"He was using you and you let him."

"I know," Paige leaned her head against the back wall. "He lied to me. And because of what happened, I believed him. I think he knew I would. He knew he could use that against me — well, more to the point, against you. I know you would never punish one of his men because you held a grudge against him. Why would you even have a grudge? We ditched him in Nephi and never looked back. Still, I fell for it. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I can't even explain why I believed him without even talking to you."

Up in Smoke

“I have to be able to trust you,” Dax began peeling the label from his bottle. “I thought I did.”

“I’m thinking your reaction was knee-jerk, just like mine. Déjà vu can do that to a person,” Paige bumped his shoulder. “Any chance I could have one of those?”

Dax passed her a bottle of beer. “Zee has a big mouth.”

“Zee was worried about you,” Paige corrected. “You know how I feel about Piper Weber. I haven’t even tried to hide the fact I don’t like her. I think a lot of that stems from your past relationship. Not all of it, but I can admit it plays. That’s why I understand your reaction, or at least I’m trying to. I don’t understand why you doubted me. I love you. I thought you knew that. I did marry you, after all. If that doesn’t prove your it for me, I don’t know what will. I know I get caught up sometimes, I focus on the work and take you for granted. But I thought you knew I loved you.”

Dax turned to her. “I do know. I guess I forgot for a minute, but I know. I’m sorry, too. Did I take you away from your case?”

“No,” Paige leaned against him and finally felt content when he wrapped an arm around her. “Jericho tracked down my missing woman. She’s in Durango. I need to head down and see if I can talk some sense into her. Any chance you can take a couple days off and join me?”

“To arrest her?” Dax was confused.

“No,” Paige settled in closer. “I missed this. I missed you.”

Dax kissed the top of her head. “I missed you, too. Can you tell me about your case? Catch me up on what I’ve missed.”

“Will you call Zee and thank him for the use of his amazing house but explain that you’re coming home,” Paige requested. “Then, tell him you’re heading out of town for a couple days and that annoying group of vagabonds you call friends will have to handle the business until you get back.”

“I could probably agree to a slightly altered version of that,” Dax smiled. “I seem to be all caught up at the office. I can probably swing a couple days off.” He stood and reached out his hand to help Paige up.

Paige let Dax pull her to her feet, but the instant she was standing, she wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his chest.

Dax held her against him. They both just stood there and enjoyed the closeness for a little longer.

Up in Smoke

“You sure about this?” Dax studied the modest home. The yard was enormous, but the house was unexceptional. “If your missing woman isn’t here, you might tip them off and she’ll disappear again.”

“I’m going to trust Jericho’s source,” Paige opened the door and stepped onto the concrete drive then made her way to the driver’s side of the car. “He seems to trust her, and she said Julia was hiding out here for a week or so until she was certain it was safe. She wouldn’t leave the house and risk exposure.”

“You want me to wait here?”

“No,” Paige opened his door. “I want you to join me inside.”

“That’s not how you normally do things,” Dax locked the car. “Why the change?”

“I want her to see us as a non-threatening, normal couple. If she just sees a cop, she might deflect, then bolt,” Paige explained.

Dax wrapped an arm around Paige and leaned in closer. “There’s nothing normal about you, baby. You’re extraordinary.”

“That makes two of us,” she reached out and rang the doorbell.

“Can I help you?” a middle-aged woman stood in the opening.

“My name is Paige, and this is my husband, Dax,” Paige introduced. “We need to speak with Julia Wilson.”

“I’m afraid you have the wrong home,” the woman began to close the door. “You may know her as Renee Davis.” Paige held out an envelope.

“What is that?” the woman hesitated.

Paige shrugged. “No idea. I didn’t open it. I believe it contains instructions from your handler.”

The woman narrowed her eyes and studied Paige for several seconds before she took the envelope and slid it open. She pulled out a small note and silently read the message. Once she finished, she glanced from Paige to Dax, then took a step back and invited them inside. “You’ll need to meet with her downstairs. She’s being cautious and we have a lot of windows.”

“I appreciate it,” Paige led the way, Dax followed still on alert.

Up in Smoke

They found Julia on the couch. She jumped in surprise when she saw them.

“It’s safe,” Paige moved forward. “You’re safe. My name is Deputy Carter. This is my husband, Dax. We’re from Utah, Julia. Your family is worried about you.”

Julie just silently stared. How did they find her? She’d been so careful.

“I know you’re scared, Julia,” Paige tried to sooth. “Do you want me to call you Julia, I know you’re changing it to Renee. Or, maybe we should go with your given name, Dawn.”

“How did you—” Julia swallowed hard.

“How did I figure it out?” Paige asked. “It wasn’t easy. I can help you, Julia. I can make sure you’re safe. I just need you to tell me why you’re running.”

“What do you know?” Julia asked.

“I believe many things, I know a few, and I need you to tell me your story so I can verify the facts,” Paige evaded.

“Where do you want me to start the story?” Julia asked, deflated and terrified.

“Is Manu-Gen involved?” Paige prompted.

“Yeah,” Julia sighed. “I guess that’s a good place to start. They hired me as an accountant at Manu-Gen’s corporate headquarters in San Diego. I worked there for nine months. They seemed happy with my work until I stumbled onto something I wasn’t supposed to see.”

“Can you tell me what?” Paige asked.

“It’s complicated,” Julia shrugged. “Basically, Manu-Gen was laundering money through an empty shell corporation called Pircee.”

“What is Pircee?”

“It doesn’t exist,” Julia explained. “They filed tax returns using bank accounts to off-shore financial institutions. The institutions are havens for secrecy and laundering. The company is a ruse, it’s not real except on paper to cover their illegal activities and make them look legitimate.”

“And you can prove that?” Paige wondered. “Can you remember specifics?”

“I don’t have to,” Julia admitted. “That’s why they’re trying to kill me. It’s the reason they caught me. I downloaded a copy — for protection. You know, in the movies, they always blame the accountant. I thought it would protect me, from them. I thought I was making sure they couldn’t use me as their fall guy.”

“Do you still have the copy?” Dax asked.

Up in Smoke

“It’s somewhere safe,” Julie said cryptically.

“Okay,” Paige decided they could get back to that. “So, you downloaded a copy of their books and they found out. Do you know how?”

“No,” Julie looked away. “I’m an accountant, not a computer whiz. I assumed they had some kind of trigger that would alert them if the wrong person accessed the file. I stumbled onto it by accident, but they know I took it.”

“Okay, then what happened?” Paige tried to keep her on track.

“I was on my way home when I realized I was being followed,” Julia continued. “I tried to evade, but I couldn’t lose him. I knew I couldn’t keep driving erratically, so I pulled into the parking garage of the mall and ran inside. Then, I hid in the bathroom for hours. I could see him, outside waiting. Eventually he left. Once I was sure it was safe, I called a cab, stopped at an ATM, and withdrew the max. I didn’t even go home. I made my way through California and was working at an obscure bowling alley in a small town. That’s when someone contacted me and said they wanted to help.”

“A hacker that cleaned up your background and gave you a new life?” Paige wondered.

“You know that, too?” Julia sighed. “I thought I was so careful.”

“We know him,” Paige corrected. “So, he cleaned up the fake identity you had and made it more solid?”

“No,” Julia shook her head. “I had no idea what I was doing. I just made up a name and started using it. This guy found me and said he could make it permanent. He gave me all the documents I would need and then gave me a backup just in case.”

“Renee Davis?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” Julia pushed a tear from her face. “Now I can’t even use that one.”

“You don’t need it,” Paige assured her. “Your family needs you. You should go home, Julia.”

“He’ll just come back and kill me and my entire family,” Julia objected.

“We can protect you,” Paige insisted. “And, if you cooperate and give us those documents, I’m confident we can end this quickly.”

“And what about Marzio Panelli?” Julie pressed. “He’s Adrian’s fixer. He won’t stop just because you arrest his boss.”

“Is that who set the fire?” Dax asked.

Up in Smoke

“Uh-huh,” Julia confirmed. “He’s the only man Adrian Rolando trusts. He’s the guy that chased me when I left and he’s the guy that must have shot my horse and burned down my barn.”

“Did you actually see him?” Paige wondered. “Or did you just assume it was him?”

“I saw him,” Julia swallowed. “But Adrian has money. That kind of wealth buys powerful friends. He can’t be stopped.”

“You don’t know my cop,” Dax grinned. “She also has powerful friends.”

“You really think you can resolve this?” Julia asked — not convinced, but it was obvious she wanted to be.

“I can if you trust me,” Paige assured her. “Hold that thought,” Paige said when her phone rang. “I need to take this. Deputy Carter,” she said in greeting.

“How’s it going with our missing woman?” Jericho asked.

“I’m working on it,” Paige advised.

“Lovato and Bannon arrested Marzio Panelli,” Jericho advised. “He was still in possession of a firearm. Preliminary ballistic reports match the one that killed our horse.”

“He kept the same weapon?” Paige asked in amazement. “Do you think it was the same one he used in California?”

“I think that’s a very good possibility,” Jericho agreed. “He’s cocky and thinks he’s untouchable. He’s starting to discover he’s wrong.”

“Then we’ve got him,” Paige said in triumph. “He’s going away for good.”

“Tolman said it’s basically a slam dunk on the arson and the animal cruelty,” Jericho told her. “Oceanside and San Diego are eager for their turn. We’ll lock him up now and give them time to prepare their cases. Let the woman know she’s safe, it might help.”

“She has evidence that can be used against Adrian Rolando, Manu-Gen, and Pericee — a shell corporation the exists in name only.”

“Sounds like a job for the FBI,” Jericho decided. “Any suggestions? Normally we’d tap Sean Wilkens, but he’s still working undercover for that general of yours.”

“I’ll call Agent Sparrow,” Paige decided. “There’s nobody more qualified.”

“Sounds good,” Jericho agreed. “Get it started, finish up with Julia Wilson and get home. It’s time to put this one to rest.”

Paige disconnected, contacted Agent Sparrow and then returned to Julia.

Up in Smoke

“You have news?” Julia asked.

“Panelli has been arrested,” Paige informed her. “You need to go home to your family, Julia. You’re safe and they need you.”

“Adrian will just send someone else,” Julia insisted.

“I have a feeling he’s going to be a little too busy to bother with you,” Paige said cryptically.

“I don’t know what that means,” Julia complained.

“Look,” Paige said impatiently. “I can’t force you to return home. I will tell you; I know what it’s like to lose your mother too soon. I know how it feels not to have her in my life for the important occasions. You’re leaving your kids voluntarily. My mom didn’t have a choice. I can’t imagine how much worse that would feel, knowing your mom could be there, but she chose not to. You won’t be there for prom dates, high school graduations, or their weddings,” she locked eyes with Dax. “Your children will suffer if you’re not there. I’m telling you it’s safe to return home. We can keep you and your family safe. It’s your choice, but you need to make it now. Come back with us or live the rest of your life on the run.”

“What about Adrian Rolando?” Julia pushed.

“He’s now being investigated by the FBI,” Paige informed her. “They’re good. If what you’ve told me is true, they can bring him down without your help. Although, it would be easier with it. You should go home, work with Agent Sparrow and turn over the evidence you saved. It will help them build an airtight case against Rolando and his entire enterprise. While they investigate, arrest, and prosecute everyone involved, they will also protect you and your family.”

“You will be safe,” Dax added. “Trust her. I do. There’s nobody I trust more.” Now it was his turn to lock eyes with his wife.

“I haven’t trusted anyone for a long time,” Julia looked away and considered. “But I love my husband and my children are more important to me than anything in the world. I’ll take the risk because I’m tired of hiding. And the thought of never seeing them again is almost worse than death. I sincerely hope you can make good on those promises. When are you leaving?”

“How about now?” Dax asked.

“I need until tomorrow,” Julia insisted. “I — there’s another woman arriving tonight. I’m supposed to drop something off early tomorrow morning. This girl, she’s in danger. I understand what that’s like. I have something I need to give her. Something I can’t trust with anyone else. Gina asked me for this one favor, after everything she’s done for me, I have to follow through.”

“Is she staying here?” Paige demanded. “This girl that’s in danger?” Paige didn’t like it.

Up in Smoke

“No,” Julia shook her head. “She’s staying with another family. Gina said she’d get here late, sometime after midnight. I’m supposed to use a disguise, sneak away and drop an envelope into a mailbox.”

“If you’re mailing it, why can’t we just drop it off on our way out of town?” Dax wondered.

“It won’t be mailed,” Julia said, clearly frustrated. “There’s an abandoned house not far from here. I’m supposed to sneak away, put the envelope in the mailbox sometime around seven and the girl will sneak away from her temporary shelter and retrieve it. She’s not supposed to get it until at least seven-thirty. That protects us both.”

Paige realized that was the reason this organization was successful. “Do you feel safe here?”

“I’m willing to bet my life on it,” Julia said confidently. “I won’t leave until I make the delivery. She’s depending on me, and she can’t disappear without the package.”

“Okay, I’m going to trust you,” Paige decided. “We’ll come back, first thing. Be packed and ready to go by six-thirty. I’ll deliver the package for you. Do not sneak out and try to do that yourself. We’ll pick you up, you provide the address, and I’ll make the drop. Then we head back to Manti. Do not trust anyone. Not even the family upstairs. The less they know the safer it is for everyone. Tomorrow morning, thank them for opening their home to you and tell them you’ve changed your plans. Wait as long as you can. They know who we are so you can tell them you’re coming back with us, but leave it at that. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Julia nodded. “Adrian has money. Money that would tempt anyone. I’ll keep it to myself. Nobody will know anything has changed until you arrive in the morning to pick me up. It’s better that way. This organization, they’re used to secrecy. They won’t ask and I truly believe I’m safe here.”

“I think I agree,” Paige stood, she didn’t like it, but Julia was easy to read. She wouldn’t leave until she did her part to help this girl. Paige just hoped it wasn’t a trap. “Be ready to leave the instant we arrive. I don’t want to linger any longer than necessary.”

Once they were in the car Dax turned to address her. “You sure about this? It would be safer to leave immediately.”

“She won’t go,” Paige buckled her seatbelt. “If I insisted, she’d back out. This group helped her when she was desperate. She needs to contribute, to give something back before she gets her life back because she knows most of these women will never have the same chance I just offered her. I think she’ll be okay. If not, it was her choice. I can’t force her to do the right thing. She’s an adult and all I had was a missing person who is no longer missing. At this point, my case is technically over.”

Up in Smoke

“I guess,” Dax started the engine and pulled onto the rural road. “Guess that means we have an entire night to ourselves.”

“Guess so,” Paige grinned. “Any ideas on how we can pass the time?”

“Oh, I think I can keep you entertained.”

Julia was waiting when they arrived. The drop was simple, which is why it was so effective. Dax parked up the road, Paige snuck around the back, ensured the coast was clear, and slid the envelope into the mailbox. The entire drop took less than ten minutes. They waited another ten to make sure nobody was watching then hit the road.

They arrived back at the office just after three that afternoon. Agent Sparrow was waiting.

“Oh, look,” Dax grinned. “The pirates in the building.”

“If I had a dollar —” Sparrow stood. “You must be Dawn Morrison.”

“I prefer Julia,” she shook his hand in greeting.

“I was told we could use the conference room,” Sparrow motioned to the door.

“Right,” Paige nodded.

“Do you need me to wait?” Dax wondered.

“Actually,” Sparrow put his hand out to stop Paige. “Julia, can you head in? I’ll join you in a minute.”

“Sure,” Julia walked away.

“You don’t need to stay,” Sparrow told Paige. “You had a long drive. I’m basically going to go rehash what she already told you — for the official record. Go home, enjoy a relaxing evening with your husband. I’m sure that’s pretty rare and there’s really no reason for you to be here. Once she gets her story documented, I want to see if she’ll give me those records she copied. When I’m finished, I’ve arranged for a safe house. Her family is already there, and they’re anxiously waiting to see her. I’ve got this, Paige. You brought me in for a reason, I’ll keep you posted as much as I can but turn it over and let me do my job. I also wanted to let you know, we’ve frozen all of Adrian Rolando’s accounts. He’s not happy. His attorney is fighting it. He won’t succeed, but I think we got his attention. My boss has already fielded calls from three congressional representatives, a Senator, and some guy that works for the State Department.”

Up in Smoke

“If you need anything,” Paige offered. “You know how to reach me. I have a few contacts of my own and I’m willing to contact them if this gets too hot.”

“I appreciate it,” Sparrow glanced at the conference room. “I need to get to this. Let the games begin.”

Paige laughed, headed into Jericho’s office, and filled him in on the status of the case.

“Sounds like it’s all tied up on our end,” he glanced at Dax standing in the doorway. “Take your bride home and pamper her. She’s earned it. Paige, I’ll see you in the morning.”

Once they were on the highway, heading home, Dax glanced at Paige. “Does it ever bother you?”

“What?”

“Turning over a case before it’s concluded,” Dax clarified.

“It used to,” she admitted. “Now, I get it. I did my part and now I’m tossing the baton. Sparrow will take down Rolando and his entire organization. He’s good, it’s the reason I brought him in. Julia is home with her family and Panelli will spend the rest of his miserable life behind bars. I call that a good day.”

“I meant what I said,” Dax turned serious. “I trust you more than anyone else in the world. I need you to know that. I had a momentary lapse, but I won’t make that mistake again.”

“I know,” she reached out and took his hand. They rode in silence the rest of the way back to their house. Once they parked, Dax exited, rounded the front of the vehicle and opened the door for Paige. He was about to retrieve the luggage from the back when Paige stopped him.

“It’s a nice night,” she took his hand. “Will you go for a walk with me?”

“I’d love to,” Dax pushed her against the car. “But first —” he leaned in and kissed her.

It wasn’t one of his off the charts, mind blowing kisses. This one was gentle and loving. This one spoke volumes. This kiss simply said — I love you. When he was done, he pressed another gentle kiss to her forehead, took her hand, and the two of them went for a quiet evening walk.