

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Salt of the Earth* *Season 6, Episode 3*

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*by:*

*Melanie P. Smith*

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*[www.melaniepsmith.com](http://www.melaniepsmith.com)*

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“That’s enough, you two,” Carmen objected, still laughing. “I have to get this finalized or I won’t have a cake for my wedding.”

“You’re right,” Sophie sobered. “I think we’ve picked on that stubborn husband of mine enough. You should at least decide on the cake today. The dress can wait until your mom arrives. I have to head home in the morning; but, I’d like to return to Virginia knowing we made some progress while I was here.”

“My vote is chocolate,” Paige sat back. “With white frosting. Maybe butterscotch, or you could go with double chocolate and do white chocolate frosting.”

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Carmen sat up straighter. “With chocolate dipped strawberries.”

“There you go,” Paige stood. “My work here is done. We had an amazing lunch, made fun of our favorite general, and settled on the cake. Now, I need to head home and pack.”

“I need to head out as well,” Sophie stood. “We should probably be on the road by seven if I’m going to make my flight.” She turned to focus on Carmen. “It’s been an absolute pleasure, as always. And if you need me, you have my number.”

Carmen dropped some cash on the table and followed Paige and Sophie into the parking lot. “Paige?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you sure you don’t mind staying two extra days in Salt Lake?” Carmen slid on her sunglasses. “I can drive up myself and get mom if you want to head straight back after the conference.”

“Naw,” Paige pulled open her door. “I’ve got this. I’ve been wanting to develop some contacts up north, anyway. We have Lo and he has friends, but I’d like to generate a few of my own. This will give me the extra time I need to check out the larger departments and make a few friends.”

“If you’re sure.” Carmen gave her friend a hug. “I owe you one.”

“Let’s see,” Paige smiled and slid behind the wheel. “Hanging out in the city, lounging by the pool, and feasting on room service. I’d say I owe you.”

“You’ve never met my mother,” Carmen said, worried. “I’ll probably owe you about twenty for the ride home alone.”

“I survived my mother-in-law,” Paige grinned. “Your mom can’t be any worse. Don’t worry, I’ve got this. Go harass the builders and pick out some flowers. I’ll work my magic, charm the infamous Mrs. Fennelly, and arrive home just in time to help you decide on a dress.”

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“I don’t know about magic and charm,” Carmen said, backing away. “But I’d be lost without you.” She turned and reached her vehicle just as Paige was pulling away.

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Paige walked down the sidewalk, headed for the Salt Palace. She’d driven by the large convention center the previous day on her way to the hotel — just to get the lay of the land, so to speak. The first thing she noticed was a lack of parking. She instantly decided she’d be walking to the law enforcement summit each day. She was staying at the Holiday inn, which couldn’t be more than a block from the front door. No big deal. She used to walk everywhere when she lived in Virginia.

She rounded the corner and immediately spotted the large windmills lining the street in front of the convention center. She absently wondered if solar panels wouldn’t be more effective. This was technically a desert, after all. Oh well, not her problem. She crossed the street and was rushing toward the front door when she spotted trouble. A female officer was wrestling with a large man who was clearly drunk — seriously, it wasn’t even ten o’clock yet. She quickened her pace, then frowned when she saw two additional officers casually heading their way — laughing and joking.

Paige rushed forward, grabbed the man by his long, greasy hair, and yanked. He stumbled backward, then tripped over her outstretched leg. Within seconds, he was on the ground, cuffed and spewing insults.

“Thanks,” the female cop held out a hand. “I’m Officer Lisa Collins. I appreciate the help, but I can take things from here.”

“Deputy Paige Carter,” she held out her hand. “Your elbow’s bleeding and you should get some ice on that eye. Might help with the bruising, but you’re going to have a pretty serious shiner.” She scowled at the two men who finally reached them. “Maybe one of these guys could deal with the prisoner. If they know where to find the jail, that is.”

One of the men stepped closer, invading Paige’s space.

“Back off, Coleman,” Collins grabbed her colleague’s arm. “She’s a cop and from what I just saw, she can probably take you.”

“Ease up, Cole,” the other cop added. “One more complaint and the Sarge is going to give you the boot. You really want to spend the next decade pushing a patrol car?”

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Coleman stared at Paige for several seconds before he reached down, yanked the drunken prisoner to his feet and shoved him onto a bench. “We’ll wait for the transport. Go on inside and deal with the eye.” He continued to watch as Paige and Collins headed for the front door.

“You here for the convention?” Collins took a right and started up a large flight of stairs.

“I am,” Paige followed.

“You alone?” Collins asked over her shoulder.

“Alone in a crowd,” Paige grinned. “I thought when I moved back to Utah, those days were over.”

“Stick with me,” Collins offered. “We’re up front. The chief reserved a couple tables. There’s plenty of room.”

“Alright,” Paige decided. She had wanted to mingle with the locals and generate a few contacts up here. Might as well hang with the city cops, maybe they knew Lovato.

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The group was sitting at a large table at the front of the room and off to the left. Paige sat next to Lisa Collins and the two officers she’d met outside had joined them. That surprised her at first, but it only took a few minutes to realize the three of them were good friends. Paige now understood she’d misjudged the situation completely. The men were holding back because they knew Collins could hold her own, but they were close enough to rush in if they were needed. Paige shifted her attention away from the familiar banter the three friends were engaged in, so she could *people watch* the rest of the room.

It was noisy, and the volume seemed to increase with each passing second. Individual and group conversations were underway at every table. Paige glanced around, taking in the various cops, and decided making friends in this structured environment wasn’t likely. She’d have to find another way to interact with some of the attendees.

“So, Deputy Carter,” the cop who hadn’t provided his name began. “Where you from?”

“Sanpete County,” Paige said absently, as she watched what looked like an argument brewing a few rows back.

“Sanpete?” he said in surprise. “Then you must know Mike Lovato.”

Paige pivoted, cocked her head, and studied the man. “I know him. Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

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“That’s on me,” the man smiled. “Detective Roland Mudrock. My friends call me Mud.”

Paige smirked. “Your name is Mud?”

Collins grinned. “Not in the disgraced sort of way. Mud’s the responsible one of the group — most of the time.”

“True,” Coleman gave Mud a friendly shove. “Unless he’s causing trouble. In that way, the name fits — sometimes.”

“There were only two options with a name like Mudrock,” the man in question added.

“And the Rock was already taken,” Paige nodded. “Makes sense. Mud it is.”

“You say you know Lo,” Coleman challenged. “If I were to call him, right now, what would he tell me?”

“Probably to give me a hard time,” Paige grinned, “and question everything I say.”

The group laughed. “Sounds like Lo.”

“Can I have your attention,” an attractive woman in her forties stepped up to the microphone. The room grew quiet, and the conference began.

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It was nearly five o’clock when Paige stepped from a small meeting room and shuffled to the side. She leaned against the wall and considered — now what? So far, the event was better than she expected. The keynote speaker was a well-known, outspoken Sheriff from the Midwest. His presentation was entertaining and informative. The time flew by as they all laughed and learned from a highly respected expert. Afterwards, they had lunch while a second speaker, Angela Whitaker — a recently retired lieutenant — talked about working high profile fugitive cases with Denver PD. Paige thoroughly enjoyed the humorous anecdotes and mishaps Whitaker described, they reminded her of the time she spent working for the bureau.

They spent the rest of the afternoon attending one hour specialized courses that participants selected when they registered for the conference. She had one class with Coleman, but other than that, she hadn’t seen the trio all day. She had met some new colleagues and exchanged numbers. She thought of them as possible contacts, but they didn’t have time in the classroom setting to really get to know each other. There was no way to determine if they were valuable assets or just casual acquaintances.

Paige pushed off the wall and started toward the large bank of stairs when she heard someone call her name. She turned and spotted Lisa Collins.

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“We’re heading over to the Blue Iguana for dinner,” Collins said once she caught up to Paige. “You want to join us?”

“What is a blue iguana?” Paige frowned.

“It’s a magic portal to old world Mexico,” Collins grinned. “Best Mexican food this side of the Rio Grande,” she added. “Trust me, you won’t regret it.”

“I didn’t bring my car,” Paige warned.

“It’s across the street,” Collins shrugged. “Follow me, the boys headed over to grab us a table.”

“Do they know you refer to them as boys?” Paige stepped in next to her.

“Sure,” Collins shrugged. “Those two are big, soft marshmallows on the inside. Don’t tell them I said that, they’ll start barking and complaining and our night will be ruined before it begins.”

“Got it,” Paige grinned. “So, does this iguana place have beer?”

“Sure,” Collins pushed open the door and stepped outside. “Don’t worry Slick, we’ll get you back to the hotel in one piece.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Paige decided.

After dinner, the group talked her into joining them at a local hangout for cops. By the time she got back to her room, she felt like she had made some lifelong friends, but it was too late to call and check in with Dax. She’d just get up earlier than planned and make the call. That way, they could have their routine discussion over breakfast.

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“So,” Mud said the following day. “The conference is over. You headed back to Manti?”

“Nope,” Paige shrugged. “I’m going to lounge around the pool and work on my tan for two more days before I head back.”

“Vacation?” Collins asked.

“Not exactly,” Paige shrugged. “My best friend is getting married and I need to hang up here for a couple days and wait for her mom’s plane to arrive. Then, I’ll shuttle her back to Manti with me.”

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“If you get bored,” Collins offered. “I could talk to the chief — see if he’s willing to approve a ride-a-long. You are certified here in Utah; it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Talk to your chief,” Paige said without hesitation. “Lo is constantly bragging about the good ‘ol days. I want to see if there’s any truth to the hype.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Collins pulled open the driver’s side door of her patrol car. “I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know. I work graves, so if it works out, I’ll pick you up around ten. You think you can handle the night life?”

“I’m sure I’ll survive,” Paige assured her. She watched as her new friend pulled away. She’d head back to the hotel, lounge by the pool, grab room service, and veg in front of the television. If she was going to face a graveyard shift, she needed some time to relax first.

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Paige stepped from the hotel and immediately spotted the patrol car. She slid into the passenger seat and turned to address Collins. “You ready to show me how it’s done?”

“I realize Salt Lake is a bigger city than Manti,” Collins began, pulling away from the curb. “But I hope all the stories of chaos and mayhem you heard from Lo haven’t given you unrealistic expectations. Some nights up here are just as mundane and boring as they are down south.”

“Don’t worry,” Paige assured her. “I’ve been a cop long enough to know our job isn’t eight hours of robberies, homicides, and car chases. I don’t need to be entertained. I’m here to assist if needed, make new friends, and use my downtime effectively. I’m not sure I could sit through another night of channel surfing in my empty hotel room.”

“Well,” Collins made a right on State Street. “In that case, let me give you a tour of the town while we wait for our next call.”

They had driven past the historical City and County Building, the LDS temple, the large conference center, Brigham Young’s historical home, and were just leaving the state capitol building when dispatch assigned Collins a detail.

“I know you’re a cop,” Collins turned to Paige. “I know you can step in if you need to, and domestics are unpredictable and dangerous...”

“But it would be cleaner and better for everyone if I let you handle it,” Paige finished. “As long as you have a back, I don’t mind waiting by the car.”

“Thanks,” Collins visibly relaxed.

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They pulled onto a one-way street and then turned right onto Pennsylvania Place. The roads were narrow, and Pennsylvania was a short, dead-end road. There were less than a dozen houses and they were nestled in tight, with tiny yards and only a few feet between the driveway and the house next door. In an attempt to gain some privacy, large, ancient trees filled every yard. Collins pulled off the road into a dirt packed front yard. There were three vehicles parked near the small home. An old travel trailer with flat tires that looked like it hadn't been moved for over a decade sat off to the side. A broken out window rested against the wall. To the side were three steps that led to a weathered old wooden door.

Paige and Collins climbed from the car. Paige leaned against the hood to wait. She glanced over when she spotted a second patrol vehicle pull in behind them. A male cop with blonde hair and a mustache that was more red than blonde stepped out and approached the two women.

"Let's head up and see what we've got," he turned to Paige. "Heard one of Lo's new friends was tagging along, tonight. Hate to do it, but maybe you could hang here while we handle this."

"Don't worry about me," Paige motioned to the door. "Go save the day. I'll stand back and watch."

Suddenly the door flew open, and a woman exited the home and darted down the cement stairs.

"Whoa." The male officer moved with lightning speed to stop her escape. "Let's step over here and you can explain what's going on."

Before she had a chance to answer, an enormous man emerged and stomped down the stairs. He marched across the yard and shoved his way between the officer and the woman.

Collins rushed in and grabbed the man's arm. "I need you to come with me," she gave his arm a gentle tug.

The man whipped around and caught Collins' chin with his elbow. Paige watched as the situation turned from bad to worse. Collins took a step back and rubbed her chin. The man took advantage of her dazed state and shoved her backward with so much force she lost her footing and almost went down. Instead, she shifted and caught herself, then moved back in for an arrest.

The male cop recognized the trouble and left the woman to assist Officer Collins. The three of them struggled for control for several seconds before Collins got one of the man's hands cuffed.

Seeing this, the woman decided to intervene. She lunged at the male officer, took two steps, then flew into the air, landing on the cop's back and wrapping her arms around his neck.



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“Let go of my husband,” she screamed at the top of her lungs. “Don’t hurt him. You have no right to hurt him!” The woman continued to hold on with one arm while releasing the other to pound on the cop’s shoulder and head.

Paige decided it was time to stop observing and start helping. She moved in, yanked the woman off the cop’s back, and used the momentum to force her onto the ground. She didn’t have her cuffs, so she forced the woman onto her stomach and held her in place with her knee pressed to the small of her back. The woman began to scream and curse as she tried to wiggle free. Paige ignored the protest. She focused on maintaining control as she gripped the woman’s wrists and pressed her knee harder into the woman’s back.

Unincumbered, Collins and her colleague were able to cuff the man almost instantly. The male cop escorted him to his patrol car while Collins joined Paige and cuffed her detainee as well. The female was escorted to Collin’s vehicle and secured in the back seat.

Paige stood, brushed the dirt from her jeans, and joined her fellow cops.

“So much for hanging back,” the man joked. “I’m Gavin Thomas, by the way. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Paige Carter,” Paige took the offered hand. “And, I said I’d hang back. I never said I wouldn’t step in — if I was needed.”

“Needed might be an overstatement,” Thomas grinned. “But thanks for the assist. I guess I’ll see you two in booking.”

An hour later, the prisoners were booked, and Collins pulled into the parking lot of a church. She circled around and parked under a tree facing the street.

“I’m going to need you to type out a statement. I’ll attached it to my report and add it to the case. We both know the domestic is going nowhere. There’s no way that woman will press charges but the assault on a PO will stick, and we’ve got resisting on the guy.”

“You got a pad of paper?” Paige wondered. “I can jot down the basics while you hammer out your report. When you’re done, I’ll use that fancy computer of yours to type out the official statement.”

Collins reached into the back and pulled out a binder. She flipped it open and held out a yellow legal pad and a pen. “Here you go,” she turned and opened up a new program. “I’ll hammer this out, then it’s all yours.”

They sat there for nearly an hour, with Collins completing her official report before turning the laptop so Paige could type out her statement. They had just finished and were headed out of the parking lot when Collins spotted a vehicle driving erratically.

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“You think he’s drunk?” Paige wondered when the car veered into the oncoming lane, then swerved back. He slammed on the brakes, slid a few feet, then regained control.

“Not sure.” Collins manually flipped on her camera and continued to follow. The driver seemed to be back in control now, but he was still suspicious. When he ran a stop sign a few blocks later, Collins activated her emergency equipment and attempted a traffic stop. Instead of pulling to the side, the vehicle sped away — and the chase was on.

“How do you feel about calling the chase while I concentrate on driving?” Collins asked.

“I can do that.” Paige retrieved the mic and advised dispatch they were in pursuit, spotted a road sign and relayed their location. She continued to transmit directions and the pertinent information as Collins did her best not to lose the fleeing vehicle. The speeds continued to increase, and Paige was having a hard time knowing exactly where they were.

Collins made another right turn. Paige gripped the handle above the door and focused on street signs, which were flying by in a blur. She had just identified the street and called it in when Collins made a left. Paige leaned forward, struggling to find something — anything — that had the name of the road they were now on, but she couldn’t see a thing. Collins realized the problem and immediately told Paige where they were. Paige updated dispatch and the other cops that were headed their way. A short time later, multiple vehicles joined them. Lights and sirens were blaring as the stream of cop cars attempted to stop the fleeing felon.

Finally, a K9 officer was able to get into position and deploy spike strips. The vehicle hit them at an angle. Two tires went flat, but the driver continued to flee. Tires now flat, his speeds had decreased significantly. Once they reached the optimal speed, Collins moved into position and performed a PIT maneuver. Her vehicle collided with the left side of the suspect vehicle in exactly the right place. He lost control, the car spun in a circle, slid across the roadway, and collided with a concrete fence. The driver jumped from the driver’s side and attempted to run.

Collins expected the move and tackled him in an empty parking lot a few feet away.

Paige watched as a dozen cops surrounded the suspect, cuffed him, and yanked him to his feet. As they escorted him to one of the patrol cars, Paige approached the abandoned vehicle. Why did the kid run? He was looking at a simple traffic ticket for the stop sign and maybe reckless driving or failure to maintain control for the rest. Why flee and face multiple felonies for nothing? She stepped up to the open driver’s side door and took a peek inside. Nothing obvious there. She pivoted when someone called her name and froze.

“Hey,” Coleman approached the vehicle. “It might be best if you didn’t touch anything. I know you’re certified and all, but the jurisdictional problems might come into play if he gets a good attorney. There had to be a reason this guy fled from a simple stop sign violation.”

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“I’d say there was an excellent reason,” Paige motioned to the back seat. “And, I’m pretty sure he’s going to get an attorney.”

“Holy—” he turned when Mud called out his name.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Mud said, joining them at the car. “I’m not sure —”

“Paige noticed the mess in the back seat,” Coleman interrupted. “She’s not interfering, just made an important observation, and she wanted to make sure we noticed.”

Mudrock glanced in the back, then immediately turned to leave. “I’ll get a warrant and we’ll see if we can figure out who all that blood belongs to.”

Once he left, Paige continued to study the gruesome scene in the back of the car. There were large red smears on the surface of the seat, and a couple of them continued several inches up the back. She shifted and tried to get a better look at the floorboard. She couldn’t see it well, but it looked like a pool of blood had settled on the floor. Something sinister had happened in that car. Or, possibly, somewhere else, and the body — she was sure there was at least one body involved — may have been transported in the back of that car.

She tried to tell herself this was not her case. It wasn’t, but still... she was itching to get involved. She’d just offer her services, once they had a warrant to do a thorough search, and hope they’d take her up on the offer. If not, she’d have to do some fancy talking and convince them her forensic knowledge would come in handy. With any luck, they’d let her in. If not, she’d call Lo and see if he’d convince them to let her play.

As luck had it, she didn’t need to call Lovato. Coleman did that for her.

Mudrock approached the car and focused on Coleman. “The warrant’s been signed, and the case is assigned to us — more specifically, you with my help. The sarge said you’re next up on the list. The rest of the unit is on their way. I realize we don’t have a body, yet.”

“But we both know we will, eventually,” Coleman finished. “I should probably let you know, I called Lo. He vouched for Paige. Said we’re a bunch of braindead idiots if we don’t use her on this.”

“Why?” Mudrock studied Paige.

“Because she’s been holding back on us,” Coleman grinned. “Lo says she’s some hotshot forensics expert that used to work for the FBI. He also said we shouldn’t hold that against her. According to him, she’s a royal pain in the keister, but she’s solid. He claims if we can get past her incessant need to drag out a search for hours, it will be worth the wait. Lo seems to think that — if there is evidence to find — our girl here will find it.”

“Any of that true?” Collins asked Paige.

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“Half-truths are Lo’s specialty,” Paige decided. “The forensics part is true; the solid part is true; and I am thorough and methodical. I believe slow and steady wins the race. If you rush, you could miss something important. I don’t rush. The pain in the keister part — that is a total and blatant lie.”

They all glanced up when a shiny black Dodge Charger pulled in and parked. “I’ll take this,” Coleman decided. “Let me see what I can do to convince the L.T. Paige is a resource we should tap.”

“He meant that in a purely professional way,” Mud added.

“Good to know,” Paige grinned. “Why don’t you get started on that search now that you have a warrant. I’ll just stand back and watch you work.”

A few minutes later, Coleman returned with a tall man dressed in loose fitting jeans and a polo shirt. “Officer Carter, I’m Lieutenant Brad Jones. I hear you may be of assistance to us in this case. I’m not convinced we need your help, but Coleman reminded me he’s the case agent on this incident, and he wants to see what you have to offer. I’m going to allow it, for now. Tread lightly. If you compromise evidence or take one step out of line — you’re out. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” Paige agreed. She wasn’t worried, she had never compromised evidence in her life, and she never stepped out of line. “I’d like to wait, see what these guys come up with before I do my own search of that car. Does that sound okay to you?”

Lt. Jones studied Paige for several seconds, unsure how to take her request. “Like I said, Coleman and Mudrock are handling this one. Take your request to them.”

“I’m good with that.” Coleman pulled open the passenger side door. “Tow trucks on the way. I want to do a cursory search here, but I think we should wait to do the thorough and methodical assessment back at the office in a more controlled environment.”

“I agree,” Mudrock straightened and pushed the button to pop the back trunk. “Let’s see if there’s anything hiding in the obvious places, then we’ll head back to the evidence bay and continue our investigation over there.”

“In that case,” Paige glanced around. “Anyone object if I take a look underneath the car?”

“Be my guest,” Mudrock handed her his flashlight.

Paige accepted it, dropped to the ground, and fished out her pocketknife. It was the sturdy Benchmade that Dax gave her, and she never left home without it. Too bad she’d left her go-bag in her patrol car back in Manti. She slowly slid beneath the car and studied the undercarriage carefully. As she slid toward the back, she smiled. Bingo! “Anyone have an evidence bag handy?”

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Coleman crouched next to the back tire and held out a bag. Once she took it, he shifted and popped his head around the tire to see what she was doing. “You’re collecting dirt? You do remember that car was involved in a chase, right?”

Paige scraped a sizeable chunk of clay like particles from the wheel well. “That would be pretty hard to forget. Hand me another bag, will you?”

Coleman straightened and asked a patrol officer for another evidence bag. Within minutes, he returned with a handful of bags. Coleman passed one to Paige, then moved to join Mudrock and Jones.

“Any value in what she’s doing?” Jones finally asked when he spotted the tow truck.

“Lo said she’s methodical,” Coleman reminded them. “I think we should let her finish and judge the value of the find later.”

“I’ll let the driver know it’s going to be a few more minutes,” Mudrock announced before he walked away.

“So,” Jones turned to Coleman. “That miscreant Lovato vouched for our guest?”

“He did,” Coleman watched as Paige shifted and moved toward the front of the car. “He said if we can be patient with her, she won’t disappoint. I trust Mike. He was adamant, if there’s something to find, she’ll find it.”

“Then we wait,” Jones agreed. “We lost a good man when Lo relocated. Let’s see what she comes up with.”

Paige listened to the conversation and realized that while she didn’t always agree with Mike Lovato and his methods, up here, his former colleagues still respected him. There had to be a reason he was still regarded so well. She’d be wise to remember that once she got back home — she would remember it. Lo came through for her tonight. He vouched for her, and people up here listened. She was going to do her best to return the favor someday.

She decided she’d found all there was to find out here in the dark, under this vehicle, and used her feet to shove her body backward. As she slowly made her way to the edge of the car, her light landed on another clump of dried dirt. She moved closer and illuminated the particles. There was something different about this soil. Carefully, she reached out and removed the small mass from the undercarriage and paused to study it. That’s when it hit her, there was saltgrass mixed in with the dirt and clay. She raised it to her nose and inhaled.

“I need another bag,” she called out and waited for Coleman to hand her one. Once she dropped it inside and sealed the bag, she scrambled out from under the car.

“Other than common dirt,” Jones stepped forward. “You find anything useful?”

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“I think your suspect spent some time out at the lake,” Paige advised.

“The lake?” Jones frowned.

“The Great Salt Lake,” Paige corrected. “There’s saltgrass in that dirt, mixed in with clay. I’m betting, once the lab analyzes it, you’re going to discover other particles that can only be found in the wetlands. When I smelled it, I could detect a slight hint of mint as well. I also suspect you’ll find salt minerals and probably a few bird droppings mixed in for good measure.”

“You’ve been under there playing with minty bird poop,” Mudrock grinned. “Good to know, and for the record, better you than me.”

“Let’s get this thing hooked up and transported,” Jones ordered. “Any luck finding the registered owners of that car?”

“RO lives a few blocks away,” Coleman held up his phone. “The car belongs to Frank and Laura Stewart. I ran both of them, they’re an elderly couple in their late sixties. Frank got a speeding ticket a few years back — nothing significant on Laura. If I had to guess, our suspect was headed back to the Stewart residence. Or, he was fleeing from the scene and wasn’t smart enough to obey all traffic laws along the way. He’s still not talking. He was booked as John Doe and immediately demanded a lawyer. As soon as we finish up here, I’d like to look around the Stewart residence. It should give us a better idea of what we’re dealing with.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Jones agreed.

Once the vehicle was loaded, secured, and on the way to the evidence lot, the group responded to the Stewart residence. Collins and Paige waited in the car at the curb. Lt. Jones wanted Collins to secure the outside and watch for any approaching vehicles that looked suspicious. He also wanted her to head off any curious neighbors that might try to interfere.

Coleman, Mudrock and Jones approached the front door. Coleman knocked, but there was no response. “Now what?” Coleman wondered, glancing around.

Detective Mudrock moved to stand in front of the large window and sighed. “There’s evidence of a struggle inside. You should call a judge, see if we can get a warrant to check the welfare of this couple.”

Jones walked over and stopped next to Mudrock, Coleman joined them. “I can see what looks like blood on that couch. Let the judge know there was definitely a struggle in that room. That mess, that’s in plain sight, combined with the evidence in the back of the car you shouldn’t have a problem. No judge would want to deny access and later find out there was a victim dying a slow and painful death in the back room.”

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“Warrants in,” Coleman announced to the group a short time later. They were now all standing on the front lawn, waiting to see what their next move would be. “Collins, you stay out here, guard the front door. Paige, you come on in and help us search.”

“Looks like you found your crime scene,” Paige whispered the instant she entered the room. There was blood on the carpet and the couch was covered in dark, almost black stains. A table was tipped over and magazines were strewn across the living room floor.

“We do a quick search to make sure there’s nobody inside, then we back out and get a search warrant,” Jones ordered.

“Be careful where you step,” Paige warned. “There’s a lot of evidence in this house and you don’t want to disturb any of it. We need to search, just in case, but I doubt he left anyone here. From what I saw in that vehicle, your suspect loaded up his victim — or victims — and did his best to destroy the evidence. He was probably headed back here to clean up.”

Once the house was searched and no one, living or dead, was found inside, they secured the residence and gathered on the front porch. Coleman stepped away to contact the judge again. There was no urgency now, the house was empty. Once the search warrant came through, they’d return to search the premises thoroughly and completely — this time, looking for evidence.

“Start marking everything,” Jones instructed once the warrant was transmitted. “I’ll get a forensics unit out here to document this.”

“Looks fresh,” Paige observed stepping into the kitchen. This room was worse than the living room. There was blood everywhere, the floor, the walls, the sink, the back of chairs. Something horrible happened in this room.

“We need to find the bodies,” Mudrock finally said once they marked the items they wanted documented.

“We will,” Coleman said confidently. “First, we need to head back downstairs and make sure there’s nothing hidden in one of those rooms. I know we didn’t see anything on the first round, but we were looking for humans, not evidence.”

Nobody was surprised when they couldn’t find anything. From the looks of things, the suspect never left the main floor.

Paige ascended then paused when she spotted a man in his thirties waiting by the front door with a camera.

“You ready for me to get started?” he asked the instant Coleman stepped into the large room.

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“Start in here,” Coleman advised. “I think we’ve marked everything. The kitchen will take longer. Sorry, Brent. I’m afraid you’re going to be here a while.”

“I’ll just go out and call Barb,” the man decided. “She’s on duty tonight and can handle anything new that comes in until I finish up here.”

Several hours later, the group stepped from the home and secured it with police tape. Collins was long gone. A call came in and she had to respond. Paige glanced around and wondered how she’d get back to the hotel.

“I realize you’re only here one more day,” Mudrock stepped in next to Paige. “But we’re heading out to the lake first thing in the morning. You’re welcome to join us, assist with the search if you’re available.”

“What time,” Paige glanced at her watch, it was nearly two in the morning already.

“I can pick you up at seven,” Coleman offered.

“Alright,” Paige agreed. “I’m free tomorrow. I have to be at the airport the following afternoon so I only have one day, but I’m game if someone can drop me at the hotel.”

“I’m heading that way,” Mudrock offered.

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The following morning, Paige woke early, grabbed a large cup of coffee from the hospitality room, and headed over to City Creek Mall. There, she stopped in at Macy’s and located the shoe department. She needed a sturdy pair of rubber boots. She rounded a corner and almost collided with an employee.

“Can I help you find something?” the woman asked politely.

“I know they’re not in season, but I need a pair of rain boots. I’m looking for something sturdy, rubber, but not too big. I don’t want them to go up to my knees or anything, maybe a pair of ankle boots if you have them. An inch or two higher would be even better.”

“I think I have just what you’re looking for in the back, what size do you wear?”

“Seven,” Paige watched the woman rush away and return with a large box. The instant she pulled off the lid, Paige smiled. “These are perfect. I’ll take them.”

“I can ring you up over here,” she pointed to a cash register. “Unless you had more shopping to do.”



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“Nope,” Paige lifted the box. “Just these.” Once she paid for the boots, she rushed back to her hotel room, changed shoes, and was outside, sitting on a metal bench when Coleman pulled up to the curb.

“You ready for a slimy, messy, hot day at the beach?”

“I live for slimy, messy, and hot.” Paige clicked in her seatbelt.

“Somehow, I think you might mean that,” Coleman sighed. “I’m serious. The marshlands that surround the lake are difficult. I guarantee you’ve never been anywhere like it before. And this time of year, there are billions of brine flies swarming around the lake. They don’t bite, but they can be annoying.”

“Maybe I should have purchased a mosquito net along with the boots,” Paige frowned. “Is it really that bad?”

“Could be,” Coleman shrugged. “Water’s low this year. I don’t know if that will make it better or worse. Guess we’ll see once we get there. The lab confirmed your suspicions, by the way. They found wild mint, saltgrass, and something called spikerush as well — whatever that is. As far as minerals, the soil was highly alkaline and had high levels of salt. You also hit on the bird poop. There was excrement from the Great blue heron and some kind of duck.”

“Sounds like we’re heading straight for the dump site,” Paige decided.

“There’s one more thing,” Coleman advised. “I got to thinking, if the car had evidence on the undercarriage, maybe our suspect’s shoes might have clues as well. I confiscated them and transported them over to the lab. Mud also tracked down a name. Our fleeing felon is Randall Stewart, son of Jerry Stewart, grandson to Frank and Laura Stewart.”

“Grandson,” Paige whispered in surprise. “Anything unexpected on the shoes?”

“Not unexpected, but it corroborates the stuff you found on the car,” Coleman advised. “He also had saltgrass and salty soil but there were some tiny seeds stuck in the clay and dirt in the treads of his shoes.”

“What kind of seed?” Paige glanced over then refocused on the muddy soil that surrounded the lake.

“Bluegrass,” Coleman told her. “And traces of calcium carbonate. There is only one place you can find all of those plants and animals together. Well, only one place that’s close enough for Mr. Randall Stewart to visit with his deceased grandparents.”

“The Great Salt Lake,” Paige nodded. “It’s a big place, any idea where to start?”

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“Yeah,” he smiled. “I contacted an expert. There was a group of researchers that did an extensive study of the lake for some project a few years back. Utah State University Extension program coordinated the project, and they own the results. I talked to the professor currently in charge of that department. He identified three areas that would contain all the elements I outlined. Bluegrass, saltgrass, spikerush, ducks and heron. Mud and the rest of the unit are already up there restricting access to our most likely areas. We’ll search those three first, then move on to the other two he said were less likely, but viable matches.”

“You’ve been busy,” Paige observed.

“You went shopping for shoes,” Coleman grinned. “I went shopping for information. We all do what we do.”

Paige rolled her eyes at him but smiled.

They pulled into a parking lot that contained several vehicles. The entrance was blocked, but Coleman easily maneuvered around the obstruction.

Paige climbed from the vehicle and just stood, taking in the lake, the marina, and the marshland. “Where are we?”

“Great Salt Lake Marina,” Mudrock joined her. “Saltair is over there,” he pointed to the north. “We’re heading back that way,” he pointed southwest. “We’ll start at Sunset Beach and continue along the shoreline — see what we see. If that area’s a bust, we’ll move closer to Antelope Island, near Bridger Bay. There’s an area over there the researchers believe fits our criteria. Detective Rob Smith is securing it as we speak.”

“Coleman said three,” Paige glanced toward the southwest to study the area they’d be searching. “How far away is the third location?”

“That one is further away, and it’s harder to get to. Of the three, that’s the least likely if you ask me. The suspect would need to know the area well to find it. It’s further north, up near Promontory Point in Ogden. If we don’t hit here, I’ll call a couple guys I know up there and see if they can assist.”

“You don’t believe he went that far?” Paige realized. “Not just because it’s harder to find, but you don’t think he would travel that distance with two bodies in the back seat.”

“I don’t,” Mudrock admitted. “But there’s no predicting crazy, so it’s possible.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Paige sighed, glanced away and spotted Coleman. “Your partner’s trying to get your attention. I think he wants to get this thing started.” Together, they made their way across the parking lot and joined Coleman on the edge of the marina.

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Once they reached the search area, Coleman gave each detective their assignment. He had already divided the search area into grids and assigned one cop to each grid. Paige took her map, studied it for several seconds, glanced around to get her bearings, and slowly headed in that direction. Once she was sure she was in the right place, she tucked the map into her pocket and began to walk the grid. The search was slow going and took hours. Once she finished, she paused to study the area. “Hey,” she called out to Coleman who was now walking toward her. “What’s that up there?”

“Black Rock,” Coleman pulled out his map. “It’s on the fringes, but outside the area the researchers identified as highly probable.”

“I think we should search it,” Paige disagreed.

“Why?” Coleman folded his map and placed it back in his pocket. “They said if we don’t hit on anything in the area we just searched, we should move north.”

“I think we should search the area around that rock,” Paige said again. “If I’m wrong, what’s it going to hurt?”

“Lost time,” Coleman disagreed.

“An hour maybe, that’s nothing in a search like this one,” Paige held firm. “Humor me.”

“Why?” Coleman asked again.

“Because it’s not that far from the search area,” Paige sighed. “It’s not like there’s some magic barrier between here and there. Any vegetation we find here, we could find over there. I want to start at that circle, the one that skirts that rock, then branch out into the marshy area below — toward the lake.”

“I’m sure that section is well traveled. It’s probably the reason they eliminated it. If someone dumped a body over there, chances are high some unsuspecting citizen would have found it already.”

“Humor me,” Paige repeated.

“Again, why?” Coleman pushed.

“We’re looking for a place our depraved grandson could pull his car in, possibly maneuver it off road, unload the bodies, and take off before anyone notices. We’re close to the railroad but hidden from the highway back here. He could easily get his car into that area. It was dark and he would have been in a panic to dump the evidence and get back to the house to clean up the mess. He didn’t make it, but I really don’t think he’d head as far north as Ogden. That leaves this area, and Antelope Island. I’m trying to think like a panicked guy with two bodies in my back seat. He’d want to ditch them as quickly as possible. Why head all the way to Antelope Island when

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there's plenty of secluded marshland out here? Why go somewhere that's further away but a lot more populated. Everyone that visits this lake, stops in at Antelope Island."

"Not everyone, but I get your point," Coleman conceded.

"Plus, I keep thinking about the calcium carbonate. That fits with that big rock over there. Calcium carbonate forms caliche layers — also known as hard rock formations. That is a rock formation and I want to check it out."

"So," Coleman grinned. "Besides being a cop, a former fed, and a royal pain in the keister — Lo was right about that — you're some kind of geologist?"

"Forensic specialist," Paige corrected. "Meaning people who examine and analyze evidence. That frequently includes biology, chemistry, trace evidence, and geological particles. I'm a jack of all trades when it comes to science. You have no idea how often a small sample of dirt cracked our case. I spent a lot of time studying plants, minerals, and fibers."

"Alright," Coleman agreed. "I hope I don't regret this, but you have a valid point. Let's go take a look."

Once they reached Black Rock, Paige held up a hand and slowly walked the area. It didn't take long to find the tire tracks. "Any idea if these match the vehicle you impounded?"

"None whatsoever," Coleman frowned. He was going to have to eat some serious crow if Paige just found their dumpsite. "Let's follow it and see what's down there."

They continued to follow the tracks. It was difficult and the water eroded some of them but they were able to follow them across a slightly soggy section that was covered in vegetation. On the other side, there was an island of soft, white soil then a huge marshland. Paige crouched down and broke off a large plant. "This is spikerush."

"Good to know," Coleman took it and studied the plant. "We're going to find a couple bodies out here, aren't we?"

"I think we are," Paige continued to follow the tracks. They stopped a few feet into the large marsh. "He couldn't have carried them far."

"Let's head this way," Coleman decided. "These look like footprints that are dissolving in the water."

Paige studied the prints. "What kind of shoes was he wearing?"

"Work boots," Coleman trudged along the edge of the marsh. A few feet out he spotted their first body. It was partially submerged and hidden by tall grass and vegetation. He stepped closer and realized it was a female. She fit the description he had of Laura Stewart, late sixties,

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approximately five feet six, gray hair, and petite build. “I’ll call it in. You see if you can find Mr. Stewart.”

Paige crouched and studied the ground intently. She couldn’t see any other prints. It surprised her to realize there weren’t any drag marks. It looked like Randall carried Laura in this direction, but it would be difficult to carry that kind of dead weight this far. She believed he only accomplished it because the woman was so petite. Frank would have been larger and harder to manage. “I’m going to head back to where he parked the vehicle and take a closer look. I don’t think he could have gotten Frank all the way out here. Come find me once you have the Calvary headed this way.”

“I need to secure the body until someone else arrives to take over,” Coleman told her. “Don’t go far. The other body has to be close.”

“I agree,” Paige slowly made her way back to the tire tracks. She crouched, ignored the indentations made by the vehicle and searched for footprints. She didn’t find any, but she saw what looked like smudge marks. Did Randall try to erase the evidence trail? Why? She stood and focused on the horizon. Which direction would he go? He had a body to dispose of, one that was heavy and, by the time he drove all the way out here, it would have been rigid and difficult to maneuver. Where would he take his grandfather? She turned and slowly began walking in the opposite direction, away from Laura’s body.

She couldn’t find any footprints, but she located what looked like washed out sand. This wasn’t a normal beach so the chance it was a wave that washed this away was miniscule. Randall must have dumped water over his tracks, washing away any evidence that he’d been out here — or so he thought. She continued to study the ground carefully, slowly taking small steps, then stopping to inspect the ground. That’s the only reason she found the drag marks. They were partially hidden at the edge of a stand of cattail. She followed it about six feet and found Frank. With a sigh, she pulled out her phone and dialed Coleman. Once she explained where she was and how she got there, he assured her a detective would find her as soon as possible.

About ten minutes passed before she spotted Mudrock, and another man she hadn’t met, walking toward her. “I’m over here,” she called out.

“You do realize,” Mudrock said in greeting. “If you hadn’t insisted Coleman join you to check out this area, we never would have found these bodies. I saw you walking this way and thought you were crazy.”

“Coleman agreed with you,” Paige admitted. “It just made sense to me. I’m glad I was here to help. And, for the record, I think you would have figured it out on your own, eventually.”

“I want to agree, but I can’t say for certain we would have,” Mudrock admitted. “And the chance of the bodies being discovered by a citizen is pretty slim. Sure, there are people who visit

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the rock, stop to rest on that short stretch that borders the formation, but I doubt anyone ventures out here. They'd have to cross that marshy area and few people would do that."

"It doesn't matter," Paige decided. "We found them, and you have enough evidence against Randall Stewart you could fill a cargo plane. You just made some prosecutor's day, and he doesn't even know it yet. Even with the blood in the car and the horrendous scene in that house, prosecuting him without a body is a crap shoot."

"True," Mudrock glanced up and spotted Coleman.

"Alright," Coleman glanced at the body then focused on Paige. "I admit it. I was sure Lo exaggerated your awesomeness, but you just made a believer out of me."

"Lo said I was awesome?" Paige grinned.

"You are so busted," Mudrock laughed. "I'm pretty sure you were supposed to keep that part a secret."

"Oops," Coleman laughed. "Must have been a spontaneous utterance. You know, a momentary lapse because of the intense excitement I'm experiencing. I'm just so overwhelmed with joy, I lost control and let it slip."

"Busted," Mud said again.

"I don't suppose —" Coleman began.

"Not a chance," Paige laughed.

They all sobered when Lt. Jones appeared in the distance.

"Deputy Carter," he said in greeting. "I'm told you proved me wrong."

"About what?" Paige wondered.

"I told you last night I would let you help, but I wasn't convinced we needed the assistance," he grinned. "Guess we did need you, after all."

"Right," Paige smiled back. "It's been a pleasure working with you and your men. Collins, too."

"I realize it wasn't much of a vacation, but I'll call down, let your boss know we appreciated the assistance these past couple days," Jones held out a hand. "If there's ever anything we can do for you, don't hesitate to call." He passed her his card, then turned and walked away.

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“He doesn’t give those out often,” Mudrock told her. “Hold on to it. He’s serious. Call anytime and he’ll do what he can. He’s tough, but he’s solid.”

Paige pulled out a couple of her own cards. “The feelings mutual. Call anytime. Now, if someone can give me a ride back to the hotel, I’d like to have a long soak in my jetted tub, order room service, and crash. I’m beat and tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

“Toby offered to drive you back,” Coleman pulled her in for a hug. “I’ve got to finish this up. We still have a few hours work, the ME’s on the way, but I need to scour the area for evidence or I’d take you myself.”

“I can stay a little while, if you want help,” Paige offered.

“Naw,” Coleman shook his head. “There’s not much to find. I’ve got our guys documenting the tracks that led to grandma. Once I knew where you were, it was easy to follow this trail as well. We’ve got this. Go back to the hotel, relax, and decompress. You’ve done enough already. Seriously though, thanks for all the help. I know the family will appreciate having their loved one’s back so they can give them a proper burial.”

“That’s the job, right?” Paige took the card Coleman held out and then grabbed one from Mudrock. She had wanted to make a few contacts while she was here. Looked like she succeeded.

“You ready?” a tall, slim guy asked from the other side of the marsh.

He looked young, which made Paige feel old. Was he really old enough to be a cop? “Ready,” Paige agreed, crossing the marsh, and making her way back to the large rock that drew her here in the first place. As they approached, she realized there was a vehicle parked on the other side of the large formation. She was grateful. As she settled into the passenger seat, she suddenly felt tired and a little sad. She’d never know why a grandson decided to kill his own grandparents. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know what pushed him to commit such a gruesome, heinous assault. She was just glad she’d been involved in his capture. The man belonged in prison for the rest of his miserable life. She closed her eyes and tried to push the image of two mangled, bloody bodies out of her head.

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Paige stepped into the airport terminal and made her way to baggage claim. She paused to study the overhead screen, located Persha Fennelly’s flight, found the appropriate baggage claim station, and made her way to that section of the airport. The area was nearly empty. These days few people, other than passengers, were allowed inside. Her badge and a call from Collin’s sergeant, was the only reason she got through the front door.

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She glanced around, spotted a chair near the carousel listed on the flight screen, and settled in to wait. It didn't take long. An exotic looking woman in her fifties retrieved two bright orange cases, paused, spotted Paige and made a beeline her way.

“Paige Carter?” the woman asked.

Paige stood and held out a hand in greeting. “You must be Mrs. Fennelly.”

“Persha,” the woman took her hand and smiled. “Any friend of my daughter's is a friend of mine.”

“Persha,” Paige smiled. The woman was a site to behold. She wore a bright purple headscarf with gold sequins lining her forehead. On the side, near the knot, was a large gold star broach. Two crescent, golden moons dangled from her ears. Every finger held a ring, some had large, shiny stones, others were gold with intricately carved symbols. Her left wrist held at least a dozen bracelets and around her neck she wore a large chain with a circular symbol in the center with more crescent moons shooting out in all directions.

Her shirt was a simple white that hung over her shoulders with large bulky sleeves. She wore a thick brown leather belt with a golden buckle — also in the shape of a moon. Her skirt looked like several dozen strips of material had been sewn together. It was every shade of purple, black, and gray you could imagine. It gave the illusion of flowing water when she walked, shifting, and flowing in all directions in a synchronized dance. She wore brown leather sandals that wrapped around her ankles in an elaborate twist, with a bow tied just above the ankle. Beneath the leather laces, she added a chain that matched her earrings with dime sized moons resting just below the bend.

“Let me help you with your luggage,” Paige reached out and took the largest suitcase. “I'm parked just outside. There's a walkway that leads to the garage. It's not far.”

Persha stepped outside the large front doors and stopped abruptly on the sidewalk. “Now I know what they mean by a dry heat. It's stifling out here, but so much different from New Orleans.”

“Don't worry,” Paige smiled over her shoulder. “My car has excellent air conditioning. It's a long ride. Did you eat?”

“I did, yes,” Persha said absently as she glanced around and took in her surroundings. “The mountains are a little intimidating, aren't they? So imposing, but beautiful and majestic.”

“I hadn't thought of that,” Paige loaded Persha's luggage into the back of her vehicle. “I'm so used to it, I rarely stop to admire them, but they are beautiful, imposing and — for me, comforting. When I see the Wasatch mountain range, I know I'm home.”



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“I feel the same about the gulf — and the river. The mighty Mississippi is also imposing and majestic, in her own way.”

“She is,” Paige climbed behind the wheel. “Now, food first, or should we just hit the road?”

“I ate,” Persha buckled in. “I’d like to get started, unless you’re hungry.”

“Nope,” Paige put the car in gear and headed out. “I ate at the hotel. I’m ready to get home.”

“So,” Persha said once they entered the freeway. “Tell me about this man my daughter plans to marry.”

The two of them talked about Zeus, Dax and the rest of the guys all the way back to Manti. Paige focused on positive stories that highlighted the amazing men they were. She wanted Carman’s mother to go into this meeting with a good impression. Carmen and Zeus were a good match. They were perfect for each other. Persha needed to know that. Paige remembered meeting Dax’s mother, and the tension they couldn’t quite overcome. That was the last thing she wanted for Carmen, or Zeus for that matter.

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Paige pulled into her driveway and had just shut off the engine when the door flew open, and Carmen rushed toward them.

“Ma,” she exclaimed as she pulled the exotic woman into an enormous bear hug. “How was your trip?” Carman glanced at Paige. ‘Thank you,’ she mouthed over her mom’s shoulder.

Paige nodded, then smiled when she spotted Dax in the doorway. She missed him. She always missed him when they were apart but this time, after dealing with such a difficult murder, then entertaining a stranger as they drove over two hours back to Manti, all she wanted was to sit on the couch and snuggle into her husband’s loving arms. She was so married!

“Welcome home,” Dax wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in for a kiss.

Paige snuggled in but glanced back at Carmen. Soon, her friend would be just as married and equally sappy. Knowing that, made Paige feel a little better.