

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Pilfering Ambition *Season 6, Episode 4*

by:

Melanie P. Smith

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www.melaniepsmith.com

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Paige pulled into the parking lot and studied the large building. With a sigh, she stepped out and made her way to the front door. The instant she stepped inside, a man in his late thirties, wearing designer slacks and a polo shirt, with a flashy, expensive watch, rushed from an office to address her.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” he held out a hand in greeting. “I’m Nick Scott. This is my company. Macie’s in there,” he pointed to the office he’d just vacated. “I told her to stay in my office and wait for you to arrive.”

“Deputy Carter,” Paige took the offered hand. “Before we get to that, I need some information. Tell me about the theft.”

“She’s embezzled tens of thousands of dollars,” Nick growled. “I want her arrested, now! I want her gone, off my property immediately.”

“I understand,” Paige nodded. “But like I said, I need some information first. How did you discover the missing money?”

“I called the bank,” Nick sighed. “If we have to do this now, let’s move into the conference room. It will be more comfortable.” He glanced at a woman in her late twenties to early thirties with light brown hair and blue highlights. “Willa, let me know if Macie tries to leave.” He didn’t wait for an answer, just turned and practically stomped down the hallway. Moments later, he made a right through an open door.

Paige followed. Gage was going to owe her big time for this one. The instant the call came in, he did everything in his power to get out of responding. Nick Scott claimed to be the owner, but that was only half true. He had a partner, Tony Clark, who was a childhood friend to Gage. Paige recognized the potential conflict and volunteered to take the call. She thought it was a simple theft, but this was turning into something far more complicated.

“Okay, Mr. Scott.” Paige settled into a chair and set her pad on the table. “Tell me about the missing money.”

“deMojo is a demolition business,” Nick began. “We specialize in large projects and even have an explosives team. What we do, it requires money. We maintain a sizeable operating budget — to make sure we have the funds readily available for the initial outlay when we start a new project. We have a lot of upfront costs, but we make it up on the backend.”

“Alright,” that made sense to Paige. “I assume you tried to access those funds and discovered they were short?”

“Exactly,” Nick sighed. “I tried to dip into our account this morning, thinking we had more than enough to cover a new project. I got online to do a transfer and realized the balance was much lower than it should be. I immediately contacted the bank, and they confirmed those funds

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had been removed. I spent nearly an hour, getting the details. Then, I looked into things internally. There was an entry, one that required identification. It's a system thing, a security precaution that we implemented. Do you need me to explain the system to you?"

"Not right now," Paige decided. "I'll get back to that later. Just tell me the basics."

"Alright," Nick took a deep breath. "The transaction required an employee number in order for it to complete the task. I checked the number, the one listed belongs to Macie... Macie Williams."

"Are you telling me, the person you think took the money, entered their employee number next to the illegal transaction?"

"Yeah," Nick shrugged. "It's how I caught her. She made it easy for us."

Paige frowned. *Too easy*, and she wasn't buying it. "So, you saw the number and what did you do?"

"I went to her office to confront her, but she hadn't arrived yet."

"Alright, then what?" Paige wondered.

"I entered her empty office and found a stack of cash; it looks like there could be over a thousand dollars."

"You found what looks like stolen money right there, out in the open, sitting on her desk?" Paige raised an eyebrow.

"Not in the open, no," Nick frowned. "It was in her top right drawer."

"And was her desk open or locked?" Paige requested.

"It was open," Nick studied the deputy, wondering why she was asking these types of questions.

"And her office? Was that locked?" Paige jotted down a few notes.

"No," Nick scowled. "What are you getting at?"

"Who was in the office when you realized the money was missing?" Paige ignored the question.

"Why?" Nick insisted.

"What's going on here?" Tony Clark demanded from the doorway.

"I was hoping to have this finished before you arrived," Nick admitted.

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“Have what finished?” Tony stepped inside and slid the door closed. “Macie’s in your office on the verge of tears, there’s a deputy sitting in our conference room, and I want to know the reason for all of it.”

“I just...” Nick began.

Paige held up a hand. “Your partner discovered there is a large sum of money missing and he called me here to conduct an investigation.”

Tony glared at Nick. “Why is Macie in your office?”

“She’s the one that took it,” Nick practically whispered. “I’m sorry, but there’s absolutely no doubt — she stole from us. I’m sorry.”

“I have doubts,” Paige interjected.

“You—” Nick blinked in shock. “I thought I explained why she had to be the one that took the money.”

“You explained that there’s a boat load of evidence in her office,” Paige corrected. “You also said she wasn’t in the building when you discovered the missing funds. And it sounds like you haven’t let her inside her unlocked office all morning. I’d like to return to my previous question,” she glanced at Tony. “Will you please join us so we can try to get to the bottom of this?”

Tony was still glaring at Nick, but he settled into a chair at the end of the table.

“Thank you.” Paige nodded then turned back to Nick. “Who was in the office when you began looking internally for the missing money?”

“Um,” Nick scrunched up his face. “I was, obviously. Willa Hill was also here — she’s our CFO. You met her when you arrived. Um... Derek. He wasn’t here at first, but he arrived later.”

“And who is Derek?” Paige glanced at Nick, then focused on Tony.

“Derek heads up our explosive demolition team,” Tony said absently. “Derek Thomas. I ran into John last night. He told me he was headed in early to finalize a bid on the Moab project. Was John here?”

“John was just finishing up when I arrived,” Nick told Paige. “He wasn’t here when I discovered the theft. He left about twenty minutes before it all happened.”

“Alright,” Paige glanced at her notes. “What is John’s last name?”

“He wasn’t involved in this,” Nick objected.

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“Then he can tell me that himself,” Paige didn’t budge. “His name?”

“John Marshall,” Tony answered. “And I agree with Nick. There is no way John had anything to do with this.”

“What about the secretary?” Paige wondered.

“Linda?” Nick shook his head. “No, she arrived just a few minutes before you did. She had a personal matter that needed her attention this morning. Why are you asking about the others? I already told you, it was Macie. I know you two are dating, Tony — but she did this.”

“No,” Tony disagreed. “She didn’t.”

“Alright,” Paige held up a hand to stop them both. “Nick, I know you believe Macie is responsible, but humor me. Walk me through it. You got out of bed this morning and left the house, headed for the office.”

“I stopped at the site before I came in,” Nick corrected. “I had a call just before we closed up shop yesterday. I told the contractor I’d swing by this morning and check out the property. I did a quick evaluation and headed back here to transfer the funds before I agreed to take on the project.”

“Alright,” Paige made some notes. “You arrived at the front door. Is it unlocked or locked? Was anyone else in the office when you arrived? Continue the story but include as many details as you can.”

“This is ridiculous.” Nick ran a frustrated hand through his hair when Paige just silently stared at him. “Fine. The front door was unlocked. Willa had already arrived for the day and was busy in her office. I passed John on his way out. He stopped to tell me everything was a go on Moab, and he was heading down for one last look in person before he finalized the contract.”

“Anyone else?” Paige pushed. She could tell there was something Nick wasn’t telling them.

Nick glanced at Tony, then looked away. “Byron was in the office with Willa.”

“I told you—” Tony began.

“I know,” Nick raised his voice. “I’ll talk to her. Let me handle this, Tony. You know it’s better for everyone if I handle it.”

“Who is Byron?” Paige wondered.

“He used to work here,” Nick explained. “There was an issue, with some of the heavy equipment. He cost us a lot of money.”

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“And you fired him?” Paige realized. “Is he still here? I’m going to need to speak with him.”

“If you’re thinking he could have stolen the money,” Nick jumped in. “It’s impossible. He doesn’t have access. He couldn’t touch those funds. I really don’t think he would if he could. With all the evidence that points to Macie, why are you looking at everyone but her?”

“She’s on the list,” Paige said absently.

“She shouldn’t be,” Tony objected.

“Nick said you’re seeing her,” Paige focused on Tony. “How long have you been dating?”

“Seven months,” Tony shifted. “I know she didn’t take money from us. Macie wouldn’t steal a bottle of water if she was dying of thirst.”

“I didn’t want to believe it either,” Nick told him. “But there’s so much evidence against her. I’m sorry, but Macie has put us in a real bind.”

“Someone has put us in a bind, but it wasn’t Macie,” Tony corrected. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. What’s the next step?” He turned to focus on Paige.

“I want to look around her office,” Paige stood. “Macie’s office. Then I’ll need to speak with each of your employees.”

“I won’t have you interrogating my people,” Nick objected.

“You don’t mind her grilling Macie, but if she wants to talk to the others — that’s a problem?” Tony challenged.

“Okay, look...” Paige waited until she was sure she had their attention. “This is difficult for everyone involved. One of you believes Macie is guilty, the other is just as sure she’s innocent. Maybe both of you could take a step back and let me conduct my investigation. Let me determine who took that money.”

Tony studied Paige for several seconds. “I can do that. As long as I know you’re following the evidence, that you’re truly investigating, I can take a step back and let you do your job.”

“I don’t see how it could be anyone but Macie,” Nick told her. “But I can do the same. I’ll stay out of your way, I promise.”

“Great,” Paige pulled open the door and spotted Jericho. “Hey, boss.”

“Gage filled me in,” he glanced at Tony. “He wanted to be here, but I pulled rank. It’s a conflict.”

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“I understand,” Tony reached out a hand to Jericho. “Good to see you, Sheriff.”

“Anything I need to know?” Jericho asked Paige.

“I was on my way to search one of the offices,” Paige advised. “Why don’t you join me?”

“What do you want us to do?” Nick wondered.

“When we’re done in the office,” Paige turned to Nick. “I want to interview your employees. I’d like to start with those that were here when you discovered the theft. Then, I’ll take them in the order they arrived. Johns in Moab, so I’ll talk to him later, but I want to speak with Willa and Byron, Derek, Linda, and anyone else that has access to the office. Not Macie’s office, but the building in general. Can the two of you make whatever calls you need to make to get your crew to come in?”

“Stagger them,” Jericho added. “We won’t speak to them all at once. We need them to arrive a few minutes apart. The two of you can decide the line-up.”

“Alright,” Tony glanced at Nick then turned and disappeared into an office.

“I still think this is a waste of time, but I agreed to let you work this your way, so I’ll be in Tony’s office. Let us know if you need anything else.”

“So, what didn’t you tell me?” Jericho asked the instant Paige shut the door.

“A lot.” Paige moved to Macie’s desk. “Nick says he discovered the missing money and contacted the bank.” She ran him through what she had, including her belief that it was all a little too easy for her liking.

“You think Macie is being set up by someone?” Jericho realized.

“I think it’s possible.” Paige slid open the desk drawer and pulled out a large stack of cash. “Convenient, how many embezzlers do you know that steals money, and then leaves it in their desk where anyone could find it?”

“I don’t believe I know any embezzlers,” Jericho frowned. “But I get your point.”

Paige pulled out a folded sheet of paper. “And here is a handy note with what looks like an account number, a username and a password. What do you want to bet, this information will line up with the details from the missing money?”

“I have a personal policy on that,” Jericho smiled. “I never make a bad bet.”

“And just in case I was too stupid to put it all together,” Paige lifted a handbag from the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet.

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“A woman’s purse?” Jericho studied the accessory and waited for Paige to explain.

“Not just any bag,” Paige opened the clasp. “It’s Gucci.”

“And?” Jericho frowned.

“And it retails for over a thousand dollars,” Paige advised.

“That thing —” Jericho motioned to the bag.

“Yep,” Paige set it on top of the desk. “This one little, unattractive — and in my opinion butt ugly — bag, cost more than a grand. It’s the only bright light in this basket full of nonsense. I bet the crook hated leaving it behind, but they had to make sure we fell for the rubbish they left us. There’s a mountain of evidence that just screams... arrest Macie Williams.”

“I take it we’re not going to arrest Macie Williams,” Jericho straightened and focused on the items Paige piled on the desk. “It is just a little too tidy for my liking. What’s your next move?”

“I need to interview Macie,” Paige decided. “We can do that in the conference room. In fact, let me check back in with Nick and Tony. We’ll need to occupy that room for a few hours if we’re going to conduct all the interviews in there.”

“I’ll talk to the secretary and see how we can lock this room down,” Jericho decided. “It’s probably unnecessary, but I want Heidi to scour this place for prints.”

“I agree,” Paige stepped to the door. “Can you get her started this way?”

“Sure,” Jericho pulled out his phone to make the call.

“Macie,” Paige said in frustration. “I’m trying to help you, but you have to help yourself.”

“By saying I did something I didn’t do?” Macie shot back. “How can that possibly help me?”

Paige pointed to the items on the large conference table. “How did they get into your office?”

“I have no idea,” Macie growled. “I told you, that money was not in my desk when I left the office yesterday. I have never seen that purse in my life, and I don’t have any idea what that account is, where that note came from, or why any of that was in my desk. I never, never lock

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my office. There's no reason to. I don't even have the key to the desk. I trusted the people I work with. Maybe that was a mistake, but I trusted them. I don't know anything else."

"If you didn't do this, someone else is going to a lot of trouble to make us think you did," Paige pressed. "Who would do that?"

"Nobody," Macie sighed. "I don't know. Somebody, obviously, but I don't know who or why."

"Let me ask it this way," Jericho stepped in. "That stuff was in your office. That tells me, someone that works here put it there. If you had to choose someone... any one person who might have used you or your office that way, who do you think it might be?"

"I'm not going to guess and point a finger at someone that might have nothing to do with this just to give myself an out," Macie refused. "I don't know who did that. If you can find proof, some legitimate evidence that points at the person responsible, I'll tell you what I know about them. Otherwise, I can't help you. Are we finished?"

"I have a couple additional questions," Paige dropped that line of questioning. The only thing it told her for sure was that Macie was not the thief; but, she had a good idea who was. "I'm told you are a mid-level manager, is that correct?"

"It is," Macie narrowed her eyes, suspicious of the sudden change in topic.

"Does a mid-level manager have unrestricted access to company funds?" Jericho asked.

"No." Macie glanced at him then back to Paige.

"Do you have any access to company accounts?" Paige pushed.

"No," Macie shook her head. "Not really. I can use the petty cash funds. That's just cash Tony and Nick have here at the office for incidentals. Other than that, for large items, I have to submit a request to either Nick or Tony. If they approve it, the signed form goes to Willa, and she makes the purchase or transfers the funds."

"What do you manage?" Paige asked.

"I'm a project manager," Macie told her. "Once a contract is completed by either Nick or Tony, they assigned it to either me or to Jerry. We manage the project and close it out once it's complete."

"And that doesn't require company expenditures?" Jericho asked.

"Some," Macie turned to address him. "But I have a credit card for that."

"Any restrictions on the card?" Paige wondered.

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“Sure,” Macie shrugged. “It has to be a business expense. I can’t just go shopping for a new dress and use the company card. When the bill arrives, I sit down and itemizing each purchase — assigning it to a project I’m currently working. We have codes we use to distinguish the item. You know EX12 for the pyrotechnics we use to bring down a large structure, CL82 for the dumpster rentals... that sort of thing. Any miscellaneous purchases have to be explained in detail. I attach my report to the bill and then it goes to Nick for approval. Once he signs off on it, Willa handles payment.”

“So, you never access the accounts?” Paige sat back. If Macie didn’t have access, she couldn’t have taken the money. It really was that simple. Sure, someone put the account information in her desk, but it was typed out. That was a bright, shiny red flag for Paige. Who would type out the account info and store it in their top drawer — nobody, that’s who. They left the note as another breadcrumb. An anonymous one, because there was no way to determine who put the note in the desk. If there was ever a case of reasonable doubt, this was it.

“No, I’ve told you that a million times now,” Macie complained, pulling Paige from her thoughts.

“But,” Paige studied her carefully. “You’re dating the boss. Surely, he has the account number and the login information. It would have been easy enough for you to sneak a peek. A late night in the office, a gentle touch while you watched over his shoulder and memorized the login details, or just a quick skim through his wallet after an intimate evening alone.”

“I doubt he has it in his wallet,” Macie scowled. “Honestly, I have no idea where Tony keeps that kind of information. And, business is the last thing on my mind after a romantic or intimate evening with my boyfriend.”

“One last thing,” the more Paige spoke with Macie, the more convinced she was that the woman was not involved in the theft. “Nick said, once he discovered the missing funds, he logged into the system to check the internal records. He discovered a transaction, one that needed approval, and it had your employee number listed. Can you explain that?”

“I have no idea,” Macie rubbed her hands over her face. “I don’t know how to make you understand... I don’t know anything about the financial systems. I don’t know how to approve something. I wouldn’t even know where to put my employee number. I just don’t know.”

“Alright,” Jericho stood. “I believe that’s all for now.”

“I can go?”

“Yes, will you pull that door shut on your way out?” Paige requested. “I’ll come out and get the next person in a few minutes.”

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Once she was gone, Jericho addressed Paige. “Either she’s as oblivious as she says, or she’s in the wrong profession. Broadway would be a better fit.”

“I agree,” Paige stared out the window. “I don’t think she had anything to do with this. Which begs the question—”

“Who is trying to frame her?” Jericho interrupted. “And why?”

“She won’t point a finger at anyone, but she suspects someone. I could tell,” Paige said confidently.

“I caught that, too,” Jericho admitted. “Who do you want to talk to next?”

“I want Nick or Tony to show us the system. I need to know the details. I also want them to explain why only one transaction required an employee number to complete it.”

“Now you’re getting a little too far into the weeds for me.” Jericho moved to the door. “Unless you need my help, I’m heading back to the office. I can send Havilland over to assist with the interviews.”

“That’s fine,” Paige followed him out the door. “If he’s not busy, I could use Havi, he makes a good interview partner. I’ll see if I can get the dynamic duo to explain the system while I wait.”

Paige stepped through her front door, dropped her gear on the couch, and hesitated. She was starving, but she couldn’t smell dinner. That was unusual. She frowned; she couldn’t hear anything either. She started for the kitchen when her phone rang. “Hello.”

“Hey, babe,” Dax said in greeting. “I’m next door. Dinner is nearly ready. Carmen and Zee are arguing with her mother about wedding details. They could use your expert mediation skills.”

“Give me five to change and then I’ll meet you out back.” She rushed upstairs, slipped into her favorite jeans and a loose-fitting tank and rushed next door. She arrived just in time for dinner. Once the meal was over and the plates were cleared, the group settled outside to discuss the upcoming wedding.

“You’re a bride,” Persha Fennelly objected. “You have to wear white.”

“No,” Carmen objected. “I don’t. I’m an adult and I look like I’m trying to be a fairy princess when I wear white. It reminds me, and everyone I encounter, of Snow White. And while these guys are close, I doubt they want to be referred to as the seven dwarfs.”

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Hawk choked on his beer.

Dax laughed, and Zeus remained unusually quiet.

“You can call these guys a lot of things,” Paige turned to focus on Carmen. “Dwarf is not one of them. However,” she continued over the objects of Carmen and Persha’s triumphant gloating. “I don’t think either of you should insist on anything, or rule anything out.”

“Stop trying to be neutral and tell us what you really think,” Carmen protested. “This unbiased impartial Paige is driving me crazy.”

“Did you guys get that issue with the bathroom figured out?” Paige turned to address Zeus, ignoring Carmen’s complaint.

“Mostly,” Zeus glanced at Carmen. He knew that face, and she wasn’t happy. She wanted Paige to take her side over Persha. In fact, he knew Carmen wanted him to side with her over her mother, but the woman was already nit-picking everything. He didn’t need even more grief, especially over a dress his beautiful wife to be would only wear once.

“Anything we can help with?” Paige wondered. “And by that, I mean anything Dax can do to help while I’m off scouring the city for criminals and vagabonds?”

“You mean, while you’re eating donuts and drinking coffee,” Hawk grinned.

“Or that,” Paige said, unoffended.

“Not really,” Zeus glanced at Carmen. “But thanks. The tile we picked out was discontinued. We need to stop in at the store and pick something else.”

“I can take care of that for you,” Persha sat up straighter. “That stuff you picked was boring. Let me find you something more colorful and livelier.”

“That’s alright, mom,” Carmen shot Zeus an annoyed look. “I already found something. If Zeus agrees, he can stop in and place the order on his way to work.”

“Let me see it, first,” Persha insisted. “Give me the sample and I’ll place the order for you.”

Carmen gave Zeus a pleading look.

“I thought you were busy trying to decide on flowers,” Paige said, hoping she could rescue the couple from a lifetime of looking at tile they hated.

“Pfttt,” Persha sliced her hand through the air. “My daughter thinks she wants roses and lilies. Flowers were meant to be vibrant and colorful. She needs to create something stunning with magnolias and Dahlia’s. She claims this man is devoted to her. If that is true, his corsage should be made of Edelweiss.”

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“Mother,” Carmen stood. “It’s time to go home.” Zeus joined her and silently waited for Persha. For a minute, nobody thought she’d budge, then suddenly she rose to her feet and seemed to glide across the porch and down the stairs.

“It’s my wedding,” Paige heard Carmen complain. “I’m going to have the flowers I want. If you don’t like it, find a man you love and get married. Then you can make all the decisions.” Persha’s startled gasp was so loud they could still hear it on the back porch.

“I think they’ll be as glad to have the ceremony over with as I was,” Dax reached out and took Paige’s hand. “I feel for both of them. My mom was difficult in a different way. I’m not sure which is worse.”

Paige studied the vehicle as it backed out of the driveway and pondered Dax’s statement. She wasn’t sure, either. She just knew Mrs. Hamilton came pretty close to ruining her wedding. She hoped Persha wouldn’t do the same to Carmen.

“Deputy Carter,” Paige set aside the documents deMojo had provided to answer the phone.

“It’s Nick Scott,” came the reply. “Could you come back over to the office this morning? I found something I need you to see.”

“What did you find?” Paige wondered.

“For one thing,” Nick pinched the bridge of his nose. “Travelers checks. Three of them.”

“And you think they were purchased with company funds?” Paige figured it was just another attempt to frame Macie.

“Yes, I know they were,” Nick admitted. “I... well, I came in early this morning, to do a more thorough search in Macie’s office. I wanted to take care of this before Tony arrived. He’s in denial and this thing with Macie — well, it’s destroying our friendship. The sooner we can put it behind us and figure out how to move forward, the better.”

“Did you have Macie’s permission to search her office?” Paige challenged.

“No, but I didn’t need it,” Nick insisted. “The building belongs to us. There’s no expectation of privacy. We made that clear when we hired her.”

Paige wasn’t sure that was true, but it didn’t matter, any evidence Nick found was planted. “I’m on my way. Don’t touch anything else.”

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“You want company?” Havilland glanced up from the paperwork he was skimming. “I’m game, but I want to show you something before we go.”

“What did you find?” Paige moved to stand next to his desk.

“This account,” Havilland handed her a sheet of paper. “I tracked that account. It’s an off-shore, secret account in the Caymans.”

“So,” Paige studied the document. “Someone other than Macie was funneling sizeable sums of money to a secret, untraceable account. Do you think they took even more than the owners realize?”

“I do,” Havilland sifted through until he found another document and handed it to Paige. “My preliminary estimate is at least a hundred K.”

“Gutsy move,” Paige dropped the documents back on his desk. “When we get back do you mind following that lead? We’ll drop by, collect the additional evidence that points to Macie but I want to talk to the CFO again. She said all the right things, but she was in the office and she was fraternizing with a guy that had been fired and banned from the premises. Why?”

“Why fraternize with the enemy?” Havilland stood. “Or why was the enemy in the office?”

“Both,” Paige decided. “Nick seems protective of her, but Tony suspects her. It was subtle, but it’s there. He was also beyond livid when he found out Byron was allowed inside the building and Nick was the one that looked the other way.”

“I sensed it too,” Havilland agreed. “There’s something brewing just below the surface but they’re all hiding it.”

“Or avoiding it,” Paige stepped outside. “You want to ride over together?”

“Sure,” Havilland shrugged. “I’ll drive.”

“Mr. Scott,” Paige sat across from him in the large conference room.

“Just call me Nick,” he sighed. “By the time this is over, you’ll know more about my business than my closest relative. The formalities seem futile under the circumstances.”

“Alright,” Paige glanced at Havi, a silent signal she was about to broach a difficult subject. “Let’s talk about Willa.”

“What about her?” Nick looked from one officer to the next.

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“In these types of situations,” Havi jumped in. “The most obvious suspect is the finance guy... the company accountant... the person who has easy, and typically unrestricted, access to the money.”

“No,” Nick immediately rejected the possibility. “It was Macie.”

“I don’t know who took the money,” Paige jumped in. “But, I’m nearly certain it wasn’t Macie Williams. With that in mind, who do you think might have done this?”

“Why?” Nick glanced back and forth between the two cops. “Why do you believe Macie didn’t do this? I mean, everything points to her. It seems obvious to me she did do it... that she’s the only one that could have done it.”

Paige studied the man carefully. He was conflicted and something just flickered in his eyes, something he wanted to hide, but he wasn’t quick enough. He turned his head abruptly and studied the window, but Paige caught it and she wouldn’t let it slide. “There’s something going on here, something everyone knows, but nobody will admit. This entire company is hiding something, and I need to know what it is.”

They all glanced up when Tony stepped into the room. “Now what’s going on?”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Paige motioned to a chair. “Have a seat. We need to discuss a few things and it’s better if we talk to both of you at the same time.”

“Did something else happen?” Tony settled into the chair next to his partner.

“Not exactly,” Paige glanced at Nick then focused on Tony. “Nick searched Macie’s office and found some travelers checks. He thought it was connected, so he called me.”

“You searched Macie’s office,” Tony glared at Nick, clearly angry but there was something else.

“I know you see that as a betrayal,” Nick turned to address his friend. “But it wasn’t. I just... we need this to end. We need answers and the longer this draws out, the more damage it’s doing — to us. To our friendship... to the business... I just needed to do something, I needed to find something that would put an end to all of this. I was hoping my search...”

“It’s okay,” Tony sat back, deflated. “I understand. I don’t believe Macie did this, but I understand. I’m trying to see things from your perspective. I’m trying, because I don’t want this to do permanent damage to what we’ve built — professionally, or personally. You’re my best friend, Nick. I don’t want that to change.”

“You can start by telling us what you’re hiding,” Paige took advantage of the silence.

“We’re not hiding anything,” Tony objected.

Pilfering Ambition

“We are,” Nick studied his hands. “Not on purpose, we just avoided it, I guess everyone avoided it.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony turned on Nick.

“Willa... and you,” Nick focused on Tony.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Tony insisted. “Don’t get started on that ridiculous theory again.”

“Before you joined us,” Havilland interjected. “Paige was explaining our position on this theft. Someone is trying to make us think Macie stole the money.”

“I keep telling you...” Tony stopped. “Wait, you said someone is trying to make you believe that’s what happened. You’ve realized I’m right, and Macie didn’t do this.”

“I don’t believe Macie took the missing funds,” Paige nodded. “You’re correct about that. So, who do you think would try to make it look like she did?”

“Nobody,” Tony frowned. “Nobody that works here. Byron was here, but how would he access the money? The systems are secure. That doesn’t make sense and even though we fired him, he understood. Plus, Nick helped him get another job... one that was more suited for him. I just can’t see him stealing from us.”

“Then why was he banned from the building?” Paige wondered.

“Because Byron sort of had a thing for Macie,” Nick provided before Tony could answer. “It wasn’t just the damaged equipment that got him fired. There were some comments and random gifts, stuff that made the environment in the office a little tense.”

“Macie made a complaint. For sexual harassment?” Haviland demanded.

“No,” Nick answered again. “Macie said she wanted to deal with it on her own. She never complained. We just saw the tension and the conflict it was causing, plus she had started dating Tony. It made things uncomfortable, so we used the damaged equipment to resolve the problem. It was serendipitous, I guess you could say.”

“I doubt Byron would agree,” Havilland grumbled.

“Actually,” Tony jumped in. “I think he would. Like I said, Nick helped him get a job with a friend of ours. He’s doing really well, and he’s not responsible for the equipment. It’s a better fit for everyone.”

“Then why was he here yesterday?” Paige sat back, curious about the answer.

Nick glanced at Tony. “We don’t know. I asked, but Willa she wouldn’t say.”

Pilfering Ambition

“I also asked, but Willa won’t talk to me about Byron, so I dropped it. I just told her he couldn’t visit her at the office. I know Macie said she could handle it, but I feel like it’s a liability. We both know there was a problem and I’m not comfortable having him here. I’d do the same for any of my employees. It has nothing to do with my relationship.”

“He would,” Nick agreed. “He absolutely would do that for any of our people. This isn’t about his girlfriend. I guess I agree with him, but it’s hard for me to take that hard line once I see Byron because I really like the kid. I also know it looks bad, him being here yesterday when I discovered everything, but I don’t believe he’s responsible.”

“Alright,” Paige decided to table that for now.

“Can I ask you something?” Tony focused on Paige.

“Sure.”

“Why are you so focused on who was in the building yesterday morning? I mean, sure that’s when Nick discovered the money was missing, but that’s not when it was actually stolen. Why does it matter?”

“Because I believe all the evidence that was planted in Macie’s office was done because Nick realized the money was missing. They didn’t plan on getting caught. They had a good thing going, why not continue?”

“I don’t understand,” Nick frowned and considered. “Anyone that works here had to know I’d realize the money was gone once I tried to tap the account for a new project.”

“That’s not the only money that was stolen,” Havilland said flatly. “That’s the other thing we need to speak to you about.”

“That’s not the only money?” Tony glanced around the room. “What else is gone?”

“I’ve been going over the records, the stuff you provided and the stuff you downloaded from the bank. So far, I’ve found over a hundred thousand dollars that’s been transferred into an untraceable, off-shore account.”

“What?” Nick jumped to his feet. “What account?” He focused on Tony. “This is worse than I thought. This is…”

“A crisis,” Tony nodded. “Which account is missing the funds? We have several, some of them we don’t really pay attention to because they’re emergency funds. Money we set aside in case of emergency, in case a project comes in that requires a lot of cash flow up front. We haven’t dealt with a project like that for over six months.”

Pilfering Ambition

“Since we completed the project for Manuva just south of Provo,” Nick agreed. “I haven’t looked at those accounts since then. In fact, we were so busy with that project, I didn’t do more than glance at that overflow account even then.”

“Me too,” Tony turned to look at Havilland. “Which account?”

“There are actually two,” Havilland pulled out his notes and rattled off the first account number and the bank.

“That’s the reserve account,” Tony ran his hands over his face. “We need to find a way to replenish whatever’s gone missing or our rating will suffer and we’ll be fined. We’ll need to make a call today; notify the authorities and hope they understand.”

“As soon as we’ve finished here,” Nick agreed.

“I’ve actually dealt with this sort of thing before,” Paige informed them. “I used to work for the FBI. Let me take care of that. There are some things I can do, people I can talk to that know me, I’m sure they’ll be willing to help. I think, with my help, you’ll avoid those penalties completely. Do you have any funds you can shift around and bring the account up to the required amount by the end of the week?”

“I’ll need to take a look, see how much we’re short and then do some fancy adjusting but I think we can make it happen,” Nick considered the dilemma and the consequences. There was no choice, they had to make it work.

“Then I’ll make a few calls once we’re done. Once you have the balance back where it needs to be, let me know and I’ll take care of the details,” Paige offered.

“You’d do that for us?” Nick asked, surprised.

“I will,” Paige nodded to Havilland.

Havilland listed off the second account number and the dates when the transfers occurred.

“That’s an even bigger problem,” Nick gripped his pen so hard; it broke in two. Ink splattered across the expensive table, but he ignored it.

Tony jumped to his feet and rushed to a small break area in the corner. He began yanking off paper towels and returned to clean up the mess.

“Stop it,” Nick grabbed them from him and began mopping up the mess. “That’s going to cause an enormous problem for us on the Moab project and John already approved it. We’re committed, there’s no way to pull out now. It was also the account I planned to rob to pay Paul and fix the problem with our reserve fund.”

Pilfering Ambition

“I know,” Tony settled back into his chair. “We’ll figure something out. The Moab job might just be a wash. I’ll talk to the bank, see about a small loan and when the job is complete, we use the proceeds to pay the money back. All of it, the stuff that was stolen and the temporary loan. We won’t make anything, but if we shuffle things around and watch our spending for the next while, we might be able to swing it. If we’re lucky, in a few months we’ll be able to get back on our feet.”

“I want you to find out who did this,” Nick seethed. “If you say it wasn’t Macie, I’ll trust you. But, I expect you to find the person responsible and charge them. I want them to rot in prison for the rest of their miserable life.”

“You do realize the person who did this... the one you say you want to rot in prison, they work for you — right now. The only way someone could have accomplished this, stolen this amount of money, is if they work here. If they have access to the funds and they knew which accounts to skim and go undetected,” Havilland warned.

“Then why take the money from the operating expense account?” Tony asked. “They had to know either Nick or I would find that in a matter of days.”

“Desperation maybe.” Havilland shrugged. “They wanted to set Macie up to take the fall, they got sloppy and arrogant, there are a thousand reasons. Only the person responsible knows why.”

“Deputy Havilland is going to proceed with that part of the investigation,” Paige informed them. “He may have more questions as he dives deeper into your accounts.”

“Call me with any questions,” Nick passed over his business card. “I have my cell phone on me at all times. I’m more involved with the financial aspects of the business while Tony is better at the wheeling and dealing. He gets the jobs and I fund them.”

“Alright,” Havilland took the card. “I have one question while we’re here and it’s on the table.”

“What’s the question,” Nick sighed heavily.

“I see a transaction roughly three weeks ago,” Havilland passed over the account summary. “It’s about a third of the way down the page, just under four thousand to Vicelane Incorporated, the code was TM18.”

“Right,” Nick found the entry. “Okay, that’s for tree trimming and removal on the Bellor job in Price.”

“Cutting down trees and removing the debris?” Havilland asked.

“Right,” Tony agreed.

Pilfering Ambition

“Now look about eight lines down,” Havilland instructed. “That entry looks like an exact duplicate to me. Is it the same job or a different site that just looks the same?”

Nick focused on the ledger for several seconds before he looked up. “It’s the same. This is a double expenditure but if we paid Dan twice, he would have called to make it right.”

“We didn’t pay him twice,” Tony said, studying Paige. “We have a bigger problem than we thought. How many double payments did you find?”

“Only a couple,” Havilland admitted. “But I wasn’t looking for that so once I dig deeper, I’m sure there will be more.”

“On the bright side,” Tony shook his head. “Those transactions are in the past. We’ve been losing money and didn’t know it, but at least we don’t have to come up with the cash to replace it right now.”

“The only person that could have done that,” Nick focused on Tony. “The only person who dealt with payments and reconciliation —”

“Was Willa,” Tony nodded.

“Which goes back to the question you still haven’t answered,” Paige pressed. “Nick said there was something between you and Willa. Did you date her, too?”

“No,” Tony sighed.

“He didn’t,” Nick insisted. “But for about a year now, maybe a little longer, I got the feeling she wanted to date him. She was infatuated, I guess.”

“That’s his theory,” Tony interjected. “I didn’t see it and I’m not sure he’s right.”

“I suspect he is,” Paige disagreed. “I also suspect the entire company knows it. When I did the interviews, there was something —”

“It was just below the surface,” Havilland added, “but it was there. Your employees know Willa has the hots for you, Tony. Everyone knows, except maybe you.”

“If you’re right,” Tony deflected, “how does that help? Does it tell you anything about the case?”

“It tells me she either wants to hurt you because you didn’t return her love,” Paige said cautiously. “Or, she just saw an easy mark and would have taken the money, anyway. She just framed Macie for it because she had something Willa wanted.”

“That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think?” Nick defended.

Pilfering Ambition

“What about you?” Havilland asked. “You seem to have a habit of jumping to Willa’s defense. Anything going on there?”

“No,” Nick said, clearly offended. “She’s just been reliable. I value her work and her commitment to the company.”

“Is she committed because she sees this place as the golden goose?” Paige asked.

“She’s committed because she’s a hard worker,” Nick insisted.

“Maybe,” Tony mumbled. “She is a hard worker, that’s true. But I also see your point. The harder she works, the better the machine functions and the more money we make. The more we make, the more opportunity there is to take it. I hope you’re wrong about Willa, I like her — as a person, not a girlfriend. But — I have always liked her. It’s going to be extremely disappointing if she’s the one that put us in this mess.”

“I think the only way to know for sure how much damage she’s cost us is to hire a forensic accountant to go over the books completely,” Nick decided. “If we do that, won’t it tip off Willa that we’re onto her?”

“I’d rather do that from my end,” Paige decided. “I have someone that I worked with at the FBI, in fact, I might bring in the feds on this one because of the wire fraud.”

“Wire fraud?” Tony asked.

“Wire transfers to the Caymans,” Havilland explained. “That’s federal. If we bring them in, they have experts that deal with this stuff.”

“Alright,” Nick agreed. “Do what you have to do. We need to sort this out. It’s the only way to stop the bleeding.”

“I agree,” Tony said, resigned.

“Is there anyone else that could have accessed the books?” Paige wondered. They were zeroing in on Willa, but she had to know if there were others that could have accomplished the fraud.

“No,” Nick glanced at Tony.

“Yes,” Tony disagreed. “Technically, either one of us could have managed it. We didn’t, but you have to check. I understand the need. I just hope you’ll do whatever you have to do to rule us out so you can focus on the real problem.”

“I will check,” Paige agreed. “But at this time, unless something changes, there’s no reason to believe either of you were involved. Unless there’s a complication or a conflict you haven’t revealed, the theft hurts your business. I’m not seeing a motive for either of you.”

Pilfering Ambition

“Is there a problem?” Havilland asked. “Are there strains in the relationship, personally or professionally, that might come into play?” He figured if one of these men were guilty, the other one would admit there was animosity between them.

“No,” Tony focused on Nick. “He’s my best friend, has been for years. I trust him with my life — and my business. It’s why we started this partnership in the first place.”

“If you’re thinking there’s resentment or — I don’t know, bitterness or hostility because he’s dating Macie, you couldn’t be further from the truth. I know I insisted she did this. It’s not because I have a problem with Macie. It’s because everything pointed to her. I believed the evidence. You say it was planted and I’m going to trust you. I hope you’re right, for Tony’s sake I hope you’re right. With the new information, I think you are and I’m sorry I doubted her.” He turned to face Tony. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” Tony put a hand on Nick’s shoulder. “Let’s just get through this and figure out how to stop it. We’ll figure out the rest later.”

“I’m going to contact an agent by the name of Sparrow,” Paige advised. “I’m telling you that in case he calls, you’ll know he’s working with us. Cooperate with him and give him anything he needs. One of us will contact you with the name of the forensic accountant that will audit the books. In the meantime, Willa needs to be kept in the dark. Can you do that? If she knows you suspect her, she might clean out a few accounts and go into hiding.”

“Would she do that?” Nick looked at Tony in surprise.

“I don’t know,” Tony admitted. “I never would have suspected she’d do this. How do we handle it? I mean, shouldn’t we restrict her access until you close your case? How do we make sure she doesn’t keep stealing?”

“Can you send her out of the office for a day or two?” Havilland asked. “You said you have a project in Moab. Can you send her down, make up a reason John needs her help, and give her limited access to credit cards? Then, you can shut things down up here so she can’t access the primary accounts. If she discovers it, claim there’s a computer glitch and you’ve called in IT but they’re backlogged and can’t get here for a day or two.”

“Or,” Paige considered. “Tell her they came and assessed the system and they had to order a part. You can say it’s being sent over night, but once it arrives the entire system will be down for a full day to do the repairs. Two days should cover it. I think a more thorough search by the accountant will take weeks, maybe months, but in a couple days we should be able to get what we need to charge her with the theft and the fraud. Once she’s behind bars, you can change passwords and usernames to lock her out permanently.”

“Alright,” Nick stared out the window. “Alright.”

Pilfering Ambition

“What if you’re wrong?” Tony asked. “I mean, for two days you’ve been investigating Macie. You were wrong about her, what if you’re wrong about Willa?”

“I haven’t been investigating Macie for two days,” Paige disagreed. “I knew almost immediately she had nothing to do with this.”

“But—” Tony began.

“She was on the list,” Paige continued. “Everyone was on the list. She was close to the bottom, but she couldn’t be ruled out completely. It was too clean, too obvious. Sheriff Walters knew she wasn’t the thief before he even left the building.”

“Macie told me about her interview,” Tony challenged. “You were hard on her. You made her believe you thought she did it.”

“I had to be hard on her,” Paige shrugged. “Someone went to a lot of trouble to plant evidence that implicated her. I had to know for sure the evidence was planted. I also needed to know if she planted the evidence herself, then pretended to be an innocent victim.”

“Do you have any idea how much stress and anxiety you caused an innocent woman?” Tony demanded. “It’s not right. It may have been a means to an end, but it’s not right. It will never be okay.”

Paige wasn’t going to apologize for her methods. They worked. They might not be popular, but they worked.

“You have a valid point,” Havilland stepped in. “We asked this before, but I’m going to ask again. Other than the two of you, is there anyone — anyone, in the company that could access those systems and steal money by double paying legitimate companies? They didn’t pay twice, they took the funds but made it look like they double paid the bills. Anyone besides Willa have that kind of power?”

“No,” Tony admitted. “No one but me, Nick and Willa. If we didn’t do this, and we didn’t, it had to be Willa.”

“Alright, we’ll be in touch,” Havilland stood and walked out of the room expecting Paige to follow.

Paige stood on the edge of the large piece of property and studied the nearly finished home. “It’s come a long way,” she turned to Zeus. “How do you feel about it?”

Pilfering Ambition

“It’s our dream home,” Zeus admitted. “I have to admit, I never thought I’d want something like this. I’ve been independent and care free my entire life. I don’t have family — other than the guys. I don’t consider myself a gypsy but more of a traveler. I never thought I’d land in any one place permanently. I drifted from place to place until I joined up. Even then, the army kept me moving. Once I graduated from bootcamp, I knew that’s where I belonged. I met Merlin, and he convinced me to do the time and focus on becoming a Ranger.”

“Merlin?” Paige wondered. She’d never heard anyone talk about Merlin.

“He was a mentor,” Zeus shrugged. “Early on. That man was a wizard, he could get anything, talk the bosses into anything. I think he had superpowers.”

“Sounds like a good friend to have,” Paige bumped his shoulder with hers. “What happened to him? You guys don’t talk about him.”

“They didn’t know him,” Zeus admitted. “That was a different time, a different life. He was a trainer, a good one. I met him in basic, but man did he know how to sift out guys like me. He approached me that first day, got me headed in the right direction, then took a step back and focused on someone new. He must be about a hundred now.”

“Do you know if he’s still alive?” Paige assumed he wasn’t really a hundred.

“Last I heard,” Zeus shrugged. “He retired, went to live with his daughter and her family. I’m not kidding, the man is ancient. Maybe not a hundred but early nineties at least.”

“Good living?” Paige realized Carmen and her mother were arguing again. “I wonder if they’ll ever agree on anything.”

Zeus sighed. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

They both looked up when Dax approached. “Zee, I need to show you something.” He reached out and took Paige’s hand. “It’s more comfortable on the back deck. You want to head down, take a look around?”

“I do,” Paige decided then laughed. “Sorry, Zeus. I think I just stole your line.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if we’ll make it that far,” Zeus admitted.

“What? Why?” Paige was shocked.

“Persha,” Zeus shrugged. “She’s — concerned.”

“She’s a control freak,” Dax corrected. “And — never mind. Don’t listen to her, Zee. You’re going to marry that woman. Look at her, not even her mother can stop her.”

“There is that,” Zeus said, clearly concerned.

Pilfering Ambition

Carmen joined them on the back deck just in time to hear Dax inform Zeus there was a problem with the windows. Some of them were the wrong size and wouldn't fit in the opening. "I give up." She dropped into a chair and closed her eyes.

"I wasn't finished, *ma chérie*," Persha settled into the chair next to Carmen.

"I was," Carmen answered without opening her eyes.

Persha glanced up, made sure Zeus was out of ear shot, and continued. "Where is the mirror I bought you? It was hanging right there, did that man of yours take it down already? I knew he was careless with your safety but—"

"No," Carmen sighed. "I took it down."

"You want the devil to come visit?" Persha spit three times on the back deck.

"That's gross mother," Carmen sat up. "I don't want your superstitions here. The devil hasn't stopped in for a visit, yet. And I've lived in the area for years. Don't spit on my floor and stop buying me mirrors."

"Wait," Paige grinned. "You lost me."

"She thinks she needs to hang a mirror outside my door to keep the devil from entering," Carmen explained.

"It's too late for you, I'm pretty sure you've already been corrupted," Paige joked.

Persha spun around and glared at Paige. "Don't mock me, *bon ami*."

"Sorry," Paige held up her hands. "Why a mirror?"

When Persha just continued to glare at Paige, Carmen answered. "It's a thing, in New Orleans. Legend has it that if you hang a mirror outside your door, it will protect you from the devil because he's so vain, he'll get distracted watching himself and leave you alone."

"Sounds like a simple solution to an otherwise dire situation," Paige barely held back the grin. She thought she pulled it off when Persha didn't scold her again, but Carmen rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Persha," Paige settled into one of the chairs. "Can I ask you something?"

"Alright."

"You are being awfully hard on Zeus all of a sudden," she chose her words carefully. "What happened? He's a great guy and there's not a man alive that will love Carmen more than Zee. What gives? Why the sudden attitude?"

Pilfering Ambition

Carmen sat up straighter and started to speak but Paige gave her a warning look. Persha needed to be honest and upfront with this. Paige would not back down.

“I don’t believe that concerns you,” Persha finally grumbled.

“You’re being unfair,” Paige challenged. “He doesn’t deserve that. He’s been nothing but kind to you. He’s accepted you completely, superstitions and all. Why can’t you do the same?”

“Paige,” Carmen warned.

“No,” Persha stopped her. “The girl has a point. She spent over two hours on the ride down singing that man’s praises. She must believe she had me convinced of his — worth.”

Dax and Zeus stepped onto the deck. Zeus turned to head back inside but Dax stopped him.

“I’m going to marry Zeus, mom,” Carmen spoke up. “There’s nothing you can say or do to change that. I brought you here because I wanted you to share my special day. Not so you could breeze into town and make the man I love feel inferior and unworthy. Not so you could try to change every little thing I want at my wedding. I’m tired,” Carmen glanced at Zeus. “At the moment, I’m seriously considering climbing into the car and fleeing to Vegas.”

Zeus shuffled his way around Dax and settled onto the lounge chair behind Carmen, pulling her into his arms.

“I won’t—” Persha began.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Dax moved forward and took Persha’s arm. “Please?” he added for effect.

“Oh, alright,” Persha let him guide her to the steps. “If you weren’t already taken, I’d talk my daughter into marrying you.”

“And that would be a mistake,” Dax countered without emotion. They continued to talk but the group could no longer hear them.

“Sorry about that,” Carmen immediately turned to Paige.

“Don’t apologize,” Paige took her hand. “If anyone was out of line, it was me. I just couldn’t sit there and let her blame Zeus for not diving head first into her quirky traditions and superstitions.”

“She knows it’s me, not you,” Carmen turned to face Zeus. “She’s just taking it out on you for some reason and I do not know why.”

Pilfering Ambition

“Because I’m taking away her daughter,” Zeus leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Carmen’s forehead. “She’s right, I don’t deserve you. She’s wrong about your safety. I’m not careless.”

“No,” Carmen laughed. “Your hypervigilant. You’re an overachiever when it comes to my protection and my safety. Don’t let her get to you. Once the ceremony is over, she’ll go home.”

“I want this to be special for you,” Zeus wrapped his arms around Carmen. “I want this to be fun and memorable.”

“Oh, it is,” Carmen said sarcastically.

“Not that way,” Zeus insisted. “And the constant trouble with the house isn’t helping. I have to call the contractor in the morning. Those windows won’t fit. I have no idea how he ordered the wrong ones but half of them are useless.”

“We’re not paying for them,” Carmen insisted. “I know we can afford it, but we’re not paying for their mistake.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Zeus evaded.

They continued to talk wedding plans, flowers and construction for the next twenty minutes.

“Where are we going?” Persha finally asked.

“There’s a bench just up ahead,” Dax assured her.

“Whatever you have to say, you can say it now,” Persha nearly tripped over a branch but Dax caught her.

“We’re here,” Dax pointed to a beautiful white bench that was obviously new. It was, he made himself and gave it to Zeus as a house warming gift.

“Alright,” Persha settled onto the bench. “Get it off your chest.”

“Paige is my soulmate,” he began. “She’s the best part of me. She understands me in a way nobody else ever has.”

“I can see you are matched well,” Persha agreed.

Pilfering Ambition

“My mother didn’t see that,” Dax confided. “She flew out for our wedding, and she blamed Paige for our strained relationship. She knew Paige had nothing to do with the situation. We’d drifted apart years before I ever met Paige. Still —”

“You think I blame Zeus for taking my daughter away from me?”

“Don’t you?” Dax challenged. “You’re critical of everything he does. You say you want to get to know him, but you push him away, blame him for the tiniest thing that goes wrong, condemn him without justification. He’s a good man. The best man I know and he’s perfect for your daughter. I don’t know what’s going on, why you’re doing everything in your power to undermine their relationship, but it’s not going to work. And in the end, just like me, Carmen is going to be relieved when you finally go home. And she’s going to resent everything you did to spoil her wedding.”

“I’m not —”

“You are,” Dax disagreed. “Trust me. I love my parents. I love my mom. But, I can’t easily forgive the way she treated Paige. We were already going through a tough time and my mom made things worse. She did it on purpose and it hurt Paige. I can handle the trouble and the disagreements between me and my parents. I won’t tolerate anyone mistreating the woman I love. Carmen is a lot like me in that way. You’re hurting her. If there’s a specific reason, something Zee has done to cause you concern, talk to me about it. He’s my best friend. I think I can help you understand him and assure you he’s not only perfect for Carman, but nobody will love or protect her more.”

Persha looked out over the hill for several seconds before she spoke. “I like Zeus, although I’m not fond of the nickname.”

“That makes two of us,” Dax grinned.

“I have noticed you selected your own,” Persha smiled back. “I can also admit, a blind gypsy could see how much he loves my Carmen.”

“But?”

“I don’t know,” Persha sighed. “I think — maybe, he wasn’t what I expected. Your Paige spent two full hours talking up the man that did the impossible. He talked my girl into marrying him. I was resigned, knowing she’d never trust a man enough to give him a chance. Then, suddenly she’s getting married, and Paige is relaying stories of sacrifice and courage. I showed up believing he could leap tall buildings and save the world from destruction.”

“And then you got here and saw that Zeus is just a man,” Dax nodded. “A good man, but a flawed man because he’s human. We all are. You, me, Zee, and even Paige. We’re mortal creatures and that comes with faults, weaknesses, and imperfections.”

Pilfering Ambition

“Well,” Persha frowned. “It sounds stupid when you put it that way.”

“It’s certainly illogical,” Dax agreed. “You have a week to finalize the details before the wedding. Carmen picked out a dress I hear she loves. She ordered the flowers she wants, and she designed an amazing cake. Let her enjoy the time she has left. Give her a week of love and acceptance. Take that week for yourself as well. Zee loves your daughter, Persha. He’d give his life to protect her. Look at that amazing house up on that hill. That is Carmen’s dream and Zee is working hard to make that perfect for the woman he loves. Give him credit for that and let the rest go. You have the power to make this time special or difficult. It’s my hope, you’ll make it special.” He stood and held out a hand.

“Thank you,” Persha took it. “Paige wasn’t afraid to challenge me, but her direct and confrontational approach was only making things worse. She’s lucky to have you. Sometimes the gentle, persuasive approach is better.”

“We’re lucky to have each other,” Dax gripped her elbow and turned her toward the house. “Carmen and Zee — they’re just as lucky. If you start to worry, remember that.”

“Can I ask you something?” Persha hesitated.

“Anything,” Dax waited patiently for the question.

Persha stopped and turned to face him. “I know this is going to sound tacky. I know it’s not appropriate to ask, but does Zeus know Carmen’s wealthy? I’m looking at that house and it has to be expensive. It’s Carmen’s dream, but every day there are complications, delays and added expenditures.”

Dax studied the woman in surprise. He didn’t know Carmen was wealthy.

“I can see I surprised you,” Persha continued to watch and wait.

“Carmen,” Dax considered. He wasn’t sure how to explain the situation to her without explaining. “Let me shift gears. I can’t speak to Carmen and her financial situation because I know nothing about it. I can speak for Zee. He’s not marrying Carmen for her money if that’s what you’re worried about. Our business is flourishing. Zee has his own money and while I don’t know what you mean by wealthy, I can tell you it doesn’t matter. In fact, some might say Zee has his own wealth. Does that help?”

“It does,” Persha started walking again. “Carmen won’t touch her inheritance. I think she’s worried her no-good father will find out she’s finally tapped into the money, and he’ll show up at her door with his hand out.”

“Did it come from his family?”

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“No,” Persha laughed. “My grandfather followed his dreams and invested well. His dreams were profitable. I inherited more than I could ever use. The same goes for Carmen. When I’m gone, her account will grow substantially. I need to know that’s not the reason Zeus is marrying her.”

“It’s not,” Dax said without hesitation. “Like I said, he has his own money and we’re making more. The business is growing and we’re in demand. What they have, what they share, it has nothing to do with money. It’s real, Persha. If you can’t trust me, you can’t trust Paige or Zee, then trust your daughter.”

“I’m going to try,” Persha decided. “And for now, I’m going to do everything in my power to make this the best wedding in the history of Manti.”

They rejoined the group and spent a relaxing evening enjoying the cool night air under a bright backdrop of vibrant stars.

“Deputy Carter,” Paige answered her desk phone without looking at the display.

“We’ve got her,” Agent Sparrow said triumphantly.

“Explain,” Paige sat back and waited.

“Our lab found a print on the inside of the bag,” Sparrow began. “We’ll match that to Willa once we process her.”

“You hope,” Paige warned.

“I know,” Sparrow disagreed. “Because I have a handy little video illustrating one Willa Hill purchasing that bag two weeks before you discovered it in Macie Williams office.”

“Seriously?” Paige grinned. “What else? I know you and there’s more.”

“I brought Teflon in on this,” Sparrow admitted. “And I don’t want to hear it. He’s good and your secret weapon was busy picking out flowers and table settings.”

“What did he find?” Paige understood. Teflon was difficult to work with. He got his name because nothing was ever his fault. He spent more time deflecting blame onto others than he’d exert if he just took responsibility. But that was her issue and Trent didn’t seem to have the same problem with the computer expert. She wondered if the problem was amplified because of her relationship with Carmen.

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“Tef tracked the money,” Sparrow said triumphantly. “All the money. Willa Hill took just over a quarter of a million paying false bills. Then there were the other funds, the hundred thousand Frick or Frack —”

“Nick and Tony,” Paige corrected.

“Right,” Sparrow laughed. “Nick discovered the missing money and your guy, Haviland identified just over a hundred thousand from the two accounts. There was money taken from every account that company had. Combined, what I have so far, there was a little over four hundred thousand and change.”

“Seriously? Paige was surprised by the amount.

“The owners said Willa started working for them about four years ago.”

“Right,” Paige knew that already.

“It looks like she only waited a month or so before she started double payments. When nobody noticed, she took more risks. She was skimming anywhere from three to six thousand every month. You’d think someone would notice.”

“I think they trusted her and thought those were just business expenses,” Paige was a little surprised she’d gotten away with something that obvious for so long. “Did she transfer the money that got her caught all at once, or a little at a time?”

“Both,” Sparrow sifted through his documents until he found the one he wanted. “She started small, same as the double billings. Then, she got arrogant. She took forty thousand at one time, which is why Nick Scott noticed it when he wanted to use those funds.”

“How much does she have left?”

“That’s the crazy part,” Sparrow admitted. “She spent some, I mean nearly half a million had to be burning a hole in her pocket. She bought a vacation home on the beach in Texas and went on a few online shopping sprees. Then, she took a trip up north and bought the Gucci bag at a store called The Lady Bag in Salt Lake. That same day, she dropped in for a new set of luggage at Louis Vuitton. Other than that, she just let it sit in that off-shore account.”

“Any chance you can seize it and return it to the rightful owners?” Paige knew that was exactly what Sparrow planned to do.

“There are hoops, but I’m jumping through them,” Sparrow assured her. “You busy or can you join me for a little take down?”

“I don’t think she knows we’re onto her,” Paige hoped Willa was still in the dark. “I doubt you need my help to apprehend the feisty brunette.”

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“Naw,” Sparrow joked. “But I thought you could do the honors while I give the gorgeous blonde-haired, blue-eyed manager the good news.”

“She’s clearly taken,” Paige laughed. “Tony will throw you out himself if you hit on his girlfriend.”

“You know me,” Sparrow joked. “Taken is the best kind. I’m not buying, it’s just fun to window shop.”

“I’ll meet you there in ten,” Paige decided it was time to end that conversation for the sake of both of them.

“Good news?” Havilland asked when she hung up the phone.

“Great news,” Paige retrieved her gun and slid it back into her holster. “Sparrow has enough for an arrest. We’re heading over to cuff the arrogant Willa Hill. You’re welcome to join us.”

“That’s okay,” Havilland shifted away from his computer to focus on Paige. “I caught one this morning. Something that can’t wait. You can give me the highlights when you get back.”

“I doubt there will be any highlights,” Paige admitted. “We’ll have her cuffed and in the back of the car before she even knows what hit her.”

“Best kind,” Havilland turned back to his computer.

Paige and Agent Sparrow stepped into the elegant foyer of deMojo and glanced around.

“I don’t see her,” Sparrow took a step forward. “You know which office is hers?”

“It’s down the hall,” Paige pointed to the right. Just then, Nick and Tony emerged from an office and headed toward them.

“Is it... do you—” Nick began.

“Give me a minute,” Paige stepped into Willa’s office, moved around the desk and yanked Willa to her feet. The cuffs were on before Willa realized what was happening.

“Pretty anticlimactic,” Nick said, relieved.

“What’s going on?” Willa demanded. “Get those cuffs off me.”

“Willa Hill,” Sparrow began. “You’re under arrest. You have the right to remain silent....”

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Paige watched her colleague escort Willa from the room. “Do you have any questions before we leave?”

“Does this mean you proved Willa was the one that took the money?” Tony asked.

“We have,” Paige softened. She could see this was hard for both of them. They trusted the accountant, and that trust had been betrayed. “Agent Sparrow will go over the details after we interview Willa. I think you’ll be surprised at what he found. I know this is hard, but there is good news. Willa didn’t spend everything she took. There was money left. The FBI seized it and they’re working through the red tape, trying to recover the funds so they can return it to you. It’s going to take some time, but I can promise you will get at least some of your money back.”

“That is good news,” Nick glanced at Tony. “If we can recover at least a little of it, we might break even. We might save the company after all.”

“I’ll let Sparrow explain the details, but I’m pretty sure you’ll be happy with the news,” Paige turned to leave. “I assume you’ll break the news to Macie. Tell her to call if she has questions. I need to get out there, we’re headed back to my office to interview Willa.”

“Will you be able to tell us what she says?” Nick wondered.

“I’ll tell you what I can,” Paige agreed. “But she may not talk. Unfortunately, we may never know why she did what she did.”

“But you can still charge her, right?” Tony asked. “If she doesn’t talk, that doesn’t matter. You have enough to convict her, anyway?”

“We have enough,” Paige assured him. “Go talk to Macie and relax. This is nearly over.”

“Willa Hill,” Sparrow sat back in his chair. He was in the conference room with his suspect and Paige, hoping the more casual setting would encourage her to talk. “I read you your rights. Are you willing to talk to us at this time?”

Willa swallowed hard. “I don’t understand. Why am I here?”

“You’ve been arrested,” Paige leaned forward. “We know you are the one that stole the money. Then you planted the clues in Macie’s office to make it look like she took the funds.”

“That’s not true,” Willa insisted. “It was Macie. I never trusted her. I know Tony thinks she walks on water, but she’s deceitful and...” she looked away briefly, composed herself and turned back to Paige. “She’s devious and manipulative. If she said I took that money, you can’t believe her. She lies.”

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“Macie didn’t say you took the money, although I think she suspected you from the start,” Paige sat back. “I said you took the money. I’m not sure if he had a chance to introduce himself. This is Agent Sparrow. He works for the FBI. He also says you took the money. He traced it, with a little help from a computer geek we know. They tracked those funds from the deMojo account to — where did it go next?”

“Denver,” Sparrow provided. “Then to London, then Sydney, then it landed conveniently into another account opened in the Cayman Islands. An account that belongs to Willa Hill.”

“I—” she sputtered, then swallowed.

“We caught you, Willa,” Paige added. “Now we’re giving you a chance to explain.”

“Tony asked me to take the money,” Willa blurted. “It was his idea. He said we could run away together. He’s tired of sixteen-hour days, never having time to travel the world. He wanted to skim a little off the top. He earned it, he’s the one that keeps that business running. He just wanted some spending money. We set it aside, like a retirement account that we could use while we were young. I don’t think that’s stealing. I mean, the money belonged to Tony. I think he can move it if he wants.”

“Nice try,” Sparrow pushed a sheet of paper in front of her. “That’s called fraud, Ms. Hill. You embezzled money from your own company. Nick Scott and Tony Clarke, they trusted you. They hired you, gave you access to everything, and you betrayed them. Tony didn’t tell you to disguise those transactions as payments to their clients and vendors. Tony didn’t approve the movement of those funds overseas, did he?”

“He —” Willa glanced at Paige then down at her hands. “I don’t know.”

“Willa,” Paige sat forward again. “Tell us what happened. If Tony asked you to do this, we can help.”

“He did,” Willa looked up. “He said he loved me. He said we could use the money to live the life we both deserved, together.”

“What about Macie?” Sparrow asked.

“It was his idea to blame her,” Willa said, clearly getting into her lie now. “He told me he was tired of her. He said he wanted to break up, but he knew that would cause problems at the company. But, if she was blamed for the missing money, she’d have to quit... or she’d be arrested. Either way, she’d be out of the picture for good. Once she was gone, we could bring our relationship out in the open.”

“I want to shift gears for a minute,” Paige said, disgusted with the road this interview was going. “The day Nick discovered the money missing, you had a visitor.”

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“Yeah,” Willa nodded. “Byron.”

“Why was he there?” Paige asked. “I asked you that before, but you refused to tell me.”

“He said he knew what I was doing,” Willa admitted. “He said he knew about the money and he was going to tell Nick if I didn’t come clean. He said I had two days to return the money and make arrangements to repay it.”

“How did he find out?” Paige wondered.

“His stupid cousin,” Willa grumbled, then glanced up at Sparrow and tried to recover. “Tony said I could use some of the money to buy me one of those Gucci bags. I had the best time shopping and picking it out. Then, when I went up to pay for it, I realized Bryon’s cousin was the one working the checkout. I had met her a couple months before that, at one of the job sites. Anyway, she recognized me, and she must have told Byron about the bag.”

“So, he knew you bought an expensive bag, but how did he know you were taking money from deMojo?” Sparrow pushed.

“He said he followed me,” Willa admitted. “He said he was watching, and he knew I went to the bank and deposited cash into my account. He said he knew it was petty cash from the office and he was going to report me. He was going to tell Nick I was taking money from the slush fund and putting it into my own bank account.”

Paige smiled; they didn’t know about that. What else had she done that they didn’t discover yet? The forensic accountant would find it. They’d sort it all out and come up with a concrete figure.

“So, you were arguing with Byron the day Nick discovered the missing money?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” Willa nodded. “Then, Nick came into the office and saw Byron. He told him he needed to leave. Byron just looked at me, in a scary way, like he was warning me, then he left. Nick said how there was money missing and I knew it was time. I had to make it look like Macie took the money Tony gave me... like he said. It was time to make Macie leave so Tony and I could have the life we wanted.”

“So, you went into her office and you put some of the money in her desk drawer?” Paige asked.

“First, I typed up the information and printed it out,” Willa admitted. “I slid the account information and the login stuff into the drawer on her desk, and I thought it would be even better if I put the bag in her filing cabinet. I hated to do that, I loved that bag, but it was causing

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problems with Byron, and it was better if you thought Macie bought it. I knew you'd take it as evidence and then Byron could tell Nick I bought it."

"And the travelers checks?" Sparrow asked.

"I put those in the office that night, after everyone left. I had them for the trip, you know for when Tony decided he could take some time off. I thought we could use them for drinks or dinner or something when we went to Cabo."

"Did Tony tell you he was taking you to Cabo?" Paige asked. "Be specific. Did he say I want to go to Cabo next month?"

"Well, no," Willa glanced around then looked at her hands again. "He said he wanted to go on a trip. He said once Macie was out of the way, we could start slow. You know, so the people we work with wouldn't know about the relationship. Then, once everyone accepted us as a couple, we'd start traveling."

"When did this relationship begin?" Paige asked in challenge.

"Um," Willa's eyes darted around the room like she was searching for the answer. "A few months ago, I guess. We were close before that. Before he started to date Macie. We were close, but then he asked her out and she seduced him. He couldn't reject her... it would cause problems in the office."

"Uh-huh," Paige was done with this. Willa had answered her only questions. She just wanted to find out if Byron was in on it. He wasn't, in fact, he was pressuring her to do the right thing. "How much money did you take?"

"Um... I don't know," Willa shrugged. "Tony would know, he's the one that asked me to move it."

"If this was all Tony's idea," Sparrow glanced at Paige. "Why isn't his name on the account?"

"What?" Willa's head jerked up, and she looked at Sparrow then looked away.

"Why did Tony ask you to open an account in the Cayman's... for the two of you, then he made sure you were the only one that could access the funds?"

"Uh..." Willa looked at the wall. "I don't know."

"I think I'm finished here," Sparrow decided. "Paige, do you have anything further?"

"Nope," Paige stood and left the room.

"What does that mean," Willa demanded.

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“It means you’re under arrest,” Sparrow advised.

Paige grinned when she heard Willa scream she wanted a lawyer. *Too late, missy. You should have thought of that before you tried to con us.*

“You were right,” Persha told Carmen, blinking back the moisture that was forming in her eyes. “You are so beautiful. That dress is perfect.”

“I think the cream is much better on you than white with your complexion,” Sophie Porter smiled. “I brought my mother’s pearls,” she moved forward to wrap them around Carmen’s neck. “Something borrowed.”

“And I have something blue,” Persha pulled out a long, slim box. It was burgundy and fragile. “The box is old, so is the bracelet, but it was my mother’s and I want you to have it.” She lifted the lid to reveal an elegant bracelet covered in diamonds and sapphires.

“Mom, I can’t,” Carmen protested.

“You must,” Persha held firm. “It’s tradition.”

“You and your traditions,” Carmen wiped away a tear once her mom had the delicate and clearly expensive heirloom attached to her wrist.

Persha smiled and pulled her daughter in for a hug. “I am so proud of you my little butterfly. Now we must go. You have a wonderful man waiting downstairs. Now is not the time to be late, his feet might get cold.”

“Not Zeus,” Paige handed Carmen her bouquet of yellow roses and white lilies, then reached for the door. “He’s waiting patiently with bells on.”

“More like a chain that Dax can pull if he gets out of line,” Sophie laughed.

“The chain is metaphoric,” Paige smiled. “But just as effective.”

Once they reached the foyer, Dax moved forward and held out an arm. The music began to play, and he slowly walked her down the aisle.

“I think I like this,” Dax leaned in and pressed a kiss to her temple. “You look beautiful,” he whispered. When he glanced up, he caught Zeus’ eye. “He looks a little sick. Tell me I didn’t look like I was about to hurl my lunch on our wedding day.”

Paige giggled, then elbowed her husband. “Stop it. He looks happy.”

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“He is happy,” Dax assured her. Once they reached the front of the room, Paige stepped to one side and Dax moved in next to his friend. “Last chance,” he whispered. “I’ll create a diversion if you want to run.”

“No more than you did,” Zeus whispered back. The music changed and Nathan and Carmen stepped through the door. The entire room went silent, all eyes were on Carmen. All except Dax and Paige.

They locked eyes and shared an intimate moment of nostalgia — each of them knowing what the other was thinking. The love they shared in that moment, was priceless. It was a love that had grown over time, and it was so much stronger now than it had been back then.

Paige smiled and realized most of the people she invited to her wedding were now here for Carmen. Her family was Carmen’s family. Sure there were a few fresh faces and others were missing, but the important ones; Nathan and Sophie, Hawk, Wooly, Vato, Thor, and even Jeeves had made it. Jericho brought Harper, and they were sitting with Gage, Havilland, and Dean. Everyone was here. Everyone except Sean Wilkens. A feeling of disappointment and worry suddenly took over, she just hoped her friend was okay.

Then Dax winked which pulled her back, away from the concern and the fear, and helped her focus on her friend. Today was a day to celebrate. She’d worry about Sean tomorrow.

Dax turned and watched Carmen glide up the center of the room. Her eyes were locked on Zeus, the same way Paige had focused on him — just the way it should be. That’s when he knew he was right. Zee and Carmen were perfect for each other, the same way Paige was perfect for him.