

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Precious Treasures* *Season 6, Episode 5*

---

*by:*

*Melanie P. Smith*

**Copyright © 2021 Melanie P. Smith**

First Edition | Series: Paige Carter  
Edited by LaPriel Dye

\* \* \*

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

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

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



MPSmith Publishing

## Precious Treasures

---

“As you may know, the Smithsonian Institute comprises seventeen museums and galleries. You are currently touring the most popular exhibit — the Museum of Natural History. Inside, you will find some of the most famous artifacts in the world. From ancient fossils to treasured gems like the Hope diamond, there is something for everyone. Contained within this large dome are millions of specimens and natural artifacts...”

Sophie Porter stood at the back of the group, only half listening to the same speech she'd heard about a hundred times before. She understood the need for consistency, especially here at the Smithsonian, but to her it was nothing more than white noise that was more monotonous than educational.

“If you will follow me down this hallway and to the right, we'll be entering the Bone Hall,” Dustin, another volunteer, continued. Sophie did her best to block out her colleague and focused on the tour group. She always enjoyed people watching, and today was no different. It was interesting to see how the energized group of teens dealt with a stoic elderly couple and how the tired-looking mother of three interacted with the young flirtatious newlyweds. They were both oblivious to how their public displays of affection were impacting the rest of the group. *Oh, to be young and in love again*, Sophie mused.

She took this job years ago, when Nathan was out of town more than he was home. She was beginning to wonder if it was time to hang up her hat. She didn't enjoy it as much as she used to; and, by the end of the day, her feet and her back ached. Some days she stumbled into the house so exhausted she could barely walk. She hated to admit it, but the signs were there — she was getting too old to do this much longer. Cutting back to half a day helped, but even that was exhausting.

It was nearly an hour later, when Sophie followed the tour group through a heavy steel door that led to the gem and mineral room. This part she did enjoy; and, in her heart, she knew she always would. It was fun to watch each of the faces as they took in the priceless sparkling stones. The Hope Diamond was the most popular by far, but Sophie's favorite was The Hall Sapphire Necklace. She was drawn to it the very first time she saw it. Probably because the brilliant blue sapphires reminded her of Nathan's deep blue eyes.

It was designed by Henry Winston and contained 36 large sapphires accented by 435 brilliantly cut diamonds. She knew the history by heart; well, to be honest, she was a total Smithsonian gem geek. She knew the story behind most of the jewels inside this room, but she'd devoured the information she found on the Hall necklace. She loved the story behind the elegant jewel and could relay it in detail — so much detail, she often bored her fellow volunteers talking about it and she knew she'd never tire of seeing it.

Sophie glanced up when Dustin moved in next to her. “Another one down,” he glanced around the room. “I'm beat. Thank goodness we only have one tour today. Instead of an hour for

## Precious Treasures

---

lunch, I have the entire afternoon to spend with my family. I know that's normal for you, but for me, it's a rare treat. Anyway, are you coming back tomorrow to do this all again?"

Sophie shook her head and grinned. "I'll be lounging on the beach tomorrow. I think Tanya is on. I'm sure she'll keep you entertained."

"Good for you," Dustin sighed when a small group broke off and returned to the display case that contained the Hope Diamond. "Will the Mighty General be joining you?"

"He is, yes," Sophie thought of her husband again. It was so rare for him to have a few days off — especially now, with Agent Wilkins on a dangerous mission in Iraq. They needed this trip; they needed a few days alone together. She couldn't wait to spend a weekend lounging in the sun, catching up with her husband. She couldn't wait to relax on the open patio with the breeze flowing through her hair and the smell of saltwater wafting around her. Maybe she'd talk Nathan into a long walk on their private beach — at sunset. She smiled, thinking of the cool sand sliding between her toes, waves splashing all around them, water lightly dusting her ankles. Yes, she definitely needed this vacation.

"I think I lost you," Dustin laughed. "It looks like the last of the stragglers just left, but let's do a quick walkthrough to make sure."

"Right," Sophie visited with her colleague as they methodically searched the room, paused to lock up, then headed toward the employee lounge to retrieve their things. They were so focused on their conversation, neither one of them noticed the man loitering in the corner. They were so relieved to have the tour completed, they also missed it when he pushed off the wall and followed them down the hallway. The instant they disappeared through the door; the man casually headed for the exit.

"Alright," Dustin turned to Sophie. "This is where I leave you. I'm parked around the corner. Don't feel too guilty, knowing you left all the rest of us back here working away, entertaining the masses, while you lounge in the sun and build sandcastles."

Sophie laughed. "You are great at entertainment." She watched him walk away before she turned and headed for her own car.

Dustin got almost all the way to his vehicle before he realized he left his nephew's birthday present in the employee lounge. He was silently scolding himself for being so forgetful when he rounded the corner and spotted a strange man forcing Sophie into a vehicle. He froze, not sure what to do. That's when Sophie glanced back and spotted him. Her look was filled with fear, panic, and an urgent sense of desperation. He was about to call out to her when the man gave her a forceful shove. Sophie stumbled and fell against the silver Camry.

Dustin yanked out his phone and began filming just in time to catch the man shoving Sophie into the back seat. He straightened, slammed the back door, and jumped into the

## Precious Treasures

---

passenger's seat. Dustin rushed forward and continued to film the car as it sped away. He tried to focus on the license plate but wasn't entirely sure he captured it. He didn't stop until the vehicle disappeared — swallowed by the thick afternoon traffic. He hoped he captured the plate, but he wasn't sure. At least he got a clear shot of the man's face. He turned and rushed to his car; his nephews present completely forgotten. He had to find Nathan Porter.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Pentagon was always tightly secured, but today it seemed ultra-restrictive. There were more security guards than usual, each double-checking credentials before granting entrance. Dustin had been here before, too many times to count. His uncle was a general in the marine corps and was stationed at the Pentagon for years before he finally hung up his hat and move to Florida. Dustin knew he'd have to convince the guard at the visitor's entrance to grant him access — and that wouldn't be easy. He watched as two men were rejected and escorted to the doors. Chances were high he'd fail too, but he had to try. If they kicked him out, he'd come up with another solution — maybe call the local police. He probably should have done that already; but, he knew for a fact, getting the information to Nathan Porter was Sophie's best chance at being rescued.

Dustin took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves as he approached the armed guard. "Sir?"

"The visitor line is to the left," the guard said in dismissal.

"I know," Dustin handed the guard his Smithsonian ID badge. "I've been here before, probably more than most — at least, more than anyone that doesn't work here. My Uncle Martin, he gave me the grand tour a few years back. He was a general stationed in this building."

"Your uncle was a general?" the guard asked skeptically. "What's his name?"

"Martin," Dustin repeated. "Martin Hancock."

"Brigadier general," the guard corrected.

"What?" Dustin asked, confused.

"Martin Hancock was a Brigadier general, not a general."

"Right, only one star," Dustin mumbled under his breath. "Anyway, I need to get in touch with General Nathan Porter," Dustin insisted. "I know he's here today, and it's an emergency."

"If he's expecting you," the guard was now focused and alert. "Your name will be on the list. You'll need to get in line with the rest of that group over there. That's where you'll be issued

## Precious Treasures

---

a visitor pass and a guard will be standing by to escort you up.” He pointed to the back of the line and turned to address the man standing behind Dustin.

“I’m not on the list,” Dustin began.

“Then, despite your connection to the Brigadier general, I’m afraid I can’t help you. You can try the line if you want. They might be willing to call up, see if General Porter’s staff will talk to you without an appointment. I can’t make any promises, but you can try,” the guard motioned to the side of the room.

“Sophie Porter,” Dustin blurted before he got thrown out — or arrested. “General Porter’s wife, she’s been abducted.”

“Are you threatening General Porter’s wife?” The guard grabbed Dustin and pushed him up against the nearest wall. “Are you even related to Martin Hancock?”

“I’m not threatening Nathan, or Sophie,” Dustin exclaimed. “I saw a strange man grab her and shove her into a car when we were leaving the Smithsonian. We work together — me and Sophie, not the man who took her. I need to get this information to General Porter immediately. You’re wasting valuable time. Can you please just call him and tell him what I said, what I saw? He knows me. He’ll know I’m telling you the truth.”

The guard grabbed Dustin’s arm and escorted him toward a door, subtly motioning for another guard to take up his position. Once they were inside the room, the guard silently watched Dustin. “Talk.”

“I assume you’re looking for an explanation,” Dustin finally said. “Here, this is better.” He pulled out his phone, found the video and hit play, then handed the device to the guard.

“This better be legit,” the guard warned. He picked up the phone and punched several buttons.

Dustin watched, realizing he hadn’t pressed enough numbers to make a call, so he must be dialing an internal extension. At least he wasn’t calling the police.

“Sir,” the guard cleared his throat. “I know this is a bad time, but there seems to be a situation involving Nathan Porter’s wife. I need to speak with him right away.” He continued to explain what he saw and gave Dustin’s information from his identification badge. “He says he’s the nephew of retired Brigadier General Martin Hancock. Yes, sir. I’ll hang tight.” He hung up and turned to Dustin. “Last chance to come clean,” he warned. “If this is some kind of trick to get inside...”

“It’s not,” Dustin interrupted.

The guard looked like he was about to speak, then snatched up the ringing phone.

## Precious Treasures

---

\*\*\*\*\*

Major Derek Calder hung up the phone and just stared at the closed door. They were not going to like this. With a sigh, he pressed the button, signaling there was an emergency. It only took a few seconds for the door to fly open. Mike Harris, the Secretary of Defense, filled the opening — visibly annoyed at the interruption.

“This better be an emergency,” he barked.

“I believe it is,” Derek motioned to the retired general still seated at the large conference table. “There’s a Dustin Hancock downstairs. He claims someone has kidnapped Sophie Porter and apparently he has video.”

“Nathan,” Harris turned to address his friend. “I’m cutting this meeting short. Trent, you’re excused. We need the room.” He turned back to Derek. “Where is this man? Where is Dustin Hanson?”

“Hancock, Dustin Hancock. He’s downstairs,” Derek glanced at Porter, then continued. “He was intercepted at the main entrance and escorted into the security office.”

“Come on in and get him on the line.” Harris turned and gave a quick shake of his head when Porter moved to stand.

“He’s ready.” Derek hit a button on the phone. “You’re on speaker with myself, Retired General Nathan Porter, and Defense Secretary Mike Harris.”

“General Porter,” Dustin called out. “Sir, it’s Dustin Hancock. I need to speak to you at once. I know security is tight for a reason, but Sophie has been taken. I haven’t called the police. I knew you’d be more effective, but maybe I should have just...”

“What do you mean Sophie was taken?” Porter stood and glared at the phone.

“We finished our shift and walked out to the parking lot together. She was in the north lot; I was around the corner to the east. We split off to head home, but I forgot a present I bought for my nephew. I was on my way back to the lounge when I rounded the corner and saw a strange man shoving Sophie into his car. He then jumped into the passenger’s seat and the vehicle sped away. I think there was another man waiting inside the car — a driver, but I couldn’t get a good look at him.”

“But you can describe the first man?” Nathan asked. “The one that pushed her into the car. You have a good description of him?”

## Precious Treasures

---

“I can do better than that,” Dustin said with confidence. “I have video and I was able to get a clear shot of the guy. The car is also pretty clear, but the plate’s a little fuzzy. I’m sorry, but it’s the best I could do from my location.”

“Bring him up,” Porter turned to Derek. “Now! I need to see that video.”

“Yes, sir.” Derek left the room. The second he was outside the door; he was back on the phone calling Saul. “Hey, it’s Derek again. Bring this Dustin guy up, take him to the secure elevator and get him and that video into conference room Charlie, stat.”

Nathan watched the video, then watched it again. A maniac had abducted Sophie. So many horrific scenarios kept running through his mind. Who was that man and what did he want with Sophie? She was innocent, naïve, and good — everyone loved her. So, who abducted her? And what were they going to do with her — or to her? She was strong in her own way, but she was too... honorable to fight back. She didn’t have it in her to be ruthless, not the way she would need to if she was going to survive this situation.

Sophie was his moral compass and had been since the day he met her. Now she was gone — her life was in the hands of a couple of lunatics. Was this retaliation for something he’d done? That was a rabbit hole he’d never get through in time. He’d participated, in one form or another, in too many operations — too many missions — to count. Any of them could have left enemies, unknown casualties who carried a grudge and spent years plotting their revenge. He was going to need help and there was only one group he trusted — only a handful of people he could depend on to get the woman he loved back home safely. And two of them were miles away, in Utah. Two were on their honeymoon. He’d have to make do. He’d need to figure out a way through this without his brilliant tech guru and her husband. Too bad, he kind of liked the idea of Travis Boudin blowing up Sophie’s kidnappers. He pulled out his phone and dialed Paige.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Paige,” Jericho called from his doorway, “I need you in my office before another call comes in that pulls you away.”

“What’s up?” Paige asked, dropping into one of the visitor’s chairs. She hoped this wouldn’t take long. She was starving and still had at least an hour before lunch.

“I talked to Steve this morning,” he began.

“And you told him you made a monumentally boneheaded mistake and you’ve decided to call off the dogs. I hope you were direct, clear, and concise. Please tell me you ordered him to stop looking into Harper’s background because you realized asking a friend to investigate your girlfriend is nuts and will only lead to heartache and pain for everyone involved.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“No,” Jericho silently glared at her. “He finished that investigation weeks ago. He wanted to update me on the Stan Donaldson situation.”

“You are playing with fire,” Paige pushed.

“Drop it,” Jericho warned. “What’s done can’t be undone. Like I said, I received that report weeks ago.”

“And let me guess,” Paige settled into her chair. “He couldn’t find anything. Harper is so squeaky clean it makes the neighbor’s dog whine whenever she walks by.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Jericho sighed. “Steve found very little on Donaldson. There’s nothing recent, which explains how he passed Tolman’s screening.”

“There’s something that’s not recent?” Paige frowned.

“There’s the situation Wilkens found, the sealed record.” Jericho shuffled through documents until he found what he was looking for. “Stan was involved in an armed robbery before he turned eighteen.”

Paige straightened. “Seriously?”

“It looks like he was just the getaway driver,” Jericho advised. “Here’s the file,” he passed the stapled section across the desk.

Paige reached out to take the documents, then frowned when Nathan’s familiar ringtone played from her pocket. “It’s not like him to call this early. I need to get this.”

“Go ahead,” Jericho motioned for her to answer the call.

“Nathan?” Paige greeted.

“I need you,” Nathan choked out. “Sophie’s been kidnapped.”

“What, when?” Paige jumped to her feet. “Do you know who took her? Have they made contact — did they demand a ransom or anything?”

“No ransom,” Nathan choked out. “Not yet.”

Paige inhaled, if they didn’t want ransom... she couldn’t go there. Not now. “What about the FBI? Are they involved?”

“I’m told they’re working on it,” Nathan said without emotion. “I need you — and Dax. I know...”

“We’ll get there as soon as we can,” Paige promised. Once she clicked off, she dropped back into the chair and just sat there in shock. Sophie — was kidnapped. She must be terrified.



## Precious Treasures

---

“Paige?” Jericho moved from behind his desk and settled into the chair next to her. “Who did they abduct?”

“Sophie,” she whispered. “I —”

“Take whatever time you need,” he interrupted. “Get to Washington and call if you need anything.” He studied her and realized she was in shock. He reached out, gave her knee a quick pat, then moved back to his desk. After another glance at Paige, he reached for the phone.

“Hamilton,” Dax held up a hand, a silent signal for his men to quiet down.

“Paige needs you,” Jericho said in greeting. “My office, now. Sophie Porter’s been kidnapped.”

Dax slammed down the phone and jumped to his feet.

“Dax?” Hawk followed him out the door. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” Dax flung open the door to his truck. “Jericho said Sophie was abducted. Paige needs me. I’ll call once I have the details.”

“I’ll get Ken on it,” Hawk decided. “You’ll be in Washington before you know it. Don’t worry.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Dax stepped into Jericho’s office and pulled up short. Paige was sitting in one of the large visitor chairs and she was white as a ghost. Her eyes were glazed over, and she was just staring at the large window behind Jericho’s desk. He swallowed hard, then moved forward. He crouched down and took her hands in his. “Paige?”

“Dax?” Paige whispered; her eyes still glued to the window.

“Baby,” Dax glanced at Jericho. “Paige, honey, look at me.”

Her eyes shifted, and she focused on him instead of the window.

“We need to go.” Dax held out his hand. “Wooly’s making the arrangements — he’s finding a flight to Washington. We’ll find Sophie, we will. Between Nathan’s power and your skills, Sophie couldn’t be in better hands. Come on, we still have to pack.”

Paige nodded, stood, and leaned into him. “I don’t think I can do this again.” They were nearly at the door when she remembered Jericho.

## Precious Treasures

---

“Call if you need anything, kid.” He stood, walked to the door, and pulled her into a hug. “Go rescue Sophie Porter. She needs you and so does that obstinate husband of hers. We’ll finish our discussion when you get back.” He turned to Dax. “Take care of her.”

“You know I will,” Dax nodded, placed a supportive hand on the small of her back, and guided Paige out the door. They were nearly home when his phone rang. “Tell me you found a flight out tonight.”

“Better,” Hawk replied. “Ken found a private jet that’s already at Ephraim airport. How soon can you get that wife of yours to pack? The owners in a rush and needs to leave immediately.”

“I’m just pulling into the drive,” Dax informed him. “Give us ten. We’ll be ready.” He disconnected and turned to Paige. “We need to hurry. Wooly got us a private flight, but the owner is eager to get in the air. Just grab what you think you need. We can buy anything we missed once we arrive.”

“Alright.” They entered the house and headed upstairs. Paige stepped to the closet and pulled out a couple of leather travel bags. She silently set them on the bed and moved to the dresser.

Dax moved up behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and pulled her against him. “Just breathe. We’ll get through this — together.”

Paige turned and burrowed in, accepting the love and strength he was offering. “I’m so scared. What if I can’t find her in time? Last time —”

“Last time was different,” Dax tightened his hold. “I’m sorry I put you through that, but you found me. We will find Sophie. Now, hurry. Get packed. Wooly’s on his way — or Hawk. I’m not sure which one.”

When the vehicle arrived, it was both Wooly and Hawk. Paige and Dax locked up their house and climbed into the back seat.

“Do you really think a simple shuttle required two of you?” Dax clicked in his seatbelt, then reached for Paige’s hand.

“You didn’t tell him?” Ken glanced at Hawk.

“Tell me what?” Dax demanded.

“Hawk arranged three seats, not two,” Ken informed them.

“I’m coming with you,” Hawk insisted. “Don’t argue, it’s not up for debate.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“I’ll hold down the fort here at home,” Wooly assured him. “I can work better here, anyway. I’d come, if I thought I could help, but here, at the training center, I’ve got all the space I need and fewer interruptions. Plus, I’ve got Vato. You call, tell us what you need, and I’ll arrange it.”

“Sounds like you’ve figured it all out.” Dax was grateful he had such great friends.

Twenty minutes later, they were on Kyle Brewers' private jet waiting for word they’d been cleared for takeoff. Paige was sitting in a lounge chair, staring out the window. Dax and Hawk were leaning over a laptop, skimming through the intel Nathan sent while they waited.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sophie rubbed her temple and felt the sticky wet liquid on her fingertips. She knew it was risky to push these men, but she wouldn’t go down without a fight. Nathan would come for her. If she could just hold out long enough, Nathan would find her, and he’d rescue her. Until then, she’d do everything in her power to fight back and make her husband proud. She just hoped the men who abducted her didn’t do too much damage. Otherwise, Nathan would probably kill them and ask questions later.

Sophie smiled at that, then pressed her palms to the cold concrete floor and forced her body into a sitting position. Her head throbbed and pain exploded from behind her eyes. She braced her feet and pushed her weight backwards until her body collided with the cinder block wall. She sat there, trying to hold back the nausea, grateful the guy only hit her once. One blow was severe enough, but his thick ring had sliced across her eyebrow, leaving a huge gash just above her eyebrow. Blood ran down her face and seeped into her eye, making it impossible to see where they were. The second man had yanked her from the back of the vehicle and the two of them flanked her and escorted her into this cold, dimly lit room. The only light inside was the sunlight that seeped in through the tiny window near the corner of the room. It was worse than a prison. At least in prison you got a cot and a working toilet. She glanced at the five-gallon bucket they’d placed in the corner.

Nope, she wasn’t desperate enough to use that thing yet. Eventually, she’d have to, but she was going to hold out until it was absolutely necessary. She knew it was too much to hope for, that Nathan would find her before she had to degrade herself that way, but hope was all she had, and she was going to hold on to it until the very last second. She closed her eyes and let the tears fall. She knew Nathan would find her — she believed that with every fiber of her being. She didn’t know what she’d have to endure before her avenging angel arrived, and that thought terrified her more than anything.

## Precious Treasures

---

\*\*\*\*\*

“Tomorrow,” Zeus called from the deluxe bathroom. “Let’s spend the morning on the beach. There’s snorkel gear in the closet and we haven’t had any downtime since we arrived.”

“Alright,” Carmen said absently as she surfed through channels on the big screen. When she saw the ‘Breaking News’ banner, she stopped and sat up straighter. “No!” she exclaimed, covering her mouth with her hand.

“What’s wrong?” Zeus rushed into the room.

“Sophie,” Carmen pointed to the TV.

“What?” he lowered himself onto the bed and stared in shock. They weren’t giving names, but he could clearly see a strange man shoving Sophie Porter into the backseat of an old, but clean silver Camry.

“Authorities have not released the identity of the missing woman, but sources say she was a volunteer tour guide at the Smithsonian. Anyone who thinks they may have witnessed this incident, or if you recognize the man in this video, please contact the FBI immediately.” A number started scrolling across the bottom of the screen.

“I know we still have two more days,” Carmen turned away from the television to focus on Zeus. “Would you hate me if I wanted to go back? I need to help—”

Zeus reached out and pressed a finger to Carmen’s lips. “I was about to ask the same thing. Nathan, Sophie — they’re family. And Dax and Paige need us. You pack, I’ll call Wooly.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Nathan,” Dax said in relief when Porter answered the phone. His first call had gone to voicemail almost immediately. “We’ll be setting down in about ten. Wooly came through with a car. It should be waiting at the airport. Paige wants to head over to the Smithsonian first thing. She needs to see exactly where Sophie was taken, and she wants to get a visual before it gets dark. She also needs access to the rest of the footage... from the cameras. Is there someone that can meet us over there? Someone with the authority to get her what she needs?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Nathan assured him. “I’ll meet you at the security office as soon as I can.”

Twenty minutes later, Dax pulled to the curb and shut off the engine. They climbed from the vehicle and just stood on the sidewalk, surveying the ground where Sophie had been taken.

## Precious Treasures

---

Paige glanced up when a tall man dressed in a navy suit and a red pin striped tie exited the front door of the Smithsonian and headed their way.

When he reached them, he held out a hand in greeting. “Lt. Tony Lancaster. I assume you’re General Porter’s family.”

“Dax Hamilton,” he took his hand. “And this is my wife, Paige.”

Hawk stepped forward. “Blaze Hawthorne, but most people call me Hawk.”

“I’m told you’d like to check out the security room. If you’ll follow me, I’ll lead the way,” Lancaster told them.

“You said lieutenant,” Paige observed. “I guess that means you don’t work for the Bureau.”

“No,” Lancaster frowned.

“Are you assigned to this case?” Dax wondered.

“Good question,” Tony glanced at Paige, then focused on Dax. “It’s complicated. Mainly because of Nathan. Mrs. Porter was kidnapped — the wife of a powerful general with a lot of classified knowledge. The FBI inserted themselves into the investigation immediately. In fact, they stepped in and declared they’d be handling the case completely. Unfortunately, the crime occurred at the Smithsonian. They’re a quasi-federal building, but they have their own police force. That dilutes jurisdiction enough, but then you have to factor me in. I’m a lieutenant with the Metropolitan Police here in DC. I’m involved because it’s possible Sophie’s abduction is just an abduction. It may not be connected to General Porter, or his top-secret pentagon work.

If that’s the case, jurisdiction would fall to the locals, not the feds. Plus, technically, it didn’t happen on Smithsonian property. It occurred on a public road that is policed by Metro. It makes this case even more complex and difficult. I’m here because I’ve interacted with Porter in the past, and he trusts me. When you asked for assistance, he requested me. I’m coordinating between agencies; I suppose you could say — and representing the locals as needed. We’ve all agreed to take a step back and let the FBI do their thing, as long as they include us in the process. However, the Special Agent overseeing the case has made it clear he doesn’t appreciate or want my help. Or anyone else’s, for that matter. It’s still a work in progress.”

“Who is it? The agent in charge of the case, I mean,” Paige wondered.

“SSA Gray,” Lancaster tried to keep a neutral expression on his face.

“That’s Super Special Agent Gray to you,” Hawk grinned.

“Very Super Special Agent — with honors,” Dax added.

## Precious Treasures

---

“I see you’ve met,” Lancaster smiled and pulled an indistinguishable door open, motioning for them to enter.

“He will not like our involvement,” Paige warned. “I know Nathan isn’t himself, so he might have neglected to warn you about our history. Gray will do everything in his power to make us all go away.”

“He won’t succeed,” Lancaster shrugged. “Porter has far more power in this town than some fed nobody’s heard of — present company excluded.”

“True enough,” Hawk agreed.

“Nathan wants you on this case — you’re on the case.” Lancaster turned to address a middle-aged man sitting in the dimly lit room. “Larry, our guests have arrived. I trust you’ll help them in any way you can.”

“Yes, sir,” Larry motioned to a chair beside him. “Porter said you wanted to look at the feed, maybe go back further than the original footage we sent over to the Pentagon. Tell me what you need and let’s get started.”

Paige settled in next to him. She pulled out a notepad, found the correct monitor, and provided the time stamp where she wanted to begin.

The group watched as Larry skimmed to the location Paige indicated.

“We were able to get the plate off the vehicle,” Lancaster said absently as they watched. “It was a dead-end, stolen from Georgetown University three days ago. The owner is a student who rarely drives the car, so she didn’t even notice it was gone.”

“Stop,” Paige shifted to get a closer look. “We watched this part at least a dozen times on the plane. I need to know where that man is coming from. Do you have another view... another camera? One that captures that side of the building?”

“No,” Larry answered in regret. “We set up the system for security. They focused most of the cameras on the doors and windows. You know —”

“To catch a thief,” Paige nodded. “I understand. So, there’s nothing that will help over there on that side of the complex?”

“We have another camera that will get a partial image and then we have one in the back to capture anyone entering or leaving from that area.”

“Can we take a look?” Paige moved closer and squinted at the screen.

## Precious Treasures

---

“Absolutely,” Larry agreed. He began punching buttons and within seconds the angle Paige requested was on the largest screen in the center of the room. They all watched as a portion of the suspect came into view.

“Where did he come from?” Paige wondered aloud. “It has to be him; there’s no way two people wore that same hideous shirt.”

Hawk moved forward. “Can you bring up the feed for that same time for this camera over here?” he pointed to the edge of the screen.

“There he is,” Dax declared, and Larry paused the video. “Same ugly shirt, but we still can’t see his face.”

“He looks like he came from the front door,” Paige frowned. “Can you pull up the video from the front entrance and go back about five minutes?”

“Right,” Larry transferred the front door video to the large screen and pulled up the requested time.

“Gotcha,” Hawk grinned. “Now see if we can follow him. What did he do inside the museum, where did he go? Is that possible? Just rewind the footage and follow him in reverse.”

“Sure,” Larry hit a slow rewind, and they watched the suspect until he rounded a corner.

“Where does that hall go?” Paige asked.

Larry frowned. “The employee lounge.”

“Where Dustin said he and Sophie stopped to retrieve their personal belongings before leaving,” Dax added.

“Right,” Paige considered. “Keep following him. I want to know where he picked up their trail.”

The group continued to watch the video in reverse as the suspect backed all the way to the gem exhibit. They followed his movements as he pushed off the wall, wandered aimlessly around the museum and finally left the building through a side entrance.

“What’s over there?” Hawk demanded. “Do you have a camera? There could be a good shot of the driver. If the footage is decent, we may be able to enhance it enough to see what the driver looks like. Might be enough to run it through the system.”

“That side of the building is covered,” Larry told them, a hint of excitement in his voice. “Let me just—” Within seconds, Larry had a new camera view displayed on the large screen. “Okay, here we go. That’s our guy backing out of the doorway.”

## Precious Treasures

---

The group watched as the man in an ugly shirt, baggy jeans, and black boots leaned against the brick wall and ground out a cigarette.

“Let me go back a little more and then we can hit play and watch it the right way,” Larry suggested. “We might catch more if it’s moving forward rather than reverse.”

“Good idea,” Dax watched as Larry rewound the video in triple speed. He stopped when a silver Camry slowly turned into the parking area of the museum.

“That’s our stolen,” Tony moved closer. The vehicle sped up the long drive then came to an abrupt stop directly in front of the entrance — and the camera.

“That’s the suspect casually sliding out of the passenger side, as if he didn’t have a care in the world,” Hawk observed.

“And that’s our driver,” Paige smiled. “Stop the tape, can we get a snapshot of that? I’d like to send it to law enforcement first, see if anyone can identify him?”

“We don’t need to,” Tony was frowning. “It’s Oliver Barnam and he should have at least another year before he’s even eligible for parole.”

“Frequent flyer?” Paige glanced at him.

“Yeah,” Tony sighed. “The poster boy for frequent flyers everywhere. Burglary mostly, although he did up his game on that last hit — Agg assault. He tried to beat his accomplice with an expensive butter knife — his mistake was using one of the silver utensils from the set he stole. Sterling silver, extremely rare, belonged to some ancient Scottish Lord or something. He was looking at time for the burglary, but destroying the rare silver made it a felony. Then, add the additional time for the attack on his buddy and he was looking at several years. Stupid pandemic. Those guys are letting the dregs of society out early with no kind of screening. It’s impossible to keep up with whose still in and who got released — for their own health and safety, of course.”

“Of course,” Dax grinned. “I hate to point out the obvious—”

“But kidnapping Nathan Porter’s wife is extremely hazardous to that man’s health and safety. I can almost guarantee he’ll end up six feet under by the time we’re done. Not exactly what I would call healthy.” Hawk laughed. “Maybe someone should report that to the prison officials and the politicians. The reward for their so-called compassion just might be a pine box.”

“I wouldn’t say that too loud,” Tony objected and motioned to the monitors. “Looks like your Super Special Agent and his entourage just arrived.”

“And Nathan,” Paige jumped up and headed for the door. She’d only taken two steps when the heavy metal barrier flung open, and Nathan filled the doorway.



## Precious Treasures

---

Paige continued across the room and wrapped her arms around the man she thought of as a second father. She held on a little longer than usual when she felt his shoulders relax and heard the relieved sigh before he tighten his grip. “We’re going to find her,” she promised. “And I just found my first lead. Let’s get out of here before Gray finds us.”

Nathan stepped back and watched Paige leave the room. He turned and was surprised when Dax wrapped an arm around one shoulder and Hawk flanked him on the other side.

“Hey, old man,” Dax said softly. “I know you’re worried, but don’t underestimate Paige. She’s already found something everyone else missed. And your buddy Tony just identified the driver.”

“You did?” Nathan turned to focus on the lieutenant.

“I did,” Tony motioned down the hall. “I think Paige is on her way to retrieve that cigarette butt the passenger was smoking before he entered the building. I’ll secure it, take it to our lab and see if we can identify our second culprit as well.”

“I’ll take it to the FBI lab,” Nathan objected. “They’ll be faster.”

“I disagree,” Tony locked eyes with Nathan. “And you can’t go near that evidence. You know that, Nathan. Once we catch them, any involvement from you — the grieving husband, who is always a suspect — would compromise everything you touched.”

“I—” Nathan started.

“He’s right,” Paige said casually over her shoulder. “You’re not going near my evidence General. Don’t argue because you know you won’t win. I’ll package it, turn it over to the locals, and we can move on to the next lead. Time is our enemy — you know that — we can’t stop to deal with the details ourselves. We need to keep moving, processing, brainstorming, and acting on anything we uncover.” She glanced at Dax. “It’s imperative that we find Sophie as soon as possible, and that means we don’t stop, we don’t hesitate, and we don’t impede the case managers. In this case, I consider Tony the case manager. We drop off what we find, let Lt. Lancaster process it, and we continue to move forward.”

“Alright,” Nathan knew she was right. “I brought you in because I don’t underestimate you. If anyone can find Sophie, it’s you.”

“It’s us,” Paige suddenly stopped, crouched, and pulled a pair of tweezers out of her small bag. She passed a plastic evidence bag to Tony, dropped in the cigarette butt, and straightened. “Alright,” she glanced over Nathan’s shoulder and sighed. “Get that to your lab,” she told Tony. “If you hurry, he might not realize you were here.”

## Precious Treasures

---

Tony followed her gaze, shoved the evidence bag into his pocket and turned to leave. He stopped when Special Agent Gray called his name. With a shrug he turned back and casually waited.

“I thought I was clear when we spoke earlier,” Gray said in greeting. “While we appreciate your willingness to help, the Bureau has plenty of resources and manpower devoted to this investigation. I’ll be sure to call you if we need you, but until then—”

“I called him,” Nathan stepped forward. “And, while I’m fully aware of the manpower and resources the FBI has to offer, I will request help from whomever, whenever, I please.”

Gray turned to Nathan and sighed. His face was puckered, lines of impatience and fury webbed out from his eyes and disappeared behind his hairline. “I’ve already shared my feelings with you regarding Paige Carter and her motley band of militants.” He glanced from Paige to Dax and finally rested on Hawk. “While you hid that from me until it was too late to stop them from coming here altogether, I will not tolerate your interference. This is my investigation, Porter.”

“General Porter,” Nathan corrected. “And, as my wife is the one that is missing, I’ll call in Paige, the highly trained, former military commander she’s married to, and any other member of his Special Forces unit I deem necessary. I will also use every friend, every contact, and every man within a hundred miles that owes me a favor if I think they can help resolve this quicker. The goal is to get my wife home safely. The goal is not for you to swoop in, take credit for our efforts; and use me, or my wife and our crisis, to get fifteen minutes of fame.”

“You know,” Hawk whispered so only Dax could hear. “You’d think that man would learn from past mistakes. Apparently, you’d be wrong. Will he ever realize, you do not stand in the way of Nathan Porter. Not if you want to live to tell the tale.”

“He’ll live,” Dax whispered back, grinning. “I’m not sure about his career, though. That might suffer a quick, but painful, death if he doesn’t take a giant step back. Pushing Nathan on a good day is not a wise move. Doing it today, when he’s wound tight, on the verge of exploding — not smart.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Tony pivoted slightly to address Nathan. “Clearly, you’re in excellent hands here and I should get back to the office. I have a pressing matter I need to attend to.”

SSA Gray smiled, believing he just won that battle.

Paige shook her head and tried to ignore her former boss. “I’d like to see your headquarters now,” she told Nathan. “I guess we’ll just try to follow you over.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“I have a better idea,” Nathan turned to the two agents standing behind Gray. “Agent Alders, can you drive that loaner vehicle back to the Pentagon? I’d like these three to ride with me.”

“Absolutely,” Jett Alders said in relief.

“Let’s head back,” Nathan took Paige’s arm and started for the parking lot. Dax and Hawk followed. Once they were situated inside the car, Nathan turned to Paige. “He’s going to be a problem.” They all looked at Gray, who was still standing in the same spot, glaring at the vehicle, his face red, eyes bulging in anger.

“Uh-huh,” Paige agreed. “But he’s going to be your problem. I need you to keep him out of my way.”

“What do you know about the others?” Hawk wondered. “The two agents he has with him.”

“The one on the right is Special Agent Waylon Ficknell,” Paige studied the trio. “He’s a company man through and through. You won’t be able to reason with him and don’t trust him. He’ll follow Grays orders blindly and he’ll get in our way, undermine our investigation, and turn anything he finds over to the boss. Don’t get me wrong, he’s not a bad guy. He’s just loyal to the Bureau and doesn’t question that loyalty.”

“Good to know,” Hawk continued to watch as the three agents slowly made their way toward the parking lot.

“And do you know the other one?” Dax wondered.

“Special Agent Jett Alders,” Paige smiled. “He’s solid and you can trust him. Rumor has it, he was transferred to Grays unit because he’s made a name for himself. The powers that be wanted him in Virginia so they could watch him in action. It’s kind of a trial run for bigger and better things down the road.”

“And will he share intel with Gray?” Nathan focused on Paige. “We need someone on this team that we can trust. Someone that will help us, not hinder what you and the dynamic duo are trying to accomplish.”

“I trust him,” Paige said without hesitation. “I’ve worked with Jett, in the past, before I resigned to head back home. He’s solid and he’ll understand the big picture. If we need something from the FBI, I have no problem taking it to Jett.”

Dax reached out and linked his hand with hers. She was holding up, but he could see all of this was taking a toll. Both Paige and Nathan were going to be off their game on this one. He’d just have to make sure he stepped in and filled the gap.

## Precious Treasures

---

“Then let’s get back to Command and see what we can dig up on this Oliver Barnam character,” Nathan decided.

“Because we need to find him so I, in coordination with the other law enforcement members involved, can arrest him — without incident,” Paige glared at Nathan in warning. “And you’re going to take a step back and let us do our job.” She was giving the good general an order, and everyone knew it. No vigilante tactics from Nathan or the men.

“Sure,” Nathan smiled when he saw Dax and Hawk out of the corner of his eye. They were doing their best to hide their own grin. The boys knew him too well, so did Paige for that matter. It was the reason for the demand. He wouldn’t order anyone to kill Sophie’s kidnappers. He’d let Paige do her job and only step in if necessary. But he wouldn’t lose any sleep if both of those men ended up dead because of their own stupidity. In fact, he hoped that would be the ultimate result, but knew he might be disappointed. If so, life in prison would have to do. He just needed Sophie to come home safe and sound. He could accept any outcome as long as she was unharmed — to a point.

\*\*\*\*\*

“You slackers got anything to eat?” Zeus asked as he stepped into the room. “After a harrowing flight in a tiny bird, a slightly less traumatic jaunt in a Cessna, and two connecting flights, I need a shower and a hot meal.”

“What are you two doing here?” Paige jumped up and darted across the room pulling Carmen into a big hug.

“Sorry the whole marriage thing didn’t work out for you, man,” Hawk strolled across the room, grabbed Zeus’ hand, and pulled him for a quick man-hug. He grinned and winked at Carmen. “I always knew the amazing tech wizard was too good for you. Tough though, having to cut the honeymoon short because your bride realized you’re a loser. I suppose, not even a stress-free vacation in paradise could hide all the flaws.”

“We had to come,” Carmen ignored Hawk, walked to Nathan, and pulled him in for a long, tight hug. “I found something I need to show you guys. Can someone get me a computer? Mine died on the way over and the charger is hidden somewhere in our luggage. We packed in a hurry, just threw everything in and bolted.”

“I’ll have something sent up,” Nathan motioned to a man standing to the right of the door. After a brief conversation the stranger left, and Nathan turned to look at Zeus. “I was trying to figure out how I was... how we could get through this without you two. I told myself I couldn’t call; it was your honeymoon, and that’s sacred. I figured I’d just muddle through and find

## Precious Treasures

---

someone else to assist when needed. While I am grateful for your sacrifice, it's too much. I don't know how we'll ever be able to repay you. How did you even know?"

"We saw it on the news," Carmen dropped into the nearest chair. "They didn't identify Sophie, but the instant we saw her we knew."

Zeus dropped next to her. "And once we knew, we came. There was no question, no debate. We had an amazing honeymoon that was nearly over; we didn't sacrifice anything. You guys are family. This is what you do for family. It's really that simple."

Paige slid a laptop onto the table in front of Carmen. "Thank you, we all appreciate it, Nathan and Sophie will owe you an enormous debt for the rest of their lives. Now, what did you find?"

Nathan laughed. "Sorry, but Paige is right. Time is running out and we need to locate Sophie as soon as we can. I've ordered food, it should get here within the hour. If you brought a change of clothes, once you show us what you found, the two of you can head into the executive bathroom. There's a shower and some clean towels. There's usually soap in there as well and they mounted the shampoo bottle to the wall."

"Thanks," Zeus glanced at Dax. "Wooly came through for us, same as he did for you. That man's a miracle worker. We should send him and Jaimie on a cruise or something when we get home. He's earned it."

"I agree," Dax dropped into the chair next to him.

"Okay," Carmen jumped up, switched on a screen mounted to the wall then dropped back into her chair. "I've been going over the footage. You know, from the Smithsonian."

"We already did that," Paige interrupted. "The instant we arrived we went over and viewed everything they had from earlier today, from when our bad guys arrived."

"I went back further," Carmen advised.

"She means we went back several days," Zeus corrected. "And they cased the place. Show them, babe."

Carmen pulled up a video and hit play. It was immediately obvious she'd clipped out the footage she wanted and spliced it together to play one scene after the other. The video covered several days, and it was short but informative. "The vehicle isn't the same," Carmen advised.

"I bet that one is stolen, too," Paige decided. "Play it again."

The suspects were driving a white SUV, and they took turns walking the perimeter of the museum as they filmed the building and the employees.

## Precious Treasures

---

“How long?” Nathan asked. “What’s the date on that first run?”

“Two weeks,” Carmen told him. “I’m beginning to think this was a simple snatch and grab. They got in, located their target, and within a matter of minutes they did the grab and fled.”

“With the merchandise being my wife,” Nathan grumbled.

“Yes,” Paige patted his arm. “The question is why. From this, it doesn’t look like Sophie was a target — not at first. As I watch this, it’s obvious they’re spending a lot of time scouting out the place, maybe looking for an in. I know you’ve been worried about retaliation, Nathan. You didn’t say anything, but I know you. You’ve been operating under the assumption that you were the catalyst. Or, the kidnapping was because of one of those top-secret missions you ran. I’m not getting that feel, not from what we know so far.”

“What if they just want you to think that?” Nathan worried. “What if they’re trying to make this look like a simple burglary and abduction, when it’s really about me and something I took part in? I have my people going through the missions. They’ve started with the most recent and they’re moving backward, skimming through everything I’ve done the past several years. There are so many, getting through a single year takes hours.”

“Have them continue with that,” Paige gripped his hand. “I don’t think you’ll find anything. I really don’t think this was an attack on retired General Porter — or the United States. My gut is telling me, it’s a burglary. Maybe a jewel heist since he followed Sophie out of the mineral and gem room, but I’m not sure they even know who they kidnapped. If I’m right, we need to keep it that way. We need to keep Sophie’s connection to you a secret. If they realize who they abducted —” Paige was interrupted when the door swung open and Gray, Ficknell, and Alders strolled in.

“I need an update,” Gray announced as he settled into one of the chairs.

Paige gave Alders a friendly smile in greeting.

Jett rolled his eyes and lowered his enormous frame into the chair next to Hawk.

“Alright,” Nathan shrugged. “Zeus and Carmen have joined my task force. Effective immediately, they will be given access to everything. Oh, and I’ve ordered food. It should arrive any minute.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Jett turned to focus on Paige. “Miracles do still happen. Hallelujah!” He raised his arms in the air. “Don’t ask. I’m just going to say when my wife and I start having children, the first one is going to be named Nathan. I sincerely pray it’s a boy, but it truly doesn’t matter. Either way, the kids gonna be Nathan Alders.”

“In the spirit of saving your daughter from a lifetime of misery,” Nathan smiled, “I’m happy to feed you and compensation isn’t necessary.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“Enough,” Gray barked. “I need a word in private Mr. Porter.”

Dax and Hawk cringed. Paige and Jett laughed. Ficknell just looked confused.

Once Gray slammed the door behind them, Jett turned to Paige. “You planning on filling us in — on the developments? We’re all on the same team, here.”

“Carmen,” Paige motioned for her to show them the video. “Carmen and Zeus spent their travel time on the flight over putting this together. Once you see what she’s done, you can ask questions. Go ahead, Carmen, play it again.”

Once the video ended Jett focused on the vehicle still frozen on screen. “Did you run the plate?”

“Not yet but it’s on my list,” Paige sat back. “I’m betting it was stolen, just like the other one.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Jett offered. “Should only take a minute.” He pulled out his phone, called a number and made the request. “Your SUV was reported stolen a week ago, but clearly it went missing long before that.”

“Why the delay?” Ficknell asked.

“No idea,” Jett shrugged. “It’s a dead end. We can get the details later. I think we should set that aside for now and talk about the rest.”

“They were casing the place for weeks,” Ficknell announced. “The behavior fits with what we already know. They watched Mrs. Porter and acted the instant she was vulnerable.”

Jett studied the group. “I’d like your take, Paige. Since I know you, I’d be willing to bet it’s the same as mine. So, I’ll go first. Feel free to jump in any time. Those two men appear to be a couple of common criminals.”

“Before you go any further with that, there’s something else you need to know,” Paige glanced around the room and then focused on Alders. “Lt. Troy Lancaster, from Metro, identified the driver. He recognized him as a frequent burglar who should still be in prison but was released early.”

“You got a name?” Alder asked.

“Oliver Barnam,” Hawk started punching keys on his laptop and another large screen on the adjacent wall lit up, revealing Barnam’s rap sheet. “He was released around two months ago.”

“You think they snatched Sophie Porter for access?” Jett asked Paige. “If so, it’s possible they don’t even know who she is.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“I do,” Paige sat back. “And, if we’re right, keeping her identity a secret is essential. It’s extremely important they never discover Sophie’s connection to Nathan. As long as they believe she’s just some volunteer with access to an item they want, she might be safe.”

“Relatively safe,” Jett agreed. “But not for long.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Ficknell spoke up. “Everything points to retaliation against General Porter. All the evidence suggests this is an elaborate scheme to gain access to a powerful man by kidnapping his wife.”

“What evidence?” Dax demanded.

Ficknell glanced at Alder then looked away. “That’s classified.”

“Look you pencil-necked—” Hawk was interrupted when the door flew open and Nathan Porter and SSA Gray stepped back into the room.

“Don’t stop on our account,” Nathan motioned for Hawk to continue.

“This is supposed to be a joint operation,” Paige focused on Nathan. “I’d like to know what they retrieved at the scene. I walked the area, where the car was parked, they swept it clean. What did you find?”

“That’s —” Ficknell began.

“Classified,” Dax and Hawk said together. “We know. Here’s the problem. I’d be willing to bet our classification is higher than yours. We’ve been cooperating, without questioning your credentials, now it’s your turn to reciprocate.”

“Go ahead,” Gray settled into a chair. “I already told both of you, those dirt particles could have come from anywhere. We swept up the place out of an abundance of caution but it’s a dead end. One that doesn’t need further discussion.”

“Did you identify the particles?” Paige asked Alder.

“Not exactly,” Jett frowned. “Which is why I collected them for evaluation. There was something unusual in the mix. Something I couldn’t identify. It was mixed in with normal dirt and leaves but there was also some kind of clay and other minerals. We’ll have the report by morning.”

“That’s too long. I’d like to see it myself,” Paige requested. “Is there any way I can get a look at the sample you retrieved tonight?”

“No,” Gray said immediately.

“Yes,” Nathan countered.



## Precious Treasures

---

“While they hash that out,” Carmen glanced at Zeus, got a nod, and continued. She pulled up a map she’d been working on. “I traced the vehicle, through traffic cameras mostly, once they left the museum.”

“How did you do that without a warrant,” Gray demanded. “She hacked the system illegally, that’s how. Porter, this was the very reason I don’t want her involved.”

“I called Lt. Lancaster and asked,” Carmen advised. “We’ve worked together before, and I knew he’d be able to approve what I wanted.”

“Which is the very reason Troy should be involved, officially,” Porter glared at Gray. “And it’s the reason I’m calling him in tomorrow.”

“That’s not your decision,” Gray insisted. “I’ll consider it. Let’s break for now and pick this back up in the morning. I’m thinking zero eight hundred. I’ll have my decision by then.”

Zeus started to object but Nathan shook his head to stop him. “We’ll meet you at eight.”

Ficknell jumped to his feet and joined Gray at the door. He glanced back and realized Jett Alder was still seated at the table. “What are you doing?”

“I need to talk to Paige,” Jett carefully kept all emotion out of his voice. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Once the two men were long gone, Dax turned to Jett Alders. “We’re not leaving. We’re going to continue all night if we have to. We came here to rescue Sophie, and that’s what we’re going to do.”

“Don’t feel like you have to stay,” Paige offered. “I understand the politics of staying, and we won’t hold it against you.”

“I’m staying,” Alders sat back. “What’s our next move?”

“I’m not taking no for an answer,” Paige spoke up. “I want Lt. Tony Lancaster involved. I need him officially added to this task force. He has access to local systems and local knowledge that is invaluable. Gray can get what we need, but it’s going to take time. The video Carmen got, from the traffic cams, that would have required a warrant.”

“Lancaster just made a phone call, and I had what I needed in minutes,” Carmen added. “He’s a valuable asset and we should include him.”

“If I might,” Jett said hesitantly. “If you bring Lt. Lancaster in tonight, Gray will have to accept it. He’ll be livid, but he won’t be able to change it.”

“I can—” Paige began but stopped when Nathan’s phone rang.

## Precious Treasures

---

“Good timing,” Nathan smiled at Paige. “Wonder if he knew we were talking about him. I’ll let Troy know we’d like him to come in, after I find out why he’s calling. He must have found something to call this late.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Porter,” Troy greeted. “We’ve arrested your driver. It was almost too easy, the idiot.”

“How did you find him?” Nathan wondered, impressed at the quick apprehension.

“My guys have been scouring the area since I left you earlier, at the Smithsonian,” Troy admitted. “Once I dropped the evidence off at the lab, I headed up to speak with my crew. We’ve been checking all Barnams usual haunts and finally found him at a dive-bar he’s been known to frequent.”

“Where is he?” Nathan demanded. “I’d like my people to speak with him, if that’s possible.”

“I figured as much,” Lancaster admitted. “He’s been mirandized, and he’s waiting inside one of our interview rooms. He’s belligerent but hasn’t requested a lawyer — yet. I have no doubt that’s coming. He’s done this before; he knows how to play the game. How soon can you get here?”

“The drive should only take about ten minutes so give us fifteen,” Nathan decided.

“I’ll have someone at the door waiting,” Lancaster promised. “See you in fifteen.”

“What?” Paige demanded. “Who did they find?”

“Oliver Barnam,” Nathan admitted. “They transported him to an interrogation room, but Troy’s worried the window is very short. He’s familiar with the process and will probably demand a lawyer the instant anyone starts to question him.”

“Is Tony open to our involvement?” Alders asked.

“He is, yes,” Nathan nodded. “He might want to split it up, one of his guys and one of mine, but he’s open, and he’s waiting. Let’s go and we can hammer out the details once we get to the station.”

“You won’t need us,” Carmen spoke up. “Does anyone mind if we take a break to shower and change? We’ll also deal with the food and have it waiting once you return.”

“And just like that,” Jett sighed. “My dreams are dashed.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“I have an apple in my office,” Nathan offered. “I’m getting the distinct feeling Gray didn’t let you eat all day.”

“I’ll take the apple,” Alder agreed. “I have had nothing to eat since breakfast.”

“We’ll meet the rest of you at the car,” Nathan said to the room. “Carmen, you and Zeus stay and get settled. Special Agent Alders and I will be down shortly.”

“We’re working together,” Alders replied. “Can we drop the titles? I prefer you just call me Jett, or Alders. I’ll answer to either.”

“Let’s go,” Hawk stood. “Paige, when you negotiate with Lancaster, I need you to insist that he lets the rest of us watch the interrogation. I need to hear what he has to say. Transcripts take time and that’s something we don’t have.”

“I’d like to know why the guy was partying it up in a bar,” Dax added. “What did he do with Sophie?”

“I’m trying not to think about that,” Paige admitted. “What if—”

“She’s alive,” Dax took her hand. “And we’re going to find her.”

“It’s impossible for you to know that,” Paige headed for the door. “But I’m choosing to believe you. Until something changes to prove me wrong, I’m choosing to believe Sophie is still alive. Let’s go find out where she is.”

\*\*\*\*\*

A man in his forties, wearing khaki slacks, a crisp blue pin-striped shirt and a solid tie with tan and blue stripes greeted them at the door. “Follow me and I’ll take you up to the office.”

They were escorted up a large flight of stairs and into a foyer area. The man opened a secured door and motioned them forward. Once inside, Lt. Tony Lancaster emerged from an outer office.

“Come on back,” Lancaster led them down a long hallway. He turned into a conference room. “I’ve discussed this with my guys. My people know Barnam, and he knows them. I think we should start this out nice and friendly — just a couple familiar faces discussing the basics. I want to put a friendly face in the room with him to start the ball rolling.”

“You want my people to watch while your people handle the interview?” Nathan realized.

“To begin, yes,” Lancaster nodded. “Barnam has no idea why he’s here. He thinks we brought him in because he was causing trouble at the bar. I want to use that to our advantage. If

## Precious Treasures

---

you take in a federal agent, he's going to clam up immediately. If we bring in Paige, he's going to wonder why he's dealing with a stranger. I'd like to play this like a friendly conversation between Barnam and Detective Adam Kingsley. They know each other well."

"Can you give us a minute," Nathan asked the lieutenant.

"Sure," Lancaster shrugged. "Before I go, I'm going to say I know how hard this is for all of you. I'm not asking permission. I need to make that clear. We have video of that man driving a stolen vehicle, that crime is my responsibility."

"Two," Paige corrected.

"What?" Lancaster turned to her.

"Two stolen vehicles," Paige focused on him. "There's additional footage going back two weeks. They used a different stolen SUV to case the place before they took that next step and abducted Sophie."

"I think there's a lot I don't know," Lancaster hesitated.

"We need to watch the entire interaction," Hawk insisted. "That's not negotiable."

"If you won't give us at least that," Jett added. "I'll just take custody of the prisoner, transport him to my office and we'll conduct the interrogation in our house. I should do that anyway, but I'm willing to defer to Nathan. This is his choice."

"Nathan?" Lancaster moved to a bank of electronic equipment and began pushing buttons. Then he moved to the wall and flipped on an enormous, big screen television mounted to the wall. Within seconds, the image of Oliver Barnam appeared on the screen. He was seated in a small room with a tiny table and three chairs.

"We'll do this his way," Paige decided. She didn't like it. She didn't like feeling like she'd just been benched. But she also knew she'd do the same if something like this occurred in Manti. Plus, his men captured the prisoner. They had a right to take the first crack at him. "I don't think we need that private moment. We're all on board, go ahead and tell your detective to get started."

"Go ahead," Nathan nodded.

The group watched as a detective in his thirties entered the room. He settled into one of the chairs, leaned back and kicked out his legs, crossing one ankle over the other.

"This is harassment," Barnam insisted. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You're looking good, Oliver," the detective said, undeterred. "Seems freedom agrees with you."

## Precious Treasures

---

“I know you,” Barnam realized.

The detective frowned. Barnam knew exactly who he was. What was this about? “You know you do, Oliver. I’m Detective Adam Kingsley. You know that, playing games won’t help, not this time.”

“I was just messing with ya,” Barnam shrugged. “What do you want? I didn’t do nothing. I was minding my own. You shouldn’t bother a guy when he’s having a beer and minding his own. That guy, he broke the code, got in my face and I didn’t do nothing.”

“Oliver,” Kingsley sat up straight and leaned forward. “I need you to walk me through what you did today.”

“Why?” Barnam demanded.

“Humor me,” Kingsley insisted. “Just walk me through the day. You said you didn’t do nothing. What’s the problem, then?”

Barnam shrugged. “You wanna know what I had for breakfast, fine. I headed over to IHOP and had pancakes and bacon.”

“Who was with you?” Kingsley asked. His tone was flat, like he didn’t really care.

“Just a friend,” Barnam shrugged. “No big deal. We had breakfast, so what?”

“If it’s not a big deal,” Kingsley cocked his head. “Why won’t you tell me his name?”

“Nolan,” Barnam glanced away.

Paige leaned forward and stared at the large TV. “Do you think he’s telling the truth?”

“Let’s see where the detective goes from here,” Nathan suggested.

“Does Nolan have a last name?” Kingsley wondered.

“Everyone’s got a last name,” Barnam grumbled.

“What is Nolan’s full name?” Kingsley pushed.

“I don’t know,” Barnam glanced away.

“I thought you said he was your friend,” Kingsley insisted.

“Not my friend,” Barnam shrugged. “I know a guy and he knows Nolan. We just sort of hooked up.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“Okay, so Nolan is a friend of a friend,” Kingsley nodded. “I get that. What’s the name of the mutual friend?”

“Uh,” Barnam stared at the door, like he wanted to escape. “What’s it to you? He wasn’t at the bar.”

“I just need to verify you were with Nolan this morning,” Kingsley said smoothly. “Without a last name, I can’t track down Nolan. I just thought if you could give me the name of your friend, I’d call him, get Nolan’s contact info, and check that off.”

“What is this about?” Barnam demanded.

“Like I said,” Kingsley shrugged. “We just need to track your movement today.”

“I used a card,” Barnam frowned. “Track that. I’m not involving anyone else.”

“Alright,” Kingsley relented. “You went to IHOP with Nolan. Then what?”

“We took care of some stuff,” Barnam evaded.

“I’m going to need you to be more specific,” Kingsley insisted.

“I think I want to call my attorney,” Barnam decided.

“That’s your call,” Kingsley shrugged. “You can use that phone on the wall over there. While you do that, I’ll step out and contact your parole officer.”

“Well,” Jett Alders sighed. “Guess that’s that. I could take him over to the office, but I doubt we’ll get anything more.”

“I want to talk to him with his attorney,” Paige decided. “I want to confront him with the stolen vehicle and the kidnapping. We won’t get anything, but I want to see his reaction when he realizes he’s been caught.”

“Alright,” Lt. Lancaster said from the door. “I’ll let Adam know.” He pulled the door shut after leaving the room.

“You want company?” Jett asked.

“Yes,” Paige decided. “We’ll do this together but first I need to talk to Carmen.” She pulled out her phone and made the call. If there was a connection between Barnam and a guy named Nolan, Carmen would find it.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Precious Treasures

---

Two hours later, the group was gathered in the conference room back at the Pentagon. It was nearly midnight, and they were all getting discouraged.

Dax glanced around the room. Nathan looked completely defeated. He'd never seen the powerful general look so hopeless and exhausted. Paige was stressed but trying to hide it and his men were somber and too reserved. He needed to do something. "We've made a lot of progress today," he began.

"Not enough," Paige sighed. "I was hoping Sophie would sleep in her own bed tonight."

"We all hoped for that," Dax took her hand. "But you had to know it was unlikely."

"I understand this is personal for all of you," Jett began. "It's easy to get discouraged, but we have made a lot of progress. In less than twenty-four hours, we know more than I ever would have guessed. We arrested one of the kidnappers, we have the first name of the second man involved, and we've narrowed down the area of focus for the morning."

"I understand if you need to head out," Paige told Jett. "This is personal for us but it's just another case for you."

"There's no such thing as just another case," Jett disagreed. "And while it's not personal for me, it is important. The first forty-eight hours of any case are essential. I already called my wife and let her know I'm working an all-nighter. I think we should pull out a map and focus on the wilderness around DC. Anything that could be accessed in under two hours."

"You're putting a lot of trust in the word of a criminal," Hawk observed.

"Oliver Barnam's attorney helped convince him to cooperate," Paige explained. "He knows he's going back to prison. The question is how long. If the information he provided helps us to find Sophie, he can probably cut that time in half. If he lied, the deal is off."

"I think we should operate under the assumption he was telling the truth," Jett added. "I also think we should assume he didn't tell us everything he knows, and he left out a lot of the details."

"So, what's the next step?" Hawk asked.

"I want to focus on trying to identify this Nolan guy," Carmen announced. "Maybe I can find property or something that will lead us to where he's keeping Sophie."

"I can go through the rest of the video," Zeus offered. "We've been trying to track the route they took to see if we can figure out where they came from, and possibly where they went. If I can find a direction of travel, that might help. There's a lot of wilderness area. We need to tighten that up a lot."

## Precious Treasures

---

“I can help you with that,” Hawk offered.

“You need down time,” Nathan insisted. “Carmen, you and Zeus were exhausted when you arrived. You need to take at least a couple hours to rest. I can watch the video and identifying the other man involved can wait until morning.”

“We’re fine,” Zeus took Carmen’s hand. “As long as you let us pull out that food you ordered, we’ve got a few more hours in us.”

“I completely forgot about that,” Paige jumped to her feet. “Nathan, can you help me bring the food back in here?”

“Sure,” Nathan slowly stood and headed for the door.

Dax leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Paige’s temple. “We’re going to find her.” He felt like he’d said that a hundred times today, but he was going to keep repeating it until she believed him. Once they left the room, Dax stood.

“What’s up?” Zeus could see Dax had something on his mind.

“Those two are struggling,” Dax began. “Paige is off her game, and I’ve never seen Porter like this.”

“Paige is okay,” Carmen insisted. “We’ve all experienced worse.” She glanced around the room. “You didn’t see what she was like, years ago when we were trying to find you.”

Dax nodded. “I’m not sure I ever thanked you guys for all you did back then. This team is the only reason I’m still alive.”

“That wasn’t my point,” Carmen began. “I just thought you should know that Paige is okay. Maybe she’s a little off her game, but she’s focused and determined. I am worried about Nathan, though. He’s devastated and struggling to keep it together.”

“The sooner we find his wife, the sooner he’ll return to normal,” Jett offered and started setting up his laptop. “I’m going to focus on the wilderness. The forest is thick out there and my gut’s telling me that’s where we’ll find our victim.”

“Does it bother anyone else that Barnam wouldn’t say why they took her?” Hawk wondered. “I think the theft is still on; and, after that interview, I also believe there are more than two people involved.”

“The mutual friend,” Paige agreed and set a large box on the table. “If Carmen can find Nolan, we might be able to narrow down the third guy. If he’s the common thread, I wonder if he’s also the leader.”

“Makes sense,” Dax stood and took several bags from Nathan. “How does that help us?”



## Precious Treasures

---

“Identifying the leader might help us find Sophie,” Jett answered. “Even if it doesn’t, we need to identify him so we can apprehend everyone involved.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Sophie was lying on the cold concrete floor, trying to get some rest. She was freezing, humiliated and near tears. She hadn’t expected her husband to find her this soon, but she wasn’t sure how long she was going to last in these conditions. Using the offensive bucket to relieve herself was degrading, but it hadn’t been as bad as she originally believed. Her captors had filled the bottom with bleach to keep down the smell. Once she finished, she replaced the lid and tried not to think about what was inside.

Her stomach growled, and she longed for one of Nathan’s cheeseburgers, grilled to perfection. Would she ever enjoy her husband’s burgers again? She hoped so, but she was having a difficult time holding onto hope. When her stomach growled again, she glanced at the door that led to the tiny closet. She wasn’t desperate enough to try that again. Earlier in the day, she had found a gallon jug of water in the closet with a box that contained snacks. They hadn’t bothered to purchase anything substantial, just fruit snacks and granola bars, but it was better than nothing. She’d been so thirsty; she hadn’t considered we might drug the water. It was. Fifteen minutes after eating two of the granola bars, a package of fruit snacks, and gulping down about a cup of water, she felt dizzy and lightheaded. She had curled into a ball on the floor hoping it would pass, thinking she’d waited too long before eating. When the grogginess set in, she understood. The water contained some kind of sleeping agent. Within minutes, she was out cold.

When she woke, it was dark outside. It was still dark, but she could see a faint tint of orange highlighting the edge of the windowsill. It must be morning. She survived the night, but what would the day bring for her? If the men who took her returned, she might learn what they wanted, but that thought terrified her. What if they wanted to kill her? “Nathan, where are you?”

Suddenly, the door burst open, and a strange man filled the doorway. Sophie studied him for several seconds before she was positive this man hadn’t been involved in the kidnapping. This was someone different, but the angry look on his face told her he wasn’t an ally.

“Get up,” he demanded. “We’re going for a little ride.”

Sophie started to panic. If they moved her, would Nathan be able to track them? She couldn’t risk it. She had to get away. “I just woke up. Do you mind if I have a snack before we leave? I found a granola bar in the closet; may I have one?”

“Hurry up,” the guy growled and motioned toward the closet. The movement caused the front of his jacket to sway and Sophie spotted the gun. At least it was secured in a holster. She slowly moved to the closet, grabbed three of the granola bars and stuffed them into her pocket

## Precious Treasures

---

before she snatched up a fourth bar and a handful of fruit snacks and shoved them in her other pocket. She hesitated, trying to think of her next move when she heard the man moving across the room, coming toward her. Her gaze landed on the gallon jug of water, and she acted before she could change her mind. She reached out, gripped the handle of the jug, and swung around to face the stranger. She continued the momentum, swung out, using as much force as she could muster and struck the man in the side of the head with the gallon jug. He dropped to the floor, swearing, and reached for his gun.

Sophie kicked out and connected with his arm. The gun dropped to the floor and slid across the smooth concrete, colliding with the cinder block wall on the other side of the room. She struck him again in the face with the jug. Blood spurted from his nose, but she didn't stop. She raised her foot and kicked him as hard as she could in the left temple. His head fell back instantly, and he didn't move. Sophie cringed at the deep thud his head made when it connected with the floor. She hesitated, shocked, and a little surprised at herself as she studied the man's lifeless form. His eyes were closed, and he looked unconscious — or dead. She couldn't think about that. If she killed the man, she'd deal with that later. Right now, she had to escape.

Cautiously, she slid through the open door and made her way down the long hallway. She could hear movement upstairs and knew someone else was in the house. She climbed one stair, then waited. Nothing happened. She held her breath as she took another, then another. When she finally reached the top, she cautiously pushed the door open an inch and tried to look around. Her view was limited but she could tell she was in the kitchen, and it looked empty. She paused to listen and could hear someone in a nearby room. After one last, quick glance back down the stairs, she cautiously slid open the door and stepped into the bright morning light.

She immediately realized the kitchen was empty. Panic was setting in when she spotted the door, just a few feet to the right. Sophie bolted across the room, flung open the door, and ran. She darted into the forest and kept running. The trees were so thick, she could barely make her way between them. The entire area was nearly dark, the tall trees blocked out the sunlight. Her arm collided with a branch, and it sliced through the tender skin on her upper left arm. She gripped the wound with her right hand and continued to run. Seconds later, she was beginning to think she was free when she heard the distinct sound of gunfire behind her and knew it came from the house she just fled. Who was shooting at who? Had her captors turned on each other? Could it be Nathan, there to rescue her and she was no longer there? No, she hadn't heard a motor. Nathan would come in a car, or a helicopter. It had to be the men who abducted her. Terror engulfed her, but she used the fear and the certainty that her husband would come for her to push her body forward. Running as if her life depended on it — because it did. She had no idea where she was or where she was going, but she had to get as far away from that death house as she possibly could.

## Precious Treasures

---

\*\*\*\*\*

“I found something,” Carmen jumped up, then settled back in her chair and displayed the information on the large screen on the wall.

Jett jumped, rubbed his hands over his eyes and sat up. He had finally curled up on the floor, in the corner two hours ago and crashed. Paige and Dax sat up, they too had curled up together on the floor on the other side of the room. Hawk crashed hours ago and was now back at it, studying the detailed map on his screen, looking for an abandoned house or a cabin in the woods, any place someone could hide Sophie and not be discovered.

“What is that?” Zeus stood and moved closer to the screen. “It looks like some kind of booking report.”

“It’s actually a housing report,” Carmen corrected. “I’ve been searching through prison and jail records, looking for a cellmate named Nolan. I couldn’t find one, so I expanded the search to units. These two were housed in the same block.”

“Norman Dartnell,” Paige joined Zeus. “Can you run him through the system, see what details you can find?”

“I’m on it,” Hawk said absently, never taking his eyes off his own screen.

Suddenly, the door flew open and Special Agent Gray stepped in. “What are you doing here? Why are all of you here? We agreed to meet at eight, not seven.”

“We never left,” Nathan said, leaning against the far wall.

“You?” Gray glanced at the screen and frowned. “What is that? Alder, is that you on the floor? What in the world are you doing down there on the floor?”

“We never left,” Jett parroted Nathan. He pushed to his feet, brushed out the wrinkles on his slacks and ran a hand through his hair.

“I didn’t approve that,” Gray said automatically.

“I did,” Nathan used a chair to pull himself off the floor. “Why are you early?”

“I wanted,” Gray frowned. “Never mind that, I need an update.”

Nathan dropped into a chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes. “I need coffee.”

“I’ll find a pot somewhere,” Dax offered. He reached out and pulled Paige to her feet then strolled casually out the door.

“Alright,” Hawk interrupted the silence. “Carmen, I need the screen. Do you mind?”

## Precious Treasures

---

Carmen punched a button on her computer and the screen went black, then suddenly a rap sheet filled the screen.

“Who told you about Norman Dartnell,” Gray demanded.

“Who told you?” Nathan narrowed his eyes at the federal agent.

“I got a call this morning,” Gray settled into a chair. “Apparently Lt. Troy Lancaster’s unit arrested a man by the name of Oliver Barnam last night. I don’t suppose you know anything about that?”

“We do,” Jett answered before anyone else could. “I was there when they interrogated him. The Bureau was represented. Once Metro finished, Paige and I conducted our own interview. We’ve been working on the limited information he gave us, trying to track down leads and determine the identity of a third man, likely the leader of the group. We’ve also been trying to locate Sophie. I planned to brief you this morning once you arrived.”

“And the DNA?” Gray demanded. “I spoke with the District Attorney, and she indicated there was a cigarette butt retrieved from the Smithsonian. She also indicated the tests would be processed by the locals. After several calls and just as many threats, I finally learned that video was obtained of our suspect smoking behind the building. That’s what led to the retrieval of the cigarette. The results are back, and the lab ran them through CODIS immediately. When they contacted me this morning, they indicated they got a hit. Nolan Dartnell kidnapped Sophie Porter.” He glanced at the information displayed on the screen. “But I guess you already knew that.”

“Not exactly,” Paige was studying the screen. “Carmen just discovered Nolan Dartnell. He was in prison at the same time as Oliver Barnam. I’d say the DNA results just confirm we’re on the right trail.”

“You mentioned a third man, where did that information come from?” Gray didn’t like being left in the dark, but he was the one that went home; and, he had to admit, the group made a lot of progress in a short amount of time. His boss would be happy. On his way home last night, he’d received a call reminding him just how important General Porter was to their director.

“Oliver claimed he doesn’t really know Nolan,” Jett answered. “He said Nolan is a friend of a friend. That brings in a third person. We need to identify this third person before we can determine the extent of his involvement.”

“That’s weak,” Gray grumbled.

“I agree, and Barnam could have lied. Can we set the value of looking for a third participant aside for a minute?” Jett asked. “I have something I want to run by you guys.”

## Precious Treasures

---

Before anyone could answer, Lt. Troy Lancaster entered the room. “I realize this is the Pentagon and security has to be tight, but seriously? I was on the list. I can’t imagine the hassle if I wasn’t expected.”

“You wouldn’t get in,” Nathan grinned.

“Right,” Tony settled into a chair. “So, I have another lead. The DA sat down with Barnam and his attorney early this morning.”

“It is early this morning,” Hawk grumbled.

“Earlier this morning,” Troy grinned. “She refused to sign off on a plea deal because it was obvious Barnam was holding out and not being completely honest. She told him unless he provided information that led to Sophie’s location, the deal was off.”

“And he cooperated?” Paige asked, surprised.

“Sort of,” Tony admitted. “He’s sticking to his story and claims he doesn’t know where Sophie is being held. Nobody believes him, but he’s not budging. Can I use one of these computers?”

“Sure,” Hawk stood. “Use mine, just minimize that arrest record and do what you need to do.”

Lancaster pulled up a map. “Alright, let me see here.” He displayed the map on the large screen.

“That’s Quantico,” Jett glanced at his own map.

“It’s close to Quantico,” Lancaster agreed. “Barnam said they headed out on Interstate 95 for about forty to forty-five minutes. That puts him out near Joplin. The road that leads to the academy is restricted. I’m betting they turned off on Joplin Road and headed into the wilderness from there.”

“Alright,” Jett nodded. “As you head up that road, there are a couple little turnouts but those are populated with families living there year-round.”

“Right,” Lancaster agreed. “I’m not familiar with that area but I saw that on the map. I think we can assume they headed deeper into the forest.”

“Did he indicate how far?” Jett wondered. “I mean, that’s a huge vast area. We can’t search the entire forest.”

“He said they travelled into the wilderness for over an hour,” Lancaster told them. “She asked if it was closer to two hours or closer to an hour and a half and he said definitely less than two. Maybe an hour and twenty minutes.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“Alright,” Jett began scrolling. “I can work with that.”

“What about the third man?” Paige wondered. “Did he provide anything further on that?”

“Not a word on his identity,” Lancaster sighed. “He started to say something, but then froze up. The DA thinks, based on Barnams comments, that the third man was waiting at the house or cabin or whatever, when they arrived. When she pushed, Barnam clammed up. He wouldn’t even discuss it and told his attorney if they kept pushing, he’d just take his chances in court.”

“He’s more afraid of his accomplice than he is of the police,” Dax observed.

“Or prison,” Hawk added. “That’s a clue. Carmen, can you start looking for anyone that might have had a connection to both Barnam and Dartnell? Start with the same time period they were in prison together. They could have hatched this plan on the courtyard during their rec time. They had to cross paths somewhere.”

“On it,” Carmen adjusted her own computer and got to work.

“Why don’t we just start driving up Joplin Road and see if we spot the Camry?” Nathan suggested.

“We might miss it,” Paige disagreed. “Or they might see us and panic, relocate and take Sophie with them.”

“Or they might decide to eliminate her and flee,” Nathan realized.

Dax returned with coffee and focused on Paige. She was rubbing her temples and trying not to look discouraged. He moved forward and took her hand, pulling her to her feet.

“What are you doing?” Paige demanded.

“We’re going for a walk,” Dax answered, casually.

“There’s no time,” she tried to pull her hand away.

“Yes, there is,” Dax held tight and pulled her toward the door.

“Dax,” Paige objected the instant they were in the hallway.

“Look,” Dax turned and placed his hands on her shoulders. “You need a break. You need a little breathing time and I need to discuss something with you.”

“What?” Paige frowned and studied his face.

“You know that every time you try to change the way you investigate, you get stuck,” Dax took her hand and pulled her down the hall. “That’s what you’re doing in there, right now. You’re not following the evidence. You’re so desperate to find Sophie, you guys are scrolling

## Precious Treasures

---

through maps trying to find a building that might or might not be the location where they're keeping Sophie."

"What do you suggest?" Paige demanded. "We don't have any clues to follow."

"Sure, you do," Dax said, undeterred. "I have an idea. Walk me through it."

"You already know—"

"At home," Dax cut her off. "When you're working a case and you get stuck, we start at the beginning. You give me the basics over breakfast, and I ask questions. It seems to help you put your thoughts in order and identify your next move. I don't have anything to serve you for breakfast but walk me through it. Start at the beginning."

"You already know—" she started again.

"Humor me," Dax insisted.

"Fine," Paige sighed. "I got a call from Nathan..."

"That's not the beginning," Dax realized. "It started when three men decided to rob the Smithsonian."

Paige furrowed her brow. "Okay, three men decided to rob the Smithsonian."

"Three friends, or three men? How do they know each other? Is there any record, other than what Carmen already found, that the two we've identified spent time together?"

"No," Paige considered.

"What do we know about the third guy?" Dax continued to throw out questions. Suddenly Paige stopped abruptly. "What?"

"The third man," Paige looked up at him in surprise. "He's in charge. He's the one that introduced them, or at least he's the one that brought them together. And this morning, Tony said the third man was waiting when they arrived with Sophie. He's in charge. He needed to see that the plan was working. See that everything went according to plan and Sophie had what they needed."

"What does that tell you?" Dax considered.

"It tells me he's calling the shots," Paige turned and headed back toward the conference room. "He decides their next move. And it tells me, he's a control freak. He had to see Sophie, make sure that phase of the plan was carried out without a hitch."

"How do we use that?" Dax pulled open the door and motioned her inside.

## Precious Treasures

---

“Everyone, stop what you’re doing,” Paige said once she entered the room. “The third man. We need to focus on him. I think that’s the key to find Sophie.”

“How so?” Jett wondered.

“He’s the leader,” Paige said confidently.

“We don’t even know that there is a third man,” Gray objected.

“Yes, we do,” Nathan corrected. “We just don’t know how involved he truly is.”

“I think we do,” Paige disagreed. “We know Barnam is afraid of him. We know he has to be a criminal and we know he was waiting after they took Sophie. He had to see the progress, make sure the mission was going according to plan.”

“Okay,” Hawk nodded. “So how do we use that?”

“We need to identify anyone that was in prison at the same time as our other two suspects,” Paige decided. “Carmen, can you go through the records again? We know Barnam was in for eighteen months, and Nolan Dartnell served two and a half years. But, I think there were only six or seven months that overlapped. I need the names of anyone those two came in contact with during that overlap time. I’ll start skimming through the video to see if the illustrious leader stopped in at the museum to get a look for himself. Then, Hawk can run the names of anyone we find, generate background information, and see if any of the individuals we identify owns property. Jett can locate that property on the map, see if it’s in the area we’re focused on. Tony, can you help him with that?”

“I agree with the premise, but I think we need to switch assignments a little,” Carmen decided.

“How so?” Paige focused on her friend.

“I’m quicker at running backgrounds. Give that assignment to me. If there’s anything to find, you know I’ll find it. Once I locate any property, I’ll pass it on to Jett and Tony.”

“Alright,” Paige agreed.

“If I’m not doing backgrounds,” Hawk spoke up. “I’ll work on the video.”

“I can help with that,” Zeus offered.

“Okay,” Paige paused. “Zeus, do you remember when we decided they stopped casing the museum, and they zeroed in on Sophie?”

“About three days ago, I believe,” Zeus squinted, like he was thinking. “Yeah, three days before the abduction.”



## Precious Treasures

---

“Then go back four days,” Paige decided. “Look for anyone that seems out of place.”

“Why four?” Gray wondered.

“I think the two suspects selected Sophie then went back and told the leader they identified the person they should abduct. I think the leader would need to see for himself if Sophie was the right person. If he had to be there when she arrived, wouldn’t he also need to approve her kidnapping?”

Dax grinned, he knew getting Paige alone, to think things through would help.

“Okay, so we’re looking for someone that appears suspicious, but also someone that is paying attention to Sophie,” Zeus nodded.

“That should be easy enough,” Hawk moved to a chair next to Zeus. “But let’s go back five days. I want to be thorough.” The two of them got to work.

“I’ll continue to look at property up Joplin Road,” Jett offered. “Just toss me anything you find, and I’ll check it out.”

“And Dax and I will get started on prison records that span at least seven months,” Paige decided.

“If you find someone, get me a photo,” Carmen told Zeus. “I’ll run him through the system and see if we can come up with a name.”

“On it,” Zeus agreed, as he studied the video.

The room grew quiet as they worked.

“I—” Gray began.

“Not now,” Nathan turned to him. “Let them work.”

“I just think we’re putting too much emphasis on a mysterious third man that might not exist,” Gray grumbled.

“Not if Paige is right,” Nathan said confidently. “And she usually is. Even you must remember that. If you put aside the issues you have with Paige — and me, you have to admit she gets results.”

Gray sighed. “She does. I don’t always agree with her methods but working with her on this has reminded me she does get results. That’s never been her problem, and it’s the reason she was destined for greatness — until she let her emotions derail her career.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“I didn’t understand her decision to leave either, not at first. But I’ve come to realize working for the Bureau didn’t make Paige happy. There’s no denying her happiness now. I think everything worked out the way it was supposed to. I also don’t believe the change was about emotions.”

“Paige has always operated on emotion,” Gray disagreed. “It’s why she ignores protocol and insists on breaking every rule in the book. It’s also the reason I developed those issues — as you put it.”

“I believe a little rule breaking distinguishes those who are great from those who just get by in life,” Nathan smiled.

“You would,” Gray huffed. “I think you’re the biggest rule breaker Washington has ever seen.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Nathan’s grin widened. “George Washington and the rest of the founding fathers were pretty notorious rule breakers. And, without them, we wouldn’t have a country — at least not the constitutional republic we all live in today.”

“Yes,” Gray conceded. “But if they hadn’t won, all of them would have been tried and convicted of treason and hung from the nearest tree.”

“I hope you’re not implying that Paige should be hung,” Nathan laughed. “Or that I should.”

“Of course not,” Gray focused on the group. “Paige and her unconventional ways tend to grind on my last nerve, but she is effective and that makes her successful. I think, in her absence, I let myself forget that. For the time being, I’m willing to put my displeasure with her unusual, and sometimes illogical, ways aside if it means rescuing your wife. That is the goal all of us are working towards. I hope you know we all want Sophie to come home safe and unharmed.”

“I do,” Nathan softened. “And I appreciate it.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Sophie knew she was being followed. She also knew, she had to find a place to hide, or she’d end up back in that cold, dark room. Unless she ended up dead. Either was unacceptable. She slid between two large trees and paused to look around. *Where to hide?* Her gaze fell on a stand of thick brush, and she considered. Further back, she had investigated that area only to discover a steep drop-off that ended in a wide ravine. If she could somehow get to the other side of that brush, nobody would find her if she remained perfectly silent. She had to try. She just hoped the bush wasn’t on the edge of a cliff. In the dark forest, she couldn’t tell.

## Precious Treasures

---

The bush was even thicker than it appeared, and that was saying something. It looked hearty, but the branches were so tightly woven together there was very little give. Sophie struggled to pull her body through, tripped on one of the thick branches and catapulted forward. She reached out but her hand just sliced through air. Unfortunately, her forehead struck a rock. Pain radiated through her entire skull. She reached up, hoping she wasn't bleeding again and felt the lump forming. She was going to have a serious goose egg. She slowly moved her hand forward and felt the sharp edges of a rock. So, that's what she ran into. She ran her hand over the hard surface and used it to pull her body the remaining few feet to the other side of the bush. It was dark back here. Not the edge of a ravine, a solid rock wall. The bush was growing against a large outcropping. On the other side of the thick rock, was the edge of the ravine. It was the perfect hiding spot.

She dropped to the ground and leaned against the cool stone wall. She was safe, for now. She would need to remain perfectly quiet, but she could do that. Suddenly, concern set in. How would Nathan find her? Was she hidden too well? Would she be able to distinguish a rescue party from her abductors? She swallowed hard; she'd have to. She'd just have to figure out a way to know the good guys from the bad guys. For now, she was being hunted by a bad guy. She stretched out on the soft ground and rested her head against a flat rock at the base of the formation. She was so tired. The stress and lack of food was making her weak. She'd just settle in for now. Nathan would come. Her husband would find her, and she'd be safe. She pulled out a granola bar and carefully slid open the package, careful not to make a sound. Then, she waited and listened.

Her hand gripped the bar so tightly, it almost broke in two when she heard a branch snap, a man curse and then footsteps clomping over dead leaves, twigs and rocks. She held her breath and waited. Once the sounds grew fainter, she continued to wait just in case it was a trick. Several minutes later, she carefully broke off a section of the granola bar and held her breath. Nobody returned. With a sigh of relief, she slid it into her mouth and carefully chewed. Still nothing. That's when she devoured the rest of the bar and then settled back onto the loose dirt to wait. She had a long day ahead of her, but at least she was shaded from the harsh sun, and she was safe. She believed that now. For the first time since that man wrapped his powerful arms around her and pushed her into that car, she felt safe. And she was determined to stay that way.

\*\*\*\*\*

"We've got something," Hawk called out.

"What?" Paige jumped up and rushed around to glance over his shoulder.

"Let me put it on the big screen so everyone can see," Zeus offered.

## Precious Treasures

---

Paige returned to her chair and was grateful when Dax reached out and took her hand.

“There’s actually two videos I want you to watch,” Hawk hit a button, and the footage stopped, then began to play.

“Can you rewind that and play it again?” Paige asked softly. Her instincts were telling her Hawk just found the third man, but her intellect disagreed. It could just be a coincidence. She grinned a little when Havi’s voice echoed in her head ‘coincidence is hooey’. Once the video finished playing a second time, Paige sat back and considered. “What day was that?”

“Four days before the abduction,” Zeus answered. “In that one, he just drives by all casual like but it’s enough to stand out. You can see, he starts to pull to the side, changes his mind, and drives off.”

“Right,” Paige nodded. “But what if it’s just a guy thinking about going to the museum then changing his mind?”

“That’s what we thought,” Hawk admitted. “So, we went back further. There were three days between the time those two appear to be aimlessly studying the place and when they obviously zeroed in on Sophie. We watched the other two days.”

“What did you find?” Carmen asked, knowing they found something.

Hawk was busy rewinding. “Here.” He hit play, and the screen was filled with passing cars and individuals hustling down the sidewalk.

Paige sat up straighter when the same blue Dodge changed lanes, slowed, and pulled up to the curb. The driver parked but never shut down the engine. He just sat there, studying the front door until minutes later, Sophie exited with another woman. The two of them continued to chat casually as they made their way to the parking lot on the side of the building. Once they disappeared, the driver pulled back into traffic and disappeared.

“I’m running that plate,” Jett announced. He stood and moved away from the table. When he returned, he was smiling. “That vehicle was not reported stolen.”

“Who is it registered to?” Tony asked.

“Owen Lewis,” Jett announced.

“There’s an Owen Lewis here, too,” Dax announced. “He was doing time for robbery at the same time Barnam and Dartnell were incarcerated.”

Carmen was frantically typing away on her keyboard. Seconds later she looked up and smiled. “Tony, can you pull up these coordinates on your map?”

## Precious Treasures

---

Seconds later, the map zoomed into an area just off Joplin Road. They could see a brown roof and a dirt packed turnout. Thick trees surrounded the property. Tony zoomed out and they could see the small road that veered off from Joplin.

“If I had to guess,” Dax studied the map closely. “I’d say it took them closer to two hours to get there. I think the uncooperative Mr. Barnam lied.”

“Half-truth,” Jett nodded. “I don’t think Miss District Attorney is going to be happy.”

Nathan jumped to his feet.

“Hold on,” Gray also stood. “We need to develop a plan.”

“I plan to drive out and get my wife,” Nathan barked.

“Is there a vehicle large enough for all of us?” Hawk wondered. He glanced at Dax.

“If so,” Dax understood. “We can develop a plan on the way.”

“That’s not how we do things here,” Gray followed them out the door.

“I’ll arrange it,” Nathan pulled out his phone. He punched in a number, requested Mike Harris, then turned to Gray. “It’s how we do things. Mike,” he relayed the update and requested a large enough vehicle to transport his entire team. “Mike will have something waiting in the bay when we arrive.” Nathan advised after disconnecting the call.

It was almost two hours later when the group pulled off the main road and followed the small dirt road back to the house. They couldn’t see any lights on, but it was still early afternoon. If the electrical was on generator power, they might be conserving power.

“We stick to the plan,” Dax ordered. “Surround the structure and wait for my signal. Nathan, you stay in the van. We’ll let you know once we have Sophie secured.”

Nathan nodded but didn’t look happy.

“I’m still unsure how you, a guy with absolutely no police experience, ended up in charge,” Gray grumbled.

“Ask Nathan,” Dax jumped from the vehicle and waited for Paige to join him.

“Because someone has to lead and Dax is the only one here that has experience leading a dangerous extraction,” Nathan said impatiently. “I don’t know why you’re still complaining. We compromised and made sure each team had a cop. Carmen and I will stay in the van with you, Dax is with Paige, Zeus is with Tony, and Hawk hooked up with Alders. The boys also agreed to defer to the cops if things get hot inside. Take the win and be happy.” Nathan watched anxiously

## Precious Treasures

---

as the group assembled then moved into position. He focused on the radio and willed someone to say they found Sophie and she was alright.

“Be careful,” Carmen told Zeus before he jumped from the car.

“You know I will,” Zeus gave her a quick kiss.

“You better because I’ve only been married for five minutes and if you make me a widow, I’m going to kill you.”

“These guys are regulars in the penal hotel, but they’ve never been violent,” Zeus assured her. “Relax, everything will be fine.”

Moments later, they entered the residence.

“Zee,” Dax stared at the dead body on the living room floor. “You might have to alter that who no violence theory.”

Zeus moved in next to his friend and cringed. “Do we have to tell my wife about this?”

“I’m afraid so,” Jett said, pulling out his phone.

It didn’t take long for Nathan, Gray and Carmen to step inside the home.

“She’s not here,” Nathan said, defeated.

“Where is Carter?” Gray demanded.

“She went downstairs with Tony,” Jett informed him. “Sophie was here. There’s evidence they locked her in the basement. Paige is looking for clues.”

“Sophie has to be in the forest,” Gray decided. “She broke out of the basement and tried to escape but was confronted by this man. She shot him and fled. We’ll just call this in, get a search party to go after her.”

“Not possible,” Paige disagreed.

“Sophie didn’t shoot anyone,” Nathan said at the same time.

“Clearly—” Gray began.

“Nathan tried to teach Sophie how to shoot,” Paige began. “He was out of town too often and didn’t like leaving her home alone, unprotected.”

“She never got the hang of it,” Nathan admitted. “She struggled. The kick was too much for her. I tried, but the only gun she was comfortable with was a .22 and that wasn’t big enough to use as protection against anything. I ended up getting a guard dog.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“When Sophie told me about the experience, I thought I could teach her. I was wrong,” Paige admitted. “She was adequate with a revolver, but she could never remember what she needed to with a semi-auto. She gave up. She does keep a .38 in the house, but that man was shot with at least a 9mm. Sophie didn’t kill that man. If I had to guess, I’d say she escaped and Owen Lewis killed Nolan in frustration and anger.”

“I do think you’re right about Sophie being in the forest, though,” Dax added. “We need to split up and see if we can find her. Be careful, though. If Paige is right, there’s also an angry killer with a gun in the forest.”

“And he’s already demonstrated he’s willing to resort to violence,” Paige added.

“I’m coming,” Nathan insisted.

“I’m not,” Carmen vowed. “That’s above my pay grade. I’m staying right here until you get back.”

“What about Carmen?” Paige raised an eyebrow. “Carmen is staying in the van. Do you really want her left alone to deal with an angry killer on the loose? We’re looking for Sophie. Do you want to find your wife, only to resume this mission because we have to find Carmen?”

“Fine,” Nathan glared at Paige, fuming because she was right. If he went into the forest, Gray would have to join him and that would leave Carmen alone and vulnerable.

“I know it makes more sense to split up,” Zeus said studying the ground. “But the dirt here is soft enough, I think I can track them.” He pulled out a flashlight and directed the beam at two footprints. “See? Follow me and watch my back. I need to focus on the signs, and I might miss a madman lurking in the shadows.”

“I agree,” Paige moved up next to Zeus. “We stick together and track them.”

“Beats wandering aimlessly hoping we get lucky and run into the damsel or the thug,” Tony Lancaster agreed.

The group slowly made their way deeper into the thick trees.

“Wait,” Zeus held up a hand. “The smaller prints take off that way, then disappear.”

“Naw,” Dax moved in next to his friend. “They resume right there. I think Sophie made her way over to the side of this cliff, realized there was nowhere to go and continued on. The guy wasn’t following the tracks because he never left the tree line or even ventured this way at all.”

“Okay,” Zeus studied the ground again. “Did Nathan teach Sophie to use the rocks and fallen trunks to hide her tracks?”

## Precious Treasures

---

“Probably,” Paige shrugged. “Nathan is very protective of Sophie, but he also wanted her to be prepared in case the unthinkable happened. I wouldn’t depend on footprints alone. She’s smart and she would do her best to hide her tracks whenever possible.”

“Good to know,” Zeus continued forward. They walked in silence, following the tiny tracks, watching for other signs and brushing aside branches as they searched.

“Hold up,” Zeus called again.

“It looks like Lewis headed off that way,” Jett observed. “But there’s only one set of tracks.” He used the beam of his flashlight to slowly study the surrounding ground, making a large circle, then fanning out in search of rocks or logs Sophie could have used to hide her trail.

Paige moved over to a large bush and tried to see over the top. From this vantage point it was impossible to tell if the ravine still butted up against the forest or if it wound around and curved to the east.

“Now what?” Hawk was walking around the area, searching for broken limbs or skid marks that might indicate the direction Sophie traveled.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sophie sat up straighter, was that Zeus? No, it couldn’t be. Carmen and Zeus were still out of the country on their honeymoon. She moved closer to the bush, trying to hear what the voices were saying. They were just too far away to make out anything. She moved closer to the bush and waited. It sounded like a group of people were headed this way.

“Hold up,” Sophie heard someone say. That had to be Zeus unless she was dreaming. After eating a second granola bar and a package of fruit snacks, she was exhausted. She had curled into a ball and let herself sleep. Now, here she was hearing things. Was it a mirage, like those desperate people walking in the desert? She wanted to be rescued so badly, had she conjured the voice of the one person who couldn’t be looking for her in her mind?

Another voice, something about Lewis and tracks. Could they be part of the group that kidnapped her? Maybe the man that chased her into the forest got lost or something and these men were looking for him. Did they know she escaped?

“Now what?” Sophie was certain that was Hawk. She took a deep breath and slowly stood, carefully to remain hidden behind the large bush. Cautiously, she straightened and peeked over the foliage, expecting to discover strangers. Instead, she saw the most amazing sight she’d ever seen. “Over here,” she called out and raised her hand in the air.

“Sophie?” Paige called. “Sophie, is that you?”



## Precious Treasures

---

“I’m here,” Sophie tried to push up onto tiptoes to gain a little more height.

“How in the world did you get in there?” Dax asked in amazement.

“Trust me,” Sophie laughed. “It wasn’t easy. Let me see if I can make my way back out. Did you guys locate the man that was after me?”

“No,” Paige admitted. “Be careful. We’re making a lot of noise. Can you guys keep watch while I help Sophie get out of that tangled mess?”

Hawk saw movement before he heard the distinct sound of a twig breaking. “We’ve got company,” he whispered to Dax.

“Yeah,” Dax whispered back. “I saw him.”

Jett moved in next to Paige. “He’s out there, be careful. I’ve got your back.”

Paige glanced up in surprise, spotted Dax and Hawk, and focused on Sophie. She had to get her out of there. They were all sitting ducks out here in the open like this. “Give me your hand. I’m going to pull you out. Watch your step and…” Paige gripped Sophie’s hand and gave it a forceful yank.

Sophie let out a surprised gasp, stumbled and was propelled forward. She broke through the bush and braced herself for a serious fall. Without the resistance of the bush, her body lunged forward but she couldn’t catch her balance because her foot was caught on a large vine. She had just resigned herself to landing flat on her face in the dirt when firm hands wrapped around her and stopped her decent.

“I’ve got you,” Jett soothed. “Paige, her foot is stuck. Can you untangle this lovely lady so we can move further into the trees and find safety?”

Sophie looked at both of them, confused. She barely noticed when Paige wrapped a hand around her ankle and pulled her leg free from the branch.

“Move,” Paige shoved Jett. They had Sophie sandwiched between them as they darted behind a tree and pulled Sophie to the ground.

“What’s going on?” Sophie demanded. She gasped and put her hand over her mouth when she heard the shot. Then, she covered her ears. The deep boom of gunfire echoed around them like a cannon blast. Then, everything went eerily silent.

“Is anyone hurt?” Dax called out. “Paige?”

“We’re good,” Paige called out. “I have Sophie and we’re good.”

“Yeah,” Tony emerged. “Me too.”

## Precious Treasures

---

“Zeus,” Dax called.

“I’m mostly fine,” Zeus grumbled.

“What does that mean?” Dax demanded. “Exactly?”

“It means when I dove behind this trunk, I landed on a protruding branch, and I currently have a stick jutting out of my left shin.”

Hawk moved in next to Dax. “I don’t remember him being a blundering buffoon before he met that exotic vixen. I’m beginning to wonder if Carmen is bad karma for our mighty Greek warrior.”

“Bite you tongue,” Zeus glanced up and frowned at the two friends that were standing over him.

“That’s gotta hurt,” Dax observed.

“Can you walk?” Jett asked, joining the duo.

“Don’t worry,” Dax crouched and gripped the large branch. “Once I yank the thing out, he’ll be fine.”

“Wait,” Zeus began, but it was too late.

Dax tightened his grip and gave it one forceful pull. The stick slid free. “You want this?” he held out the branch. “Carmen might want a souvenir. You know, something to help her remember this trip.”

“And the reason for that scar you’re going to have,” Hawk added.

Zeus took the stick and tossed it into the forest. “Help me up already.”

Hawk reached out a hand and pulled Zeus to his feet then wrapped a supportive arm around his friend’s waist. “I’ve got this. Get Sophie to the van. She has someone waiting that is going to be anxious and out of his mind after that gunfire erupted.”

“I’ll get Gray, and we’ll process the scene,” Jett offered. “You good with that Lancaster?”

“Fine by me,” Tony shrugged and took Sophie’s arm. “Let’s get you out of here. I’m sure you can’t wait for a long, hot meal and a dip in a jetted tub.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Sophie let him lead her back toward the house.

Dax moved in and wrapped his arms around Paige. “I knew we’d find her. Let that be a lesson to you in the future. Never question the master.”

## Precious Treasures

---

Paige stopped and suddenly wrapped her arms around Dax. “He shot at you. I was so focused on Sophie, I didn’t even realize you were in danger.”

“I was never in danger,” Dax said confidently. “I’d put my shooting skills up against that thug any day of the week, but I also have the best marksman in the universe standing right beside me. We’re trained, same as you. Sophie needed you more than I did.”

“It all brought back so many memories,” Paige pulled back. “Your kidnapping, you getting shot, the coma...”

“Shh,” he pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “Everyone survived this one, well except Zee but I can’t explain how a highly trained special forces expert tripped over a tree trunk and landed on the one branch that wouldn’t give an inch.”

They emerged from the forest to find Nathan and Sophie embracing.

“I’m afraid this is going to take some time,” Gray advised. “I’ve called the Attorney General’s office. They’re sending a team of investigators out. They’ll need to interview all of us before we’re released to go. I told them to take the Porters statement first and then I’ve arranged for a shuttle to take them home. The rest of you guys, hunker down and get comfortable. It might be a long afternoon.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The media went nuts when they realized the woman that had been abducted was Sophie Porter, wife of the powerful retired General, Nathan Porter. The team couldn’t get back to Manti soon enough. Cameras followed them everywhere until they boarded the plane, headed for Utah.

Jericho called once he heard the news. He wanted to congratulate the team and also discuss the Stan Donaldson situation with Paige. Paige’s suggestion was to turn everything over to James Tolman and let him decide what to do. Jericho agreed and assured her he would take care of it. With any luck, the entire thing would be resolved by the time she got back.

The flight landed in Salt Lake and, not surprising to anyone, Wooly had a car waiting for the ride back to Manti. Dax dropped Zee and Carmen off at their new home, then headed for his place to drop off Hawk. He pulled into the driveway, parked and was halfway out of the vehicle when he spotted the woman sitting on his front porch. “Looks like we have company,” he pulled open the passenger door and waited for Paige to climb out.

“Amy?” Paige rushed forward. “What’s wrong? Is Sean okay?”

“I think so,” Amy stood and held out a single sheet of paper.

## Precious Treasures

---

“What’s this?” Paige took the folder paper and waited.

“I know Sean is on a top-secret mission,” Amy began. “I might know more than I should, so I don’t want to get him into trouble.”

“Just tell me,” Paige insisted. “I don’t work for the FBI, you know that. I don’t care what Sean told you before he left.”

“More than he was supposed to,” Amy shrugged. “Not enough to compromise anything. He set up a secret email address — well, he set up two. One for him and one for me. It looks like I work for that humanitarian group he’s pretending to work for.”

“Alright,” Paige flipped open the paper.

“We email, pretty regularly,” Amy told her. “We’re both careful. I talk about my kids, like they are missions some of our other volunteers are working. He does the same. We’ve kind of fallen into a rhythm, one we both understand — if that makes sense.”

“It does,” Paige skimmed the email and frowned.

“There’s trouble, isn’t there?” Amy asked immediately. “I knew Sean had to be in trouble. How bad is it?”

“I think he’s fine,” Paige assured her. “Really, I think he’s fine. He told you he won’t be able to write for a while and based on this email, I think he’s right. But that doesn’t mean he’s in trouble. In fact, this is a coded message. One that says he’s not in trouble and he doesn’t want you to worry. I’ll need to keep this, and I can’t explain. Trust me, Amy. And, if you can’t trust me, trust Sean. He’s okay. And I’m going to do everything in my power to keep him that way.”

“Alright,” Amy let out a little shutter. “I know you just got back from a long, stressful trip. I’m sorry to bring you this before you even got through the door, but it says to get the information to you as soon as possible. I spoke with Nathan, and he told me you were on your way home, so I came over. I had to wait, to give it to you immediately. I hope you don’t think—”

“I’m glad you did,” Paige folded the page and slipped it into her pocket. She reached out, gave Amy a hug and then stepped back. “Go home, I’ll handle this. Everything is going to be okay.”

Amy swallowed hard, then stepped past Paige and slowly made her way to her car. She glanced back, hesitated for several seconds, then climbed inside and drove away.

Dax carted the last of the luggage into the house and settled onto the couch next to Paige. “Now, tell me what you didn’t tell Sean’s sister.”

“I do think it’s okay,” Paige admitted. “It’s just —”

## Precious Treasures

---

“Will you let me read it?” Dax held out a hand. “First, let me read it. Then, you can explain it.”

“Sure,” Paige handed him the note.

“What does he mean when he says he ran into Doug Egan, and they decided to spend time catching up over a cup of tea? Why would that mean he’s going to be out of contact for a while?”

“It’s code,” Paige studied the fireplace. “One that only I would understand.”

“But you do understand, right?” Dax pushed.

“I think so,” Paige turned to focus on him. “Sean and I worked a case together, it had to be ten years ago. Anyway, a guy by the name of Doug Egan was embezzling funds from the company because he had a serious gambling problem. The partner, I forget his name —”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dax decided. “What happened?”

“The partner discovered the missing money,” Paige told him. “He confronted Egan and, instead of working something out, Egan kidnapped him. I’m not sure what he planned to do, I’m not sure he knew.”

“What happened?”

“The partners brother, Danny something — he basically went off the grid. He told his wife not to worry, and he disappeared completely. Went completely dark, no cell phone, no credit cards, nothing that would help us track him. About a week later, he located Egan and rescued his kid brother.”

Dax settled back against the couch. “So, what does it mean? Why did Sean say he ran into this Egan guy? I assume that’s not possible.”

“No,” Paige settled back next to him. “Doug Egan is dead.”

“How does that play in?” Dax was trying to figure out the message but wasn’t sure he was right.

“Doug had the means to kill the hostage,” Paige admitted. “I’m not sure he would have followed through, but when Danny showed up, there was an altercation. Doug attacked Danny. Danny grabbed a knife off the table and stabbed him, in self-defense.”

“So, he mentioned Doug Egan to remind you of the case,” Dax guessed. “Not because he was dead.”

“Right,” Paige frowned. “Maybe. I think Sean is trying to tell me he’s gone off the grid to find his British counterpart who was taken by someone. I have to assume that someone was

## Precious Treasures

---

trying to hide something, the British guy discovered it and was kidnapped as a result. Sean has gone off the grid and will be going dark to try to find the Brit and we shouldn't worry."

"But you are," Dax took her hand. "Worried. You need to tell Nathan. Not tonight, he deserves one night of happiness and Sophie deserves a night with her husband. But you need to call Nathan tomorrow."

"I will," Paige promised. "They were supposed to go to the Hamptons. I think they are going to the Hamptons. They have this amazing place out there on the beach. I'm going to wait until I'm sure they arrived at the beach house, then I'll call Nathan. Once he's there, Sophie will make him take a couple days off before he investigates this Sean thing. Sean said he's okay. I'm going to take him at his word. It's important, but not pressing. Now, I'm beat. Maybe my husband will give me a little TLC tonight. I think I've earned it."

"That you have Mrs. Hamilton," Dax plucked her off the couch and headed for the stairs. "That you have."