

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Toxic Indifference *Season 6, Episode 6*

by:

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Toxic Indifference

“Paige,” Margie called across the room.

“Yeah?” Paige said absently, studying her report.

“Can you respond out to Ryan Chilcott’s Farm?”

“Sure,” Paige stood. “What’s the call?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” Margie admitted. “He said someone destroyed his crop. When I asked for details, he just said he needed a deputy to come out to his farm immediately.”

“Just classify it as a vandalism for now,” Paige decided. “Once I arrive, I’ll evaluate and let you know if I need it changed.”

“Alright,” Margie shrugged. “Sorry, I don’t have more details. You know Ryan, he can be difficult.”

“Ryan Chilcott has never been what you would call a great communicator.” Paige grabbed her car keys. “I’ll handle it and let you know.”

Paige pulled onto the long drive and slowly made her way to the old farmhouse. So far, she didn’t see any vandalism. “Mr. Chilcott,” Paige said the instant he opened the door.

“Deputy Carter,” Chilcott joined her on the front porch and pulled the door shut behind him. “It’s about time.”

“Right,” Paige sighed. “Can you tell me why you called?”

“I’d rather show you,” he motioned toward the steps.

Paige followed the stoic farmer around to the back of his house and down a long drive. He stopped on a berm overlooking an enormous field.

“I gather you think there was foul play here?” Paige studied the wilting field. All the plants were withered and drooping, many of them had turned black.

“Clearly someone killed my crop,” Chilcott forcefully pointed at the damage. “They murdered my livelihood. What are you going to do about this?”

“Mr. Chilcott, this might be a vandalism,” Paige began.

“I know that murder gets more attention. There are funds available,” Ryan insisted. “If you classify this as death to my crops, I know you have special accounts — unlimited funds — to deal with a death.”

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“Mr. Chilcott,” Paige tried to hide her annoyance. “We live in a safe community. There are rarely homicides in Sanpete County. We do not have a special, unlimited account with funds saved to investigate homicides.”

“I think you do, and my dead crop just isn’t important to you,” Chilcott said stubbornly. “Maybe I’ll just go to the news, let them report how our sheriff and his cops don’t care about farmers. We have a lot of farmers in Sanpete.”

“Alright,” Paige shrugged. “But I need a minute. I’ll need to contact Walters, see if he’ll approve your request.” She turned and walked a few feet away.

“Paige,” Jericho answered. “I told you I was unavailable this morning.”

“Yeah,” Paige sighed. “I know you’re in a meeting, but I have a situation.” She explained the call and Chilcott’s demand.

“Any idea what killed the crop?” Jericho glanced at Tolman.

“Not yet,” Paige admitted. “I could use an expert to take a look.”

“An expert?” Jericho grinned.

“Like an old farm boy turned sheriff,” Paige suggested.

“I’m on my way,” Jericho clicked off. “I have a situation that needs my attention. We’ll have to resume this conversation later.”

“Who owns the crop? The one that got killed?” Tolman asked.

“Ryan Chilcott,” Jericho stood and started for the door, but changed his mind. He turned back and explained the situation.

“I’ll join you,” Tolman grabbed his suit coat. “I’ll meet you out at Ryan’s place.”

“Any idea what caused this?” Tolman asked Paige.

“Jericho?” Paige turned to her boss. “Any brilliant old-school, earth whispering ideas?”

“I’m asking you,” Tolman focused on Paige.

“Yes, but you should be asking him,” Paige pointed toward her boss. “Jericho’s the expert here and your anger with him is irrational.”

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“Irrational?” Tolman narrowed his eyes at Paige. “He went behind my back and investigated my employee.”

“Actually,” Paige glanced at Jericho. “We investigated your employee. And, if you put aside your anger and looked at this objectively, you could admit you would have done the same thing.”

“I wouldn’t investigate one of Jericho’s deputies without speaking to him first,” Tolman insisted.

“That’s ego talking,” Paige said flatly. “I’m not trying to make you mad, but it is. If you were tying up loose ends on a case and you realized I spoke to the suspect, or Gage did, or Havi—”

“I’d call Jericho immediately,” Tolman insisted.

“Would you?” Paige asked. “Take a step back. This isn’t personal. It was business. We discovered — well, actually, during the course of their investigation, the FBI discovered one of your employees spoke with the man that was trying to kill me. The communication occurred around the same time that I was targeted. That could be a serious crime. Under those circumstances, would you call Jericho immediately? Or would you take a step back, consider the possibility it was just a few random calls, and take a closer look. Maybe, determine if there was a legitimate reason that employee was conversing with a suspect?”

James Tolman started to speak, then stopped.

“Exactly,” Paige smiled. “We decided not to bring the problem to you until we were sure there was a problem. The instant we uncovered Stan’s history, the big guy over there brought the file to you. Instead of saying thank you, we’re standing on the edge of a field dealing with your irrational anger. And, to be honest, it’s interfering with my investigation. So, what do you say we all call a truce and get to work?”

Tolman grinned. “You might want to conduct a training session on insubordination, Walters.”

“Won’t take,” Jericho smiled. “I’m fairly certain what you see is what you get with Paige. The rest of us common folk just have to deal with her idiosyncrasies. I choose to keep her around because she’s usually effective. Although I am questioning her efficacy when it comes to that field.” He studied his old friend. “Are we good, now?”

“I suppose,” Tolman nodded toward the field. “What can you tell us? Any idea what happened here?”

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“It looks like poison,” Jericho frowned. “That’s going to limit delivery possibilities. We’ll need to check, but this late in the season, I doubt it was bad pesticide. Crop dusters are typically closed down by now.”

“What about fertilizer?” Paige wondered. “Or irrigation? I asked Chilcott about that. He said he rotates the watering schedule. He watered this field yesterday and the one to the left last week. That field is fine, this one —”

“Dead,” Jericho considered. “Most of the farmers out here irrigate. It wouldn’t just impact Chilcott if the water was contaminated. As far as I know, we haven’t had any reports of damage from his neighbors. We should check before we head back to the office but, with what we know right now, it’s got to be something else. Get samples of the soil, the plants, and the water. We’ll have it tested; but until we talk to Ryan, we’re never going to figure this out. We need him to walk us through his day, explain what he did to care for his crop for the past several weeks... and if he did anything different over the past few days. At the moment, I’m at a loss. We need more information and that might take some time. Ryan won’t be happy about that. The man’s obstinate on a good day — and today is not a good day.”

“Then,” Tolman straightened. “We better get started.”

Paige pulled into the drive, tired and frustrated. She was ready to kick back, relax, and think. She studied the samples from the Chilcott farm before she dropped them at the lab. The plants were clearly poisoned, but she couldn’t determine what had killed them. The soil just looked like soil to her, and the water was typical irrigation water. It had a million tiny little particles and all of them would need to be identified. Like Jericho said, it was going to take time. Unfortunately, Ryan Chilcott was not a patient man. He was still threatening to involve the media. That would rile up the other farmers, but it wouldn’t resolve anything.

With a sigh, she climbed from her vehicle and made her way to the front door. The instant she stepped inside; warmth engulfed her. Dax sat in his favorite chair in front of the fire, visiting with Nathan and Sophie Porter. “Another vacation, already? With the exorbitant fee the government pays you, I’d think they’d require at least a few days at the office. You two just got home from the Hamptons. How did you talk them into another trip so soon after nearly three weeks lounging on the beach?”

Nathan glanced at Sophie. “I didn’t call it a vacation.”

Paige frowned. “Then what is it?”

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Nathan hesitated. “I guess you could say it’s a mental health retreat, and an official mission,” he glanced at Dax.

“Sean Wilkins?” Dax wondered.

“Yes,” Nathan focused on his wife. “Sophie, why don’t you head to the bedroom and get us settled in?”

“I’m fine, Nathan,” she reached out and took his hand. “I know you’ve been worried about Sean — almost as much as you’ve worried about me. I could tell, even while we were at the beach house, not knowing is making you anxious. I’d like to stay if that’s possible. I know it could be top secret...”

“I’m beginning to think I’ve kept far too much from you over the years,” Nathan leaned in and kissed her temple. “If you want to stay, I’m not going to argue.”

“I’m worried, too,” Paige admitted. “But Sean’s smart. He knows what he’s doing. I think we need to trust him. He said he was going dark. He’ll surface once he’s completed his mission.”

“He hasn’t checked in,” Nathan disagreed. “There’s no way to know if he’s still alive. There are protocols, and reasons they were implemented.”

“Yes,” Paige settled onto the arm of Dax’s chair. “Which is why he sent me that message. He needed you guys to understand he planned to go completely dark. He was trying to avoid this; he didn’t want you to panic and burn his cover.”

“We have no intention of putting Agent Wilkins in danger,” Nathan assured her.

“But?” Paige demanded.

Nathan glanced at Dax and hesitated.

“He wants me to find him,” Dax realized. “You came here in person because you know I’d never agree to a trip to Iraq if you did your negotiating over the phone.”

“No,” Paige said immediately. “No. There are other people, special forces soldiers, that are trained for this. Send in a specialized team. Dax already served his country. He has a business to run. You can’t ask—”

“I’m afraid I am asking, Paige,” Nathan sighed. “We can’t get authorization to send in a team. Sean is FBI, not military. The DOD won’t activate military assets to locate and rescue him.”

“Then send in a task force from the Bureau,” Paige insisted.

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“State is blocking any action to address this,” Nathan admitted. “And the current FBI Director won’t blatantly go against State, not for this. I’ve done everything I can. I’ve tried to call in favors, but there were issues long before I sent Sean over. They’ve dug in their heels, and they won’t budge.”

“Paige,” Dax took her hand. “Let’s talk about this in private.”

“No,” Paige gave him a sympathetic look. “Because if we do, you’ll give in. You’ll risk everything for duty. It’s no longer your duty, Dax. And just because the great and powerful Oz marched into our home and tossed out a request, neither one of us has to say yes.”

“I know you’re worried,” Dax pulled her onto his lap. “I’m not considering it for General Oz over there.”

“Oh, for the love of—” Nathan began.

“No,” Paige interrupted. “You don’t get to complain. You don’t even get a vote. This is between me and my husband.”

“And your husband thinks he should go,” Dax focused on Paige. “For Sean. I need to go because he’s out there alone and he needs backup. Apparently, Nathan is unable to provide that, but I can. We never leave a man behind — you know that.”

Paige studied Dax for several seconds but realized he was already dug in on this. If the military, the State Department, or the FBI wouldn’t save their friend, Dax would. “If I’m going to consider this,” she turned to address Nathan. “I need the details — all of them. I know you sent Sean and this British guy over to locate someone. Who?”

“I can’t,” he glanced at Sophie.

“I can leave,” Sophie started to stand.

“No,” Paige shook her head. “Don’t argue with me about this, Nathan. And do not spout off some nonsense about top secret intel or the freaking company line about national security. That’s a copout and we both know it. If the government isn’t willing to help Sean, they lose the right to control the information. We decide who knows the details and Sophie stays.”

“You know that’s not how it works,” Nathan insisted.

“That’s how it works today,” Paige insisted. “That’s how it’s going to work in my home. How it’s working if you want my husband’s help. And this part, it’s not up for debate. You want Dax, tell us everything you know.”

Nathan sighed. Trying to reason with Paige when she got like this was futile. “You’re going to get us both fired.”

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Paige grinned and relaxed. Nathan was a bear to deal with, but he could be reasonable when cornered. “Not me, I don’t work for you, the FBI, or State. Don’t worry, if they give you the boot, we won’t make you live out of your car.”

“That’s thoughtful,” Nathan grumbled. “Seriously, the compassion is just oozing out of you in buckets.”

“Tell me why you sent Sean to Iraq,” Paige would not let him change the subject.

“I told you the truth, Paige,” Nathan said impatiently. “Sean went in undercover as an aid worker to locate a man who has been missing for several months.”

“And his backup was a British guy,” Paige nodded. “British intelligence? MI6?”

“Yes,” Nathan agreed. “We set the two of them up as competitors. We didn’t want them to be seen as friends, but they weren’t enemies, either. They were more like rivals that pushed each other to excel.”

“Who is the guy they were looking for?” Paige pushed. “Why does America and the UK want him?”

“Elijah Turner. He’s a brilliant geneticist,” Nathan told her. “Some of the world’s biggest breakthroughs have come from his work. He has dual citizenship. His father was American, his mother was British. Over the years, he’s lived in both the US and the UK. His disappearance concerned both countries.”

“Because he has valuable information that could be detrimental to both; but, not enough to send a team over to find him,” Paige considered. “So, you sent in Sean, and they sent in an operative of their own. Why was this Elijah Tuner guy in Iraq? Which country sent him?”

“Neither.” Nathan practically vibrated with annoyance. “He is somewhat of an amateur historian. He couldn’t resist the pull of Babylon.”

“Which is another reason the mission was basically off the books,” Paige realized.

“Yes,” Nathan settled into his chair and relayed the details he knew about Turner’s work, his personal life, and the mission that took Sean Wilkins into hostile territory to find him. The four of them discussed the situation for hours, only pausing to have dinner. It was after midnight when they finally called it quits and went to bed.

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“Are we going to talk about — everything?” Dax asked, lowering himself to the edge of the bed the following morning.

“Why?” Paige pulled on her boot. “We both know what you’re going to do. There’s no reason to talk about it. You’ve already decided.”

“In a previous life?” Dax took her hand. “Sure. But things have changed. We’re partners now. Initially, you went on record with a resounding no. Has anything changed?”

“I don’t want you to go,” Paige sighed. “But I don’t want Sean to die because he doesn’t have backup.”

“So,” Dax bumped his shoulder to hers. “Where does that leave us?”

“You know how I feel,” Paige focused on Dax. “Tell me what you think. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t want to leave you,” Dax looked away. “I don’t want you to worry, and I know it’s dangerous over there. I also feel an obligation to Sean.”

“Right,” Paige frowned. “Never leave a man behind.”

“We don’t need to decide today,” Dax stood. “I’ve got to head out, talk to the guys, and you need to get to work.”

“I do,” Paige also stood.

“You said you had a frustrating day, but with Nathan and his news, we didn’t have time to discuss it. Did you catch a new case?” Dax wondered.

“Not a big one.” Paige slid on her jacket. “Ryan Chilcott’s field died. We don’t know why, but I think it was poisoned. I’m waiting on lab results.”

“But?” Dax moved closer and wrapped an arm around her waist.

“I don’t think I know enough about farming to solve this one,” Paige admitted. “One field is completely dead. Another field, just a few feet away, was fine.”

“Well,” Dax pulled her into his arms and kissed her. “Start there.”

“Huh?” Paige pulled back.

“Figure out why one field was poisoned, and the other is fine,” Dax suggested. He gave her another quick kiss before he walked out the door.

The instant he arrived at the training center; he called his men in for a meeting.

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“I’m going with you,” Zeus insisted.

“Well,” Dax grinned. “Since you’re now married, same as me, I suggest you discuss this with your new bride before we make any plans.”

“Fine,” Zeus shrugged. “But Carmen will understand, and she’ll agree. You’re not going alone and I’m the extraction guy. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“I don’t know,” Hawk said casually. “Taking your sniper to a hostile country also makes sense.”

“I need you to stay here, to run the business,” Dax focused on Hawk. “We have several courses coming up. I’m confident you guys can handle it, but I need you to take point, manage any problems that might arise while I’m gone.”

“I think we need to discuss this,” Vato sobered. “I’m familiar with the country. I was there not that long ago. I could help and you know it.”

“Or hinder it,” Zeus disagreed. “There could still be a bounty on your head over there.”

“What’s the plan?” Wooly finally asked. “You need logistical support, weapons, intel and a detailed mission plan with safe houses along the way. If State, the DOD, the FBI, all of them have turned their backs on this, where are you going to get your information and resources?”

“I don’t have a plan.” Dax stood and moved to the window. “I’m still working things out with Paige. Once we come to a decision, the next step is developing a mission plan. Porter will have to arrange the big stuff but I was hoping I could enlist a few members of my old team for the rest.”

“Paige is resisting,” Hawk realized.

“She’ll come around,” Dax said confidently. “We’re talking about Sean Wilkins.”

“Then let’s take a few hours and come up with at least a preliminary plan,” Hawk suggested. “Just in case we need it.”

“We’ll need it,” Zeus said confidently.

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Paige stepped into her office and dropped into her chair. She should get started on the dead crop problem, but she couldn't get past the worry and the fear. Dax was heading to Iraq. She knew she could stop him. He wouldn't go if she said no, but that would be selfish. She had to let him go. She didn't really have a choice. Then something else hit her, he'd be taking one of his men with him. Immediately, her thoughts turned to Carmen. Zeus or Hawk would be the obvious choice, but someone had to stay home to run the training center. She picked up the phone to call her friend, but stopped when she heard the sheriff call her name.

"In my office," Jericho added.

"What's up?" Paige paused in the doorway.

"Preliminary lab results are in." Jericho motioned to a chair. "They're inconclusive."

"How can they be inconclusive?" Paige dropped into one of his visitor's chairs. "I don't understand. Why couldn't the lab identify the poison? We submitted a large enough sample, there shouldn't be a problem identifying the particles."

"I said it was inconclusive." Jericho passed a file across the desk. "Identification wasn't the problem. The soil, water, and the plants all had excessive amounts of nitrite and sulfur."

"Alright." Paige picked up the file. "So, it had to be in the water, right?"

"Not necessarily," Jericho disagreed. "It could be in the soil and that's how it spread to the water and the plants."

"Which means we know what killed the field, but not how," Paige agreed. "What do we do now?"

"We need to go back out to Ryan's place," Jericho decided.

"I've gone completely over the Chilcott farm already," Paige argued. "Why go back?"

"I want a closer look at the field that wasn't impacted," Jericho frowned. "And I want to look into the fertilizer he used. It could have been a bad batch. We need better information and Ryan is going to stop all this nonsense about going to the media so we can focus on the problem at hand."

"Alright," Paige sighed. She didn't feel like they were getting anywhere, but she trusted Jericho and his instincts. Especially on this one. He was a farmer; she was a city girl. "I guess I'll meet you out there."

"First," Jericho sat back and studied Paige. "Tell me what happened. You're upset and stressed; I don't think it's this case."

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Paige sat forward and ran her hands over her face, then explained the situation, leaving out the classified information.

“When does Dax leave?” Jericho wondered. “Well, Dax and his team. Did he decide how many of the men will go to Iraq with him?”

“Who said he’s going to Iraq?”

“Sean told me where he was headed,” Jericho admitted. “I know, he broke the rules. He was worried and wanted a few things dealt with before he left. He needed my help, just in case.”

“He should have come to me.” Paige stood and began to pace. “That’s not like Sean. He knows he’s not supposed to reveal anything, but especially his location, to anyone when he’s undercover.”

“I’m not just anyone, Paige,” Jericho watched her and realized she was really upset. Was she mad Sean broke protocol or was she concerned her husband might be headed to the Middle East? “Sit down and I’ll explain.”

Paige dropped back into the chair.

“Sean asked me to handle a couple of things before he left,” he began. “He also needed me to know the details, just in case he didn’t make it out. He didn’t want his sister to get the company line. He didn’t want her to live with the secrets the way you did. Sean wanted her to know this mission was important and why he had to go. He knew it was against the rules, but he felt like it was something he needed to do. He didn’t tell you, because he didn’t want to put you in the position of having to hide things from Nathan. I know the details and you know I won’t tell anyone. So, it’s not an issue — if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I have a bad feeling,” Paige focused on Jericho. “If Sean talked to you before he left, that tells me he had the same feeling about this mission. It’s the only explanation. There aren’t many things that would make Sean deviate from protocol so blatantly. My gut says this one is different. Plus, even if Dax can find him, Sean won’t leave until he completes his mission. I don’t think this will be a quick in and out with Wilkens meekly going along. What if he talks Dax into helping and none of them comes home?”

“They will,” Jericho stood and moved to the chair next to her. “If anyone can sneak into a hostile country, locate Sean Wilkens when he doesn’t want to be found, and rescue everyone — it’s your husband. Trust him. He’ll be fine.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Paige stood. “Dax is going to do this whether I want him to or not. There’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

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“Do you want to?” Jericho also stood. “This is Sean and those military men you hooked up with can’t abandon a friend.”

“Never leave a man behind,” Paige parroted. “I got the memo, and it wouldn’t matter if it was friend or foe. Dax needs to go. He’ll say no, if I insist, but he’ll resent me for it. Anyway, I don’t think I can leave Sean over there alone. I keep telling myself he’s fine, but what if he’s not?” Paige shrugged. “So, it’s a moot point. Dax is leaving and I have to learn to live with it.”

“While you’re sucking it up and dealing with your crappy life, let’s go inspect some fertilizer,” Jericho laughed at the look Paige gave him.

“Jericho,” Margie called. “I just got another call and I think the two of you should handle it together.”

“What is it?” Paige turned and headed back toward Margie.

“Becky Giles,” Margie glanced at her boss. “She said her sunflower crop was poisoned.”

“Where does she live?” Paige demanded. “Where is her field?”

“Due east of Ryan’s place,” Jericho frowned. “We’ll handle it. Paige, let’s go.”

“I’ll follow you out,” Paige rushed toward the door.

Becky Giles' field was a repeat of Ryan Chilcott’s. The only difference was the product. Where Ryan lost his final alfalfa harvest, Becky lost her entire crop of sunflowers. They collected samples, and this time asked for a large container of the fertilizer she used. Becky had irrigated the previous day just like Ryan Chilcott. She said she hadn’t dusted the field since early spring and wasn’t doing anything different than she had before. Once they finished collecting the evidence, they headed back to the house. They found Becky sitting on the front porch, crying.

“You okay?” Paige asked, not sure how to help.

“No,” Becky wiped her face with a tissue. “I made very conservative calculations this season and cut back my crop because of the drought. I needed those sunflowers just to survive and now it’s gone. I have no idea what I’m going to do. This loss will destroy me.”

“I know it feels daunting, and it’s hard to have faith things will work out,” Jericho put a hand on her shoulder. “I understand how difficult this is. I’m going to ask for time and a lot of patience. We’re trying to pinpoint the problem. Once we know how your field was poisoned, maybe we can get you some relief for the damages. I plan to ask the courts to order restitution, but we can’t do that until we find out who is responsible. That process will take a little time. I’m asking you to support our investigation. We might come back, ask questions that seem strange or irrelevant. Don’t lose hope. I promise we are trying to get to the bottom of this.”

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“I understand,” Becky swallowed. “I trust you and I can see you are working to solve this mystery. To be honest, you’re working harder than I expected. Just let me know what I can do to help.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Paige assured her.

The instant they stepped back into the office; Gage jumped to his feet. “Boss, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“What’s up?” Jericho turned and headed into the bullpen.

“The Stewarts pig died,” Gage told him.

“Sorry to hear that,” Jericho settles into one of the visitor’s chairs. “I assume you offered our condolences.”

“The pig was poisoned,” Gage continued. “Do you think it’s related to Ryan Chilcott’s case?”

“Another poisoning?” Paige frowned.

“Poisoning an animal is a lot different than killing a crop,” Jericho warned. “What makes you think it’s connected?”

“Coincidence is hooley,” Havilland glanced up from the report he was reading.

“Yeah, that,” Paige pointed at her colleague. “Where’s the pig?”

“I confiscated it,” Gage glanced at Jericho. “Uh, I sort of took it to the morgue. The coroner’s not happy, by the way. I’m guessing you’ll probably get a call.”

“You asked Benny Park to autopsy a pig?” Jericho laughed. “I’ll get a call.”

“We need to know cause of death,” Paige supported the request.

“I agree,” Jericho nodded. “I’ll call him, explain the situation and the reason we need a full report.”

“If the pig is connected,” Paige considered. “That means we can rule out irrigation water.”

“Actually,” Gage shook his head. “It means the water is most likely the problem.”

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“How?” Jericho settled back, curious now. “I know Dave and Iris didn’t force their pigs to drink irrigation water.”

“No,” Gage agreed. “They used their time slot to irrigate a large pen. The pigs use it to wallow in.”

“They used it to create a mud wallow for the pigs,” Paige realized.

“Exactly,” Gage grinned. “It’s the only common link in this whole situation.”

“Because they wouldn’t fertilize the mud,” Jericho considered. “And no pesticides would have been used around the livestock.”

“None of the normal things would apply,” Paige agreed. “Nothing Ryan or Becky did to nourish their crops would have been used on pigs. Nothing but the water.”

“Still doesn’t explain why Ryan’s field died, but Brandon Turpin next door was fine,” Jericho considered. “And why Becky’s sunflower crop was destroyed but the Burton pumpkin patch next door is healthy. In fact, those pumpkins are flourishing.”

“I need to go back out to those fields,” Paige decided. “More to the point, I need to go walk the irrigation ditch.”

“Why?” Gage wondered.

“Because I need to understand the system, how it works, who gets the water first, where it came from before Ryan used it and where it went after that. The same with Becky. I need more information. I’m never going to figure this out until I understand it.”

“It’s late,” Jericho stood. “We’ll head out, first thing in the morning. Meet me at Ryan’s at zero-eight-hundred.”

Paige stepped through the door, unhooked her duty belt, and draped it over the back of the couch. She settled down next to it, removed her boots, then headed for the kitchen. Something smelled wonderful. The instant she stepped inside; she spotted the entire gang. Nathan and Dax were seated at the table, Sophie was standing at the stove cooking them all dinner.

“You make me feel guilty,” Paige stepped into the room. “You’re supposed to be on vacation, but every time you visit, you spend half your time cooking for us.”

“I enjoy cooking,” Sophie insisted. “It relaxes me.”

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“You don’t seem relaxed,” Paige settled into the chair next to Dax. “You haven’t been relaxed since the kidnapping.”

“Not true,” Sophie disagreed. “I have good days and bad days. The bad days occurred back home. Mostly when I was out and about alone. I feel safe here in Manti. I am relaxed. It’s the reason Nathan brought me here. He knew it would be good for me to get away completely, and it has been.” She picked up a large tray of fried chicken and set it on the table.

Sophie pivoted to return to the stove but stopped when Dax reached out and took her hand. “You are safe here. Stay as long as you need to. No questions, no explanations needed. If this is where you’re comfortable, this is where you should be. Plus, I never say no to an amazing home cooked meal. You’re a much better cook than I am and don’t get me started on Paige’s culinary failures.”

Sophie blinked back the moisture that had formed in her eyes. “Thank you,” she glanced at Nathan, nodded, and returned to the stove.

“Are we going to discuss the elephant in the room?” Nathan finally asked.

“We don’t live in a zoo,” Paige snatched up a large piece of chicken. “There are no elephants in my kitchen. I do want to discuss the reason for your visit, though. We need to go over the plan. I want to know every detail and I want a promise that you’ll consider my input.”

“The plan?” Dax focused on Paige.

“We all know you’re going to Iraq,” Paige dropped a large scoop of potato salad onto her plate. “We knew it the instant Nathan arrived at the door. Well, you did. I was still working, but since we all know this mission is a go, there’s no use arguing about it.”

“And you’re okay with that?” Dax pushed.

“Not really,” Paige set her fork on the table and sat back. “I’m not okay with you rushing into danger to save the world. I’m also not okay with Sean being out there alone, trying to rescue his partner without backup. I know you said the choice is mine and I love you for that, but we both know there wasn’t a choice to be made. Not really. So, let’s start planning an air-tight mission that brings you back home to me as soon as possible.”

The room went completely silent, all eyes on Paige.

“What?” she finally demanded.

“Nothing,” Nathan shrugged. He dropped an enormous pile of potato salad onto his plate and then sat back. “I can give you the basics, that’s all I have. Now that the missions a go, we need to hammer out the details.” While they ate, Nathan explained his ideas of how to deal with

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the situation. Once dinner was over, Dax called his men. The group discussed options until nearly midnight.

Paige needed a break. Sophie had served them all cherry cobbler before announcing she was headed to bed. Paige glanced around at the empty plates and used them as a means of escape. She gathered up the plates and made her way to the kitchen, hoping for a few minutes alone. It surprised her when she turned around and spotted Carmen.

“You okay?” Carmen leaned against the counter next to her friend.

“Can you honestly say you’re okay with this?” Paige snatched up a dishrag and started drying her hands.

“I don’t like Zeus heading into danger any more than you do,” Carmen said carefully. “But he has to go. They’d go no matter who it was, but this is Sean. Plus, I’ll worry less knowing Dax has his back. And you should know Zeus would risk his own life to protect Dax. I can’t go that far, to say I’m okay with it, but I understand. We married warriors, Paige. I support Zeus and I’m proud of him. He’s making the right decision, so is Dax.”

“I know,” Paige sighed. “I just don’t have to like it.”

“Do you think Dax likes your job?” Carmen countered. “He supports you. He’s proud of you, but every time you walk out that door, it terrifies him. You need to accept him, all of him — the same way he accepts you. You need to get on board with this, because the last thing that man needs is a distraction. Thinking you’re upset and worried, is going to be a huge distraction.”

“I know,” Paige dropped the towel onto the counter. “Let’s go back and support our warriors.”

Dax shut the door and turned to focus on Paige. “It’s been a long night,” he reached out and brushed a lock of hair away from her face. “I want some time with you.”

Paige took his hand and led him upstairs. “Then let’s make time.”

“We’ll need to leave tomorrow afternoon if we’re going to make it onto that cargo plane,” Dax warned.

“I know,” Paige settled onto the edge of the bed.

Dax sat down next to her and pulled her in for a long, intense kiss.

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It was a little after two in the morning and Paige was still wide awake, staring at the window.

Dax rolled over and pulled her against him.

“You can’t sleep, either?” she asked, turning to face him.

“What’s keeping you up?” Dax gave her a gentle kiss.

“Too much on my mind,” Paige admitted. “I can’t settle.”

“Too much personal or too much professional?”

“Both,” she admitted. “What’s keeping you awake?”

“You,” Dax whispered.

“Me?” Paige sat up. “Why?”

“You’re saying all the right things,” Dax stared at the ceiling. “When we discuss Iraq, you keep your expressions neutral, but I can see you’re masking something, and I don’t know what it is. I can’t help wondering what I’m going to come home to.”

“I—” she hesitated. “Okay, I was going to argue, but you’re partially right.”

“If you don’t want me to go,” Dax sat up. “You need to be honest about that.”

“That’s not it,” Paige shifted and leaned against him. “Of course, I don’t want you to go. I also know you need to go. I’ve been honest about that. You live by a code, one that won’t let you abandon anyone behind enemy lines. I also have a code. As much as I want you here, I also need you to save Sean — for you, and for me. I don’t like the situation, but I support the mission.”

“Then what?” Dax pushed. “Because I can tell your holding something back.”

“Superstition, I guess,” Paige considered. “Cops never say it’s quiet because the instant they do, the world gets crazy. We also don’t admit it when a case feels off. When we do, Murphy always seems to pay a visit, and everything goes to hell.”

“Something feels off?” Dax realized. “In what way?”

“I don’t know,” Paige said in frustration. “Maybe I’m just off. This poisoning case is throwing me off my game. I don’t know enough about farming, and I feel out of my element.”

“It’s not work or the case,” Dax disagreed. “It’s the Iraq mission. Why?”

“I don’t know,” Paige sighed. “I have a bad feeling. I think Sean’s in trouble and if you guys go over there—”

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“We’ll find trouble?” Dax finished for her.

“Maybe,” she ran a frustrated hand through her hair. “The whole thing feels off to me. Sean should have contacted someone by now. I know he said he’s going dark, but too much time has gone by. He should have checked in. Plus, he broke all the rules before he left and discussed classified information with Jericho. That has to mean he knew something would go wrong. Then factor in the plan, if you can even call it that. Nathan’s going to sneak you two in on a cargo plane filled with supplies. Then what? He’s working on getting you transportation, but you need to sneak into the country from Kuwait and hope you don’t encounter trouble. If by some miracle you make it to the FOB near Babylon, how are you supposed to get inside? You’re calling this a mission, but it’s a mission in need of a solid plan.”

“Alright,” Dax turned her to face him. “I understand your concern, but this is normal for us. Sure, we gather as much information as we can before we ship out; but, more often than not, we have to go in cold. I’m very good at gathering intel on the move and working the problem on the fly.”

“Sounds reckless,” Paige frowned.

“It’s not. We have a satellite phone,” he reminded her. “We’ll learn as we go, and the team will update us daily. I’m not going in dark like Sean. We’ll have constant contact with Carmen and my men. Porter will monitor everything from the best satellites in the world and we’ll be prepared for any danger that comes our way. I don’t want you to worry about this.”

“Well, I’m going to,” Paige admitted.

“You need to trust me,” Dax insisted. “And trust my team.”

Carmen’s words replayed in Paige’s head. Dax trusted her. She needed to do the same. She needed to get on board, because Dax was heading into danger, and he didn’t need to be distracted worrying about her. “I trust you and your team. And if you say this is normal, I’m going to trust that, too. Just promise me you’ll be careful and you won’t take any unnecessary risks.”

“I promise,” Dax said without hesitation. “I may have walked on the wild side in a previous life, but now I have too much to lose. So does Zee. We’ll be careful, I can make that promise for both of us.”

“There’s one other thing you need to know,” Paige took his hand. “Sean won’t leave until he finds his partner. He went dark to find the guy, he won’t just cut his losses and come home.”

“I realize that,” Dax pressed a kiss to her forehead. “It might take a little longer, but the mission is the same. We don’t leave a man behind. We’ll find Sean and the British operative, then we’ll come home.”

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“Do you think the scientist is still alive?” Paige wondered.

“It’s possible,” Dax settled back into bed and pulled Paige with him. “We’ll talk to the locals and decide how to handle that situation once we know more. Now, you need to get some sleep. You have a mystery to solve before another farmer’s livelihood is destroyed.”

Paige turned and pressed the palms of her hands on either side of his face. “I love you.”

Dax pulled her even closer. “I love you more,” he whispered before he showed her how much.

“I promise I’ll be home for lunch,” Paige insisted. “No matter what, so wait for me. I know you need to get on the road by one, but don’t leave until I get here.”

“I’ll wait,” Dax promised. “Go arrest someone. I need to pack.”

Paige was smiling when she climbed into her car and headed toward the Chilcott farm to meet Jericho. She was still worried about Dax, but something had shifted and the unsettled feeling that had been looming over her since Nathan arrived was gone now. She was going to trust Dax and his team. They were good and Sean needed them. She pulled into Ryan’s driveway and parked behind Jericho’s truck.

Jericho was waiting out back by the field. “I was thinking we should walk the ditch and follow the line all the way to the gate. You up for a short hike?”

“Sure,” Paige joined him. Along the way she took pictures and asked a ton of questions. By the time they made it back to the Chilcott farm, she thought she understood the way the system worked. “Do you want to head over to Becky Giles and go through the same routine?”

“Sure,” Jericho began.

“Hold that thought,” Paige held up a hand when Margie called her over the radio. “Go ahead.”

“Paige,” Margie’s voice crackled over the walkie. “Can you respond to the hospital?”

“Um...” she glanced at her watch, it was already ten.

“Problem?” Jericho studied her.

“Dax is leaving today,” she began.

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“Say no more,” Jericho took the walkie from Paige. “Margie, send Havilland to the hospital and tell him I’ll meet him there.”

“Copy,” Margie said hesitantly. “Um, I don’t know if it’s related but Ivy and James Rycrofts baby is sick. The doctors are running tests, but she thinks it had to be the baby formula.”

“I’ll handle it,” Jericho glanced at Paige. “Go home. Spend a couple hours with that husband of yours then meet me at the office. I’ll brief you and we’ll decide how to proceed.”

“Are you sure?” Paige asked. She wanted to go home, but she didn’t want to leave them shorthanded.

“Positive,” Jericho started walking toward the driveway. “We’ve got this.”

Paige pulled into her driveway and rushed into the house. She pulled up short when she spotted the luggage sitting by the door. Dax was already packed and ready to go. She crossed the room and settled onto the couch next to him. Zeus, Carmen, Nathan, Sophie and Dax were seated in the family room going over last-minute changes to the plan.

The group visited, planned and laughed for two full hours before Zeus declared it was lunchtime and he was starving. He suggested they order pizza and have it delivered to the house. Once it arrived, Paige glanced around the room and relaxed. Everyone here was family and they would all do their part to get Dax, Zeus and Sean home safely.

They had just finished cleaning up when Nathan cleared his throat. “It’s time. If you don’t get on the road, you’ll miss your flight.”

Dax and Zeus stood, Carmen and Paige followed them outside and waited while the men loaded up their vehicle.

Zeus tossed his bag into the back, turned, and plucked Carmen off her feet. He pressed her up against the truck and pulled her in for an intimate kiss.

Dax smiled, shook his head, and pulled Paige against him. “I’ll call you once we’ve landed and we’re safely inside Iraq. Don’t worry, I still have contacts and if we run into trouble, I’ve got a few locals I can call, people I trust, places we can hide and regroup.”

“I think safely inside Iraq is a gross exaggeration, but I’ll be anxiously awaiting your call,” Paige wrapped her arms around his neck and savored the kiss he was now giving her. He’d be okay, he had to be. She’d just stay positive, and he’d be home in no time.

“I love you,” Dax whispered in her ear. “And I’m going to miss you.” Then he turned and climbed behind the wheel.

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Carmen stepped in next to Paige and gripped her hand so hard it cut off the circulation in her fingers. “That maniac of mine better take care of himself. Otherwise, I’ll be forced to kill him.”

Paige wrapped an arm around her friend and the two women watched their warriors disappear down the road. “You gonna be okay?” Paige finally asked. “I need to get back to work.”

“Do you mind if I stay here?” Carmen glanced from Paige to Nathan and Sophie. “I don’t want to be alone right now.”

“Of course, you can stay,” Sophie put a supportive hand on Carmen’s shoulder. “Paige, you get back to work. We’re going to visit for a while, then I think I’ll make some stew for dinner.”

“Don’t wait for me,” Paige focused on Sophie. “I have a case and I’m not sure when I’ll be home. I might have to work late to make up for the time I took this morning.”

“We’ll see you when you get home,” Nathan answered. “Come on, you two. Let’s get back inside.”

Paige stepped into the office and glanced around. Jericho’s truck was outside but his door was shut. “Is he in?” she asked Margie.

“Yeah,” Margie glanced at the closed door. “But he’s on the phone with James Tolman. I don’t think we should interrupt.”

“Alright,” she settled in at her desk and opened the file on Ryan Chilcott, then grabbed Becky Giles photos. She was so focused on what she was doing, she didn’t notice when Jericho opened his door and crossed the room. He settled into one of her chairs and waited. Finally, she spotted him and looked up. “Was the baby connected to the other cases?”

“I think so,” Jericho frowned. “But James is resisting. You busy or can you take a ride with me?”

“Let’s go,” Paige jumped to her feet and followed Jericho out the door. “Where are we going?” Paige finally asked once they were flying down the highway.

“Iris said she normally breast feeds the baby, but she hasn’t been feeling well, so she decided to switch to baby formula for a few days just in case she caught a bug or something,” Jericho advised. “I asked the doctor to draw blood and test Iris as well.”

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“You think Iris was poisoned, which made her ill,” Paige realized. “Then she fed the baby, and he got really sick because he’s an infant?”

“I do,” Jericho scowled.

“But how?” Paige asked, confused. “They don’t drink irrigation water.”

“But they irrigate,” Jericho advised. “And they have a well. I think the tainted irrigation water seeped into their well and is making that family sick.”

“Alright,” Paige considered. “So we’re heading out to investigate their well?”

“We’re headed out to take samples from the well,” Jericho corrected. “Then we’re going over to the Harper place to do the same.”

“Why?”

“Because Andrea and Scott brought their six-year-old daughter into the emergency room just as I was leaving. Duncan is still at the hospital trying to get the details.”

“A six-year-old?” Paige frowned. “What about the parents? Are the Harpers sick as well?”

“No,” Jericho pulled off the highway onto a long dirt driveway. “But Angie’s condition is serious, that’s the six-year-old. Andrea said their daughter complained that she was dizzy, then she started to vomit. Scott told her to sit down on the couch, but she passed out before she got there. Then the corners of her mouth turned blue. The doctor said she was suffering from oxygen deprivation. I told him to test for nitrite and sulfur poisoning. Duncan hasn’t called with the results yet, but the Rycroft infant showed high levels of nitrite.”

“I’m sorry I abandoned you today,” Paige felt guilty now that she knew all that happened while she was gone.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jericho glanced at her. “There was nothing you could have done that Duncan and I didn’t cover. Now, we need to get samples of the well water, the soil and I think we should check the plants as well.”

“Alright,” Paige glanced around. “Where do the Harpers live? How close are they to the Rycrofts?”

“Just over there,” Jericho pointed to the west. “See that big red brick house with the large windows?”

“Yeah,” Paige took a few seconds to glance around. “Is that the backside of Becky Giles property over there?”

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“It is,” Jericho nodded. “We’re missing something and I want to know what it is. That’s Becky’s place, over there is Ryan Chilcott, and back that way is the Stewart place. Results came back, the pig died from nitrite poisoning.”

Paige turned a slow circle. “Where is the well?”

“Over here,” Jericho pointed to the south end of the property. “And the irrigation ditch is over there.”

“Yeah,” Paige moved forward to get a closer look. “But over here, it runs parallel to the well. Under normal circumstances that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“But these aren’t normal circumstances,” Jericho pulled out a plastic container. “I’ll get the water; you go walk the ditch and see where the line comes in.

“What is that enormous building over there?” Paige pointed to what looked like an industrial warehouse.

“Fertilizer plant,” Jericho said absently as he raised a bucket full of water.

“Fertilizer?” Paige said in surprise.

“And that’s going to be our next stop,” Jericho straightened. “I should have thought of that sooner.”

“It seems too far away,” Paige objected. “Even if they had a leak, that’s too far away to cause damage. Not in the sporadic way this poison is hitting the area.”

“Coincidence is hooley,” Jericho reminded her.

“It is,” Paige agreed. “Although, I’m not sure you should ever say that again. Havi can get away with it. You, Sheriff? I think you need a different expression. That just sounded wrong on so many levels.”

“You done here?” he glanced at the irrigation ditch, then focused on the plants. “They look fine.”

“I know,” Paige frowned. “This case is a mystery wrapped in an enigma, tied with a conundrum. I can’t figure it out.”

“We will,” Jericho assured her. “Let’s stop over at the fertilizer plant, then we can head back to the Harpers. I want to catch the top-level guys before they leave for the day.”

“I’ll leave my car here and ride over with you,” Paige decided. “I need to think.”

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Ten minutes later they were sitting in the executive office of Deke Morgan, Vice President of production for AmAgri-Science Incorporated.

“I suppose I should be used to this kind of questioning,” Deke sat back in his chair. “It just gets a bit tiresome. Whenever there’s a problem, the first instinct of law enforcement is to harass the closest fertilizer plant. I can assure you, we have had no leaks, any accidents, or any chemical spills in the past five years. We have strict safety procedures here at AmAgri. Employees that don’t take them seriously aren’t employed with us for long.”

“Are you willing to turn over your disposal records for the past six months?” Paige asked. “We’re looking for documentation on what happens to all the chemical waste that your manufacturing process creates.”

“I should make you get a warrant,” Deke considered. “But I’m not going to. I’ll tell Linda to pull the contract and the pickup orders for the past six months. If you need to go back further, I will make you get a warrant. Will that suffice?”

“It should do,” Jericho stood. “I know you’re busy, but it might help us understand the process if you could take us around, give us a quick tour.”

“I can give you exactly twenty minutes before I need to head out,” Deke Morgan stood. “I have an important meeting I can’t miss.”

“That should be more than enough time,” Paige also stood.

Twenty minutes later Paige and Jericho walked silently to Jericho’s truck. Once inside, Paige turned and addressed her boss. “I don’t see how they could be responsible. It made so much sense on the surface, but it took less than five minutes to see just how safety conscious they are. They could be hiding a dirty little secret, but my gut says no.”

“I agree,” Jericho shifted into gear and headed for the Harper residence. “Let’s get the other sample then we can regroup at the office. I also want to check in with Havilland and see how Angie Harper is doing.”

Paige stepped through her front door and was surprised to see Carmen seated on the couch, staring at a low burning fire. “Any word from our men?”

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“No,” Carmen didn’t take her eyes off the flames. “Nathan talked to his contact at the military base. They got onto the cargo plane without any problems. I doubt we’ll hear anything from the guys for several hours.”

“You run a good bluff,” Paige settled down next to her. “But, I can see you’re as worried as I am.”

“I’ve done everything I can,” Carmen glanced at Paige. “I’ve tapped every source I have but I can’t find any sign of Sean — anywhere. How am I supposed to help Zee if I’m completely blind and I keep coming up empty?”

“That’s not what he needs,” Paige dropped her boots onto the floor and settled back. “If you found Sean, they wouldn’t have had to go over there. Nobody expects you to locate the elusive agent. Sean is good, and he’s experienced. If he doesn’t want to be found, you won’t find him.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” Carmen asked, frustrated.

“I think what they need from you is information,” Paige decided. “They need to know if the route they’re taking is clear, or if there’s fighting in the area. Have there been any ambushes? What villages are still friendly, and which ones should they avoid? They need the kind of information that will keep them safe while they look for Sean.”

Carmen was silent for several seconds. “Why did it take you ten seconds to figure that out and I’ve been sitting here for hours and never thought of that?”

“Because I’ve been undercover and I’m familiar with Sean’s habits and his tactics,” Paige said, unconcerned. “I know him and I know Dax. I guess I know what they need. You know this stuff, you’re just not thinking straight because it’s Zeus. When Dax was missing, I had to put all the personal stuff aside and focus on doing the job. We both did that in Washington when we found Sophie. Now, you have to do that knowing Zeus could be in danger. He needs your amazing skills to help him navigate around the risks. You can do this. I believe in you, now you just need to believe in yourself. Dax or Zeus will tell you what they need, and you’ll get it for them.”

“You seem to have a lot of faith in me,” Carmen frowned. “They’ll be okay, right?”

“Yes,” Paige pressed a hand to her growling stomach. “But I won’t if I don’t find something to eat.”

“Sophie left a bowl of stew out for you,” Carmen stood. “Let’s head into the kitchen. I want a glass of wine to go with your stew.”

Paige put the stew in the microwave then moved to the fridge and started looking for a loaf of bread. “Do you know what happened to the bread I had in here?”

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“Sophie threw it out,” Carmen said absently. “She bought some fresh rolls. They’re over here.”

“Why did she throw my bread away?” Paige shut the fridge and retrieved her stew before settling in at the table.

“You stored the bread on the same shelf as that ancient bottle of lemon juice,” Carmen complained. “The lemon juice leaked, and the liquid was directed around that old bottle of pickles and seeped into the bread. It was ruined, so Sophie threw it out.”

Paige started at her friend. “I need to take a drive.”

“Eat first,” Carmen insisted. “Whatever epiphany you just had can wait.”

“But—” Paige began.

“If you eat first, I’ll go with you,” Carmen offered. “And you can explain why you think you just discovered the cure to cancer.”

“Not cancer,” Paige took a huge bite of stew. “I just figured out why only some of the fields were impacted and others were left healthy and untouched.”

“Soggy bread solved the mystery?” Carmen scowled. “How?”

“The unaffected fields were blocked by a large jar of pickles,” Paige grinned.

“I have no idea what that means,” Carmen admitted. “But if it works for you, I guess that’s what counts.”

“I’ll show you once we get to Becky Giles field,” Paige shoveled in the last of her stew and grabbed another roll before she stood and headed for the door.

Paige pulled to the far end of the field and shut down her car.

Carmen wrapped her arms around her chest and sank further into the seat. “I’ll wait here.”

“This shouldn’t take long,” Paige shoved open the door and flipped on her flashlight. She strolled to the edge of the field, looking for the junction where the irrigation water left the main line and was diverted to Becky’s system. It didn’t take long. Once she found it, she crouched and studied the ground around the pipe. Even in the dark, she could see the weeds around the area had died. She was pretty sure she’d find the same problem at the other farms. Paige was nearly back to her truck when she spotted a figure looming at the back of her vehicle.

“It’s late,” Becky Giles called out. “Is there a problem?”

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“Can you tell me about that area back there?” Paige joined her and pointed the beam of her flashlight to an empty field that bordered a wild looking area full of tall weeds.

“There’s not a lot to tell,” Becky frowned. “The irrigation water comes in back there. I haven’t done anything with that field because there’s a vein of rock that runs through it. I’m told it flows all the way to those hills over there.”

“So, the other farmers in the area probably have an area that’s been left untouched just like you?”

“Sure, if their place runs along the line of bedrock like mine,” Becky confirmed. “There are stories of old timers trying to break through the rock but as far as I know, they all failed. What’s going on?”

“I think someone poisoned your field with the irrigation water,” Paige told her. “Not from the main line, or even the main ditch, which is why your neighbor’s pumpkin patch is fine. There’s some kind of poisonous leak between the main line and your ditch. When the water flowed over the contaminants, it picked them up and deposited them into your field, killing your sunflowers.”

“Poison from where?” Becky wondered.

“I’m still working on that,” Paige admitted. “It’s late, you go back inside. I’ll be in touch.”

“Didn’t you need to make another stop,” Carmen asked when Paige pulled back onto the highway, headed toward home.

“I changed my mind,” Paige told her. “It’s late, I need to get you home so you can rest, and I want to see if I can find a geological map of the area.”

“I can find you one,” Carmen offered. “What are you looking for?”

“Becky said there’s a vein of rock that runs through her property all the way to the hills back there. I need to see exactly where that vein is.”

“Now I get it,” Carmen said in understanding. “The soggy bread theory.”

“Exactly,” Paige grinned.

“Jericho,” Paige joined her boss on the edge of Ryan Chilcott’s field.

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“Paige,” Jericho glanced at her. “You ready to take a walk?”

“First, I need to show you something,” Paige pulled out a large printout of a map and spread it out on the hood of Jericho’s vehicle.

“You’ve been busy,” he glanced at her. “Guess that’s what happens when your man goes out of town.”

“Something like that,” Paige ignored him. “I’ve marked the Chilcott farm, Becky Giles place, the Stewarts where the pig died, the Rycroft infant incident, and the Harpers. Any word on their daughter?”

“Yeah,” Jericho said absently studying the map. “Uh, Havilland said she’s improving but they want her to remain in ICU for another day or so. Explain your conclusions, here.”

“I think the poison is coming from this field,” Paige pointed to a parcel that connected with each of the victim’s property line. “I also think the bedrock beneath the surface is blocking the hazardous waste from settling on some farms and diverting it to these others.”

“And this overlay is a map of the bedrock that runs through this area all the way to the hills?” Jericho pointed at a blue line that crossed over several property lines.

“It is,” Paige sighed.

“That would explain why some fields are impacted and others are not,” Jericho agreed.

“Now we just have to find out where the hazardous material is coming from and who is putting it there,” Paige said, frustrated.

“We’re here,” Jericho started down a dirt trail that ran along Ryan Chilcott’s ditch. “I want to walk the property like we planned and venture over to that empty lot. Let’s see if we notice anything unusual. We’ve been all over the property and the city irrigation system. Let’s go test your theory and see if anything jumps out.”

“Okay,” Paige joined him. “I’m game.”

“Have you heard from the boys?” Jericho asked casually. “The ones that aren’t on a top-secret mission to save the fed who didn’t go into a foreign county under questionable circumstances?”

“No,” Paige grinned. “But they won’t touch down until around noon our time — which should be about ten o’clock at night in the Middle East — specific location unknown.”

“You stick to that story, kid,” Jericho grinned. “Will they call to let you know everything’s on track?”

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“Dax said he would,” Paige studied the ground next to the irrigation ditch where the pipes split off from the primary system into Chilcott’s ditch. He had the same black gooeey dirt and dead weeds that Becky had. “Anyway, I don’t know how often he’ll be able to call, but I think he’ll at least touch base with me tonight. They can’t risk having the call intercepted by the wrong people.”

“Regardless of what we are doing at the time,” Jericho looked out over the weed infested field at the center of all this mess. “Take the call. It’s important.”

“Thanks,” Paige also stopped to study the field. “What do you think?”

“I think Dean’s been playing with that drone we purchased,” Jericho pulled out his phone. “Now feels like the perfect time to test it out, see if that fancy camera works.”

“Good idea,” Paige agreed. “I’m going to walk a bit. When I see Dean headed this way, I’ll come back.”

“You ready for this?” Zeus asked once the plane began it’s decent.

“The instant we touch down, exit the plane like we belong,” Dax instructed. “Nathan said he arranged for a Humvee and it should be parked at the airport. We get in, grab the keys, and get out as quickly as possible. Once we get on the road, we don’t stop for anyone or anything. The locals will be used to that.”

“It’s dark,” Zeus shrugged. “I bet nobody even notices we’re there.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” Dax gathered up his supplies and impatiently waited for the plane to land.

The two men exited the plane and stood on the isolated runway, each one deep in thoughts of the last time they were here.

“Just as I remember,” Zeus motioned to a man in camo approaching them. “Hot and dusty.”

The man reached out and handed him a set of keys. “Compliments of the general. Humvee’s waiting over there.” He pointed to the left, several yards from the runway.

“Thanks,” Dax accepted them, then turned to Zee. “Let’s go.”

Zeus dropped his bag into the back and slid into the passenger’s seat. “Let’s see if we can get out of the airport.”

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“The security’s not that tight,” Dax put the vehicle in gear. The exit from Kuwait International Airport was smooth and easy. Once they drove through the gate, they made their way to the highway and headed northbound toward the Iraqi border. The instant they entered Highway one, both men grinned.

“Al Hillah, here we come. I guess Porter is good for something,” Zeus stretched out his legs. “Now what?”

“I want to head to the village, see if Adnan still grazes his goats in the evening,” Dax decided.

“Good place to start, I suppose,” Zeus glanced at his friend. “I still don’t trust him, but as long as we don’t give him any details, he might be useful.”

“I agree,” Dax sobered. “We’ll just tell him we’re looking for a colleague that went missing, an aid worker that helped us out once. He doesn’t need to know we’re here trying to locate someone we care about.”

“Because he’ll try to extort us for more money,” Zeus frowned.

“Or a few more goats,” Dax shrugged. “I don’t plan to add to his family fortune this time around.”

“Yeah,” Zeus agreed. “This time, he’s going to give us something we want, and he’s going to do it for free.”

“If he can’t,” Dax remained alert, scanning the area for trouble. “We continue north. The original asset was near Babylon. The aid camp had to be somewhere near FOB Alpha. They’d want the protection.”

“They could have taken the Brit anywhere,” Zeus warned. “But I think they’d keep him close, near one of the villages, maybe headed toward Kuwait where they know they’ll find Americans willing to pay for a prisoner.”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” Dax agreed. “So, we check in with Adnan, see if he’s heard any rumors and then continue on toward Al Hillah, but we scour the villages on the way.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Zeus agreed.

They found Adnan grazing his goats next to a large palm date orchard. Some things never changed. When they approached, he pulled out a gun, but the instant he realized who it was, his entire demeanor changed.

“I heard you were no longer working for the American soldiers,” Adnan challenged. “Come, have some sharbat. Tell me what has happened, you are happy, yes?”

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“Yes,” they both agreed.

“I see your flock has grown, Adnan,” Dax observed. “I trust things are good for you and your family.”

“Ah, yes. Very good,” Adnan glanced around the dark. “My flock has grown just enough. The rest is hidden. Secured for, what do you say? Insurance. My family is grateful, and we did not bring unwanted attention to our village.”

“That’s good,” Dax also glanced around, watching for trouble or unexpected guests.

“It is good to see my old friends, but I have to be honest,” Adnan glanced at Zeus then focused back on Dax. “I did not think I would see you again, not here in my country. Why did your people send you back?”

“They didn’t,” Zeus told him, refusing to elaborate.

“We were visiting a friend in Jordan when we got word that a colleague, someone like you that provided us with valuable information, is missing,” Dax offered. “Since we were close by, we thought we’d drop in, see if we could find some answers. I was hoping we could locate him, make sure he’s safe. If not, at least find out what happened.”

“An American?” Adnan asked.

“No,” Dax frowned. “I think he might be British or maybe Australian. I’m not sure, we didn’t really know him that well. He was a contact, but we didn’t get close, didn’t become friends.”

“He’s the good friend of a friend,” Zeus added. “Our friend, in Jordan, asked us to stop in, see if we could locate this missing guy, and make sure he was okay. Have you heard anything about a guy that might be missing?”

“I have heard rumors,” Adnan glanced around nervously. “Of an American. They call him the ghost. Nobody has seen him. The villagers, they say he’s immortal and can’t be seen or stopped. This could be the man you speak of.”

“How do they know he’s real if nobody has seen him?” Zeus asked.

“I don’t know,” Adnan said honestly. “I just hear the rumors. Missing food and supplies, they blame the ghost. It scares them. They fear what they cannot see.”

“And these rumors,” Dax said casually. “Do they put this ghost in a specific region or does he travel all over?”

“Mostly around Al Difar,” Adnan pointed north. “I heard the thefts occur at night, under the cover of darkness when most of the villagers have settled in for the night. Some claim he snuck

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in, right under their noses, while family and friends socialized on the roof, smoking hookah and relaxing at the end of a hard day. This ghost is bold, but elusive.”

“That’s not far from here,” Dax realized. “Maybe we should check it out, make sure it’s not the missing man we’re looking for.”

“You stay tonight,” Adnan offered. “You can leave in the morning.”

“No,” Zeus held out a hand. “We need to get back. I think we should just check it out tonight, and if we don’t see anything, we’ll head home and let our friend know we tried but came up empty.”

“Right,” Dax held out a hand. “It was good to see you again. Take care, Adnan.”

“He’s watching us,” Zeus whispered. “You think he’s waiting to get on the phone and call the tribal leader?”

“No idea,” Dax ducked into the thick grove of trees and began walking faster toward the vehicle. “Let’s not wait around to find out.”

“You think this ghost is Sean?” Zeus wondered.

“Could be,” Dax shrugged. “We have to check it out, you know that.”

“Yeah,” Zeus put the vehicle in gear and pulled away. “But I’m glad it’s still dark, just in case we’re walking into a trap.”

“Let’s find a place to set up,” Dax decided. “We stash the truck in one of those abandoned huts, make sure it’s well hidden, then we take a look around on foot.”

“After we make a couple phone calls back home,” Zeus insisted.

“After we make a couple phone calls,” Dax agreed.

Zeus maneuvered his way through the rough dirt trail with so much ease, Dax realized he’d been there before. “You’ve spent some time here.”

“Yeah,” Zeus suddenly veered off the road and disappeared into one of the fields. Moments later, he bumped over a thin ridge and was winding his way down another trail, one that was overgrown and probably hadn’t been traveled in years.

“You have a place in mind?” Dax asked. “Somewhere we can set up for the night?”

“Trust me,” Zeus made another turn.

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Dax studied the area through the darkness. It was obviously an abandoned farm with several rundown outbuildings and one adobe structure that was barely standing. Zeus pulled the Humvee into a building that was missing a door and parked off to the side, in the dark.

Dax slid from the Humvee and made his way back outside. That building over there looks steady. We should be able to get up on the roof and see for miles, use it as a lookout while we're here. He stepped back inside the old building and paused at the Humvee. "There was a mission, years ago. I remember you and Narco ran into some trouble. If memory serves you were missing for three days. Is this where you spent that time?"

"Yes," Zeus moved in next to Dax. "The mission was complicated, and we ran into trouble almost immediately. I think the entire village was hot on our tail. We were speeding through farms and orchards, dodging bullets with no idea where we were going. Suddenly, Narco pulled off the road and followed a small trail. I thought he was crazy, and I was sure he was going to get us killed. We ended up here, hunkered down until we figured it was safe to bolt, and flew back to our rendezvous point like a bat out of hell. I think the extraction team had basically given up on us." Zeus shook his head, lost in memory. "That mission was close, worst Op I ever had, we barely made it out of that one alive. Never thought I'd be forced to spend a night out here again. Don't worry, we're well hidden and we have the advantage. Your right, we can see for miles from that roof but, if we're careful, the enemy can't see us."

"Looks perfect," Dax moved to his bag and pulled out his satellite phone. "You want go first?"

"Naw," Zeus headed for the abandoned structure that had to be the primary residence. "I'll keep watch while you call your cop. That way, I won't be rushed when I talk to my girl."

"I hate to break it to you," Dax followed him toward the home. It was large enough he could find a little privacy. "I'm not going to rush either."

Paige watched the drone make one last sweeping circle then start back toward the edge of the property where she stood with Dean and Jericho.

"I think that will do it," Dean said, slowly lowering the device to the ground.

"Go on back to the office," Jericho told him. "Download the footage and we'll see if it sheds any light on this situation."

"We—" Paige glanced at her phone's display. Unknown number. "Hold that thought, I need to get this." She stepped away before answering. "Deputy Carter."

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“Hey babe,” came Dax’s low voice. “Miss me yet?”

“You have no idea,” Paige smiled. “Did everything go okay?”

“Better than okay,” Dax answered, then proceeded to explain what had happened so far.

“So,” Paige considered. “You think this ghost could be Sean?”

“What do you think?” Dax asked. “You said he’s good and you know him better than I do. Would he drop down and replenish his supplies that way?”

“Yes,” Paige said without hesitation. “And, if he did, nobody would see him. Sean is quick and nimble. I don’t know if you knew this, but he played baseball in college — shortstop. He’s fit and his build is small enough to be agile and wily. If this ghost is Sean, how will you find him?”

“We’ve set up for the night,” Dax told her. “Zeus had a secret place that is perfect. We’re safe and we can watch and wait, see if we spot any movement. We’ll each get a couple hours down, then we’ll start searching before daylight.”

“I was thinking today,” Paige began.

“Worrying today,” Dax smiled.

“I was thinking,” Paige repeated. “I had this case, a long time ago. Anyway, there were four of us — me, Sean, Sparrow and Trent Brinkley. It was a complicated case and the details don’t matter, but the important part was how we dealt with being separated. They split us into twos and we came up with a code, to let the other group know we’d been there. We called it our knock. While you’re looking for Sean, take a rock or some chalk if you have it, and make a mark somewhere fairly obvious with one straight line and then three short lines the same length.”

“Okay,” Dax frowned. “What’s the message?”

“If Sean is in the area, he’ll recognize it and he’ll add two solid lines at the end. Kind of like you knock, and he knocked back,” Paige explained.

“What kind of case required you to knock at your team?”

“Like I said, it was complicated,” Paige repeated. “It’s a long story, I’ll tell you all about it when you get home. Anyway, it will tell Sean you’re there looking for him and it will also let you know he’s nearby.”

“You sure he’ll answer the knock?” Dax considered; it might work if Sean would bite.

“Positive,” Paige said confidently. “If he discovers any sign of you and Zeus, he’ll evade but if he sees that mark, he’ll probably come find you.”

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“It’s worth a try.” Dax asked Paige for an update on her case, and they talked for a little longer before Dax decided he needed to go. “Is Carmen with you?”

“No,” Paige admitted. “I’m still at work. I think she’s at the house with Nathan and Sophie.”

“Well, I better let you go. Zee’s impatiently waiting to call his wife,” Dax said reluctantly. “I don’t know when I can call again. We don’t want anyone to realize we’re here.”

“I love you, and be careful,” Paige didn’t want to let him go, but she knew she needed to.

“I love you too, baby. And same goes,” Dax told her.

“We need a warrant,” Havilland said once they finished watching the video Dean took that morning. They were all gathered in the conference room deciding how to proceed.

“For whom?” Paige frowned.

“For the field,” Jericho agreed. “We need to dig up those damaged areas and see what’s below the surface.”

“Do you think we have enough to convince Judge Potter?” Paige wondered.

“I don’t need to convince Potter,” Jericho disagreed. “I need to convince Tolman, and he’ll convince Potter. Give me just a minute.” He headed for his office to make the call. Minutes later he returned. “Tolman’s on board.”

An hour later, the group stood on the edge of the vacant field watching the backhoe driver carefully remove dirt and set it aside. When he paused and motioned toward the group, Paige and Havilland broke away and joined him next to the shallow hole.

“AmAgri-Science Incorporated,” Paige read the labeling on the aluminum barrel. “I didn’t see that coming.”

“I still don’t think they’re responsible,” Jericho joined them. “I went over the documents Deke Morgan provided. I think we need to focus on Dyna Disposal Services. The orders look legitimate, and the fertilizer plant is too strict about safety and following procedures.”

“I got the same feeling,” Paige agreed.

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It took several more hours, but they discovered over a dozen barrels, several were corroded, and the waste had leaked into the soil.

“You two head back to the office and see what you can find on Dyna Disposal,” Jericho told Paige and Havilland. “I’ll meet you there once we’ve finished here. James is on the phone right now with Waste Management and I assume they’ll be contacting the EPA.”

“That could take a while,” Paige realized. “We’ll be in the conference room.”

“Everything okay with that man of yours?” Havilland asked once they were settled in at the large table.

“So far,” Paige evaded.

“I know you can’t talk about it,” Havilland fired up his laptop. “But we’re all here if you need anything.”

“I appreciate that,” Paige answered sincerely. “So far things are moving according to plan.”

“So,” Havilland glanced up. “I already ran the property owner, on that field. The place has been owned by the Peterson’s for years. If I had to guess, some ancestor bought the place, realized it was worthless for farming because of the bedrock, and moved on. It’s part of the Peterson family trust and the trustee lives in Florida. We can dig into that deeper if we need to, but I don’t think they’re involved in any of this.”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Paige sat back. “Let’s see what we can find on Dyna Disposal Services. You identify the owners and start digging into them, I’ll look into the company itself, see if they have any complaints or if they’ve cut corners in the past, have any fines or disciplinary actions for sloppy disposal.”

They worked for nearly two hours before Jericho joined them. He advised that Waste Management had secured the area, deeming it a biohazard. EPA reps would arrive in the morning and the two agencies would decide how to proceed with cleanup. That situation was no longer their problem.

“I assume they’ll be sending in their own investigators,” Paige considered.

“They will,” Jericho sobered, “I don’t know if the state will assist, but the EPA has jurisdiction on this. We’ll offer our assistance, but I doubt they’ll take us up on that. They’re the experts in this type of situation, and we’ve done about all we can do from our end.”

“What do we need to accomplish?” Havilland asked. “I mean, today before we turn the case over to them. If they’re going to investigate anyway, what can we offer they can’t handle themselves?”

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“James wants to make sure we have a tight case,” Jericho advised. “The EPA only cares about the spill and prosecution. The victims, our citizens, are just stats to them. Becky Giles has a loan on her land and she needed that crop to survive. We’re not going to leave them destitute over this. Ryan Chilcott needed that last crop to get him through the winter. The Rycrofts and the Harpers have medical bills. James is determined to make sure our people are compensated for their damages. When I left James, he didn’t care if he had to step on some bureaucratic toes in the process, he’s going to get those people justice.”

“He’s mad,” Paige realized.

“Furious,” Jericho admitted. “He even mentioned going to the media to create public support if he needs to. So, tell me what we have and let’s get this done.”

“Dyno Disposal is owned by two cousins,” Havilland offered.

They all looked up when Gage entered the room. “The Rycroft’s baby has been released from the hospital and they’re on their way home. I told them to stop by the office and grab half a dozen cases of bottled water. If that’s a problem, I’ll replace them myself.”

“It’s not a problem,” Jericho told him. “Have a seat. That’s only going to last a few days. We’ll figure out a better solution before they run out. In the meantime, Havilland was briefing us on the disposal company.”

“First, I have more. They moved Angie Harper out of intensive care and she is now recovering in a private room,” Gage continued. “The doctor said he thinks she’ll need to stay at least another day or two but he’s confident she’ll make a full recovery.”

“Any idea how she came in contact with the poison and her parents didn’t?” Paige wondered.

“Yeah,” Gage settled into a chair. “Angie took the family pet, a yellow lab named Arlo, out to play in the field. Arlo is also sick and currently at the vet clinic. He was splashing around in a pond out back that was filled with irrigation water and drank enough to get poisoned. The Harper’s keep it as overflow. It comes in handy in years like this one when we have a drought and they’re worried about water.”

“She got that sick from splashing around in a pond?” Havilland asked in surprise.

“No,” Gage sighed. “They have an old well, out by the pond. Andrea said they switched over to the city years ago but the well still works. Angie was out in the field, playing with Arlo, got thirsty, and filled her water bottle with well water. She said she drank at least three bottles of the stuff before her stomach got upset and she went looking for mom.”

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“The tainted pond had seeped into the well and contaminated the water,” Jericho realized. “I want these guys. Whoever’s responsible for this mess, I want them to pay dearly for the damage they’ve inflicted on these unsuspecting families.”

“That’s where I come in,” Havilland straightened. “Like I was saying, the company is owned by two cousins — Kirk and Ron Hull. They both live in Laurel Bluffs and the company is right on the border of the Bluffs and Manti. Kirk doesn’t have a record but five years ago, Ron did time for embezzlement. It looks like, when he got out, he went into business with his cousin.”

“Anything on the company?” Jericho wondered.

“Yes,” Paige jumped in. “On paper, Dyna Disposal looks like they’ve been in business for two years. I think, realistically, it’s only been fourteen months.”

“Explain that,” Jericho demanded.

“The business license was issued over two years ago but I can’t find anything else on the company, no expenses, no utilities, nothing. Then, fourteen months ago, the electricity, phones, internet, everything is hooked up, and they bid on the job at AmAgri. I called Deke Morgan, he confirmed they’ve only been using Dyna Disposal for the past year. Before that they contracted with a place called Mercer out of Price. He’s upset. Waste Management has already contacted him. He said they looked into Dyna Disposal before they signed the contract, and everything checked out. He thought they were dealing with a reputable company, and he’s devastated to find out Dyna was dumping the waste in an empty field. I believe him because, like I said, it all looks legit for the past fourteen months. Two years, if you go by the license.”

“So, they’re technically victims in all of this,” Gage surmised. “Just like the Harpers and the Rycrofts?”

“And all the rest,” Havilland added.

“They are,” Paige agreed. “I don’t know if they’ll convince the hazardous waste people, but I believe him.”

“So, what was Ron and Kirk doing two years ago?” Jericho wondered. “Before they went into the waste disposal business.”

“Running a pawn shop,” Paige pulled up the information on her laptop. “The Treasure Hull. You’re Hull is our Treasure.”

Havilland just stared at her. Paige shrugged.

“How did they go from running a pawn shop to getting a lucrative contract in waste disposal?” Jericho wondered.

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“They got into some trouble with the pawn shop,” Paige advised. “It was a small business they ran out of New Mexico. The local police were looking at them, trying to build a case, when the cousins suddenly shut down operations and left town.”

“Was it a front?” Gage wondered. “A place to fence stolen property for Ron’s friends — guys he met in prison, maybe.”

“Maybe,” Paige shrugged. “I have a call into the detective that was working the case, but I haven’t heard back yet. What I do know, is while they were still in New Mexico, they got the business license and started setting up the phony disposal company. I say phony, but the company really exists. They also have a contract to dispose of used oil out of Salina.”

“They could have another dump site out there,” Gage considered. “Oil wouldn’t be as toxic so there might not be obvious indicators.”

“We’ll notify James, he can coordinate with the Waste Management on that,” Jericho decided.

“So,” Paige focused on her boss. “Where do we go from here?”

“I think we’ve done all we can do,” Jericho decided. “We call it a night for now. James said he’d bring the EPA investigator over in the morning. Once he arrives. We’ll brief him, turn over everything we have, and offer to help in any way we can. Then, I think we need to let the feds do what they do and trust James to get the victims compensation.”

“I agree,” Paige added before anyone could argue. “The EPA has jurisdiction and they’re good at this. They’ll build an airtight case and, now that Tolman is vested in the outcome, he’ll do everything he can to help those guys recoup their damages.”

“Can we ask the community for help?” Gage wondered. “A fundraiser or a drive to get them drinking water and maybe a little cash to help them get by until they recoup those damages?”

“I’ll turn that over to Margie,” Jericho decided. “She has people.”

“And those people are far more effective than any of us could ever be,” Havilland stood. “I guess I’ll see the lot of you first thing.”

“Yeah,” Jericho stood. “Go home, all of you.”

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Paige stepped through the front door, tired and a little unsettled. It always made her feel this way when she passed a case onto another agency. It never felt complete, but there was no way around it.

Carmen jumped from the couch. "I promise, I won't stay here forever."

"Stay as long as you like," Paige invited. "I know it's probably lonely up on that hill in that big monstrosity you and Zeus call a house."

"It is," Carmen admitted.

"Plus, I think having someone to talk to all day is helping Sophie," Paige removed her gun belt and settled onto the couch. "I assume you talked to Zeus."

"I did," Carmen sat in the chair opposite Paige. "I still haven't found anything but I know where they are and I'm monitoring hostile encounters in the area. I might not find our man, but I'm going to make sure our warriors are safe while they look."

"Sounds good," Paige sat back, exhausted.

"You look tired," Carmen realized. "Rough day?"

"Not bad," Paige sighed. "I think it's the stress and the worry. It's taking a toll."

"Me too," Carmen focused on the window. "But we talked to them. They're doing okay and Zeus said you gave them an idea of how to find Sean. Hopefully, it won't be much longer and then all of them will be home where it's safe."

They both glanced up when Nathan stepped into the room. The three of them talked for a while before Sophie informed them dinner was ready. They had a comfortable dinner together and Paige couldn't help thinking this felt like family. Once they cleaned up, the group settled back into the living room where Paige told them about her case.

"That's awful," Sophie finally said. "I hope our government will do the right thing and take care of those poor people that have suffered so much over this."

"I think James Tolman will make sure of that," Paige smiled.

"It's getting late," Nathan stood and held out a hand for Sophie. "I think we're going to turn in. With any luck, the boys will have news by morning."

"I hope so," Carmen also stood. "I didn't sleep well last night. I think I'm going to bed as well."

Paige watched Nathan and Sophie disappear down the hall and Carmen ascend the stairs that led to her room. Once they were gone, she sprawled out on the couch and pulled a thin

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blanket over her. She'd get up, go to her own room... in a while. It took less than five minutes for her to drift off to sleep.

"You know," Zeus finally spoke. "The past couple months, I was starting to think I missed this — the adventure, the excitement, the thrill of the chase." It was late afternoon, and they were making their way back to the hidden location they had set up their base camp. They were both tired, dirty, and miserable. Once they spoke with their wives, they took turns sleeping while their partner guarded their position. Then, just after dawn, they headed out in search of Sean willing to put Paige's secret code to the test. They still didn't trust Adnan, but it looked like — so far — he'd kept their presence a secret. None of the villagers seemed to notice two strangers wandering around the neglected farms.

"And now?" Dax left the overgrown path, wiped the sweat from his forehead, took a few steps to the left, and marked another abandoned building with the symbols Paige had instructed.

"Now," Zeus grinned. "I'm traipsing through this powdery crap the locals call sand, exhausted and hungry, marking buildings that are barely standing with a stick of chalk and thinking just how good it would feel to sleep in my own bed, next to the woman I love."

"Yeah, the simple life sounds pretty good about now," Dax agreed.

"We're good at what we do," Zeus finally added. "But I think we're getting too old for this nonsense. I remember when I could walk for days, hyped up on adrenaline and anticipation, only stopping because I knew I had to. Now? We've spent one day out in the sun, the sand, and the filthy air — and, I can't wait to get back, scarf down a quick meal and crash."

"That sounds like a plan," Dax marked another building. "I'll take first watch tonight. We'll take a few hours down, then come back out and see if our elusive Sean Wilkins knocked back."

"You do realize there's not even a hint of evidence a man or a ghost has been living in this area," Zeus warned. "We've walked for miles today and I haven't seen one footprint, one broken branch, one waded down field."

"Do you think a ghost would leave a print?" Dax wondered.

"If the ghost were human?" Zeus growled. "Yes."

"Paige said Sean's good," Dax disagreed. "At hiding and tracking. I think he'd know what signs you were looking for and he'd make sure he didn't leave any. I'm not ready to give up, not yet. We head back to base, regroup, have dinner, and get a few hours rest. Then we come back

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out and check the code. If we still don't see any sign of Wilkens, we'll camp here one more night and move on."

"I can live with that," Zeus decided. "I'll pull out the map, see if I can find a good place to hole up on our next leg."

Paige pulled into the lot of the Chevron and sighed. She felt guilty about it, but she longed for something big to happen. An interesting, or even dangerous, case that would take her mind of Dax, Zeus and the mission to find Sean. The day was dragging, and she still had three hours before she could check off duty and head home. Then what? Another night sleeping on the couch because she couldn't bear to sleep in her own bed without her husband. She was pathetic. Frustrated and restless, she shoved open the door and headed inside to deal with another routine, mundane call. This one was a gas theft. The one before this? Graffiti on a white vinyl fence near the skateboarding park.

"Sorry," Denise said the instant Paige stepped inside the building. "I know this is stupid, but I had to call it in." She gave Paige the details of the theft.

Three hours and twelve minutes later, Paige finally checked off duty and headed home. She stepped inside the house, expecting a repeat of the previous evening. Instead, she found Carmen and Nathan hunched over a computer reading through a lengthy report. "Honey, I'm home." Paige called out.

Nathan looked up, ignored the comment, and returned his focus to the report. Carmen stood and approached Paige. "I found something." She was clearly excited, but also a little apprehensive.

"What did you find?" Paige removed her coat and crossed the room, stopping directly behind Nathan.

"A report," Carmen advised. "There was shooting in the area, just outside of Babylon."

"Recently?" Paige pulled up a chair.

"Yes," Carmen told her. "About a week ago. The team that went in says there was some chatter about a man attempting to rescue another man that was being held for ransom. Militants in the area frequently kidnap anyone they think will get them money. There was a gun battle in Al Difar. Some villagers were injured, and two members of the militant group were killed. The locals believed the other man was badly injured. The soldiers that were sent in to investigate couldn't confirm any of it. They also didn't locate anyone being held against their will."

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“And the villagers wouldn’t talk because they were afraid it would endanger their family,” Paige realized. “There’s really no way to know how much of that report is factual and how much they fabricated to make the soldiers go away.”

“I agree,” Nathan turned. “Read it, then I want to look into this a little closer. I have other databases I can tap, other resources where we can try to piece this together. How’s the case?”

“I don’t have a case,” Paige sat back in her chair. “The investigator for the EPA arrived this morning. It took less than an hour to brief him on our findings and then get ceremoniously dismissed. It’s fine, I expected it. And, Tolman said he’s not going anywhere. He’s inserting himself where he can — to make sure restitution is part of the deal. It’s the best we can hope, I suppose.”

“But not very satisfying,” Nathan said in sympathy. “No, but this gives me something to focus on.” The three of them worked for another two hours before Sophie insisted they had to stop and have dinner. Once the meal was over, they returned to the work. Nathan broke off around eleven and called it a night. Carmen and Paige worked for two more hours before Carmen announced she couldn’t stay awake another minute and headed for the guest room. Paige stared at the couch for a full minute before she forced herself to retreat to her room and drop into bed.

Paige pulled a pillow over her head and tried to drown out the ringing, but it was no use. Suddenly, she realized it was the phone, and she bolted upright and snatched the handset off the base, glancing at the clock before she said hello. Two-thirty in the morning. This had to be an emergency.

“I’m telling you, there’s nobody here,” Zeus insisted. “We’ve been walking since six o’clock this morning and we haven’t seen a single sign. Nothing fresh. Nothing to indicate Sean, or anyone else for that matter, is hiding in the trees.”

“I already said I agree,” Dax grumbled. “You don’t need to beat a dead horse. We’ll head back, grab a quick lunch, and then load up. We can spend a couple hours driving the area, then we’ll move on. I think if Sean was hiding out here, he would have responded to the chalk message Paige told us to leave.”

“Okay,” Zeus relaxed. “So, we strike camp, head further north and do this all again in the next village. We’ll continue the same routing all the way toward Babylon. There’s a tiny village, not on any maps that I know of, I think we should stop in, talk to the locals, and see if anyone knows anything. If not, we continue on from there.”

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“Sounds like a plan,” Dax said maneuvering his way through the dying orchard. It was a shortcut that led back to the overgrown trail, the hard-packed dirt masked their footprints, making it impossible for anyone to track them back to their hideout. It seemed counterintuitive, but Dax had hesitantly carved a long line followed by three short lines with his pocketknife into a tree right next to the driveway. Out of habit, he checked the simple code and stopped abruptly, shocked and intrigued at the mark that had been added. He held up a hand to stop Zeus before he crouched and studied the symbol.

“Is that—” Zeus whispered.

“Blood,” Dax nodded. “Keep an eye out. It looks like Sean was injured.” He stared at the two additional lines that had been added to the code for several seconds before he straightened and rushed toward the rundown home.

“He’s dragging a leg,” Zeus said, reading the signs before them. “So, why wasn’t there a single sign out there? He didn’t just drop out of the sky and land at the base of that palm tree.”

“Paige said he was good,” Dax picked up his pace. His gut was telling him Sean was in trouble. The two of them followed the trail all the way back to camp.

“You hang back,” Dax decided. “Maybe go check the vehicle and the supplies. Then, wait for my signal before you head up. We don’t know if he’s alone. If someone spotted us, this could be a trap.”

“Sean wouldn’t lead us into a trap,” Zeus disagreed. “But I’ll wait we can check the Humvee later. Go on up and see how bad it is.”

Moments later, Dax cautiously stepped through the door, gun drawn, every sense he possessed alert and on edge. He cleared the first room and was heading for the stairs when he spotted Sean’s crumpled mass on the ground next to the opening that was once a window. Dax hesitated and took a few seconds to glance around before approaching the body to see if Sean was still alive. Relief flooded him when he felt the pulse. “Zee, come on in. I need your help.”

Zeus practically darted inside but came an abrupt stop when he spotted Sean. “Is he alive?”

“Yeah,” Dax answered absently. “I need you to head out to the truck, get the medical kit from the back, there’s a bag on the driver’s side next to the MREs. And grab the satellite phone. We need Jeeves. He’ll have to walk us through what to do.”

Zeus dropped down next to Dax and inhaled sharply. “It looks like someone went all Mike Tyson on him. You’re sure he’s still alive?”

“I’m alive,” Sean croaked.

“What’s the worst of it?” Dax asked.

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“Gunshot,” Sean tried to shift but only groaned in pain. “You had to pick the one building that’s light years from the civilization, didn’t you?”

“Best vantage point,” Dax smiled. “Where are you hit?”

“Upper thigh,” Sean coughed out. “Water?”

Zeus opened his jug and dripped a few drops into Sean’s mouth.

“What about this?” Dax asked, pulling up Sean’s shirt and spotting the deep bruising around his stomach.

“Hurts,” Sean nodded.

“I think you might be bleeding internally,” Dax advised him. “We need to address that before we deal with the leg.”

“Alright,” Sean whispered before he passed out.

“Call Jeeves,” Dax ordered.

“Wait,” Zeus jumped up, grabbed a tablet from his pack, and connected it to the satellite phone.

“What are you doing?” Dax wondered.

“Something Carmen taught me,” Zeus said absently. “She said only to do this in case of emergency. I think this qualifies. I need to... yeah, there we go. Alright, let me call Jeeves and see if he answers. I’m putting him on speaker.”

“Hello?” Jeeves greeted hesitantly.

“Hey Jeeves,” Zeus spoke up. “It’s your two favorite people. Dax and I have sort of a situation here and we need your help.”

“What kind of situation?” Jeeves frowned and wondered what the daredevil partners had gotten themselves into this time.

“Hey, Jeeves,” Dax glanced at Zeus. “What are you going to do with that?”

“Video,” Zeus told him. “I need to switch this to a video call, Jeeves. I’m really hoping you have that ability where you are.”

“Okay, sure,” Jeeves waited. Suddenly there was a video call coming through on his phone.

“Alright,” Zeus said, relieved. “I can see you; can you see us?”

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“Where are you?” Jeeves demanded. “I know that’s not Manti.”

“Can’t say,” Dax cut in. “Here’s what I need. I have a man that’s injured. I’m going to scroll across his abdomen. I think he might have some internal bleeding. I need you to walk me through what to do to save him.”

“The crazy, impossible and often hopeless situations you two get yourselves into,” Jeeves broke off when he saw the injury. “We need to open that up immediately. He’s bleeding internally and we need to stitch that up before it gets any worse.”

“That’s what I thought,” Dax yanked open the medical kit. “We have a ton of morphine. How do I know what to give him?”

Jeeves walked him through the calculations then waited while Zeus shoved in the needle and injected the pain medication. Within minutes, Sean’s body seemed to relax.

Over two hours later, Dax shoved his body backwards until it collided with the side of the dilapidated hut. He leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and told himself Sean would be okay. He glanced up when Zeus bumped a plastic water bottle against his shoulder. Dax twisted off the cap and slowly began cleaning the blood from his hands and arms.

“The gloves may have kept the germs out of Sean, but it didn’t keep the blood off of us,” Zeus settled down next to his friend. “Jeeves said he thinks that was a success. We won’t know for maybe forty-eight hours or so, but he thinks it went well. Good call, not telling him it was Sean until we finished. His nerves aren’t what they used to be, and he was visibly upset when he heard what happened to his favorite agent.”

“I have to call Paige,” Dax wiped his hand on a disposable towelette and shoved the bloody cloth into the empty water bottle. “I don’t know what to tell her.”

“The truth,” Zeus stood and retrieved the phone. “We don’t know the details of what happened to him, but we know we did all we could to save him. The rest is up to him, but Paige needs to be warned. And she needs an update. So does Porter.”

Dax banged the back of his head against the wall again and let out a frustrated sigh. “All this only to find him barely alive.”

“It was better than barely dead,” Zeus responded. “Call Paige.”

“It’s what — two o’clock in the morning, back home?”

“About two-ten,” Zeus shrugged. “Make the call.”

He did. “Hey baby, I know it’s late, but this is important.”

“Are you okay?” Paige demanded.

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“I’m fine,” Dax assured her. “Zee’s fine, too.”

“Sean?” Paige asked, alert now. She glanced up when she heard a soft knock on the door, then it opened to reveal Carmen and Nathan. “Come in,” Paige motioned to them.

“You’re not alone,” Dax realized.

“The phone woke Carmen and Nathan.”

“Can you switch to speaker?” Dax asked.

“Alright,” Paige studied the phone for several seconds before she found the right button, then she set the phone on the bed between her and Carmen — who had now climbed in next to her. Nathan had pulled up a chair and settled in next to the bed. “We’re all here. I take it you have bad news.”

“We found Sean,” Dax informed them.

“Alive?” Nathan asked.

“Barely,” Dax told them the basics of his injuries.

“He needs a medical evac,” Nathan decided. “If he’s bleeding internally, he won’t last long.”

“He’s not,” Dax interrupted. “He was, but I called Jeeves and he walked Zeus and I through the procedure. We’ve stitched him up, removed the bullet from his thigh, and now we just have to wait. Jeeves said we’ll know in the next forty-eight hours and moving him could be fatal. We just have to wait this out and see.”

“What about infection?” Paige wondered.

“I don’t know what Nathan said to that supply colonel. but he hooked us up better than I expected. I’ve got plenty of morphine to manage the pain and enough antibiotic to deal with any infection. Jeeves gave me very strict instructions. We’ll stick to the routine he outlined and wait this out. I’m sorry to wake you all up just to give you bad news but I thought you should know as soon as possible.”

“You did the right thing,” Nathan answered immediately. “Now, let us tell you what we found.”

They walked Dax through the information they uncovered about the botched rescue attempt and the attack.

“The information would match Sean’s injuries,” Dax decided. “If he’s stable in the morning, I’ll take Zee and scout out that village. I don’t want to leave him alone for too long, but

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that's not too far away, I think we can manage it and get back before he needs the next injection."

"Be careful," Nathan warned. "If the militants know someone is trying to steal their prized hostage, they won't hesitate to attack. I think Sean is proof of that."

"I thought of that," Dax assured him. "We're not going in. Not yet. I need more information and we can't move Sean. We're going to hunker down here and monitor things while we wait for super-Agent Ghost to recover enough to fill in the details. We need to know what he knows before we can take action. I'll keep you posted as much as possible. If you hit on anything else, let me know."

"Be careful," Paige told him again.

"I promise," Dax answered immediately. "Now Zee would like to have a minute to speak with his wife. When he's done, I'd like to say goodnight to my bride and then we'll be in touch. Goodnight, Nathan."

"Goodnight, kid," Nathan stood. "I'm heading down. I need to explain everything to Sophie. I'll see you two in the morning."

Paige flipped the phone off speaker and held it out to Carmen. Her friend climbed from the bed, took the phone, and walked to stand in front of the window. She had a muffled conversation with her husband for several minutes before she walked back and handed the phone to Paige.

"I'll give you two privacy," Carmen decided. "I'll be in my room when you're done."

"Thanks," Paige took the phone and raised it to her ear. "Hello."

Dax stood and moved away from his friend. "Baby, I am so sorry I didn't have better news. It's bad, but Jeeves seemed to think Sean could make a full recovery. I'm going to stay optimistic. He's strong and he's nearly as obstinate as I am."

"I know," Paige whispered. "It's out of our control. I won't give up on him. Don't you give up, either. Tell Zeus I expect his unwavering optimism. The same as he had when you were in a coma. We believed in you when nobody else did. I need Zeus to believe again."

"He does," Dax assured her. "I promise, we will do everything in our power to help Sean pull through this. Do you think he'd leave once he can travel? Do you think he'd agree to an evacuation if he knew we'd take it from here?"

"No," Paige said confidently. "He'll stay. Even if he can't help with the extraction, he'll insist on staying. I know that makes things more difficult, but if you can accommodate him, I'd consider it a personal favor — for me."

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“Let’s just play this by ear,” Dax decided.

“Are you really safe enough to stay in one place for that long?” Paige wondered.

“Yeah,” Dax assured her. “Zeus and another one of our men holed up here for three full days before they made a run for it. They could have stayed longer. It’s a perfect hideout with a clear view of the village and surrounding area. If anyone tries anything, we’ll see them coming a mile away. Don’t worry about that. We’ve got security covered. Now, we just need Sean to fight hard and brief us on the details we’ve missed.”

“I don’t want to hang up,” Paige told him. “I know we need to, but I just don’t want to.”

“I love you,” Dax ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “I’ll be home soon. Count on that. We’ll help Sean fight through this, rescue his partner, then I’ll be home. I promise.”

“I know,” Paige whispered. “Call me when you can.” She hung up and just sat there staring at the black window. She was grateful Dax and Zeus found Sean in time to save him, but she wanted her husband to come home. Deep in her gut, she knew this had only just begun. Sean wouldn’t leave without his partner, and she was worried none of them would leave until they found the missing scientist.

Tears formed and slid down the corner of her eyes, glided over her cheek, and dripped off her chin, but she ignored them. She just sat there, silently staring at the window and the dark abyss looming outside.