

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Reasonable Doubt* *Season 6, Episode 8*

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*by:*

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Maddie sliced through the air, grinning. The sky was clear and bright today, but it was deceiving. The air was so cold, her snow pants crackled every time she shifted her weight. She was dressed in layers — thermal underwear, insulated jeans, long-sleeved turtleneck, and a heavy parka. Between that and the heated seats and grips, she was more than comfortable. And she was having a blast.

She leaned hard to the side to make a turn. The tracks slid, then straightened, as girl and machine glided over the snow packed trail. Once the snowmobile straightened back out, she took a minute to look around. She loved it out here. The trail had just enough powder to make things challenging and fun. She sped up, powdery dust burst into the air, swirled, and settled as Maddie glided over the surface. Tiny, frozen particles struck her face and settled on her arms and legs, leaving the only tracks for miles. She grinned, grateful to be alone in this enchanting winter wonderland. A thick forest of quaking aspen lined the frosty trail, sporadic dark spots peppered the landscape with knots that looked like a hundred M's floating on the horizon. The rough white bark blended with the crisp bed of snow covering the ground and the sparkling crystals frozen to each limb high above. The frozen crystals sparkled and danced in the sun, making it feel hypnotic and magical.

Maddie slowed as she approached the bridge. Memories flooded her mind, and she paused for a minute to remember. Seely Creek was frozen today. The air was sharp, and the sky was clear. Suddenly, a memory hit her, and she laughed. It was the last year she came here with Scarlett; they were racing to the lake and reached the bridge together, both determined to win the race. She nearly drove her snowmobile over the bank of the river before she gave in and let Scarlett win. It was always like that with Scarlett, pushing their limits to the very edge. Maddie always gave in; she wasn't nearly as brave as her friend had been.

She glided over the bridge and continued down the slick trail. The closer she got to the turnoff, the more painful the memories. She was crying when she reached the trail that led down the hill to the tiny body of water called the Soup Bowl. It was only a short distance from Pete's Hole. They had camped at both, depending on which was less crowded. She had spent so many summers fishing in the tiny reservoirs; hot, muggy nights under the stars, laughing until they cried; a campfire breakfast of burnt bacon and runny eggs, and a lifetime of fun. She swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat. Her heart ached for Scarlett and the time that was stolen from them. With a shake of her head, she tried to shake off the emotions — and the pain. She failed.

She pulled to the side of the trail and shut down the engine, not quite ready to descend the hill and enter the area where they had camped. She brushed away a tear and tried to regain control of her emotions while she sat there, taking in the frozen surface. She could just see the water — well, ice — through two large pines. Summers were fun, but she enjoyed the winter trips just as much. She loved racing Scarlett, nearly getting stuck in the thick snow as they sped across a pristine meadow and flying down the icy trail on the verge of losing control, barreling

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toward their favorite spot. The near misses, the laughter, the excitement, and the giddy feeling of adventure each trip brought was something she knew she would never forget.

With a sigh, she started the machine, twisted the throttle, and made her way down the hill. Once she reached the camping area, she swung her leg around, slid from the snowmobile, pulled off her helmet, closed her eyes, and just inhaled. The air was so cold it froze the tiny hairs inside her nose, but she loved it. There was no place she would rather be right now. She wouldn't stay long, not today — but she had to come. Maddie made this trip every year since she was nine. She had made it alone the past eight years, and she knew she'd make time for this adventure for the next eight — and probably the eight after that. It was her way of honoring the memory of the best friend she ever had.

A movement off in the far trees caught her eye and she straightened, then squinted, trying to get a better look. *Was that a person?* It looked like a woman. Honestly, it looked like Scarlett — but that was impossible. Scarlett was dead — murdered by her abusive husband eight years earlier. Levi Thayer, the monster Scarlett married while they were still in college, was rotting away in prison, and he'd stay there for the rest of his miserable life.

But that woman — Maddie jumped onto her machine and raced across the trail that ran around the lower section of the lake. When she reached the other side, she made an abrupt left and gunned it. Her machine lurched and whined but climbed the steep trail. Moments later, it leveled out on the edge of what looked like a small meadow between the trees. The tracks continued across the opening and disappeared back into the trees, following a distinct and well defined drainage. Maddie scanned the area and thought she spotted the snowmobile darting through the trees on the way back to the main road. The woman was racing away, recklessly flying over the wet, fluffy snow with so much speed, she looked like she was about to lose control. Maddie knew she'd never catch her. Her breath caught, and she stared in shock when the woman glanced back over her shoulder. It looked exactly like Scarlett Thayer — Carmel hair pulled into a tight ponytail, long angular face, and large walnut shaped eyes. She even managed the snowmobile like Scarlett.

Maddie blinked; certain she must be hallucinating. Nope, the powdery dust from the fleeing snowmobile was still there. Whoever that woman was, she was racing away like a thief in the night. Maddie reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone, snapping a picture before the sled and rider disappeared over the ridge. Frowning, she climbed from her own machine and began walking the area. It wasn't hard to find the footprints. She snapped photos of those as well before she straddled her snowmobile and headed back the way she came. It was getting late; she needed to reach the truck and load up the snowmobile before it got dark.

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Several hours later, she sat in the corner of Dirk's Farmhouse Restaurant. She was completely exhausted with that aching muscle, bone deep fatigue she always got after doing something exhilarating. Normally, she'd be thrilled, on top of the moon right now, but she couldn't get that mysterious woman out of her mind. She glanced up when the door chimed and spotted Gage Clayton.

"Hey stranger," Gage approached Maddie's table. "I didn't realize it was already that time of year. Are you heading out tomorrow for the annual ride?"

Maddie shook her head. "I sort of did it today." She frowned. "It's crowded. Would you like to join me?"

"Sure." Gage settled into the chair across from her. Maddie Rowley wasn't exactly a friend, but she was more than an acquaintance. "How did it go?"

Maddie frowned. "We're coming up on a decade, Gage. I thought, with time, it would get easier. Every time I go there, I just feel intense pain from the loss, and I leave sad and depressed."

"You come here once a year," Gage glanced up at the waitress, rattled off his order, then focused on Maddie. "You come out every winter, relive the past, and leave with a void that can't be filled because you don't fill it."

"What are you saying?" Maddie wondered

"Tell me about your life," Gage sat back. "Are you seeing anyone? How's the job? Give me the basics."

"The job is the same as the last time we talked," Maddie relaxed. "Except I got that promotion I was hoping for. And there is a guy."

Gage watched her face light up. "Better."

"What?" Maddie asked, surprised.

"You've been on edge and distracted," Gage observed. "More so than usual. But that changed as soon as you talked about your guy. Why didn't you bring him with you?"

Maddie sobered and thought of Jordan. "He wanted to come. He called last night and offered to head out today if I wanted him to. I just thought this was something I should do alone."

"Which brings me back to my original point," Gage raised an eyebrow. "You come here once a year and visit the one place that holds a ton of memories. Then, you pack up and leave. You never make any fresh memories out at Pete's Hole or at the Soup Bowl. Which is why,

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every year, you drive away sad, a little lonely, and empty. If you brought your guy out, if things are serious, that is—”

“I could make new memories and it wouldn’t be so depressing and difficult,” Maddie nodded. “I understand. Maybe next year.” She turned to stare out the window. Maybe it was time to make new, happy memories. Maybe she should share this place with Jordan. He would love it, probably as much as she did.

“So, this guy? Is he important?” Gage pushed.

“I think so,” Maddie smiled. “We’ve been dating for about ten months. I met him at a New Year’s celebration. We hit it off instantly and I —” she paused to consider. “I think he’s the one.”

“Then you should bring him next year,” Gage decided. “Now, tell me why this visit was different. I can tell, something has you upset — more than usual.”

“I—” Maddie glanced out the window again. “I saw something, but if I tell you, it’s going to sound crazy.”

“Tell me anyway,” Gage sat back.

“I saw a woman today,” Maddie practically whispered. “She was hiding in the trees. She looked just like Scarlett.”

“But Scarlett is dead,” Gage frowned. This did sound crazy. “Are you saying you saw Scarlett’s ghost?”

“No,” Maddie locked eyes with Gage and debated. Finally, she pulled her phone from her pocket, found the last photo, and set it on the table in between them. “She was real.”

“This just looks like a woman riding away on a snowmobile,” Gage pushed the phone back across the table. “I think your mind was playing tricks on you. It’s normal, natural even. You rode out to the reservoir where you have a lot of history, thinking about Scarlett the entire time. Once you got there, I’m sure your mind was filled with memories. Then, a woman appeared, and you thought it looked like Scarlett. Not because she did, but because that was the only thing on your mind at the time.”

“I told you it would sound crazy.” Maddie slid the phone back into her pocket. “Anyway, I think I’ll go back tomorrow. I wasn’t going to. I planned to check out in the morning and head home, but I think I want one more ride out there before I go. And, I think I’ll take your advice and bring Jordan with me next time. He’d love it out here and I need some new, happy memories.”

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“Good for you,” Gage watched as the waitress set their dinner on the table. They talked about her job, Maddie talked about Jordan, and Gage relayed funny stories about coaching high school football.

The time passed quickly and by the time they were finished, Maddie was relaxed and eager to call Jordan and lay the groundwork for next winter. She was pretty sure he’d love the wild ride through the wilderness, and she was looking forward to showing him. If they could swing it, maybe they’d even come back during the summer — for a camping trip. Fresh memories. Gage was right, it was time.

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The following afternoon, Maddie rushed into the Sheriff’s Office and stopped at the desk. “Is Gage Clayton here?”

Margie looked up and frowned. The woman looked spooked. “Gage is on a call and out of the office. Can I help you with something?”

“I—” she glanced around in desperation. This was crazy. She couldn’t explain it to a stranger. This woman would think she lost her mind. “Can I wait for Gage?”

“He might be awhile,” Margie sat back. “Maybe Deputy Carter can help you.”

Paige heard her name and glanced up. Margie was talking to a citizen.

“I don’t know her,” Maddie glanced around. “I’d rather wait for Deputy Clayton.”

Paige stood and moved to address the woman. “What if you start with me and when Gage gets here, he can take over?”

“I—” Maddie panicked. “I don’t think you’ll understand.”

“Let’s go into the conference room and we can call Gage,” Paige offered. “He might not answer, but he might. We can ask him how long he’s going to be, and you can decide what you want to do.”

“Alright,” Maddie relented.

“Deputy Clayton,” Gage answered.

“It’s Paige. Are you busy?”

“I’m waiting for Dan to find his receipt,” Gage sighed. “He thinks it has the serial number for the chainsaw that was stolen. Could be awhile, what’s up?”

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“I have a woman here,” Paige glanced up and waited.

“Maddison Rowley,” Maddie provided

“Maddison Rowley,” Paige repeated. “She says she needs to talk to you. I tried to help, but she’s insisting I won’t understand.”

“Can you put her on speaker?”

“Sure,” Paige punched the button, then checked to make sure Gage could still hear her.

“Maddie?” Gage asked. “What’s going on?”

“I saw her again,” Maddie admitted. “I went back out to the reservoir, and I saw that woman again. I have a picture — a better picture. Gage, I know it sounds crazy, but she looks exactly like Scarlett.”

“We talked about this,” Gage began. “Scarlett is gone. You need to accept that.”

“I know, but I got video this time,” Maddie interrupted. “I need you to see her. I have her face; well, the side view, but I need this, Gage. I need a second opinion.”

“This call is going to take some time,” Gage sighed. “Give the pictures to Paige. Let her watch the video and I need you to explain everything to her. I’ll connect with her once I’m done here, and I’ll watch the video and look at the pictures. I’ll call you later today. Are you staying in town or heading home?”

“I’m staying,” Maddie didn’t hesitate. “I called work; told my boss I had an emergency. He gave me a week to figure this out. Gage, I know you don’t believe me, I know you think this is my mind playing tricks on me, but I need you to really look.”

“I’ll call you,” Gage promised. “Now, I have to go. It looks like Dan found his receipt.”

Paige disconnected, sat back, and watched. She didn’t understand what was going on here, but from Gage’s reaction, it was something strange.

“I know I need to explain this,” Maddie began. “I know you need the information. Unfortunately, every sentence that forms in my head makes me sound delusional. I just don’t know where to begin.”

“Let’s start with the video and the pictures you took today,” Paige suggested. “I assume they’re from today.”

“Yes, today and yesterday.” Maddie snatched up her purse and pulled out her phone. “Do you want—” she glanced down at the image.

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“Maybe you could send them to me?” Paige provided her email address and waited while Maddie sent her several files.

“Alright.” Paige hooked her laptop to the large screen television and opened the first image. “What am I looking at here?”

“Those are from before,” Maddie explained. “Gage already saw those. They’re just footprints — from yesterday. I went snowmobiling to the Soup Bowl out by Pete’s Hole Reservoir. While I was there, I saw a woman. Can you go to the next image?”

“Alright.” Paige pulled up the next photo. It was a woman speeding away on a snowmobile. You could only see her back and a long ponytail swaying in the wind. “And I assume those footprints belong to this woman?”

“Yeah,” Maddie glanced at her hands folded on the table. “I don’t know why I took those. It just seemed — important somehow.”

“Okay.” Paige pulled up the next email. “What are these?” She scrolled through several shots of what looked like the same woman. The girl had the same dark brown ponytail but different clothing. Her face was either obscured by the trees or she was looking away from the camera in all of them.

“Those I took today,” Maddie swallowed. “The last email is the video. Maybe we could watch that before I explain any further.”

“Alright.” Paige pulled up the email and silently watched the video. The woman looked to be the same age as Maddie. She moved through the trees like she was hiding from someone or hiding something. Throughout most of the video, she had her head tucked down or her face was turned away from the camera. Toward the end, there was one brief glimpse of the woman’s face. She didn’t act like a carefree, innocent vacationer out for a little fun. Once the video concluded and began playing again, Paige stopped it and turned to focus on Maddie. “Now what?”

“Now I tell you why Gage thinks I’m crazy.” Maddie took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. She gripped her hands together with so much force they turned white.

“Relax,” Paige prompted. “Do you want some coffee or hot chocolate?”

“No, thanks,” Maddie sat back in her chair and tried to relax, but failed. Then she had a thought. She pulled up another photo, one she took before Scarlett disappeared. “I sent you one more email. Can you look at that first before I begin?”

Paige pulled it up and cocked her head, studying the image on the large screen. “It looks like the same person. They have similar bone structures. Is this the Scarlett that you mentioned to Gage?”



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“Yes,” Maddie nodded.

“Alright.” Paige pushed away from her chair and moved to stand closer to the screen. “Gage said she’s gone. Are you ready to tell me what happened?”

“What happened to Scarlett, or what happened today?” Maddie wondered.

“Let’s start with Scarlett. When Gage said gone, did he mean deceased?” Paige wondered.

“Yes.” Maddie focused on the two images. “I took that picture at the same place, except it was at Pete’s Hole, eight years ago.”

“How did she die?” Paige continued to study the images.

“I don’t—” Maddie closed her eyes and remained silent.

“I had a lady come to see me one day.” Paige settled back in her chair. “She was the sister of a good friend of mine. He referred her to me because he was stuck on another case. He told her to come in and tell me her story. This girl, she had a baby, and the hospital told her he didn’t make it. Call it mother’s intuition, call it denial, call it whatever you want, but she knew her baby didn’t die. Everyone told her she needed to accept the obvious and move on. Instead, she came into this very room and laid it all out for me. I didn’t know what to think. I didn’t have enough information to believe her, but she knew something was off. She was so certain she was right. I found myself compelled to look into it. I became invested, and I needed to get answers because after she told me her story — I had to admit, there were signs. There were things that didn’t add up. She also came in believing I would brush her off and assume she was delusional.”

“What happened?”

“I made her a promise,” Paige sat back. “The same one I’m going to make to you.”

“What was the promise?” Maddie couldn’t look away. She held her breath and held back the hope she was feeling.

“I promised her I would investigate the situation.” Paige watched Maddie and thought she had that same stubborn determination Amy had when her baby was stolen. “I told her I would follow the evidence and I would do everything in my power to determine what happened to her child. Then, I asked her for something in return. I asked her to trust me, to trust what I uncovered — no matter what that was. Even if it wasn’t what she wanted to hear. Now, I’m asking you to do the same. Can you trust me to investigate this, whatever this is, and can you accept my findings, whatever they are, and move forward knowing I took the time to get you the answers you obviously need?”

“Yes,” Maddie said without hesitation.

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“That was fast,” Paige frowned.

“Because I thought I already knew what happened,” Maddie explained. “I already accepted what looked like a logical conclusion. Then this—” she pointed to the pictures. “What happened to the baby?”

“He was kidnapped,” Paige said flatly. “We uncovered the truth and arrested a married couple who had been stealing and selling babies that way for years. We found the missing children, and we returned them to their biological parents.”

“So,” Maddie let out a relieved breath. “She wasn’t crazy. Which means maybe I’m not crazy, either.”

“I need you to tell me about Scarlett,” Paige didn’t answer.

“My dad was a photographer,” Maddie began. “He traveled to exotic places, taking pictures for National Geographic. Mom loved to see the world, so she went with him. We had some wonderful adventures. As a child, I always went with them and it was fun, planning the next great journey into the wilderness. I was seven when mom decided I needed more structure. They bought a home down south, near Panguitch. Dad cut back on traveling and spent his time exploring the Dixie National Forest, Bryce Canyon, and Zions. He was doing really well, selling his photos and they decided to stay, settle in permanently — mostly for me, I think. I went to public school for the first time. That’s where I met Scarlett. We became instant friends. Her parents were divorced. Her mom lived in Panguitch, her father lived in Cedar City.

“Um—” Paige interrupted.

“I know,” Maddie smiled. “It feels like I’m taking the scenic route, but I’m not. Scarlett spent most of the year with her mom, but she spent summers with her dad — except for one week, when she joined my family for our annual camping trip. It took us two years to convince him to give in. We were both nine when the trips started. Then, when we were twelve, her mom got married and they moved away. We were both devastated. My parents finally convinced her father to let Scarlett continue our annual camping trip to Pete’s Hole. There were several years when that’s the only time I saw Scarlett. I need you to know that place was special— to both of us. We never missed our annual trip — not once since we were nine. When we got older, we tried to visit twice a year, once in the summer and a second time snowmobiling in the winter.”

“And that’s why you’re here?” Paige realized. “To go snowmobiling and stop in to visit the Pete’s Hole area.”

“Yes,” Maddie smiled. “We both went off to college and my parents resumed their traveling. Scarlett got married, and it was more difficult for her to get away, but we always managed at least one trip a year. I always suspected her marriage wasn’t as ideal as she claimed it was, but she insisted she was happy. Then, eight years ago, she disappeared. Levi was arrested

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and all the horrible details came out in the trial. Levi was a violent, abusive husband. They had money and partied a lot and apparently, he was a mean drunk. They found him guilty. He's been in prison the past seven years for killing my best friend."

Paige frowned. "She was never found?"

"No," Maddie sighed.

"Did he ever admit to killing her?" Paige wondered.

"No," Maddie looked away. "He adamantly insists he's innocent. I heard he's trying to get a new trial."

"Does it sound promising?" Paige didn't like coincidences. Was it possible this Levi guy hired someone to come out and shed doubt on the murder? Someone that looked enough like his later wife that Maddie would fall for it. Something to consider, although that would be difficult to arrange, so it wasn't very likely.

"I don't know," Maddie said honestly. "I told the prosecutor — maybe six months ago — I wanted to know if he was successful. If he had a new trial, I would attend. Otherwise, I didn't want to hear about it, or him."

"Makes sense. So, you planned the annual trip and saw a woman that looks like your missing friend at a place that — if she were alive — she would visit." Paige considered, it was possible the woman fled, went into hiding and came to the La Sal's because she also has a connection to that tiny reservoir. It seemed improbable, with the conviction for murder — but not impossible.

"You're not saying anything," Maddie accused.

"I'm just taking it all in," Paige shrugged.

"Well," Maddie considered. "You're also not running out the door dialing the psych ward. I'm going to take that as a good sign."

"I'm going to look into your friend's disappearance," Paige decided. "There's a reason a man went to prison for murder. That's difficult without a body."

"I know," Maddie nodded.

"I'm going to pull everything on Scarlett — what was her last name?"

Maddie spent the next hour telling Paige everything she knew about Scarlett Thayer, her husband Levi, his parents, the family business, and their address in Draper, Utah. Maddie believed it was Draper Police Department that investigated the original incident.

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“Alright,” Paige sat back. “Now tell me about today.”

“Right.” Maddie focused on the image still displayed on the large screen. “After yesterday, I decided to go back out there. I felt like I had unfinished business. Anyway, I didn’t play around the way I did on that first trip. I headed straight for the reservoir. I got there fairly early and parked the snowmobile next to an area with a lot of trees. I wasn’t trying to hide it, not really. I guess I hoped, if the woman returned, she wouldn’t see it until it was too late. I hadn’t been there long when that same woman showed up. I knew it was the same one from the day before. I hid from her and took a couple pictures, then I switched my phone to video and you saw what I got.”

“Did she see you?” Paige wondered.

“Yeah.” Maddie let out a frustrated breath. “I was hoping she’d get close enough that I could basically ambush her. I was going to jump out and call Scarlett’s name, see if she reacted. I didn’t get the chance. She spotted me and ran to her machine. I didn’t stop filming until she was gone.”

“Okay,” Paige stood. “That’s all for today. I’m going to discuss this with Gage, and then the two of us will look into it. Remember my request. Whatever I find, you need to accept it. I’ll do my best to get answers, but you need to trust me enough to accept I did my job.”

“I don’t know you,” Maddie stood. “But I do know Gage, and I trust him. If he says you did everything you could, I’ll trust that.”

“Good.” Paige watched the woman walk out of the room. She settled back in her chair and just stared at the wall, considering her options.

That’s how Gage found her. He stepped into the room, dropped into the chair across from her, then froze when he saw the two images displayed side-by-side on the large TV. “No wonder she’s spooked.”

“Did you know her?” Paige asked absently.

“I wouldn’t say Maddie or Scarlett were friends.” Gage studied the images. “I met them one year while they were camping out at Pete’s. They were stranded, truck hit a rock and sliced the tire. I helped them out, got them back on the road and the following year, when they came back, they looked me up. They continued to track me down year after year. Pretty soon, I found myself looking forward to their visit. Over time, I guess they became — I don’t exactly know what. Not friends, but more than casual acquaintances.”

“What’s your take on this?” Paige wondered.

“On what?” Jericho stepped into the room.

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Paige proceeded to explain the situation. When she finished, she waited for Jericho to shut the case down before it even got started.

“There’s a reason it’s difficult to convict without a body,” Jericho studied the two images. “There’s always a possibility the missing person is just hiding. Do you know how they convinced a jury he did it?”

“I don’t,” Paige admitted. “I know nothing about the case.”

“I’d have to look up the details,” Gage said, surprised at Jericho’s reaction. “I do remember the husband said he was fishing all day at Willard Bay with a buddy. The police discovered the alibi wasn’t as tight as it initially appeared. I’m guessing they convinced the jury he did have an opportunity to commit the crime.”

“Okay,” Paige frowned. “But that’s not enough.”

“A neighbor, maybe two, testified there was a lot of fighting, loud arguments that may have turned violent in the home,” Gage continued. “Plus, she didn’t take anything with her. Her car was still in the garage, her clothes were still in the closet, and an expensive rug was missing. I think there was a mysterious trip in the middle of the night, too. Levi couldn’t account for his whereabouts during that time.”

“Any evidence there was a struggle?” Paige wondered.

“Not that I remember,” Gage shrugged. “It was eight years ago. The trial happened seven years ago, it took them a full year before they got it into court. I’m sure if we were close, I’d remember every detail, but Scarlett was an occasional friend that I sort of knew. I followed it, but I wasn’t traumatized by it.”

“I’ll call the Chief up there, see if we can get the details,” Jericho offered.

“Why?” Gage wondered. “I mean, I thought you’d start in with the lecture about manpower and jurisdiction.”

Jericho grinned. “Maybe I want to keep you on your toes. Can’t have my men thinking they know me well enough to predict what I’ll do next.”

“Seriously,” Gage pushed. “Why?”

Jericho glanced at Paige. “Because I know a little something about unanswered questions.”

Paige froze and studied Jericho. They both knew a little about that. “Do you think you can get anything from the cops up north? I mean, they’re convinced they got their guy. They put him away for life. The last thing they want is someone questioning their conclusions.”

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“I won’t know until I call,” Jericho admitted. “And they might hang up once they know why I’m calling. However, they didn’t put that man away. They followed the evidence they had at the time and the prosecutor decided he had enough to proceed. If I need to, I’ll get James to help.” He turned to Gage. “Why don’t you head home? It’s been a long day and tomorrow might be even worse.”

“Paige?” Gage glanced at his partner. “She came on before me this morning.”

“I’m right behind you,” Paige assured him. “I need to talk to Jericho about something personal. It will only take a minute. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Once Gage left, Jericho turned to Paige. “Have you talked to Stan Donaldson lately?”

Paige shook her head. “I think he’s avoiding me. Every time I see him, he gets all nervous and tries to mask it with annoyance. Then, he walks away. I know Tolman wants to handle this, but I think he’s getting suspicious. He really needs to put the poor guy out of his misery.”

“I agree,” Jericho leaned against the door jamb. “And I told him that this morning. He says he needs to confirm one last thing before he confronts Stan with the evidence. I’m worried he might fire the guy and I’m not convinced the kid deserves it.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Let’s just wait,” Jericho decided. “We’ll let this play out and decide our next move once James makes his decision.”

“Alright,” Paige shut down the computer and gathered up the notes she took during her meeting with Maddie. “What about this case? You seemed to jump onboard the Maddie train quicker than usual.”

Jericho shrugged. “Like I said, I understand how it feels to have unanswered questions. I also don’t like making assumptions. Everyone assumed that girl was dead, but a missing rug and a fishing trip doesn’t check all the boxes for me. Especially after seeing those photos.”

“Well,” Paige headed for the door. “Wait until you watch the video.”

“What’s your gut saying?” Jericho flipped off the lights and followed Paige to the parking lot.

“Mostly that I’m starving,” Paige laughed. “But there’s a little niggling feeling of doubt in there. I can’t say we’re standing on solid ground with the — I don’t even know what to call it, possibility, I guess. There’s a possibility the woman is still alive. She was in an abusive relationship and there are underground organizations that help with that sort of thing. If she did escape, why stage the house to look like he killed her? Did she hate him that much? Was she just a vindictive human being? What?”

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“Maybe she just wanted to make sure nobody ever went looking for her,” Jericho shrugged.

“Like that movie,” Paige considered. “The one with Julia Roberts. She faked being afraid of the water so she could swim away and make it look like she drowned. She thought nobody would look, but Mr. Monster ran into the wrong person and the gig was up. If that was Scarlett, she made the same mistake. She went somewhere she shouldn’t have and ran into the wrong person. If she’s alive, she may have just flushed all that hard work down the proverbial toilet.”

“If,” Jericho pulled open his door. “Go home, spend some quality time with that husband of yours. I’m late for a date.”

“Harper?” Paige asked, knowing the answer.

“You know it is,” Jericho climbed behind the wheel.

“Things are going well, then?” Paige wondered how long that would last.

“They are,” Jericho studied Paige. “Is that a problem?”

“Not for me,” she shrugged. “I like Harper and I can see she likes you. Unfortunately, that’s all going to change when she discovers you had her investigated. She might be willing to forgive that, but your lack of honesty about the whole thing is going to catch up to you. Come clean, Sheriff. She might throw a coffee mug at you, but she’ll eventually forgive you. If someone else rats you out, I guarantee your toast.”

“I have an idea,” Jericho gripped his door. “You handle your domestic affairs and let me handle mine.”

“I will,” Paige stepped back. “As soon as you start handling them.” She frowned when Jericho slammed the door shut and pulled out of the lot.

“Stupid, stupid decision,” Paige mumbled all the way to her own vehicle.

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“So,” Dax dropped into a patio chair. “Why did you summon me to the back porch?”

“It’s never easy with you, is it?” Nathan settled across from him. “I simply asked if I could talk to you.”

“Alright,” Dax sobered. Nathan was unusually serious. “What’s going on?”

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“Sophie and I have imposed on your hospitality long enough,” Nathan stared off into the distance. “It makes little sense to head back to Virginia. We’d just need to turn around and come back in time for Thanksgiving.”

“Then stay,” Dax shrugged. “It’s not a problem. We’re happy to have you.”

Nathan ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I have no idea what I’m supposed to do here.”

“Tell me what’s going on?” Dax studied Nathan. He’d never seen him like this before.

“Sophie is still struggling,” Nathan admitted. “She tries to put up a good front but just the mention of returning home sets her off. Her hands start shaking and she has to turn around so she can try to hide the tears she insists on fighting.”

“She doesn’t feel safe there,” Dax nodded. “She feels safe here. Just another reason to stay a little longer. Plus, Paige will probably fly to Virginia and drive you back herself if you try to miss the holidays.”

“She insists on leaving,” Nathan turned back. “Sophie can’t deal with the slightest suggestion that we go home, but she feels like a burden — to you and Paige. I’m stuck. I can’t stay here, and I can’t go home. I broached the subject of a hotel, but Sophie won’t have that either. She thinks it will hurt Paige’s feelings.”

“It would,” Dax said immediately. “I have another option, if you want it.”

“I’m open to anything at this point,” Nathan admitted.

“Carmen and Zee have moved into their new home. We completed the purchase on Carmen’s old place, the Pearl Ledbetter’s home. She’s happy, the funds will pay for her housing for years and now we have a place we control where guest speakers and wayward generals can crash while they’re in town. It’s yours, if you want it. It’s not the Ritz-Carlton, but it’s comfortable.”

“You’re sure it’s available?” Nathan questioned.

“We just finalized the sale,” Dax stretched out his legs and shifted in his seat, his arm was still bother him where he’d been shot — well, grazed. “The plan is to renovate after the first of the year. None of us want to deal with that during the holidays. Come January, we thought we’d start looking for contractors and schedule a few bids. There’s no chance we’ll do anything with that place for three, maybe four months. Realistically, it could be longer.”

“That would solve the immediate problem,” Nathan sighed “Do you need to speak with the others first?”



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“Nope,” Dax stood when he heard a car pull in. “That sounds like Paige. Let’s get you the keys, then we can break the news.”

Nathan stood. “One question. Why aren’t you doing the work yourself?”

“Time,” Dax stepped into the kitchen. “Between the training center and this old general that keeps sending me out of town—”

“That’s going to stop,” Nathan promised.

Dax glanced back, surprised. “Sounds like we need to have another conversation.”

“Sophie’s not the only one evaluating her life choices — and her future.”

“What does that mean?” Dax wondered. They both glanced up when Paige stepped into the room.

“You look —” Nathan cocked his head to the side. “I’m not sure. I was going to say tired, but that’s not accurate.”

“Perplexed,” Paige draped her coat over the back of the chair.

“New case?” Dax moved forward and pulled Paige into a hug. He kissed the top of her head and rubbed her back.

Paige leaned back, gave Dax the usual ‘Honey, I’m home’ kiss and dropped into a chair. “New case that is going to cause problems.”

“Before you tell us about that,” Dax settled down next to her. “I offered Pearl’s cottage to Nathan. He and Sophie will move over there. They’re going to remain here through Thanksgiving, and they might extend their vacation and hang out until after Christmas.”

“I didn’t say—” Nathan began.

“Sounds like an excellent idea,” Paige pointed to the wall next to the fridge. “The keys are on that hook. If you can wait until the weekend, we’ll help you move.”

“Now that we settled that,” Dax sat back. “Tell us about the new case.”

Paige did. She told them about Maddie’s trip, the husband, and Jericho. Both of them agreed with her, Jericho needed to come clean with Harper.

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“Meeting in the conference room in ten,” Jericho announced before stepping into his office.

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“That means you, Clayton,” Paige stood and grinned.

“That means you, Carter,” Gage grabbed a notepad and headed for the conference room.

They both settled into a chair and waited for Jericho to return.

“I talked to Chief Bonner up in Draper,” Jericho settled across from his deputies.

“How did that go?” Paige wondered.

“He was less than enthusiastic at first,” Jericho admitted. “Once I emailed him the photos, he agreed the two women looked similar enough we had to look into it. He still insists our mystery woman is not Scarlett Thayer because Scarlett is dead, but he won’t interfere.”

“Did he agree to send a copy of the full report?” Paige wondered.

“He did,” Jericho sat back. “He said the full report is over two hundred pages so it’s going to take some time. Once Margie gets the report, she’ll print out several copies.”

“I’d like her to email it to me as soon as it comes in,” Paige decided. “I can start reading the electronic copy while I wait for the hard copy.”

“Go ahead and let her know,” Jericho nodded. “I’ll wait.”

Paige returned and settled back into her chair. “Where do we go from here?”

“I want you to start contacting snowmobile rental agencies and see if you can get a list of people that rented machines the past week,” Jericho told Paige. “Gage, you contact motels and hotels. See if they’re willing to give you a guest list and we’ll compare the two and see if we can get a match. I doubt she used the name Scarlett Thayer, so we’re looking for an alias.”

“The report came through,” Margie said from the door. “I forwarded the email to all of you.”

“I’ll take both the hotels and the snowmobile rental companies,” Gage offered. “Paige, you read through the report and see if you identify any leads.”

“Does that work for you?” Paige asked Jericho.

“It’s your case,” Jericho decided. “Work it however you think is best. What do you need from me?”

“Let us work through this,” Paige decided. “I think what we need from you is influence. If I find anything, it might help if you handle all contact with Draper PD. You’ve already had the initial discussion; the Chief up there might be more cooperative if we continue along those lines.”

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“I can do that,” Jericho agreed. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything.”

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Several hours later, Paige stepped into Jericho’s office. “Hey, boss—” she stopped abruptly when she spotted Jericho standing in front of the window. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, what’s up?” Jericho turned to face her.

“This can wait,” Paige moved forward and leaned against the sill of the window. “What’s going on? It doesn’t have to be work related; you know that.”

“I don’t know how to talk to you about this,” Jericho admitted.

“This is about Harper,” Paige realized. “Let me guess, you’ve finally realized that your attractive, brilliant, deputy was right all along, and you need to come clean but now you don’t know how.”

“When I lost your mother—” Jericho began.

“Wait,” Paige held up a hand. “I think I understand. You don’t know how to talk to me about this because you care about Harper. I mean, you really care about her. If you think I won’t support that—”

“I was in love with your mom, Paige,” Jericho settled into his chair. “I truly believed I would love her for the rest of my life. I never expected to feel, even a portion of what I felt for Chaya for anyone else.”

“I never wanted you to live your life alone,” Paige moved to one of his visitor’s chairs. “Mom wouldn’t want that either. She wouldn’t want you to close yourself off and stop living. She would want you to love again, Jericho. She wouldn’t want you to waste away, sad and lonely, wallowing in grief. She wouldn’t want you to die a miserable old man who spent the rest of his solitary life unhappy and depressed. I don’t want that for you, either. If Harper makes you happy, that’s a good thing.”

“Is it?” Jericho sighed. “Because every time I see her, I have this annoying voice in my head that sounds an awful lot like you, telling me to come clean. I think you’re right. I need to tell her I had her investigated. I’m worried I waited too long and now it’s going to be a problem.”

“You’re making this too big,” Paige decided. “Just tell her, and make it sound normal. Just casually mention that you had her investigated. Tell her you did it because of your job and some of the problems you’ve had in the past. Just make it sound like we all do it.”

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“She’s going to see right through that,” Jericho insisted.

“You think Nathan didn’t investigate Dax?” Paige countered. “It is normal. You just have to help her see that.”

“Maybe,” Jericho sighed. “Enough about that, what do you have? Did you find something that we need to follow up on?”

“I want to take the time to read this report more thoroughly,” Paige shuffled through some papers until she found the one she wanted. She’d let the personal stuff go for now, at least Jericho was coming around to her way of thinking. Hopefully, he’d take that next step before it was too late. “Okay, here’s the part I want. Draper didn’t find a body, but there were red flags. It’s the reason they could get a conviction. I’ll give you the condensed version. Several neighbors testified there was a history of fighting at the house. They didn’t know how serious it was, but it did get loud — loud enough that a few months before her disappearance one of them called the police. The cops arrived, and both parties said they were fine and there wasn’t a problem.”

“I assume there was no evidence of violence?” Jericho wondered.

“No,” Paige agreed. “So, a few months go by with no further incidents. On the day Scarlett disappeared, her husband, Levi, goes fishing with a friend at Willard Bay. He claims he was there all day and his friend, says a guy by the name of Jason Davis was with him the entire time. That was his first mistake. He lied. Investigators discovered Jason Davis was having an affair, and he left Willard Bay for a couple hours to see his mistress.”

“Okay,” Jericho made a note on his pad. “But one lie didn’t get him convicted of murder.”

“No, but it helped,” Paige insisted. “Prosecutors claimed that gave him opportunity.”

“Well, they still needed motive and means,” Jericho argued.

“That’s where they lose me,” Paige admitted. “I don’t see any motive. Sure, you have a history of marital problems. And this Levi guy was wealthy, so he probably had the means. But they couldn’t prove Levi’s car ever left the parking lot. There weren’t any cameras in the area so he could have, though. That gives his story doubt, but it’s a pretty big jump to premeditated murder. After all this time, the husband still insists he never left. He said he was fishing all day and returned home at around eight o’clock that night.”

“I’m still wondering how they got a conviction,” Jericho questioned.

“I’ll get to that,” Paige promised. “Here’s the thing. The motive, according to the prosecutor, was domestic violence. I’m not buying it. They had several arguments but all of them

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occurred when Levi was drunk. Witnesses testified he was a great guy unless he was drinking, and several people admitted he was a mean drunk.”

“Was he drunk that day?”

“Nope,” Paige said confidently. “His friend, this Jason guy, said they drank a couple beers, but that’s it. He says they had a whole cooler full of beer, but Levi got a mild case of sunstroke that day. Davis said Levi developed a headache and stopped drinking because the alcohol would make it worse. Davis claimed he drank more than Levi Thayer did that day.”

“Well,” Jericho considered. “That brings the motive into question. If the motive was an argument gone bad.”

“I agree,” Paige frowned. “So, Levi gets home to find police at his house.”

“Already?”

“Yeah,” Paige smiled. “Odd, right? The police wanted to question Levi, and they asked him if he was impaired. Levi told them he’d had a couple beers that day, so they did a blood draw. He wasn’t impaired. His alcohol level came back as a .03.”

“Who called the cops and why?” Jericho demanded.

“A woman by the name of Leslie Davis made the call,” Paige flipped through the pages for a second, then grabbed the one she was looking for. “In her original statement she says Scarlett called her the night before crying and said she was afraid, and she needed to get out. She claims Scarlett was threatening to leave Levi because she couldn’t take the volatile situation anymore. She said Scarlett called her back about a half an hour later and said she overreacted, and everything was fine.”

“That was the night before Scarlett went missing? Then the next day the husband went fishing with a friend?” Jericho wondered.

“That’s what she says,” Paige confirmed. “She further stated that she called Scarlett the following afternoon, the day Levi went fishing, and Scarlett never answered. Worried, after the conversation from the night before, Leslie drove over to the house to check on her friend. She said Levi’s car was missing and when she pounded on the door, nobody answered. She walked around to the back, to see if Scarlett was in the kitchen and didn’t hear the door, and that’s when she spotted drag marks in the dirt. She immediately called the police.” Paige passed over a photo that contained the marks left just outside the back door.

“Okay,” Jericho frowned and considered. “Suspicious, I’ll give you that.”

“The cops locked down the area and requested a search warrant to enter the house and check the wellbeing of the occupants,” Paige told him. “They went in and spotted a small amount

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of blood on the headboard in the master bedroom. They did a thorough search of the home but didn't locate Scarlett. At that point, they again secured the residence and requested another search warrant so they could do a thorough search and seize the evidence. They retrieved the blood and positively identified it through DNA testing. They confirmed it belonged to Scarlett Thayer. They also realized an expensive rug was missing. Leslie told police the couple purchased the rug on their honeymoon in Fiji and she explained it was Scarlett's favorite souvenir."

"So, the prosecutor walked the jury through a story of violence, abandonment and a betrayal that ended in a woman's death," Jericho frowned. "It sounds good, but when you scrutinize the evidence, I'm not sold on their theory. What do we know about this Leslie Davis woman?"

"Nothing," Paige admitted. "Once she gave her statement and led the cops down the path, she wanted them to follow, she disappeared. In fact, I'm not convinced she ever existed."

"Meaning?" Jericho studied Paige. "You said the cops talked to her."

"Let me rephrase that," Paige pulled out the sheet that had her information on it. "A person existed, but not a woman by the name of Leslie Davis. It's a fake name. I can't find anyone with that name in Utah or any surrounding state. I asked Margie to do a nationwide search and she can't find a driver's license anywhere."

"So what do we think really happened?" Jericho wondered.

"I'm still working on that," Paige admitted. "I want to read through the report again and I asked Margie to get me the transcripts of the trial. I need a little time to go over it all, maybe we could regroup tomorrow afternoon. That will give me time to look into this and Gage might have something on the rentals."

"I'm fine with that," Jericho agreed. "Why don't you call it a day and head home? We can all sleep on it and come back tomorrow and take a fresh look."

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"Okay," Jericho settled in at the conference table. "Where are we on the missing woman case?"

"I read through the report and the court transcript," Paige began. "I know that man was convicted of murdering his wife, but I'm not so sure she's dead."

"Based on what?" Gage asked skeptically.

"First, no body," Paige began. "Also—" she continued when Gage was about to interrupt. "There was violence in the marriage. However, I can't find a single report of violence when both

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parties weren't drunk. I'm not excusing the husband, violence is violence, and it's never okay. I'm just saying he wasn't drunk that day and we know that because the cops ran a test. It doesn't fit the pattern. There were also reports of her fighting back. I don't know if there's any truth to it, or if those claims were well-meaning friends and family trying to justify Levi's behavior. I'm just saying there are reports and it sounds like this could be a mutual combat situation rather than a one-sided domestic situation."

"Blame the victim?" Gage grumbled.

"I don't believe that's what Paige is saying," Jericho frowned. "I know you have a personal interest in both Maddie and Scarlett, but I need you to be unbiased and objective, Gage. You knew Scarlett, if someone hit her, would she fight back?"

Gage started to speak then stopped himself. Jericho was right, his response couldn't be knee jerk. He had to answer accurately without bias. "Maybe," he finally decided. "I could see her striking back and getting volatile, especially if she was drunk. I don't know why that means she's still alive, though. I want to go on record and say we can't give Maddie hope if we don't know for certain that Scarlett is still alive. She's been through a lot and she's still struggling."

"I agree," Paige nodded. "There's another reason I'm not sure the picture painted is the correct one."

"What's that?" Jericho asked.

"The blood," Paige pulled out a photo and passed it to her boss. Gage moved closer so he could see the picture as well. "They claimed that meant there was some kind of trauma. The working theory was that the two of them got into a fight and Scarlett hit her head against that board."

"Okay," Jericho frowned. "That looks more like a smear to me than blunt force trauma."

"Exactly," Paige smiled. "If she hit her head, hard enough to kill her, the blood evidence would look different. For one thing, there would be a ton of it, not just that little smear mark."

Gage frowned. Paige had an excellent point. "Didn't the defense have a blood expert?"

"Yes," Paige shrugged. "The prosecution explained that away by saying Levi cleaned up the blood after disposing of the remains."

"But you don't think so?" Jericho sat back.

"No," Paige shrugged. "That blood was obvious. They saw it immediately when they entered the room — almost like someone planted it there on purpose to make it look like there was a struggle."

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“You think she faked her death and disappeared?” Gage frowned. “Why?”

“I don’t know the why,” Paige admitted. “But yes, I think she staged the house to make it look like something may have happened there and she fled.”

“Then why risk coming back now?” Jericho wondered. “She got away with it. Her husband is serving time for murder.”

“I might be able to answer that,” Margie stepped into the room. She handed Paige a sheet of paper. “I just found that this morning. I thought I’d do a quick search to see if there was any record of a name change.”

“What is it?” Gage asked.

“They officially declared Scarlett Thayer dead on September 10th of this year,” Paige sat back and considered. “Maybe she decided it was finally safe to return.”

“What are you thinking?” Jericho studied Paige.

“I’m wondering if that was the trigger,” Paige glanced at her friend. “If she felt comfortable returning to a place that was important to her this year because she was officially declared dead—”

“Where else did she feel comfortable going?” Gage realized where Paige was going with this. “I’ll look into her parents. And, I’ll add hotels in Panguitch and Cedar City to my list. I have a couple of crossovers — people who rented machines and stayed in hotels. This time of year, that’s to be expected. I’ll get her parents birthdates and start with those. If nothing pans out, I’ll move to Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and any other holiday I can think of where kids might be drawn back to their parents.”

“While you work on that, I want to talk to Maddie again,” Paige decided. “I want to do a more thorough interview now that I’ve read through the report and the trail record. I have a couple questions I think she might be able to answer. Also, I want to ask her about any other dates that might be significant. If she came out here, to make her annual trip, what other events might she revisit that we don’t know about?”

“I’m coming with you,” Jericho decided. “And when we’re finished with Maddie, I want to take a trip to Gunnison and talk to the husband.”

“He’s housed out here?” Gage asked, surprised. “I assumed he’d be up north at the Draper facility.”

“He was,” Jericho pulled out a sheet of paper. “He had some trouble with a prison gang and prison officials decided to transfer him out here for his own safety.”



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“Alright,” Paige stood. “So, we go over to the hotel, talk to Maddie then the two of us will venture into the cesspool and see what we can learn from the guy that claims he didn’t do it.”

“Only, this time, he might be right,” Jericho stood. “I never thought I’d say that but, I’m beginning to think, it’s possible they got it wrong.”

“Maybe I should go with you to interview Maddie,” Gage said, worried. “She might feel more comfortable if I were there.”

“She also might minimize things,” Paige reached out and laid her hand on his arm. “You knew Scarlett and you’re friendly with Maddie. We need this to be official and I want you to remain friends once we’ve finished. I will not be as gentle and accommodating this time. I need answers and I plan to push if she tries to hide something. It’s better if you’re not there.”

“I agree,” Jericho motioned to the door. “Paige, let’s get started. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

Gage watched them go, then continued to stare out the side window. Was it possible Scarlett was still alive? Had she faked her own death to escape? If so, why? There had to be a reason she went to these lengths to get away. He considered the possibilities for several minutes, then he picked up the phone and called his next contact.

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“Come in,” Maddie took a step back and waited for the two cops to enter. “I talked to Jordan last night. That’s my boyfriend. He’s on his way out here. I tried to tell him it was okay, that he didn’t need to come but he insisted. I just thought you should know.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Jericho settled onto the lounge chair and left the two chairs at the small table for Paige and Maddie. “This situation is emotionally difficult. Having someone here, to give you moral support, it’s going to help when this is all over.”

“Did you find something?” Maddie asked, eager to hear anything new they had discovered.

“Not exactly,” Paige settled onto the chair. “Have a seat. We have a few questions.”

“Alright,” Maddie slowly lowered herself onto the chair across from Paige. “I told you everything I know yesterday but I’ll try to help.”

“I was able to get the full report from Draper Police,” Paige glanced over at Jericho. “Well, actually, my boss got the report. I also obtained the transcripts from the trial. I spent several hours yesterday and last night going over them. Now that I have a better idea of what happened, I’d like to ask you some questions. Do you mind if I record this?”

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“Oh,” Maddie looked at the recorder. “No, I guess not.”

Paige switched on the recorder and pulled out her notes. “I think this will go quicker if I just dive right in. Are you okay with that?”

“Sure,” Maddie glanced at Jericho then focused on Paige.

“Okay. The prosecution had a theory,” Paige began. “They believed that Levi Thayer was violent and that he got into an argument with her the night before, went fishing with a friend, and when his buddy ditched him to hook up with his mistress, Levi rushed home, killed Scarlett and rushed back to the boat, arriving before his friend returned to resume the fishing excursion.”

“When you put it like that, it doesn’t seem likely,” Maddie frowned.

“Why do you say that?” Jericho wondered.

“Well,” Maddie turned to focus out the window. “I told you I didn’t think Scarlett was happy in her marriage. I got the impression there were problems. I didn’t realize they were as serious as they were until the trial but still—” she hesitated.

“You can be honest with us,” Paige pushed. “What are you thinking?”

“If Scarlett was fighting with Levi the night before, she would have resolved it the night before. Scarlett wasn’t the type to placate or back down just to make things blow over, if you know what I mean.” Maddie considered. “I didn’t know her before her parents divorced. She talked to me about the way it was before they split. They argued constantly and there was a lot of screaming in that house. Scarlett hated it, but — I don’t know, I think she also learned from it. Confrontation didn’t make her uncomfortable like it does most people. She was the type of person to hash it out, get it out on the table, then move on.”

“So,” Paige pulled out a witness statement. “When this Leslie Davis person who said she was Scarlett’s friend, told police Scarlett called crying and scared, then called back and said everything was okay, you think it was okay?”

“I have no idea who that woman is,” Maddie admitted. “I was never convinced they were friends. I realize I lived in a different state and Scarlett, and I didn’t see each other often, but we talked. I don’t think she was close to that Leslie woman, and I don’t believe that conversation happened. It doesn’t sound like the Scarlett I knew.”

“Maddie,” Jericho leaned forward. “If Scarlett wasn’t murdered, if she went into hiding and the woman you saw was your friend, what could have happened that made her flee?”

“Do you think she might not be dead?” Maddie jerked her head back to Paige.

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“You thought so,” Paige said in response. “You’re the one that asked us to look into this. We’re simply asking why? Other than seeing a person who might look like your friend, what made you come into the office and ask us to help you?”

“Scarlett’s mom will no longer speak to me because I voiced my opinion out loud,” Maddie said hesitantly. “I know she’ll never forgive me if her daughter remains missing and the man she believes is a monster, is successful — if Levi gets out of prison, I mean. She’ll blame me because I talked to you about this.”

“But you know you have to talk to us,” Paige said flatly.

“It never made sense to me,” Maddie admitted. “None of it. I know Scarlett wasn’t happy in her marriage. I also know she was fearless and adventurous. I just can’t see it. Unless—”

Paige and Jericho waited. When Maddie didn’t continue Jericho asked, “Unless what?”

“Scarlett was a fighter,” Maddie admitted. “I sat through that entire trial. When Levi’s friends said Scarlett was also violent and the arguments were mutual, I believed them. I believed them because Scarlett admitted they fought. She told me on one of our trips that they knew how to push each other’s buttons and they could be cruel to each other.”

“So,” Paige glanced at Jericho. “Do you think it could have been a mutual combat situation rather than a one-sided domestic violence situation?”

“I do,” Maddie sighed. “I don’t think that matters, though. There’s no excuse that could justify Levi hitting his wife, not even once. But I suspect Scarlett hit him right back, and the fighting got more nasty because of it.”

“So, you think she hit him back in self-defense?” Jericho wondered.

“No,” Maddie looked away. “I suspect she started it sometimes. I honestly think the two of them were toxic together. I hate that man. If he killed Scarlett, I will never forgive him and I will hate him for the rest of my life. But I have to be honest. It’s the only way I can accept what happened and move forward. I know Scarlett had a temper. She unleashed it on me more than once. We worked, because I backed down and once I did, she calmed down. I don’t want you to think I’m blaming Scarlett or that I’m making excuses for her husband. What he did was wrong. I’m just saying maybe the situation wasn’t entirely his fault. Maybe it wasn’t as cut and dried as the prosecutor made it sound.”

“Did you tell anyone this?” Jericho wondered. “Did you express this feeling that the fighting might have been mutual?”

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“I did,” Maddie swallowed. “It’s why I wasn’t involved in the trial. They interviewed me, the District Attorney’s office did. Then they said I wouldn’t make a good witness and they didn’t think it was wise to use me. They thought I would confuse the jury.”

“Did they tell the defense?” Paige wondered.

“I think so,” Maddie shrugged. “They also called me, brought me in for an interview, then said they couldn’t use me, either. I think I knew too much; I mean about the marriage being toxic and explosive. I know Scarlett wasn’t happy, but when we talked about it, she said nobody is truly happy and you have to work to make a marriage succeed. She told me Levi was worth the effort.”

“She loved him?” Paige asked.

“I think she did — or maybe she just thought she did,” Maddie closed her eyes, trying to regain her composure. “I think, in his way he loved her, too. But sometimes, the one you love isn’t good for you. They weren’t good for each other.” She hesitated. “Anyway, I don’t really know what to think. I accepted the conclusion of the jury. I believed she was dead and that her husband killed her, then—”

“Then you saw someone that looked a lot like her,” Paige nodded. “And, because she’s important to you, it made you hope.”

“It all seems surreal,” Maddie whispered. “I’m so afraid to hope. And when I do hope, I find myself feeling a little sorry for Levi. Then, I get angry because he doesn’t deserve my sympathy. No matter how many times I tell myself she’s dead, there’s still this little sliver of hope and I’m worried it might destroy me.”

Jericho silently listened and understood her dilemma. He wondered, was it better to know? To have the closure that came with a body, but no answers. Or, was it better to have answers and the closure of a trial, but never locate the remains? It took over ten long years, but he finally got his answers — so did Paige. He just hoped, somehow, they could help this woman find the truth that she needed. He was worried, no matter what they did, the wounds that had started to heal for her, would reopened and she’d be back at the beginning again, trying to deal with the fallout. Couldn’t be helped but maybe it could be minimized.

“Is there anything else you think we should know?” Paige asked.

“I don’t know,” Maddie considered. “Not that I can think of.”

“What about the rug?” Paige shifted gears. “This Leslie Davis said it was important to Scarlett. Do you know if that’s true?”

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“It is,” Maddie admitted. “That’s another thing. They claimed that since it was missing, that meant Levi used it to remove the body. But that’s not the only possibility. If Scarlett left, she would have taken that rug with her. It meant that much to her — she loved it.”

Paige considered. “But she didn’t take any clothes and her car was still in the garage.”

“Right,” Maddie sighed. “Which is why I keep going around in circles.”

“Anything else?” Jericho asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Maddie took a long breath. “Do you think Scarlett is still alive?”

“We don’t have any answers,” Jericho jumped in. “We’re doing our best to find those answers, though.”

“I promise,” Paige added. “If we find anything, we will let you know.”

“Alright,” Maddie glanced at Jericho then looked at Paige. “Jordan should be here tonight. We’re going to stay here in town for a few more days. If you have any further questions, we’ll be here.”

Paige stood. “Thank you for your time. We’ll be in touch.”

They were back in the car and headed for the prison when Jericho finally spoke. “What do you think?”

“I think she was an excellent witness,” Paige stared out the window. “I also think the prosecutor was honest. They didn’t use her because her testimony would confuse the jury. They painted a picture of a violent man that murdered his wife. Maddie would have told a story of a toxic, unhealthy relationship that was equally destructive. They couldn’t take that risk.”

“And the defense couldn’t use her because she was too close to Scarlett, and they were afraid of what she knew and would reveal on the stand,” Jericho agreed. “Let’s go see what the homicidal husband has to say.”

“It’s heartwarming and refreshing to have a boss that’s so open minded and unbiased,” Paige grinned and climbed from the truck.

“Uh-huh,” Jericho opened the front door. “Ladies first.”

“Why did that sound sarcastic?” Paige asked, stepping past him.

“Look at that, you should be a detective,” Jericho stepped in behind her.

“We don’t have detectives,” Paige moved to the guard. “Deputy Paige Carter and Sheriff Jericho Walters to see Levi Thayer.”

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“We’ve been expecting you,” the guard handed them a sign-in sheet. “Guns can be placed in the lockers over there. Let me know when you’re ready and we’ll escort you back.”

They were seated in a small room with a metal table that had a bar that ran from one end to the other, and three chairs. It only took a few minutes for a guard to escort Levi Thayer into the room and handcuff him to the bar. He turned to address Jericho. “You good or do you want me to stay?”

“We’re good.”

“Mr. Thayer, I’m Deputy Carter and this is Sheriff Walters. Are you willing to talk to us without your attorney?”

“He says I should say no,” Levi settled back in his chair. “But he also said I’d never get convicted so I’m not sure it’s wise to listen to that guy.”

“Is that a yes or a no?” Jericho wasn’t amused.

“Sure,” Levi shrugged. “It’s a yes. I’m beginning to think my attorney only cares about my case because he thinks it’s going to get him better clients in the future. What can I do for you Deputy Carter?” He grinned and winked at Paige.

Paige gritted her teeth and understood why the jury hated him. No wonder they found him guilty of a crime he may not have committed. “I was wondering if you could tell me about the day your wife disappeared.”

“Why?” Levi narrowed his eyes at her. “Why would a deputy and the Sheriff from — where are you from?”

“Sanpete County,” Jericho answered coldly.

“Why would a couple cops from Sanpete County care about the disappearance of my wife?”

“Are you willing to talk to us or not?” Paige evaded.

“I went fishing,” he shrugged. “When I got home, she was gone. I’m sure you already know that.”

“I’m interested in the testimony from your neighbor that said you left the night they released you from custody and didn’t return until the following morning. Where did you go, Mr. Thayer?” Jericho sat back, mirroring Thayer’s casual demeanor.

“Didn’t,” he shrugged. “That guy is delusional. I never left my house that night. He’s a crackpot, and he thought I was having a fling with his wife — so he lied.”

“Were you?” Paige wondered.

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“No,” Thayer sighed. “Look, once this all went down, the neighbors, they wanted their fifteen minutes. That’s all that was. I never left.”

“What happened to the rug?” Paige asked.

“No idea,” Thayer frowned. “I assume Scarlett took it with her. She loved that rug. That’s why I bought it for her.”

“On your honeymoon, right?” Paige wondered.

“Yeah,” Levi studied her. Clearly, she’d been talking to someone. “Look, unless you’re here because you realize I’m innocent, there’s not a lot to say.”

“I can think of a lot of words to describe you,” Paige sat back. “Innocent isn’t one of them.”

“Domestic abuser,” Jericho added. “Violent felon, coward, pathetic drunk—”

“Yeah, I get the idea,” Thayer grumbled. “But I’m not here because I hit my wife a few times.”

“You sure about that?” Paige said flatly. “Do you honestly think you would have been convicted if it wasn’t for your violent marriage?”

“Maybe not but they did not convict me of hitting my wife,” he corrected.

“So you admit you did hit your wife?” Jericho wondered if he’d answer honestly.

“I’m getting bored,” Levi pretended to yawn. “We all know something happened and you’re here to see if I’m serving time for a crime I didn’t commit. There’s no other reason for you to be here. So, what happened?”

“You didn’t answer the question,” Paige stood. “If you’re not willing to talk, we’re leaving.”

“Fine,” Thayer sighed. “I drank too much back then. Prison tends to cure you of that. When I drank, I — got impatient. I hit Scarlett. What nobody seems to care about is, when she got drunk, she was just as mean. I’m not excusing what I did. I know better and you’re right, it’s probably the reason I landed here. Still doesn’t make it right. I know you don’t believe me, but I loved Scarlett and I did not kill her.”

“It doesn’t really matter what we believe,” Paige informed him. “We’re not here to question your conviction. We came to get answers.”

“And did you?” Levi wondered.

Jericho studied him for several seconds. “What do you think happened?”

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“I don’t know,” Levi said honestly. “I assume she left me.”

“And made it look like you killed her?” Paige asked. “Why would she do that?”

“Like I said, I was an SOB when I drank,” Levi admitted. “I’m not proud of that. But I wasn’t stupid. Do you honestly believe Jason would have left if we knew Scarlett was planning an escape that day?”

“He left to meet with his girlfriend,” Paige disagreed. “It was spontaneous.”

“No,” Levi disagreed. “It was planned. We would have planned it better if we knew I needed a solid alibi.”

“So, you think she staged the scene to make it look like you killed her, and she walked away dragging that rug behind her?” Jericho pushed.

“I think she had help,” Levi considered. “I also don’t believe she wanted me to rot away in a prison cell for a crime I didn’t commit.”

“Then why the staging?” Paige asked.

“Sounds like you believe me,” Levi realized. “You know I didn’t do this but you’re not doing anything about it.”

“I never said that,” Paige disagreed. “This prison is full of guys that say they didn’t do it. I’m simply humoring you. You said she’s not dead, and she’s not missing. You claim she took off. So, why the staging?”

“I have no idea,” Levi admitted. “We drank a lot the night before — or, I did. I don’t think she drank that night. We fought. She wanted me to go to rehab, to stop drinking, so we could try to have a less contentious marriage. I brushed her off, said I didn’t need rehab, I wasn’t a drunk. She was right,” Levi admitted. “I’d still be drinking if I was free. I’m sober now and plan to stay that way — I guess, in here, I don’t have a choice. Anyway, I needed help to stop. It was going to take something drastic. Prison is pretty drastic.”

“True,” Paige nodded. “Maybe you can’t get alcohol in here but there’s always a way to get narcotics. You haven’t, not as far as I can tell. At least you didn’t trade one vice for another. Anyway, I think that’s all I have.”

“Yeah,” Jericho stood. “I’m done.”

Levi frowned when Paige knocked on the door. The guard came in, unhooked him from the table, and escorted him out the door.

Paige climbed into Jericho’s car and just silently sat there looking out the windshield at the enormous building. “Horrible life.”



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“Yeah,” Jericho started the engine. “I can’t recommend it.”

“What’s your take?” she turned to face him.

“I think he’s served seven years for a crime he probably didn’t commit. I don’t get the sense he’s lying. And he makes a good point. If he was planning to kill his wife, he would have had a better alibi. I also agree with him, she had help.”

“Leslie Davis?” Paige wondered.

“I’d bet the farm on that one,” Jericho pulled out of the lot.

They were nearly back to Manti when Paige finally spoke. “What we think we know doesn’t matter. Not if we don’t find her.”

“I know,” Jericho pulled into his parking spot and just sat there, thinking. “Maybe Gage found something we can follow up on. I don’t feel like we got anything from our visit to the cocky prisoner.”

“He’s not cocky,” Paige pushed open her door. “He’s terrified. This appeal is his last shot. He was desperate for us to give him something, anything that he could hang onto. I think, just like Maddie, allowing that one sliver of hope will destroy him if it doesn’t work out.”

“You’re probably right,” Jericho joined her and they walked silently into the building.

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“I want to hear about your interview with Maddie and the visit to the prison,” Gage said the instant they stepped into the bullpen. “But first, I think I found something.”

Paige shrugged out of her coat. “Alright.”

“Let’s take this back into the conference room,” Jericho suggested. “Margie, you can head home. We shouldn’t be long.”

As soon as they were settled around the large table Gage flipped on the large screen. “As you know, I called around and talked to all the snowmobile rental agencies and the hotels. There were several names that overlapped. I wasn’t surprised, we have a lot of tourists that come out, rent a room for a few days, grab a machine and explore.”

“Right,” Paige leaned forward to study the data.

Gage hit a button and several of the names were instantly highlighted.

“Fancy,” Jericho studied the information.

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Gage hit the button again and two names appeared. "I narrowed it down to these two. Leah Mancini is the right age. She was staying at a hotel in Mayfield but she checked out earlier today. I sent the photo over to have the staff look at it. They said maybe, but they couldn't be sure."

"Alright," Jericho studied the information on the screen. "It's a good start. What about Diane Huffington?"

"Basically the same," Gage admitted. "She was staying at a hotel in Sterling, checked out this morning. The staff said the picture matches her basic features but they don't know."

"Okay," Paige sighed. "We've narrowed it to two, then."

"Not so fast," Gage clicked a button and different information filled the screen. "Scarlett's dad is Grayson Peters. His birthdate is October eighteenth. Guess who spent the seventeenth to the twentieth in a hotel in Cedar City?"

"Who?" Paige asked, excited.

"Leah Mancini," Gage grinned. "I checked Panguitch in May, that's her mom's birthday. Barbara Bentley had a celebration, but I couldn't find Leah anywhere near that region at the time."

"Maybe she was out of town," Paige offered. "Maybe she was still in hiding and only came out now because they declared her legally dead."

"It's possible," Jericho continued to study the screen. "Am I reading that right? Has Leah used the same address in Loa on every stay?"

"Yes," Gage nodded. "I contacted the county. They said the title was changed last June, about five months ago."

"That long?" Paige frowned. "Then why not come one month early and see your mom's birthday?"

"I'm guessing we'll have to ask her," Jericho decided. "You two head home. I want you to meet up here in the morning and head to Loa. Go see if Leah Mancini is actually Scarlett Thayer."

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Gage pulled the vehicle into the driveway and just stared at the modest house.

"You okay?" Paige wondered.

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“I am,” he shut down the engine and pushed open his door. “I might need a minute, especially if she’s here. Can you take the lead on this one?”

Paige climbed from the vehicle and started down the sidewalk. “No problem. Just jump in whenever you want. I’m not going to introduce you. Let’s see how she handles that.”

“Alright,” Gage stood back and let Paige ring the bell.

Leah Mancini stood in the doorway wiping her hands on a small towel. She was in her early forties, with hazel eyes, and long brown hair. It was definitely the woman from Maddie’s photo. Paige was also certain it was Scarlett Thayer.

“Can I help you?” Leah asked.

“I’m Deputy Carter from Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office,” Paige held out a hand. “Are you Leah Mancini?”

“I am,” Leah noticed Gage and her eyes grew big, but she recovered quickly.

“What is this about?”

“I was wondering if we could come inside and speak with you for a moment,” Paige took a step forward.

“I, uh—” she glanced back, appeared to regain her composure, and motioned for them to enter. She led them to a small living space and settled onto a large couch.

Gage took a chair across from her, Paige settled onto the couch next to her. They sat there in silence for several seconds.

Leah turned and nervously glanced down the hall again.

“Do you have company?” Paige inquired.

“What? Oh, no,” Leah placed her hands in her lap and began fidgeting. “How can I help you?”

Paige studied her, something was wrong. “Ms. Mancini, if someone else is in the house, someone that poses a danger—”

Just then a kid that looked about six or seven barreled down the stairs. “Mom! I can’t get it. Can you help with—” he spotted the group in the living room and froze, but his stocking feet didn’t stop the momentum on the hard wood floors. He slid at least three feet before he reached out and stopped himself with the wall. “Mom? Are you okay?”

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“I’m fine, Benji,” Leah stood and moved to stand in front of her son. “I need a minute to visit with these police officers then I’ll come up and help you with your math. Is that okay?”

“Should I call Nana?” Benji whispered.

Leah smiled. “No, I know them. It’s really okay. Go on up and work on your spelling.”

Benji glanced around his mom and focused on Paige and then Gage. “I’ll go up, but I’m going to be listening.” He glared at Gage for another few seconds before he turned and ran up the stairs.

“He’s the reason you ran,” Paige asked.

Leah settled back onto the couch and closed her eyes, sighed, then opened them and focused on Gage. “He was.”

“Before we go any further,” Gage interrupted. “I want to hear you say it. I want you to acknowledge who you really are. Then you can explain how you can live with yourself, knowing you hurt everyone that loved you. Knowing what you put Maddie Rowley through all these years.”

“Gage,” Leah swallowed, then gave him a tentative smile. “I’m glad it was you that found me. I knew Maddie would talk to you and I think, deep down, I knew you’d be the one that realized it really was me.”

Gage just waited.

“Yes,” Leah swallowed again. “I am Scarlett Thayer, or I was. Scarlett has now officially been declared deceased.”

“And that’s why you came back?” Paige could see her partner was too emotionally invested in this. She’d have to do the questioning and keep them on track.

“I came back because my son has reached an age he needs to know his father,” Leah glanced at Gage.

“How’s that conversation going to go?” Gage wondered. “Benji, we can go meet your dad but unfortunately, he’s in prison for killing me. Yes, I know I’m not dead.”

“Gage,” Paige warned.

“No, he’s right,” Leah settled back into the couch. “My situation is hard to explain so I think maybe I should start at the beginning.”

“First,” Paige took out a notepad and her recorder. “Do you mind?”

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“I don’t,” Leah smiled. “I’m pretty sure my attorney would.”

“You already have an attorney?” Paige wondered. “To deal with the legal ramification of faking your own murder?”

Leah frowned. “No, not at first. My lawyer was working to get Scarlett pronounced legally dead.”

“Why was that important?” Paige wondered. “First, can I record this?”

“I suppose,” Leah focused on Gage. “I really am sorry and I hope you’ll help me unravel all that’s happened instead of nitpicking what I say to find a reason to punish me.”

Paige turned on the recorder and set it on the coffee table. “Okay, you came back to make sure Scarlett Thayer was official listed as deceased. Why? I guess we should step back. I’m in the home of Leah Mancini. Leah, are you Scarlett Thayer?”

“Yes, I was,” Leah admitted. “Although I’m not anymore. Scarlett is officially gone now. I prefer to be known as Leah.”

“Okay,” Paige agreed. “Why was it important to have Scarlett declared dead?”

“For Levi,” she turned and stared out the window. “I wanted to do that for Levi. I know it’s going to be hard for you to believe but I loved my husband. We had problems, big problems. We were both young, passionate; and, often times, out of control. But I honestly believe we did love each other.”

Gage glared at her, skepticism written all over his face.

“I’m not following,” Paige admitted. “How does having Scarlett declared dead help Levi Thayer?”

“I left him,” Leah provided. “I left. I decided to end the marriage and go into hiding. He shouldn’t have to go through a public divorce, and he shouldn’t be forced to pay for a child he never knew he had.”

“So, Benji is Levi Thayer’s son?” Paige knew he was, she just wanted Leah to admit it.

“Of course,” Leah glanced at Gage, then looked away. “It was the reason I left.”

“Why did you leave?” Paige asked. “More to the point, why did you leave that way?”

“I think I need to start at the beginning,” Leah shifted. “Oh, I didn’t offer you anything to drink.”

“We’re fine,” Paige motioned for her to begin her story.

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“Okay,” Leah settled back. “Levi and I, our relationship, it was a series of highs and lows. When I met him, we clicked instantly. We dated for a year then Levi graduated and I went home with him, to meet his family. He asked me to marry him and I thought I was living the fairytale. Of course, I said yes. I was in love. I truly was. The problem wasn’t emotion, it was too much emotion. We seemed to bring out the best and the worst in each other. I pushed him to excel, and he did. His family business took off once he got involved. But our fights, they were also off the charts. There was no middle ground with us. We were either on top of the world, or about to kill each other.”

“Which is fine when you’re a couple, but not a suitable environment to bring a child into,” Paige realized.

“Yes, but I’m not there yet,” Leah shifted then appeared to settle. “Several months before I left, we attended a party. It was a big deal for some important client, and we got all dressed up, determined to look our best. Levi was nervous about the meeting; he fidgeted the entire way to the party. I tried to help him relax but nothing I did could settle him. Once we arrived, they disappeared into a study and conducted business. The meeting lasted over an hour, I paced the room the entire time, waiting to see if it went well.

Levi came out, and I instantly knew he landed the client. He was so relieved, he started to drink. At first, in celebration but then because he was at a party and he was having a good time. He was pretty drunk that night, but I was worse. Toward the end of the night, an extremely attractive woman hit on Levi. He laughed and acted like he was flattered but didn’t rebuff her. She came back and invited him to her room. That’s when I lost it. I shoved between them and told her I’d be helping my husband to the car, it was time to go home.”

“You fought?” Gage realized.

“Not exactly,” Leah rubbed her hands over her face. “I fought. We always knew we’d be drinking at those events, so Levi arranged for a driver. We settled into the backseat and I confronted him. He brushed me off, said I misread the situation, and I needed to calm down. Then he motioned to the driver and said he would not discuss anything until we were alone.”

“I agreed, but all the way home I seethed,” Leah admitted. “It was his reaction; my jealousy and I suppose it was a little fear. Then add in all the booze and it was a recipe for disaster. The woman was beautiful, I kept asking myself if he would have refused or joined her if I wasn’t there. By the time I got home, I was ready to explode.”

“Did you?” Paige wondered.

“I did. He didn’t,” Leah admitted. “And that made me even more irate. I was standing there, yelling, accusing him of wanting to cheat, of not loving me, and he just stood there looking at me like I was insane. I lost it. Before he knew it was coming, I shoved him. He wasn’t prepared, lost

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his footing, tripped on the rug, and smashed his head into an end table. He was just lying there unconscious, head bleeding all over the hardwood floor. I panicked, but I didn't know what to do. I shook him and begged him to wake up. I was crying so hard I could barely breath. Finally, he woke up, told me he was okay, and we helped each other upstairs."

"You just went to bed?" Gage asked, shocked.

"We did," Leah looked down at her hands for several seconds. "That was a normal pattern for us. Fight, get it out, then let it go."

"Did that change anything?" Paige wondered.

"It changed everything," Leah nodded. "For a while. The following morning, we talked, really talked. I explained why I was so mad, and he assured me it wasn't a big deal because he wasn't tempted. We worked it out, but we also realized the drinking was getting out of hand. I could have killed him. We both agreed we had to make a change. And we did, for several months. We went to parties, supported each other, and we never drank a drop of alcohol. We were proud of our progress and our relationship was better than it had ever been. That's when Benji was conceived, during that temporary respite."

"Who started drinking?" Gage wondered.

"Levi," Leah sighed. "We went to a party and his father pulled him into another room to talk business. His dad never understood why alcohol was a problem. So, they went into this meeting and when Levi came out, he was smoking a cigar and drinking a glass of scotch. I tried to talk to him, but he brushed me off. Said his dad helped him to realize it wasn't a problem. He'd just control his drinking and everything would be fine."

"Did you start to drink again?" Paige asked.

"No," Leah shrugged. "I probably would have but my stomach was bothering me. I stuck to Ginger Ale all night. When we got home, Levi tried to start a fight, but I was tired and didn't take the bait. He slept in the master bedroom and I crashed in one of the guest rooms. We continued to argue about the drinking until the day I left."

"I finally realized I must be pregnant. I was worried, would that set Levi off, or would it be the trigger he needed to stop? I didn't know. I went to the doctor and while I was there, I met a woman. She had a black eye and bruises around her left wrist. We got to talking and to this day I don't know why I did it, but I told her my husband would get mean when he drank. We talked, she went to her appointment, and I went to mine and I didn't think I'd ever cross paths with her again. When I walked outside, she was waiting for me. She handed me a card and told me if I decided I wanted out, I should call that number."

"An underground network for battered women?" Paige asked.

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“Yes,” Leah glanced at Gage. “I tried several times to talk to Levi about his drinking, but his dad believed Levi did better work, socialized better, worked the clients better, when he was a little tipsy. I was fighting against his family, and I knew I couldn’t win. We had one last fight, a really ugly one, the night before I left. I called the number on the card and told them I needed out. They asked when my husband would be away, and I told them he was going fishing with a friend the next day. They showed up, we left, and I tried not to look back. That proved impossible.”

“You just skipped over every detail that put your husband in prison,” Paige stopped her. “What happened to the rug?”

“I have it,” Leah pointed out the door to a large, spacious room that held a fireplace, two large French doors leading to a back patio, a comfortable lounge area and a big screen television. On the floor, in the center was a large, beautiful rug.

“And the blood?” Gage asked.

“What blood?” Leah frowned.

“On the headboard?” Gage pushed.

“I—” Leah frowned. “Wait, I wanted to bring a jewelry box with me. It had belonged to my grandmother, and it was important to me. The woman, she called herself Leslie, but that’s not her name. Anyway, she insisted I had to leave it there. When she turned away, I snuck it into my bag. She saw me and forcefully took it from me. When she pulled it away, the tiny hinge sliced my finger. I must have touched the headboard—” he scowled, trying to remember. “I did. When I went into our bedroom, the enormity of what I was doing hit me. I was leaving the man I loved. I remember placing one hand on my stomach and I braced myself with the other hand on the headboard. I just stood there, for the longest time, trying to decide what to do. Finally, Leslie returned and told me we had to go. I insisted on taking the rug. She argued, I refused to listen. Finally, she helped me roll it up, and we dragged it outside and hefted it into her trunk.”

“The drag marks,” Paige mumbled.

“What?” Leah asked.

“Nothing.” Paige considered. “So, you fled, then what? Was it always part of the plan to have this woman that called herself Leslie return to the house and make false statements that led the investigators to believe there was foul play?”

“I don’t know what Leslie did,” Leah glanced at Gage. “I only know what happened to me. We drove for hours, then Leslie handed me off to another couple. We did that for days. I’d ride, sometimes stop at a house to eat and sleep, then it was back on the road to another location. I won’t tell you where they are, I couldn’t tell you about most of them but the ones I do know, I



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won't discuss it. Some of those women barely escaped with their lives. I won't do anything that puts them in danger."

"Okay, so you didn't know about it that night," Gage said without emotion. "But why didn't you come forward, or at least find a way to let someone know you were alive, when Levi was arrested for your murder."

"I didn't know," Leah whispered. "I thought he'd come home, find me gone and know I left. I convinced myself he'd know it was the drinking that pushed me away."

"I get you were in hiding, but you can't tell me you didn't see the news, read a newspaper, see a magazine in a convenience store. The story went national. It was the headline of every network for weeks."

"I will not tell you where I went," Leah repeated. "I will tell you, for that first week, I wasn't watching the news or reading magazines. I was traveling, and I never went into a store because they have cameras. It took some time, but I ended up in Italy. My choice. They set me up in a small home and I got a job. I gave birth and lived my life for the past eight years. I gave birth to Benji, and I tried to move on."

"What happened?" Paige asked when she didn't continue.

"Benji got older, and he kept asking questions about his dad," Leah admitted. "Once I told him how wonderful his father was, he didn't understand. If his dad was such a great guy, why wasn't he with us. I couldn't do it anymore. Plus, I missed my parents and I miss Maddie. I just kept thinking what I did was wrong. I understand why women do it. The others, the ones that I became friends with, they needed that network. I didn't. I felt like a fraud, with Benji, with the other women, even myself. Finally, I couldn't take it any longer. That's when I contacted the administrator and asked about a lawyer. I wanted to be declared dead before I returned and messed up Levi's life. Honestly, I wondered if he got remarried and moved on with someone else."

"When did you find out?" Paige asked. "And be specific."

"The group," Leah focused on Paige. "They helped me get this place in Loa. I got settled in, found a sitter for Benji and I drove to Panguitch to see my mom. It was almost her birthday and I wanted to surprise her. It's less than two hours away. I planned to drive over, spend a little time with her, then come home that night. She told me Levi was in prison for killing me. I freaked out, I was so upset my mom wouldn't let me drive. I had to call the agency and get someone to take Benji for the night. I wanted to come clean immediately, but the lawyer said it would be better to have me declared dead, then decide how to proceed. They finalized the request in September, and I told her to start working on a plan to get Levi out of that place."

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“You do realize, if you come forward, Levi will find out you have a son?” Gage wondered how she planned to deal with that.

“I don’t plan to keep Levi and Benji apart,” Leah said without hesitation. “It’s going to be up to Levi what that looks like. Benji is his son, and as long as he’s not drinking, I trust him to love and care for Benji. Any visitation agreement will have to include that restriction — no alcohol, not even one beer.”

“That will be up to the judge,” Paige warned.

“I know,” Leah looked down, then focused on Gage. “Now what happens?”

Before they could answer, there was a knock on the door.

“You expecting company?” Gage wondered.

“No,” she glanced out the window and smiled. “Benji,” she called upstairs on her way to the door. “I told you not to call Nana.”

“I know but—” he glanced from his mom to Paige to Gage, then focused on the woman standing just inside the foyer. “Nana?”

“Don’t punish the boy for doing the right thing,” Barbara Bentley pulled off her coat. “I assume you have some place I can stay the night. That was a dreadful drive this time of year.”

“Hello, mother,” Leah took the coat and draped it over the couch.

“Come on down here, Benji,” Barbara demanded. “This will impact you as much as the rest of us.” She turned to focus on Paige. “What do you plan to do with my daughter?”

“Nothing,” Paige shrugged. “Once I return, my boss will need to notify the Draper Police Department of our findings. I suspect they will conduct a thorough investigation and the District Attorney’s office up in Salt Lake will decide what charges to file, if any.”

“Maddie needs to see you,” Gage focused on Leah. “This has been difficult for her and she needs to see you.”

“I know,” Leah glanced at her mom. “If these two are willing to give me a ride, can you stay with Benji? I need to see Maddie and try to explain everything to her. She might not forgive me, but I have to explain.”

“I—” Barbara glanced at the deputies then focused on Benji. “I’m happy to babysit, but do you think that’s a good idea? Can you trust them?”

“Ma’am,” Paige stepped forward. “Your daughter didn’t break any laws in our jurisdiction. You can trust us. We just want to give the friend that brought this to us closure.”

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Barbara sighed. “Alright, if that’s what you want, Leah.”

Paige smiled when the woman pulled a strange face. Clearly, she wasn’t sold on the name change.

“If you ride with them, how will you get home?” Barbara wondered.

“If Maddie won’t bring me, I can rent a car or something.” Leah decided.

“If Maddie won’t bring you, I will,” Gage offered.

“Alright,” Leah glanced around the room. “Benji, come upstairs with me for a minute. I need to pack a bag and then you’re going to have a slumber party with Nana.”

Once they were gone, Barbara turned to address the cops. “If anything happens to my daughter, you will answer to me. I will go on every news network, every blog, every podcast I can and tell the world how my daughter, a victim, is being vilified and mistreated. I will become your department’s worse media nightmare.”

“Like I said,” Paige sighed and reminded herself this woman was only protecting her child. “Leah didn’t break any laws in Manti. Our only interest in this case, from this point forward, is reuniting Maddie with a friend she’s been grieving for years.”

“I’m ready,” Leah hugged Benji, hugged her mother and followed them out the front door.

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“Hi,” Maddie stopped at Margie’s desk. “I’m Maddie Rowley, Deputy Clayton called and said I should come here immediately. Uh, this is my boyfriend Jordan Hinkley, I hope that’s okay.”

“Maddie,” Gage called from the conference room door. “Come on up here. And, if that’s the man you told me about, bring him with you.”

Maddie tightened her grip on Jordan’s hand and slowly moved toward the open door. The instant she stepped inside, she burst into tears.

Leah jumped to her feet, darted across the room, and pulled Maddie into a hug. “I am so sorry. I’m so very, very sorry. Can you ever forgive me?”

Paige watched the two women reunite. She glanced at Jericho, then Gage. The three of them had solved another mystery. She wondered if Leah knew just how difficult the next few months were going to be. Sure, she reunited with Maddie. But, Levi was still in prison for a crime he didn’t commit and Leslie Davis was partially to blame for that. If Leah continued to insist on

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keeping the woman's identity and location a secret, the authorities up in Salt Lake might not be that understanding. There was no doubt, once Levi got released from prison, he'd be filing a lawsuit.

Smiling, she backed out of the room. They should give the reunited friends a little privacy. Gage and Jericho followed her out.

Jericho pulled the door shut. "Good work, you two. Things are bound to get hectic and difficult for them — soon. But we gave them this and that's a good thing. Gage Havilland came on early so you can head home. Paige, I need to see you in my office."

"Now what?" Paige asked the instant they were behind Jericho's closed door. "Before we get into whatever this is, I want to make sure you and Harper will join us for Thanksgiving."

"Oh, yeah," Jericho settled into his chair. "We'll be there. I wanted to let you know, just before you arrived back at the office, I had a conversation with Tolman. Stan Donaldson couldn't take the pressure any longer. He decided something was up and he wanted to take a proactive step to resolve it. He met with James and told him everything."

"Really?" Paige asked, surprised. "I didn't think he had that in him."

"Neither did James," Jericho smiled. "He said he didn't know what to do, so he sent Stan home. The kid's suspended, pending an investigation."

"That sucks for him," Paige leaned against the back of the chair. "It's going to make the holidays difficult."

"Maybe," Jericho grabbed his coat. "We can talk about that later. Let's get out of here."

"I'm all for that," Paige agreed. "Did you talk to Harper, yet?"

"No," Jericho frowned. "But I will."