

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Festive Repercussions *Season 6, Episode 9*

by:

Melanie P. Smith

Copyright © 2021 Melanie P. Smith

First Edition | Series: Paige Carter
Edited by LaPriel Dye

* * *

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

www.melaniepsmith.com

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



MPSmith Publishing

Festive Repercussions

“Paige,” Margie placed her phone on the receiver. “Are you busy, or can you handle a welfare check?”

“Sure, there’s nothing here that can’t wait. What’s the address?” she stood and moved to stand in front of Margie’s desk.

Margie ripped the sheet off the pad and passed Paige the information. “The complainant is Tiffany Sanchez. She’s a co-worker and a friend of the subject in question, Brenda McKay. Tiffany said Brenda didn’t show up to work this morning. They had a big project they were working on and even worked late into the evening on Friday. They called it a night, each promising to pick things back up first thing this morning. Taking a break over the weekend would allow them to clear their heads and come back refreshed. Tiffany insists Brenda wouldn’t just blow off work. She tried to call several times but got voicemail.”

“Alright. Show me en route and send the detail to my computer,” Paige turned and headed back to her desk. “I’ll advise once I arrive.”

“Do you want a back?” Margie wondered.

“Not at this time.” Paige grabbed her coat and started for the door. “Do we have an approximate age for Brenda McKay?”

“Late-twenties,” Margie glanced at her notes. “Medium blonde hair, blues eyes, average build. Tiffany said she’s about five-six, maybe one-twenty.”

“Thanks.” Paige shoved open the door and stepped into the crisp, cool morning. Bitter icy wind whipped around her, sliced across her face, then slithered beneath her jacket. She shivered and tugged at the cold metal zipper. It took two tries, but finally the insulated leather — zipped up to her chin — blocked out the frigid air. She reached into her pocket and retrieved the new pair of winter gloves Dax had shoved in there this morning. The man was always right — annoying, but true. He predicted below zero temps today and insisted, if she didn’t use the gloves, her fingers would shrivel into frozen nubs and fall off before her shift was over. Definitely an exaggeration, but her hands were already frozen and stiff after only a few seconds — and they shook uncontrollably as she slid the leather into place. With a sigh, she squinted past the sun, trying to block out the bright flashes of light that shimmered and danced over the powdery snow, and located her police car. Today was going to be a cold, miserable day — but, at least, it was no longer snowing.

She made her way cautiously across the parking lot, careful not to slip on the hidden ice. Once inside, she started the engine and flipped the heat to high. Cold air swirled through the vents and filled the already freezing cab as she pulled onto the highway. The dry air circled inside the car and gradually turned from frigid to hot. She was just beginning to feel comfortable when she pulled to a stop in front of the cozy little cottage. She hesitated, taking in the

Festive Repercussions

surrounding scene. There were no footprints in the yard, no tire marks in the driveway — in fact, her subject's car was covered with at least a foot of freshly fallen snow. Paige frowned and shoved open her door. The blizzard had blown in Saturday morning around three and lasted all weekend. If the girl — Brenda — hadn't left home because of the storm, she had to be inside. *So why wasn't she answering the phone?*

Paige waded through the deep snow and stomped her feet once she reached the tiny landing in front of the door. She hadn't gone twenty feet and her nose already felt like an icicle. She paused and rang the bell, then waited. The house was eerily silent. She took a step to the side and tried to peek inside the front window. No luck. The curtains were shut and blocked her view completely. She pounded on the door with that thundering police knock that could wake the dead. Still no answer. After ringing the bell one last time, she made her way around to the back of the house. Snow covered the entire yard. It was crisp and clean — and undisturbed. Paige crossed the back patio; a sinking feeling had settled in the pit of her stomach. The screen door creaked, breaking the silence when she yanked it open. Paige waited, hoping to hear something inside. After a few seconds, she reached out and banged on the back door. Still nothing. Resigned, she moved to the right, maneuvered a chair under the window, and climbed onto the seat — hoping it was as sturdy as it appeared. The instant she looked through the clear glass barrier, she saw the body. Anger and pity shot through her, but she pushed it aside. If she let the emotions surface, she wouldn't be able to do the job.

Once she climbed from the chair, she called it in and asked Margie to contact the Medical Examiner. After a quick glance around, she took a minute to search under pots, inside a plastic storage container, and beneath a small statue of a garden gnome — for a key. When she didn't find one, she broke through the door and stepped inside. The smell hit her immediately. She slapped her hand over her face, pivoted, and rushed outside. She paused on the edge of the back porch, reached into her go-bag, and retrieved a small container of vapor rub. Once the large glob was slathered generously over her nose, she dropped the container back into her bag and stepped inside the home.

The smell of death clawed at her nostrils and clung to her clothing, but she had to ignore it. She maneuvered around the vomit and body fluids that mingled with the putrid smell of decay and got to work. She was crouched over the woman's lifeless form when she heard a noise. Glancing up, she spotted Gage. "Hey."

"Do you need help in there?" Gage offered hesitantly from the doorway, breathing through clenched teeth.

Paige smiled. "Naw, I got it. Has Benny arrived?"

"I told him to wait in the van. You need him already?" Gage wondered.

Paige stood and headed for the door. "Let's take this outside for a minute."

Festive Repercussions

“Best idea I’ve heard all day.” Gage stepped back and moved away from the open door. “Any idea what killed her?”

“Maybe, I’ll fill you in once I’m done here. Uh, I’m nearly out of evidence bags.” Paige moved to lean against the wooden railing. She needed fresh air, if only for a moment. “Since you’re such a boy scout, I’m hoping you’re prepared, and you’ve got a few extra in your truck.”

“I have plenty,” Gage nodded. “What size?”

Paige pointed at the box lying next to the body on the floor. “I need that box of chocolates taken to the lab.”

“Death by chocolate?” Gage grinned.

“You could say that,” Paige frowned when Jericho emerged from the side of the house and joined them on the back porch. “I’m not sure this required the boss.”

“It’s a death,” Jericho said in response.

“Right,” Paige shrugged. “Anyway, I’d like the lab to analyze the candy, see if it contains poison. Well, more to the point, what kind of poison it contains.”

Jericho frowned, stepped forward, and glanced through the open door. “It’s Christmas time, Paige. Receiving a holiday gift isn’t that unusual.”

“Finding a box of Christmas candy next to a dead body is,” Paige countered. “Especially when you factor in the partially consumed chocolate next to her right hand.”

“You have a point,” Jericho sighed. “Did you find anything else in there?”

“No,” Paige glanced back, pity clouded her eyes for just an instant before she blinked it away. “I want the chocolates, the envelope with the card, and her phone. Maybe we’ll get lucky and find a stalker or a jealous ex-boyfriend.”

“Do what you need to do,” Jericho stepped back. “I doubt she’d happily tear open a box of chocolates from an ex-boyfriend, though. Not if he truly was an ex.”

“She might, if she wanted it to be a temporary condition,” Gage disagreed. “Maybe she thought it was a reconciliation, but he was set on termination.”

“It would have to be some breakup for the guy to kill the girl — easier to just walk. Let me know what you find,” Jericho decided. “I have a meeting that I can’t miss, but don’t hesitate to call if something comes up. I’ll be available.”

Festive Repercussions

“I’ll follow you up,” Gage decided. “I need to grab a stack of evidence bags and I’ll bring Benny on back.” He paused and glanced around. “The blizzard might be over — but so far, it’s been a really sucky day.”

“I’m sure Brenda McKay would agree,” Paige grumbled, then stepped back inside and got to work. She had a scene to process before she shattered the holidays for the McKay family and Brenda’s friends. For them, Christmas would never be the same again.

The following morning, Paige sat at her desk, contemplating. The candy box was a bust. Since it arrived by mail, there were a dozen prints covering the surface — including Brenda McKay’s. The envelope didn’t help, neither did the card inside. The sender must have worn gloves when he prepared his lethal holiday gift — telling Paige this was premeditated and not an accidental contamination. The return address printed on the outside was the same as the mailing address, which was a guarantee the package would arrive at the desired location. For Paige, that would also mean a quick toss in the nearest trash can. Apparently, the clue was so subtle Brenda didn’t notice, or she didn’t care. Paige leaned back and closed her eyes. She had to think of something, needed to find a new lead to follow — but there wasn’t one.

She opened her eyes, thinking she’d read through Benny’s autopsy report again, and spotted Jericho standing next to her desk, studying her. His mouth twitched in amusement when she jumped, straightened abruptly, and pushed her chair forward.

He settled into one of her chairs and waited.

“You’re enjoying this,” Paige accused.

“Of course,” he sat back. “Do we have anything new — anything that will tell us who killed that girl?”

“No,” Paige sighed. “I was trying to come up with a new strategy, but I’ve got nothing.”

“She was just a kid,” Jericho grumbled. “By all accounts, she was a young, hard-working, innocent kid that had her entire life ahead of her.”

“And now she’s dead,” Paige frowned.

“Yeah, she is,” Jericho agreed. “And I want to know why.”

“So do I,” Paige scowled. “Unfortunately, we might have to learn to deal with disappointment because whoever did this, didn’t leave any clues. There’s no such thing as the perfect murder, but this one comes close.”

Festive Repercussions

“I—” Jericho motioned to the phone when it rang. “Go ahead, answer it.”

“Deputy Carter,” Paige said in greeting.

“This is Amy Reeves,” a woman greeted. “From the Utah State Lab.”

“Oh, right,” Paige sat back.

“I’m calling about the box of candy you sent us,” Reeves informed her.

“You’ve already analyzed it?” Paige asked in surprise.

“Sort of,” Reeves sighed. “The chocolate was poisoned. I’ll be running more test, but I wanted to confirm that right away.”

“We knew that,” Paige grumbled. “That’s why we sent it up north to have it analyzed. How soon before you identify the toxin?”

“Tetrodotoxin,” Reeves answered.

“TTX,” Paige sat back. “That’s unusual. Have you identified the host?”

“Pufferfish liver,” Reeves provided.

“How did you identify it that quickly?” Paige wondered.

“Because it’s the third box of contaminated chocolates I received. Yours arrived yesterday, and I had two others last week,” Reeves advised.

“Third?” Paige straightened in surprise.

“Yes,” Reeves clipped tone telegraphed her displeasure. “Richfield PD sent the first box to my lab Friday morning. The weekend crew received the second box Saturday afternoon. That package is connected to an incident in Riverton. When I arrived this morning, I discovered the third box that was sent from you.”

“There were enough similarities that you believe they’re connected?” Paige wondered.

“They’re identical,” Reeves corrected. “Down to the tape used to wrap the boxes for shipping — and the paper used to package them.”

“Identical,” Paige glanced at Jericho. “Can you send me the contact information — for the other cops that submitted contaminated samples?”

“I’m just putting the finishing touches on an email that will go out to all three of you,” Reeves advised. “I wanted to touch base with you in person first, to let you know we will test the

Festive Repercussions

contaminated candy thoroughly, but I don't need to — not to give you the basics. I already did that, twice.”

“I appreciate the call.” Paige hung up and considered.

“Problem?” Jericho wondered.

Paige had just finished giving him the details when the email from Amy Reeves arrived. She skimmed through it, then printed a copy and handed it to her boss.

Jericho dropped the message back on the desk and focused on Paige. “Three victims. Three random individuals that live miles apart.”

“Yeah,” Paige considered. “I need to run a background on all three, see if we can find anything that connects them. This could get tricky, now that we have two additional agencies involved.”

“I'll step in and help pave the way if it becomes necessary,” Jericho assured her. “In the meantime, I think you should contact the detectives working the other cases — go ahead and answer that,” Jericho motioned to the ringing phone.

“Deputy Carter,” she said in greeting. “Great minds, I was just about to call you.” Paige sat back. “Looks like we have a cluster on our hands. Yeah, I'll hold.” Once the line went silent, she pressed her hold button, transferred the phone to the speaker, and focused on Jericho. “It's Detective Thomas from Richfield PD. He said he's patching in the detective up north so we can all discuss the situation together and decide how to proceed.”

“Carter, you there?” a male voice came through the speaker.

“I'm here,” Paige called out. “I switched you to speaker. My boss, Sheriff Jericho Walters is also present.”

“Sir,” the voice acknowledged. “Jake Thomas here, from Richfield PD. I've also patched in Detective Robison.”

“Just Brad is fine,” a second voice cut in. “I work for Riverton Police Department. I understand we have two homicides that are connected to my attempted. As of an hour ago, my victim was upgraded and the medical staff that's been treating him the past couple of days believe he should make a full recovery.”

“That's good news,” Paige answered. “Did you have time to question him?”

“I did, briefly,” Brad advised. “But it didn't do much good. Trent Whitmer received the package in the mail after returning home from a business trip. He couldn't say when it arrived as he hadn't been home for a couple days — holiday commitments that coincided with the business

Festive Repercussions

trip. Anyway, he said he dropped it on the counter and basically forgot about it while he unpacked and prepared for a romantic dinner with his girlfriend. After the meal, the two of them settled in for a relaxing evening at home. They picked out a movie, prepared some popcorn, and he grabbed the box off the counter as an afterthought.

They were well into the movie when he started craving something sweet. That's when he randomly grabbed one of the chocolates and took a bite. Both he and the girl said he only took one bite. His girlfriend said Trent, that's my victim, complained that there was something wrong with the candy. He thought it was bad or rancid. He tried to get rid of the taste by downing a handful of popcorn, but it didn't help much. That's when he jumped up, darted to the kitchen, and rinsed out his mouth. The girlfriend, Trina Fairmont, stopped the movie and followed him out of the room. She said she had a bad feeling and wanted to check, to make sure he was okay. When she walked into the kitchen, Trent told her his lips and tongue were tingling. Then the side of his face went numb. He thought he was having a stroke. The guy was lucky his girl is a nurse. She helped him to the car and rushed him to the emergency room. They ran tests and ruled out a stroke within a few minutes. Trina pushed, and she pushed hard, insisted they test him for poison. She told them if they refused, she'd go over their head."

"Is that why he survived?" Jake asked.

"Yeah," Brad affirmed. "The ER doc was a young guy, fairly new on the job, and inexperienced. When Trina wouldn't back down, he brought in a specialist. Based on the symptoms, and the fact that it all happened after eating that candy, the veteran doctor suspected TTX. I spoke to him, the specialist, he said there's no antidote. They did their best to pump his system, inserted a breathing tube so the swelling wouldn't constrict his airway, and waited it out. It was touch and go there for a while. Trent was weak, his speech was so slurred they couldn't understand anything he said, and he experienced paralysis, profuse sweating, muscle weakness, and an abnormal heart rhythm."

"He's lucky he was dating a nurse," Jake mumbled.

"Does he know anyone that would want him dead?" Paige wondered.

"He says no," Brad sighed. "I pushed, but he seemed baffled. I believe him."

"It sounds like that line is basically a dead end," Paige considered. "I'm going to do a deep dive into my victim, see what I can find on her. I assume you ran each of your victims through the system, but let's try to find a link — no matter how tentative. I doubt some maniac chose these three at random."

"Uh," Jake interrupted. "I agree with that line, but there's something else I'd like to discuss first."

"Alright," Paige prompted.

Festive Repercussions

“My victim, Stephanie Lancaster, received her candy at least four — probably five — days ago. Her body was discovered basically the same way as yours — welfare check called in by a friend. ME put TOD approximately twenty hours before discovery. I think she was the first victim. She lived alone. Probably received the package, tore it open and dove right in. For whatever reason, she didn’t seek medical attention for her symptoms and died on the living room couch. Anyway, I found the box minus two chocolates — along with the packaging in a nearby garbage can. At the time, I assumed the victim threw it away because it made her sick. With the new intel from Brad, she probably tried one, thought it was rancid, gave it another try, then tossed the box when chocolate number two tasted off as well. Anyway, it was wrapped in your basic run of the mill brown paper. I didn’t think it was worth tracking down because that would be next to impossible, especially this time of year.”

“Right,” Brad agreed. “Everyone and their dog are sending wrapped packages to family and friends for Christmas.”

“Exactly,” Jake agreed. “But the package had a postal stamp with all the routing information on it. I was able to confirm someone mailed that thing from the post office in Ephraim, Utah last Wednesday at 1326 hours.”

“Hold on a minute,” Paige jumped up, retrieved the evidence bag that contained the packaging from her case, and returned to her desk. “Mine matches yours. He mailed the packages together — at the same time.”

“Yeah,” Brad agreed. “Jake gave that same information to me and I checked — mine was dropped off and mailed along with both of yours.”

“Which begs the question,” Jericho jumped in.

“How many packages were mailed?” Jake finished.

“Have you contacted the post office?” Jericho wondered.

“That’s where I’m hitting a wall,” Jake said, clearly frustrated. “I’ve completed a boat load of paperwork, submitted the forms, then submitted more forms. Apparently, the feds aren’t big on interagency cooperation. I’ve done everything I can think of to nudge them along. My leads have dried up here, but if we could get them to pull the video from the surveillance cameras, track down the paperwork, locate the payment details — anything damn thing, we might have a line to tug. We could get really lucky and discover the guy paid with a credit card or parked his vehicle in view of a camera. Information from that alone could help us identify the sender.”

“They’re blocking you?” Jericho wondered.

“Not blocking,” Jake disagreed. “Just taking their sweet time; because, according to them, it’s not a priority. I’m getting the runaround, excuses about Christmas, shortages, and deadlines.

Festive Repercussions

My boss is worried there could be more — packages, I mean — so he finally ordered me, about an hour ago, to head to Ephraim and put pressure on the supervisor at the post office. I'm to stay there and push until they give me what I need. Then he wants me to remain in your fair city for as long as it takes to close the case. I'll be heading out of town just in time for the holidays — does wonders for the home life, let me tell you."

"That sucks," Paige said sympathetically.

"You don't know the half of it," Jake grumbled. "I finally got Darcy to marry me and four months later, I'm pretty sure she's contemplating divorce. She knew it wouldn't be easy, hooking up with a cop, but this was supposed to be our first Christmas together. Our first *married* Christmas — whatever that means. She had all these plans, memories she wanted to make, traditions she wanted to start, and I had to tell her — *sorry, babe. I caught a case.*"

"Try explaining a sudden trip to your eight-year-old son," Brad cut in. "A cop's wife learns to deal with missed events and interrupted holidays. Our kids — that's different. Oh, they pretend to understand, but they don't — not really. Anyway, I'm headed your way as well — same directive from the brass up here. Carter, can you point us in the right direction? You know, find us a five-star hotel we can rent during the holidays, for an unspecified amount of time — all on a two-star budget?"

"One that's close to the office and has a couple of restaurants close by," Jake added.

"Hold off on that," Paige considered. "I think I have a better idea. I'll call you back with the details within the hour."

"Alright," Jake frowned. "Anyway, back to the case. I tried to get a warrant — to light a fire under their feet at the post office — but the judge is stalling. He's hesitant to issue an order that could prove time consuming in another district — especially this time of year. Guess he doesn't want an overworked employee to go postal."

"He's afraid he'll get the blame if some overworked employee goes postal," Brad corrected.

"Let that sit for a while," Jericho advised. "Paige and I will head over to the post office in person once we conclude here. I'll see what I can do to light my own fire under the supervisor without a warrant. Excuse me," he stood when his phone rang. "I need to take this."

"Any chance his fire will do the trick?" Jake wondered.

"I'd say the odds are in his favor," Paige glanced at Jericho. "You just met Sheriff Jekyll. Those people over at the post office — they're about to meet Sheriff Hyde. We should have some answers by the time you two arrive. In the meantime, while I do a little graveling to arrange housing, maybe you could work on a deep dive into your victims. Let's see if any of

Festive Repercussions

these three knew each other, or if they were associated with the same people. There must be a connection. We're just not seeing it."

Once she disconnected, she stepped up to Jericho's doorway and waited for him to acknowledge her.

Jericho placed a hand over the speaker on his phone and motioned to Paige. "It's the mayor. I need a few. Once I'm done here, I want to call Tolman, then we can head to the post office."

"I need twenty to arrange housing," Paige smiled. "I'll check back when I'm done and see if you've finished playing politics."

"I understand," Jericho said into the phone. "Yes." He glanced back up and motioned for Paige to leave.

Paige nodded and headed for her car.

The building was eerily quiet as she made her way down the sleek hallway. When she reached the office, she paused in the doorway, amused. Dax was stretched out, his chair leaning back, legs propped on the desk — one ankle crossed over the other, watching a video of an old guy shooting a large caliber rifle. "Great gig, if you can get it."

Dax glanced over and smiled. His eyes sparkled with — something, Paige wasn't sure what.

"Jealous?" He pressed a button on the remote and the video paused.

"You don't have another course planned until mid-January, right?" she approached his desk.

"Right." Dax dropped his legs to the floor and straightened. "Before you tell me the significance of that question, I think you're contractually obligated to kiss me hello."

"I'm on duty and I'm pretty sure police SOP supersedes that clause in the marriage contract," she moved around the desk and leaned her hip on the edge.

Dax grabbed her arm, pivoted, and knocked her feet out from under her. She lost her balance, swore, and toppled into his lap. Before she had time to react, he leaned forward and covered her mouth with his.

Paige resisted — for form, but her heart wasn't in it. After a moment, she relaxed and let herself enjoy the contact. Instead of releasing her, he deepened the kiss. She felt one palm slide across the small of her back as the other gripped the back of her neck and forced her body

Festive Repercussions

forward. She was now plastered against his chest in an intimate embrace. Paige tried to pull back, thinking they had to stop before this got out of control, but Dax shifted and held her tighter. The man could go from zero to sixty in a millisecond. And that talented mouth of his left her brain foggy and the rest of her revved, ready to explode. “Not fair,” she gasped when he finally let her come up for air.

His eyes sparkled and danced with amusement, which was bad enough; then, he gave her that sexy grin she always loved, and she was ready to dive back in for more.

“Better,” he leaned in for another gentle, but equally amazing, kiss. “Now if I could just convince you to play sensual cop arrests the big, bad ranger, my day would be complete.” He slid his hand up her side.

“Stop it.” Paige slapped his hand away and stood. “You’re certainly in a mood today, but this is official business. I don’t have time to play Studley Do-Right gets detained.”

“Studley Do-Right?” he considered. “I certainly try.” Dax also stood and invaded her space a little. “Now, I always love to see my gorgeous bride, but there must be a reason for this unexpected visit. What’s up?” he leaned in and gave her another quick kiss, lingering an extra second before he pulled back.

Paige swallowed and tried to push the lust aside. It took a couple seconds but, after another deep breath she outlined the new information from the lab, relayed the details of the conversation she had with the other cops, and told him both detectives had orders from on high to make an unexpected trip to Manti. “The guy from Richfield is a newlywed, and he’s already in the doghouse because he’s being sent out of town so close to Christmas — it’s their first and his wife had all these elaborate ideas to start new traditions. Then Brad, the detective up north, pipes in and says how his son doesn’t understand why the job is taking Dad away. They had all these plans once school let out and now he’s left with disappointment and holiday frustration — instead of cheer.

“We have space,” Dax offered, immediately realizing what Paige was asking. “They’re welcome to use the housing units out back,” he took her hand and led her from his office. “In fact, I think you’ll like our recent additions. As far as the holidays go, they can decorate all they want while they’re here. None of us will mind. Tell them to head out and make things comfortable for their family.”

“There’s one more thing,” Paige followed Dax out the back door. “We’ll need a conference room. A place we can set up three complete cases, then lock everything down for the night, and leave the details pinned to the boards and spread out across the table.”

“Use Conference Room B.” Dax took her hand again and walked toward the enormous building off to the right.

Festive Repercussions

Paige glanced around and halted.

“What?” Dax immediately went on alert.

“It’s amazing.” Paige ran a hand down the side of his arm.

“Huh?” Dax confirmed there wasn’t any sign of danger, then turned back to Paige, confused.

“This,” she pointed to a running track at the far end of the property. Next to it was a large basketball court — it was currently covered in snow, but she could see it was regulation size. To the side of that was a large open space they could use for a quick baseball game or to toss a football. Next to the housing building, there was a large, covered slate patio decked out with a cozy sitting area, lounge chairs, a large firepit, and an outdoor cooking area. “You told me it was finished, but I never imagined something this incredible.”

“Too much?” Dax wondered.

“No,” Paige shook her head. “It’s just right. It’s good, Dax. It’s really good.” This time, she leaned in to kiss him. “I know I get busy and preoccupied, which means I don’t tell you as often as I should, but I’m proud of you — all of you — for this. You took a basic idea and created something even more spectacular than anyone could have imagined. It started as nothing more than an intriguing idea, and now you run the top training center in the western United States — custom outfitted with all the bells and whistles.”

“It’s getting there,” Dax started walking again.

“Any word on the tower?”

“That’s right, I didn’t tell you.” Dax pulled open a heavy metal exterior door and flipped on the interior lights. “The council finally approved the plan. Wooly finalized the contract with the construction crew this morning. They’ll start erecting the tower once the weather breaks this spring.”

“I know you have the climbing wall inside, but that tower will push demand even higher.” Paige was sure of that.

“That’s what we’re hoping.” Dax pushed open a door and motioned for Paige to step inside.

“Wow,” she glanced around the comfortable space, trying to take it all in. There was a small, but functional kitchen off to one side that flowed into a huge lounge area with big cozy chairs and a comfortable looking couch. To one side there was a door, to the other was a short hallway. “You guys have been busy,” she focused on Dax. “This looks like it was built for a family. Why add it into the plan here at the center?”

Festive Repercussions

“Teams,” Dax pushed open the side door and motioned her inside. “This would work for your cop and his wife, sort of a master bedroom — we designed it to function as the supervisor or team leader’s room. The bed is larger and there’s more space.”

“It looks comfortable,” Paige observed. “The bed, I mean. I can see the room is spacious and cozy. It would have to be to accommodate this king-sized bed.”

Dax picked her up and tossed her onto the mattress. “Let’s test it out and see. We wouldn’t want to offer a defective mattress to a fellow colleague working a homicide.” He grabbed her before she could roll off, straddled her body, and yanked her arms above her head.

“Dax,” Paige laughed. “We are not having a morning quickie. I’m on duty. What’s gotten into you today?”

He nibbled on her ear. “I’ve missed you. We’ve both been so busy lately. That last course took me away for over a week and once we got back, you’ve been working overtime — dealing with all the storms. Plus, don’t get me wrong, I enjoy having the Porters out for a visit — but it limits our time together. When I looked up and saw you standing in the doorway, it just hit me. I had this overwhelming need for my wife.”

Paige pulled her hands free and gently cupped his face. “I’ve missed you, too. I wish I could stay and enjoy this — and you,” she grinned. “But I have to go. Jericho is waiting for me to get back so we can go push some exhausted, underpaid, postal workers over the edge. I’d really hate to miss that.”

Dax rolled over and climbed from the bed. “I want a night alone with you. Nathan and Sophie are settled into the guest house, and I’ll warn my men to stay away. I need some time — just you and me. No work, no phone calls, no visitors. We both know this case is going to keep you busy. I want some time, Paige. Tonight. No excuses.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Paige climbed from the bed. “Talking to those guys, especially the one from Richfield, made me realize how much our lives have been getting in the way of us — you and me. We don’t just hang out together like we used to. I guess that’s why I drove over in person, rather than settling for a quick phone call.”

Dax wrapped an arm around her shoulders, leaned in and kissed her temple. “I can show you the rest of the suite if you want, but basically, there’s a bathroom down that hallway and a couple of private rooms. Like I said, we built it for teams, but I think a family could settle in, decorate a tree over there, and have a pleasant holiday.”

“I agree,” Paige leaned closer. “And the newlyweds?”

They stepped into the main hallway and secured the door behind them. “That one,” he pointed to a door on the other side of the corridor. “We set it up for an instructor, to make it more

Festive Repercussions

comfortable when we bring in experts. It should accommodate their needs better than a hotel. It has a large bedroom, a kitchen, bath, and another room off to the side that is outfitted as an office. The lounge area isn't as elaborate as the one in the suite, but it's comfortable and I'm sure it's large enough for a couple at Christmas time."

"Alright," Paige headed for the exit. "Now for the conference room."

"Don't worry about that," Dax took her hand again as they strolled up the sidewalk. "I'll have Hawk set it up today. It'll be ready for you and your team when they arrive."

Instead of returning to the building, Dax walked Paige to her vehicle.

She climbed behind the wheel, started the engine, then turned and just looked at him. "I'll be home as close to quitting time as I can manage, I promise."

Dax stepped forward and brushed a stand of hair away that had escaped her tight ponytail. "No excuses," he kissed her, then stepped away and watched her pull onto the highway. Resigned, and freezing, he made his way back to his office.

Paige sat next to Jericho, crowded in front of a panel of monitors. This was their last chance at getting a good, usable photo of their suspect. They had his back and a partial side view, but he was bundled up in a coat, hat, gloves and an enormous scarf. He was smart, and he was careful. Since the moment he stepped into the building, he used the boxes to shield his face. Once he moved up to the counter, he maneuvered his body to the side, preventing a clean shot from the camera as he interacted with the postal worker behind the desk. They had already skimmed through the rest of the footage and now, they were down to this footage at the counter and the last angle that captured the entrance. They pulled up the final camera to watch his exit.

"There he is, but he knows where the cameras are and he's avoiding them," Paige grumbled. "Look how he side-steps at just the right moment to use that other customer as a shield. We've got him strolling out and turning left before he vanishes — no car, no plate, nothing we can use to identify him."

"He's good," Jericho sat back. "We're better. We'll find him, Paige."

They both looked up when a woman stepped hesitantly into the office. "I found that transaction you needed. The man paid cash, I'm sorry, but there's no record that will help identify him. I can tell you he mailed five boxes."

"Do you have the information on where those five boxes went?" Paige asked, irritated. The instant they spotted the guy — and the packages, they knew there would be additional victims.

Festive Repercussions

“Yes,” she stepped forward and handed Jericho a sheet of paper. “I pulled the tracking information and identified all five of them. We delivered those packages to these five addresses.”

“Thank you,” Jericho stood. “We appreciate you taking the time to help us with this.”

“I um —” she swallowed, visibly distressed. “I think I need to notify the Postal Inspector. Should I—”

“I’ll do that,” Jericho gave her shoulder a quick pat. “Don’t worry about this. I’ll contact the proper authorities and I’ll let them know you wanted to contact them yourself, but I stopped you. Don’t worry about anything. Go back out, deal with the holiday chaos, and put this behind you.”

“Thank you,” she relaxed. “Thank you.”

Once they were back on the road, Paige calculated. “I think the first thing I need to do is contact the local police. There’s one in Idaho and the other is in Colorado. We need to check and see if we have additional victims — or just targets unaware they’ve been marked for death.”

“I agree,” Jericho nodded. They were traveling along Highway 89, headed back to the office when they spotted the accident. There was only one vehicle, so unless it was a result of a hit and run, it was a single car incident. Most likely, the driver lost control on the slick roads. Jericho dropped Paige off and headed back to the office. He’d have the guys shuttle her vehicle over while she dealt with the crash.

That was only the first of several calls that came in. Paige was swamped, rushing from one detail to the next for the rest of the day. She finally made it back to the office ten minutes before end of shift.

“Paige,” Jericho called from his office. “We need to make those calls. Give me the information on the first one, you take the other — then go home. There’s nothing that won’t hold until tomorrow.”

The instant Paige stepped through her front door, she smiled. Dax was setting the stage for romance tonight. She dropped onto the couch and held her hands in front of the fire, hoping they would thaw a little before she made her way to the kitchen. She pulled off her boots and stood, eager to find her husband and begin what was promising to be a memorable night. She didn’t know what Dax was cooking, but it smelled wonderful.

Dax set a large plate with warm Danish on the table and settled across from Paige. He took a sip of coffee and watched her over his mug, smiling when she snatched up the fresh pastry and took a huge bite. “What’s on the agenda for today?”

Festive Repercussions

Paige gulped her coffee then sat back and wiped crumbs from her chin. “I’ll set things up while I wait for the other cops to arrive and get settled in. Then, we’ll coordinate our cases and skim through the evidence from each scene. The guy mailed five packages. We’ll sift through, see if they have anything in common and go from there. We had another victim in Idaho, Detective Mick Singleton is headed down to join us. Oh, I forgot, can we set up another room for him?”

“Sure,” Dax took a sip from his mug. “We have another instructor room just down the hall from the others. Does he have family?”

“No,” Paige sat back. “I asked. He’s single. He planned to spend the holidays with his family down in Texas, but he cancelled that trip. Said he could juggle things around and go next year.”

“Alright,” Dax reached for another pastry. “And the fifth victim?”

“She isn’t a victim,” Paige hesitated. “Well, she is — but she still had her package. She didn’t even open it. I think she’s the only one that really looked at it. She told the Denver cop, the one that responded to check on her and seize the candy — she told him she brought it into the house and wondered who sent it. She’s single and hasn’t dated anyone for months. When Angela — that’s the victim — when she saw the return address and recognized it as her own address, she didn’t trust it. She set it on a shelf in her workroom and forgot about it. She told him she planned to toss it initially, but then wondered if it could be dangerous. She took it in, turn it over to the police once the holidays were over and her schedule settled down.”

“That’s a bit of good news,” Dax continued to study her. “So, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Paige evaded.

“Something,” he took her hand. “Personal or professional?”

“I feel like I’m missing something,” she admitted. “I have this feeling that something was overlooked. Something I should have picked up on. I keep going over the scene and the steps in my head, but nothing pops. Sorry, I guess I’m just distracted.”

“Walk me through it,” Dax offered. “You know that helps sometimes. Start at the beginning. Tell me about the call and how you discovered your victim.”

She did, but it didn’t help. Once she finished, nothing new came to her, but she still felt like they all missed something vital.

“And there’s nothing that ties them together?” Dax asked, knowing there had to be something.

Festive Repercussions

“Not that I can find,” Paige let out a frustrated sound that was a cross between a growl and a moan. “They don’t work in the same field or attend the same church. They live in different areas, some in different states, and have different hobbies. We all got a list of friends and associates from family and co-workers — none of them match. There’s no crossover — nothing that ties all our victims together; but, there must be a connection.”

“What do they do?” Dax smiled at the confused look on her face. “For work. What did your victim do for a living?”

“Marketing,” Paige sat back. “Not an exec but it sounded like middle management, or a team leader sort of thing.”

“Okay,” Dax considered. “And the victim from Richfield? What did he do?”

“She,” Paige hesitated. “I think she was a graphic designer.”

“And the one up north, near Salt Lake?” Dax continued.

“Uh,” Paige frowned. “I think he was a project manager for a large construction company.”

“Do you have the details on the victim from Idaho?” Dax wondered.

“Not a lot,” Paige sat back and considered. “Not yet. I don’t know what he did for a living, but I’m going to find out. Graphic design, project management, and marketing — not entry level but management,” she ticked them off on her fingers. “Wouldn’t all of those careers require a college degree?”

“I believe they would,” Dax nodded. “More, I think some courses would cross over. All of them fall under the category of business, don’t they?”

Paige stared at him in surprise, then she jumped to her feet, rushed over, and kissed him. “You’re brilliant. I knew there was a reason I married you.”

“I thought it was my good looks and charming personality,” Dax called out.

“That didn’t hurt,” she replied before she rushed out the door.

Paige was halfway to the office when she was redirected to a shoplifting incident. Once she handled that case, Margie asked her to respond up the canyon to deal with a simple assault that occurred on a tubing hill that was popular with local families. On the way back to the office, she came across a fender bender at the mouth of the canyon. Then she was dispatched to deal with a

Festive Repercussions

gas theft, followed by a vandalism. By the time she reached the office, she was tired and annoyed.

“You’ve got company,” Margie advised. “The family from Riverton. Gage took them over to the training center so they could get settled.”

“Thanks,” Paige turned to leave, but Jericho stopped her.

“Grab the files and plan on working out of the center until this thing is solved,” Jericho ordered. “I’ll try to stop by now and then to check in and see if you need anything. Otherwise, keep me apprised on your progress. If you need help, I’ll send in Gage when I can spare him.”

“Thanks,” Paige sighed. “I’m hoping we can resolve this quickly, but you never know.”

“Don’t worry about the detective from Richfield,” Jericho decided. “Once he gets here, I’ll bring him to you. Send Gage back as soon as you can but if you need him for an hour or so, that’s fine.”

“I should be good for now. I’ll keep you posted,” Paige promised and headed for the door. She pulled into the parking lot of the training center and just sat there, studying the family unloading their vehicle. Besides the eight-year-old son, the detective also had a daughter. Paige would guess the girl was around ten or eleven. She was focused on her phone and doing her best to ignore the rest of the family. Paige spotted what had to be Detective Brad Robison. He was alert and working to keep his son focused while his wife — a pretty brunette that was clearly in charge — pointed and gave orders to her small family. Paige smiled and slid from her car.

“You must be Deputy Carter,” the woman said in greeting. “I’m Madison Robison, but most people call me Maddie. Thank you so much for all of this,” she swept her arm toward the building. “It’s an adventure for Ryley. I think he took it the hardest when Brad announced he had to go out of town over the holidays.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Paige moved forward. “Clearly, the timing couldn’t be worse. I realize, you must have years of experience adjusting to the demands of the job, but you seem to handle all this better than I expected. If you guys want to take the day to relax and get settled, I don’t mind. I have plenty to keep me busy. Tomorrow would be soon enough for Brad to start working. Even if you are used to this life, the last couple days had to be hectic. Plus, you could probably use some down time to recover from the drive. I can arrange the boards and get things started on my own.”

“If you could give him a couple hours, that will be enough,” Maddie offered. “Brad will need to get back to it. Don’t worry, he always finds a way to shuffle in a little family time. We’ll be fine.” She turned away, called out for Ryley to stop playing with the luggage and carry it into the room, then turned back to Paige.

Festive Repercussions

“There’s nothing that pressing,” Paige began. “It really can wait.”

“We both know that’s not true,” Maddie interrupted. “Brad talks to me about his cases. I understand the situation. He told me there were five packages, and you guys located all of them; but, there’s no guarantee the madman that sent them is finished. Those five might just be the first wave. This killer needs to be stopped before anyone else dies — before he mails another batch of poison candy. Brad will head over and work tonight, but we do need an hour or two so we can get the kids settled before he gets started.”

Paige stared at the woman in surprise. Not because she discussed cases with her husband — Paige did that with Dax. It shocked her to realize she hadn’t thought things through to the next obvious step — more victims. She assumed the maniac was finished, that the deaths were done, and they just needed to find and arrest the killer. Realizing it might only be the beginning was frightening — and it gave this case a renewed sense of urgency.

“I surprised you,” Madison realized.

“A little,” Paige admitted. “I’ll let you get back to your kids. It was a pleasure to meet you. I’m sure we’ll be seeing a lot of each other over the next few days.”

“Thanks again, Paige,” Madison placed a warm hand on her arm. “Can I call you Paige?”

“Of course,” Paige smiled. “And you should thank my husband and his merry band of troublemakers. I was just the messenger.”

“Well then,” she glanced over her shoulder when they heard her son yelling. “I better get back to that.”

Paige watched her leave then turned and collided with Dax. He reached out and gripped her hips, but her foot glided across a patch of ice, slipped out from under her, and they both tumbled to the ground.

At the last minute, Dax shifted their weight, so he landed on the bottom with her toppling onto his masculine chest with a thud.

“Did I hurt you!” Paige asked, a little panicked.

Dax laughed. “Yes, and now you have to kiss it better.”

“Is that your clever way of telling me to kiss your butt?” Paige narrowed her eyes at him. “You have to know that’s never going to happen.”

He continued to laugh, shifted, and pinned her to the ground. “Surrender and pay your debt, woman.”

Paige reached down, scooped up a handful of snow and dumped it down his shirt.

Festive Repercussions

“You little,” Dax raised her arms over her head and pinned them in place with one hand while he scooped up snow with the other and rubbed it over her face.

Paige turned her head and tried to buck him off her, it didn’t work. When he grabbed another fist full of snow, she yanked her arms free and shoved at his chest. Dax just wrapped an arm around her body and pulled her against him.

“Stop it you maniac,” she was laughing so hard, she could barely talk.

“Never,” Dax tightened his grip and grinned. When she wiggled and tossed her head back, still laughing, Dax froze. Sometimes the love he had for this woman could sneak up and grip him with so much force, he could barely breathe. He leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was intense and possessive. He couldn’t seem to get enough of her.

Paige went from laughing and enjoying the frivolity of the moment to hot powerful need in a matter of seconds. She saw the raw and intense love in Dax’s eyes for just a second before he pressed his mouth to hers and immediately stopped her laughing. When they finally came up for air, she focused on him and waited. “What was that?”

He stood and held out his hand to help her up. When she took it, he pulled her to her feet and was about to speak when he spotted movement in the parking lot. “I think the newlyweds have arrived, and she doesn’t look happy. You should probably just go and—” he nodded toward the couple. “I don’t know, do something.”

“Right,” Paige sighed and strolled toward the couple who was now standing on the sidewalk, tension radiating around them in waves. “I’m Deputy Paige Carter, but you can just call me Paige. You must be Jake Thomas and —” Paige turned to the woman.

“This is my wife, Darcy,” Jake glanced at his wife then down at the bags in his hands and back to Paige, signaling he couldn’t shake her hand in greeting.

“No formalities necessary,” she smiled in understanding, turned and started toward the building. “Let me show you where you’ll be staying. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised. There aren’t any courses running at the moment, so feel free to walk around, explore the place, and make use of the facilities.”

“We appreciate that,” Jake stopped the door with his foot and waited for Darcy to enter.

“Oh,” Darcy exclaimed. “It’s so cozy and... well, it’s like a little apartment.”

“Settle in,” Paige offered. “We can start working in the morning.” She silently walked away, hoping the two of them would work through their conflict. If that display was still residual anger and disappointment because Jake had to work, things just might get interesting around here over the holidays. Maybe it was something else. Maybe they were arguing over another problem, something that happened on the drive over from Richfield. With a shrug, Paige started down the

Festive Repercussions

hallway. Whatever was causing the rift, it wasn't her problem. Once outside, Paige made her way to the conference room and began setting up the boards.

Two hours later, Jake and Brad joined her in the conference room. They both moved forward and began silently studying the images, notes, and other details of the case.

"It's a good start," Brad moved to the information on his victim. "We'll need to fine tune it but most of the information is here."

"How do you guys do it?" Jake wondered.

"Do what?" Paige asked absently.

"Maintain balance," Jake added. "Between your personal life and the job."

"Balance," Paige glanced at Brad. "I think I've heard of that."

"It's a myth," Brad shrugged. "Don't waste your time. It's easier to find a unicorn lounging next to that pot of gold at the end of a rainbow."

"That's encouraging," Jake grumbled.

"Okay," Paige turned to face him. "You may not achieve true balance, but my advice is to seize all the little moments and make the most of them. Your wife's upset because all of her plans for the season were shattered and she's stuck in a strange town, with strange people and nothing to do. You're worried about her, so you can't concentrate on the work. Give us two hours. We need to go over the information I've compiled and discuss the two cases I haven't listed, yet. I have the basics on these three, but each of you can add details I missed. Once we're finished, let's call it a night. You can go make up with your wife and I can enjoy a hot meal and a quiet evening with my husband. And Brad can do whatever men do when they have a wife and two children to entertain. Two hours, then we'll all work on that balance."

"Sounds like a good plan to me," Brad agreed. "I'll go first. You have most of the information from my case, but I stopped in and talked to Whitmer again last night. I asked him if he knew any of the other victims. He insisted he didn't know any of them. He lied."

"You think they knew each other?" Jake wondered.

"I know they did," Brad insisted. "I could see it, for just an instant, before he blanked his face and played innocent. He dug in, I went at it from a different angle, but he still denied knowing any of them. I pushed hard and I think he was close to breaking. Then, the nurse interrupted, said it was late, and forced me out. I think we need to pursue that avenue. We need to figure out the connection — because there is definitely a connection."

Festive Repercussions

“You missed my interview with Sandy Jones,” Jake stood in front of the board. “She worked with Lancaster. When I asked her if she knew of anyone that would want to hurt Stephanie, she said there was something — but she didn’t have the details. It was a secret that Stephanie wouldn’t explain, but her friend felt guilty about something. Something that happened a long time ago.”

“Could tie in with your college idea,” Brad offered. “I called Trent’s girlfriend on my way down, after you contacted me. When I quizzed Nurse Nadia on where Trent went to college, she said he graduated from the University of Utah. She was sure about that because it’s where she went to nursing school. They’ve spent a lot of time talking about their time there and laughing about the crazy things they did when they were young and stupid.”

“They’re still young,” Paige insisted. “I was told by a close friend of Brenda’s, my victim, that she graduated from UNLV. The information seems solid. The friend said she was positive, and it sounds like the same sort of deal. They laughed about it, Brenda said how crazy it was living in Vegas and how entertaining people watching could be on The Strip. It sounds like we hit another dead end. I was sure the college angle would get us a connection, but it seems to be a bust.”

“My victim got her degree from San Diego State University,” Jake added. “It doesn’t sound like any of them went to the same place.”

“I have a call into a contact in Las Vegas,” Paige advised. “He agreed to head over to the college and talk to someone in administration. I want to know if Stephanie went there all four years or if she transferred from somewhere else.”

“I’ll call Trina,” Brad decided. “She might know if Trent was a transfer or if he did all four years at the U.”

While they waited, the three of them discussed the case, added details and fine-tuned the investigation. It was nearly eight o’clock that evening when they finally called it a night. Paige headed into the main building, found Dax and enjoyed one of those stolen moments she talked to Brad about. They grabbed a pizza on the way home, built a fire and stretched out on the couch to enjoy a rare movie night — it felt like an actual date, something they hadn’t enjoyed for a very long time.

“Brad, your wife said something yesterday that I think we need to discuss,” Paige began the following morning.

Festive Repercussions

“What’s that?” Brand asked absently as he tacked photos to a large board. They had images of all five victims now, including the woman in Colorado that hadn’t touched the candy and the deceased victim from Idaho. Detective Mick Singleton would be arriving sometime later that evening and they wanted all the data up to date when he arrived.

“She said this might just be his first wave,” Paige frowned when Dax stepped into the room. Her frown deepened when she saw the look on his face. It was a mixture of anger and pity clouded with a flash of shock. “Uh —” She took a step to the side to block his view.

“I’m not staying,” Dax assured her. “I just wanted to let you know something came up and I need to take my crew and head out for a few hours. We should get back around noon. Wooly arranged for lunch and we ordered enough for you and the rest of the guests. Bring your wives and your kids on over to the main building. If you get there before I make it back, there’s no need to wait, just dig in and help yourself.”

“Catered?” Paige wondered.

“Delivered,” Dax corrected. He moved to her side, leaned in, and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “I know — you’re working.” With a smile, he pulled her against him and gave her a deeper, more intimate kiss, then he released her, turned, and walked away.

Paige watched him cross the room and stroll casually out the door.

“We all know you’re married,” Brad grinned. “Why does that embarrass you?”

“Baffles,” Paige disagreed. “It baffles me, and it messes with my head. He’s a distraction, one that fogs my brain and makes it impossible to concentrate. Forget it, let’s get back to work.”

The two men grinned but complied. “You were saying something about my wife,” Brad reminded her.

“Right,” Paige focused on the board and the images of their victims. “She said we needed to work on this because it might just be the first wave. I was working the case, thinking we located all the victims, and we just needed to identify our suspect. But Maddison is right, a lot of packages are mailed this time of year. What if he’s not finished? What if he has another five or seven or ten packages ready to be sent to a fresh wave of unsuspecting targets?”

“What if he’s already mailed them?” Jake sobered.

“Maddie mentioned that to me,” Brad shrugged. “It’s certainly possible. I think it’s more likely he’ll try to figure out a way to get to the girl in Colorado. He’s not finished. She didn’t take the bait. At least Trent, my victim, sampled the goods and ended up in the hospital. That Angela woman tossed it aside and forgot about it. You’re also forgetting — Trent knew the other victims. I still think there’s a connection. Our bad guy might believe this round was such a fun

Festive Repercussions

filled success that he wants to do it again, but I think those first five are personal. He knows them and Angela didn't cooperate."

"Maybe we should call the cops up there," Paige considered. "It wouldn't hurt to at least call them and let them know this Angela Young woman could still be in danger."

"I'll call," Brad offered. "Because I want to convince one of their detectives to head out and question her in person. I want to know what secret Stephanie was keeping, and if it's connected to the others — maybe it's the reason they ended up dead. I want to know how she knows Trent and if she admits she knows the others — because they all know each other. I think if a detective from Denver corners the woman in person, she might provide the information we're missing."

"I agree," Paige waited for Brad to hang up before she admitted she was out of ideas.

"Unless we get answers from your contact in Vegas, or the detective from Denver comes through for us, we're at a dead end," Jake agreed.

"Let's take a break," Paige decided. "Go spend some time with your family. I need to check in at the office, anyway. Go work on that balance, we can dig in harder when Detective Singleton arrives from Idaho. I'll be back in a couple hours to set up for lunch. Just head over to the main building when you get hungry."

Brad stopped to stare at the board but finally had to agree. They were at a standstill until additional data came through. "We'll hook back up around noon," he announced before he turned and headed for the door, Jake followed him out.

Paige stepped into the office and approached Margie's desk. "He sounds busy. Angry citizen?"

"Sort of," Margie evaded.

"Not my case, I hope," Paige settled into one of the chairs that lined the wall in front of Jericho's office.

Margie hesitated. "It's Harper. She —"

"Found out he tapped his investigator to look into her," Paige realized.

"We both told him it was a bad idea," Margie sighed.

"I told him to come clean," Paige glanced at the door. "Apparently, he ignored my advice." She winced. "Sounds bad. Do you think he can salvage it?"

Festive Repercussions

“I hope so,” Margie sighed again. “She—”

The door flew open, and an angry, red-faced Harper stormed from the room. She didn't even glance around, she just marched to the front entrance, threw it open and practically stomped out the door.

Jericho emerged, stopped in the doorway and motioned for Paige to join him in his office. “Not one word, Paige. I mean it.”

“Understood,” Paige settled into one of his chairs. “I just need to know if you're okay.”

Jericho settled back in his chair and rubbed his hands over his face. He looked tired and a little sad. “Yeah. No. I don't know. I just don't know,” he looked up. “Maybe I messed up. Maybe I took a right when I should have jogged left, I don't know. I do know I should have talked to her about it, explained my reason for all of it, but now — I don't know, Paige. I need to put that aside and let it sit for now. Tell me about the case.”

Paige hesitated. She knew Jericho really cared for Harper and she was pretty sure Harper was falling for the amazing sheriff as well. Maybe if he set it aside, let Harper cool down a little, and cornered her later to grovel, they could discuss the situation like rational adults. An image of Harper's angry face popped into Paige's head; and she knew, without a doubt, it would take more than time to fix this mistake. It might take more than Jericho was willing to give. Paige frowned but tried to push it aside, that was a problem for later. Right now, she needed to relay the new information to her boss.

Once she filled Jericho in, they discussed the case for nearly an hour. Neither one of them had any answers and before long Paige realized they were just going around in circles, debating the same points over and over. She was frustrated and Jericho was distracted. With no clear path to solving this case, she cut the conversation short, and headed back to the training center.

Paige ran the case through her head as she drove. There had to be a way to force the truth out of witnesses they didn't have access to. It made little sense for her to drive up to Salt Lake to interview Trent Whitmer alone. Doing so would probably be a waste of time, anyway. There was no guarantee he'd talk to her. She had to trust Brad, it was his case and his victim. He already pushed and Whitmer shut down and lied rather than explain the connection. The Manti victim was dead — nobody to interview there — so were the victims out of Richfield and Idaho. The killer had to be feeling pretty cocky about this round — three dead and one in the hospital. Not bad odds, and pretty slick for a first round. Was it a first round? It had to be. Otherwise, they would have found similar unsolved crimes. This kind of poisoning was unusual and would stand out. So, what would the suspect do next? She had to agree with Brad, the killer would need to go after Angela Young. She just hoped Denver was taking the threat seriously. She hoped Angela Young was taking precautions; because it was nearly impossible to stop a killer that used poison as a weapon, even when you knew it was coming.

Festive Repercussions

It was nearly one that afternoon when Dax stepped into his office and spotted Paige sitting behind his desk. She was wearing headphones and making notes on a pad. He moved forward and settled into one of his spare chairs before she glanced up, stopped the player and pulled off the headset. “Did you eat?” Dax wondered.

“Not yet,” she relaxed into the chair. “I was about to go in when the detective from Denver sent this interview over. I wanted to see what Angela Young had to say.”

“Digital recording?” Dax wondered.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “He recorded the interview and then sent it right over.”

“Did you learn anything you didn’t already know?”

“Maybe a little,” Paige stood. “Let’s go eat, I’m starving.”

“Alright,” Dax took her hand, and they headed down the hallway.

“Angela,” Paige began. “That’s the woman in Denver. She admitted they all knew each other — Stephanie Lancaster, Brenda McKay, and Trent Whitmer. The last guy, the one from Idaho is Gary Pembroke. She knew him as well. She’s pretty freaked out, learning all her old college pals are dead, or nearly dead. That was a good lead, by the way.”

“Glad to be of service,” Dax grinned and pulled her through the door that led to a long corridor. “You know, I kind of like seeing you here. It’s nice, spending the day with you like this. Anyway, I thought you said they all graduated from different colleges.”

“They all transferred from Snow College,” Paige studied him. “I think that’s why he mailed the packages from Ephraim.” She paused, considered, then grabbed his hand before he could open the door that led to the break room. “I agree with you, about working together. It’s a little weird, but nice to see you several times throughout the day.”

“But?” Dax lifted her hand to his mouth and gently kissed her knuckles.

“I’m sorry you had to see the board this morning,” she decided to be direct. “I saw your face and I’m sorry you had to see that. Death is never pretty, no matter how you go. I should have realized — sometimes forget, but I should have shielded you guys from that, made sure we concealed the board in case one of you walked in. Those images, that’s part of the job but I brought that ugliness home and I’m sorry. That’s all.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Dax frowned. “I mean, the evidence photos weren’t all cheerful and rosy, but I’ve seen worse. I’m a combat veteran, death and carnage were part of my life for a

Festive Repercussions

long time. It was just a surprise, I think. When I stepped into the room and saw it laid out like that, it just hit me how senseless and pitiful it all was. They're so young and from what you've told me, they were all making their way. They went to college, got a good job, and they were moving up, carving out a life; and then, one day, a guy sends them a box of chocolates for Christmas — and they're dead. It pissed me off and made me sad — and it just hit me, seeing it on display like that. I felt sorry for them, and their families, and I couldn't get past just how pathetic and pointless it was."

Paige nodded in understanding, she had all those same feelings standing over Brenda's body in that tiny little cottage, with the silly dancing pig salt and pepper shakers, and the cookie jar that looked like a cow. She stood there and thought — *I bet when you lift the head, it moos.* "I don't know why this group of college pals were targeted, not yet. But I'll find him, Dax. I'm going to track him down and make sure he never kills anyone again. Because it is senseless and it's abhorrent and ugly. I'll get him, because underneath it all — he's a coward. He didn't even have the guts to confront them. He poisoned a box of Christmas candy and sent it anonymously through the mail. He's a sad, pitiful little man with a despicable sense of entitlement. And when I find him, he won't be able to avoid a confrontation with me."

"How do you know it was a man?" Dax wondered. "I thought poisoning was typically a method used by women."

"I guess it could be a woman," Paige considered. "It just feels like a man to me. Like a weaselly little pimple seeking revenge. I bet he went to college with them. I bet they were all friends; or, at least, acquaintances and kids that age are stupid and reckless. I bet they offended him, slighted him somehow — intentionally or otherwise — and now he wants them to pay. The pathetic little weasel probably got his feelings hurt, and he didn't have the guts to confront them. So, he snuck away with his tail between his legs to stew and simmer in his warm little basement until he got up the nerve to poison them with chocolate."

"I think it feels like a guy. To me, it feels that way, but I could never explain why," Dax pulled open the door. "Let's put this aside for a little while. Let's set it aside, have lunch, and visit with friends. We could both use the break."

"Alright," Paige let him lead her into the break room. "Where did you guys go, anyway? You don't normally have an issue that requires all of you to head out together."

"Problem with the tower," Dax handed Paige a plate and took one for himself. "Just a minor structural issue. Normally I'd go, maybe take Hawk but we needed Vato — he's the expert. Plus, Wooly's been handling the project, so he was essential, and Zeus wanted to make sure if we made any changes, it would hold up if we had a little explosive incident in the hot house."

"Explosive incident?" Paige narrowed her eyes at him.

Festive Repercussions

“Yeah,” Dax shrugged. “You do what you do, I do what I do. It works for us, babe. Don’t try to change things now.”

Paige decided she would not think about explosives or towers or incidents. She was going to enjoy her meal and visit with friends. Then, she was going to get back to work.

“You have a lot of information, but no leads to follow,” Detective Mick Singleton said. “I’m not sure I can add much to it. Give me a minute here, let me get the information from my case up on the board and we can go from there.”

“What’s the incident? That note you added up there on the left,” Brad wondered.

“No idea,” Mick shrugged. “Once I received the updated information, I went back, talked to friends and family again. His sister, uh... Darla, said there was an incident. Something my victim refused to talk about. She didn’t know the specifics, and she wasn’t even sure when or where it happened. She just knew her brother was worried about something in his past. One night, after a party where he’d been drinking heavily, he let it slip that there was an incident. He told her there was a secret. Something he’d sworn on his life, and the life of his mother, he would never reveal. He said something about a blood oath and retribution. He was rambling and when Darla asked him about it the next day, the guy freaked out. Said he was drunk, and he had no idea what she was talking about.”

“Another guy with a secret,” Paige paced the room.

“I’m not a betting man,” Jake considered. “But I bet that secret has to be the reason for the murders.”

“Me either,” Brad tipped his chair back. “But I’d take that bet.”

“Now we just need to figure out what the secret was,” Paige moved forward to study the boards. “Let’s see what we can dig up. Could be an incident at the college, one that happened when they all attended Snow College together. Do you think it was big enough to make the papers?”

“Let’s see what we can find,” Brad let the chair drop back to the floor and got to work.

Festive Repercussions

Dax glanced up from the documents he was reading when the young woman passed by his door for the third time. He stood, moved to the entry and waited. It didn't take long. When she pivoted and headed back toward him, he stopped her. "Can I help you with something?"

"Oh!" she jumped in surprise. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you. I think I might be lost."

Dax leaned against the jamb and waited. It didn't take long.

"Do you have a minute?" she finally asked.

"Sure," Dax straightened. "Do you want to come in and sit, or should we take a walk?"

"I'd love a walk, if you don't mind," she glanced at him then immediately looked away.

"Walk it is," he motioned her forward, then followed a few steps behind. When they reached a door a few feet away, he stopped her, directed her through, and guided her toward the stairs.

"Where are we going?" Darcy asked nervously.

"Jake told me you're a swimmer. I thought you might like to see the pool," Dax casually explained. "You're welcome to use it any time. We're installing a couple of saunas next month so that area is sectioned off and could be hazardous, I'd appreciate it if you steered clear, but the rest is available and open any time you need an escape." He pushed open another door, reached around to the wall, and flipped on the lights.

"This is amazing," Darcy moved forward to admire the pool — both of them. Off to one side was a long lap pool with three lanes. The center of the room was taken up by a huge recreation pool with a tall diving board. To one side were two doors, she assumed they led to locker rooms and a shower area. Next to the door was a long bench and the other side was blocked off with plywood. That must be where they were adding the saunas. Along the far wall on the other side, in front of a bank of windows that led to a weight room, were four hot tubs — they currently covered with brown tarps. She glanced behind her and spotted several round tables with comfortable chairs. She moved forward and settled into the closest one.

Dax followed her over and took the chair across from her. "Like I said, come down whenever you want. I can show you how to work the hot tubs if you want. They work, just let me know if you decide to take a soak. We like to test the water and keep the chemicals balanced between uses."

"I — thank you," she corrected. "I know you and the female cop that is working with Jake are together — what I mean to say is I know you're in a relationship. I don't know if you're married or dating or what; but, I saw you. I saw —" she swallowed, unsure how to continue.

Festive Repercussions

“Paige is my wife,” Dax settled back. “You saw us, when you arrived, you saw us wrestling around in the snow.”

“Yes,” Darcy looked away. “I saw what looked like a really sweet moment between two people that love each other.”

“It was,” Dax agreed.

“How long have you been married?” she finally asked.

“Just over two years,” Dax frowned. “But we’ve been together longer.”

“How do you do it?” Darcy practically whispered.

“Do what?”

“How do you enjoy those sweet, tender moments when you’re married to a police officer? How do you get past the disappointment and the bitterness?”

Dax wasn’t sure how to answer that because he didn’t feel bitterness toward Paige or the department. Maybe because he understood the sacrifice it took to dedicate your life to protecting others and accepted it.

“I know Jake is a cop,” Darcy said impatiently when he didn’t answer. “I knew what our life would be like when I married him — at least, I thought I did. But I had all these plans, special traditions I wanted to start for our first Christmas, and now it’s all ruined because he’s a detective and he has to stop a killer. Sure, I know that’s important, but I can’t plan anything and I resent it. I don’t think I was prepared for that part. I know his job is dangerous. I’m proud of what he does, how he lives, the sacrifices he makes for strangers and victims. When he walks out the door, I’m so proud I could burst — and I’m so terrified I could drop to the floor and cry. That’s the part I expected, the part I was prepared to deal with. This? This is different, and it blindsided me. I wasn’t prepared, didn’t know I couldn’t even have one holiday tradition that wouldn’t be tossed aside for a case. It’s not fair, and he won’t even talk to me about his work. He can’t share the job with me, so I’m left bored and alone — and it makes me feel isolated and rejected. I’m left to deal with the disappointment and the bitterness alone. He says he’s trying to protect me, to shield me from the darkness and the ugliness, but I feel like he’s pushing me away and building a wall.”

“I think every marriage is different,” Dax considered. He didn’t have that problem; Paige discussed her cases with him. It was their own kind of tradition and it worked for them. “There are things — horrible things — that happen in the world. Tragedies, atrocities and the ugliness you mentioned. I think it’s natural for a husband to shield the woman he loves from that kind of vicious brutality. Pushing against that, insisting that Jake change and share those things with you

Festive Repercussions

— that will form a wall. Instead of resenting it, I think you should be grateful he loves you enough to protect you.”

“But where does that leave us?” Darcy asked in frustration. “How do we share our lives if we can only share part of our lives?”

“Think of it this way,” Dax focused on the pool. “You have hobbies — swimming, for instance. Does Jake have to share that with you? Does he have to love the sport, take part in a competition, dedicate time to engage in a race?”

“No, of course not,” Darcy frowned. “Jake doesn’t really like to swim. That’s not something we share.”

“So, how do you share your lives if you can’t share that part of your life?”

Darcy continued to frown. “I understand what you’re saying and I’m going to think of it that way. We don’t have to share everything. We just need to support each other and share the things we have in common.”

“Exactly,” Dax nodded. “As for the other stuff, I think in time you’ll learn to adjust. Instead of focusing on the actual holiday, you’ll find ways to focus on each other. You’ll appreciate those little stolen moments, like wrestling around in the snow. You won’t miss getting all dressed up to go out on the town. Instead, you’ll cherish the days when Jake comes home early, and you can snuggle on the couch with popcorn and a good movie.”

Darcy pulled out her phone and began punching keys.

“What are you doing?” Dax asked, bemused.

“I’m taking notes,” she said, not looking up. “Rule number one — be flexible and treasure the little things.”

Dax laughed. “I’m not sure I’m the best person to be giving advice.”

“Who better?” Darcy wondered. “Okay, what’s rule number two?”

“I guess I’d have to say accept Jake for who and what he is,” Dax considered. “Don’t pry. If he wants to talk about his day, he will.” He thought of the images tacked to the board in the conference room and was pretty sure Jake would never reveal that part of the job to his wife. “There are some things that are too horrible to share. Accept that and gear the conversation to something you can share.”

“Okay,” Darcy stared at the wall for several seconds then began to type. “Accept Jake and don’t try to change him — and don’t pry. Next?”

Festive Repercussions

“I think I’d add a caveat to that,” Dax said cautiously. “What I mean, is if Paige comes home distracted, I can usually tell if it’s work related. If we had plans to hang out that night, to watch a movie or visit with friends, and Paige has her attention split between what’s happening around her and a case she’s working — I don’t take it personally. I tell myself to be grateful she could be there with me, instead of at the office. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” Darcy nodded. She held up a finger and punched out her next rule. It took longer than the others. “Okay, go ahead.”

“I think the final and maybe the most important rule — if that’s what we’re calling this,” Dax hesitated.

“What?” Darcy demanded.

“When Paige gets exhausted and worn down,” Dax tried to formulate his thoughts. “When she comes home, and she has that look, the one that says she’s dealing with something that is too difficult for her to handle on her own — do you know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” Darcy nodded. “Jake had that look for over a week just before our wedding. I thought he was getting cold feet, but he finally told me he was working a tough case that involved children. The case, plus the wedding stuff was almost too much for him.”

“When Jake gets that look,” Dax said again. “The one that says he’s on the brink. That’s when you step in. That’s when you push, you intervene, and you do something drastic.”

“Like what?”

“Convince him to take a drive with you,” Dax shrugged. “Take him out, somewhere that is special. I can take Paige up the mountains, but anywhere is fine. Take a blanket, trick him, manipulate him, coerce him into your car, and drive away. Take a picnic, a bottle of wine, anything. You’ll know what’s right for you. Go out, sit under the stars, and seduce him. Take that moment to show him he’s loved and cherished. It will strengthen your marriage and it will give him the strength he needs to face whatever gave him that look in the first place. Be spontaneous.”

“Be spontaneous,” Darcy grinned. “That’s my favorite rule so far. So, basically the secret to a happy marriage is to find a way to be happy.”

“Well said,” Dax stood. “And I think I have an idea. Go change into something warm. I’m going to round up the guys so we can all have a little fun.”

“You really don’t mind if I use the pool?” she glanced back, longingly.

Festive Repercussions

“Not at all,” Dax assured her. “Let’s see if you can find your way out of here.” He stood back and followed her back up the stairs and out the door. Once she was heading toward the housing unit, he turned and made his way to the conference room.

It took more convincing than it should have, but an hour later, the group was flying up the canyon on the back of several snowmobiles. Hawk and Zeus were riding solo, so was Mick Singleton. Paige was snuggled against Dax’s back, holding on for dear life. Darcy was riding with Jake. Brad had Ryley seated in the front, and the boy was laughing and giggling nonstop. Maddie had their daughter, Nadia, on the back of her machine. The girl had her arms firmly wrapped around her mother’s waist, but she too was grinning.

They spent over an hour on the main highway before Hawk veered off the road onto a smaller, narrow trail that led to an amazing overlook. When they reached the top, Zeus pulled a thermos out of a hard case and began pouring everyone hot chocolate. The group was happy, relaxed and enjoying the fresh air and the spontaneous outing. Everyone except Paige.

Dax linked his hand with hers and pulled her away from the group. He led to her to the jagged edge of a cliff and wrapped his arms around her from behind. “Spill it. What’s eating you? This was supposed to be fun.”

“It is,” Paige sighed. “I promise, it is. I’m just frustrated. I finished listening to the interview with Angela from Denver. She confirmed they knew each other, all of them. She said the five of them did everything together. She knew nothing about a secret and said whatever it was, she wasn’t involved. He believed her — the detective that interviewed her, which gives us another dead end. If I don’t find something fast, a dangerous man is going to get away with killing three people and nearly killing a fourth. I don’t think I can live with that.”

“I know,” he leaned forward and kissed the back of her head. “Can’t you put it away for just a little while? Push it aside and enjoy the crisp air and the feel of a sturdy machine beneath you while you slice through the air and rocket across the slick snow packed trail?”

“No,” Paige grinned. “Because when I’m on the back of your machine, all I can do is hold on for dear life and watch as my entire life passes before my eyes.”

“Good,” Dax grinned. “Just focus on that then.”

“You’re a lunatic,” Paige slugged him in the arm.

“Yes, but I’m your lunatic,” Dax turned her around and pulled her into his arms.

Festive Repercussions

They stood there, enjoying the view for several minutes. Finally, Paige straightened, sighed and took a step back. “I think I need to talk Brad into making a long trip to Salt Lake. I think we need to interview his victim again. And this time, we need to post a guard at the door so we’re not interrupted by a grumpy nurse with control issues.”

“Then go,” Dax took a step forward, yanked her against him and pressed a kiss to her temple. “Go to Salt Lake, drag the truth out of the guy, then come home and close this case so we can all enjoy the rest of the holiday.”

“That’s it?” Paige wondered. “You’re not mad?”

“No,” Dax took her hand and led her back to the group. “I expect compensation. I expect a boatload of the payment of my choice for my supportive nature and because you’re leaving me all alone to fend for myself so close to Christmas — with strangers. And be prepared because I plan to have your bill waiting when you return.” He leaned in and nipped her right ear.

Paige elbowed him in the stomach but grinned. Now she just had to convince Brad.

It wasn’t hard. It surprised her to learn he had the same thought. He’d already spoken to Maddie, which was a relief. His wife wasn’t exactly happy to be left in a strange town with people she barely knew, but if Brad thought cornering his victim would get them home for Christmas, she was willing to go along with the plan.

Once that was settled, she called Jericho. Her boss approved the trip, told her to book a hotel if the interview took too long, and cut her off. Paige wondered if he was busy, maybe working things out with Harper. But, he didn’t offer an explanation, and she didn’t think asking over the phone was a good idea.

The following morning at seven o’clock, Paige and Brad Robison were on the road, headed back to Salt Lake. Two and a half hours later, they were pulling into Trent Whitmer’s driveway in Riverton. He wasn’t happy to see them.

Once they gained entry — through a little intimidation — Paige took the lead. They discussed their approach, at length, on the way up and they both thought it might throw Trent if Paige jumped right in and started to push.

“We know you were friends — very good friends — with Brenda McKay, Stephanie Lancaster, Angela Young and Gary Pembroke. Don’t lie to me. Angela already confirmed the connection. Now we want to know who you pissed off enough, when you were all attending Snow College — that they would want to kill you.”

Festive Repercussions

“I—” he slowly pushed himself off the sofa and moved to stand in front of the window.

Paige and Brad waited, positive they were boxing him in.

Finally, he turned, gave them a resigned look and settled back onto the couch. “I don’t know if this is connected. I mean, it was so long ago and — well, it wasn’t life altering or anything. Not for us. But I guess — with a twisted mind like his, it could be enough.”

“What was enough?” Brad demanded.

“The five of us,” Trent began. “We were tight. If he’s part of this, it started in a business class, just a casual brush that didn’t mean that much, not to us. We were all working on our general requirements — you know, getting them out of the way so we could transfer to another university somewhere to finish out the specialty courses. I met Gary the first week of school and we hit it off instantly. We had a lot in common and we just seemed to click. He planned to work at his dad’s firm — architect and he was good. I had a contact in construction. It fit, I guess. We could talk shop, had a lot of the same interests, and we took a lot of the same courses. It was about a month later that Gary met Angie. They went on one date and realized it wasn’t a match—no spark — but he invited her to something or other at the college. I can’t remember, it was so long ago. There were always events going on and there wasn’t much else to do. Anyway, Gary invited Angie who brought Stephanie. The four of us slid into an easy and smooth friendship.”

“And Brenda?” Paige wondered.

“I think we met her about a month later, at a party,” Trent shrugged. “I think. She clicked, too. From that point forward it was the five of us. We’d hang, study together, plan adventures on the weekend, that sort of thing. We were focused on school, but we liked to have fun. It didn’t take long to realize we were all going into some kind of business career, and we started taking the same courses. The prereqs were basically the same and that way we could study together. You know, kind of help each other along if anyone got stumped.”

“You talked about a sixth guy,” Paige tried to get him back on track. “Who was the guy and why do you think he could be involved?”

“We all needed another credit,” Trent continued. “Something in math so we took an accounting course, you know because of the business angle. It would satisfy the general requirement and fulfilled one of the business credits we would need later. We were acing the course. It was easy because we did the assignments together, helped each other out and glided along for the first half of the course. All five of us aced the midterm. I guess the rest of the class took notice. We didn’t realize there were other students that resented us. The professor graded on a curve, and we were messing up their grades.”

“Maybe they should have studied more,” Paige shrugged. “What happened?”

Festive Repercussions

“A guy from class approached us one day,” Trent stared into the distance. “I think it was just after the midterm, but I’m not sure how long. Weeks, maybe a month, but no longer. We were just hanging like we did, outside on the lawn near a large tree where we liked to crash when it was warm. Martin approached us and asked if he could join. We figured no big deal, we recognized him, so we said sure.”

“Martin who?” Brad tried to sound casual. He didn’t want Trent to close up and shut down the story.

“Uh... Martin Weiss. He was a year or so older than us. He never said why he got the late start, not to me anyway.” Trent shifted and tried to get comfortable. “He just used his age to try to control us. Then, he started flirting with Angie and that annoyed me a little. Not that we had anything going, but we were tight, and he was there — flirting and making her feel sorry for him, then using his age to control us. She fell for it, all the girls did. Gary hated his guts but the girls — well, the girls convinced us to let him tag along now and then. It didn’t take long to realize he was gone for Angie. She couldn’t see it, though. She thought he was lonely and just needed a friend. I knew better — the guy was obsessed, and he was a little whacked.”

“Whacked how?” Paige interrupted.

“It’s hard to explain,” Trent shrugged. “For one thing, he was always there. We didn’t have to tell him what we were doing or where we were going. He was just there. That’s why I think he was obsessed. I told Angie I thought he was stalking her, but she brushed that off and didn’t take it seriously. He was in the accounting class with us, so he used that and always wanted to study together. Then, he’d weasel his way into other things — a hiking trip up the canyon, a movie night to see a new release, he somehow got tickets close to us for a play we were attending at the school. He was always just there, bumping into us when we were goofing around. Then it got worse. Brenda told me and Gary she went grocery shopping with Angela and when they came around the corner in the cereal aisle, there he was — lurking and waiting. It spooked Brenda. Angie said it was a little annoying, but she never bought into the creep factor.”

“What happened?” Brad pushed.

“We were stupid kids,” Trent sighed. “Stupid, full of energy and on top of the world if you get me.”

“We’re not going to hassle you over a stupid prank or a college caper,” Paige said impatiently.

“Alright,” Trent relented. “I don’t think anything we did was illegal, so it doesn’t matter, I guess. One night, we were bored. The five of us met up — there’s this art gallery by the library and outside is a big open area — lots of lawn and some trees. We met up there, connected with a buddy who gave us a case of beer and a couple bottles of cheap wine. We thought we’d head up

Festive Repercussions

the canyon and party a little. Angie had to work, so she was going to follow us up and leave early. The rest of us thought we'd just crash in the back of the truck and sleep it off if we got drunk."

"Martin showed up?" Brad surmised.

"Yeah," Trent scowled. "He was livid. Tried to make us all feel guilty for not inviting him. He was whining and carrying on, basically throwing a tantrum. I glanced at Gary, and we exchanged a look — nothing big, just a mutual exasperation type thing. I think Gary rolled his eyes and Martin saw us. He lost it. He went on for I don't know how long. When his outburst finally wound down, Angie said she had to book it. The argument lasted so long; she didn't have time to go anywhere. That set him off again, but Angie shut him down immediately. For the first time since we met him, Angie was angry that Martin ruined our fun. The rest of us were furious that he crashed our party and tried to take over — and we just knew we were going to be stuck with him for the rest of the evening.

Angie took off and Martin sulked. He was beyond pissed that Angela left. He wanted her to ditch work and hang with him. When she told him it wasn't going to happen, he lost it. I mean, after she drove off, he bugged out. The guy went completely wacko, like he was unhinged. The guy went stark raving mad — if you get me."

"Was he violent?" Paige wondered.

"No, he just pulled a full-on lunatic," Trent sighed. "He started ranting and raving about crazy stuff, said he wanted to head over to the restaurant where Angie worked and set the place on fire. It scared us — all of us. I think he realized how appalled we were because he suddenly backed off, started saying how we should put together some Molotov cocktails and toss them at a few of the cars parked in the lot."

"What did you do?" Brad was studying Trent, not sure if he was getting the entire story or not.

"We told Martin we were tired and said we were going to call it a night," Trent's explanation became cautious.

"Trent," Paige warned. "We need you to finish this out. Tell us what happened and don't try to lie to us or leave anything out. We need the truth."

"We walked off, but Martin followed us," Trent dropped back against the couch. "We thought we'd ditch him and follow through with the plan. You know, go up the canyon and shake off all the negativity — but he latched on and wouldn't let go. He stuck, leaned against Gary's truck and wouldn't leave. He wanted to do something daring and risky. We pushed back. Then, he told us about a party up the road. He convinced us to go. We were all stressed and just wanted to have some fun, so we finally gave in. I got tipsy but Gary got drunk. I mean totally

Festive Repercussions

smashed, falling down wasted. Brenda drank some and so did Stephanie. Again, we tried to ditch Martin, but we couldn't. He was always just there, lurking in the shadows. Finally, we all had enough and started for home."

"I'm not hearing anything that would make Martin send you poison candy," Brad barked.

"I'm getting to it," Trent insisted. "We left. Martin followed. We were cutting across the campus when Martin announced he was going to break into the campus store. We resisted, but he wouldn't budge. He told us to stand by, to be his lookout while he snuck in and grabbed us all something memorable. He said he wanted to give us something special, something that would tie us together — a souvenir we could keep forever, like a talisman that would symbolize friendship or some nonsense. He made us promise we wouldn't leave, that we'd stick and let him know if trouble was coming. We finally gave in and swore we'd stick. We promised him we'd hang out and make sure he didn't get caught. We lied, the instant he stepped inside, we bolted. None of us wanted any part of what he had planned. We were there to get an education and have fun, we didn't want to ruin our entire life stealing something stupid in the campus store."

"He got caught," Paige realized.

"Yeah," Trent rubbed his hands over his face. "He snuck in, stole a ton of crap. Hoodies, half a dozen flags with the badger mascot on them, he pried open the cash register and swiped the cash, then he took a business laptop that was left in the back office. I guess there was also an expensive bronze statue on the bookcase behind the desk. He took that, too. By the time he left the store, he had over five thousand dollars' worth of possessions in his bag — a large gym bag with the football team logo on it he also stole. It was crazy, and it had nothing to do with me or any of my friends. Martin got caught, I don't know the details. I didn't care enough to learn the details. I just knew he was gone. He was no longer a nuisance, and we didn't have to deal with the irritating lunatic for the rest of that year. It was a relief — for all of us, even Angie. The rumors circulated and the five of us — we made a pact. We swore none of us would ever admit we were there. We'd keep our mouth shut and pretend we didn't know anything. We renewed that promise — that oath — when we learned Martin was convicted and sentenced."

"Five thousand would be a felony," Brad surmised.

"I want details," Paige demanded. "Everything you know about Martin Weiss. How old was he, what did he look like, what did he eat for breakfast? You tell us everything you know, and this is finished. You can go back to your life, pamper that nurse of yours, and celebrate the fact that you didn't end up dead like your friends."

"And if you arrest him, I'll have to testify against the maniac," Trent grumbled.

"Maybe," Paige shrugged. "Maybe, but once it's done, just like before, you can sit back and feel relief because he'll be locked away where he can't hurt you or those you care about."

Festive Repercussions

“I guess that will have to be enough,” Trent said. “He killed Gary and Steph and Brenda. I’m not sure a life sentence is enough to compensate for that.”

The two cops remained silent and waited for Trent to relay the details.

It was nearly midnight when Paige and Brad arrived at the training center. She climbed behind the wheel, watched her colleague disappear into the building, and headed for home. Brad drove back from Salt Lake and Paige used the time to run a background on Martin Weiss. From the data she gathered, it looked like they arrested the man for the theft, he skipped bail, went on the run, and was captured two years later in Colorado. Paige wondered if he was still stalking Angela Young at the time. The Denver detective finally got back to her. Angie went to the University of Northern Colorado, graduating with a master’s in business administration. Coincidence? Paige didn’t believe in such things. She stumbled through the front door and was surprised to see Dax sitting on the couch, working.

“I thought you’d be sleeping,” Paige dropped onto the couch next to him. “How are the guests?”

“Managing,” Dax set his computer aside and wrapped an arm around Paige. “Productive trip?”

“It was,” she told him about the theft and Martin’s eventual capture, as well as her theory that he was still stalking the innocent girl he had an obsession with.

“Then why did he try to kill her?” Dax wondered.

“Rejection, I suppose,” Paige shrugged. “He was on the run for two years before he got caught. Then, the trial took another six months before they sentenced him. He served seven years and was released six months ago. Six months, and the first thing he did was put a plan in motion to take out a group of college pals because they refused to take part in his late-night felony.”

“And because they rejected him,” Dax stood and held out a hand. “What’s your next step?”

“Martin’s out on parole,” Paige followed him up the stairs. “Brad said he’d touch base in the morning, see if his parole officer knows how to find him. If he hasn’t skipped, we’ll go pay good old Martin Weiss a little visit.”

“Can you bring him in for questioning?” Dax asked before climbing into bed.

Festive Repercussions

“We can do one better,” Paige smiled. “He’s on parole. That means his PO can drop in and do a thorough search of the residence just because he wants to. Brad is determined. He plans to be very persuasive and when he’s finished, I know Martin’s parole officer will want to assist us.”

“And if you find anything that connects, they can revoke his parole, and he’s on his way back to prison,” Dax realized.

“Exactly,” Paige slid into bed and snuggled against Dax. “Night,” she yawned.

“Goodnight, baby,” Dax wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in tighter. “I love you.”

“Me too,” Paige managed before dropping into oblivion.

The following morning the group was gathered in the conference room. Martin’s parole officer, Bill Astin, had joined them.

“I think we should just head over,” Bill told the group. “I’ll go to the door, secure him and pass him to one of your men.” He glanced at Jericho.

“His residence is located in Gunnison,” Jericho disagreed. “I don’t have men in Gunnison. We need to notify Chief Patrick Strong. You can pass this Martin guy to one of his men and the rest of you can enter the home and search for the poison. I want Paige inside that house. The rest is up to Astin.”

“I don’t have any problem bringing four of you with me,” Astin shrugged. “If he’s responsible for three murders and one attempted, each of you have an interest in searching the home. I’ll stay out of your way, but I have to be there.”

“Then let’s go,” Jericho stood. “I’ll call Patrick on the way.”

Martin Weiss wasn’t home. From the stack of mail and the fresh snow, it looked like he hadn’t been home in weeks. Bill Astin insisted on entering the residence. He had a signed document that gave him the authority to enter as a condition of Weiss’ release. The other cops stood back and waited to see if there was anything inside that would help with their case. They would need probable cause to get a warrant to enter and they wanted everything they did to stand up in court.

“I think you should get a warrant,” Astin said, stepping onto the front porch. “He’s got a fish tank inside. I’m not an expert, but I think it might contain the pufferfish you’re looking for. I could let you in, but its cleaner if you call a judge.”

Festive Repercussions

“I’ll call Patrick,” Jericho decided.

Twenty minutes later, the Chief himself arrived on scene, warrant in hand.

The group stepped inside and fanned out. Paige took her time, walking slowly through each room, looking for evidence that would link Martin to the killings.

“Carter,” Brad called from the back of the house. “You’re gonna want to see this.”

Paige stepped into the kitchen and froze. The table contained several fish tanks, each with two exotic pufferfish swimming inside. They took up half the surface of the table. On the counter were seven carefully wrapped packages identical to the five that were mailed to their victims. “Seven more.”

“Looks like I was wrong,” Brad frowned. “I was sure the guy would head north and hunt down the one that got away.”

“Maybe he did,” Paige pulled out her phone and dialed Denver. Angela Young could be in serious trouble. Once she hung up, she moved to the boxes stacked meticulously on the counter. They were all perfectly lined up, with the odd box positioned on the end. She read the names and frowned. “Any idea who these people are?”

“Nope,” Brad shrugged. “I want them bagged and sent to the lab to be analyzed, though. We can worry about the intended targets later. First, we need to find the killer and we need to open those up and make sure he was using the same method on round two.”

“And we need to seize those fish,” Paige glanced over her shoulder. “Think we can pass that on to Gunnison, or Atkins?”

“Atkins,” they said at once, then laughed.

“Patrick said his man would take care of the evidence,” Jericho stepped into the kitchen. “He’s going to deliver the packages to the lab in person and they’ll figure out what to do with those fish. Let’s get home. I’ve had about all I can take of this place. We need to locate our killer.”

“How do you plan to do that?” Jake wondered.

“Follow the money,” Paige glanced at Jericho.

“Follow the money,” Jericho agreed.

Once they got back to the office, Jericho and Paige convinced Tolman they had enough for a warrant on Martin’s financials. He told them to wait while he contacted the judge. Moments later, he returned with the signed document.

Festive Repercussions

“Before you leave, I need a minute,” Tolman explained, stepping into his office and shutting the door.

“What’s up, James?” Jericho wondered.

“I’ve completed my preliminary review and relieved Stan of duty until a more thorough investigation can be conducted. I have to be honest; I’m leaning toward termination. I just wanted the two of you to know where things stand,” Tolman advised.

“I think that’s a mistake,” Jericho glanced at Paige.

“From what I understand, Stan didn’t take part in the criminal activity,” Paige considered. “In fact, I’d be more inclined to call him another victim. He was being blackmailed — coerced for sure. His job was threatened. And, when the activity became criminal, he got out. He shouldn’t be punished for that. Since I’m the only one you could call a victim in this, I think my opinion should have weight.”

“The man knew you were being attacked, and he said nothing, did nothing,” James objected. “He may not be criminally responsible for Daniel’s actions, but he had a moral and an ethical responsibility to speak up. I’m not sure I can trust him, not anymore. I have to trust my people.”

“We can’t tell you what to do with your employees,” Jericho stood. “I will ask you to consider one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“If you fire him,” Jericho glanced at Paige. “If he loses his job over this, who benefits? Not my department. Some of my men have a good report with Stan, they like working with him, they’re comfortable with his style. They won’t benefit from this. Firing him serves no purpose, expect maybe to punish him. We all know he won’t do anything like that again, so rehabilitation isn’t a factor. Paige just voiced her opinion. Firing the man wouldn’t be for her, wouldn’t benefit her — the victim. So, who is it for James? Because where I’m standing, it looks like you’re coming down hard on that man because he made you look bad. He succumbed to outside pressure. A killer extorted him with secrets that were supposed to remain secret. If you’re honest with yourself, you must admit, this isn’t for us, it’s not for the community, and it’s not about justice. This is about punishing a man that didn’t trust you enough to tell you he was being victimized by a madman. Who benefits if you follow through with this, James? Because, from where I’m standing, I think we would all benefit from a little leniency and mercy.”

“I’ll let you know,” Tolman settled into his chair. “The warrant covers the financials. If you need to use Carmen, do it officially and on the books. I want this guy to pay. We don’t give him any room to wiggle out and slide under a rock. Let’s find him and take him down.”

Festive Repercussions

“On that we do agree,” Jericho opened the door and waited for Paige to leave before he silently followed.

“Do you think he’ll listen?” Paige wondered.

“I think he expected us to agree,” Jericho slid behind the wheel. “I think it surprised him we objected. And, I think that will make him reconsider. He’ll conduct that thorough investigation. When its done, I’m confident he’ll remember that conversation. The rest is up to him. We did all we could. I do know James Tolman is a fair man. If he fires Stan, he’ll feel justified in doing so. That has to be enough.”

“Then it will be,” Paige snapped her seatbelt into place. “I want to head back to the training center. If I hit a snag, I’ll tag Hawk to help me. Carmen’s trying to finalize a few things so she can relax and enjoy the holidays. I don’t want to bother her unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Do what you need to do,” Jericho pulled into the lot and dropped her at the front door. “Keep me apprised.”

She watched him pull away, then turned and went inside to brief her team.

Three hours later, they had tracked Martin Weiss to a cheap, rundown hotel on the outskirts of town near Denver, Colorado. Brad was right, the guy was obsessed with Angela and had resumed the stalking. The local cops were actively trying to locate him. They already checked the hotel. The room was empty, but Martin’s belongings were still there. The local cops were holding surveillance on the hotel in case he returned. If he showed, they’d swoop in and snatch him up before he could barricade himself inside. With a solid plan in place and nothing productive left to do, the group called it a night.

It was just after midnight when the call came in. Martin Wiess was in custody and locked in a cell awaiting extradition. Paige decided she’d wait and call Jericho in the morning. They could hash out logistics in the morning. Jake and Mick announced earlier that day, they wanted to do the transport once Weiss was caught. Paige was inclined to let them and was pretty sure her boss would agree. Once they got him back to Utah, Bill Astin was more than happy to revoke his parole and lock him up tight while they prepared their individual cases and filed charges. The man would never be free again — that would have to be enough.

Two days later, Martin Weiss was locked up tight. The judge denied bail, his parole was revoked, and he was sitting in his old cell compliments of Gunnison Utah. Paige stood on the sidewalk of the training center and watched with interest as Darcy Thomas approached Dax, whispered a few words, then gave him an enormous hug. *What was that about?*

Festive Repercussions

“It’s been a pleasure,” Brad held out a hand to Paige, his other arm was casually resting on Maddie’s shoulders.

“Same goes,” Paige took the offered hand then nodded to Maddie. “You guys are welcome any time. If the housing unit is full, I’ll figure something out. Drive safe and keep in touch.”

“Will,” Maddie pulled away and gave Paige a friendly hug. “Thank you for everything. And we’re especially grateful for the accommodations. Without them, we couldn’t have spent this time with Brad and that would have been difficult for all of us.”

“It was our pleasure,” Dax moved in next to Paige. “You’re welcome any time.”

Once Brad’s family pulled away, they said their goodbyes to Jake and Darcy, then to Mick.

“Another successful mission complete,” Dax kissed Paige’s temple. “What time does the vacation start?”

“I’m off now. No more work until after Christmas,” Paige took his hand. “Maybe you could sweet talk the boss into giving you time off and we could play hooky, gorge ourselves on popcorn, and veg in front of the TV all night.”

“Sounds like —” he trailed off when he spotted the vehicle headed their way. “I wonder why Nathan and Sophie are here.”

They continued to watch as Nathan parked the car, opened the door for Sophie and approached the sidewalk where they were still standing.

“Could we head inside where it’s warmer?” Nathan requested. “Let’s go to your office. We need to talk to you both.”

“Alright,” Paige let Dax take her hand and lead her inside. “Is anything wrong?”

“No,” Sophie assured her. “There’s just something we wanted to discuss with you.”

“Alright,” they stepped into the office and Dax closed the door behind them. “Discuss away.”

“I know you’ve realized by now I’m comfortable here,” Sophie began.

“And she’s not comfortable alone in our home back east,” Nathan added. “Since we’ve been here, I’ve had to travel to Washington several times. Sophie has opted to stay here.”

“We noticed,” Paige reached out and took Sophie’s hand. “You experienced something traumatic. If we didn’t find you —”

Festive Repercussions

“Yes, but you did,” Sophie cut her off. “It’s in the past, but I’m comfortable here and with each passing day, I love Manti even more.”

“We’ve decided we’d like to purchase a home here,” Nathan said, getting to the point. “We just need to know how you feel about that.”

“Here?” Paige glanced from one to the other. “But you work in Washington,” she frowned at Nathan. “How will you —”

“We’re not selling our home in Virginia,” Nathan interrupted. “We’re just buying an additional home here. I can still travel back and forth between the two. For now, Sophie will live here. Well, that’s the plan once we find a place we like. The first thing we needed to discuss with the two of you is how you feel about our plans and then we’ll need to address the timetable. We’re occupying a home slated for renovation. If it takes a longer than expected to find a permanent location, will that be a problem?”

“No,” Dax said immediately. “Stay as long as you need to. And to answer your other question — how do we feel about having you close? We’d both be thrilled to have you nearby as often as possible. You’re family. If there’s anything we can do to help, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” Sophie jumped up and pulled Dax into an enormous hug. Then, she turned to Paige and wrapped her arms around her. “We are family,” she wiped a tear from her cheek. “I can’t wait to start house hunting. And it will be such a relief knowing we have a home here and I can visit whenever I want. It’s been hard, living on the east coast while Paige is all the way out here. I think of you as my daughter and I miss our visits — have missed them since you moved away.” She rubbed her hands together. “Nathan, I told you this was a good idea and nothing to worry about.”

“And you were right,” Nathan gave Sophie’s hand a gentle squeeze then moved to Paige. He leaned down, pressed a fatherly kiss to her forehead then wrapped his arms around her in a gentle hug. “We’re staying for the holidays then we’ll start our search. Thank you. Sophie is happy here and, if I’m being honest, I too find it refreshing and relaxing. As long as you don’t mind, I think this is the right move at the right time. We’ll remain in Virginia. I’m not ready to hang up my hat just yet, but my work is mobile, and I can easily accomplish most of it from here.”

“It’s going to be nice, seeing you more often,” Paige stepped back. “I’ve missed having you close the past few years. I think this is the best Christmas gift you’ve ever given me.”

“Then we’ll get out of your hair,” Nathan took Sophie’s hand and started for the door. “We’ll see you on Christmas if we don’t see you before then.”

Festive Repercussions

“Let’s head home,” Paige turned to Dax once they were gone. “I’m beyond ready to start my holiday vacation. It’s a time for celebration. With Nathan and Sophie looking for a secondary, permanent home here, close to us, the holidays are almost perfect.”

“Almost?”

“Yeah,” Paige frowned. “Jericho is depressed and lonely. He tried to talk to Harper, to explain why he did what he did, but she’s freezing him out. I’m not sure he can repair the damage to their relationship, and that just sucks. I thought he might finally find a little happiness after all this time. After the way he lost Mom, he deserves a break and the fact that they broke up, especially at this time of year, is a devastating blow. Not that he’d admit that, but I can see it.”

“They could still work things out,” Dax ushered her into his truck. “Don’t give up just yet. If it’s right, love will find a way.”

“I hope so,” Paige smiled and relaxed. She was beyond ready for some holiday cheer and a little of that balance that always seemed to elude her.