

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

An Eye for an Eye *Season 7, Episode 1*

by:

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Paige glanced at her phone display and smiled. "I hope you called to tell me you're on your way home. Not that you decided to stay another day."

"Actually, I'm already here and I'm starving. I was hoping your shift might be over and you could meet me at the Chophouse for dinner. I owe my wife a date."

"Your wife accepts. I'm starving, too," Paige pulled to the side of the road and headed in the opposite direction. Fifteen minutes later, she glided to the curb and parked her vehicle. She spotted Dax immediately, leaning casually against the brick wall of the restaurant. She climbed from the car, grinned, and casually strolled toward him. "Hey stranger, what does a girl have to do to get dinner around here?"

Dax reached out, grabbed her shirt, and yanked her against him. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and grinned just before he pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was loving and hot at the same time. Dax lingered just long enough to convey how much he missed her before he pulled back and whispered in her ear, "Honey, I'm home."

Paige straightened. "Okay, you earned dinner."

"You know you missed me." Dax took her hand and kissed her palm. Suddenly, he straightened and became stiff and alert. He tightened his grip on Paige's hand and spun her around in a smooth move that placed his body protectively in front of hers.

Paige was so shocked; she was slow to react. Before she understood what was going on, he pushed her back toward the restaurant entrance. "Dax! What's wrong?" Paige tried to move around him but failed.

"Get inside," Dax ordered.

"Why?"

He reached back, pulled on the door handle, and shoved Paige inside.

"What did you see?" Paige demanded, alert now.

"We were being watched," Dax finally explained.

Paige moved forward; her eyes darted in all directions, trying to see what spooked her husband. It was too dark to make out anything. Especially through the thin windows that lined the sturdy entrance doors. "I don't see anyone. Where are they?"

"Gone," Dax reached out, gently took her hand, and pulled her toward the waiting hostess. "Let's go eat."

"You're sure they're gone?" Paige frowned, but followed the hostess to a table near a window.

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“Someone was watching from that alley, over there,” Dax pointed across the street. “You can see for yourself, they’re gone.”

“Will it be just the two of you tonight?” the hostess asked.

“Yeah,” Paige nodded. “Can we have that table over by the window?”

Dax tightened his grip on her hand. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Yes,” Paige insisted.

Dax settled into a chair and studied his wife. “Did you catch a new case? Could someone be worried about an investigation you’re handling?”

“No,” Paige said, clearly perplexed. “I have no idea who that could be. Why was somebody watching us?”

“I’ve been out of town, in the back country,” Dax reminded her. “I have no idea, but this can’t be about me.”

The waitress approached the table, they ordered dinner, and waited for her to leave before they continued the conversation.

“So, tell me what you’ve been working on while I was gone,” Dax requested.

“Nothing big,” Paige settled back. “A couple domestics, a group of high school kids playing a shoplifting game, and the usual — gas thefts, vehicle burgs, that sort of thing.”

“Clearly, it wasn’t the high school kids watching you.” Dax sat back. “I also doubt it’s related to the domestics.”

“I told you, there’s nothing hot right now,” she glanced at the window and froze in shock. “Julianna Barrow,” she whispered.

“Who?” Dax turned and saw a young woman with thick, wavy, long red hair standing on the sidewalk a few feet away from the window. She was staring at Paige and grinning. “Who is Julianna Barrow?”

Paige didn’t answer. Instead, she suddenly jumped up and ran out of the restaurant.

Dax slid from the booth and started to follow. He paused when he spotted the waitress. Once he got her attention, she rushed over. Dax pulled out a twenty. “Something has come up; can we get that order to go?” He handed her the twenty then rushed out of the building.

“I’ll take care of it,” the waitress called after him.

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Dax pushed open the door and stepped into the cool night air. He was alert and cautious as he took in his surroundings and frantically searched for his wife. In the distance a door slammed, tires squealed, and a blue Camry sped away. Seconds later, Paige came running down the sidewalk. “Stop and tell me what’s going on.”

Paige darted past him. “I’ll meet you at home.”

Dax watched in shock as his wife jumped into her vehicle and maneuvered away from the curb. She barely missed a parked car, activated her lights, and sped away. Seconds later, she disappeared around a corner. Dax stood there for several seconds, fuming but worried. He stepped back inside the restaurant, retrieved their dinner, and drove silently home.

An hour later, Paige pulled into her driveway. She stepped from her vehicle and slammed the door in frustration. She couldn’t believe she lost the car. Julianna must have plotted out her escape ahead of time. How long had the woman been in Manti — watching her? Memories flooded her mind, and she tried to push them away. She needed to focus on today. Recalling the frustration, sadness, and the anger she felt years ago wouldn’t help her deal with her current situation. She shoved open her front door, stepped inside, and froze. Dax was sitting on the couch — waiting. There was a dim lamp glowing in the background, but it didn’t illuminate his face. She didn’t need it; she could tell he was angry.

“From the look on your face, I’m guessing the woman got away.” Dax watched and waited.

“I’m sorry I took off, but that’s the job.” Paige shrugged and draped her gun belt over a chair. “By now, you should understand what I do — and why. You know there will be times I miss dinner or other important events because something comes up that I can’t control.” She walked through the room and into the kitchen.

Dax stood and slowly followed. He retrieved his dinner from the oven, settled in at the table, and waited.

Paige frowned, grabbed her own dinner and dropped into the chair across from him. When he didn’t say anything, she got mad. “What? I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want to know who Julianna Barrow is.” Dax sat back and pushed his plate aside. He was no longer hungry.

“She’s someone I arrested a long time ago.” Paige was trying to act casual and detached, but there was nothing casual or detached about Julianna Barrow.

“How did she get away?” Dax pushed. Paige was hiding something, and he didn’t like it. “You guys have radios and can easily block and secure a fleeing suspect. What went wrong?”

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“Nothing,” Paige evaded. “She had a plan, and she executed it before I could catch up.”

“And nobody else could locate a blue Camry speeding through the city?” Dax studied Paige for several seconds before he finally got it. “You didn’t call it in.”

“No, I didn’t.” Paige pushed her own plate aside.

“Why?” Dax demanded.

“Because as far as I know,” Paige glared at him. “Other than violating a few traffic codes, Julianna Barrow didn’t break the law.”

“Then why chase her?” Dax would not give up until he had answers. “And why did she flee? Which I believe is a felony; and, that means, she broke the law.”

“I didn’t have the right to chase her in the first place,” Paige disagreed.

“Then why did you?” Dax challenged.

“I need to know why she’s here.” Paige ran a frustrated hand over her face. Nothing tonight was going as planned.

“Who is she, Paige?”

“I told you, someone I arrested a long time ago,” Paige stood abruptly. “I’m going to bed.”

Dax waited for Paige to reach the doorway. “You can tell me yourself, or I’ll figure it out on my own. Either way, I will know all there is to know about Julianna Barrow.”

“And by that, you mean you’ll have Carmen compile a detailed report,” Paige whirled back around. “Not if I talk to her first.”

“I have other people in my life with the skills to dig out information,” Dax shrugged. “If you block Carmen, I’ll just tap someone else.”

“Hawk,” Paige spat. “Fine, I’ll give you the short version.” She practically stomped back to the table and dropped into her chair. “I arrested Julianna Barrow when she was eighteen. She’s diabolical, manipulative, and a liar. She’s also a stone-cold killer. She’s a sociopath that fooled her therapist, fooled the court, and fooled the system.”

“But she didn’t fool you,” Dax nodded.

“She didn’t fool her parents either,” Paige sighed. “They knew what she was because they’d been dealing with her for sixteen years. They wanted her to get help. The system wanted a simple resolution.”

“Tell me the rest,” Dax prompted.

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“Julianna disappeared when she was sixteen,” Paige began. “Her parents reported her missing, but admitted she was likely a runaway. I think they were relieved to have her out of the house, but they also felt guilty about it. So, they made the report and waited to see if she’d return. She didn’t.” When Dax didn’t respond, Paige continued. “It was about a year later, or maybe a little longer, that I got involved. The FBI was called in and I was one of several agents assigned to the case.”

“Because?”

“Because a group of women were breaking into homes in the Great Lakes area,” Paige was trying to remain vague, but she should have known Dax wouldn’t allow it.

“Burglary doesn’t fall under the FBI’s jurisdiction,” Dax disagreed.

“They started out committing residential burglaries, but eventually, it escalated. The women, there were five of them, and they were all young. A couple of them were teens — including Julianna — the others were in their early 20s. Burglary turned into assault; and, before long, it escalated to murder. Anyway, the leader of this posse of thugs was a man named Rod Anderson. They called him Master Saber — like the tiger, I guess. He was twenty-nine, just shy of thirty, when we caught them. He tried to skate, claimed he did not know what his girls were doing and shouldn’t get punished for their actions.

He swore they were free spirits, and he didn’t want to inhibit them with rules. He insisted his only mistake was trusting the people he loved. He said he assumed the girls would control themselves and limit their activities to legal pursuits while they were away from home. Nobody bought it, not even a jury. He’s locked up tight, serving several life sentences and will never get out.”

“I could find all of this on the web. It’s a matter of public record. Tell me what you don’t want me to know,” Dax pushed.

“Julianna was involved with Saber — intimately.” Paige glanced out the window. “It’s a ridiculous name used by an absurd man. The guy was batshit, don’t get me wrong, but I think she was the true leader of that clan. The group called themselves the Crimson Nomads. All of those women were devoted to Saber. They probably still are. He created a little harem and enjoyed the power and benefits that came with that lifestyle.

Julianna was the exception. She’s only devoted to herself and didn’t mind sharing because the relationship was never real. She became infatuated with the idea of him, but Saber was just a conquest. I believe she manipulated him, maybe even controlled him. The man was completely captivated by her youth, her beauty, and her uninhibited spirit — as he put it. He would have done anything to make her happy. All Julianna had to do was whisper a suggestion to her devoted lover, and she’d instantly have his cooperation. Then Anderson would take the idea to

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the other girls and convince them to follow Julianna's lead. It was actually pretty simple to put their sadistic plans in motion. She's diabolical — he was obsessed. It was a lethal combination.”

“But she got away with it — and he's doing time,” Dax pointed out. “How did she manage that?”

“She claimed she was kidnapped and forced to do those things against her will. She insisted she complied out of fear.” Paige focused on him. “She fake cried, and played it up for her attorney, the court appointed therapist, the judge, and the FBI supervisors overseeing the investigation into the crime spree. They bought it. I didn't, but I couldn't convince anyone I was right. The guy was a freak. He ground his teeth into points, had demonic tattoos covering his arms and torso, caked on heavy black makeup, and would only wear orange and black clothing. The guy actually drank blood. I think everyone involved wanted to believe he was the bad guy, and she was a victim. She's a master manipulator. She came in looking like this cute little innocent girl, like an angel that was victimized by the big bad demon — and it worked.”

“What happened to the other women?” Dax wondered.

“They'll spend the rest of their lives in prison. The four of them were loyal. I mean, cult level devotion, without question, to that man. They parroted the same nonsense, insisted they were above our laws and couldn't be touched by mere mortals. They fully embraced the doctrine and ideals of the coven Anderson created. It was kind of freaky. They dressed alike, did their makeup the same, walked the same, moved the same. Seeing them together was like watching synchronized swimming or something. It reminded me of the Stepford Wives on steroids. They were completely brainwashed, and insisted they were living an exulted demonic life with an undead being.

Their Master — Saber — convinced them they were succubus minions, and he was an immortal vampire. Those women truly believed they had risen above societal norms and couldn't be restricted by antiquated laws and civil servants. I think the steadfast devotion and unwavering loyalty was all Rod Anderson's doing. Julianna wasn't capable of emotional connections. She couldn't entice or charm those women the way Saber could. He was completely out there, but he was charismatic and alluring. He sold those women a bag of magic beans and they were so insecure and malleable they rushed to the garden and started planting. All of them were social outcasts. They'd been rejected in one way or another their entire lives. Saber used that against them and gave them purpose.”

“So, a Charles Manson copycat,” Dax said flatly.

“Basically, other than the drinking blood thing,” Paige admitted. “Ron Anderson, the man they called Master Saber, had dead eyes just like Manson, and he was able to con those women into giving him complete control over their lives.”

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“Which led to murder — to prove their devotion to him,” Dax was starting to understand. “With each kill, he felt more powerful. He went along with the rest to perpetuate the illusion of immortality — he used the blood drinking and theatrics to continue the myth so he could feel invincible. If Julianna truly is a psychopath, she did it to feed her ego and prove to herself she was smarter than all of them.”

“Exactly,” Paige nodded. “And, I think, just to see if she could. Plus, she liked the killing.”

“Did she serve any time at all?” Dax wondered.

“They sent her to a psychiatric hospital,” Paige shrugged. “To help her deal with the trauma of being kidnapped and to overcome what they deemed Stockholm’s. Maybe she just got out.”

“And the first thing she did was come after you?” Dax frowned. “She’s dangerous, Paige. You need to talk to Jericho about this.”

“No, I don’t,” Paige stood again. “I need to go to bed so I can develop a plan to deal with the threat myself.”

“You have a team,” Dax insisted. “You should use them. Jericho needs to know about this threat. You’re obviously in danger, at the very least, you have to talk to Gage, he’s your partner.”

“I’m a cop, there’s always danger,” Paige barked. “But out, Dax. I’m the expert and I’ll handle this my way.”

“If you don’t talk to Jericho, I will,” Dax insisted.

“I don’t tell you how to do your job,” Paige said, clearly angry. “Don’t tell me how to do mine.” She jumped to her feet and abruptly left the room.

Paige woke, rolled over, and realized Dax was already gone. She couldn’t believe he just left without saying goodbye. Okay, she ignored him last night and shut him down. Then, when he came to bed, she pretended to be asleep. Still, he just left. He was obviously angry with her, and she couldn’t really blame him. She should stop by the training center today and talk this out, but what could she say? Her position hadn’t changed. She was going to track down Julianna Barrow and find out why she was lurking around Manti. Then she’d find a way to make her leave. What she wouldn’t do was risk the lives of her fellow officers in the process.

Frustrated, she sat, swung her legs over the edge of the bed, and immediately felt nauseous. She bolted across the room and rushed into the bathroom, barely reaching the toilet in time to toss last night’s dinner. Great, now she had food poisoning, an angry husband, and a sadistic killer to deal with. What next? A furious swarm of murder hornets? She pushed her body

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backwards, leaned against the wall and remained on the cold tile floor for nearly twenty minutes before she finally felt well enough to stand.

After a quick shower, Paige walked slowly into the kitchen, determined to enjoy her first cup of coffee. Unfortunately, the potent smell of her favorite dark roast sent her running back to the bathroom. Resigned, she decided coffee was out. She'd stop at the convenience store and grab a large mug of ginger ale.

The cool liquid soothed her aching throat and Paige decided to take a little walk. If Julianna wanted to find her, she'd make sure she was out in the open and readily available. She hadn't gone far when the call came in from Jericho.

Dax brought the vehicle to an abrupt stop, threw it in park, and flung open his door. The scowl on his face told his men to steer clear of the boss today. Dax moved to the back of his truck, snatched up his gear, and headed for the steep overhang.

"We should check that," Vato began. "Or not," he mumbled under his breath when Dax glared at him and continued walking.

"Vato," Dax dumped the rope on the ground. "I'll head down first. You follow. I want you to focus on the terrain and the level of experience necessary to manage this descent. We need to know if an intermediate class can handle the obstacle."

"Hold on," Vato reached out and grabbed Dax by the arm. "You can shoot daggers at me all day, but there are certain safety precautions we all agreed we'd never skip. You're not going over that cliff until I see your friction knots with my own eyes."

"You're right," Dax took a deep, calming breath. "Would you mind taking care of the knots while I grab the rest of my gear from the back of my truck?"

"Sure, I got this," Vato offered.

Dax rounded his truck, dropped the tailgate, and grabbed his gear. When he turned, he nearly collided with Hawk and Zeus.

"What's going on?" Zeus asked.

"It has to involve Paige. You were fine when you left last night," Hawk added.

"I'll fill you both in later. But, Hawk, when we get back to the office, I need you to get me everything you can find on a woman named Julianna Barrow, late twenties, red hair, five-six about one-forty."

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“Who is she?” Zeus wondered.

“A killer Paige dealt with when she worked for the FBI,” Dax told them.

“Why am I doing a background, then?” Hawk frowned.

“She’s here.” Dax flung his gear over his shoulder. “In Manti.”

“How? If Paige arrested her for murder, shouldn’t she be in prison?” Zeus asked.

“Wouldn’t Carmen already have all the details on her?” Hawk was watching Dax and knew there was more to the story.

“Paige said she’s playing the friend card, and Carmen won’t help me,” Dax ran a frustrated hand through his hair.

“She’ll help me. I have the husband card,” Zeus pulled out his phone and called his wife. “You busy, honey?”

“I have a few minutes. What’s up?” Carmen asked.

“I’m going to put you on speaker. I’m here with Dax and Hawk,” he told her.

“Sounds ominous.” Carmen was curious now.

“We need you to tell us everything you know about Julianna Barrow,” Hawk requested.

“Why?” Carmen demanded, instantly alert. “The woman is depraved and dangerous.”

“She’s here — in Manti,” Dax provided. “And Paige won’t talk to me about her — not more than the basics. She won’t talk to anyone. She refuses to warn Jericho or Gage that danger has come to their town. I think she plans to handle it herself, and I’m worried.”

“Right,” Carmen said in understanding. “She’s trying to avoid another Tommy Malone.”

“Who?” Zeus asked, confused.

“The math genius?” Hawk clarified.

“Yeah,” Carmen answered, surprised. “You know him?”

“I’ve worked with him,” Hawk evaded.

“Never mind,” Carmen sighed. “It’s top secret, super classified stuff. I get it.”

“What does Tommy Malone have to do with Paige?” Dax asked impatiently.

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“Malone was a field agent,” Carmen provided. “He was good — like, amazingly good. He was assigned to the team working on the Julianna Barrow case. He and Paige got really close. They played off each other. Her forensics complimented his math — somehow. Those two worked for hours mapping out the crazy cult’s most likely targets. Malone used some of that fancy genius math stuff he’s so good at and was confident he knew the women’s next target. Paige trusted him and tried to get extra manpower assigned to that house, but the brass wouldn’t listen. So, the two of them headed out on their own.”

“What happened?” Dax was sure he already knew. Malone told him he was injured on a case while he was tracking a crazy cult. Dax had no idea the man was working with Paige at the time.

“They scoped out the house for a while before they evacuated the family. Once they knew the residents were safe, Paige set up around back. Malone hid in the shadows out front. The succubus chicks arrived and broke into the house through the front. Paige was supposed to confront them and push them back outside, where they’d hook up with Malone and safely arrest the entire group. Paige had some trouble inside and before she could get the group to the front door, that vampire freak came barreling up the driveway and struck Malone from behind with his car.

Nobody knew the guy would even be there. Before that night, everyone thought the women committed the crimes on their own. We figured he gave the order, and they carried it out. We were wrong. Anyway, Paige reached the front door just in time to see Malone fly through the air and collide with a stone wall. His days of field work were over for good.”

“I didn’t realize Paige was the agent with him when he was paralyzed,” Hawk practically whispered.

“She blamed herself,” Carmen told them. “She had a split second to make a choice that wasted time and had dire consequences. Then, once she finally got outside, she was frantic and conflicted. Worse, she was faced with another tough choice. She could have chased after the vehicle and probably would have arrested the entire cult that night. Instead, she stayed with Malone and insisted on riding with him to the hospital. It devastated her when she found out he was paralyzed, and she blamed herself. They were partners, and she wasn’t there when he needed her. The following night, she got another blow when she learned the same group hit one of the homes Paige and Malone identified as a likely target. They killed a young couple and the girl’s elderly grandmother. Paige swore that the group would never hurt anyone else — especially no one she cared about.”

“Malone doesn’t blame her,” Hawk provided. “He’s accepted his life and even told me the injury forced him to make a move he should have made long before that incident happened. He’s doing what he was born to do, and he excels at it. He loves his job at the Bureau and wouldn’t change it if he could.”

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“I know that,” Carmen sighed. “But Paige insists she ruined his life. She accepted Malone’s fate but never got over it and never stopped felling guilty and responsible.”

“Yo,” Vato called. “Are we doing this or what?”

“If Julianna has come to Manti,” Carmen sobered. “She’s here for revenge and Paige will try to handle this herself. You can’t let her. You guys have to step in. That woman is dangerous and the two of them share an emotional connection that makes the situation even worse.”

“Once we’ve finished up here,” Dax decided. “Hawk will head over to your place. I need the two of you to pull everything you can on Julianna Barrow. If possible, I could use the old FBI file as well. Paige will have backup whether she wants it or not.”

“Damn straight, Paige is family,” Zeus held up a hand to stop Vato. “Now, we need to get to work. We’ll dive deeper into this tonight. Love you, babe.”

Dax had descended approximately halfway down the side of the cliff. Vato was casually suspended a few feet below him, when disaster struck. The harness snapped and the force of the break catapulted Dax toward the side of the mountain. His knee struck a tree that was protruding from a small outcropping just before his head collided with a large rock. White lights began popping around his eyes and he worried he might pass out. He gritted his teeth, gripped the rope with both hands, and held on — knowing Vato would do his best to rescue him. He just hoped his friend was quick enough.

Vato saw the line jerk and looked up to see Dax collide with the mountain. He immediately realized the harness failed and his friend was in serious danger. Within seconds, he had climbed the rope and was dangling by his friend’s side. He twisted his spare rope into an elaborate new safety harness, flung it around Dax, and pulled it tight to hold him securely in place while he studied Dax’s injuries. “Don’t black out,” Vato ordered.

“Working on it.” Dax gripped the rope tighter.

“You can let go of that,” Vato instructed. “You’re locked in tight; the new harness will hold. Now, we need to get you back up to the top so we can doctor those wounds.”

“You’re sure?” Dax pressed.

“Trust me,” Vato requested.

“I do.” Dax held his breath, and let go of the rope. It held.

“What do you guys need?” Zeus called down from the top.

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“Grab the rope and try to pull him back up,” Vato instructed. “I’ll see what I can do from down here.” He reached out, retrieved the damaged harness, and shoved it into his pack. “We’re ready when you are. Just start pulling.”

They worked together carefully raising Dax back to the top of the overhang. It didn’t take long before he rolled over the side, landed on his back, and got tangled in the rope.

“What happened?” Hawk demanded and impatiently untangling his friend.

“No idea.” Dax closed his eyes and tried to catch his breath. His head was pounding, and his knee was killing him. “The harness broke and flung me into the side of the mountain.”

“The harness was cut,” Vato fumed and focused on the group. “This was deliberate.”

Hawk and Zeus looked down at Dax in understanding.

“What?” Vato demanded.

“I’m not so sure Paige is the one in danger,” Zeus turned, kicked the dirt, and headed for his truck.

“We need to call Jericho,” Dax tried to sit up but a wave of blackness engulfed him. He blinked it back, gritted his teeth and willed himself not to lose consciousness. “Someone find my phone.”

Hawk handed him the cell phone just as Zeus returned with a medic pack. “Let’s get the pants off and see what we’ve got here.”

“I think we should take pictures before we do anything.” Hawk moved forward and pulled out his own phone.

Dax tried to dial Jericho, but his vision was so blurry he couldn’t read the screen. Frustrated, he gave up and dropped his phone on the ground.

Hawk retrieved it and contacted Jericho. He handed his own phone to Zeus so he could finish documenting the damage.

“When you’re done, just cut the pants above the knee. They’re junk now anyway; those rips can’t be repaired.”

“I don’t know,” Vato grinned. “I think that’s the style these days.”

“Cut them,” Dax ordered before he leaned back, closed his eyes, and tried to ignore the pounding in his head.

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“Where are you, Paige?” Jericho demanded. “Margie has you checked out at the convenience store, but I don’t show a call there.”

“I went for a walk,” she evaded.

“Well, you don’t have time for a leisurely stroll,” Jericho scolded. “Meet me at the mouth of the canyon.” He disconnected, knowing she’d have questions he wasn’t prepared to answer.

Paige frowned and stared at her phone. That wasn’t like her boss. Something was up. She shoved her phone into her pocket and headed back to her vehicle. An uneasy tingle slid up her spine, and a feeling of dread threatened to consume her. Why were they headed up the canyon? Margie hadn’t dispatched anything. Maybe Jericho intercepted the call — or it came to him directly from someone he knew. Dax? Was he working in the office today, or was this about him? Fear consumed her. Did Julianna get to Dax? Or was it one of the other men? For the first time since she saw an old nemesis standing in front of that window, she wondered if she had handled this all wrong. Dax’s words came back to her, ‘You have a team, you should utilize them.’

She slid into her vehicle and dialed a friend.

“Carter,” Agent Zach Sparrow greeted happily. “I didn’t expect to hear from you again so soon. To what do I owe the honor?”

“Julianna Barrow,” Paige practically whispered. “I need your help.”

“What?” Sparrow barked in shock. “She’s out?”

“She’s here,” Paige pulled onto the road and headed for the canyon. “She’s in Manti and she’s playing some kind of game. She deliberately stood in front of a window and glared at me in challenge, then she fled. By the time I got out of the restaurant and to my vehicle, I lost her. I trust the guys I work with, but this is different. You know how dangerous she is. I need help and I was hoping you had time to head up and give me a hand.”

“Of course,” Sparrow promised without hesitation. “I’m working a case, but there’s nothing hot at the moment. Give me a day to talk the SAC into it. I’ll call once I have his blessing and we’ll coordinate from there. Have you considered calling in Houston?”

“That’s my next call,” Paige admitted. “Sean’s tied up on something for Nathan or I’d tap him as well.”

“We’re going to need Carmen,” Sparrow warned. “Will the good General object if we pull her in, too?”

“I’ll talk to him tonight,” Paige promised. “Go do whatever it is you have to do and be convincing. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

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“Be careful,” Sparrow warned. “She’s got a beef with you — a big one. Watch your back until I arrive to watch it for you.”

“Thanks,” Paige said sincerely. “I owe you about a hundred for this one.”

“Not if we put that maniac away for good this time,” Sparrow disagreed. “You, me, Malone, we all knew she was involved up to her eyebrows in those murders. Nobody wanted to hear it. The Bureau should have known better, we deal with sadistic sociopaths as a matter of routine. Why they allowed that woman to blatantly manipulate the system is still a mystery to me.”

“I know,” Paige pulled up behind Jericho and parked. “Look, I’ve gotta go. My boss needs my help with something. Call me tomorrow.”

“Will do,” Sparrow disconnected.

Paige took several deep breaths, then shoved open her door and approached Jericho.

“Lock up and ride with me,” he ordered and pointed to his passenger seat.

“What are we doing?”

“Lock up,” Jericho repeated.

Paige gritted her teeth in frustration but complied with the order. She silently climbed into the passenger’s seat and waited for Jericho to explain where they were headed.

They were halfway up the canyon before he spoke. “Hawk called. The call came to me directly. There was a slight incident and Dax was injured but he’s okay.”

“Injured how?” Paige stared out the window and tried to remain calm.

“Hawk said the equipment failed but they have safeguards in place.”

“Jericho,” Paige said in warning. “Injured how?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “They didn’t elaborate.”

“Why call you?”

“Someone tampered with the equipment,” Jericho pulled off the dirt road into a flat meadow and stopped next to a black truck.

Paige glanced at Dax’s truck, then shoved her door open. She slowly made her way to the group of men standing over her husband. When she saw him, she swallowed hard but remained calm.

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The group looked up and froze. “I requested you, sheriff,” Hawk finally spoke. “I didn’t request Paige. You just complicated an already difficult situation.”

Jericho frowned but didn’t respond.

“Tell me what happened,” Paige demanded.

“Equipment failure,” Dax rolled and tried to stand but he couldn’t make it on his own. “Zee, help me to the truck. I need to get a look at the area from that trail down below. Vato, you come with us. Hawk —”

“I’ll stay here and deal with the rest,” Hawk offered.

“Wait,” Paige blocked Zeus and stared down at Dax. “You called us. Explain what happened. And don’t be an idiot, wandering around with that head wound is dangerous.”

Dax gave her a humorless smile. “I’m a ranger, there’s always danger. I don’t tell you how to do your job, don’t tell me how to do mine. Zee, help me to the car.”

Paige stepped back and watched Dax hobble to a company SUV with the training center logo on the door. Zeus and Vato joined him, and the group drove away. She did her best to brush the disappointment and hurt aside before she turned. “Hawk, what happened?”

“We came out to rappel the mountain ourselves,” he began. “We have a course coming up and we never drop a class over terrain we haven’t rappelled ourselves. Dax and Vato started the descent together. Vato’s the expert but Dax is nearly as good. Anyway, we needed to know if our intermediate class could handle the obstacle, or if it was too advanced for their skill level.

Zeus and I waited up here and planned to hop in the truck and head down the trail to retrieve them once they reached the bottom. About halfway down, the harness broke and the force of the break pushed Dax into the side of the mountain. Vato was on him almost immediately. He rigged some fancy brace out of rope, and we pulled Dax back up to safety.”

“What makes you think someone tampered with the equipment?” Jericho asked. “Couldn’t it just be an accident?”

“No,” Hawk began walking toward the edge of the cliff. He pointed to a harness draped over a large rock. “Vato examined this, but once he realized someone sabotaged it, he set it on the rock and none of us have touched it since.”

Paige stepped forward and studied the torn strap. “It’s been cut.” She pulled out her gloves and a magnifying glass and crouched to get a better look. “There are straight, obvious slices in several places. Whoever did this sliced the strap just enough to compromise it; then, placed clear tape over the damage to hide the weakened line. It would have been impossible to see, but it was extremely effective.”

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“The person who did this doesn’t know us,” Hawk provided. “They didn’t do their homework and don’t understand how we work. I guess they were too obsessed with someone else and didn’t bother to look into the man they targeted — or his men. She didn’t know we always have safety measures in place, no matter how mundane the task. If it were anyone else, they’d be dead.”

Paige looked up and realized Hawk knew who did this and why. Dax had already spoken to his men about the situation. She looked away, pulled out an evidence bag and retrieved the harness. “I want to get a look at the area from down below. Can you guide us to that trail?”

“I know where it is,” Jericho interrupted. “Hawk, would you mind remaining up here, to secure the equipment while we join the rest of your group?”

“Sounds good to me,” Hawk shrugged. “I took pictures of the scene before we went to work on Dax. I can send them to you, if you want.”

“That would be great,” Jericho answered before Paige could. “Email them to me.”

Jericho turned onto the dirt trail and glanced at Paige. “Tell me. I can see you and Dax are fighting, but I think there’s more to it than that. In fact, I think everyone on this mountain knows who tried to kill Dax but me.”

Paige glared at him. “We don’t know...”

“Who is it, Paige?” Jericho demanded.

“Her name is Julianna Barrow,” she sighed. “She’s dangerous and unpredictable. I thought she’d go after me, not my husband. I guess I should have seen this coming.”

“Which is why you were wandering around out in the open this morning,” Jericho realized. “You were setting yourself up as bait — without backup. Without telling me there was a dangerous and unpredictable woman in my county.”

“Yes,” Paige said defiantly. “Because she is dangerous and unpredictable, and I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“Well, now that we’ve established your plan was an epic failure, tell me what I need to know,” Jericho stopped behind the men’s vehicle and waited.

“Can this wait?” She focused on Dax. She could see he was in pain and Jericho was right, Julianna tried to kill him today.

“I don’t know, can it?” Jericho raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll tell you everything,” Paige reached for the door. “I promise.”

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“Wait,” Jericho stopped her. “I realize your head is just as hard as that stubborn husband of yours; but, if this woman is as dangerous as you say, and if she’s really going after Dax, you need to find a way to sort this out. You need to work together to stop her before that man of yours gets hurt worse than he already has.”

“I know,” Paige sighed. “I messed up and fixing it won’t be easy.”

“Nothing worth doing ever is,” Jericho slid open the door and climbed from the truck.

Once Paige processed the scene and the men cleaned up the rest of their gear, the group decided to reconvene in the conference room at the sheriff’s office. Paige offered to drive Dax so they could stop at the clinic for treatment, but he refused. Instead, he rode with Hawk who advised Jericho they would make a detour to the clinic on the way to the office and might be a little late. Paige didn’t like it, but she didn’t argue. The conversation they needed to have was one she’d start once they were alone — in private. For now, she’d bite her tongue and give her husband what he wanted.

Once they exited the canyon, Jericho called Gage and instructed him to meet them at the office. Less than an hour later, Gage, Jericho, Zeus, Vato, and Paige sat around the large table and silently waited for Hawk and Dax. They all looked up when the two of them, plus Carmen, stepped into the room.

Carmen glanced around the table, then moved to settle in next to Zeus. She had a large stack of files that she set on the table in front of her, then focused on Paige. “You’re going to listen and you’re going to cooperate because we both know you can’t handle Julianna Barrow alone, and if you insist on continuing this idiotic solo expedition, I’m calling Nathan.”

“Nathan’s already aware of the situation,” Dax told the room. “He’s tracking down some information I requested but doesn’t expect to have answers before tomorrow.”

“What information?” Paige demanded.

“I’ll show you mine after you show us yours,” Dax settled into a chair at the opposite end of the table from Paige.

“That’s enough,” Jericho jumped in. “It’s obvious to me that some people in this room understand the situation we’re faced with, while the rest of us are completely in the dark. I really don’t care who provides the information, but somebody better start talking.”

Carmen cleared her throat. “Do you mind if I conduct the briefing? I know what happened today, and I was involved in the previous case nearly a decade ago.”

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“I’ve got this,” Paige interrupted.

“Sheriff Walters?” Carmen turned to face him. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for Paige to conduct this meeting. She’s too emotionally involved and I’m not sure she’ll relay all the pertinent information. If we’re going to stop this bimbo psychopath once and for all, you need to know everything.”

“Carmen,” Paige warned.

Jericho glanced from Carmen to Paige and back to Carmen. “I agree. Go ahead.”

Carmen ran them through the history, explained the situation and described Rob Anderson, the other girls, and the dynamics they believed were at play in the cult like group. “Anderson called himself Master Saber. He only wore orange and black to mimic a sabertoothed tiger and claimed he was an actual vampire who drank blood. He convinced the girls that having intimate relations with him would turn them into a succubus; and, once that happened, they too would need to consume blood — or die. He enticed them with an ‘anything goes’ philosophy. They all experimented with drugs, sex and alcohol. Besides the burglaries turned murder, they sought adventure and mayhem. I’ll call it extreme sports with a twist. We know they bungee jumped from the Mackinac Bridge, paraglided off Harbor Towers, and went cliff diving at Black Rocks in Michigan — naked. They were up for anything that would give them an adrenaline rush. Once they started killing, the extreme sports took a backseat to more violent escapades. I guess nothing was more extreme than taking a life from innocent, unsuspecting homeowners.”

“And one of the dangerous, uninhibited, thrill-seeking women is prancing around my county looking for her next thrill?” Jericho glared at Paige. “And you didn’t think it was important to share that information with the rest of us?”

“Let me continue and I think you’ll understand,” Carmen held up a photo of Tommy Malone. “I will not pass this around, because this man is an FBI agent, and he sometimes works undercover.”

Paige stood up and left the room. Dax followed.

“What happened to Malone — it was not your fault,” he settled into one of her visitor chairs. “I know you think it was, and in a way, I understand. It’s the same sense of responsibility I felt when one of my men took a hit on a mission I commanded.”

“It’s not the same,” Paige glanced down at her desk.

“You’re right,” Dax settled back. “Because I was responsible for my men, the mission, and everything that happened while they were under my command. You were not responsible for your partner. Malone doesn’t blame you. In fact, he’s happy. He’s thriving at the Bureau and that injury gave him the push he needed to pivot and move in the right direction.”

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“You don’t know that,” Paige disagreed. “He’s coping with the hand life gave him, but he loved field work and I know he misses it, even if he pretends otherwise.”

Dax pulled out his phone, scrolled through his contacts, and punched a few buttons.

“Hamilton,” came a familiar voice. “Long time. What’s up?”

“I just found out you used to be friends with my wife,” Dax watched Paige carefully. “She’s dealing with an old nemesis, one that will hit close to home for you, and she insists she ruined your life. I was hoping you could talk to her for me because I’m hitting a brick wall, and we don’t have a lot of time to work through the irrational guilt. We need to get to work.”

“Wife?” Malone laughed. “The terminal bachelor is married? I must have been isolated and didn’t hear the good news. I’m speechless. Who’s the lucky woman that finally knocked some sense into you?”

“Paige, formerly Carter, currently Hamilton,” Dax grinned.

“Now I’m really speechless,” Malone admitted. “Give her the phone, I haven’t talked to Paige for at least ten years. Not since—” he hesitated. “You said an old nemesis. Is it Julianna Barrow?”

“Yes,” Dax sobered. “And Paige needs a little guidance on this one. Can you help?”

“I’ll try,” Malone agreed. “Pass the phone to your wife. We have a few things we need to discuss. Things I should have tracked her down and forced her to listen to before.”

“Thanks,” Dax held the phone out to Paige. “I’ll be in the conference room when you’re finished.”

“Who—”

“You know who,” Dax stood and walked away.

Paige stepped into the house and glanced around. Dax was relaxing on the couch, watching television. “You left before I had a chance to talk to you.”

“You guys were doing cop stuff, and I needed a little rest,” Dax watched Paige step into the room and settle onto the couch.

“How are you feeling?”

“A little sore, but not bad,” Dax shrugged. “Did you come up with a plan of action?”

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“First, I want you to know, I heard what you said.”

“Which part?” Dax wondered.

“All of it,” Paige admitted. “And I called Agent Sparrow — from Vegas. He worked the original case, and he’s familiar with the situation. I asked him to talk to his SAC, see if he could head up and help. I did that before I hooked up with Jericho and before I knew Julianna was coming after you rather than me. I also called another agent that worked the original case, but Houston is tied up and can’t help.”

“I guess that’s something,” Dax conceded. “You might be determined to handle this on your own, but that’s not the way this marriage works. It’s not the way friendship works, either. Hawk, Zee, even Vato — they’ll all in. Your family, Paige. We protect our family. You should understand that by now.”

“I do,” Paige settled back. “I just — Carmen was right. Well, partially right. This case is emotional for me. It’s also emotional for Julianna. I didn’t realize that. I forgot that psychopaths do have emotions. The emotions are just centered on themselves. I took her man, now she’s determined to take mine.”

“Do you think it’s really that simple?” Dax considered what Paige was saying. “Because if it is, I think we can work with that.”

“You’re not bait,” Paige immediately rejected that idea.

“I guess you think you’ve cornered the market on that role?” Dax waited. “Yes, I know what you were doing, wandering around out in the open this morning. If we’re going to work together on this, there have to be rules. I don’t like that anymore than you do but we need to set boundaries. And we both need to accept those boundaries and work together.”

“I agree,” Paige reached out and touched the large bruise on the side of his face. “I hate that she hurt you.”

“You’re lucky Vato insists on strict safety precautions,” he grinned. “I think he saved my life again today. I really wish he’d stop doing that. We’re going to reach a point I can’t pay my tab.”

“We’ll get a loan,” Paige dropped her head onto the back of the couch. “It terrifies me to think what could have happened to you. I’m sorry I brought a sadistic lunatic into your life. I’m sorry being married to me puts you in danger.”

“I’m pretty sure I have more skeletons in my closet and being married to me is far more dangerous for you,” Dax reached out and took her hand.

“Are we okay now?” Paige wondered.

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“We will be,” Dax evaded.

“So, that’s a no?”

“I’m going to say something you probably won’t like, and I doubt you’ll agree,” he decided. When she didn’t object, he continued. “What you did last night was dangerous, and it was reckless. I understand why you took off and why you felt compelled to chase after that woman. As an outsider, I can also see that’s exactly what she wanted. But you didn’t think — you reacted.”

“I’m a cop,” Paige began. “That’s what we do.”

“I know you’re a cop and I know what you do,” Dax snapped, then took a deep breath and tried to calm himself before he continued.

“Sorry,” Paige sighed. “I’m sorry. I know. I’m just not myself right now. I have so many conflicting emotions swimming around in my head, I can’t think.”

“I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have snapped at you,” Dax paused to organize his thoughts. “What you did last night was reckless. It was dangerous for you to run off alone to chase after a killer, especially when I was right there and could have helped. But it was dangerous for me, too. You left me there, unaware of the threat. I had no idea what was going on. I had no idea who that woman was. I walked outside; well, chased you outside, and they could have ambushed me. This Julianna woman worked with a man, manipulated a man, controlled a man, when you caught her. What’s to say she’s not working with someone else now? You took off and left me oblivious to the danger I might have been facing. We now know, you’re not the target. I am. What if she wanted to lure you away from me so a partner could step in and take me out while I stood on the sidewalk wondering what the hell was going on — and what I should do about it.”

Paige’s eyes grew wide. “I didn’t even think of that. I would never—” she closed her eyes. “I did. I left you vulnerable and in the dark.”

“That can’t happen again,” Dax insisted. “I will tolerate a lot when it comes to your job, but I will not accept that. You know you can trust me. You know I can help. Still, you left me there in some misguided attempt to protect me — you left me. Do not do that again, Paige.”

“You’re right,” Paige admitted. “About all of it. All I can do is say I’m sorry and I’ll work hard not to do that again.”

“You need to work harder,” Dax countered. “So, when does the pirate arrive?”

Paige smiled. “Don’t start on that, again. It’s Zach Sparrow the lawman, not Jack Sparrow the pirate. He’s a respected agent with the FBI. We’re lucky he could get his supervisor’s

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blessing to help us. And, to answer your question, he's driving up first thing. He should be here sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"Nathan called," Dax informed her. "He'd like to talk to you. He said Sophie planned on coming out this week to continue her house hunting efforts, but he talked her out of it. He doesn't want her too close with a killer on the loose."

"Good," Paige let out a huge breath. "So, how are we going to keep you safe until we can lock this woman up for attempted murder?"

"The guys are on alert," Dax promised. "They'll monitor things from next door. I don't think she expected to come up against former army rangers when she slithered into town. We're cautious and we'll be extra cautious until this is over. Carmen also agreed to work on the security system. She said it would be easy to get the surveillance cameras running again — the ones we installed here at the house while we dealt with your mom's killer and a violent terrorist. Julianna Barrow won't mess with the truck or my equipment again. That covers the house, and we have a good system at the center already. We'll work to beef it up a bit, but that place is safe and locked up tight. I think you should focus on catching the homicidal maniac. I'll focus on staying alive until you do."

"I hate how casual you are about this," Paige admitted. "You're the target of a vicious and diabolical killer, but you talk like it's just business as usual."

"A sadistic terrorist kidnapped and tortured me and that was after I retired. This is business as usual," Dax shrugged. "You should be grateful you didn't marry an accountant. If you did, there's a high probability I'd have a coronary and whisk you off in the middle of the night to somewhere safe."

Paige shook her head. "I think we're both — I don't even know what word to use to describe our situation."

"Jaded but living in paradise?" Dax grinned. "Enlightened? Basking in nirvana?"

"Stop," Paige smiled. "I'm going to call Nathan. Do me a favor and don't get too close to the windows."

"I can do that," Dax agreed.

"Oh, tell me what Nathan is working on for you, on this case," Paige requested.

"I asked him to check on the other members of that cult," Dax admitted. "I want to know that this Anderson character is locked up tight, as well as his deranged sycophants. I also asked him to get me anything he could on recent visitors. He said tapping into people that visited Julianna in the Psych ward might be problematic, but he's working on it."

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“I should have thought of that,” Paige frowned. “And I think I can help him. Thanks, I’m gonna go call my favorite general.”

Dax watched her leave the room then he switched the TV back on and began to surf.

Paige woke alone for the second day in a row. This time she knew Dax was downstairs. She could hear him moving around in the kitchen. She swung her legs over the bed, stood, and bolted for the bathroom. Once she was sure the stress vomiting was over, she moved to the sink and studied her reflection in the mirror. She thought the days of weak stomachs, extreme stress, and bland crackers were behind her. Apparently, she was wrong. Clearly, facing Julianna Barrow had brought it all back. The emotions, the worry, and this time the knowledge that a dangerous killer was focused on the man she loved, it was taking a toll. If she wasn’t careful, the anxiety and fear would take over again. Ten years ago, the first time she chased Julianna Barrow and the idiot that called himself Master Saber, she lost almost twenty pounds. She reached the point where she couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat, and she nearly put herself in the hospital. She would not let that happen again.

Paige turned on the water and scrubbed her face with the cool liquid. She had a good, strong team. Nothing was going to happen to Dax, she wouldn’t let it. Julianna made her first mistake when she zeroed in on Dax. She went after a man that had loyal friends, men that would stand with him, protect him, and outmaneuver anyone that tried to hurt him. This was no longer a contest between the convict and the cop. Julianna thought she was targeting Paige’s husband. Instead, she rattled the cage of a big, mean, tactical machine. Smiling and a little more confident, Paige descended the stairs and headed for the kitchen.

“Are you okay?” Dax glanced at Paige and frowned. “You look pale and a little sick.”

“Stress,” Paige settled onto a chair. “This was normal when I worked for the Bureau. It’s part of the reason I left.”

“Do you want coffee?” Dax stepped over and kissed the top of her head. “Eggs?”

“No,” Paige brushed her hand through the air in dismissal. “I’ll stop and grab something on the way to the office.”

“Alright,” Dax hesitated for an extra second. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Positive,” Paige forced a smile. “Be careful today. Don’t go anywhere alone.”

“I promise,” he moved forward and gave her a quick kiss before he strolled out the door.

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Dax pulled into the parking lot of the training center, careful to study his surroundings. He relaxed a bit when he saw nothing unusual. He paused, studied the area, parked on the far side of the lot, and slipped inside through the north entrance. He knew the place was secure, but he hesitated and focused out the window for an extra second before he made his way to his office. He had a staff meeting to attend.

“I think we should add a firearms competition to the advanced course,” Hawk began. They all straightened, alert and on edge when the alarm sounded. Hawk moved to Dax’s computer and pulled up the security feed. They watched as a red-haired woman crouched in front of the north door; the edges of a small device protruded from her hands. Suddenly, she straightened, grinned, and darted toward a white Explorer parked on the far edge of the lot.

Zeus jumped from his chair and bolted out the door.

“Wait,” Dax was only a few feet behind him.

“It’s a bomb,” Zeus called back. “Stay inside, I got this.”

“Not likely,” Hawk called seconds behind Dax.

“Watch the door,” Vato flew past Hawk and darted around Dax.

Just before they reached the end of the hallway on the north end of the building, Vato and Zeus pivoted and disappeared into the storage room.

“What are they doing?” Hawk called out.

“No idea,” Dax answered before he followed them into the room. He came to an abrupt stop near a window.

“When did you do this?” Hawk frowned and watched his friends slide open the window and drop a ladder that provided an easy exit.

They didn’t answer, Zeus flew through the window, Vato on his heels.

“When did they do this?” Hawk turned to Dax.

“No idea, but we should have thought of it when we built the place.” He climbed through the window and waited for Hawk to follow before he approached the outer door and studied the bomb. “She rigged it to take anyone out that came through that door. She’s not just after me, she didn’t care who she killed.”

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“She’s not killing anyone today,” Zeus said confidently. “Hawk, I can see a box under Dax’s truck. Can you check that out while I deal with this? Be careful, I suspect it’s wired to the ignition. If so, hook the thing to your truck and drag it out to the middle of the lot, away from the building. That way, if it explodes it won’t take down a wall.”

“You’re going to let my truck explode?” Dax said incredulously.

“I’ll get to it as soon as I can, but we need to deal with this one first. It’s larger and will do more damage if we don’t stop it,” Zeus answered absently as he continued to work on the bomb.

“Vato, you come with me,” Hawk decided. “Dax, you stick with Zeus. Our killer could be on a rooftop somewhere just waiting for you to exit and venture out in the open, so she can take you the old fashion way. She might not like it if you avoid the presents she left you this morning.”

“And if you move the truck instead of me, she might take a shot at you,” Dax grumbled. “I’m not hiding behind the building so you can take the risk for me. Let’s go.” He jogged to Hawk’s truck and waited by the door. Hawk slid behind the wheel, circled around, and slowly backed toward Dax’s truck. He stopped when their hitches were nearly touching.

Dax jumped out and was securing the strap when he spotted the timer. They only had a few minutes before the world would erupt. He quickly wrapped a strap around his hitch and secured it to Hawk’s truck. “It’s on a timer,” Dax advised once he jumped back inside. “We’re running out of time.”

Before Hawk could bring the vehicle to a complete stop in the center of the parking lot, Dax jumped out, disconnected the strap, and tossed it into the back of Hawk’s truck. His butt barely hit the seat when Hawk sped away. Dax gripped the door and struggled to pull it shut as they flew across the parking lot. They came to a screeching stop next to the building and joined Vato, who was still watching Zeus deactivate the second bomb, but he had moved to the corner of the building and was standing guard.

“I’ll just clip this little bugger,” Zeus mumbled. “And... we’re good.” He straightened and grinned just as Dax’s truck exploded.

“She must have had it on a switch,” Zeus frowned.

“Timer,” Dax corrected.

Hawk moved forward and slowly walked around his truck looking for damage.

“The truck is fine,” Zeus shook his head. “Now, that truck — that’s a different story, but we saved the building.”

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“If she had a remote detonator, you could have been killed,” Dax studied his truck and shook his head. “I guess I was due for a new one, anyway.”

Vato approached. “Have the three of you lost your minds?”

“Why?” Hawk frowned.

“Because that woman sat across the street watching all of us for the past ten minutes. If she was armed, you could be dead. What happened? You were all completely unaware of your surroundings — so much for situational awareness, I think it went up with that truck.”

“I guess we’ve become complacent,” Dax agreed. “Too many years out of the hot zone.”

“Well, we’re in a hot zone now,” Vato scolded. “We all need to be careful and aware of what’s happening around us.”

“I guess I better call Paige,” Dax pulled out his phone, then dropped it back into his pocket when two patrol cars flew into the parking lot.

Paige was just finishing up a report when the phones went crazy. Margie was trying to keep up but there were too many calls. Paige reluctantly helped. “Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office.”

“Yeah,” a man cleared his throat. “I um... well, I think there... I know there was an explosion at that fancy new building near the canyon. I was pouring myself a cup of coffee when I heard this loud boom and the walls on my house shook.”

“Hold please,” Paige didn’t wait for a response. She waved at Margie to get her attention, then pointed to the phone, grabbed her jacket and ran out the door. She was about to pull onto the highway when Gage flew past her. He had to be going at least eighty. She accelerated and caught up just in time to follow him to the training center.

Her heart was beating a mile a minute when she slowed her vehicle then finally came to a sliding stop. Panic engulfed her as she frantically took in the scene. She spotted the men standing around the side door and she could breathe again. Dax was okay. She shut down her vehicle and ran to where he was standing. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?” She reached out and began running her hands over her husband’s arms, his torso and his head.

Dax grabbed Paige’s hands and maneuvered her inside. Once he knew they were safe, he pulled her into his arms and just held her. “I’m okay. I’m not hurt. I promise.” He kissed the top of her head, then pulled back. “Look at me. I am not hurt, but it’s not for lack of trying. You need to get the bomb squad out here.”

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“They’re on their way,” Paige pivoted when she heard the loud pounding on the door before it flew open.

“Just wanted to give you a heads up,” Hawk smiled. “Bomb guy is here. Zeus turned over the device he neutralized. They said they want to tow the truck back to the shop before they sift through that mess. Gage is stalling, he doesn’t want anything removed until the boss arrives.”

“Alright,” Dax nodded. “Do they need us?”

“I think we’re good,” Hawk glanced at Paige. “He’s fine.” He stepped backward and shut the door.

“Let’s go into my office and I’ll give you a statement,” Dax offered.

Before they could take a step, the door flew open, and Jericho stepped inside. “Paige, I hate to interrupt but it appears Dax is fine. I’m glad to see that, kid. Anyway, I need you to go over that truck — thoroughly, before the bomb guys take it back to do what they do. In other words, find me some evidence that we can use to prove Julianna Barrow did this. She will not escape this time; I want that woman arrested for attempted murder, but we need evidence.”

“We can prove it,” Dax offered.

“How?” Jericho and Paige asked together.

“Surveillance video,” Dax shrugged. “Come on, I’ll show you. We saw her plant the bomb on the door.”

The three of them watched the video together. Dax began to shut it off when the group exited the building, but Jericho stopped him. They continued to watch as Zeus deactivated the bomb on the door, and minutes later when Dax’s truck exploded.

“There was a timer on the truck,” Dax provided. “Zee told us not to start the vehicle because she could have linked the switch to the ignition, but it was on a timer. I saw it.”

“So,” Jericho considered. “She put a bomb under your truck and used a timer for that one. Then she attached a second bomb to the side door.”

“And she sat across the street and watched,” Dax added. “She drove off, after the truck bomb detonated.”

“What?” Paige turned to Dax in surprise.

“Vato watched her, but he figured as soon as he approached, she’d speed away,” Dax provided. “He observed her from a safe distance just in case she had something else planned.”

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“She planted the bomb on the truck, secured the bomb to the building, then sat and waited,” Jericho considered. “Why?”

“She wanted to watch,” Paige tried to keep the emotion out of her tone. “She wanted to see my husband die.”

“She’s diabolical,” Jericho glanced at Dax. “Her plan was foiled again. She’s going to be livid.”

“She blew up Dax’s truck,” Paige disagreed. “I think half of her plan was a success.”

“No,” Jericho disagreed. “The truck was the trigger. Once it exploded, the boys were supposed to come running out the side door and get blown up. Opening the door was supposed to activate the second bomb. She failed, again.”

“Right,” Dax nodded. “Makes sense. She was sure I’d be one of the first ones outside because it was my truck. She thought she’d take me out and hoped to get a bonus and take out a couple of my men. That’s why she waited across the street — she wanted to watch this time, make sure nothing went wrong, but she failed again.”

“Which only means she’ll try again,” Paige warned. “And we’re no closer to catching her. At least this time, once we do, that video will nail her. She’s going away for a very long time and she won’t be able to lie and scheme her way out of this one.”

“Especially since the bomb guys have a fully intact bomb,” Jericho stood. “Thank Zeus for that, will you? We have a fed to meet. Your Agent Sparrow should be at the office by now.”

“Right,” Paige pulled out her phone and realized she missed a text. “He says he’s in the conference room going over the new information.”

“I’ll give the two of you a minute,” Jericho moved to the door. “Don’t take long.”

While Paige and her team organized everything they knew about Julianna Barrow, Dax and his team set up in their own conference room going over their copies of the same file.

“I’m tired of sitting around waiting for the next attack,” Hawk sat back and studied his friends. “I think we should shift the balance.”

“What did you have in mind?” Dax considered.

“Remember that op we had in Kandahar?” Hawk focused on Dax.

“Which one?” Dax began sifting through Afghan missions in his mind.

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“The one where I was bait,” Hawk grinned.

“We’d need to find a location,” Zeus smiled. “But it might work.”

“We’re a man short,” Vato stood and moved to the white board. He began diagramming what he remembered from the mission.

“Mark the spot on that diagram where we want her to end up — where I’d lure her and wait,” Hawk requested. “A few inches to the left of that doorway.”

Vato began to write Hawk’s name.

“Not Hawk,” Dax disagreed. “That will be me.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Zeus wondered. “What if she just pulls a gun and takes you out?”

“She won’t,” Dax answered confidently. “Because Hawk will be on a nearby rooftop with his rifle. If she so much as twitches wrong, he’ll take her out.”

The men spent the next several hours hammering out the details. By the time they were done, they didn’t have a location, but they had a solid plan.

“Alright,” Dax sat back. “There’s nothing more we can do about that situation today. We need to talk about the tactical course we have scheduled for mid-May.”

Paige pulled into the driveway, hesitated long enough to check for danger, then headed inside the house.

“Hey,” Dax stopped at the top of the stairs. “I just got home myself, so I ordered pizza. Did you guys come up with a plan?”

Paige dropped onto the couch, exhausted. “We checked every hotel, motel and rental property in a hundred-mile radius. Then we contacted all the car rental agencies and even searched the used car dealerships for that blue Camry. There’s no sign of her or the car anywhere. If she’s not renting a room or a car, she has to be staying with someone. Unfortunately, we can’t find a connection, relative, previous classmate or grade-school teacher that might have crossed paths with Julianna Barrow. I’m stumped.”

“Well,” Dax settled into the chair across from her. “She hooked up with a guy before, she may have done the same thing out here.”

Paige frowned. “She could have, but we did a thorough trace on her, and nothing popped.”

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“She was getting help to cope with a perceived trauma. She wasn’t incarcerated,” Dax shrugged. “It’s possible there’s no record of the meeting. Could be a brother, cousin, uncle or best friend of someone else that was staying in the same facility.”

“There has to be hundreds, possibly thousands of names,” Paige realized. “There’s no way we could run them all.”

“Aren’t you feds — or former feds — known for your profiling skills?” Dax pointed out. “Profile the type of guy that would be vulnerable to Julianna’s charm, then check around and see if anyone fits the description.”

“That’s not my area,” Paige grabbed her phone. “But it is Sparrows.” She scrolled through her contacts, selected his number and stood to pace. Moments later, she dropped back onto the couch. “Sparrow is on his way.”

“Hum,” Dax stood to answer the door when he heard the knock. He returned with two large boxes of pizza. “I’ll grab mine and head next door. You and the pirate can have the house.”

“Wait,” Paige stopped him. “Will you stay? I’d like your input on this.”

“Why?”

“You have good insight,” she evaded.

“I’m perfectly safe, Paige. I assure you; I can walk next door without being killed.”

“I just —” she sighed. “I think there’s still some underlying tension between us. And I thought — well, we usually connect while we’re working a case. With this one, you’ve been off working with your guys and I’ve been working with my team. We haven’t had a chance to walk through the situation together. I just thought maybe we could do that tonight, while we’re trying to outline the kind of man Julianna would target.”

“Alright,” Dax agreed. He glanced at the door when he heard the second knock. “You want me to get that?”

“I’ve got it,” Paige walked to the door and casually flung it open. “Did you eat? We have pizza.”

“I’d love a slice,” Sparrow stepped inside. “I know we’re here to work, but this will also give me a chance to get to know your husband.”

They were spread out in the living room beer and pizza covered the small table. Dax and Paige were lounging on the couch, Sparrow was sitting in a comfortable chair, large notepad in hand. Paige and Sparrow were arguing over every detail. Dax remained silent, listening and watching them work. It was interesting to see Paige slide her invisible FBI hat back on. Sparrow

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also had some good points, and he didn't hesitate to push when necessary, in order to get his way.

"I just think women are drawn to a type," Paige insisted. "Anderson was nearly thirty when we arrested him. Julianna was only eighteen. If she has a partner, he has to be at least eight to ten years older than she is."

"I think younger," Sparrow disagreed. "My profile is going to cover men between the ages of say thirty-two to forty-five."

"I think that's a mistake," Paige grumbled.

"He could be any race, but likely white or Hispanic." Sparrow ignored her. "And he'll be a social outcast, unemployed or working a low-paying job without real responsibility."

"Anderson was a charismatic leader," Paige argued. "Why do you say little or no responsibility?"

"She needs someone easily controlled, and she needs a partner with no ties to the community. She hasn't been here long. I don't know where or how she met this guy, but he would have to be flexible. He couldn't have a job that ties him down to one place."

"Can I ask you a question?" Dax finally cut in.

"Sure," Sparrow grabbed another slice of pizza and settled back in his chair. "Fire away."

"It seems to me, both of you are using the fake blood-sucking fiend as a measuring post," Dax focused on Paige. "Why?"

"Because we know they were tight," Paige said defensively.

"And women have a type," Sparrow added. "Her first boyfriend is locked away for good, so it only makes sense that she'd seek a similar guy to replace him."

"What if she's not looking for a replacement?" Dax considered. "What if she's just looking for convenience?"

"What do you mean?" Paige wondered; he had her attention now.

"I get Julianna is a psychopath or a sociopath or whatever," Dax began. "And many people have the misconception that people like that don't have emotions. I've dealt with enough of them to know they can have feelings. Those feelings are just centered on themselves."

"Right," Sparrow agreed. "I'm with you so far."

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“You are both assuming this Saber guy is part of her past,” Dax explained. “What if he’s not? What if this entire scenario, mission, whatever you want to call it — what if it’s all emotional? What I mean by that is emotional for her. What if she was obsessed with this Master Saber, creepy vampire extraordinaire to the point she can’t move forward? She wouldn’t just forget him because you took him away. She wants revenge — that’s obvious — but she could think, once she’s finished here, she can break him out and run away again.”

“Paige took the object of her obsession, so she’s going to take what she sees as an obsession for Paige — her husband,” Sparrow provided. “It’s personal, in that she wants Paige to lose but the players aren’t personal. Not like before. I can work with that. But, if you’re right, that means she could have shackled up with anyone. It doesn’t get us closer to finding her. It actually pushes us further away.”

“She wouldn’t understand love,” Paige considered. “Not true love. She only understands her own wants. She was obsessed with the man they called Master Saber. I firmly believe he was obsessed with her, too. If Dax is right, we’re approaching this all wrong. We need to focus on her needs — I mean, immediate needs. Like you said, she thinks she’s smarter than all of us. She might truly believe she can break Anderson out of prison and ride off into the sunset when she decides the time is right. She’s not thinking about that now. She’s here, in Manti, to get revenge on me — to take my man because I took hers. If she hasn’t found a new partner, that opens the door for anyone. It’s just as likely she’s staying with a woman as it is a man.”

“A woman that is easily manipulated, like the freaky succubus women that were drawn in by Anderson,” Sparrow jotted down some notes. “I never got the impression they were overly fond of Julianna, but they were devoted to their master, and he told them to follow Julianna. It could be a woman, but I think it’s far more likely she’s using another man. It would be easier to control a man. She’d just use seduction and punishment and reward.”

They talked for several more hours. Finally, Sparrow set his notepad aside and stretched. “I’m beat. Let’s pick this back up in the morning. I’ll meet you at the office, say around nine?”

“Sounds good,” Paige stood and began cleaning up the pizza mess.

“I’ll get this,” Dax offered. “You see our guest to the door.”

Paige returned and paused to watch Dax. “The leg looks better today.”

“It’s not bad,” Dax dropped the boxes in the trash. “I barely have a limp, the brace helps. I have an early morning, you ready to crash?”

“Yeah,” Paige frowned. “How early?”

“I’ve got a conference call at seven. Hawk agreed to give me a lift. Don’t worry, we’ll head straight to the office and once inside, I won’t venture out alone,” Dax assured her.

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“Alright,” Paige climbed into bed. “If I don’t wake up before you leave, be careful.”

“Don’t worry,” Dax wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. “I love you, baby.”

“Me too,” Paige mumbled, already half asleep.

Dax was sitting behind his desk, Hawk sprawled out in his visitor’s chair discussing the call they just finished when suddenly gunfire erupted outside. Both men dropped to the floor and used the desk for cover. Seconds later there was a thud, the window cracked, and shook from the impact.

“I thought you guys were being excessive when you told me you installed that ballistic glass in our offices,” Dax shoved his chair to the side and crawled toward the door. There was another thud and another crack.

“If she keeps this up, it might not hold,” Hawk frowned. “Maybe we should have sprung for the heavy stuff.”

“I think under normal circumstances that window is fine,” Dax made it to the hallway, stood and began to run. Hawk was only a few seconds behind. They approached the foyer and realized the shooting was over — everything was eerily quiet. Dax stopped at the end of the hall and slowly peered around the corner.

Hawk stepped behind him, glanced through the large window, and spotted the Camry speeding away. He kicked the wall then frowned at the dent he made in the sheetrock.

“You’re fixing that,” Dax walked cautiously forward but hesitated when his phone rang. He glanced at the display and saw it was Zeus. “Hey man, can I call you back?”

“I saw what happened,” Zeus informed him. “She came barreling onto the highway right in front of me. Nearly collided with the side of my car. I decided to follow her. I’m closing in, but this chick is nuts and my SUV can’t keep up. Are you guys okay?”

Dax switched to speaker then turned to Hawk. “Call the police, Zee’s chasing her car, but he’s having a hard time. He needs backup. We’re fine, Zee. The damage is going to hurt, but the glass held, so we’re fine.”

“Glad to hear it,” Zeus had just relayed his location when the sound of tires squealing rang through the speaker followed by a loud crash, metal scraping and crunching, and several loud

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horns. Finally, everything went silent. It took Dax a second to realize the phone had been disconnected.

“I’ll drive,” Hawk shoved open the door and ran for his truck. Dax was right behind him.

They approached the address Zeus gave them and immediately spotted the wreckage... and the vehicle. Hawk swerved to the side of the road and the two of them jumped out and ran toward the car. Paige intercepted them.

“He’s on his way to the hospital,” she grabbed Dax’s arm and pulled him toward her car. “We’re still talking to witnesses, but from what I can gather, Zeus was chasing a blue Camry.” She glared at the two men. “We all know who he was chasing and you’re going to explain what the hell you were thinking once I’m done here. Seriously, what was the plan? Once he caught up to her what did you guys think Zeus would do with that homicidal maniac? If he survived, which is highly unlikely, he’d be in the clutches of a violent psychopath.” She turned and kicked the tire on her patrol vehicle. “Why was he alone? What kind of hairbrained plan did you maniacs devise that had Zeus chasing after a killer all by himself?”

Dax studied Paige and wondered how long it would take for her to recognize the irony. Zeus wasn’t the only person who chased after a killer all alone. When she spun back around, he just raised one eyebrow and waited.

“Shut up, Dax,” she sighed.

“What happened to Zeus?” Hawk demanded.

“He’s injured, but he should be fine,” Paige softened. “He hit his head pretty good, and I think he probably broke his foot. His ribs slammed into the steering wheel, I think he might have broken one or two, but he insists they’re just bruised. He’s lucky to be alive,” she glanced back at the car and shook her head.

“What happened?” Dax sobered.

“Zeus was chasing the Camry and she couldn’t shake him, so she swerved into oncoming traffic and nearly collided with a truck. The driver reacted, swerved to avoid the Camry, clipped the backend of that white Escape, and landed in that ditch over there. The Escape spun out of control and collided with Zeus’ SUV. He was trying to swerve to avoid the collision so when he was hit, his vehicle rolled. I called Carman. She’s going to meet Zeus at the hospital. Now, tell me how this happened. What did you guys have planned and why were you doing it behind my back?”

“Well,” Dax sighed. “Once you’re finished here, you’ll want to head over to the training center. We’ll wait for you there.”

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“Why?” Paige frowned.

“Let’s just say, this morning we learned firsthand that the ballistics glass we installed in the offices worked,” Hawk answered.

“What?” Paige yelled. “She shot at you, and you didn’t call me?”

“Well,” Dax shrugged. “We were kind of busy at the time. You know, getting shot at and all. Then Zee called, and we heard the crash. We planned to call you but didn’t get the chance.”

“I’ll turn this over to Gage, then meet you at the office,” Paige decided. “I’ll need a minute to let Jericho know what’s going on.”

Paige inhaled sharply when she saw the damage.

“You know they’re okay,” Jericho said in understanding. “She didn’t hurt them.” He parked in front of the building and walked to the window. “She used a .223,” Jericho pulled a pen from his pocket and poked at the window. “I always wondered how well this glass worked, guess it really does stop a bullet.”

“I want to start inside, get a statement from Dax and Hawk, then we can come back out and deal with this mess. Honestly, I doubt there’s anything out here. We’ll have Heidi get photos and I want the window.”

“Looks like Lovato arrived,” Jericho motioned to the parking lot. “I’ll have him process this while we get statements from the boys.”

“Do you want to speak with us together?” Dax asked when he spotted Paige. “We were both here when she fired the shots, but I can leave if you want individual statements.”

“What is this?” Jericho asked, studying the whiteboard.

“Oh, um…” Hawk glanced at Dax.

“You are not bait,” Paige glared at Dax. “We talked about this.”

“It was just a thought,” Dax told her. “A work in progress. We started talking about the situation and remembered a mission we led in Afghanistan. That’s the op — in a nutshell.”

“You are not bait,” Paige insisted.

“It’s a cunning plan. Did it work?” Agent Sparrow asked from the doorway.

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“It did,” Hawk gave Dax a mysterious look.

“Dax is not bait,” Paige studied the diagram and had to admit it was brilliant, and unconventional, but too dangerous.

“Looks like you guys had an interesting morning,” Agent Sparrow settled into a chair.

Dax walked them through the shooting, Hawk added a few details and explained how Zeus got involved.

Once they were finished, Jericho motioned to the diagram. “Now, explain that. It might work to draw her out, but where did you plan to do it?”

“That’s the one detail we haven’t figured out,” Dax admitted.

“We are not using Dax as bait,” Paige growled. “It’s too risky.”

“Not really,” Hawk disagreed. “We just need to find a location where I can set up and wait. If she makes a move, I’ll take her out.”

“We’re not using...”

“Paige, stop,” Jericho ordered. “We haven’t been able to find our suspect. We’ve spent days trying without a single lead. We need to flush her out. She’s determined to get to Dax. I don’t like using a civilian as bait, but it might be the only way to control this situation.”

“Then use me instead,” Paige countered.

“Absolutely not,” Dax answered immediately. “If it’s too dangerous for me, you are not taking my place. I will not hide away while my wife puts herself in the line of fire.”

“This is my job,” Paige countered.

“She’s after me,” Dax disagreed. “What makes you think she’d even take the bait if you try to lure her instead of me?”

“You’re both right,” Jericho cut in. “So, we’ll use both of you as bait?”

“I don’t understand,” Paige frowned.

“She’s tried to kill your husband three times now,” Jericho pointed out. “I doubt it would surprise her to learn I’ve assigned you, his spouse, to protect him from further attempts on his life.”

“Okay,” Dax considered. “So, Paige accompanies me whenever I leave the center.”

“Exactly,” Jericho nodded.

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“And after a day of being seen, we could lure her to a location of our choosing,” Sparrow grinned. “We could have Hawk set up as our sniper and the rest of us will surround the area and close in when the time is right. If Paige can get close enough, she can make the arrest herself.”

“Now we just need a location,” Jericho glanced around. “You got a map in this place?”

“I’ve got a computer and a large screen in the conference room. Let’s move in there. I’ll notify Vato and we can all get to work,” Hawk offered.

“I’m bringing in Gage and Mike,” Jericho pulled out his phone. “We might also need Havilland for this one.”

Paige hesitated and waited for the group to leave. “We’ll need to be alert at all times and work together if we want this to work. That means I don’t try to protect you and you don’t protect me. We’re a team and we assume the risks together.”

“I can do that,” Dax agreed.

“Can you?” Paige wondered. “Watching me walk into danger, standing by your side while we both walk into danger is going to go against everything you stand for.”

“Can you trust me to handle myself? I suspect that goes against what you stand for,” Dax pointed out.

“Which is why I know how hard this will be for you,” Paige sighed. “We have to work together and treat each other as equals. If we walk into this trying to protect our partner, she’s going to win and one or both of us might not walk away alive. Unfortunately, I think her main target will be you. She wants me to know how it feels to lose the way she has.”

Dax realized she was right and a part of him relaxed at the knowledge. He was the target; Paige was just the audience. Julianna would welcome a chance to take him out while Paige watched. He could live with that because Julianna was going to be disappointed. He trusted Paige. He trusted Hawk, and he trusted the rest of the men. He didn’t know Sparrow, but Vato, Gage, Havilland... they would protect him. He knew that for a fact. But the person he trusted more than anyone else in the world — Paige — would be standing by his side, just waiting to make her move. Yeah, he could live with that. And if they found the right location, they might neutralize the threat before she had time to put another attack in motion.

“Dax?” Paige pushed. “Can you set aside your personal feelings and trust me to handle myself?”

“Yes,” Dax said confidently. “Now let’s join the others and figure out the best place to put our plan into action.”

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Paige studied Dax. He appeared calm but determined. Could he really do this? Could he set aside his feelings, avoid being distracted by her safety, and carry out a mission knowing both of them would be in danger? Then it hit her, Dax was the one risking his life for this plan. Julianna might get off one good shot; and, if she did, that attempt would be directed at Dax. Of course, he was okay with the situation. He knew he was risking himself, not her. But was she? Could she give Dax the same trust she was requesting from him? She didn't know, but she'd have to try. They needed to arrest Julianna so their lives could return to normal.

They stepped into the conference room and began to plan their next move.

Dax finished his bacon and studied Paige. "You're not eating much this morning."

"It's this case," Paige sipped her juice. "Stress. I told you; this happened a lot when I worked for the Bureau." She glanced to her right and got a nod from Sparrow, who was dining at a nearby table.

"Hawk said Julianna just walked by," Dax informed her. "She stepped into the drug store."

"Then it's working," Paige nodded. "We could try to apprehend her inside the store, but I think it's too dangerous."

"I think we should continue with the plan," Dax took a sip of coffee. "We hoped for this. Let's let it play out."

"Did you do this a lot?" Paige wondered. "For me, it's hard. If I see my suspect, I want to arrest them. This feels unnatural."

"I guess it would," Dax nodded. "It's different for us. We do a lot of surveillance before a mission. This is more natural for us. Don't worry, it won't take long. I think we should stick to the plan today and we'll lure her to the target tomorrow, see if she takes the bait."

"Let's head back to the training center," Paige suggested.

They spent the day working at the training center. Hours later they ventured out, making sure they were seen. They ate dinner at the Chophouse, then returned home and went for a late-night walk.

"Do you think it worked?" Paige climbed into bed.

"Yes," Dax settled in next to her. "She was hiding inside the vacant house up the street. I saw her watching through the window. I think she'll be annoyed that we appear to be unconcerned about the attacks. She'll bite. I have a couple things I need to take care of in the

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morning. Can you meet me around ten? We'll head over to the bakery and finish this once and for all."

"That should give us time to get everyone in place before we arrive. What about Hawk? Will he need to work in the morning, or can he set up and be in place by zero nine hundred?"

"He'll be ready," Dax assured her.

Paige and Dax stepped into the bakery and approached the counter. Deputy Mike Lovato stood at the counter. Duncan Havilland sat at a table in the corner. Gage was positioned at a table on the other side of the building and Agent Zach Sparrow sat a few feet from the front door. Jericho and Zeus waited in the kitchen. Wooly was located up the road watching from the café, Logan Reed was at the opposite end of the street, waiting inside the thrift store. Vato was on the roof with Hawk, serving as his spotter.

"We'll have two coffees, a cinnamon roll, and a blueberry muffin," Dax told Lo.

"Try to get it right this time," Paige grinned. "Last time you waited on me, you got the order all wrong."

"Right," Lovato nodded. "That was one coffee, one black tea, a cinnamon roll, and a lemon cookie. Is that correct?"

"Just get our stuff," Paige grumbled. "You know what we wanted. If you give me a lemon cookie, you will pay. You won't know when, you won't expect it, but you will regret it."

"Target acquired," Wooly announced through his headset. "Julianna just passed the café, and she is carrying a large bag. ETA approximately two minutes."

"Hold your positions and stay alert," Jericho ordered. "Hawk, do you have the subject in sight?"

"Affirmative," Hawk acknowledged. "She's approaching the front door."

Lovato returned with the coffee and pasties and handed them to Paige. "It's showtime."

"Can you see her?" As much as she wanted to, Paige didn't dare turn around.

"Yes ma'am," Lo nodded toward the door.

Paige stiffened. When she heard the door shut, she knew their suspect had arrived.

Julianna strolled to the counter and stopped next to Dax. "You're a hard man to kill."

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“You’re a hard woman to find,” Dax shifted slightly but continued to watch Julianna. He was ready for anything.

“Well, here I am,” Julianna grinned. “As are you.” She turned toward Paige. “So, we meet again. How is your old partner these days? The one Saber maimed? I suspect living your life in a wheelchair is a fate worse than death. I’d say you could ask your husband once I’m finished with him, but I guess you can’t really talk to the dead, can you?” She threw her head back and laughed.

Paige took a step forward but froze when Julianna pulled a knife from her large bag and shifted closer to Dax.

“Nu-huh, no you don’t,” she warned. “One step closer and I’ll gut him like a fish.”

Dax was quick. He pivoted, gripped Julianna’s wrist and kicked her feet out from under her. She went down immediately. The knife skittered across the floor and collided with the far wall.

Paige pounced. It only took seconds to pin Julianna to the floor. She reached for her cuffs, but Agent Sparrow beat her to it. He grabbed Julianna’s arm and her leg, flipped her over and cuffed her hands behind her back.

Julianna looked at Sparrow in surprise. “Please, help me. They attacked me for no reason.” She focused on Lovato. “You have to call the police. They’ve been stalking me. I rushed inside to get away, but they followed me inside and tried to kill me.”

Lo leaned forward, invading Julianna’s space. “See that camera, sweetheart? We got it all on video. You’re not in Kansas anymore. And the local DA, he doesn’t take kindly to pampered brats setting bombs or shooting at his citizens. You’re going away for a very long time.” He plucked her off the floor and shoved her toward the door.

“Somebody help me,” Julianna glanced around the bakery. “Please, anyone? At least record this so I can prove police brutality.”

“I’m afraid you’re out of luck,” Jericho stepped forward. “You walked into a trap young lady. Nobody inside this room will help you with anything. This is my town, and I don’t take kindly to violent strangers waltzing in and taking shots at my citizens.” He turned to Paige. “Meet us at the station. Mike transport her to the conference room. I’m going to have a little talk with Ms. Barrow before you introduce her to an eight-foot cell.”

“You’ve got nothing!” Julianna screamed. “I’ll beat this, just like I did before.”

“Not likely,” Jericho followed Lovato out the door.

Sparrow turned to address Paige. “Looks like we got her this time. I hate to play and run but my case just heated up and I need to get back to Vegas. I trust you can handle this without me.”

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“I’ll try to talk to her, but I doubt she’ll say anything,” Paige sighed. “She’ll try the insanity thing again but it won’t work out here. Everyone knows her history. She won’t fool the cops or the DA this time. She’s going down for all of it. Jericho already talked to Tolman. He’s charging her with domestic terrorism for the bombing. Add that to attempted murder and she’s going to be locked up for a very long time. We can handle this locally. Go ahead, get back to your case. Thanks for the assist. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Sparrow glanced around the room. “You had a pretty good team. I’m surprised she went down so easily. Anyway, thanks for including me. It feels like we got a little closure today. I never did like the way things ended up. It felt like that woman got away with murder.”

“You know,” Paige considered. “They did not charge her with the crime. She convinced everyone she was innocent and forced to participate. Considering her current charges, we might be able to convince the feds to pick that back up and finish things off. And by that, I mean District Attorney James Tolman might be able to make a case that will keep her locked up for the rest of her life.”

“Hope springs,” Sparrow turned to Dax. “It was a pleasure meeting you. I hope to do it again sometime, minus the deranged psychopath trying to kill you.”

“You’re welcome any time,” Dax reached out and shook Sparrow’s hand. “Have a safe trip back and good luck on that other case.”

Sparrow turned to the rest of the group. “Until we meet again.”

They watched him exit the building and drive away.

“I need to get to the office,” Paige told Dax. “I’ll see you at home.”

Paige got home that night, tired but relieved. Julianna was locked up tight in the Sanpete County Jail and would remain there for a very long time. The judge denied bail. He agreed she was dangerous and a flight risk. Tolman called the federal prosecutor assigned to Utah. He promised to look into the case and see if they could file charges against Julianna for the murders that were committed years ago. She figured that was all they could do. In the meantime, Tolman planned to throw the book at her locally. They had a solid case, which would give the feds time to decide what to do on their end. All in all, it was a pretty good day. Best of all, Dax was safe. The stress and worry were over and their lives could go back to normal — whatever that was.