

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Runaway Bride* *Season 7, Episode 2*

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*by:*

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“Paige,” Deputy Gage Clayton greeted the instant she exited her vehicle.

“Hey,” Paige hesitated once she reached the sidewalk. “What do we have?”

“Well.” Gage studied her. “You look like you have the flu. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Paige shrugged. “Bad takeout. I’ll get over it. Anyway, all Margie said was you need a back. It’s eight o’clock. What are we doing at a reception center this early in the morning?”

“Missing person.” Gage glanced at the front door. “Or cold feet.”

“Awe, well let’s go see what we see,” Paige grinned and headed for the door.

“Officer,” a man rushed toward them the instant they stepped into the large open room. “Something happened to Amber. You have to find her. She could be hurt.”

“Who are you?” Gage wondered.

“Chet,” the man brushed his hand through the air. “Chet Rivers. I can provide my information and everything you need to know about my family, friends, everything — later. First, you need to find out what happened to Amber. She’s the priority.”

“Chet,” a sophisticated woman in her fifties, moved forward and wrapped an arm around the man’s shoulders. “It’s obvious what happened, Amber got cold feet.” She glanced around the room. “Unfortunately, she didn’t figure it out before we paid for all of this. I told you she wasn’t right for you. It’s time to accept that and move forward.”

“Mom, I told you, she did not leave me.” Chet took a step away from the woman. “Something happened, otherwise she would be here. She would never miss our wedding and she wouldn’t leave without talking to me first.”

“He’s in denial,” the woman sighed.

“Who are you?” Paige wondered.

“Oh,” the woman shifted her gaze between the cops and her son. “I’m Diana Rivers, Chet’s my son.”

“Chet, have you heard anything?” a middle-aged couple rushed into the room.

“No,” Chet seemed to break a little. “She wasn’t there?”

“Son,” a man in his late fifties stepped toward the group. “I’m sorry, but you have to stop this. Amber finally accepted the situation and the futility of this wedding. She walked away before it was too late. I tried to tell you she wasn’t the girl for you, but you wouldn’t listen. I’m

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sorry she broke your heart, but this is not a police matter. We need to accept that. I'm sure these two police officers have important business to attend to."

"My daughter is missing," the middle-aged man took a step forward. "That makes this a police matter."

"Who are you?" Gage asked.

"Grant Metcalf and this is my wife, Alison."

"They're Amber's parents," Chet advised.

"The girl ran," Diana Rivers insisted. "It's for the best."

"You never wanted her to marry your son," Alison accused and turned to address Paige. "They were horrible. They treated my daughter with such contempt. They did everything they could to stop this marriage. I don't know what they did; but, mark my words, that family is behind this."

"Now you wait just a minute," Lance Rivers took a step forward.

Diana gripped his arm. "Lance, you need to calm down. Come on, sit over here. The last thing we need today is for you to have a heart attack."

Paige frowned and watched a large gathering of people head their way. "Gage, we need to separate this group and interview each one of them individually." She turned to Lance. "Do you have a medical condition?"

"He had a heart attack a few months ago," Chet answered for him. "He shouldn't get upset."

"Alright," Paige glanced around. "I'm going to track down an employee, find a place to conduct the interviews, then I'll be back to speak with your parents first. Once I'm finished, they can head home. Get comfortable. This might take a while."

"You've gotta be kidding," a man in his thirties barked. "The chick took off. She finally figured out she didn't belong. Seriously, I have no idea what my cousin was thinking but a Metcalf and a waitress — that relationship was doomed from the start."

Chet took a step toward the belligerent cousin.

"Chet," Diana scolded.

He froze, turned to study his mother, then sank into a nearby chair — defeated.

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“Alright.” Paige focused on Gage. “You think you can handle this crowd alone? I should only be a minute.”

“I’m good,” Gage assured her.

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Paige returned and escorted Chet’s parents into the room they had provided her. She reluctantly agreed to interview them together. The wife insisted on it because of her husband’s medical condition.

“I don’t understand why your department is spending so much time on a woman that skipped her wedding,” Diana dropped into a chair. “That girl all but abandoned my son at the altar and you’re just making things worse. Hasn’t he suffered enough?”

“I think the woman doth protest too much,” Paige glanced at Gage.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lance scowled.

“Why are the two of you so adamant the girl ran off?” Paige pushed. “You’re beginning to sound pretty desperate.”

“I’d say determined,” Gage corrected. “To make sure there’s no investigation into what happened to the bride-to-be.”

“I call it protective,” Diana corrected. “The woman my son thought he was in love with abandoned him the night before his wedding. He needs to deal with the loss so he can move on. He does not need a lengthy police investigation. It’s frivolous and will only give him false hope. The girl left. There’s nothing suspicious about that and there’s certainly no crime.”

“You’re pretty confident about that,” Gage observed.

“I am,” Diana nodded.

“Are we finished here?” Lance asked impatiently.

“No,” Paige sat back. “When was the last time you saw Amber Metcalf?”

“Last night,” Lance sighed. “She left abruptly — after dinner.”

“Why?” Gage wondered.

“Who knows,” Diana grumbled. “I’m sure she got offended — yet again — about something or other and was throwing a tantrum.”

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“Okay, so the dinner?” Paige ignored the comment. “Was it the rehearsal dinner?”

“Yes,” Lance frowned. “Everything went according to plan. We walked through the ceremony, had dinner, and Amber left.”

“Alone?” Gage asked.

“Yes,” Diana insisted. “Look, we don’t know anything, and my husband needs to rest. Can we leave?”

“For now,” Paige agreed. “But I may need to talk to you again — later. Once we get further into the investigation and have a better understanding of the situation. Please send in your son.”

“Oh, but —” Diana began.

“I’ll tell him on our way out.” Lance took his wife’s hand.

Paige watched the couple leave. Once she was sure they were gone, she turned to Gage. “They’re hiding something.”

“Or lying,” Gage nodded. “They made it pretty clear they didn’t approve of their son’s marriage. Maybe they said something at dinner, made sure it was enough to upset the intended bride, then threatened her or coerced her into leaving. She may have taken off without a word to the man she loves, but if she did, the catalyst was his parents.”

“Without telling her parents? Or any of her friends?” Paige shook her head. “I don’t think so. We’ll talk to them, see what they have to say, but I don’t think they’d let this continue if they knew where she was.”

“I’m not sure who you’re talking about,” Chet stood in the open doorway. “But Amber is missing. She didn’t get cold feet, she didn’t change her mind, she didn’t just leave me without a word. Something happened to her, or someone is preventing her from being here — it’s the only explanation.”

“Come on in and take a seat,” Paige motioned to the chair. “Let’s talk.”

“I don’t want to talk,” Chet objected. “We need to search for Amber. She could be injured somewhere.”

“What makes you say that?” Gage asked casually. “Do you know someone that would want to do her harm?”

Chet ran his hands over his face in frustration, or maybe desperation. “I don’t know. I don’t understand any of this.”

“Tell us when you last saw Amber,” Paige requested.

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“At dinner last night,” Chet answered instantly.

“Can you walk us through your evening?” Paige requested. “Give us as many details as you can.”

“There was nothing special about the evening,” Chet began. “The rehearsal went long because my cousin shot off his mouth, and that idiot Derek joined in.”

“There was an argument?” Paige quizzed.

“Not an argument, exactly,” Chet disagreed. “Karl, that’s my cousin. He decided to bring up the business, and the timing was inappropriate. He was spouting off about the new client I made him deal with because he was unhappy about it, and complaining about the added workload. Then Derek joined in. I shut them both down, but after dinner, they started up again and my parents joined in. They blamed Amber, said I was neglecting my duties to appease her.”

“She was upset?” Gage realized.

“Maybe a little,” Chet evaded. “No more than usual. She was used to it — we’re both used to it. But it was the night before our wedding. I think she had a right to expect a smooth evening without all the drama. Anyway, Amber was fine when she left. She was excited about our wedding. We both were. If you think she abandoned me the night before our wedding because of a brief argument over company politics, you’re wrong.”

“Did the two of you leave together?” Paige asked.

“No,” Chet frowned. “I got called back to the office. There was an unexpected problem, and I had to head over and deal with it immediately.”

“The night before your wedding?” Paige challenged. “There wasn’t anyone else that could handle this pressing issue?”

“No,” Chet’s features hardened. “There was an issue with a long-standing client, one that will only deal with me. There was a glitch and their system stopped working. I knew it would only take an hour — tops — so I headed over and dealt with the problem, then I joined my cousins at the bar. It was my version of a bachelor’s party. I had a couple drinks, listened to the band, and was home by one.”

“When did you realize your bride-to-be was missing?” Gage asked.

“This morning,” Chet swallowed. “When her parents contacted me. They were frantic. Look, I know it’s common for a bride or a groom to back out at the last minute, but that’s not what happened here. Amber is missing. I’ve spoken to her parents, her cousins, her friends. Nobody knows where she is. She just walked out of the building and vanished. You have to find

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her.” He covered his face with his hands and started to shake when he looked up. His eyes were filled with moisture. “Please find her. I can’t live without her.”

“You should go home, Chet,” Paige stood. “Go home and we’ll be in touch.”

“I —” he stood and glanced around the room. “Alright. Okay, I’ll be at home if you find anything, anything at all, please let me know.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Paige evaded. “Could you send Amber’s parents in next?”

They spent the next several hours interviewing friends, family, and the staff. Finally, they stepped outside, and Paige raised her face to the sun. A slight breeze drifted over her face and blew a stray hair along her cheekbone. Paige reached up to brush it aside, closed her eyes and took a second to enjoy the heat of the sun as it beat down on her exposed skin. “I could stand here for hours,” she admitted. “After the winter we had, I could bask in the afternoon sun all day.”

“I realize it might sound paranoid or jaded, I guess.” Gage ran a hand through his hair. “But every single person we interviewed in there was lying through their teeth.”

“Yeah,” Paige agreed, but didn’t open her eyes. “You should be used to that by now.”

“But the man she’s supposed to marry, her parents, her best friend, they all lied,” Gage replied, perplexed and exasperated by that fact.

“You say that like you think they’re responsible for the girl’s disappearance.” She turned and faced him.

“Why else would they be lying?” Gage insisted.

“I think lying is a little strong,” Paige disagreed. “They’re hiding something.”

“Maybe,” Gage conceded. “Some of them, but some are flat out lying.”

“True, and I think something happened to that girl. I don’t think this is a simple case of cold feet. But I don’t think her parents, her best friend, or even her fiancé had anything to do with her disappearance. I think they lied because they think holding back secrets or minimizing the truth will help keep us focused.”

“You’re saying you don’t think the lies were nefarious,” Gage considered.

“Right,” Paige agreed. “It could be that Amber had a terrible fight with Chet after the minor disagreement he had with his family. Maybe the company stuff turned personal, and he doesn’t want to tell us that; because, he thinks, if we knew we’d just chalk this up to a change of heart. So, he lied, minimized, and evaded.”

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“So, how do we tell the difference?” Gage started toward their vehicles.

“The difference in what?”

“The white lies meant to hide insignificant details, and the real lies meant to lead us in the wrong direction?” Gage reached out and opened the door to his truck. “I mean, we have to sift through it all and decide what’s worth pursuing and what’s irrelevant.”

“Let’s get back to the office and commandeer the conference room,” Paige suggested. “Then we can lay all of this out and decide where to go from here.”

“Alright,” Gage slid behind the wheel. “I’ll meet you there.”

Paige started for her vehicle, turned, and decided to search the area for clues. She was headed down the sidewalk when something glistened in the sunlight. It took her several minutes, but she finally found the delicate golden chain. When she picked it up, she realized it was broken — and expensive, with tiny diamonds and sapphires dangling like charms. After returning to her vehicle for an evidence bag, she secured the broken bracelet and spent another twenty minutes searching the area for additional evidence. She found several scuffs in the dirt that looked like footprints and some branches on the nearby bush were broken. Paige took pictures of everything, then returned to her vehicle and headed back to the office to meet with Gage.

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“I was getting ready to head back to the truck and come looking for you.” Gage glanced up when Paige stepped into the conference room.

“I decided to stop and search for evidence,” she dropped the bag with the broken bracelet onto the table. “And I’m glad I did.”

“What is that?” Gage reached for the bag.

“Broken chain with expensive looking charms I’m pretty sure are precious gems,” Paige answered. “I also found scuff marks in the dirt that could indicate a struggle and some broken limbs on a nearby bush.”

“What are you saying?” Gage studied Paige. “You think she was abducted? And why can’t you just say diamonds and sapphires? You gotta use all that fancy talk like expensive precious gems?”

“Because that’s what they are and I don’t know if she was abducted,” Paige said honestly. “But I’m also not convinced she changed her mind and left the man she loves hanging on their wedding day. There’s more to this story and we just haven’t figured it out yet.”



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“Well, it would help if everyone stopped lying to us,” Gage grumbled.

“I agree, but that won’t happen, so you need to get over it,” Paige suggested. “Let’s go over the interviews. I think the first step is to create a diagram. We’ll map out where everyone was when Amber left the facility.”

“Alright,” Gage stood. “Let’s use the whiteboard. Do we think it was someone involved in the wedding or someone outside of this small group?”

“At this point, I have no idea,” Paige sighed. “The Rivers family clearly didn’t approve of the wedding, but we don’t know who would have the most to gain if they canceled it. I think that’s the first thing we need to figure out.”

“And if anyone left early,” Gage agreed.

“Follow the money,” Jericho said from the doorway.

“What?” both Gage and Paige asked at the same time.

“If two of my best deputies responded on a runaway bride case and came back with this,” he pointed to the whiteboard. “There must be a reason. So, if the girl is missing, and there was some kind of foul play here, the family is rich — follow the money.”

“I don’t think —” Gage began, then paused.

“The girl was common, a middle class waitress, and she doesn’t have a lot of money. The Rivers are rich, paid for the wedding, and they’re all snobs, which is why they don’t approve of the match. I think that’s the only way money plays into this — a battle of two classes.”

“The boss might have a point,” Gage considered. “Remember, Lance Rivers has health problems. Nobody said it, they were too busy lying and evading, but rumor has it the boss is planning to retire.”

“I assumed Chet would take over. He’s the current VP, at least one of them. It would only be natural for him to inherit the family empire once dad buys a luxury yacht and sets sail for calmer waters,” Paige considered. “How would the marriage to an unworthy commoner — they clearly believe is beneath them — play into that?”

“Or would it?” Jericho wondered. “Before we take this any further, I have to ask, how confident are you that girl didn’t just change her mind and head off to enjoy a little honeymoon for one?”

“Gage?” Paige waited.

“Um,” Gage considered. “Eighty percent.”

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“Paige?” Jericho prodded. “Do you agree?”

“I do,” Paige nodded, then picked up the bag that contained the bracelet. “If the parents confirm this belonged to Amber, I’d bump that up to ninety.”

“Why only ninety?” Jericho frowned.

“Because they lie,” the two deputies said together, then laughed.

“Everybody lies,” Jericho grumbled. “Paige, you head over and talk to the parents again. Take the bracelet and see if you can get answers. Gage, you and I will go through all these documents and try to organize them into a simple system.”

“Actually, I think Gage should talk to the parents,” Paige countered.

“Why?” Jericho wondered.

“Because they liked him,” Paige shrugged. “He seemed to have a good rapport with those two. I just thought he might get more information than I could,”

“Dad’s a fan,” Gage corrected.

“Why are we talking about your dad?” Paige glared at Gage.

“Not mine,” Gage laughed. “Amber’s dad, Grant Metcalf, he’s a fan. He loves football and —”

“And the hometown hero,” Jericho smiled. “Use that to your advantage and see what he’s hiding. That means, Paige, you’re with me. Let’s get started.”

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Gage stepped onto the porch and rang the bell. It only took seconds for the door to swing open, with Grant blocking the entrance.

“Do you have news?” he asked eagerly.

“No,” Gage apologized. “I have more questions. Can I come in?”

“Alright,” Grant stepped back, defeated. “I’ll get Allie — my wife. Go ahead and take a seat.” He motioned to the large living room, then disappeared down the hall.

Gage settled onto the couch, but while he waited, he took in the room. It was cozy, but lived in. The Metcalf’s appeared to be a typical family with a pleasant home. There were no red flags here. He just wondered why they were being dishonest. Their daughter was missing. They should

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cooperate completely. They should be open and honest about everything. Paige said this was normal, but not for him.

“Grant said you have more questions.” Alison entered the room and settled into a chair across from Gage. “We’ll help in any way we can.”

Grant sat in the chair next to his wife, then reached out and took her hand. “Ask whatever it was that you came here to ask.”

“First,” Gage pulled out the evidence bag. “I need to know if you’ve ever seen this bracelet before.”

“Grant,” Alison gripped her husband’s hand with so much force it turned white.

“That belongs to Amber. Where did you find it?” Grant asked.

“Do you know if she was wearing it last night?” Gage evaded.

“She was,” Alison nodded. “So, now you believe us? You know something happened to our daughter?”

“It’s not that simple,” Gage answered carefully.

“It is that simple,” Grant disagreed. “That was her favorite bracelet. If you found it, that means something happened to her, and she lost it, or it was yanked from her wrist.”

“Can you tell me about the bracelet?” Gage focused on Alison.

“Chet gave it to her,” Alison admitted. “She loves that bracelet. I know you’re thinking they had a fight, and she tore it off herself. She wouldn’t do that. Even if she decided to call off the wedding, which she didn’t, she would never part with that bracelet.”

“Why?” Gage wondered.

“Because Chet gave it to her. He bought it to mark one month together as a couple.” Alison stared at the evidence bag and the bracelet. “Amber cherished it — partially because it’s so beautiful, but also because of what it signified. Plus, she wouldn’t let Chet buy her anything else. That bracelet was so expensive, she worried it would make things worse. If he kept buying her expensive gifts, she knew his parents would interpret that to mean she was only after their money. It didn’t matter whether or not Chet bought her stuff, those arrogant snobs have already judged my daughter, and I’m not sure they will ever give her a real chance.”

“Wouldn’t that support the theory she left voluntarily?” Gage wondered.

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“I knew you’d think that,” Alison accused. “But you’re wrong. My daughter found the love of her life and she strongly believed the feeling was mutual. You don’t throw that kind of connection away without a word to anyone.”

“Alright,” Gage agreed. “I’ll trust your judgement on that. Now, tell me what you’re hiding.”

“Nothing,” Grant barked.

“Look,” Gage softened. “In football, keeping the next play a secret is tactical. In a police investigation, it’s detrimental. It’s obvious you’re hiding something. I felt it this morning at the reception hall, and I’m even more sure of it now. Nothing good will come of concealing things from us because instead of following leads that might help us find your daughter, we’ll have to spend time looking into your family. We’ll waste valuable time while we determine the reason for the secrets, uncover the secrets, and decide how they pertain to your daughter. Is that what you want?”

“No,” Grant studied his wife for several seconds. “Tell him.”

“But —” Alison sighed. “Oh, alright. It doesn’t pertain. I know that in a way only a mother can.”

“What doesn’t pertain?” Gage pressed.

“There’s been some trouble,” Alison admitted. “Chet’s been having trouble at work. Amber confided in me. She said it was sabotage. As the date of the wedding drew closer, the more problems Chet encountered. Apparently, Chet thought it was coming from a family member.”

“Who?” Gage asked.

“She didn’t say,” Grant answered. “I honestly don’t think Amber knew. Chet told her not to worry. He said once they were married, everything would be fine. But —”

“She did worry,” Gage realized. “Did she do anything about it? What kind of incidents are we talking about?”

“Small things, I think,” Alison fidgeted. “Someone keyed Chet’s car.”

“And Amber said there were problems with some accounts,” Grant offered. “I suspect the emergency that pulled him away last night was part of the pattern.”

“Why?” Gage asked.

“It was sudden and unexpected,” Grant shrugged. “And it fits the pattern. Plus, once Chet got the phone call, he confronted a group of relatives that work at the company. They started to

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argue, then Chet pulled them into a room and shut the door. You could tell it was heated from the yelling, but it was muffled, and I don't know what they were saying."

Gage considered. "I don't understand why you tried to hide this."

"Because Amber was upset," Alison answered. "It came on the heels of the previous confrontation. One man, I think his name is Karl, got angry. He started heckling Chet, accusing him of neglecting the company for a girl. Then, the banter became serious, and Kyle insisted Chet deal with a client that was being difficult. Derek joined in, and things got ugly. That's when Chet's parents joined the conversation and threatened to give the company to Derek if Chet didn't straighten up and put the family and their business ahead of my daughter."

"And Amber got upset?" Gage realized.

"Yes," Alison said defiantly. "But she didn't call off the wedding, or runaway because of it. She knew Chet's parents didn't support the wedding. She knew it was going to take a lot of time and work to make them come around and accept her. Amber was willing to put in the time and the effort. She was willing to do whatever she needed to do to make them understand she loved their son. She also knew Lance would never leave the company to Derek. It was a stupid threat he made in the heat of the moment to force his hand."

"And you didn't tell us about the conflict because you thought we'd stop looking for your daughter?" Gage wondered.

"Yes," Grant nodded. "Are we right? Because my daughter is missing. She loves Chet Rivers, and she would do anything to make him happy. He'd do the same for her. Chet knows his parents are unreasonable. He hates it, but he's willing to take it because he loves Amber. Those two kids are perfect for each other. I know you've only seen that boy at his worst, but he's a good kid. He's down to earth and he loves my little girl so much he was willing to give it all up — for her. She wouldn't let him."

"What does that mean?" Gage quizzed.

"Chet offered to move away," Alison swallowed hard. "He proposed they get married and then move. He was willing to take a job with another company — far away from his family, to protect her from the constant attacks and the condescending attitudes. Amber refused. Instead —" She hesitated and glanced at her husband. When Grant nodded, she continued. "Amber spoke with a family friend, a lawyer. She asked him to draft a prenup. It says, if they divorce, she gets nothing but what she brought into the marriage. She signed it and gave it to Chet."

"The boy refused," Grant said, pride and love clear from his tone. "He wouldn't go into a marriage planning for it to end. He also said he wanted Amber to be provided for if the marriage didn't last."

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“What happened to the document?” Gage wondered. If they could prove what they were saying, it would show Amber was willing to do anything to make this marriage work.

“I have it,” Alison studied her husband. “We have it in our safe.”

“Would it help?” Grant wondered. “If we gave you a copy?”

“I’m not sure,” Gage admitted. “But I’d like to take a copy, if you don’t mind.”

“We have a copy you can take,” Grant stood. “Amber signed the agreement, and we took a copy before she gave the original to Chet. He refused to sign it or have anything to do with it, so we placed both of them in the safe. I’ll get you the copy.” He left the room.

“Is there anything else?” Gage asked Amber’s mother.

“I know that bracelet is broken, but can we have it back?” Alison practically begged. “Once this is over, I know Amber will want it back.”

“As long as Chet confirms it was a gift to your daughter, I don’t see any reason she can’t get it back — once the case is over, that is. We’ll need to keep it until then.”

“I understand,” Alison dropped her head and stared at her hands. “My girl is strong, independent and loyal. She didn’t run away. She wouldn’t do that to us, or to Chet. Please find her. I am so afraid for her. I get so scared and terrified when I think what might have happened to her. Please, Deputy Clayton, find my daughter.”

Grant stepped back into the room, handed Gage a large envelope, then moved to his wife. “If there’s nothing else, I’d like to tend to my wife. It’s been a long, strenuous day. We need some time alone. I hope you understand.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Gage pivoted and stopped. “Thank you for cooperating and for this,” he held up the envelope. “I’ll make sure you get these back.”

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“Well, I guess that proves she wasn’t after his money,” Paige said once she finished reading the prenup.

“Or, she was brilliant,” Jericho set the last page of the document aside. “It’s an excellent strategy. Draft this document, present it to the man you claim to love, then sit back and let him toss it away. After reading that, anyone would believe the girl was in it for love and didn’t care about the money. But she had to know Chet would reject something like that. It appears risky on the surface, but I don’t think there was any risk involved at all.”

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“You think this was a ruse?” Paige asked, appalled.

“I think it could be,” Jericho corrected.

“No,” Paige disagreed. “I’m not buying it. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Why?” Jericho challenged.

“Because she’d have to go through with the wedding,” Paige said confidently. “If it was all a scam for his money, she wouldn’t take off. She’d have to go through with the marriage to get the money. So, where is she?”

“That’s the hundred-thousand-dollar question,” Jericho grinned. He wasn’t nearly as skeptical as his deputies thought he was. He just liked to play devil’s advocate to keep them thinking.

They all looked up at the knock on the door.

“Warrant was denied,” Margie advised. “Sorry.”

“I expected it,” Paige sighed. “I was just hoping for a miracle.”

“What warrant?” Jericho frowned.

“I wanted to get the financials on the business,” Paige admitted. “It seems there’s a lot of family drama associated with that company. I wanted some insight before I cornered the Rivers family again.”

“That’s not a miracle,” Jericho grinned. “I’m not sure even divine intervention would have gotten you that warrant.”

“Not with Trent Malloy for a lawyer,” Gage was studying the file and didn’t look up.

“So, what’s our next move?” Jericho wondered. “We still have a young woman missing and no idea where to look.”

“I’m going to talk to Chet Rivers again,” Paige decided. “Maybe, now that he’s had time to settle, he might have better insight.”

“Tread carefully,” Jericho warned. “Lance and Diana are very protective of their son. If they think he’s being railroaded, they will close ranks and call in their attorney.”

“Clearly, they already did,” Paige stood and headed for the door. “He blocked my warrant.”

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“Deputy Carter,” Diana Rivers scolded. “It’s a difficult time for our family. I thought you’d respect that and give us some privacy.”

“It’s a difficult time for the Metcalf’s as well, I mean their daughter is missing and all,” Paige didn’t budge. “I need to speak with Chet, is he here?”

“I don’t think —” She began.

“Mom, it’s fine,” Chet stepped into the room looking shattered and a little gaunt. “I’d like to help.”

Paige watched the man slowly walk into the room and lower himself onto a chair. The guy looked about ninety.

“How can I help?” Chet finally asked.

“Well, for starters, you can try to get some rest and eat something,” Paige settled across from him. “Chet, once we locate Amber, she’s going to need you. If you make yourself sick, won’t be in any condition to give her the support she needs.”

“Stop giving my son false hope,” Diana demanded. “Amber is gone. She’s no longer a part of our lives and we just need to figure out the best way to move forward.”

“Mom, stop it,” Chet demanded. “I know you’re right,” he turned back to Paige. “It’s just —”

“You’re worried,” Paige nodded. “I understand that. I’m worried, too. Chet, I need you to be honest with me.”

“Alright,” he pushed himself further into the chair.

“When I asked you to explain what happened last night, you left some stuff out,” Paige accused. “Like the argument you had with Kyle and Derek, and how your parents joined in and upset Amber.”

“Now you wait just a minute,” Diana pulled out her phone. “I don’t like your tone and I won’t stand for it. Lance, Deputy Carter is here questioning Chet. I think she’s trying to accuse him of something. I need you out here, immediately.”

Seconds later Lance Rivers stepped into the room. “I think we should call our lawyer. Trent insisted we shouldn’t speak with anyone from the Sheriff’s Office without him in the room. I’ll make the call,” Lance stepped out of the room.

“Are you worried about your son Mrs. Rivers, or yourself?” Paige accused. “I mean, your hostility toward the woman your son chose to marry has been obvious from the start. Then, I learned that you verbally attacked her at the rehearsal dinner. What else did you do?”



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“Mom didn’t hurt Amber,” Chet insisted. “I know they can be a little hard to take and it looks bad — the denial and the snide remarks, all of it. But I know, without a doubt, my parents did not hurt Amber.”

“How can you be so sure?” Paige wondered.

“Because it’s beneath them,” Chet shrugged. “They wanted her gone and they tried everything in the book to make that happen, but in the end, they simply wouldn’t get their hands dirty. Something else happened to Amber, I know it.”

“Chet,” Diana scolded, clearly shocked by her son’s response. “We’re only trying to protect you,” Diana glanced up when Lance stepped back into the room. “The girl was after your money.”

“Well,” Paige glanced at Chet. “Actually, Amber hired an attorney and had him prepare a prenup, one that shielded your son and gave Amber nothing if the marriage failed. She even signed it, but Chet refused.”

“Is that true?” Lance studied his son carefully.

“Yes,” Chet shrugged. “Deputy Carter, I can tell you about the incident last night, but I don’t think it’s relevant. I got a call, a referral from one of our loyal clients. His name is Scott Olson if you need to check. Scott had a friend that needed our services, but I was knee deep in the wedding and I planned to take Amanda on a two and a half week honeymoon to Italy. I couldn’t give the new client the attention he would need, so I assigned it to Kyle.”

“Why on earth would you give it to Kyle?” Lance demanded. “The kid is lazy, and you know he’ll cut corners.”

“It was the only option,” Chet insisted. “Anyway, I expect him to pull his weight or he’s going to be reassigned. I need someone I can depend on. If Kyle can’t, or won’t, rise to the occasion, I’ll move him to troubleshooting and bring Alan in to do his job.”

“Chet,” Lance frowned. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Chet cut him off. “I gave the account to Kyle, and he was grumbling about it all through dinner. Then, Derek jumped in — he’s not one to let an opportunity to pass him by.”

“Opportunity for what?” Paige asked.

“Opportunity to make me look bad in public,” Chet shrugged. “He was making some remark about me neglecting my duties at the company to dote on Amber. Of course, my parents also jumped in. They’re not in the habit of passing up an opportunity, either.”

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“We only want what’s best for you,” Diana insisted.

“That’s when I got a call from the office,” Chet ignored his mother. “I wanted to spend some time with Amber, calm her down a little before I left but she insisted she was fine, and I should handle the problem. I hesitated, I know she was upset, and I didn’t want to leave her that way, but she convinced me it was important, and we were going to be gone for weeks. The problem needed to be rectified before I left the country.”

“What was the problem?” Paige quizzed.

“I think that’s enough,” the doorbell rang, and Lance left the room. He returned with Trent Malloy.

“Deputy,” Malloy stared at her. “I specifically requested no interviews until I was present.”

“I wasn’t interviewing Lance or Diana Rivers, they inserted themselves into my conversation on their own. And Chet didn’t seem to need your assistance — in fact, he didn’t ask for it, and he agreed to answer a few questions without your help. He’s an adult, it’s his right to refuse your overbearing presence if he wants to. I’ll let myself out.”

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Paige pulled onto the highway and headed for the office. She hadn’t gone far when she suddenly felt nauseous and pulled over. Her vehicle barely came to a stop before she jumped out and darted for the ditch that ran the length of the road. The instant she reached it, she dropped to her knees and nearly puked out a lung. Minutes later, she crawled back to her police unit and leaned against the front tire.

She could no longer pretend she was suffering from nerves or stress. There was something else going on. It made sense while she was searching for Julianna, while that psychopath was trying to kill her husband. But Julianna was no longer a threat, and her stomach problems were getting worse. She’d need to make an appointment with her doctor, but first she was going to rule out the obvious. She allowed herself a few more seconds before she stood and climbed back into her vehicle.

The instant she stepped into the convenience store; she spotted Harper. Embarrassment replaced common sense, and she decided to wait until after her shift to purchase a test. Instead, she moved to the drink dispenser and got herself a medium soda. She pivoted toward the checkout and nearly collided with Harper.

“Paige,” Harper greeted.

“Harper,” Paige nodded.

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“Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“I’m in a hurry,” Paige stepped up to the counter and handed the clerk some cash. “Keep the change.”

“I only need a minute,” Harper insisted.

“Alright,” Paige reluctantly agreed. They stepped outside and settled onto a wooden bench near the entrance. “How have you been?”

“Fine,” Harper answered immediately. “Well actually that’s a lie. I’m struggling.”

Paige took a closer look and could see Harper was depressed, maybe even a little broken. “You could always call him.”

“I can’t,” Harper looked away.

“Look,” Paige stared off into the distance. “He misses you, too. I’m not sure why a simple background check is a deal breaker, but you made your decision so tell me what you needed to talk about. I have a missing woman to find.”

“It’s a big deal because he betrayed me,” Harper answered. “He betrayed my trust and if we don’t have trust, we have nothing. Jericho had me investigated, I can’t just get over that.”

“First,” Paige took a deep breath. “There is a big difference between running a background and having you investigated. And second, you were dating a cop — you should have expected it.”

“I should have known the man I was falling in love with didn’t trust me?” Harper asked, appalled.

“Harper,” Paige shook her head in frustration. “It wasn’t about trust and don’t give me that look. Jericho’s a cop. He called a friend and asked him to do a quick run, just to make sure he wasn’t making a mistake. Honestly, the fact he went to the trouble to do the background in the first place is a compliment.”

“Do all cops think like you?” Harper just stared at Paige in shock. “Because I think that’s sad and a little disturbing. I bet you didn’t run a background check on Dax.”

“No,” Paige smiled. “Nathan did. And, if Nathan Porter didn’t find any red flags, there was nothing to find.”

“Nathan investigated Dax?” Harper asked for clarification.

“Sure,” Paige shrugged.

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“And he was okay with that?” Harper frowned.

“I’m sure he expected it,” Paige waited.

“But —”

“Harper,” Paige smiled. “Nathan investigated Dax. When Hawk and the rest of the motley crew of militants arrived, they investigated me. They also looked into Nathan, Sean, and Carmen. I’m pretty sure they also gathered their secret intel on Jericho and the entire crew — Gage, Havi, Dean and all the rest. Then, Nathan had Carman run a deep background on Hawk, Zeus, Ken, and Thor and Doc who you didn’t meet. There were background checks being conducted all over the place. It’s what we do.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Harper challenged.

“Not really,” Paige answered honestly. “Especially when I factor in what was happening at the time. Dax had been kidnapped and was being tortured by a sadistic, sociopathic terrorist. A former contact was brutally murdered. The bad guys were generating a plan to kill Nathan, destroy me, and wipe out Dax’s entire team. Sean was under attack at the Bureau and Jericho was dealing with a couple ATF agents harassing him. Then the guys returned from Arizona where Vato was seriously injured. That’s about the time when you arrived. It would have been stupid and naïve of Jericho not to run a background. And Jericho might be a lot of things but he’s not stupid or naïve.”

“I don’t understand half of what you just said, but Jericho told me some of that,” Harper admitted. “I’m trying to understand what that has to do with me.”

“A woman from his past suddenly appears out of nowhere,” Paige raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t seem suspicious to you?”

“I didn’t suddenly appear,” Harper objected. “I moved here for work.”

“And Jericho just wanted to make sure he could trust his heart,” Paige shrugged. “It’s difficult for him, especially after what happened with my mom. You came into town, and I think it spooked him, then add in the rest and he had to make sure.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Harper admitted. “I’ll let you go. I know I pulled you away from something important. Thanks for the insight. I don’t know if it changes anything, but I want to think about it and consider what I would do if I were in his shoes.”

“Then my job here is done,” Paige stood. “Now, I need to find my runaway bride.” She climbed into her vehicle, then sat and pondered for several seconds. Everything they had all gone through was common knowledge to their tight little group, but it had to be hard for an outsider like Harper to gain her footing — and learn the history. She laughed and backed out of the stall.

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She had to admit they were all a little neurotic — and sometimes too paranoid for their own good.

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“Where have you been?” Jericho demanded the instant she stepped into the office.

“I stopped to get a drink,” Paige held up the cup. “Why? What’s going on?”

“The Rivers family is waiting in the conference room,” Jericho advised. “But they’re getting impatient.”

“Why? They threw me out,” Paige advised. “They brought in their attorney and told me to leave.”

“Obviously they had a change of heart,” Jericho motioned to the conference room. “Let’s go see why.”

Paige stepped into the room and glanced around. “Apparently, you now want to talk to me.”

“We made a mistake,” Lance admitted.

“We’ve made so many mistakes,” Diana was near tears.

“We’re here to see if there’s anything we can do to help you find Amber,” Chet explained. “You had questions, but their attorney interrupted us.”

“Okay,” Paige wondered just how cooperative the family would actually be. “Amber’s parents said you’ve been having problems at work. Is that true?”

Chet glanced at his parents, then focused on Paige. “It’s true.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?” Lance demanded. “What kind of trouble?”

“Nothing serious,” Chet insisted. “I’ve had files go missing. And the glitch last night was deliberate. I asked Donny to look into it. Well, and Derek keyed my car.”

“How do you know it was Derek?” Paige asked.

“I have it on video,” Chet sighed. “I downloaded it just in case I needed it.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?” Jericho asked.

“Because he’s family,” Chet frowned.

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“Are you willing to press charges now?” Paige asked. “If it helps us get to the bottom of Amber’s disappearance?”

“Um —” Chet looked at his father.

“I say we keep that as an option,” Lance nodded to his son. “Especially considering everything else. You say someone tampered with the program, that had to be from the inside,” Lance concluded. “The only person who would do that is Derek. I suspect we can trace it back to Derek. And if Derek is involved, Donny will cover for him.”

“I trust Donny,” Chet disagreed. “He wouldn’t sabotage an account.”

“The account has been fixed,” Lance reminded him. “He only needs to cover up Derek’s involvement. Hiding what Derek did won’t impact our client. That’s all Donny will care about.”

“I can’t believe —” Chet began before he was interrupted.

“Let’s focus on Amber,” Paige suggested. “Do you think the trouble with Derek at the office has anything to do with Amber’s disappearance?”

“How could it?” Diana wondered.

“The timing seems too perfect to be a coincidence,” Paige pushed. “You got called away at just the right time to pave the way for Amber to disappear. If you didn’t have that trouble with the account, Amber wouldn’t have been alone.”

“I—,” Chet considered. “I want to disagree, but when you put it like that, I have to say maybe. It’s possible.”

“Let’s start with the basics. How did you instantly know Derek was responsible?” Jericho demanded.

“History,” Lance sighed. “This might take a little time.”

“Will it help us find Amber?” Paige wondered.

“Maybe,” Lance told them. “Chet has convinced us Amber would never willingly disappear the night before their wedding. That means someone took her or forced her to leave. If that’s the case, that someone could be Derek.”

“That’s an enormous leap from harassing Chet at work to preventing his wedding,” Paige pointed out. “What would Derek have to gain if Amber and Chet didn’t get married?”

“I don’t know,” Lance answered honestly. “Derek wants my job, but I can’t see how preventing my son’s wedding would get him what he wants.”

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“He’s been different,” Chet admitted. “Since you decided to retire. Derek has been different. It’s subtle, but he’s distant and I believe he’s behind the trouble I’ve been having. All the trouble. Even so, I can’t see how this gets him control of the company.”

“Often, only the suspect can explain their motives,” Jericho advised.

“And most of the time it only makes sense to them,” Paige added.

“If Derek did this,” Diana said softly. “You can ask him why after you arrest him.”

Lance and Chet stared at her in surprise.

“What?” Diana shrugged. “I know he’s family but if he did anything to harm that girl, he belongs in jail.”

“Tell us about Derek,” Paige encouraged.

“If you can bear with me, I think I need to give you a brief family history,” Lance began.

“Alright,” Jericho motioned for him to continue.

“Arthur and Daisy Rivers had two sons — my father, Darian, and his brother Kevin. Together they founded River Technologies. Unfortunately, Kevin was wild and out of control. He suffered from addiction. Gradually, that addiction controlled his entire life.”

“What kind?” Paige asked.

“Do people really have just one?” Lance wondered. “Gambling was the worst, but he drank a little too much and he liked women.”

“Dangerous combination,” Jericho observed. “What happened?”

“He was killed,” Lance told them. “Our family believed a dangerous gang of individuals murdered him. It was a group he tried to con so he could place a bet on the game. He used to brag that he could get money from anyone. He spent a lot of time in Vegas. But the casinos, the environment wasn’t the same back then. Most of the casinos were owned and controlled by the mob. Kevin knew that, but he thought he could outwit anyone. Anyway, after he died, my father officially held full control of the company.”

“So why does Derek think he has a claim?” Jericho asked.

“As I said, Kevin was an addict. He was addicted to gambling, but he also had a woman by the name of Venus. He was obsessed with her, but they couldn’t get along. They were both strong-willed, sometimes violent individuals. Basically, the union was toxic. The relationship was on and off for several years. She eventually got pregnant and gave birth to Leon, Derek’s father.”

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“Awe,” Paige nodded. “So, he thinks he has the same right to the company as Chet.”

“Yes,” Lance admitted. “He’s wrong, but he feels cheated. Kevin was a founder, but he got bored easily. By the time he died, my father was running the company alone. In fact, Kevin had actually signed ownership over to his brother a few months before his death. My father hoped Kevin would overcome his demons, so he held on to the document — hoping he’d never have to produce it.”

“Does Derek know that?” Paige wondered.

“He does,” Lance sighed. “But he doesn’t care. He accused my father of coercing Kevin while he was under the influence. Derek went so far as to claim dad was responsible for Kevin’s death. He believes, or wants to believe, dad contacted the mob and had Kevin killed. Therefore, he insists he has a right to the company. In fact, his position is that he has more rights to it than I do because I inherited it under illegal means. I’ve tried to reason with him, but he’s obsessed. Maybe he inherited that from Kevin. Maybe he developed it on his own. Regardless, he’s not entitled to anything the Rivers owns. He wasn’t even born with the Rivers name. He changed his name legally before he came to work for us.”

“Okay, so Derek wants the company,” Jericho surmised. “How does stopping Chet’s wedding get him what he wants? Actually, what I really want to know is what would he do with the girl? Would he hurt her?”

“I hope not,” Lance sobered. “But I just don’t know. Like I said, he’s obsessed.”

“No,” Chet insisted. “I don’t believe he’s going to hurt her. He doesn’t have it in him to be violent.”

“Just passive aggressive?” Paige asked.

“Exactly,” Chet agreed. “He keyed my car and stole a few files, but I don’t think he could hurt anyone.”

“Can you finish up here?” Paige asked Jericho.

“Why?” He frowned when she stood to leave.

“I need to go back to the reception center,” she paused in the doorway. “Now that I know what I’m looking for, I need to see if there are any additional clues.”

“Alright,” Jericho agreed. “Keep me posted.”

“I want to come with you,” Chet stood.



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“No, I need you to stay here and finish the discussion with the sheriff. Give him all the information you can. I’ll be in touch.” She didn’t wait for an answer, before she turned and rushed out the door.

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Paige pulled into the parking lot, shut down her vehicle and just sat there. She studied the area and tried to get into the mind of a kidnapper. Finally, she climbed out of her vehicle and approached the sidewalk. When she reached the place she found the broken bracelet, she conducted another search. Unfortunately, she found nothing that would help.

Sighing, she stood and ran her hand over her face in frustration. There had to be something, another clue, a way to find the missing girl. She moved backwards to study the area from another angle. *Think, Paige.* She was about to leave when she spotted a large puddle of oil. It wasn’t in a parking stall; it was parallel to the sidewalk.

Paige crouched to study the remnants more carefully. It looked fresh. She had just reached out to touch it when her phone rang. She stood, wiped her oil covered fingertip on her pants and answered the phone. “Deputy Carter.”

“Hey, Paige,” Gage responded. “We’ve been talking to the Rivers family, and it occurred to me that if Amber was abducted against her will, there had to be two people involved. There’s no way one person could grab her and disappear without someone noticing.”

“Not impossible,” Paige considered. “But not likely.”

“So, I asked the family if Derek was involved, who would he trust to help him,” Gage continued. “They have two names, Donny the tech guru and Derek’s administrative assistant, Becky Turner.”

“Can you ask Margie to run both of them and find out what they drive?” Paige focused on the oil spill. The location was perfect for a quick snatch and grab. If Amber exited the building, upset and not paying attention, it would have been easy to take her by surprise. But wouldn’t she fight and struggle, even if she didn’t see the attack coming?

“Uh, looks like Donny Miller drives an Escalade and Becky Turner — sweet, she drives a vintage Mustang.”

“It’s Becky,” Paige smiled. They just got their first genuine lead. “Can you pick her up? I’ll head to Gunnison and bring Derek in for a more thorough interrogation.” She was about to disconnect when something caught her eye. “Gage, you talked to Derek this morning, right?”

“Yeah,” Gage frowned. “But I didn’t get any red flags or anything.”

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“Did he have any visible wounds?” Paige pulled an evidence bag from her pouch, slid on a pair of gloves, and slipped a medium-sized rock into the bag. If she got lucky, the lab could match the single drop of blood on the rock to their suspect. She just needed a judge to sign off on a warrant for Derek’s blood. She pulled out a flashlight and carefully studied the area more thoroughly. It paid off, she found blood on a branch in the small bush that lined the sidewalk.

“He had a rash, or redness maybe, I don’t know, some kind of irritation on his neck, but I couldn’t swear that it was an injury,” Gage advised. “He was wearing a suit and with the tie, he was buttoned up tight. I asked him about it, he said the aftershave the hotel provided irritated his skin. Did you find something?”

“A tiny bit of blood,” Paige moved forward, pulled out her tweezers and retrieved what looked like a fingernail. “Do we have pictures of the dinner last night? What I’m looking for is a picture of Amber, one that shows her hands.”

“Why?” Gage began rifling through the file. “Got one. What am I looking for?”

“I found a broken nail,” Paige informed him. “I need to know what her fingernails looked like.”

“Alright,” Gage grabbed a magnifying glass and studied the photo more closely. “It looks like a deep pink, or maybe a red polish with some kind of decoration on them. Could be dots, or maybe silver stars.”

“Stars,” Paige dropped the nail into a bag. “If you can get Becky, I’ll bring Derek in. We’ll reconvene at the office and figure out our next step.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Gage agreed. “See you in an hour or so.”

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Paige pulled into the Walmart parking lot and just stared at the enormous building. She had to do this and buying the test in Gunnison would allow her to make the purchase without the entire town knowing about it. She glanced at the phone again, then picked it up and dialed home.

“Hey, baby,” Dax greeted. “Are you on your way home?”

“Sorry,” Paige focused out the side window. “I’m working a case and I thought I’d call to let you know I’m going to be late.”

“Sounds serious,” Dax observed. “Anything I can do to help?”

“No,” Paige finally relaxed. “It’s just a missing person case. The girl was last seen at an event last night.”

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“Is it a kid?” Dax asked. “Those are always tough.”

“She’s twenty so yes, a kid — but not the way you mean,” Paige corrected. “She was supposed to get married this morning, but she vanished.”

“Runaway bride,” Dax grinned. “Pour sap.”

“I don’t think it’s like that,” Paige disagreed. “I suspect foul play. Anyway, I’m in Gunnison to pick up a suspect and bring him in for questioning. Hopefully, I can get answers and locate the girl tonight.”

“Right,” Dax agreed. “Time isn’t on your side. I’ll see you when I see you. Before I let you go, how are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Paige said immediately.

“I think you should make an appointment with your doctor,” Dax suggested. “You’ve been sick for a while now. And don’t give me that nonsense about stress and anxiety. Julianna is no longer trying to kill me; the threat is gone, and you’re still struggling to keep anything down.”

“I’ve gotta go,” Paige evaded.

“Paige,” Dax warned.

“I’ll think about it,” she relented. “Now, I really do need to go. I have a suspect to harass.”

“I’ll see you tonight,” Dax gave in. “I love you.”

“Yeah, me too,” Paige disconnected and focused on the building again. It was time. She wandered around the store for several minutes before she found what she was looking for. Once she did, she grabbed one box, hesitated, then snatched up a second test. It couldn’t hurt to have a backup just for confirmation. She headed for the checkout, absently grabbed a bag of chips on the way and got into line. Once the clerk bagged her purchases, Paige started for the exit. When she spotted the bathroom sign, she pivoted and darted through the door. Might as well get this over with.

“Okay,” Paige tore open the box. “I pee on this stick, wait fifteen minutes, and see if my life is about to change forever.” She didn’t wait fifteen minutes. She followed the instructions, tossed the stick in the bag and headed for her car. She had a suspect to question.

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Derek’s house was easy to find. Paige pulled into the drive and watched a dog run the length of the fence line. A light flipped on, and Paige could see movement inside the house. As

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she ascended the stairs to the front porch, she heard a television in the distance. The instant she rang the doorbell, everything went silent. Suddenly, the door swung open, and Derek stood in the doorway.

“Derek Rivers, I’m Deputy Paige Carter,” she greeted. “I’m working on the Amber Metcalf case, and we have a few additional questions for you.”

“I already spoke to that other deputy,” Derek’s face hardened, and he stepped onto the porch.

“I understand that, but I need you to come with me,” Paige insisted. “We just have a few more questions.”

“Then ask your questions, I’m busy,” Derek folded his arms in front of him.

“Like I said,” Paige didn’t budge. “I need you to come down to the station with me.”

“And if I refuse?” Derek asked.

“That’s not an option,” Paige advised. “I need you to come with me now.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna happen,” Derek turned and reached for the door.

Paige grabbed his arm and snapped her handcuffs onto one wrist then the other.

“Wait,” Derek protested. “Are you arresting me for something?”

“Derek Rivers,” Paige turned him toward the steps. “You are under arrest for vandalizing Chet River’s Ferrari. I think that might be a felony — those things are expensive.”

“This blows and you know it,” Derek growled. “That stupid bimbo decided to leave the idiot at the alter and I get arrested for a stupid family prank. You know this is messed up. I’ll have your badge for false arrest.”

Paige guided him toward her vehicle. “You have the right to remain silent,” she continued with his Miranda warning before she maneuvered him into her back seat. As she slid behind the wheel, she casually reached over and turned on her recorder. Derek had that look... the one that said he wanted to talk, and she didn’t think he’d resist for very long. Or he planned to make something up to get her fired. Either way, she’d record it.

She had just pulled onto the highway when her phone rang. “Deputy Carter.”

“Hey, Paige,” Gage began. “I’m at Becky’s residence and she’s not here. From the looks of things, she’s been gone a few days. I checked the mail and there’s at least two, maybe three, days’ worth in the box.”

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“That’s not possible, Amber went missing yesterday.” Paige frowned and glanced in the rearview mirror.

“I put out an ATL and Jericho is trying to track down her family,” Gage advised. “At this point, I think that’s all we can do.”

Paige disconnected and stared out of the windshield.

“Look,” Derek fidgeted. “You don’t have to go this far. I know you’re only arresting me because I won’t answer your questions. So, I’ll explain what happened. I admit, I talked to Amber. She was upset after that seen last night at dinner. Chet’s parents made it clear they did not support their marriage. They didn’t want Amber to be part of their family. She was devastated and I understand how she felt. I simply suggested it would be better for everyone if she went away for a while. I guess she decided I was right, and she took a little break to get her head straight.”

“And by everyone, you meant it would be best for you?” Paige suggested.

“Sure,” Derek shrugged. “I might get something out of it, but I was thinking of Amber — and Chet, of course.”

“What do you get out of it?” Paige pushed.

Derek stared out the side window for several seconds. “I figured if that little imp left, just disappeared for a few days, a week, whatever, I figured Chet would be so focused on finding his woman he’d neglect his duties at the company.”

“And after all the sabotage you’d already done,” Paige glanced back. “You thought Lance would change his mind and give the CEO position to you? Over his son? You’re delusional.”

“Not Lance,” Derek disagreed. “Lance Rivers will always choose his son, even if that choice was detrimental to the company. No, I figure after a week or so, the board would figure it all out themselves. They’d see I’m the true leader in that company. They’d realize Chet is too emotional to be trusted with that much power. And they’d see that I have just as much right to that position as that sniveling spoiled brat and his arrogant father.”

“So, you kidnapped Amber and thought you’d just wait it out and get everything you wanted — even if you don’t deserve it.”

“I deserve it,” Derek disagreed. “My grandfather founded that company. My grandfather was responsible for the success of the business and his brother got him killed. Damian Rivers is a murderer, maybe not by his own hand, but he told that gang where to find my grandfather. He sold out his own blood for money and power. Now, I’m going to take it back and there’s nothing Lance or Chet Rivers can do about it.”

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“We’ll see about that,” Paige grinned. “It’s gonna be hard to run a company when you’re serving ten to fifteen behind bars.”

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Paige, Lovato, and Gage took turns interrogating Derek but after three hours, they still had gotten nothing from him. He insisted Becky was on vacation and Amber just needed some space to think. He refused to take responsibility for any of it.

“Well,” Paige stood. “I guess it’s my turn again.” She started for the conference room but stopped when Chet and his parents stepped through the front door.

“Can we speak to you for a minute?” Lance asked.

“Of course,” Paige motioned to her desk. “Have a seat over here.” Paige settled into her chair and waited. It didn’t take long.

“We’ve been thinking,” Diana spoke first. “If Derek is behind this, he has to have a place where he can hide Amber. Someplace secluded and out of the way.”

“He’s not talking,” Paige admitted.

“My grandparents had a cabin,” Lance told them. “It’s up Mayfield Canyon. It takes approximately forty minutes to get there. It’s secluded but comfortable. And the entire family has access.”

“We think it would be the perfect place to take Amber and hide out for a while,” Chet added. “If they had supplies, they could stay there for a month, maybe longer.”

“Show us where it is,” Jericho ordered. “Margie, pull up that mapping thing on the overhead.”

Lance stood and moved to the large screen. “Can you drag the map a little further south? Yeah, right there, now to the east and zoom in. Okay, a little more. Right there. This is the road that leads into the cabin. It might be overgrown — the drive into the cabin. We don’t go there a lot and it’s off the main path, so it doesn’t get a lot of traffic.”

“Are there weapons in the cabin?” Jericho asked.

“No,” Lance answered immediately. “We don’t leave weapons there. If anyone wants that kind of protection, they need to bring their own.”

“Do you think Becky would bring anything with her?” Gage asked.

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“I really don’t think so,” Chet jumped in. “I don’t think she’s violent. She’s fascinated with Derek and just trying to help.”

“I hope you’re right,” Paige glanced around the room. “What should we do with Derek?”

“Gage, take him to the cells,” Jericho ordered. “He can spend a little time behind bars while we apprehend his accomplice. Everyone else, pack up, let’s head out.”

Forty-five minutes later the group arrived at the cabin. They were staged at the edge of the driveway, out of sight of anyone that might be watching from inside the target.

“Since weapons are unlikely, I think we should just go knock on the door and see who answers,” Paige suggested.

“And if they do have weapons?” Haviland asked. “You’d be vulnerable and unprotected.”

“It’s a risk,” Paige shrugged. “A small one, but a risk.”

“We surround the cabin,” Jericho decided. “Gage you and Haviland take the back. Dean and Lovato, you hang back and cover the front from those trees over there. Paige, you and I will approach the cabin and knock on the front door.”

“You sure that’s the best idea?” Lo asked, concerned.

“No, but that’s the plan,” Jericho insisted. “Move out and notify Margie once you’re in position. As soon as we get the word, Paige and I will move in.”

“You ready?” Jericho glanced at Paige. “Everyone’s in position and ready to move in on our signal.”

“Let’s head up,” Paige motioned toward the door. “You want left, or right?”

“I’ll take the left,” Jericho decided. “You take the lead. If she opens the door and spots a woman, she might not spook.”

“Right,” Paige rolled her eyes but continued forward. She slowly ascended the stairs, moved forward and to the right, then hesitated to make sure Jericho was in position before she knocked.

“Can I help you?” a petite woman peered through a tiny crack in the door.

“I hope so,” Paige shifted, sliding her foot in the door to prevent the woman from closing it. “I’m looking for Becky Turner, I was told I could find her here.”

“Um —” the woman frowned. “I’m Becky. Do I know you?”

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“Could I come in and speak with you for a moment?” Paige used her foot to push the door open another crack. “I have a few questions I’m hoping you can help me answer.”

“I don’t know you,” Becky tried to close the door. When it didn’t budge, she gave it a hard shove. When it still didn’t close, she glared at Paige. “If you don’t leave, I’m going to call the police.”

“Well, that’s handy,” Paige shoved the door open. “We are the police.”

“You can’t come in unless you have a warrant,” Becky pushed at the door again.

“I don’t need one,” Paige smiled. “I have the cabin owner’s permission.” She gave the door one last shove, and it flung open, striking the back wall with a loud thud.

Becky squealed — she actually squealed. Paige stared at her in shock for several seconds before she reacted. Becky flung around and started running toward the back of the house, her arms flailing like a small child. Paige followed, caught up with her in the kitchen and tackled the squealing maniac. Becky continued to scream and started to kick and thrash her arms.

“Knock it off,” Paige grabbed her left arm and locked a cuff around it, then she was able to secure the right hand and within seconds had that arm cuffed as well. She stood, lifted Becky off the floor and shoved her into a chair. “Now, where is Amber?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Becky pouted and turned her nose up in defiance.

“Dean, I need you to remain outside and watch for anyone trying to approach the cabin. Everyone else, get inside. We need to conduct a thorough search,” Jericho demanded. “I’ll watch her, you head upstairs and see if you can find our missing girl.”

Paige studied Becky, trying to give her one last chance to do the right thing. Something in Becky’s eyes told Paige the woman would not cooperate. She pivoted and rushed up the stairs.

The group gathered on the main floor, Becky was now double cuffed to a chair and Jericho was scowling as he held a damp cloth to the side of his head.

“What happened to you?” Paige demanded.

Jericho nodded at Becky. “She thought she could take the old guy, she was wrong. It would take more than a tap to the side of the head with those cuffs to take me out.”

“Idiot,” Paige mumbled.

“What’s the next move?” Gage asked. “We’ve searched the entire cabin. Amber is not here.”

Becky smirked.



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“I think she is,” Paige studied Becky. “And she’s going to talk.”

Dean’s voice filled the room “Incoming, I think it might be the Rivers family.”

“I told them —” Jericho began.

“No, this is good,” Paige moved to the door. “They know this place, the layout, the crawl spaces, all the little gems we didn’t find. Let me go out and talk to them. I’ll see if they know anywhere large enough to hide Amber.”

“Be careful,” Jericho warned. “We don’t know Amber’s condition and — well, it might not be good.”

Paige nodded and pivoted when the door swung open, and Chet and his parents stepped inside.

“I know you said to wait,” Chet began.

“My son is frantic,” Lance explained. “He couldn’t just sit at the station and wait for news.

“Come in and have a seat,” Jericho invited.

Diana stepped forward. “Let me take a look at this for you.”

Jericho just stared at her in confusion.

“The wound,” Diana clarified. “Before I married Lance, I was a nurse. Did Becky do this?”

“She did,” Jericho removed the cloth. There was a large goose egg on the side of his head and a slight cut about an inch long that was still bleeding.

“It’s not large, but it’s deep,” Diana observed. “I think you need a couple of stitches. If you trust me, I can handle that for you.”

“Here?” Jericho wondered.

“Yes,” Diana nodded. “We keep medical supplies in the closet. Just give me two minutes and I’ll have this taken care of. That way, you can avoid the hassle of an ER visit.”

“Alright,” Jericho glanced at Paige then over to Gage. “You two are in charge. Find that girl.”

“You haven’t found her?” Chet frantically looked around the room.

“We’ve searched the cabin, but she’s not inside,” Paige advised. “Can you think of anywhere else they might hold her? Maybe an outbuilding? An old outhouse further into the woods? A nearby cabin, anything?”

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“No,” Lance focused on Becky. “Tell us what you did with Amber.”

Becky looked away.

“Becky, tell us,” Chet demanded. “She’s innocent in all of this.”

Becky closed her eyes but remained silent.

“Dad,” Chet focused on his father. “What about the crawl space?”

“It’s so small,” Lance frowned.

“What crawl space?” Paige demanded. “We didn’t find any crawl spaces.”

“I’ll show her,” Chet offered. “You stay inside and wait for Mom.”

“I’ll stay inside and try to talk some sense into this girl,” Lance glared at Becky. “She’s already ruined her life but maybe, if she cooperates, she can minimize the consequences.”

“Doubtful,” Haviland grinned. “She clocked the boss.”

“Right,” Lance sighed. “Go on, show Deputy Carter how to access the water system.”

“Water system?” Paige asked once they were outside.

“Yeah,” Chet answered then headed for the back of the house. “The cabin is secluded and for recreation, not residential living. When my grandparents built it, they were worried about trespassers. We get a lot of hunters up here as well as summer hikers, campers, and fishers. They wanted running water, but didn’t want to deal with vandalism or break-ins. So—” he reached out and removed a small section of the back wall. “This was their answer.” He set the section aside and crouched to peer into a small hole. “I’ll go down and see if Amber’s inside.”

“No,” Paige held out an arm to stop him. “I need to go in first. I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

“It’s not that long,” Chet informed her.

“Chet?” came a weak voice, followed by a dry, hacking cough.

“Amber?” Chet called out. “I have to get her out of there.”

“No,” Paige stepped forward. “I’m going to get her out of there. And it’s going to take me a few minutes because I’m going to document the evidence. You want Derek to pay for what he did, right?”

Chet closed his eyes. “I do, but you need to get in there. You have to help Amber.”

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“Can I trust you to stay right here?” Paige ordered more than asked. “Because if I can’t, I’ll have to drag you back to the house so one of those big men inside can restrain you.”

“No,” Chet answered immediately. “I’ll wait right here. I need to be here when she gets out of there.”

“Alright,” Paige hit a button on her walkie. “I’ve located the victim. She’s in a small crawlspace on the rear east side of the building. I’m going in but could use someone to head out and back me up.”

“I’m on it,” Havilland answered.

Paige had barely slid into the hole when Havilland arrived. “Keep him out here,” she clicked on her flashlight and let out a sigh of relief. “It’s not bad. Amber has already called out to Chet, so we know she’s in there. I need to snap a few pictures, then we’ll be back. Easy enough.”

“Yeah,” Havilland laughed. “Because I know how much you love spiders.”

“Shut up,” Paige tried to crouch and walk but the opening was too small. Finally, she got down on all fours and crawled through the space. It actually wasn’t that bad. It also didn’t take long to find Amber. She was sitting against the rough dirt wall, secured to a water tank with plastic ties. Paige took several shots before she pulled out her pocketknife and cut the restraints. “Let’s get you out of here. There’s a groom outside eager to see you.”

Amber started to cry.

“Hey,” Paige put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I think you’re a little dehydrated. It’s probably not a good idea to waste all that liquid right now.”

Amber snorted then coughed. “My throat is so dry.”

“Let’s head out,” Paige suggested. “We’ll get you some water and then you can tell us exactly what happened.”

The instant they crawled from the opening, Chet pulled Amber into his arms and wouldn’t let go. Amber wrapped herself around Chet and cried harder.

“Let’s get them inside,” Paige whispered to Havilland. “I want Diana to do a quick exam and make sure the girl is okay. It may have been a blessing to have a nurse show up at our crime scene.”

“Let’s see how it went with the boss before we jump ahead,” Havilland moved forward and maneuvered the couple toward the house.

After a quick exam and orders to drink plenty of water, Amber was ready to tell her story. Jericho contacted Amber’s parents with the good news, let them speak to Amber to verify she

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was okay, but insisted they remain at the station. They reluctantly agreed. The group gathered around the gigantic fireplace. Becky was still handcuffed to the chair but now she was the one crying. Apparently, she finally figured out what she'd done, and that she was facing a future behind bars rather than an executive desk.

"I was upset when I left the reception center," Amber began. "Everything was so perfect, and I hoped we could get through the ceremony without another fight. Then Karl started in, and Derek pounced."

"And then we joined the argument," Diana reached out and placed a supportive hand over Ambers. "I — we, Lance and I that is — we are so sorry for not seeing how much you loved our son until it was almost too late."

"I understand," Amber gripped Diana's hand. "I always understood and just hoped that eventually you would see that you were wrong. I don't care about Chet's money. I love Chet."

"We do see; and, I promise you, things will change from now on," Lance told her. "Tell us the rest."

"So, I was upset when I left," Amber continued. "I wasn't really paying attention to my surroundings because I was worried about the wedding — if everyone would behave, if I'd get to have one good day without all the quarrelling, there were so many things running through my mind. I didn't see Derek until I nearly collided with him. I looked up to apologize when he grabbed my arm and started to drag me toward a Mustang I didn't recognize. I fought, and that's when I lost my bracelet." She turned to Chet and tears filled her eyes. "I lost it."

"Deputy Carter found it," Chet assured her. "It's broken, but we'll get it repaired."

"Thank you," Amber turned to Paige. "You have no idea how much that means to me."

"We'll need it for evidence, but I promise you will eventually get it back," Paige assured her.

"I fought with Derek, scratched and kicked and punched, but he was too strong for me," Amber admitted.

"Do you remember where you scratched him?" Jericho asked. "Did it leave a mark?"

"Yes," Amber smiled. "I got him good on his right arm, right here," she turned her arm and ran a finger over the inside of her right arm just above the wrist. "I also got him on his neck, right by the collar bone. I was aiming for higher, so it would show no matter what kind of shirt he wore, but he turned, and I missed. I know he has marks because he was bleeding when he shoved me into the car." She pulled down her sleeve and showed them the smeared blood.

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“That’s great,” Paige smiled. “I’m going to need that shirt. Do you have anything here she could change into so I can preserve that evidence?”

“I’m sure there’s something,” Diana stood. “Let me go look. Can Amber come with me? We can change upstairs immediately.”

“Sure, but I’ll need to come as well,” Paige stood.

The women returned with Amber wearing a clean blue golf shirt that was several sizes too big, Paige was carrying an evidence bag that contained the evidence they would need to put Derek away for a long time.

“Should I continue?” Amber settled back in her chair. Chet wrapped a supportive arm around her and waited.

“Go ahead,” Jericho prompted.

“So, Derek shoved me into this Mustang and that’s when I saw Becky. She was just sitting there, waiting behind the wheel with the car idling. I couldn’t believe she just sat there and didn’t help. Then it hit me, I realized what they planned to do. I started to scream but Derek shoved a rag over my face, and I blacked out. When I woke up, I was tied to that tank with no idea where I was and no means of escape. And my throat felt raw, like it was burning or something.”

“Chloroform?” Chet asked.

“We’ll have her tested, but that would be my guess,” Paige nodded.

“Where would Derek get chloroform?” Lance wondered.

“Her father is a veterinarian,” Diana explained. “I’m sure he has some on hand to euthanize animals.”

“How did you know that?” Lance asked his wife.

“I pay attention,” Diana grinned.

“I think that’s all we need for now,” Jericho stood. “Gage, you transport Becky and get her booked. Chet, I think your bride could use a little TLC and her parents are eagerly awaiting her arrival. Everyone else, go home. It’s been a long day.”

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Paige pulled into the driveway, shut down the engine and just stared at the bag on the passenger’s seat. She never got a chance to read the results of that test. She was still

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contemplating what to do when she spotted movement on the front porch. Dax was sitting there with Hawk, but the two men had stood and were now headed toward her. Instinct told her to grab the bag and hide it. She was too late. Before she could react, Hawk was headed across the lawn towards his house and Dax was climbing into the passenger's seat. He grabbed the bag, then slid inside.

"Long day," he observed. "Did you find your missing girl?"

"Yeah," Paige tried not to focus on the bag, but she couldn't help it. The unopened box was dangling halfway out of the bag and was about to fall to the floor. "It's a long story, but she was being held in a cabin up the canyon near Mayfield. She's back with her family and the weddings still on, so all's well that ends well, I suppose."

"And who abducted her?" Dax shifted, then froze when he spotted the box that fell from the bag he was holding. He turned to Paige in shock. "You're pregnant? That's what's wrong?"

"I don't know," Paige couldn't take her eyes off the bag he was holding. "I—"

"Right, the box hasn't been opened," Dax reached down and retrieved it. "We should go inside and —"

"I already took a test, I just don't know what it says," she admitted.

"I don't understand," he held up the unopened box.

"That's the second test," she swallowed hard. "The backup test, just in case I needed it."

"And the other test?" Dax studied her.

"In that bag," Paige admitted. "I took the test, but I was on my way to confront a suspect, so I didn't want to wait the requisite fifteen minutes to learn the results. I just tossed it in that bag and did my job."

Dax stared at her. "You thought you were pregnant... that we might have a baby and decided to take the test alone, without telling me. Then, after you took the test, you just tossed it in a bag and headed off to confront a suspect? Who does that, Paige?"

"I guess I do," Paige said defensively. "I — was scared, alright. If that stupid stick has two pink lines, my life is going to change forever."

"Our lives," Dax corrected. "Where is the test?"

"In that bag," Paige closed her eyes and waited. "You do it. You read it and tell me what it says."

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“We’re going to do this together,” Dax corrected. He rummaged around in the bag until he felt what had to be the testing stick. “You ready?”

“Not even close,” Paige locked eyes with his. “I’m sorry. I just — panicked.”

“How long have you known?” Dax reached out and took her hand. “How long have you been hiding behind fake stress and bad take out?”

“A few hours,” Paige answered honestly. “What time is it? I’ll do the math.”

“You figured it out today?” Dax needed to confirm he’d read that right.

“Yeah,” Paige sighed. “I was sitting on the ground next to my patrol car after puking my guts out in a ditch and it hit me. I drove over to the Chevron to buy a test but ran into Harper — just my luck. So, I decided it could wait. But when I hit Gunnison and saw the Walmart, I pulled in without thinking. Then, I called you to let you know I’d be late, and it gave me the courage I needed to walk through those doors and buy the stupid test.”

“You were sitting in the parking lot of Walmart when you called?” Dax glared at her. “And you didn’t tell me what was going on?”

“I —” she looked away. “I panicked, alright?”

“No, Paige,” Dax scolded. “It’s not alright. We’re supposed to be partners. Especially in something like this. You did this on your own. You said yourself you panicked, then you went to confront a suspect, alone, distracted, and in no condition to handle yourself if something went wrong.”

“You’re right, I should have told you,” Paige considered. “But you’re wrong about the rest. I took the test, and I was a bit panicked about the entire situation. Then I tossed that stick in the bag and refocused. I wasn’t distracted — and that worries me. I should have been thinking about a possible baby, our lives, how things would change. Instead, I tossed the test in the bag and didn’t think of it again until I pulled into our driveway. What does that say about me? If I am pregnant, I’m going to be a horrible mother.”

“I disagree, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. It’s time to look at the test results,” Dax pulled the stick from the bag and turned it over before holding it under the interior light.

Paige’s heart dropped and she couldn’t breathe. “Pregnant,” she whispered.

Dax grinned. “I’m going to be a dad.” He shoved open the door and climbed out, then rounded the front of the vehicle, and flung Paige’s door wide open.

Before Paige knew what he was doing, Dax had unbuckled her belt, lifted her out of the vehicle and had her pinned against the back door. He kissed her. A long, seductive, happy kiss.

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After a while... a long while, he pulled back. Paige just stared at him, still shocked. How could he be so happy when she was so — what? Overwhelmed.

“I guess we should have expected this, it was bound to happen eventually,” Dax smirked. “Now, for the other thing. You are going to be the most amazing mother that ever existed. You’re the smartest and most intuitive woman I know, so we’ll always know what our kid needs and when he or she is up to no good. You are the most compassionate woman on the planet, you’re a natural protector and you are a good person. I can see how wonderful you are, and our child is going to be lucky to have you as a mother.” He took her hand and led her to the house. “Now, enough moping. Tonight, I want to celebrate. I’m going to be a dad!”

Paige laughed and followed him up the stairs. Dax was going to be a great dad and, if she worked hard at it, she might figure this mom thing out — eventually. She was starting to get the hang of this whole wife thing. Yes, she stumbled now and then but not nearly as much as she used to. Being a mom had to be easier, right?