

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

The Portrait *Season 7, Episode 3*

by:

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Edited by LaPriel Dye

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Paige pulled onto the highway and headed for the large church parking lot. She knew there would be shade in the back of the lot. If she was lucky enough to catch a slight breeze with the windows rolled down, it should be cool enough to hammer out her report. She felt bad for Mr. and Mrs. Ennis. They didn't have a lot, and it didn't make sense for someone to burglarize their home. She had a feeling the suspects were looking for something that wasn't there. Or it was simply a crime of opportunity.

She backed under a large box elder, rolled down both windows, and adjusted her computer. Twenty minutes later, she saved her work and was about to pull away when Margie's voice came over the radio.

"We have a burglary in progress," Margie announced. The instant she relayed the address, Paige took off. The home was just around the corner.

Within minutes, Paige was parked in front of the residence. The garage door was wide open, but she couldn't see anyone inside. "Margie, I've arrived. The large overhead door on the garage is open. I'm going inside to look around." She absently wondered if this could be the same person who burglarized the Ennis residence. If so, she might recover the locket that belonged to Liz's great grandmother and the pocketknife that was gifted to Jerry's great, great... too many greats to remember... grandfather by Kit Carson himself. The burglar couldn't have known the history — and wouldn't benefit from it, either. He'd need the provenance to capitalize on his good fortune, which was still locked up in the Ennis family safe.

Paige pushed away thoughts of her previous detail and focused on the current burglary. She had to be alert if she wanted to trap the rat inside. She slid from her vehicle and slowly entered the garage. Once she was confident the area was clear, she started for the door that led inside the home. She was reaching for the handle when she heard a noise in the backyard. "Gotcha," she grinned, pivoted, and bolted out the large opening. After a quick left, she rushed around the side of the house.

There was a wooden fence with a small gate standing wide open. Paige slid through and cautiously walked to the corner of the building. She took a few seconds to look around the backyard, then maneuvered around the corner, sticking close to the back side of the house. When she reached the large deck, she pulled out her flashlight and carefully swept the dark space underneath. It would have made a great hiding place, but she couldn't see anyone crouched in the corner or hidden under an old piece of plywood. She'd come back later and do a more thorough search. Right now, she needed to investigate inside the house.

Paige silently crept along the side of the deck until she reached the stairs. She took another second to glance around, then cautiously ascended one stair at a time. Once she reached the top she took a step toward the back sliding door — which was currently open, then froze. She heard a noise to her left, but before she could react, a freight train struck her. Okay, it was a body, but the guy was one solid mass of muscle. Paige was still dazed when the man shoved her — hard.

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She tried to take a step back to regain her footing, but hit the edge of the stairs, lost her balance, and tumbled backward.

Her shoulder hit the railing, her back struck the sharp edge of one step, and her ankle bent at an unnatural angle as she tumbled downward. Finally, her back hit the hard dirt surface of the landing just as the back of her head struck a large post. Paige had a second to realize she was in trouble before she blacked out.

Gage parked in front of the driveway and rushed inside. He couldn't see Paige or any sign of their suspect. He entered the home through the garage, cleared the residence, but still didn't find Paige. The instant he stepped onto the large deck, he panicked. Paige was lying at the bottom of the stairs, motionless, and at a strange angle. He ran forward, took the stairs two at a time, and dropped to the ground next to his partner. His hands were shaking when he reached out and tried to find a pulse.

Gage closed his eyes and let out the breath he'd been holding when he felt the throbbing beat under his finger. He wanted to shake her, to demand she wake up, but he knew he couldn't. If he had to guess, he'd say Paige fell down the stairs, and he didn't want to risk additional injuries. Instead, he pulled out his walkie and called it in. Once he was confident medical was on the way, he straightened and fastened the walkie to his belt. Then, he glanced around and started to clear beneath the deck when his phone rang.

"Tell me what you know," Jericho demanded. "I'm on my way, but I might not get there before medical arrives."

"Not a lot," Gage admitted. "The burglar is long gone. The house was wide open when I arrived, and I found Paige lying at the bottom of the outside stairs that lead up to the deck. I verified she has a pulse, but she's out cold."

"Call me back when they transport her," Jericho decided. "If I haven't arrived yet, I'll change course and head to the hospital."

"Yes, sir," Gage frowned. "Uh, what about Dax?"

"I'll notify him," Jericho decided. "You focus on Paige."

"And catching the guy that did this," Gage added.

"We'll all focus on catching the guy that did this," Jericho sighed. "Go take care of Paige. I have a few phone calls to make."

Jericho disconnected and glanced at his phone. He needed to call Dax and he should probably notify Nathan Porter as well. He just needed a minute to settle. When he heard Paige was unconscious, it was like a punch to the gut. The news knocked the wind out of him for several seconds. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't move — all he could do was stand there and

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force air through his nose. Memories of Chaya ran through his mind. Would he lose the daughter as quickly as he lost her mother? The kid was sassy and, more often than not, a pain in the neck, but he loved her like a daughter. He was robbed of the chance to marry Chaya, to develop that close father-daughter relationship he should have had with Paige years ago. But since she moved back to town, they'd rectified that. They were close, they were family, and he couldn't lose her to some sticky-fingered criminal burglarizing his community.

He glanced at the phone again, sighed heavily, and dialed Dax.

"Hamilton," Dax punched a button and answered using the speaker option without looking at the display. His attention was on the new lesson plan Hawk and Vato had completed. The new advanced course was only a few months away and it had to be perfect.

"Dax," Jericho hesitated.

Dax frowned and picked up the receiver. "What happened?"

"Paige has been injured," Jericho swallowed. "Gage found her lying at the bottom of a section of stairs, unconscious. She's being transported to the hospital in Gunnison."

Dax jumped to his feet, worried about Paige and their baby. "I'm on my way," he said before disconnecting.

"On your way where?" Hawk stepped into the room.

"They're taking Paige to the hospital." Dax stepped to the side and tried to get around Hawk, but his friend wouldn't move.

"How bad?" Hawk sobered.

"I don't know," Dax growled. "Get out of my way."

"No," Hawk didn't budge. "I'm driving."

"I need you to call Grant DeVane and cancel the meeting," Dax objected.

Hawk reached for Dax's phone. He punched a button and waited. "Woolly, I need you to cancel today's meeting with DeVane. In fact, clear the entire afternoon. Yes, I'm sure."

Within seconds Woolly, Zeus and Vato were standing in the doorway.

"What's going on?" Zeus demanded.

"I'm driving Dax to Gunnison, to the hospital. Paige has been injured." Hawk moved past the group and stepped into the hallway.

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“I’m coming, too,” Zeus announced. “I’ll meet you there. First, I need to stop by and pick up Carmen.”

“Have her notify Nathan,” Hawk demanded.

“No,” Dax shook his head. “I’ll handle that.”

Once they were on the highway, Dax pulled out his phone and just stared at it for several seconds. Finally, he scrolled through his contacts, looking for Nathan. Before he could initiate the call, his phone rang.

“Dax,” Nathan greeted. “I only have a minute. Sophie and I just landed in Salt Lake. We think we found a home. I know it’s short notice, but do you have a place we could stay tonight?”

“Nathan, I was just about to call. I don’t want you to panic, but Paige has been injured. I’m headed to the hospital right now. I’ll call you back once I know more,” he offered.

“Do you know how serious the injuries are?” Nathan sobered.

“They knocked her out, but it sounds like that’s the worst of it,” Dax warned. “Like I said, I don’t know much. I’m meeting Jericho and Gage at the hospital. If you can give me an hour, I’ll know more. There’s no need for alarm, but I thought you should know. I might not be home tonight, but you’re welcome to crash in the guest room, but you’d probably be more comfortable at Carmen’s old place. I mean the cottage, where you stayed the last time you visited.”

“Let’s play that by ear,” Nathan countered. “I’ll be waiting for your call. We’ll collect our luggage and head that way. Let me know if we should detour to Gunnison or head to the house.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Dax promised.

Paige opened her eyes and was immediately confused. *Where was she?* She tried to sit up, but realized she was connected to several wires. She yanked on her arm and the wires went taught.

“Paige,” Dax warned.

“Where — what happened?” Paige turned to face Dax. The instant they locked eyes, she could tell he was upset. He was trying to hide it, to keep his emotions behind a neutral mask, but she knew him well enough to know he was stressed.

“You fell down a flight of stairs,” Dax advised.

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“No,” Paige tried to focus, to remember exactly what happened. “I walked up the flight of stairs and was looking for my suspect when he rammed into me from the left. I lost my balance and took a step backwards. That’s when he shoved me, and I toppled down the stairs. I don’t remember anything after that.”

“You hit your head on the large post at the bottom of the stairs,” Dax advised.

Paige reached up and ran her finger over the lump on the side of her head. Then her hand flew to her stomach. “What about the baby? Is our baby okay?”

Dax reached out and placed his hand over hers. They sat there for several seconds. “The doctor said everything is fine, but he wants to keep you overnight as a precaution.”

“Is that necessary?” Paige frowned. “I’d rather go home.” She shifted and began rubbing her baby bump. “Can’t you monitor things and make sure we’re okay?”

“You have a concussion,” Dax advised. He began to run his hand gently over her stomach. “They said you should be fine, but he’s being extra cautious because you’re pregnant.”

Paige heard a noise and turned toward the door. Jericho was standing there, frowning.

“How long?” he demanded.

“I —” she locked eyes with Dax. When he gave her a subtle nod, she turned back to Jericho. “Come in and shut the door.”

“How long, Paige?” Jericho demanded.

“I’m not sure,” Paige admitted. “I —”

“I thought your doctor could tell you.” Jericho’s frown deepened. “I heard they were extremely accurate.”

The door opened and a man in a white coat walked in. “She hasn’t seen a doctor.” The man advised. “At least not one I could find. I appear to be the first and I’m dealing with the head, not the pregnancy. I’m here to speak to you about that, Mrs. Hamilton. Can you tell me why there’s no record of an obstetrician in your file?”

“I haven’t found one,” Paige admitted. “I called two, but one said they aren’t taking new patients and the other never called me back.”

“So, you just gave up?” the doctor frowned. “You’re approximately 20 weeks along. At this point, you’re nearly halfway through your pregnancy. You should have been taking prenatal vitamins for weeks. It’s time for your mid-pregnancy ultrasound to make sure everything is going as it should be. If you haven’t already, you will start to feel the baby move and kick. We

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need to know if the fetus is growing the way it should be and if there are any issues with the infant's heart and lungs. How do you plan to deal with these things without a regular doctor?"

"I'm working on it," Paige insisted. "I was thinking I'd call Doctor Seaton and see if he could help."

"I think that's an excellent idea," the doctor nodded. "I'll contact him immediately and see if he's available."

"Oh." Paige watched the doctor leave the room.

"I'm going to give the two of you a few minutes alone," Jericho decided. He could see Dax was struggling and he couldn't blame him. "Paige, you haven't been taking care of yourself and that needs to change immediately. You're having a baby. That child needs to come first. Once the doctor releases you, we're going to have a long talk about your duties and your schedule."

"What does that mean?" Paige frowned. "I have to do my job."

"Last I checked, I'm still your boss. That means I decide what your job entails," Jericho said forcefully. "Things are going to change. You don't have to like it, but you do have to live with it."

"Jericho," Paige sat up. "I don't want special treatment."

"Too bad," Jericho shrugged. "Had I known about the baby, you wouldn't be lying in that bed right now. You would have been chained to a desk weeks ago."

"That's ridiculous," Paige insisted.

Jericho didn't have a chance to respond because Nathan and Sophie pushed open the door and stepped inside. Sophie rushed to the bed. Nathan strolled across the room and stopped next to his wife, wrapping an arm around her waist.

"I've been telling you for years you have a thick head," Nathan forced a smile. "Now I have proof."

"I'll let you visit with the Porters, but this conversation isn't over," Jericho turned toward the door.

Nathan glanced at Dax; he was upset. Paige was frowning, and Jericho looked annoyed. "I think we missed something."

Paige watched Jericho leave, then turned to Dax. She wanted to ask him how they should handle this but didn't know how to bring it up.

"Go ahead," Dax nodded, then turned to stare out the window.

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“I have news.” Paige hesitated. “We have news. Um... Dax and I are having a baby.”

“I’m going to be a grandma,” Sophie exclaimed.

“I’ll give the three of you some space while I head down and grab some coffee,” Dax decided. “Do you want anything?”

“We’re good,” Nathan frowned. He watched Dax leave before he turned back to Paige. “He’s upset.”

“Yes,” Paige agreed. “He hasn’t said anything, but I can tell he’s — I don’t know. Not angry, but frustrated — I guess.”

“Can you blame him?” Nathan moved to the window. “I mean, you’re pregnant with his child and you’re lying here in this bed after being attacked by a violent criminal. He’s worried about you, but he’s trying to be supportive.”

Paige thought about the conversation she had with Jericho and realized it didn’t help the situation. In fact, it probably made everything worse. “I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do about that.”

“You’re supposed to be cautious,” Nathan scolded. “You’re not supposed to be shoved down a flight of stairs and you’re not supposed to let some maniac knock you out cold.”

“Yeah,” Paige frowned. She was annoyed that all of that had happened, but she didn’t know what she could have done differently. Still, deep in her gut; she knew, somehow, she should have prevented it.

“I’m a terrible wife, and an even worse mother,” Paige swallowed hard and stared out the window.

“Nonsense,” Sophie took her hand. “You’re just focused, and you hate change.”

“But you need to get used to it, kid.” Nathan settled onto the couch. “Everything is about to change. You need to be prepared and you need to stop fighting it.”

“Nathan,” Sophie scolded.

“What?” Nathan shrugged. “Paige knows I’m not in the habit of blowing smoke.”

Paige laughed. “Everyone knows that, General Porter.”

“Retired,” he corrected, but grinned.

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Paige descended the stairs and headed for the kitchen. She heard voices and wondered who Dax was talking to this early. When she entered the kitchen, she spotted Nathan and Sophie.

“Paige,” Sophie moved to stand.

“Don’t get up,” Paige brushed her off. She moved to the counter and poured herself a large mug of coffee. Once she had it doctored, she settled in at the table. “What brings you two out so early? Is there a problem with the cottage?”

“It’s nine o’clock,” Nathan frowned. “And the cottage is fine. We’re going to need it for at least a month, but Dax insists it’s not a problem.

“It’s not,” Dax agreed.

“Are you feeling okay?” Sophie frowned.

“I’m fine,” Paige shrugged, but focused on Dax. “Why aren’t you at work?”

“I was just leaving,” Dax stood. “Congratulations.” He pushed back his chair, stood, and started for the door. He only took two steps before he paused, pivoted, pressed a quick kiss to the top of Paige’s head, then left the room.

Paige watched Dax leave, then turned to Nathan and Sophie. “Congratulations?”

“We put an offer on that house we told you about and the owners accepted,” Sophie advised. “We close in ten days. That’s why we’ll need the cottage for so long.”

“That was fast,” Paige sat back. “You’re really going to do this? The two of you are going to move to a small town; away from the rat race; away from the hustle and bustle of the Pentagon, Washington, important committees, and top-secret missions? You’re going to trade it all in for a life of relaxing on the back porch and summer barbeques with our motley crew of militants?”

“I am,” Sophie reached out and took Nathan’s hand. “He’s not.”

Paige frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means I’m going to work. I’m just moving the committees and the top-secret missions out here,” Nathan admitted.

“How?” Paige looked from Nathan to Sophie.

“For now, I need to spend time in Washington, but once I complete my current project, I’m going to relocate and spend most of my time here,” Nathan admitted. “The new house has a space in the basement that is perfect for a secure workspace. It’s big enough for large screens that will accommodate video conferences, fancy computers I’ll have Carmen set up, and I can

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move my desk and files out here as well. I've also arranged for an office at the NSA building up north. It's a bit of a drive, but no longer than I had back home."

"I'm going to spend most of my time out here," Sophie admitted. "I planned to do that anyway, but now that we know you're pregnant, I want to be close just in case you need me."

"We're going to be grandparents and we want to spoil that kid rotten. You have our support," Nathan added.

"I'm glad I have someone's," Paige mumbled.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Nathan narrowed his eyes at Paige.

"I don't know," Paige sighed. "Nothing, I guess."

"Paige, what's wrong?" Sophie asked, concerned.

"Dax is acting — I don't know," Paige sighed. "He's acting strange. Not mad, but... annoyed. He's present, but distant."

"He's worried," Nathan sipped his coffee.

"There's no reason for him to worry," Paige objected. "Especially now. Jericho benched me."

"And that right there," Nathan pointed. "That's a big part of the problem. Sure, you're benched, but you're pissed about it. If you had your way, you'd be dodging bullets in the middle of the intersection and chasing suspects over a cliff."

"I don't chase suspects over cliffs," Paige objected.

Nathan stared, then raised one eyebrow and waited. "You should probably try that again. And remember, I know all there is to know about your cases, Paige."

"Fine, but that was years ago," Paige argued. "Now that I think about it, you're acting just like Dax. Are you annoyed?"

"I'm worried," Nathan said flatly. "Dax is worried. And he's acting distant and out of character because he doesn't know how to deal with the situation. He's anxious and afraid. He's terrified you're going to get hurt; that the next time someone knocks you out, they'll finish the job instead of running away. He's also concerned about the safety of his unborn child. And, even with all of that, he wants to be supportive — and he doesn't know how to deal with his conflicting feelings."

"You scared all of us," Sophie whispered. "You've always been tenacious and fearless, but you have a child to think about now. You're angry that Jericho took matters into his own hands

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and forced the issue. He took away your control, but he did it for you. He did it for us, and Dax, and himself. He did it for that child that is growing inside of you. Instead of being angry and obstinate about it, you should be grateful he cares enough to look out for you.”

“He cares enough to force me into five months of tedious filing and staring out the window, waiting for the phone to ring,” Paige grumbled.

Nathan laughed. “Jericho knows you, Paige. I’m sure your department has phone reports and unsolved cases you can focus on. He will not waste your talent on filing.”

“Dax knows I’m benched,” Paige returned to the original conversation. “Why is he still worried? And how do I get things back to normal?”

“Be happy.” Sophie took Paige’s hand.

“And if you can’t be happy, pretend.” Nathan finished his coffee and set down his cup. “Stop moping around and stop complaining.”

“Dax and I don’t pretend.” Paige focused out the window. “We—” Paige stopped when Sophie’s phone rang. She didn’t pretend with Dax, and she would not start now. She was pretty sure that would violate some kind of marriage rule. If Nathan was right, and he usually was, she needed to sit down and talk to Dax. They needed to be open and honest and, she had to admit, she needed to act more like a pregnant mother and less like an invincible cop. It was only a few months, she could survive. For the sake of their child, she would stop complaining and accept her limitations. Because Nathan just hit a nerve. If the man that knocked her out the other day wanted her dead, she would be.

“Let me ask her,” Sophie placed her hand over the phone. “Paige, Carmen needs to drive out and pay the last installment on that painting she purchased. I told her I’d love to go; I need to find a large piece to break up the wall in that front living room. Would you like to go with us? It will get you out of the house.”

“Sure,” Paige glanced at her baggy pajama pants and t-shirt. “I need to shower first; do I have time?”

Sophie laughed. “Carmen said she’ll be here in an hour, but unless things have changed drastically, you won’t need over fifteen minutes.”

“She knows me well,” Paige stood. “Tell her to make it thirty. I’ll be ready.”

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“How did you even find this place?” Paige stared out the side window. “I patrol this town and I didn’t even know it was here.”

“It’s a small gallery but they have some great stuff,” Carmen opened the door. “The piece I got was kind of expensive. Zeus nearly had a coronary when I told him how much I spent. But he finally agreed because I love it and can’t wait to hang it over our fireplace.”

“Carmen,” Iris Garrett, the owner of the gallery approached the group. “I’m so glad to see you again. And you brought friends.”

“Yes,” Carmen turned to Sophie. “I’d like you to meet Sophie Porter and my best friend, Paige Hamilton.”

“It’s a pleasure.” Iris shook each of their hands. “I assume you’re here for your masterpiece.”

“I’d love to see Carmen’s landscape first,” Sophie glanced around. “Then maybe you could show me around a bit. I just purchased a home and could use a few pieces of my own.”

“That’s great,” Iris glanced over her shoulder. “Katie, I need you to cancel my ten o’clock appointment. Tell him I’ll call him next week.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Katie assured her.

“Follow me.” Iris led them down a long hallway and through a double door.

“You have a lot of beautiful artworks back here,” Sophie glanced around. “Seems like a shame to hide them in a backroom, away from the public’s eye.”

“Eventually, some of these will be rotated into the gallery,” Iris admitted. “Now, here we are.” She stopped in front of a large painting of a beautiful mountain landscape with a scenic lake, pine trees, and rays of sunlight reflecting on the water.

“I can see why you loved it.” Paige stood in front of the image and tried to take it all in.

“Will you be paying the balance today?” Iris asked Carmen.

Before Carmen could answer, Sophie stepped forward. “Actually, I asked Carmen to bring me over today so I could look at what you had to offer. I believe she’ll have the balance to you by next week sometime.”

Carmen stared at the painting. There was something in Sophie’s tone, something that told her to keep quiet and let this play out.

Paige was watching Sophie closely and knew the instant she realized there was a problem with the painting. Sophie had worked for the Smithsonian for years; but before that, she spent a

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few hours a week at a prestigious gallery in New York. Sophie knew her art and Paige knew Sophie. The woman she thought of as a mother was angry but trying to hide it. Paige continued to silently watch as Sophie maneuvered Iris out of the back room and into the front gallery.

“Do you know what that was about?” Carmen moved beside Paige.

“Not entirely.” Paige moved closer to the painting. “But I have a pretty good idea.”

“Do you plan to fill me in?”

“Not here.” Paige pulled out her phone and took a picture of the mountain scene before she turned toward the door. “Let’s find Sophie and make our escape. I want her to explain why she’s concerned about this painting.”

“I really don’t like the sound of that,” Carmen followed.

“Do you know who the artist is?” Paige pulled open the door and stepped into the long hallway.

“Sure,” Carmen hesitated, glanced over her shoulder at the painting that she loved knowing her dream just went up in smoke, then stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her. “A guy named Drew Raine painted it, why?”

“Drew Raine?” Paige stared at Carmen.

“What?” Carmen demanded.

“Can you tell me what you paid for it?” Paige asked hesitantly.

“Paige, what’s going on?” Carmen demanded.

“If that was a real Drew Raine, it would cost at least a hundred thousand. I know you said Zeus freaked at the price, but I highly doubt you spent that kind of money on a painting.”

“I—” she stopped and swallowed when she saw Sophie and Iris returning.

“I found this lovely piece and couldn’t resist.” Sophie held up her painting. “I bought it. It will go perfectly in that little sunroom off the kitchen, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely,” Paige tried to sound cheerful. “Um, I think we need to head out. Carmen isn’t feeling well. I’m going to help her to the car.” Paige guided Carmen through the front door and into the parking lot. “Breathe.”

“I paid seven thousand dollars for a fake, Paige,” Carmen choked out. “One the FBI will seize, and I won’t ever see again.”

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“Sit down,” Paige opened the passenger door and maneuvered Carmen inside. “Give me your keys. I’m driving.”

Tears formed in Carmen’s eyes, and she couldn’t hold them back. “Zeus is going to kill me.”

“He’s not,” Paige disagreed. “Because he’s going to see how devastated you are, and he’s going to pamper you and love you. He’s going to understand — well, until he drives over and murders the gallery owner, that is.”

Carmen let the tears fall. Paige was right, but somehow, that just made everything worse.

“I’ll sit in the back.” Sophie pulled open the door and set the painting on the seat next to her. “Paige, drive up the road then pull over. We need to talk.” She reached up and gave Carmen’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Once they were clear of the gallery, Paige pulled to the side of the road in front of an enormous field.

“I’m sorry, Carmen,” Sophie began. “But you purchased a forgery. So did I,” she pointed to the small painting resting on the seat. “I did it willingly, though. I wanted to get it out of that gallery before it was destroyed.”

“You think she’s onto us?” Paige asked, worried. She couldn’t handle this case by herself, but who could she turn it over to? Not Gage. He didn’t know the first thing about art.

“I think she’s a little suspicious, but not too concerned. If we act quickly, I think you can stop her before she truly knows what hit her.”

“I can’t,” Paige considered. “I’ve been benched, remember?”

Carmen didn’t take part in the conversation. She was staring out the window, giant tears running down her face.

Paige reached over and took her friend’s hand. “If I can fix this, I will. I promise,” she gave the hand a quick squeeze before releasing it. “Sparrow was handling some kind of forgery case a few months back. Once Julianna was arrested, he had to rush back to Vegas to act on a new lead. Give me a minute, I need to call him.”

“Good idea,” Sophie considered. “Vegas is close, this could all be connected.”

“I agree,” Paige nodded then greeted her friend.

“This is becoming a habit. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you missed me,” Sparrow joked.

“Are you still working that forgery case?” Paige got right to the point.

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“I am, why?” Sparrow asked cautiously.

“Carmen purchased a painting that was sold as a Drew Raine landscape,” Paige advised. “It’s not a Raine painting. It’s a forgery. Sophie also purchased a painting today. It too is a forgery, but the gallery owner passed that one off as a Reginald King.”

“Do they know you’re onto them?” Sparrow’s mind was reeling. This could be the break he’d been looking for in his own case.

“Sophie said suspicious, maybe cautious, but not spooked,” Paige advised.

“I need you to secure that painting,” Sparrow decided. “The one Sophie purchased. Where is the painting Carmen bought?”

“She’s still paying it off,” Paige admitted. “We went out to give the owner the balance and take possession of the painting, but Sophie stopped us. We all know, Carmen might be out the money she spent, and Sophie didn’t want her to lose even more funds on a worthless fake.”

“Alright,” Sparrow sat back. “Can you book the painting that belongs to Sophie? I’ll be there tomorrow afternoon to deal with the fraudulent Raine. Does your boss know you called me in?”

“Not yet,” Paige admitted. “I’ll book the painting and fill Jericho in on the rest. We’ll see you tomorrow sometime. I need to go.”

“Sounds good,” Sparrow hesitated. “I don’t know how you fall into this stuff, but I’m always glad you do.”

Paige dropped Sophie off first. When she got to Carmen’s house, Zeus was waiting. Paige smiled, knowing Carmen was in excellent hands. “Go talk to your man. Everything is going to be okay, Carmen. I promise. Just don’t let him kill Iris. Sparrow needs her alive.”

Carmen just nodded and climbed from the car.

“I’ll get Dax to shuttle the car back tonight,” Paige called out the window, before she backed out of the driveway. She’d only gone a block when she spotted a *For Sale* sign. On impulse, she pulled to the side of the road, shut down the engine and climbed out of the vehicle. She walked the property for nearly twenty minutes before she slid behind the wheel and headed home.

Dax stepped through the door and spotted Paige immediately. “You ready to head out and shuttle Zee’s car?”

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“I guess he filled you in on everything that happened with the painting,” Paige stood.

“He did,” Dax held the door for her and took a step back.

Paige stopped directly in front of Dax, gripped his shirt in her hand, and kissed him. At first, he hesitated, but within seconds he deepened the kiss and pulled her tighter against him.

“Better,” Paige stepped back. “Now, I’m ready to shuttle the car. I thought we could grab something quick for dinner while we’re out.”

“I got sandwiches already,” Dax shut and locked the door. “I’ll follow you over.”

Paige was nervous all the way to their friend’s house, but she couldn’t decide if she was nervous to see Carmen or the conversation she needed to have with Dax. Once she pulled into the driveway, she approached the front door, still worried about Carmen. The woman loved that painting, and her heart was broken, knowing the forgery would be confiscated, and eventually destroyed. She rang the bell and waited. It didn’t take long.

Zeus slid the door open and thanked her for the car and the keys.

“How is she doing?” Paige wondered.

“She understands, but she’s devastated,” Zeus admitted. “The silly woman thought I’d be angry with her.”

“She loves you,” Paige shrugged. “Anyway,” she glanced over her shoulder at Dax waiting in the car. “I’ll call her tomorrow. We’ll help her through this. All you have to do is find another painting she loves just as much.”

“Right,” Zeus frowned. “Like that’s possible.”

“It is,” Paige assured him. “And I’ll help you.”

“Go spend time with your man,” Zeus nodded to Dax. “He’s —”

“I know,” Paige cut him off. “Call if you need anything.” Paige turned and made her way to the waiting vehicle. Once Dax pulled onto the roadway, Paige started her pitch. “Can you pull over, right up there,” she pointed to the side of the road and the sign.

Dax pulled over, spotted the sign and glanced at Paige.

“Are you up for a short walk?” she asked.

“Sure,” Dax rounded the vehicle and stopped in front of Paige, who had climbed out without him. “You’re supposed to wait for me.”

The Portrait

“Not tonight,” she reached for his hand and led him onto the property. “I spotted this lot when I left Carmen this morning. I stopped to look around and wanted you to see it.”

“Because?” Dax smiled inwardly. He was pretty sure he knew what Paige wanted.

“It’s not perfect,” Paige turned to face the road and the city below. “I’d like a little better view but property in this area doesn’t come up for sale often. I — well, I’m wondering what you think. I know you’re happy in our home and I love my mom’s little house, but I just think we should consider the future — and space, once the baby comes.”

“It’s not bad,” Dax agreed. He moved behind Paige and wrapped her in his arms. “You know, even when we’re off; somehow, we’re always in sync.”

“What does that mean?” Paige leaned against him and relaxed, loving the way she felt in his arms.

Dax kissed her temple, took her hand and led her back to the truck. “Now, I want to show you something.”

Paige frowned but let him guide her back into his truck. He headed back toward Carmen’s but passed their property and pulled onto an overgrown dirt path that led into a field full of weeds and wildflowers. “What are we doing?”

“I’ve been looking into this place for a few months now,” Dax confessed. “Even before you told me about the baby. I think it was after that whole mess with Julianna. Anyway, the property is owned by a family trust. Wooly did the legwork, but I finally got ahold of the owner last week. He referred me to their lawyer and long story short; they’re willing to sell. The price is a little high but not too excessive.” He led her to the spot where he wanted to build their dream home, pulled her into his arms and turned her so her back was against his chest. “What do you think of this view?”

“It’s stunning,” Paige admitted. “How high? Can we afford it?”

Dax whispered the asking price into her ear before he pressed a gentle kiss to her neck.

“We can do that,” Paige considered. “It is a little on the high side, but not overt. For this, I’m willing to pay a little extra. Plus, we’ll be close to Carmen and Zeus. If they’re able to—” she stopped.

“I know they’ve been trying,” Dax tightened his grip around her. “Zee told me. It might take a little time, but soon we’ll have a little Carmen or a miniature Zee running around the neighborhood.”

The Portrait

“I agree. I’d like our kids to be neighbors. We both know they’re going to be great friends.” Paige glanced around. “Do you think we could stay here, maybe have a picnic dinner with those sandwiches you bought?”

“I’ll be right back,” Dax stepped away. “Walk around and check the place out. Once we get settled, I’ll tell you what I envision, and you can see if you agree, or if you want something entirely different.”

Paige watched him jog back to the truck before she walked the area. She might have a few changes, but she knew her vision and Dax’s vision would be similar. Dax was right, even when they were off — they were still in sync. A feeling of peace washed over her. They were going to be okay. She’d have that difficult discussion with him, and they’d work things out and get back on track. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that Dax had a blanket spread out over the weeds and he’d placed a bag and two paper cups on a small board at the edge. She headed back and settled across from him on the blanket.

“How did Jericho take the news that you stumbled onto a new case?” Dax tried to keep the worry out of his voice but was afraid he failed miserably.

“From that tone, I’d say about as well as you did,” Paige studied him. “I’m not getting involved. I told Jericho that as well. I called Sparrow in. He’s been working a forgery ring in Vegas and I’m pretty sure this has to be connected somehow.”

“Because coincidence is hooey,” Dax grinned.

“Exactly,” Paige nodded.

“The boss was okay with you calling in the feds again?”

“Jericho mumbled some nonsense about chaining me to my desk, then agreed contacting Sparrow was the right call,” Paige picked up her sandwich. “I’m going to eat this, then you and I are going to talk.”

Dax watched her and wondered how he could explain the turmoil he’d been experiencing since he got Jericho’s call informing him Paige was headed to the hospital.

They ate in silence. Once they finished, Paige gathered up the garbage and slid it into the small bag before she set it aside. “Now for the hard part. I scared you. I know that.”

“Paige,” Dax objected.

“No,” Paige put a finger over his mouth. “I need to say this. I know what happened scared you, because it scared me. Before going to the hospital, I didn’t think twice about doing my job. When Jericho benched me, I was furious. Not because I was benched, not really. But because I didn’t have a say. If he talked to me, asked for my input, I would have come to the same

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conclusion and suggested the same solution. I can sit at my desk for the next few months. I need to take a step back and I have. I stumbled onto a crime today, but I handed it off. I called Sparrow immediately. I'm trying, Dax, but I need you. I need your support, because I can't do this without you."

"You have it," Dax pulled her into his lap. "I love you, babe. I'm trying to support you but —"

"But you're worried," Paige kissed him. "Worried about me and worried about our child. I know. I'm going to be careful; I promise. And I'll try not to complain too much."

"Now, that would make me worry."

"Shut up," Paige laughed.

Dax leaned forward and kissed her again. He pushed aside the worry and the stress and focused on his love for this amazing woman.

Moments later, Paige leaned back, breathless and a little shaken from the intensity of that kiss. "Um, we should probably stop trespassing on some random family's property."

"Right," Dax stood and held out his hand for her. "Let's clean this up, then I want to walk around and tell you about my vision for this place. If you agree, we'll contact the seller and buy the property immediately."

"I already know I agree," Paige let Dax lead her around the area. "I want this place. Our vision might change, or get altered slightly, but I love the view, I love the area, and I want it."

"As you wish," Dax pulled her into a hug.

"You and your movie references," Paige smiled. "At least it wasn't an eighties rock band moment."

"That could be arranged," Dax laughed. "So, will Jericho let you help with the forgery case?"

Paige stiffened.

"I think he should," Dax smiled took her hand and started for the truck. "You have mad investigative skills. He should use them."

"But I thought —"

"You thought I wanted to lock you up in a padded room until after our baby was born," Dax helped her into the truck. "I don't. I just need you to be safe. I think both is possible, if you're

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careful. And you just promised me you would be careful. I trust you.” He shut the door and headed for the driver’s side. Paige was still staring at him when he started the engine. “What?”

“You are so getting lucky tonight,” she smiled and took his hand.

“I look forward to it,” Dax relaxed. “Before we get to that. I saw Jericho and Harper today. They were having lunch at the park. Do you think they worked things out?”

“I hope so,” Paige settled into her seat. “It was stupid of them to break up over something as basic and ordinary as a background investigation. Honestly, what’s the big deal? We’ve both had a dozen of them performed on us over the years.”

“I —” Dax hesitated. “Well, I should probably tell you I had Hawk do a pretty thorough check on Harper. She passed, but he uncovered some things I’m not sure Jericho or his PI looked into.”

“What?” Paige frowned.

“Harper was married,” Dax told her. “And the idiot wasn’t a nice guy.”

“Abusive?” Paige frowned; Jericho should have found that.

“Not that I can tell,” Dax sighed. “Hawk didn’t find any police reports or hospital visits. She has a kid with the guy, the son is an adult and attending college in Texas. He did a cursory on him, but the son seems like a good kid. Anyway, the dad, the guy Harper married is a narcissist. He runs a successful business, but everyone hates him. He’s arrogant and controlling. I suspect that’s the reason Harper freaked out when she realized Jericho had a friend run her. It hit too close to home.”

“I have to tell Jericho,” Paige decided. “He’ll overreact when he learns you ran Harper, but he needs to know about her past. He needs to understand the situation, and he needs to avoid doing something like that in the future.”

“I’ll tell him,” Dax decided. “I had Hawk do the run, I’ll confess my crime and take my lumps.”

“We’ll tell him,” Paige corrected. “We’re a team, we’ll talk to him together.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Dax pulled into their driveway and parked his truck.

The two of them walked inside, both looking forward to the rest of the evening. Both determined to reconnect and get back to normal.

The Portrait

“It’s the same,” Sparrow stepped back from the painting and focused on Paige. “You accomplished something I haven’t been able to.”

“What’s that?”

“Identified a gallery selling fake pieces,” Sparrow settled into a chair and gave her a weary look. “With this painting, I can get a warrant for the rest.”

“I know,” Paige said in understanding. “Carmen will be okay. Just put her on the list for restitution. She’s upset, but she knows how it works. Zeus will find her another painting; one she loves even more — and he’s willing to spend any amount of money to do it. She’ll be fine.”

“It’s a beautiful landscape,” Sparrow studied the image Paige took with her phone. “I can understand why she fell in love with it.”

“So, you get the warrant and seize the property,” Paige changed the subject. “Feel free to store the evidence here until you can transport it.”

“I need you with me,” Sparrow studied her. “I want your eyes and ears and... well, I need your intuition.”

“The boss won’t go for it,” Paige objected. “Jericho wants me chained to this desk.”

“I think the gallery is safe enough,” Jericho stepped into the conference room. “Agent Sparrow.”

“Sir,” Sparrow moved to shake Jericho’s hand. “I’d like Paige to accompany me while I serve a warrant on the gallery if you don’t object.”

“We’ll both go,” Jericho decided. “If that gallery is linked to your case in Vegas, I want to know. I don’t like the idea of big city criminals taking advantage of my town to operate their underground business.”

“I don’t suppose you do,” Sparrow retrieved his phone. “I need a few minutes to get the warrant started. We have nothing that links the two cases yet, but hopefully the warrant will give us something we can work with.”

“I’m sure it will,” Paige turned to Jericho.

“Before we talk about whatever you have on your mind,” Jericho settled into the chair next to her. “Lovato just called. They caught your burglar. The neighbor had security and their camera caught a clear shot of the vehicle and a decent shot of the suspect. The boys have been working night and day to track the man down and they cornered him around four this morning. He’s locked up tight and won’t be going anywhere for the foreseeable future.”

The Portrait

“That’s a relief,” Paige relaxed. “I wasn’t worried, I mean he had the chance to hurt me if he wanted to but instead, he ran.”

“But knowing he’s no longer out there is a comfort,” Jericho nodded. “I have Gage and Dean scouring pawn shops looking for property. I understand Liz and Jerry lost property that is irreplaceable. Hopefully, one of the men will find the Ennis’ property in their sweep.”

“I hope so. Thanks, Jericho. I know you put pressure on the guys to drop everything and work this case, because you wanted to give me closure. It wasn’t necessary, but it’s appreciated.” Paige was truly grateful they caught the burglar so quickly. He didn’t worry her, but knowing he was locked up, did give her comfort.

“I didn’t have to put pressure on anyone,” Jericho disagreed. “Your fellow officers were livid when they found out what happened. They wanted justice and they were determined to get that man off the streets and into a cell where he belongs. I just gave them the flexibility to get the job done.”

“Then thank you for being flexible,” Paige reiterated. “Anyway, are you free for dinner? Dax plans to throw a couple steaks on the grill. We have plenty and would love you to come over.”

“Sounds good,” Jericho glanced through the door and confirmed Sparrow was still on the phone. “I’m not chaining you to the desk, Paige. I plan to utilize you in the best way possible but still keep you safe. It’s going to be difficult to balance your safety with the needs of the department, but I believe it’s possible. That means, you work this case. I doubt the gallery owner will come out shooting or take you hostage over this. It’s always possible, but not probable. We’ll help your Fed and send him back to Vegas before he demands his own desk in my store. First Wilkens, now the dashing pirate. What next?”

“I know,” Paige grinned. “Interagency cooperation is so overrated.”

“And don’t think you get to sit around doing nothing for months, once this case is over. I’ll know if you start milking your condition to try to get special perks from me or pampered girly treatment from my men.”

“Milking my condition?” Paige grinned. “I think the whole milking thing comes later, once the baby is born and gets hungry.”

“No,” Jericho held up a hand. “We are not talking about that and I’m giving you a direct order to keep all of that private stuff private when you’re working.”

“Killjoy,” Paige grinned. “Any luck?” she asked Sparrow when he stepped back into the room.

The Portrait

“I have one of my men working on it,” Sparrow settled back in a chair. “Also, Special Agent Dixon eliminated another one of the galleries last night. We’ve narrowed it down to two. With any luck, the warrant will help with that. We might be able to connect your gallery out here with one of our possible targets in Vegas.”

“How does that help you?” Jericho wondered.

“It should help narrow down our suspect,” Sparrow admitted. “We discovered the forgeries when a wealthy client complained to our SAC. He was embarrassed when he learned he’d been conned. We’re also confident the mastermind is working in Vegas. He’s the one finding the clients, but we haven’t been able to identify him.”

“You say him,” Paige observed. “You’re sure it’s a man?”

“I’m sure our Vegas suspect is a man,” Sparrow advised. “Our victims dealt with a male — all of them dealt with a man.”

“Then why can’t you narrow down your suspect? Can’t they identify which gallery owner they dealt with?” Paige wondered.

“No,” Sparrow sighed. “They never visited the gallery. They received a phone call after attending a prestigious event. The caller said they met the night before but none of my victims actually remembered meeting a gallery owner. The man is elusive and very careful. He claimed they talked about art, and he was following up. The victims talked about art at the event with numerous people, all of them are collectors. They admitted to me they thought the initial contact was strange, but not unusual. The man dangled a rare acquisition under their nose, and they couldn’t resist.”

“How did they make the exchange?” Jericho wondered.

“They arrived at an office space that the suspect rented for the day. The location was never the same. He’d set up an official-looking office and hire a temporary secretary. Then, he’d call and say he was called away on an emergency, but his secretary could handle the transaction. The unsuspecting, temporary secretary handled the exchange and left the money inside the desk. The following morning, the office was gone, and the money had disappeared.”

“He’s been doing this a long time,” Paige decided. “He may have gotten caught in the past and put safeguards in place to make sure he doesn’t get caught again.”

“Maybe,” Sparrow shrugged. “Or he’s paranoid.”

“Just because he’s paranoid, doesn’t mean we’re not after him,” Paige grinned.

“We tried the normal techniques, but nothing has worked,” Sparrow said, clearly frustrated. “He’s a ghost.”

The Portrait

“What about the temps?” Jericho wondered. “Could they identify him or give a description? What about the temp agency? They should have records.”

“He doesn’t use one,” Sparrow admitted. “We haven’t figured out how he finds the secretaries, but they disappear as quickly as the money.”

Paige sat back and tried to think of another way to track the elusive criminal, but nothing came to mind. “Vegas is warm, could the women he employs be homeless and desperate for quick cash? Or maybe they’re struggling performers living from day to day trying to get a job at one of the casinos.”

“He could hire them as performers,” Jericho surmised. “It could be a job; one performance and they don’t know it’s real.”

Sparrow frowned. He hadn’t thought of that.

“It’s worth looking into,” Paige added. “And I think Carmen would jump at the chance to help. She feels like a victim. I think it would do her good to get involved.”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Sparrow decided. “On a surface level, anyway. Carmen can’t be directly involved in the case, it taints things. She’s now a victim, but running backgrounds, tracking performers, I think I can justify that.”

“I’ll call her,” Paige stood and left the room. By the time she returned, Sparrow had his warrant.

“I’ll meet you there,” Sparrow decided. “There could be a lot of evidence and I’d like an extra vehicle just in case.”

“I’ll drive,” Jericho motioned for Paige to join him. “And I’ll have Logan bring the large evidence truck.”

They pulled into the parking lot and waited for Sparrow to take the lead. He straightened his shoulders and strolled through the front door.

Paige stepped into the foyer and glanced around. The only person inside the gallery was the secretary from the day before. “Hello, I don’t know if you remember me. I’m Paige. I think Iris said your name was Katie.”

“Yes,” Katie looked from Paige to Sparrow to Jericho. “Can I help you with something?”

“I’m Special Agent Sparrow,” the agent took control of the situation immediately.

The Portrait

“Oh,” Katie looked at Paige, clearly nervous.

“I have a warrant to search the area and seize all of the property listed in that document and anything else out in the open that pertains to my case,” Sparrow handed her a copy. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Katie swallowed. “Well, no.” She glanced at the warrant. “Are you looking for something specific? Um — should I call someone?”

“I’ve got this,” Paige motioned for Sparrow to proceed. “The landscape is in the back room. Just follow that hallway and take the last door on the left.”

“Wait,” Katie stood. “That painting belongs to Carman Boudin. She’s nearly paid for it in full. You can’t just take it.”

“It’s evidence in a police investigation,” Paige motioned for Katie to sit. “Carman is aware of the situation.”

Katie watched Jericho and Agent Sparrow disappear down the hall. “I don’t know what to do. Can you help me?”

“Is Iris here today?” Paige felt sorry for the girl. She was coming across as innocent and Paige didn’t think she was involved in the forgery — or the fraud.

“No,” Katie frowned. “Did she know this was going to happen? She —” Katie glanced down the hall again. “Iris was supposed to be here today, but she called in, early this morning, and said she had to meet with a client. She said she was going out of town, and I wouldn’t be able to reach her until tomorrow.”

“I don’t think she knew,” Paige considered that. Did Iris know something was off? Maybe. She had a feeling yesterday that the woman was suspicious. Maybe she did a little research and fled. It wouldn’t be hard to discover Sophie was married to the infamous general, and that Paige was a cop.

“What did Iris do yesterday, after we left?” Paige questioned.

“Um,” Katie furrowed her brow. “Nothing, not really. She went into the office and made a couple phone calls, but other than that, nothing. Everything seemed normal. Why?”

“As you probably realized,” Paige pulled up a chair. “I’m a cop, Katie. Can you tell me your last name?”

“Thompson,” Katie whispered. “Am I in trouble?”

“Why do you ask that?” Paige sat back.

The Portrait

“Well,” Katie looked down the hall again. “Um, that guy said he’s an agent... a Special Agent.”

“He’s not really that special,” Paige smiled. “He works for the FBI. They all think they’re special but that’s just a title, like deputy or officer.”

“Oh,” Katie closed her eyes, still upset. “FBI?”

“Yes,” Paige nodded.

“You didn’t say if I was in trouble,” Katie pushed.

“Do you know what’s going on here?” Paige decided to be direct. They both looked up when Jericho and Sparrow approached their desk carrying Carmen’s painting.

“I need to load this in the back of the truck,” Sparrow paused. “Then, I’ll come back and leave you a receipt for it.”

“Okay,” Katie glanced at Paige then focused on Sparrow. “Um, Iris has an attorney. Do you think I should call him?”

“Up to you.” Sparrow shrugged absently and moved toward the door.

Katie frowned and chewed on her bottom lip.

“Katie,” Paige drew her attention again. “Do you know what’s going on here?”

“Not really,” Katie sighed. “I um, well Iris gave me a job when I needed one. She’s my aunt — sort of.”

“What does that mean?” Paige pulled out a recorder. “I’d like to record this. Do you mind?”

“I guess not,” Katie glanced at the recorder then focused out the window and watched the men load the expensive painting into the back of a large box truck that had just arrived.

Paige hit record. She started with the date, time and location of the interview, then gave her name and Katie’s information. “Katie, you are employed by Garrett Gallery, is that correct?”

“Yes,” Katie glanced at the recorder then focused on Paige.

“Before we started the recording, you mentioned that Iris Garrett is sort of your aunt. You were about to explain what that meant. Are you still willing to talk to me about the situation here at the gallery?”

Katie hesitated and considered, then she made a decision. “I am.”

“Okay, good,” Paige nodded. “Tell me about your connection to Iris.”

The Portrait

“My father died when I was ten. My mom struggled for a while; and, well — she’s currently on her fifth marriage. I think this one might actually work out. Jason adores her and they seem really happy. That wasn’t the case with Brian — Brian Garrett. Iris is Brian’s sister. There have been a lot of men in my mom’s life. Brian was one of them. Mom and Iris became friends during that brief marriage, and they’ve maintained contact for some reason. Anyway, I recently graduated, and I needed a job. Mom knew Iris owned this gallery, and she called in a favor. Iris hired me to work the front desk until I can find something that better suits me.”

“What does that mean?” Paige wondered.

“Iris did mom a favor, but she treats me like I’m an idiot,” Katie admitted. “She knows I have a degree in accounting, she knows I could help her and free up some of her time, but she won’t let me touch the books.”

“But you did?” Paige saw something in Katie’s eyes, but she couldn’t decipher it.

“No,” Katie looked away.

“You need to be honest with me,” Paige pushed. “I can help you, but you need to be honest.”

“I saw something,” Katie knew her mom was going to be angry, but she couldn’t protect Iris from illegal activity. Hopefully, her mom would understand. She taught Katie to be honest and responsible. And that meant Katie could not lie to a cop or the FBI guy. She had a duty and an obligation to report what she knew.

“Something that concerned you?” Paige wondered.

“I don’t — I guess,” Katie decided. “It was just something that didn’t add up. I got curious, and I started paying attention to the invoices.”

“From customers?” Paige wondered. “Here locally?”

“No,” Katie shook her head. “Iris has customers she deals with from out of town. I think she does that business off the books.”

Paige studied Katie. She was being forthcoming, but it seemed too easy. Why was this woman ratting out her former aunt? A woman that gave her a job when she needed one. “What makes you think she operates off the books?”

“That’s not what you really want to ask,” Katie observed. “You want to know why I’m telling you about it.”

“Okay,” Paige agreed. “Why are you telling me about it?”

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“Because I saw an invoice that was questionable last week,” Katie explained. “I asked a generic question about it and Iris freaked out. She didn’t just get upset, she totally freaked. So, I started to dig, but I almost got caught. I decided to wait until I was alone to find answers. This morning, once I knew Iris wasn’t coming into the office, I dug a little deeper. I found a second set of books in her office, and I was sitting here trying to decide what to do about that when you guys marched in with a warrant. I’m not going to jail for Iris Garrett. I don’t even like her — she fooled mom, just like her brother Brian did. But she’s bad news, and I don’t want to get caught up in any of this. Whatever it is.”

It made sense, sort of. Paige studied Katie. “Where are the books? The second set?”

“I left them in her office,” Katie motioned to a closed door. “They’re in the bottom left drawer. There’s a hidden compartment. You trip the latch from the top drawer. There’s a tiny nub in the front. Press the little trigger thing, then open the bottom drawer. Once you do, the hidden compartment will slide open, and you’ll find the books.”

“And the regular books?” Paige asked. “Do you know where we can find those?”

“Iris keeps a ledger on her desk,” Katie answered immediately.

“Alright,” Paige looked up when Sparrow and Jericho stepped back inside.

“Jericho, can you sit with Katie?” Paige stood. “Sparrow, I need you to come with me.”

“We still have two additional paintings I need to load in the truck,” Sparrow objected.

“That can wait,” Paige headed for the office.

“This better be important,” Sparrow grumbled behind her,

Paige moved to the desk and followed Katie’s directions. “I’d say you probably want that.” She grinned at the ledger that dropped from the hidden compartment.

“How did you know?” Sparrow moved forward and took the book.

“Katie found it,” Paige pointed to the ledger on the desk. “That’s the public, or official ledger. This one is the second set, the private underground set.”

“The one that might contain the name of the man I’m looking for,” Sparrow took the book and slid it into an evidence bag. “Anything else I should know?”

“I don’t think Katie is involved,” Paige glanced through the window. “She’s smarter than Iris gave her credit for, and I think, if we hadn’t arrived when we did, she would have paid me a visit at the office.”

“Why?” Sparrow glanced at Katie.

The Portrait

“She saw something that didn’t make sense to her,” Paige explained. “She’s an accounting major, and she saw an invoice she wasn’t supposed to see. When she asked about it, Iris jumped down her throat. Katie waited until today, when Iris said she was going to be out all day, and went digging. She found those books and was trying to decide what to do when we arrived.”

“You believe her?” Sparrow asked.

“I do,” Paige decided. “I’ll let you listen to the recording but I’m not seeing anything deceitful or suspicious about her. I think she’s nervous, and she wants to be honest. That has made her more forthcoming than usual, but maybe she’s just a straightforward person and is trying to do the right thing.”

“I’m always suspicious of people trying to do the right thing,” Sparrow admitted. “I wonder if that says more about me than it does them.”

“Join the club,” Paige grinned. “I had the same reaction once she started talking. She called me out. She’s smart and perceptive, but not in a clever like a fox underhanded way.”

“You like her,” Sparrow realized.

“I think I do,” Paige admitted. “I also feel sorry for her. I don’t think she realizes it yet, but she’s going to be unemployed as soon as you find her boss.”

“Does she have any suggestions on that front?”

“Nope,” Paige shrugged. “I can’t do your entire job for you, can I?”

Sparrow silently glared — and waited.

“Okay, I do have something,” Paige admitted. “Katie said Iris called this morning, said she had an unexpected meeting and would be out of town all day.”

“Do you think she went to Vegas?” Sparrow pulled out his phone.

“I’d watch the two galleries you suspect,” Paige decided. “I think we made her nervous, and she rushed to Nevada to hook up with her partner,”

“Give me a minute,” Sparrow punched a button then began barking out orders. Moments later, he slid the phone back into his pocket and glanced around. “I think the books will help us and they’re covered in the warrant. I need to grab two more forgeries from the back, they’re identical to paintings purchased by two of my victims. Then, I need to lock this place down and bring in a team.”

“Let’s go deliver the bad news,” Paige headed for the door, Sparrow followed her out.

The Portrait

Sparrow approached Katie and began a muffled conversation. Paige held back, glanced at the paintings hanging on the wall and moved to get a better look.

“Anything I need to know?” Jericho stepped up behind her.

“Not really,” Paige glanced over her shoulder. “Sparrow has two sets of books to go through and you guys found a couple additional paintings in the back. I think that about covers it. Oh, and Iris said she was going out of town, so Sparrow has his guys in Vegas watching for her.”

“Sounds like things are pretty well covered,” Jericho moved forward and studied a western style painting. “Sparrow, you’ll want to take this one, too.”

“Which one?” Sparrow joined them.

“This is not a Remington,” Jericho motioned to the image a few feet away.

“Good eye,” Sparrow lifted the painting off the wall. “I think we’re going to find several others scattered throughout this place. I’m locking it down. I have a team on the way. Oh, and by the way, my men just apprehended Iris Garrett. She’s not talking, but we’ll figure out who her partner is before the night is over.”

Paige moved back to Katie. “Did he explain the situation?”

“By that you mean, did he explain that my sort of aunt just got arrested and this place is a crime scene?” Katie wondered.

“Yeah, that’s what I mean,” Paige watched Katie, then smiled when the woman grinned and let out a long, frustrated sigh.

“So much for an easy job to get me by,” Katie stood. “I can walk you through and point out the paintings I believe are questionable.”

“You knew they were forged?” Paige frowned, maybe she misjudged this woman after all.

“No,” Katie ran a frustrated hand through her hair. “But now that I know, I can pick them out in a few seconds. I spotted the Remington. There’s another one over here I think you’ll want to take.” She moved quickly across the room, but her movements were clunky, and Paige could see the situation was taking a toll. “For the life of me, I can’t understand why she’d forge other people’s work. Iris was talented. She taught me everything I know about painting. And she was good. I mean, you could hang her stuff in this gallery good.”

“You paint?” Paige perked up. “What kind of work do you do?”

“Mostly landscapes,” Katie reached the far wall and pointed to another painting that was labeled as Raine’s work.

The Portrait

“Katie,” Paige studied the painting. “Do you think your aunt painted these?”

“I do,” Katie looked at the floor. “I should have known, but I swear I didn’t. It’s just — well, she was secretive and would never show me any of her current work. I knew she was painting; I could tell from the turpentine and the specks on her shoes. They were fresh,” she added when Paige just stared at her.

“Sparrow,” Paige called out.

“What now?” Sparrow emerged with his phone pressed against his ear. “Another one?” He glanced at the painting and dragged it from the wall.

“Yes,” Paige said impatiently. “But that’s not why I called you over. Katie thinks Iris is the forger.”

“Iris is a painter?” Sparrow focused on Katie. “Do you have any examples of her work?”

“Um,” Katie considered. “Yes, come with me.” She led them to an indistinct door at the end of the hallway. “This leads upstairs,” Katie explained. “There’s an attic that Iris used for storage.” Katie reached above the door and retrieved a key.

“Not the smartest hiding spot,” Paige grumbled under her breath.

“I don’t think she believed anyone would ever break in,” Katie pushed open the door and ascended the staircase. “She told me if I was caught up here, she’d fire me. Since I’m already out of a job—” She let the sentence trail off.

“Maybe you should stay here,” Sparrow glanced at Paige’s midsection.

“Who told you?” Paige demanded.

“I asked Jericho,” Sparrow grinned. “He didn’t exactly confirm it, but he confirmed it.”

“I’m fine,” Paige followed them up the stairs.

At the top, Katie paused to turn on the lights, then gasped when she saw the easels full of partially completed paintings. “Um, I think my mom might kill me.”

“You need to leave,” Sparrow moved forward to protect the evidence.

“I’m not going to do anything,” Katie frowned. “Iris stores her stuff over there,” Katie pointed to the far end of the attic.

“I’ll escort her down,” Paige offered. “And I’ll let Jericho know we’re still going to need the truck.”

The Portrait

Several hours later, Paige and Jericho were sitting in the conference room studying the ledgers that were removed from the gallery.

“You know,” Jericho sat back. “I was just thinking —”

“That’s dangerous,” Paige interrupted.

“I was recalling the number of times I’ve been stuck in this chair, at this table, going through someone’s books on one of your cases — and it hit me,” Jericho ignored her.

“What hit you?” Paige frowned, knowing whatever followed would not be a compliment.

“I have gone over more books, more ledgers, and more spreadsheets since I hired you than I dealt with in my entire life pre-Paige Carter.”

“Yeah,” Paige grinned. “Welcome to my world.”

“I’m pretty sure that was my point,” Jericho grumbled. “And I was looking forward to a nice juicy steak tonight.”

“It’s getting late,” Sparrow stepped into the room. “We have a ton of evidence against Iris Garrett and; thanks to you two, we finally discovered who her partner is. Thanks for dealing with that mess for me. I had my hands full coordinating things in Vegas from up here.”

“Was it one of the guys you suspected?” Paige stood.

“Yes,” Sparrow grinned. “I knew that guy was dirty, I just couldn’t prove it. They apprehended Martin Delano having dinner with a beautiful blonde at the Top of the World Restaurant. My men tell me he was extremely surprised to be caught. I suspect the woman was his next victim, or at least he was grooming her to be. And, I hate to admit this, but Jericho was right. Iris confirmed Martin hired struggling actresses and told them they were filming a commercial — or a one-day production of some kind. I think he deliberately picked women that were a little —”

“Ditzy?” Paige wondered. “Figures. Is he talking?”

“He’s singing, but he’s blaming Iris for all of it,” Sparrow rolled his eyes. “He’s playing the unsuspecting partner that got duped and knew nothing about the con. He wants us to believe he was completely in the dark.”

“Will it work?” Paige wondered.

The Portrait

“Nope,” Sparrow grinned. “Once we combine the evidence you two found in those ledgers with what we already had, that man’s goose is cooked. Sheriff, you should give this one a raise. She just closed a case that was driving me crazy for months.”

“Not an option,” Jericho stood. “But I will let her buy me dinner. We were just heading over to her place. That husband of hers promised to grill some steaks.”

“I’m in,” Sparrow turned to Paige. “If that’s okay.”

“It’s fine,” Paige pulled out her phone to call Dax and warn him they were heading home. “We have plenty. Once the grilling starts, our neighbors usually swarm. We’ve found it’s best to be prepared.”

“I’ll drive,” Sparrow motioned for them to head out. “I need to find a hotel where I can crash for the night, before I join you. And it’s going to be an early morning. I doubt I’ll see you before I leave.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Paige grabbed her stuff and headed for the door. “Crash in our guest room. It’s open.”

“The bureau —” Sparrow began.

“You’re crashing at my place,” Paige insisted. “I’ll see you there in five — both of you.”

“More like fifteen,” Jericho pulled his door shut. “Don’t argue with her. It’s futile.”

“That’s one thing I remember from her Bureau days,” Sparrow shrugged. “See you at her place.”

Sparrow settled onto the chair next to Paige. “Dinner went well, but the boss seemed a bit perturbed when he left.”

Paige sipped a glass of cold lemonade and missed her wine nearly as much as she missed caffeinated coffee. “Dax confessed. He admitted he asked Hawk to run a background on Jericho’s girlfriend. The boss didn’t like it.”

“Seriously?” Sparrow laughed. “No wonder he was annoyed.”

“He’s family,” Paige defended. “And Jericho doesn’t have a right to be mad. He hired a friend of his to run his own background on the woman.”

Sparrow shook his head. “And what did the miscreants find on me?”

The Portrait

“I have no doubt they ran you,” Paige admitted. “They tend to do that with ease and without question. They didn’t tell me what they found. Was there something to find?”

“Nothing worth repeating,” Sparrow decided he could live with the intrusion. He probably would have done the same if he were in their shoes. “Things are a little strained between you and that husband of yours. Does it have anything to do with that baby bump you’re sporting?”

“We worked it out,” Paige insisted.

“He’s being supportive, but it’s costing him,” Sparrow observed. “Have you thought about hanging it up? If not now, after the kid is born?”

“What? No,” Paige frowned. “Are you crazy. This is my job. It’s my life. I can’t give it up. What would I do? It’s not like I have mad plumbing skills and I can’t paint.”

“You should think about it, Paige,” Sparrow stood. “Now, I’m going to call it a night. I have an early drive and I’m beat.”

“Goodnight, Sparrow,” Paige watched him for several seconds. “It was a pleasure doing business — as always.” She stood. “If I don’t see you before you leave, have a safe drive.”

Sparrow pulled her into a hug. “The pleasure was all mine.”

The following afternoon, Paige ascended the stairs that led to Katie’s front porch. She hesitated, then rang the bell.

Katie pulled open the door and frowned. “I’m afraid to ask.”

“It’s not bad, it’s personal,” Paige said, hoping it would put her at ease.

“What can I do for you?” Katie opened the door and invited Paige inside.

“You said you paint,” Paige began. “I was wondering if you had anything finished I could see.”

“Why?” Katie dropped into a chair and studied Paige.

Paige glanced at the table and the papers spread across the entire surface. “Studying?”

“Job hunting,” Katie corrected. “But it appears nobody in the area wants to hire a woman that used to work for a criminal that was arrested for fraud.”

Paige frowned. “You had nothing to do with that.”

The Portrait

“Tell my neighbors,” Katie swiped a hand through the air. “Forget that. What about my paintings?”

“Carmen is devastated that she lost that painting,” Paige explained. “Her husband is desperate to find a replacement. He’s looking for something similar and he’s willing to pay for it. I thought, well you said Iris taught you everything you know. I was hoping you might have a painting of a lake, or a cabin, or the mountains — something that I could look at.”

Katie sat back and considered. “I might have something. Follow me.”

Paige followed Katie into what looked like a sunroom. Katie had converted it to a painting studio. She glanced around and was amazed at the vibrant colors and the sleek lines covering the canvas currently adorning the sturdy easel. Katie had captured a rose garden perfectly. It wasn’t her style, but it was good.

“Let me see,” Katie moved to a stack of canvasses and began scrolling through them. “Yes, here it is.” She lifted a large canvas from the stack and turned, holding the painting in front of her.

“Oh my gosh,” Paige moved forward. In her opinion, the painting was even better than the one Carmen lost. “It’s amazing. You captured the lake; the sunset; and you even captured that majestic elk on the edge of the water. Can I call Zeus?”

“Do you have the Greek Gods on speed dial?” Katie laughed.

“You’ll understand once he gets here,” Paige shrugged. “Are you willing to sell it? I need to know before I get his hopes up.”

“I’ve never sold anything before,” Katie admitted. “I’m willing to sell it but I don’t know how much it’s worth.”

“Let Zeus make you an offer,” Paige suggested. “He’s going to want it, I guarantee it. Plus, you’re unemployed at the moment. Sell him the painting but get a good price for it. It’s wonderful and you deserve it.”

“Call him before I change my mind,” Katie insisted.

Twenty minutes later, Zeus stood in front of the painting, speechless. “How much do you want for this?”

“Make her an offer,” Paige suggested. “We both know Carmen is going to love it. How much is your wife’s happiness worth to you, Zee?”

“What are you doing?” Zeus frowned at Paige.

The Portrait

“She lost her job,” Paige explained. “She worked at the gallery, and she lost her job when her boss got arrested. Now, the town has decided she can’t be trusted, and nobody will hire her. She needs the money to live on until she can find another job. So, make her an offer.”

Zeus glanced from the painting to Katie. “Five thousand,” he offered.

“Are you serious?” Katie choked back her surprise. “I was thinking two —”

“She’ll take it,” Paige interrupted. “Did you bring cash, studly?”

“I don’t suppose you have a frame, do you?” Zeus wondered.

“I—” Katie glanced at Paige. “Is that old saying true about possession and the law?”

“Sell him a frame if you have it,” Paige laughed. “The case is over and if Sparrow didn’t ask for the property, I assume it’s now yours. Call it compensation for yesterday’s salary.”

“I have a few that would work,” Katie admitted. “There’s one I think would be perfect. Come with me.”

Paige left Zeus and Katie framing the amazing painting for Carmen. She was pretty sure her friend was going to be even happier with this painting than she was with the last. She stepped into her house and headed upstairs. That’s where she found Dax.

“How did it go?” He pulled a clean t-shirt over his head. “Zeus was so happy, he practically ran to the truck. Did he like the new painting?”

Paige grinned. “He loved it,” she held out her phone so Dax could see the picture she took.

“Wow,” Dax handed the phone back. “She’s talented. Why is she wasting her time working as a secretary?”

“Painting is a hobby for her,” Paige settled onto the bed. “She has an accounting degree and wants to pursue a career doing that.”

“Her hobby could pay the bills until she lands her dream job,” Dax suggested.

“She has another painting that I think Sophie would love. I thought I’d wait a few days then ask Katie if I could bring Sophie out to see it.”

“Another landscape?” Dax wondered.

“No, not exactly,” Paige wished she had thought to take a photo of that one. “It’s a beautiful, old colonial cottage with a white picket fence lined with colorful hollyhocks, a cozy porch with an intricately carved wooden swing off to one side.”

The Portrait

“I’m sure Sophie will love that,” Dax agreed. “Do you think the secretary who paints will sell it?”

“Maybe,” Paige hesitated.

“What?” Dax settled next to her. “I know that look. You have something cooking in that busy brain of yours.”

“Well,” Paige looked away from him. “She seems like a good person and she’s having a hard time finding a job. I thought — um, well you guys said you needed some help booking classes and stuff.”

“And you thought we could hire her at the training center?” Dax considered. “We’d need to do a thorough background and if she’s experienced in finance, we’d need to keep the books out of her hands.”

“Oh wow,” Paige straightened. “I didn’t even think of that. Never mind.”

“I think, if she passes Hawk’s background, we can use her as a secretary,” Dax offered. “I know it’s not what she wants but I’m not comfortable giving her access to the money until we get to know her. If we decide we can trust her, we might ease her in and see how it goes.”

“I ran a preliminary background and found nothing,” Paige offered. “I know Sparrow also ran her through his system. She’s clean, doesn’t even have a parking ticket. But she was too quick to give up her boss. I’m not sure if this is a good idea. If she gave you up...”

“She won’t,” Dax pulled her in for a kiss. “Let’s start slow and see how things go. If we decide we can’t trust her, we’ll come up with a reason to let her go and just say things didn’t work out. Plus, I might commission her to paint a few pieces for the center.”

“Are you sure?” Paige fidgeted.

“What does your gut say, Paige?” Dax already knew Paige liked her or she wouldn’t have suggested this in the first place.

“It says I’ll be devastated if I asked you to hire someone that ends up sending you —and the rest of the guys — to prison for the rest of your natural life,” Paige frowned.

“What else?” Dax took her hand in his and began rubbing circles over her palm.

“I thought it was a good idea,” Paige focused on him. “But she’s good. She saw an invoice and realized there was something off immediately. Then, she went digging. You guys spend weeks out in the wilderness. That would give her plenty of time to snoop — and discover your secrets.”

The Portrait

“I’d like to think we’re a bit more secure than shady Aunt Iris,” Dax smiled. “Let’s try it and we’ll see what we see. We desperately need someone to book the classes. I think she could deal with those transactions, keep track of the income from the courses and coordinate payments from the attendees. It might be enough to appease her, and it will give us time to evaluate. First, I need to talk to Hawk and the others and see how they feel about it.”

“Whatever you guys decide, I’m on board,” Paige told him. “She was saying how nobody would hire her and I remembered you guys needed help, but you haven’t had time to interview—and that’s as far as my thinking went. The rest, the money from that plane and the creative accounting, that never even crossed my mind. Be careful, Dax. If you hire her, be careful until you have time to get to know her.”

“We will,” he took her hand and pulled her to her feet. “Let’s eat. I brought a pizza home. It’s been a long day, and I wasn’t sure how long you would take with Zeus and that painting.”

They walked into the kitchen and Paige smiled. It was good to be back to normal. She liked this routine, and she loved her husband. Working light duty at the office until the baby was born wouldn’t be that bad. Her smile widened when Dax pressed her against the counter, leaned down, and kissed her. Yeah, her husband was definitely back to normal.