

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Muddled Affair* *Season 7, Episode 4*

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*by:*

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Edited by LaPriel Dye

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“It’s official,” Dax wrapped his arms around Paige and pulled her against him. “Our new home.”

“Can I at least have a tent?” Paige laughed.

“Someday Junior might want to go camping, but let’s wait until he’s born to plan that adventure,” Dax pressed a soft kiss to the side of her neck.

“You’re pretty sure of yourself,” Paige observed. “Will you be disappointed if the baby is a girl?”

“Are you kidding?” Dax turned Paige around. “I would love to have a miniature Paige running around the house. I can’t think of anything I’d like better than coming home every night to two beautiful, challenging girls.”

“Good answer,” Paige smiled. “This baby is going to love you. If we have a girl, I bet she’ll be a daddy’s girl, through and through.”

“And if it’s a boy?” Dax wondered.

“A miniature Dax,” Paige widened her eyes. “Heaven help us all.”

Dax laughed and pulled Paige back into his arms. “I don’t think the house will be finished before the baby comes, but we should be able to move in before the end of the year or the beginning of next year at the latest.”

“Our group is growing,” Paige smiled. “Now that Ken moved his family to Laurel Bluffs, I think Hawk and Vato are itching for their own space as well.”

“I can’t believe Wooly bought a farm,” Dax grinned. “That guy was city through and through. And his mother, she lived in Vegas her entire life. Now she’s raising chickens and teaching her grandsons to collect eggs.”

“Jaime loves their new place,” Paige relaxed. “I can’t blame her. I think she loves having Ken home every night even more.”

“Yeah,” Dax pulled Paige closer. “I can’t believe he held out as long as he did, but he loved that place up north. I get the feeling, he loves the farm more, though. And, it’s good for the business to have him closer. Now that Nathan and Sophie finalized the purchase of their new home, it feels like the family is finally home.”

“I hope Nathan will slow down a little,” Paige sobered, then grabbed her ringing phone. “Hello.”

“Paige, it’s Kyra Black.”

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“Hey, it’s been a while,” Paige smiled. “I heard you’re working the Nightfall Killer case.”

“I was, but they transferred me,” Kyra sighed. “Paige, I need your help.”

“What’s going on?” Paige frowned.

“My sister’s in trouble,” Kyra admitted.

“Larisa?” Paige asked. “There’s no way that kid committed a crime.”

“She didn’t,” Kyra assured her. “I can’t talk for long, and I can’t use my phone. They’re monitoring my communication. I borrowed a phone from a friend, because I need to meet with you, and it has to be in person. Are you available if I drive out to see you? Do you have somewhere I can spend the night, where we can talk in private? Someplace you’re sure it’s safe?”

“No,” Paige disagreed. She knew Kyra, if she was this on edge, whatever the situation, it was serious. “I’ll come to you. Where are you?”

“Colorado,” Kyra said, frustrated. “They transferred me to work on a simple embezzlement case. They needed me out of the way. I’ve been ordered to stay away from my sister and her husband’s case.”

“They who?” Paige wondered.

“Look,” Kyra sighed. “I’ll head out tomorrow and we can talk.”

“No, Kyra,” Paige disagreed. “If you’ve been benched, they’ll get suspicious if you take time off. Especially, if I get involved following your unplanned vacation. Let me talk to my husband and arrange a few days off with my boss — then, I’ll come to you.”

“Alright,” Kyra relented. “Please hurry. I’m worried about Larisa — and her family. They’re in trouble and you’re the only person I trust to help.”

“How can I contact you?” Paige asked before her friend hung up.

“Don’t call,” Kyra insisted. “Use our normal channels and the Hillside method.”

“Alright,” Paige frowned. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Where are we going?” Dax asked the instant Paige disconnected.

“What?” Her mind was racing. Kyra sounded near panic. She also sounded a little paranoid. Whatever was going on, it was huge. They hadn’t used that system for nearly a decade. They developed it while they were undercover investigating the Hillside killer. Nobody knew the code but her and Kyra. It used mathematical equations to form words and it was complicated.

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“I heard half the conversation,” Dax reminded her. “Sounds like you have a friend in need. So, where are we going?”

Paige studied Dax. “I need to take a trip to Colorado. I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s going on, but I have to go.”

“Then we’ll go,” Dax agreed. “I need a couple hours with the guys, I have to clear my schedule and reassess a few things. How many days do you think we’ll need?”

“I don’t know,” Paige admitted, completely shocked by his response. “Kyra is spooked. I’ve known her a long time and I’ve never heard her this stressed before. I won’t know how long it will take until I talk to her. Dax, I have to go but why are you doing this?”

“Babe,” Dax pulled her into his arms. “When I heard Zee was in trouble, I dropped everything and left. I didn’t know how long it would take or what I would have to do, but I was prepared to do anything to save him. That’s friendship. It doesn’t matter how long it takes or what this Kyra person needs. She trusts you and she needs you — that means, you’re going to be there for her. Plus, if she’s that spooked, you need backup and I need to know you’re okay. So, I’m going to be there for you. I think it falls under that contractually obligated thing you’re always referencing.”

“Awe,” Paige nodded then smiled. “The marriage rules. I think you’re right.”

“We’ll head to Colorado and talk to your friend.” Dax decided. “Then, we’ll come up with a plan of action together. The boys can handle things until we get back. As long as it takes, Paige. I’m there.”

“Alright,” Paige nodded. “While you take a couple of hours with your men, I’ll head over and try to talk Jericho into approving an unplanned vacation.”

“He’ll give you what you need if you explain the situation,” Dax opened the truck door. “Be straight with him. Then, meet me at the center.”

“What if he doesn’t?” Paige asked, worried.

“Then take a leave of absence,” Dax shrugged. “We can afford it, and this is important.”

“You’d really be okay with that?”

“Sure,” Dax gave her a quick kiss. “If there’s one thing I understand, it’s being there for your friends. Let’s get you to your car. The sooner we leave, the sooner this will be resolved.”

Paige watched him round the front of the vehicle and slide behind the wheel. That was true, Dax did understand true friendship. So did his men.

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Jericho studied Paige for several seconds.

“What?” she finally barked.

“I’m thinking,” Jericho sat back. “I’m trying to make some sense out your request.”

“My request makes sense,” Paige frowned. “I need some time off to help a friend. I have plenty of vacation hours and I’m asking to use them.”

“Your request is denied,” Jericho began.

“Then I want—”

“No,” Jericho cut her off. “If you’re helping a fellow agent, this isn’t vacation. If her family is in trouble, and you think you can help, it’s a case.”

“Then I can go?” Paige asked for clarification.

“I have stipulations,” Jericho studied her. “And restrictions.”

“What kind of restrictions?” Paige frowned. She couldn’t work with restrictions.

“You don’t care about my stipulations?”

“I’m sure I can live with those,” Paige shrugged.

“Let’s cover them anyway,” Jericho sat back. “First, Dax goes with you — that’s nonnegotiable.”

“Okay,” Paige agreed.

“He already offered,” Jericho smiled.

“More like insisted,” Paige corrected.

“Once this Agent Kyra ... what was her last name?” Jericho demanded.

“Black,” Paige settled into her chair.

“Once Agent Kyra Black explains the situation to you,” Jericho continued. “You call immediately and explain it to me.”

“She doesn’t trust the phones,” Paige argued.

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“I’m sure Hawk has a burner he can loan me,” Jericho dismissed that. “And, I have no doubt your husband will be in contact with his team during the entire situation. He checks in with his team, you check in with yours.”

“I’ll make it work,” Paige promised.

“If this turns into something... let’s say complicated,” Jericho decided. “You back off.”

“No,” Paige disagreed. “If it wasn’t complicated, Kyra wouldn’t have called. Plus, I told you, the FBI already benched her. That makes it complicated.”

“Alright,” Jericho considered. “What do you think is going on here?”

“I have no idea,” Paige answered honestly. “I know Kyra is a good agent. I know she’s scared and worried about her sister. And I know Larisa is a good kid that would sooner cut off her right arm than do anything wrong. Beyond that, I don’t know. I won’t know until I meet with Kyra.”

“Is Larisa in Colorado with her sister?” Jericho questioned.

“I doubt it,” Paige frowned. “Kyra said she was benched and transferred to Colorado. Last I heard, Larisa lived in Texas.”

“Do you think the problem is in Texas?”

“Probably,” Paige decided. “Kyra was removed from a high-profile investigation in Texas, then transferred. She was working the Nightfall Killer case. Those murders occurred on the coast, along the Gulf. If they transferred her to Colorado, it was to get her away from her sister and whatever problem arose while she was assigned there. They’re creating distance. Which was stupid, there’s nobody better to handle a serial case than Kyra. Maybe she’s right and the bad guys have pull in the bureau. Maybe the FBI sees a potential conflict and they’re trying to avoid a scandal. Maybe it’s something entirely different. The only thing I know for sure, is Kyra won’t cut off all contact with her sister — no matter what the brass says. And she asked for my help. She wouldn’t do that unless there was no other option.”

“Then let’s do this,” Jericho decided. “You and Dax head to Colorado and find out what’s going on. Then, you return here and report in, brief me on the situation. I’m going to assume you’ll be traveling to Texas after that, but at least we’ll all know what we’re dealing with and how to help. At that point, we’ll decide your status.”

“I can live with that,” Paige decided.

“Good because I wasn’t asking,” Jericho glanced at the clock and stood. “I have a meeting and I’m late. Oh, and you deal with the obstinate General before you leave.”

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Paige watched him stroll out the door before she stood and headed for her car. She had some packing to do, and she needed to talk to Dax about how to handle Nathan. Worse, she had no idea how to handle Sophie. The woman was hovering, and she wasn't going to like this impromptu trip. Especially, once she realized the reason behind it.

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"How will we find her?" Dax pulled onto Main Street.

"Give me a minute," Paige studied the map. She glanced up and bit her bottom lip. "Okay, it's been a while but if my math is correct, Kyra will be waiting for us in the parking lot of the —" She glanced down at her phone. "Of the Louis Swiss Bakery."

"And if your math is off?" Dax smiled. "Kyra isn't actually in Aspen. She's hanging out in Grand Junction — at Starbucks."

"Naw," Paige grinned. "More like a golf course in Wolcott."

"Words can't describe how much better I feel about the situation," Dax grumbled.

"There it is," Paige pointed toward the bakery. "And there she is." Paige frowned. Kyra looked terrible. She'd lost a lot of weight and she looked like she hadn't slept in days.

"It's a good thing we came," Dax parked the car and waited. "Should I stay here or join you?"

"Join me," Paige opened the door, climbed out, and just stood there for several seconds. She knew the instant Kyra spotted her. "Wait for it." She told Dax once he moved in behind her. "She'll come to us."

Kyra strolled across the parking lot and stopped in front of Paige. "You brought company."

"Kyra, meet my husband, Dax Hamilton," Paige pulled her friend in for a hug. "You look like hell."

"Thanks," Kyra turned toward Dax. "You must be an amazing man. You had to be, to get this one to take the plunge. If she trusts you, I'm going to. We can't talk here, though. Agent Davis will be back any minute."

"What's the plan?" Paige glanced around.

Kyra slipped her a key. "I sent you the address. Make yourself at home. I'm off in an hour, then I'll join you."

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“Alright,” Paige slipped the key into her pocket. “Kyra, are you safe?”

“Me? Yes,” she gave a short laugh. “I’m sorry for all the intrigue but I’m fine here. I will be fine as long as I leave my sister’s problems in Texas. Nobody knows I’m still working this, and it has to stay that way.”

“We’ll see you in a bit,” Paige motioned for Dax to get back into the car. She climbed into the passenger seat and ducked down.

“What are you doing?” Dax started the engine.

“Making sure Agent Do-gooder Davis doesn’t see me,” Paige peeked out the window. “What are you waiting for, drive.”

“I was waiting for the address,” Dax shook his head.

“Right,” Paige pulled out her phone, deciphered the message, and rattled off an address.

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The couple was lounging on the couch when Kyra entered the residence.

“Did you guys get settled?” Kyra asked.

“Who is Philip Keim?” Paige asked casually.

“I should have known you wouldn’t relax,” Kyra dropped into a chair. “You were always suspicious and never trusted your surroundings. Philip is a friend. One nobody knows about. I met him in college, but his parents were very strict and didn’t allow outside influence — or friends. He was raised Amish, but no longer practices. Anyway, we kept our friendship a secret back then out of necessity. After college we didn’t intentionally hide our connection, but since he was shunned by his family and landed in Portland, it played out that way. This place belongs to him, it’s his vacation home — well, one of them. He loves to ski and only uses it in the winter. It’s safe and you won’t be discovered here.”

“You’re not staying here?” Dax wondered.

“No,” Kyra stood and began to pace. “It is safe, though.”

“We know,” Paige sat up. “We already swept it for bugs and Dax assures me the angle would be difficult for a sniper or even electronic surveillance.”

Kyra just stared. “How?”



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“You have Philip, I have him — and Carmen,” Paige shrugged. “Tell us why we’re here. Actually, how much time do you have?”

“You always were thorough,” Kyra settled back into the chair and studied Dax before she focused on Paige. “I’m off duty for the rest of the night but I’m wondering if it was a mistake to call you in. You didn’t tell me you were pregnant. I’m dealing with some dangerous people, and I don’t want to risk you — or your child.”

“I’ll decide how we proceed once you tell us what’s going on,” Paige pushed.

“We’ll decide,” Dax corrected. “Tell us about your sister. Is she safe?”

“Larisa has gone into hiding with her five-month-old son,” Kyra began.

“Who is she hiding from?” Paige frowned.

“I need to tell this my way if that’s okay,” Kyra fidgeted.

“Alright,” Paige agreed. “I remember she got married, what — six or seven years ago?”

“Eight,” Kyra corrected.

“Wow,” Paige said, surprised. “She’s just a kid. Time flies, I guess.”

“She was twenty when she got married,” Kyra explained. “I was sure it wouldn’t last. You know me and my trust issues. It’s gotten worse — since my split with Rowan.”

Paige just nodded. Kyra did have trust issues, but that’s not the reason her relationship with the love of her life ended. Paige didn’t know what happened, but she knew Kyra hadn’t been serious with anyone since her relationship with Rowan Leavitt ended abruptly.

“Anyway, enough about that. Kendric is amazing,” Kyra told them. “He is so in love with Larisa and would do anything to protect her and make her happy. You can see it when you’re around them. That man adores my sister. Kind of the way your guy adores you.”

“Okay, so they’re in love,” Paige acknowledged. “How is that pertinent?”

“Kendric’s been arrested for killing his mistress,” Kyra admitted. “You need to know that, but he’s being framed. He never had a mistress.”

Paige narrowed her eyes at Kyra. “I know it’s difficult —”

“Paige, you know if there was any possibility that Kendric was cheating on my baby sister, I wouldn’t defend him,” Kyra interrupted.

“True,” Paige agreed. “But a frame job, you know that’s unlikely.”

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“It started with his work,” Kyra continued. “Kendric is a brilliant financial planner, but he made most of his money in real estate and he has a lot of it. Money, that is.”

“Alright,” Paige nodded.

“He’s good,” Kyra reiterated. “I mean crazy good. People seek him out, especially people with problems.”

“You’re rambling,” Paige accused. “Give me the report, Kyra.”

“Okay, you’re right,” Kyra looked away. “It’s just personal. I guess I get it now. I can empathize with all the families we interrogated over the years. The personal stuff, the character stuff, that means nothing to us, but when it’s your life and your family — it’s all that matters.”

“Report it like you would a briefing,” Paige suggested.

“Alright,” Kyra took a deep breath. “Kendric was hired by a rich hotel heir. The client’s funds were disappearing, and he wanted Kendric to find out where they were going. Kendric was excited at first. It was a challenge, and he doesn’t have many of those — not anymore. Anyway, he stumbled onto something. The deeper he dug, the more he was convinced he’d accidentally uncovered a sophisticated theft ring.”

“How does this play into a dead mistress?” Dax wondered.

“He took what he found to Larisa,” Kyra ignored him. “She agreed, something didn’t add up, and she started to dig electronically.”

“Is Larisa a hacker, like Carmen?” Dax wondered.

“There’s nobody in the world like Carmen,” Paige laughed.

“Larisa is a computer genius, in a different way than Carmen,” Kyra explained. “Carmen’s a hacker, but she’s also amazing at digging out data — official data. Larisa deals with programming for the most part, but she’s dialed in to the social side of hacking. She can also dig, in a different way, and she uncovered a pattern. I should also tell you she’s furious with me. I came down on her pretty hard after Kendric was arrested. If they had only come to me —”

“But they didn’t,” Paige realized. “She didn’t want to drag her big sister into something shady.”

“That wasn’t it,” Kyra disagreed. “She wanted proof. She thought she needed to tie the evidence up in a tidy little bow before they brought it to me. She said she was trying to prove she wasn’t a reckless kid anymore. Epic fail on that one. Now, she feels like this is all her fault. Her husband is in jail and she’s hiding out, afraid for her life. She admitted Kendric wanted to contact me immediately. Larisa talked him into waiting.”

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“Alright,” Paige considered. “You still haven’t said where the girlfriend comes in.”

“There is no girlfriend. I don’t know who that woman is. Larisa was digging, and she assumes there was a trigger,” Kyra sighed. “I think she got cocky. I mean, Carmen does this kind of thing all the time, but Larisa doesn’t. We know how to get what we need without leaving a trace. I think my sister missed something, a trigger of some kind that alerted the bad guys. Whatever it was, the thieves realized someone was inside their business looking around. I’m only guessing at this point, but they must have assumed it was Kendric because he’d been hired by Tyler Atwood to look into things. That’s the only thing that makes sense. Then, they put a plan in motion to frame Kendric for murder. It gets him out of the way, and it discredits him. Problem solved.”

“The girlfriend was killed after Larisa started to dig?” Dax clarified.

“The fake girlfriend was killed,” Kyra barked. “Kendric did not have a girlfriend.”

“Okay,” Paige soothed. “We’re talking about Tyler Atwood the mogul that inherited a gazillion hotels from his parents —that Atwood?”

“Yes,” Kyra nodded. “He has so much money, he doesn’t know how much he has. It was a fluke, really. He wanted to purchase an island or something and realized his monthly expenditures were higher than they should be. He tried to look into it, but his accountant couldn’t explain it. That’s when he tracked down Kendric and paid him a ton of money to find the leak.”

“Tell us the rest,” Paige prompted. “I know there’s more.”

“Only speculation by Larisa,” Kyra admitted. “She believes there are multiple players. A group of at least three, maybe four. That’s how many they would need to pull this off. It looks like they connect with their targets somehow. I was tracking Atwood’s movements when I got unceremoniously benched. There has to be something to that. Once they zero in on a mark, they go in and secretly transfer funds from their victim’s account. It’s then transferred to a secret, offshore slush fund. Once it clears, they begin bouncing it all over hell and back.

Larisa was trying to follow the money to the final destination when Kendric got spooked. He wouldn’t tell Larisa what happened, but he was terrified. Larisa is sure he was threatened because that’s what happened to her. A guy approached her at the market and told her she was vulnerable and so was her child. He warned her what would happen to both of them if she didn’t back off. Kendric made arrangements with a friend and Larisa took their son and fled that night. He was supposed to meet up with them the next day, after he completed an important meeting with a client. Instead, he was arrested for the murder of a woman he never met.”

“And Larisa is still in hiding?” Paige wondered.

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“Yes,” Kyra nodded. “I know where they are, but Kendric arranged a safe place for her to stay with Darius — that’s their son. It’s a good thing he did. Their house was ransacked a few hours after Kendric was arrested. It was completely torn apart.”

“And the husband?” Dax asked. “Where is he now?”

“He’s sitting in jail awaiting trial for murder,” Kyra jumped to her feet and began to pace. “I was in Texas, working the Nightfall case but secretly digging on Kendric’s situation on the side. Suddenly, I was called into the SAC’s office, reprimanded, and shipped off to Colorado to handle a stupid embezzlement case that would normally get assigned to a rookie. I was also warned to stay away from my brother-in-law and his case. If I go near it, I’m fired. You need to know, whoever these guys are, they have friends in high places. If I step foot in Ashmont Landing, I’m finished.”

“Well,” Dax smiled. “Lucky for you, we don’t work for the FBI. It would be kind of difficult for them to fire us.”

“This isn’t a joke,” Kyra insisted. “These people are dangerous. If you get too close, they’ll stage a murder, frame you for it, have you arrested, and lock you away for the rest of your natural life.”

“Lucky for you,” Dax repeated. “I don’t scare that easily.”

“What Dax means,” Paige corrected. “Is we’ve dealt with dangerous people before and we know how to handle it.”

“Actually, what I mean is that they might have power and influence in that small Texas town, but we also have friends in high places,” Dax said flatly. “I’m not worried and I don’t like bullies. Is your sister available to speak with us and hand over everything she found — or, do you have it?”

“I have it,” Kyra admitted. “I’m still not sure I should bring you in, though.”

“We’re already in,” Paige insisted. “Pregnant or not, I’m not letting an innocent man go to prison for the rest of his life because he was dumb enough to try to handle this on his own. It sounds like we’re dealing with a violent crime syndicate. That’s tough enough for law enforcement, it was stupid for a financial planner to think he could save the day and come out of this unscathed.”

“Kendric wanted to bring me in from the start,” Kyra reminded her.

“Then he won’t go to prison for your sister’s mistake,” Paige shrugged. “Either way, we’re making a stop in Utah, then the two of us are heading to the Lone Star state.”

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“Paige,” Kyra focused on her stomach. “You need to be sure about this. I seriously wouldn’t have asked if I’d know about—” she waved her hand at Paige.

“I’m pregnant,” Paige nodded. “I’m not helpless. Plus, I have a secret weapon. One the bad guys won’t see coming.”

“What secret weapon?” Kyra frowned.

“Him,” Paige motioned to Dax. “He’s not just a pretty face.”

“Thanks, babe,” Dax took her hand. “Now, show us everything you have and let us get started. Can we stay here, or do we need to find a hotel?”

“Stay here,” Kyra blurted, afraid they might leave. “I mean, if you stay here there’s no record of it. Nothing can be traced back to you, or me.”

“One more thing,” Paige reached into a bag and pulled out a phone. “I need a way to reach you. This is a burner. Do not tell anyone you have it. Not even your sister. Keep it safe and keep it close.”

“Alright,” Kyra took the phone.

“This is in code,” Paige handed Kyra a piece of paper. “It has a number where you can reach me. Guard that with your life.”

“Okay,” Kyra tucked it into her bra. “Anything else?”

“Did Larisa or Kendric have any idea who might be involved?” Paige questioned.

“Larisa said they talked about possibilities,” Kyra answered. “They didn’t know who, but together they decided a banker had to be involved to approve the initial transactions. They also thought it could be someone inside the justice system — a cop, a prosecutor, a judge? They didn’t get that far before their world was destroyed. I also think they’d need a hacker.”

“Alright,” Paige glanced at Dax. “Give me the file, then go home. You have to look like you’re passing time. Keep it business as usual and stay under the radar until this is over. We’ll keep you in the loop, but you have to appear distant and removed from everything.”

“Paige, take some time—” Kyra started again.

“You need to go home,” Paige stood. “Don’t waste your breath. We’re in. I have a team I can trust and when it comes to backup, there’s nobody better.”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea to bring more people in on this,” Kyra objected.

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“Trust me,” Paige gave her a hug, then shoved her toward the door. “Lay low. I’ve got this.”

Dax watched Kyra leave. “Is Carmen an option — with the FBI angle? If not, I’ll need to bring Hawk in.”

“We do have this, right?” Paige turned to Dax.

“We do,” Dax pulled her into his arms. “We might need a good team, but we have that. First, we need to make sure the man is innocent. I’m not willing to risk our safety on a guy that killed his mistress and got caught. Once we’ve satisfy ourselves on that front, we’ll do what we have to do to save that family.”

“I know you don’t know Kyra, but she’s solid. If Kendric was cheating, I think she’d know, and she’d let him fry. Her assessment of the situation goes a long way for me. We have to look, but I’ll be surprised if Kendric was involved. I honestly think this is exactly what she says it is. Especially with the roadblocks and the transfer. Given that, I think we need to bring the entire team in on this as soon as we get home,” Paige considered. “We need all of them, including Nathan. If these guys really are as powerful as Kyra thinks, we might need his contacts and a few favors before this is over.”

“We’ll have a meeting at the center,” Dax promised. “We’ve got this, Paige. Now, let’s read through this file and see what we’re dealing with.”

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“When I said we’d have a briefing once you got home,” Jericho settled into a chair and leaned against the conference table. “I was thinking something a little more private.”

“Let me run you through the situation and tell you what we know,” Paige told him. “Then you’ll understand why we brought everyone in on the case.”

“Sophie isn’t happy about this,” Nathan advised.

“Yeah,” Paige nodded. “She made that clear, but I’m not changing my mind. So, let’s get started.” She proceeded to go through the timeline she’d built and filled in the information they had on Kyra, Larisa and Kendric.

“And you’re sure this Kendric guy was framed?” Jericho studied the diagram Paige had displayed on the wall. “A lot of men have secret affairs. What do you know about the victim?”

“I know Kyra,” Paige nodded. “She’s like a sister to me. And, I know Larisa. If Kendric was cheating, both of them would let him rot in a cell and never look back. Larisa went into

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hiding, but her home was ransacked, and she's received death threats through fake accounts on social media. Someone wants to silence her. Why? If she's wrong, if her husband was having an affair and killed his mistress, why go to the trouble? Why harass and threaten her — and her infant son?"

"Compelling, I'll give you that," Nathan nodded. "I also know Kendric Beazley, loosely. By that I mean, I've had dealings with him, and he comes across as solid. He's handled portfolios for some powerful people in Washington. I'm inclined to believe him and Agent Black."

"So where does that leave us?" Jericho continued to study the board. He hated corruption and had a bad feeling about this case, but Dax and Paige were determined to see it through. All he could do was support them and get out of their way. "It's obvious the two of you are heading to Texas."

"We are," Dax affirmed. "But we need to know we have backup we can trust if things get hot," he told the group. "That's where you come in. I'm taking a burner with us, and Paige gave one to Kyra. We'll communicate anything we want to keep secret with the burners."

"But we're also going to call in and relay some innocuous details now and again," Paige added. "It would look suspicious if we flew to Texas and immediately went silent."

"You'll call us with insignificant information to throw them off," Zeus realized. "You want them to think you're out there spinning your wheels and getting nowhere."

"Exactly," Paige agreed. "Nathan, I'm going to need Carmen on this. Will that be a problem?"

"No," Nathan turned to Carmen. "Be careful and try not to leave a trace. That's what got the girl and her husband in a bind in the first place. If I have to call in a favor at the Bureau, I will but it would be cleaner to avoid that altogether. The two of you also need to be careful. Getting one guy out of jail is going to be complicated enough. If either of you land behind bars, it will just compound things further and the situation is already precarious. I have contacts in the state, but nothing in that town. You need to be careful and stay alert. The bad guys could be hiding in plain sight, in any job, with varying levels of power."

"Again, that's why we need you guys," Paige glanced around the room. "We're leaving in the morning. Dax has an advanced class he needs to get back to next month, so that gives us roughly three weeks to wrap this up. That's our deadline. Dax will be back to help with that class, I promise. Hawk, I'll need you to work with Carmen and generate backgrounds on all the suspected players. Kyra compiled this list. We might have more names once we arrive and start looking into things. We'll prioritize the suspects based on those backgrounds and it will give us a place to start. Any questions?"

## Muddled Affair

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“I have one,” Carmen said. “You’re not with the FBI anymore and Dax is retired. How do you plan to get the police reports on Kendric and the murder?”

“Kendric has hired a new attorney,” Paige grinned. “One that owes me a favor. He’s already requested discovery. Hopefully he’ll have it by the time we arrive.”

“Who?” Nathan demanded. “I have contacts as well. I think we should approach this with the understanding the case might actually go to trial.”

“August Dellinger,” Paige grinned.

“He agreed?” Nathan asked, surprised.

“He did,” Paige nodded. “He’s meeting us in Ashmont in two days.”

“How did you accomplish that?” Nathan demanded. “I’m not sure I could have pulled that one off. He’s in demand and chooses his clients carefully.”

“Like I said,” Paige shrugged. “He owes me a favor. It’s not going to come cheap, but he’s the best.”

“Must have been a big favor,” Nathan relaxed. “If we can’t fix this, at least Kendric will get the best defense known to man.”

“We’ll fix it,” Dax said confidently. “There’s no other option.”

The group worked for several hours developing a plan of action and putting safeguards in place just in case something went terribly wrong. Paige and Dax passed the list of suspects off to Carmen so she could get started on backgrounds.

“Alright,” Paige finally stood. “I’m starving and we need to pack. We want our own vehicle, so we’re driving down in the morning. I’ll call and check in once we arrive and get settled.”

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“Leave a few outfits in the closet,” Paige pulled out three shirts and a pair of pants, then hung them in the closet. “When they come looking, it has to appear legit.”

“Sophie and Carmen sent that small bag over there,” Dax pointed to a small black bag he dropped on the bed. “They said it was girly stuff for the bathroom.”



## Muddled Affair

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Paige grabbed it and disappeared into the small bathroom. Within minutes she returned. “Okay, let’s get out of here. I want to take these shoes off and veg for the rest of the night. Once things get started, it might get intense.”

“We stick together, Paige,” Dax insisted. He pulled open the door and waited for her to exit. “No matter what, we’re a team. We take precautions until we understand the threat and the risks.”

“I agree,” Paige slid into the car.

Dax pulled onto the road and headed for the secret location Nathan arranged. They set the hotel up to give the men they were after a target, but they needed their privacy. They also needed to know they would be safe and not come under attack in their sleep.

“I don’t think the good general knows the meaning of the word subtle,” Dax pulled into a large estate with a private gate. It would be secure, that’s for sure, but they would need to be careful and make sure they didn’t draw attention to themselves. The neighbors would certainly notice in this part of town.

“The butlers on vacation so you’ll have to carry your own luggage,” Paige teased. “Let’s get inside. I have the security codes. Nathan is worried. I didn’t realize just how worried until we pulled up to this house. It’s his way of helping and making sure we stay safe.”

“I know,” Dax dropped the luggage in the foyer. “Let’s take a look around and get settled. We need time to read through all these backgrounds and you need to prepare for your meeting with Kendric and the lawyer.”

“Right,” Paige stepped into the luxurious den and spotted two large whiteboards and an enormous cork board. “Let’s get organized.”

“Nathan never ceases to amaze me,” Dax grinned at the boards. They spent the next few hours organizing photos, reports and suspects, laying out all the players and prioritizing who to investigate first.

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“Paige, I need a minute before we head in,” August handed her a file.

“What’s this?” Paige flipped it open.

“As soon as we leave here, I’m filing a motion to dismiss,” August advised. “Are we still pretending you’re my assistant?”

“We are,” Paige nodded. “Is that a problem?”

## Muddled Affair

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“No,” he shrugged. “I don’t care for the games you cops play, but I can live with this one.”

“Gee, thanks,” Paige said sarcastically. “What are your grounds for dismissal?”

“You should read through that,” August suggested. “If you were actually my assistant, you would have typed it for me.”

“Give me the highlights,” Paige said, annoyed. “I’ll read through it later.”

“Unless I’m missing something, they didn’t have probable cause,” August frowned. “We’ll talk to the client, see if there’s something I don’t know, but rumors of an affair and a dead girl isn’t enough for an arrest.”

“There wasn’t any evidence?” Paige flipped through the motion.

“Not in the documents they sent me,” August glanced at the closed door. “This case doesn’t pass the smell test, Paige. They have a witness that said the dead girl, Willow something, was secretly dating someone. The witness thought he might be married because it was all covert meetings and a hidden identity — Willow refused to tell anyone his name. Then, she ends up dead, Kendric is arrested, and everyone assumes he was the married guy she was dating. I can’t see any documentation showing how they got from the dead woman to Kendric. One day she’s dead. The next, Kendric is behind bars and denied bail.”

“I told you when I called, this was a frame job,” Paige dropped the file on the seat of her car. “It doesn’t pass the smell test because it stinks.”

“Even for a small town, this is sloppy,” August insisted. “We live in America; you have to have PC to arrest someone. They’ve got reasonable suspicion at best. I’m not even sure you have that. A frame job implies planting evidence to frame someone, not arresting a random man simply because he’s married.”

“Go ahead and file your motion,” Paige decided. “But don’t be too surprised when it’s denied.”

“I also have a demand before we go inside,” August studied Paige.

“Go ahead,” Paige motioned for him to proceed.

“I agreed to let you join while I meet with my client,” he began. “But you’re a cop. Once you’ve finished asking your questions, you leave. I need privacy, away from the prying ears of law enforcement.”

“I’m on his side,” Paige protested.

“You are now,” August nodded. “What if he says, okay you caught me, I was having an affair with that girl. How do you proceed, then?”

## Muddled Affair

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“Alright,” Paige agreed. “I’ll leave if it gets to a point, you feel you need privacy.”

“Just like that?” August asked, skeptically.

“Sure,” Paige shrugged. “Because he wasn’t having an affair with that woman, he didn’t even know that woman, and this is a frame job. Clearly, it’s a bad frame job, but being a sloppy idiot doesn’t change the facts.”

“Maybe they’re just cocky and that’s why it’s sloppy. Let’s go,” August motioned toward the door. “I want to meet this Kendric Beazley and figure out how I want to proceed.”

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Kendrick studied Paige for several seconds. “Kyra talks about you. I know you’re close and she trusts you. I understand that, but you are also pregnant. We’re dealing with some dangerous men. I can’t risk it. I won’t have you involved.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Paige told him. “I’m already involved. I can do it with or without your help. It will be easier with your help, but I can and will proceed without it — if I have to.”

“This is crazy,” Kendric scrubbed his hands over his face then turned to August Dellinger. “And I’m not even sure why you’re involved in this. Who hired you?”

“You did,” August said flatly. “Now, we don’t have a lot of time. From what I’ve seen, their case is weak. I doubt they’re planning to take this to trial.” He focused on Paige. “I need you to be very careful how you answer this question. If Kyra spoke of Paige, you know she’s a cop and you know she’s good at her job.”

“I don’t need to be careful,” Kendric glared at August. “I did not do this. I’ve never met that woman in my life. She was not my mistress, and I did not kill her.”

Paige smiled.

“Gloating is beneath you,” August said under his breath.

“No,” Paige disagreed. “Not really. Kendric, I have questions.”

“Go ahead,” he stared at the table.

“What was the threat?” she studied him. Finally, he glanced up and locked eyes with her.

“Why does it matter?”

“Because it tells me the type of people we’re dealing with. You said they’re dangerous. What did they threaten?”

## Muddled Affair

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“They said if I didn’t do exactly what they said, they would kill Larisa and my son,” Kendric sighed. “The man described how he would do it, in detail. He said he would make me watch, then he’d let me go and force me to deal with my failure for the rest of my life. Then he told me to plead guilty to killing that Willow woman. He was very specific that he does not want this to go to trial.”

“Alright,” Paige wouldn’t make him describe the deaths. She figured it was gruesome. “So, you sent Larisa into hiding and you planned to join her that evening?”

“Yes,” Kendric agreed. “I had a meeting that afternoon that I didn’t want to miss.”

“Who were you meeting with?” August demanded.

“Why?” Kendric frowned.

“Did he show?” Paige pushed.

“Uh, no,” Kendric’s frown deepened. “Do you think he was involved?”

“It’s possible,” Paige admitted. “I need to check it out.”

“Alright,” Kendric considered. “I doubt he’s involved, though. I’ve been working with him for years. He said there was some suspicious activity, recent stuff. Investments that he didn’t approve. He thought his accountant was skimming or hedging.”

“Do you think it was connected to Alcott’s missing money?” Paige wondered.

“I didn’t,” Kendric considered. “I guess it’s possible. I just thought Gary was using Scott’s funds to invest in risky projects, again. Scott agreed and we planned to meet to go over each expenditure, but he never showed, and I got arrested.”

“I’ll look into it,” Paige decided. “Scott who?”

Kendric hesitated.

“I’ll be discreet,” Paige promised.

“Vandenburg,” Kendric admitted.

“The gazillionaire drone guy?” Paige wondered.

“More like billionaire, but yes,” Kendric sighed. “Please be very discreet. He’s not just a client, he’s a friend.”

“And he’d be a great target,” August considered. “If this is related to a theft ring, if the people responsible are stealing from wealthy moguls, your friend would be an ideal victim in their underhanded scheme.”

## Muddled Affair

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“True,” Kendric agreed. “But Gary has done this before.”

“Why does he still have a job?” Paige wondered.

“He’s family,” Kendric turned to glare at the tiny window. “He’s Scott’s cousin. I think that’s why he does it. He knows Scott won’t fire him.”

“I’ll look into it,” Paige reiterated. “Now, is there anything else I should know?”

“No,” Kendric turned back to Paige. “Other than the obvious — you shouldn’t get involved. I can’t control what you do, but I think you should go home where it’s safe.”

“Duly noted,” Paige stood. “I’m going to head out, start researching Vanderburg. If he’s not involved, there had to be a reason he didn’t show. That might give me a lead to follow. I assume you’ve got this?”

“I’m going to stick around for a while,” August told her. “I have questions and I want to go over strategy with Mr. Beazley.

“Sounds like a plan,” Paige strolled to the door. “Oh, Kendric, do not tell anyone who I am. Not anyone. Don’t discuss it with Larisa if she visits or calls. Everything you do inside this jail will be monitored and we want the people that orchestrated this little plot to believe I’m just a pregnant secretary. The longer we can keep up that ruse, the better.”

“Larisa won’t visit,” Kendric assured her. “I’ve given her strict orders to stay away. She agrees because the distance protects our son.”

“Then I’ll leave you in August’s capable hands.” Paige motioned to the guard and left the building.

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Paige was crossing the parking lot when she spotted the man leaning against her vehicle. He pushed to his feet when she approached. “It’s been a long time, what do you want?”

“I think you know why I’m here,” Rowan frowned. “So, it’s going to be like that, is it?”

“Like what?” Paige leaned against the hood of her car.

“I thought we were friends,” he settled back next to her.

“I thought you promised not to hurt my friend,” Paige stared into the distance. “Then you broke her heart.”

“Actually, she broke my heart,” Roman corrected. “And still, I’m here to help.”

## Muddled Affair

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“What is that supposed to mean?” Paige studied him.

“Kyra broke up with me, Paige,” he practically growled. “And she refused to tell me why. Then she requested a transfer and I never heard from her again.”

“She broke up with you,” Paige repeated. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Did she tell you I broke things off?”

“No, I just assumed,” Paige frowned.

“Everyone assumed,” Rowan looked away. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is the here and now. Kyra’s family is in trouble, and she’s been shipped off to Colorado to work with Davis. He’s watching her closely, reporting in on her movements, and he’s trying to track her phone calls. He didn’t know about you, though.”

“But you did,” Paige realized. “How?”

“I expected it,” Rowan admitted. “You two were always tight and I figured she had nowhere else to turn.”

“At least, that’s what Kyra thought,” Paige bumped his shoulder with hers. “She had you, though — didn’t she?”

“She always will,” he admitted. “Whether she wants me or not.”

“I’m not going to pry,” Paige decided. “I just need to know if this is off the books or if you’re here to watch my movements and report to your boss.”

“I was officially assigned,” Rowan admitted. “But not to watch you. The Bureau has no idea you’re here. I asked for the assignment. Well, I actually begged, blackmailed, and coerced. The case is mine and I’m going to protect Kyra.”

“Sounds like the Rowan I know and love,” Paige studied him. “You better be telling me the truth. I’m going to trust you, because I always did. You’ve never given me a reason not to, but if you cross me, I swear—”

“I’m not stupid enough to cross you, Paige,” Rowan admitted. “I know you have the power to destroy me.”

“I think Kyra already did that,” Paige frowned. “Do you know why?”

“No,” Rowan stood. “If you still trust me, I think we should compare notes and develop a plan.”

## Muddled Affair

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“I already have a plan,” Paige considered. “Follow me back to my place. But I swear, if I’m wrong about this, my husband will kill you and I’m going to let him.”

“You can trust me, Paige,” Rowan said forcefully. “I promise, I’m just here to help.”

“And who do you report to?”

“Technically, I report to Dennis,” Rowan shrugged. “He’ll give me the freedom to do what I need to do.”

Paige smiled. “Good. He won’t interfere but if we get in a bind, he might be able to help.”

“I agree, so lead the way,” Rowan hesitated. “You’re not really staying at the hotel, are you?”

“Nope,” Paige opened the door and slid behind the wheel. “But that is where I’m going. Well, I’m going to make a stop there just in case I’m being watched. We won’t stay. Give me some space but try to keep up.”

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Paige was only a few blocks from the jail when the patrol vehicle passed Rowan and maneuvered behind her. The instant it was in position, the cop activated his lights and made the stop. Rowan glided by, turned on the next road and pulled to the side to watch. Paige knew he was there, but the cop was focused on her. *Good. Let’s see what he does.*

“Ma’am, I need you to step out of the vehicle,” the cop ordered.

He was tall, at least six-three and Paige guessed around two-forty, maybe two-fifty. He had dirty blonde hair, blue eyes, and a cocky smirk. She immediately knew this guy was involved — somehow. And he was dirty up to his eyeballs. She slowly pushed open her door and stepped outside. The instant she did, the man shoved her against the car and got in her face.

“Can you tell me why you stopped me?” Paige made her voice shake, just a little. She wanted him to think she was intimidated and afraid. Clearly, that was his intent.

“We’re going to have a little chat,” he leaned forward. “Let’s call this a partnership. Your boss has created a problem for me and my friends. I need an insurance policy. One that ensures Kendrick Beazley goes down for murder. So, here’s what you’re going to do. First, you’re going to tell me who you are and how you’re involved in this case. Then, you’re going to tell me what that hotshot attorney has planned.”

“And if I don’t?” Paige glanced down, still hoping he’d think she was intimidated. If he saw the anger brewing behind her eyes, he’d know she wasn’t some assistant or a secretary.

## Muddled Affair

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“You’re a pretty little thing,” he grabbed her arm and tightened his grip. “You don’t want anything to happen to that kid you’re carrying, do you? I’m going to assume you’re a secretary or a paralegal. It’s the only way you’d get inside that jail with the attorney. If you want to keep that pretty smile and those beautiful eyes, you’ll contact me before that lawyer makes a move. I’ll give the information to my guy, he’ll be prepared for what’s coming, and everyone will go home happy. Do you understand me?”

“I guess,” Paige wanted to knee the arrogant prick in the groin, but she’d play along — for now.

“When he talks strategy, you call me,” he handed her a card. “You tell me what he’s up to and you go home with that pretty face intact. You cross me and that kid of yours will never be born. Are we clear?”

“Yes,” Paige whispered.

“I can’t hear you,” he tightened his grip.

“Yes,” Paige gritted her teeth and knew Dax was going to be on the warpath once he saw the bruise.

“Good,” the cop stepped back. “Now you go on back to the hotel and freshen up. I don’t want that lawyer suspecting anything once he returns. Go!” he ordered when she didn’t move.

Paige climbed back into the car and drove away. She glanced in the mirror and saw Rowan pull in behind the cop, but he was keeping his distance. She relaxed. He’d back her if needed, but otherwise, he’d remain a ghost. It felt good to have him back on the team. And she was pretty sure they’d need backup on this. It was stupid for the cop, what was his name? She glanced at the card he handed her — Levi Rathbone. It was stupid of him to reveal himself so quickly. Now they had a face and a name. One that wasn’t on the original list they gave Carmen.

Paige pulled into the parking lot of the hotel and watched the cop car speed past the entrance. She headed inside, grinned when she realized someone had searched the room, reset the string that ran across the top of the door and headed for her car. Twenty minutes later, she pulled up to the gate at her real headquarters and waited for Rowan to follow her inside. “Park in the garage,” she called through her open window, then opened the second door and waited for him to pull in.

“Sloppy,” Rowan said once they stepped into the house. “And fancy. The cop then the place, in that order.”

“A man of few words,” Dax stepped into the kitchen and studied Paige. “Who manhandled you?”



## Muddled Affair

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“I need a drink,” Paige pulled open the fridge. “Then I’ll fill you both in. This is Rowan Leavitt, Special Agent in charge of the investigation out here. I trust him, you should, too.”

“We’ll see,” Dax studied Paige’s arm. It was starting to bruise.

Paige handed him the business card. “Can you get Hawk or Carmen on this right away?”

“The law enforcement link?” Dax asked.

“That would be my guess,” Paige dropped into a chair. “He wants information before August presents it. He wants to make sure his partner is prepared before anything goes before the judge. And he threatened to damage my pretty little face if I don’t comply.”

“Someone’s face might get damaged,” Dax studied Rowan before he focused on Paige. “But it’s not going to be yours.”

“He knows who I am,” Rowan motioned to Dax. “Can I assume this is the husband I’ve heard so much about?”

“It is,” Paige sighed. “Rowan Leavitt, meet Dax Hamilton. Dax, Rowan. And before you ask, the man is in love with Kyra. He’s solid. And if we run into trouble, I think he can help.”

“Just so you know,” Dax stood. “I’ll be passing your name along to Carmen and Hawk as well.”

“Tell Carmen I said hey,” Rowan grinned and watched Dax leave the room. “Is he going to be a problem?”

“Only if Rathbone tries to damage my face,” Paige shrugged. “What do you know?”

“Not a lot,” Rowan admitted. “I have a copy of the original report. Don’t ask how I got that. And I know Larisa has disappeared. I also know they don’t have anything solid. Their case is crap and that’s generous. I think they were hoping Kendric would get a public defender, but he has money. It was stupid to assume he’d hire a novice representing him. Honestly, nothing about this case make sense.”

“Including your involvement,” Dax returned. “How is the FBI involved? This is a simple homicide case. It should have stayed local.”

“Except Kyra’s involved,” Rowan disagreed. “The Bureau has an interest — unofficially.”

“Dax makes a good point,” Paige studied him. “How did you get involved, not counting the begging, blackmailing and so forth.”

“Dennis,” Rowan shrugged. “He’s worried.”

## Muddled Affair

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“And protective,” Paige nodded, then turned to Dax. “He’s a sort of mentor. He took a liking to Kyra and has kept an eye on her throughout her career.”

“Like Nathan?” Dax wondered.

“Sort of,” Paige admitted. “He’s not as powerful and he doesn’t owe a debt to a dying friend, but he has rank, and he uses it when he needs to.”

“Carmen says I can trust you,” Dax told Rowan. “She better be right.”

“She is,” Rowan focused on Dax. “I don’t know you either, but Paige says I can trust you. She better be right because I’ll do anything to protect Kyra and her family.”

“Carmen has also identified three bankers that could be involved,” Dax ignored the comment. “Not all three, but she’s narrowed the pool down to these three. I told her to see if she can find a connection to the cop you encountered today.”

“Who are the bankers?” Rowan spotted the boards and began to study the intel.

“Vincent Bodine,” Dax was watching Rowan. “He’s top management and would have access to all of the accounts, but he’s audited frequently. She’s going to do a deep dive on him first. Then there are two mid-level possibilities — Arlo Williams and Terrance Noble. If she can eliminate Bodine, she’ll move on to one of them. Hawk took the cop and he’s digging into his life as we speak. We’ll know everything there is to know about Mr. Rathbone by morning at the latest.”

Paige interrupted to tell them what happened with Rathbone and the discussion she had with Kendric. “Rathbone is a loose cannon and he’s ready to go off. I think he’s the weak link, but he thinks he’s the shot-caller.”

“I’ll have Carmen look into Vandenburg, but I think that’s a dead-end,” Dax told them. “I would like to know why he didn’t show, though.”

“Yeah, I’d like to know that, too,” Rowan considered. “Dennis might be able to help with that, discreetly of course.”

“Have him see what he can get,” Paige decided.

“So what’s next?” Rowan wondered.

“We have a motion hearing tomorrow afternoon,” Paige advised them. “It was already on the books, but August sent me a text. He filed his motion to dismiss right after he left the jail. I’m going to meet him at the courthouse and attend the hearing. I need to see the judge in action, to see if I think he’s involved.”

## Muddled Affair

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“Rathbone is going to be pissed,” Rowan warned. “He threatened you and you ignored him. I think I should go with you, to make sure he doesn’t try anything.”

“He won’t,” Paige insisted. “He knows I didn’t have time to warn him about the motion and he needs me to cooperate. He won’t mess with me, yet.” She focused on Dax. “I know that look, what are you planning?”

“I’m deciding if I agree with you,” Dax told her.

“And?” Paige pushed.

“I think I do,” Dax decided. “I don’t think he’ll try anything because the motion was already in play, and he wants you to give him a heads up the next time August files something. You need to go to the courthouse alone, but I want you to call me on the burner the instant you leave. If he tries anything, I want to know immediately. We’re not that far away. I can get there in time to intervene if I need to.”

“He’s not going to try anything,” Paige insisted. “But I know you’re going to worry so I’ll call.”

Dax nodded then turned to Rowan. “There’s plenty of space if you want to stay here. It might keep the FBI’s involvement hidden for a while.”

“I’ll stay,” Rowan nodded to the boards. “I want to study that tonight, see where we’re at. Once I have a better understanding I’ll know how to proceed.”

“You’re not in charge, Rowan,” Paige warned. “I know you’re used to being in control, but this is our investigation. We’ll work together but you don’t try to pull rank.”

Rowan studied Paige. He wanted to argue, but she was doing him a favor and he wouldn’t jeopardize that. “We work together — as a team.”

“I can live with that,” Paige decided. “As long as you understand the team is bigger than the three of us. Dax has his own guys working things from a distance and I’ve got Carmen.”

“And Nathan,” Rowan grinned. “We both know this house has Nathan’s name all over it.”

“And Nathan,” Paige agreed. “In the shadows.”

“I think that’s where he does his best work,” Rowan sobered. “Can I have some time, alone? Can I have an hour to go over all of this? The police report is in that file. Feel free to take a look. There’s not much. They’ve got a witness, a woman that claims Willow Delano was having an affair with a married man. That’s speculation, though. All she really knows is that Willow was seeing someone, and she was keeping it a secret. We don’t know for sure the guy was married. The neighbor said Willow was headed out, on a date, the night she disappeared.”

## Muddled Affair

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And we know where the body was found. There's no hard evidence to connect Kendric to Willow. Oh, and there's a video from a local restaurant that shows Kendric sitting at a table alone. Twenty minutes after he arrives, Willow arrives but they never connect, not in the video."

"That's new," Paige frowned. "I wonder if August has that and didn't share."

"Why would he keep information from you?" Rowan frowned. "And if he kept that, do you think he's keeping other things hidden?"

"He doesn't trust me," Paige admitted. "He said he thinks I'll turn cop and use the information to nail Kendric for this crime."

"That's ridiculous," Dax frowned. "Are you sure he's the right attorney for this job?"

"He's the best," Paige and Rowan said together.

"So, I hear," Dax grumbled. "But I'm sure there were other people inside that restaurant as well. Do you even know what night that was?"

"It was the night Willow was killed," Rowan admitted. "We think they're trying to frame Kendric for the murder. I think someone sent her to the restaurant in an attempt to get her on video at the same location as Kendric Beazley. It's not a good frame, but it's a start."

"I think there's more," Paige considered. "Maybe something they planted in the house the night they ransacked it. I think they hid something inside and they plan to retrieve it when the time is right. We know this Rathbone is involved. He could just show up at the house for some reason and stumble onto it while he's there."

"While you're at the courthouse," Dax considered. "I'm going to search the Beazley residence. I think we need to know what evidence they've planted."

"We'll search," Rowan corrected. "I can take the evidence and have it analyzed. It will be official evidence, not tampering with evidence that way."

"If you find something, it's going to look like Kendric was involved," Paige warned.

"True," Rowan agreed. "But we know he wasn't. I can have it analyzed and see if they left anything incriminating on it."

"I'd like you to wait until later so I can go with you," Paige decided. "I want to look for forensic evidence that can link the cop to the victim."

"You think Rathbone killed that girl?" Dax wondered.

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“I think it was either him, or one of his partners,” Rowan shrugged. “And I think Rathbone was the one that planted it — whatever it is. That way he knows exactly where it is, and he can stumble onto it when he has an audience.”

“You go to court tomorrow,” Dax decided. “Check out the judge and see what you think. The fed and I will find something to occupy our time until you return. I agree you should be there. We know these guys have a plan; and, so far, the one they’ve started is lacking.”

“I’ll meet you at the hotel, but we’ll need to be careful,” Paige warned. “They could have someone watching the house. None of us can afford to get arrested for burglary.”

“I’m sure you could convince Kendric to vouch for us,” Dax grinned. “But it’s better if we don’t get caught.”

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Paige entered the courtroom and settled into the chair next to August.

“What’s that look for?” August demanded.

“You’re keeping secrets,” Paige shrugged. “I’m thinking I might do the same.” She spotted Rathbone. He was standing against the back wall glaring at her. He wasn’t happy, but he had to know this was already in the works.

“What’s that about?” August looked away from Rathbone and focused on Paige. “And what are these secrets you think I’m keeping?”

“That cop pulled me over when I left the jail,” she told him. “He fell for the secretary bit, and he wants me to keep him in the loop. He threatened to mess up my face and harm my kid if I don’t warn him before you make a move.”

“He what?” August looked at Paige in shock. “How are you so calm about this? That man threatened you.”

“It might be a problem if I was just a secretary with a pretty face,” she glared at him. “I’m not. Don’t worry about that cop. I want to discuss the video. The one from the restaurant the night Willow was murdered.”

“How do you know about that?” August asked, resigned.

“Is there anything else you haven’t shared?” Paige ignored the question.

August hesitated for several seconds, then he reached into his file and pulled out a document. He slid it in front of Paige and waited.

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Paige glanced at the document, frowned, focused on Kendric, then returned to the document.

“That’s not my signature,” Kendric whispered. “He has my signature, it’s not even close.”

Paige glared at August and waited. He opened the file and pointed to the signature on the bottom of his contract, the one he had Kendric sign to agree to his terms and his fees. Kendric was right, they weren’t even close. She grabbed her phone, took pictures of both, then sat back and considered. Why would someone forge a lease agreement? One that was for the apartment where Willow Delano, their victim, lived. She glanced back down and noticed the date. It was two days before Kendric was arrested. Coincidence? Not likely. But again, it was sloppy. Kendric could easily prove he didn’t sign that lease or pay Willow’s rent.

Paige glanced up when the judge entered the courtroom. The proceeding was interesting. By the time it was over, Paige was convinced the judge was not involved in the crime, Rathbone was furious, and Kendric was going to be a free man. Well, he was going to be released from jail once he forked over a huge sum of money to a bail bondsman. August didn’t get the case dismissed, but the judge was obviously intrigued and had taken his motion under advisement, claiming she’d rule on it before the next hearing. The fact the judge was female was another indication she wasn’t involved. Paige didn’t think Rathbone would work with a woman.

“Your cop is not happy,” August whispered directly behind Paige. “Watch yourself. He has his eye on you.”

“He’s going to follow Kendric,” she warned. “He’s not going to let his suspect out of his sight. How soon before he’s released?”

“Less than an hour,” August glanced at Rathbone. “I already dealt with the paperwork and Kendric authorized my company to pay the initial bail and he’ll reimburse me the moment he’s released. I need your help to get him away from here without a tail. He’s going to join his wife and son in hiding until this is over. I can’t do this without your help.”

“On it,” Paige nodded, then moved down the hall, away from the crowd, to call Dax. Once she relayed what she needed, Dax assured her both he and Rowen would intercept Rathbone and make sure Kendric had a clean getaway.

“My office has dealt with bail,” August informed her. “We need to head over to the jail, produce the paperwork and Kendric should be free to leave. I’ll be transporting him to the safe house. Did you get what you needed, or do I need to stall?”

“We’re good,” Paige glanced down at her phone and read the text. *That was fast.* “My guys are in position. Go ahead and get started. I’ll follow you over to the jail and make sure you get away clean. Stash your client, then we need to talk.”

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“Get mad if you want, but I won’t change the way I do business,” August warned.

“Neither will I,” Paige smiled, then stepped into the elevator.

“What does that mean?” August frowned.

Paige just continued to smile.

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An hour later, Paige pulled into the parking lot of the hotel. Dax called to tell her Kendrick got away clean and he and Rowen were waiting for her inside their room. When she stepped through the door, Dax nodded in greeting but continued to talk on the phone. Rowan was sitting at the table in front of his laptop.

“That cop is as dirty as they come,” Rowan greeted, but didn’t look up. “We all know it. His actions prove it. Plus, he just looks like he belongs behind bars — and not in a good way.”

“What are you doing?” Paige stepped up to the table.

“Digging into Rathbone,” Rowan studied the screen and frowned. “But I’m not finding anything. On paper, he looks clean.”

“I’m not surprised. If Carmen hasn’t found anything, there’s nothing to find.” Paige moved across the room and pulled open the small fridge. “I need something to drink. There was a machine around the corner, do you want anything?”

“Sure,” Rowan pulled out a couple one-dollar bills and handed them to Paige.

“What’s up with Dax?” she studied her husband for several seconds. He was having an intense discussion with someone... if she had to guess, she’d say Hawk.

“Someone wants to head out here, to provide backup after the situation today,” Rowan shrugged. “We had a little trouble and Rathbone tried to run us off the road. That husband of yours knows how to drive.”

“Dumb move,” Paige moved to the door. “I’ll be right back.” She shut the door quietly and slowly moved toward the soda machine. She was nearly there when she spotted Rathbone. Instinct told her he was up to no good. He glanced around, like he was making sure there were no witnesses, then marched toward her. She pulled out her phone and video called Carmen.

“I don’t have anything yet,” Carmen greeted.

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“I need you to record this,” Paige slid her phone into her pocket just as Rathbone reached her. He didn’t crowd her this time. Instead, he grabbed her upper arms and slammed her into the wall.

“I don’t think you got my message,” he growled and leaned into her. “I guess you need a little reminder. You have no idea what I’m capable of — you stupid whore. Do not cross me, again. Because of you, that idiot finance guy is in the wind. And if I find out you had anything to do with that guy from earlier today, the one that got in my way, you’re dead. I’ll make sure it’s a long, painful death for you and that little brat you’re carrying. Say you understand me.”

“Hawk,” Carmen called. “Tell Dax Paige needs him. Immediately!”

“Hey, Paige is in trouble,” Hawk advised. “Call me after you deal with the cop.” He disconnected.

“Where is Paige?” Dax darted across the room.

“She went to grab some drinks,” Rowan glanced up. “Why?”

“Stay here,” Dax warned then rushed out the door.

“I won’t just mess up that pretty face of yours,” Dax heard the cop growl. “I’ll kill you, then chop you up in little pieces and dump you and that kid in a ditch out in the middle of a field where the wild hogs can feast for days.”

Dax moved fast; he closed the distance without making a sound, grabbed Rathbone by the neck and slammed him against the wall, pressing his face into the hard brick.

“Dumb move, buddy,” Rathbone growled. “You’re under arrest for assaulting a police officer.”

Dax stepped closer, shoving Rathbone’s face further into the wall. “You ever lay a hand on my wife again and you’ll find out just how much pain a body can take before it breaks. I will destroy you — mentally, physically, emotionally. Nod if you understand.”

“I’m going to take you down the instant you let go,” Rathbone growled. “You and your little wife will regret the day you crossed me. You’re headed to jail, pal.”

“I think I may have forgotten to tell you I was on the phone with my friend,” Paige stepped forward and swung her phone around so he could see the screen. Carmen smiled and waved. “She recorded the entire incident. I’m pretty sure my husband has a clear case of self-defense. I’ll have to consult August on that, but I’m pretty sure I’m right. Go ahead and arrest him — if you’re sure that’s what you want to do. I just don’t think it’s going to turn out the way you think it will. I mean, August Dellinger... he’s a pretty big deal and he has some friends in the media. You have no idea how much those media guys love to speak with August.”



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“Get off me,” Rathbone shoved backward, and Dax let go. “This isn’t over.”

Paige and Dax watched their prime suspect stomp down the stairs and across the parking lot. Paige turned and spotted Rowan headed their way. She ignored his questions and focused on her husband. “Um, can you put scary Dax back in the closet? Because that man is out of control, and we need to come up with a plan to deal with him immediately.”

“Scary Dax?” Rowan frowned. “What happened?”

“Rathbone threatened me and my unborn child,” Paige continued to watch Dax. She was afraid he might take off after Rathbone and make good on his promise.

“And?” Rowan asked.

“And I helped him to understand what would happen if he touched my wife again,” Dax turned and headed back to the room. “We need to clean up and get out of here.”

“Paige, should I be worried about this?” Rowan followed her.

“Yes,” Paige admitted. “Because Rathbone is going to go after Dax and I’m afraid he might kill him.”

“Rathbone will kill Dax or the other way around?” Rowan stepped into the hotel room and shoved his computer into a bag.

“Hell will freeze over before that idiot gets the jump on me,” Dax grabbed a black bag and moved toward the door. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll meet you two back at the house,” Rowan decided. “Maybe you’ll be cooled down by then and we can talk.”

“Not likely,” Paige mumbled before she opened the passenger door and dropped onto the seat. Dax climbed behind the wheel and they rode in silence all the way back to the house.

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“I’m sorry, Carmen,” Zeus told her. “I have to go.”

“I know,” Carmen glanced up. “I won’t try to stop you. That man threatened Paige. He’ll be lucky if Dax doesn’t kill him and ask questions later.”

“I’ll go with you,” Vato offered. “Nobody threatens Dax or Paige and gets away with it.”

“I need you to stay here,” Hawk stepped back into the room. “We have a class arriving tomorrow. I need you and Wooly to handle it,” Hawk told Vato. “The focus is on tactics and

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rappelling. That's your forte. We didn't include a shooting course so that rules me out. Plus —

“Plus, Dax might need a sniper to back him up,” Wooly stepped into the room. “I'll handle logistics from here. You know any one of us would head out and back Dax on this, but it makes sense for you and Zues to deal with this one. The look on that man's face screamed trouble. I'll stay here to help Carmen, and Vato can take the lead on the course. Zeus, I restocked the explosives last week. Take what you need, I'll replace it while you're gone.”

“Explosives?” Katie swallowed and locked eyes with Hawk.

“We'll be fine,” he assured her. “Just follow Carmen's lead and do whatever she tells you to. We'll be back in a few days, a week tops.”

“But—” Katie watched Hawk leave the room, then she just sat here, worried and afraid.

“How long have the two of you been dating?” Carmen asked.

“We—”

“Don't bother lying to me,” Carmen focused on her computer screen. “I saw the way he looked at you and I can see the turmoil brewing in your eyes right now. He's going to be fine, by the way. He's a professional and there's no one better.”

“Do you think he'll really have to shoot someone?” Katie stared at the empty doorway.

“I doubt it,” Carmen shrugged. “I'm pretty sure my guy will blow them up before it comes to that.”

“Your—” Katie sat frozen and silently stared at Carmen. Was she serious? “Blow him up?”

“Yeah,” Carmen focused on Katie. “If you're going to work here, you need to understand these men don't back down and they don't tolerate threats. That man, he threatened Paige and her unborn child. That would be enough because she's family, but she belongs to Dax. And those men would walk through fire for Dax. They would do that, because Dax would do the same for them — has done the same for them. Sooner or later, you'll have to decide how you feel about that. Otherwise, this thing you've started with Hawk will be over before it starts.”

“Will you answer something for me, and will you be honest about it?” Katie asked.

“Sure,” Carmen focused back on her screen.

“Do you honestly think Hawk will murder someone?” Katie wasn't sure she wanted the answer to that.

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“Murder? No,” Carmen sat back. “He might kill someone, but it won’t be murder. These men, they have a code. They are testosterone filled adventure junkies who play hard and work harder. They have a bond that few will ever understand, but they are also courageous with more integrity than anyone I have ever met. If Hawk kills someone, he’ll do it because he didn’t have a choice. He’ll do it in self-defense or to defend Dax or Paige or that new agent they’re working with. He’ll do it because he has to, not because he wants to.”

“Okay,” Katie nodded. She could live with that.

“But it’s not going to happen,” Carmen grinned. “Because Zeus will blow that guy to smithereens before Hawk has to take him out. He’ll do it to protect Dax but also to protect Hawk.”

“Um,” Katie chewed on her bottom lip. “Won’t he get into trouble for that?”

“They’ll have to find him, first,” Carmen laughed. “Now, I think I’m onto something. I need to concentrate on this. Maybe you could head out and see if Wooly needs anything.”

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“I’m just saying,” Paige was pacing the room. “I think there was another way we could have handled that.”

“I don’t,” Dax crossed one leg over the other and relaxed into the pillows. “I let it go the first time, Paige. That man will not put his hands on you again or he’ll suffer the consequences.”

Paige threw her hands in the air and growled. “I’m a cop! Are you seriously telling me you don’t think I can handle myself?”

“No,” Dax disagreed. “I’m telling you that I’m going to handle it for you.”

Rowan knocked on the door. “Hey, I hate to interrupt this tantalizing conversation, but I think I have something.”

“What?” Paige demanded.

“Come downstairs and I’ll walk you through it,” Rowan turned and disappeared down the hall.

“Spill it,” Paige demanded before she dropped into a chair.

“Okay,” Rowan glanced at Dax then turned to the board. “I’ve been working on the bankers. I know you said Carmen was working on that, but you have her running the backgrounds, looking into the bankers, and digging on Rathbone. I think she needs to focus on

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the cop. He's dangerous and we need to be prepared. That guy is not finished with you and after what happened today, I'm sure Dax is on his hit list. Anyway, I called Carmen and told her I was taking over the investigation into the bankers."

"What did you find?"

"It's what I didn't find — on Bodine," Rowan turned his screen so they could see. "I've looked at every transaction he's made for the past six months. I can go back further, but I don't think I need to. I wanted to make sure you guys agreed before I set it aside. Vincent Bodine is not involved in this. He's as clean as they come. He's so boring, I'm tempted to nod off just relaying the details."

"Okay," Paige nodded. "We can look through the specifics tomorrow but for now I believe you. What about the other two?"

"That's where it gets interesting," Rowan explained. "Rathbone knows both of them. Or, at least, he did. They've had dealings in the past."

"Run us through it," Paige insisted.

"Okay," Rowan pulled up another screen. "Arlo Williams was born and raised in this one-horse town. He never left. After high school, he got a job as a teller at the bank and has slowly risen up the ranks to mid-management. He plays poker every Friday night with his buddies, which does not include Rathbone. He did play football with Rathbone in high school, neither had the talent to go any further. He owns a home and drives a pickup truck that's three years old and paid for. He has no debt to speak of — which could mean he's paying the bills with the stolen funds."

"So, a connection to Rathbone, but an old one," Dax considered. "The lack of debt is a red flag, but not definitive. What about the other guy?"

"Terrance Noble," Rowan changed the screen again. "Terrance didn't grow up here. He's from Idaho. He attended college in his home state and met Chastity Rathbone his senior year. He graduated with a bachelors in finance with an emphasis in banking. He and his girl moved to Texas a few months after graduating to be closer to her family. They were married a year later."

"Who is Chastity?" Paige pressed. "In relation to Levi Rathbone."

"Cousins," Rowan advised. "It doesn't appear they are close, though. I doubt there was any kissing involved. Chastity moved away after she graduated and only returned when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She beat it and Chastity and Mr. Noble remained here in town. Hubby was hired as a low-level manager immediately and has moved his way up to mid-level after only a couple years."

"Any suspicious transactions in their records?" Dax wondered.

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“Not that I can find,” Rowan admitted. “I think Carmen will need to take this over and dig deeper than I can go. We eliminated one but it’s anyone’s guess on the other two. They both have ties that could go deeper than I’m seeing from here.”

“Right,” Paige agreed. “I want to work on this for a while, but then let’s sleep on it. We can always shoot it back to Carmen tomorrow.”

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Carmen called just after two that morning. She found an expensive beach house owned by Levi Rathbone in Corpus Christi. She was going to dig further and try to trace the money backwards and see if she could connect it to the bank somehow. They decided to turn the remaining two bankers back over to Carmen and she could look at all of it together while she tracked the money.

“I’m going to focus on Willow,” Paige decided. “I’ve been working the data, but my area of expertise is forensics. I want to get into Willow’s apartment and take a look around. I’ll head out first thing,” Paige told Carmen. “It’s late, put this away for the night and pick it back up in the morning. I’ll call you sometime tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Carmen disconnected.

“We’ll head out and go through Willows apartment together,” Dax corrected.

“I can—”

“When we started this, you agreed we’d be partners,” Dax reminded her. “Nothing has changed. Rowan can dig into her background and see what he can find about her history. You and I will search her place for clues.”

“Fine,” Paige agreed. “Let’s go to bed. I’m tired.”

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“I understand why you want to go to Willow’s apartment,” Rowan said, clearly frustrated and in need of a second cup of coffee. “I’m just saying we need to search Kendric’s home first. That cop is unpredictable and he’s livid. He’s lost Kendric and needs him back where he can keep an eye on him. What better way to do that, than to stumble onto evidence that points right at the man that was just released from jail?”

“Alright,” Paige agreed. “Make that cup to go, though. I’m not waiting. We’ll stop at Larisa’s house first, but you have to drive. Dax and I will spend some time helping you look for

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evidence before we continue over to Willow's apartment and search for clues there. I know we have to find whatever was planted to convict Kendric, but that evidence will be manufactured. I want real evidence, something that August can use to point the finger in another direction."

"I agree," Rowan followed the couple out of the house. "But isn't that what Carmen's doing?"

"It is but there's only so much she can do from Utah," Paige stopped next to the SUV. "We'll meet you there."

The group was only inside the residence for twenty minutes when they found the planted evidence.

"The shoes are a size too small, and Kendric didn't attend Texas A & M." Rowan slid the mud caked shoes and the bloody sweatshirt into an evidence bag. "I'm going to take these to the lab and see what they can tell me. I'd lay odds the blood belongs to Willow Delano."

"And the mud will match the dirt where the body was discovered," Paige nodded. "It's too obvious. The guy calls himself a cop, but this is amateur hour."

"I'm guessing they've never run up against outsiders before," Dax glanced around the room then focused on Paige. "He's used to bullying his way through any situation to get what he wants. We're not cooperating. I don't think he expected Kendric to bring in a high-priced lawyer."

"Why didn't he expect that?" Rowan wondered. "The guy has money. Everyone in town has to know that. I don't get it. None of what happened so far should be a surprise to these guys."

"I think because he's used to threatening his way out of trouble," Paige decided. "He threatened Kendric using his wife and kid. He also told Kendric to plead guilty, so this thing never went to trial. Then, he threatened Larisa using her son. He threatened me and my unborn child. I think that's his MO. I suspect it's worked well in the past. Then, Rathbone just plants a little evidence that will convince the prosecutor there's a case and it all goes away quietly."

"Or the prosecutor is in on it," Dax suggested. "We've focused on the cop and the banker, but Larisa believed there were others. Maybe a hacker and there could be an attorney or a judge."

"Not the judge at the hearing," Paige disagreed. "I saw her face when August challenged the foundation of this case. She was fuming but trying to hide it."

"Fuming because the case is a dud, or fuming because August noticed?" Rowan wondered.

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“She let Kendric out on bail,” Paige ran through the hearing in her mind again. “I think she was upset that the system, cop and prosecutor, made her look smalltown. I don’t think she liked it.”

“So, ego,” Dax nodded. “Not corruption.”

“Yeah,” Paige agreed. “That’s my take. Anyway, are we finished here? I want to get over to Willows apartment.”

“I’m going to transport this to the lab,” Rowan held out the evidence. “I want to see if we can link it to Rathbone or anyone besides Kendric. I’ll meet you back at the house later tonight.”

“Sounds good,” Dax took Paige’s hand and led her back to the truck. They rode in silence for several minutes. “Have you dealt with a case like this before?”

“A frame job or a corrupt system?” Paige asked absently.

“Either,” Dax was on alert, watching for trouble around every corner. He hadn’t felt this tense since his army days.

“Similar,” Paige admitted. “They’re all unique in their own way. Small towns, they’re notorious for problems. You take a local farm boy and hand him a badge, it’s easy for the power to go to his head. They’re not all like that, though. Some have more integrity and courage than the city departments.”

“Makes sense,” Dax glanced in the mirror again. He was pretty sure they were being followed but it didn’t look like the cop this time.

“What’s wrong?” Paige demanded.

“Not sure,” Dax shrugged. “Could be something, could be nothing. I’m just on edge and I’m seeing ghosts around every corner.”

Paige reached out and took his hand. “I’m sorry I got angry with you. I know you didn’t have a choice. Rathbone is dangerous and if he gets a chance, I think he’ll make good on his promise.”

“Which one?” Dax turned over his hand and linked fingers with Paige. “The one to arrest me or to leave you in a ditch?”

“I doubt he’s planning to arrest you now,” she frowned. “I think he’d like to leave you in a ditch.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Dax assured her.

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“No, it’s not,” Paige smiled. “Because if he lays a hand on my husband, he’s going to find out how much pain a body can take before it breaks.”

“I’m glad we understand each other,” Dax laughed. Man, he loved this woman.

They pulled into the parking lot of the apartment building and took a minute to survey the area. Once they were sure the coast was clear, they casually walked across the lot and up the stairs to Willow’s apartment. In only took a few seconds for Dax to bypass the lock and open the door.

“I guess bringing a fancy Army Ranger with me has its benefits,” Paige stepped inside. “This might take a while. I need you to watch for trouble and warn me if someone comes this way.”

“I’ve got this,” Dax moved to the side of a window. “Just do your thing so we can get out of here.”

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“I suspect they’ll be a while,” Hawk told Zeus. “I want to drive the area and scout out escape routes and obstacles just in case.”

“I agree,” Zeus glanced at the apartment door, then frowned when he spotted the truck drive by for the second time. “Did you get the plate off that truck? I want to call it in to Carmen and see why they’re trolling the area. I also want to find a route where I can leave a little insurance policy just in case we need it to get out of here.”

Hawk rattled off the plate and Zeus called it in to Carmen. They didn’t recognize the name, so they put it on the back burner for later.

“Pull down that road,” Zeus pointed to a dirt road that led to an old barn. “It looks deserted, but I want to make sure.”

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“Find anything?” Dax glanced over his shoulder when Paige stepped back into the room.

“Yeah,” Paige sighed. “Willow was dating Levi Rathbone. From what I can see from the box of mementoes, they’d been dating for months. The first one, a movie ticket, is dated eight months ago.”

“He’s not married,” Dax tried to remember everything they’d uncovered about Levi Rathbone. “Why all the secrets?”



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“I found a gold necklace and some tiny diamond earrings in her jewelry box. I’m wondering if he bought her small tokens to keep her quiet. You know, things that were too expensive to afford on a cops salary, but items that were insignificant and cheap when you consider the kind of cash he’s stealing from the rich and famous.”

“A convenient girlfriend that’s disposable?” Dax wondered. “He kept her on a tight leash and in his back pocket to use if he needed to frame someone. That’s cold.”

“He’s a narcissistic egomaniac with delusions of grandeur,” Paige grumbled. “It’s not out of the realm of possibilities. I’ve bagged the evidence and I’ll get it to Rowan tonight. I think he should collect all the evidence and use it to build a case against Rathbone. One the FBI can defend when they charge these guys with federal racketeering and murder.”

“You’ll push for a RICO violation?” Dax realized.

“I think we have enough,” Paige agreed. “It’s definitely federal, the fraud crosses state lines, then add in the extortion, threats and murder — I’m sure Rowan can swing it.”

“Good,” Dax turned and strolled across the room. “Do you think Willow was the only death?”

“I hope so,” Paige leaned into Dax when he wrapped his arms around her. “I hate to think how long they’ve been getting away with this. And Willow’s death, it’s so callous and senseless. It’s just stupid.”

“And wasteful,” Dax agreed. “They tossed away a life like it was nothing and that pisses you off.”

“Yes,” Paige agreed. “Probably as much as it does you. Let’s get out of here. This girl lived a modest life and died a horrible death. There’s nothing else to find here.”

The instant they pulled onto the highway; they spotted the car. “He must be off duty,” Paige watched Rathbone through the rearview mirror. “That’s not a patrol car.”

“I don’t think he appreciates your tenacity,” Dax sped up, then slammed on his breaks when Rathbone tried to side-swipe him. “We might be in trouble here. This SUV is harder to handle than that souped-up BMW he’s driving.” Dax swerved, took a right a little too fast, then regained control just before the car tagged his bumper. “We can’t keep this up for long.”

“Find a dirt road,” Paige considered. “We’ll have better control than he will on backroads.”

“He’s pushing us toward that bridge,” Dax warned. “We need to get off this highway and we need to do it before we reach that bridge.” He swerved and slammed on his breaks again, barely missing a collision.”

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“He’s being reckless,” Paige studied the area. “I don’t see a road.”

“Can you answer that,” Dax pointed to his ringing burner.

“We’re a little busy,” Paige greeted.

“Take the next left,” Zeus ordered. “Right before you reach the bridge, about a hundred yards out.”

“What?” Paige frowned. “Take the next left,” she told Dax before she put the phone on speaker.

Dax did as requested. The BMW followed and started to gain on them.

“Give it a little gas, granny,” Zeus demanded. “Floor it, when you reach the T-intersection, take a right, then a fast left.”

“Where are you?” Dax demanded. “I told you to stay in Utah.”

“I’m a little busy at the moment,” Zeus ignored the question. “Right there, take that right.”

“Zee?” Dax warned. “What are you up to?”

“Yeah, so — about that,” he lit the fuse and jumped into the waiting truck. “If you hear a little explosion, don’t be too alarmed.”

“What!” Paige barked just before they heard a loud boom, dirt and gravel erupted around them peppering the SUV with tiny granules — and the vehicle vibrated violently.

Dax took the next left, and spotted Hawk standing in front of an old barn with the door wide open. He pulled inside and Hawk slid the door shut.

Paige jumped from the truck. You crazy, idiotic, reckless maniac. Please tell me Rathbone isn’t dead. Because if you just blew that man up, I’m not sure even Nathan will be able to save you.”

“Looks like you two are okay,” Hawk observed. “And no, he’s not dead.”

“Unfortunately,” Zeus added before he and Hawk burst out laughing.

“But I do think we should get out of here,” Zeus suggested. “I’d say leave the SUV, but I suspect that idiot cop will do a thorough search of the area and that last thing we need is for him to find your vehicle stashed in this barn.”

“I’ll follow you,” Dax studied his friends. He should be angry with them, but they just saved his life and the life of the woman he loved. He wasn’t sure Paige realized that yet, but she would— eventually.

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“What were you thinking?” Paige didn’t budge.

“I was thinking that man wants you dead and I wasn’t willing to sit back and let that happen,” Zeus shrugged. “Get in the car, Paige. We need to get clear of this area. You can chew me out once we get back to that fancy compound Nathan calls a house.”

Paige slid into the passenger seat and studied Dax. “He’s right. Rathbone would have killed us both. He was pushing us toward that bridge so he could help us over the edge and resolve his problem. I know you didn’t want them involved, but I think they just saved our lives.”

“I know,” Dax followed Hawk as they wound through dirt roads, bounced into a large ditch, then surfaced a few blocks from the house where they’d been staying.

“How long have they been here?” Paige wondered, amazed at the convoluted trail they just followed to get back to their headquarters.

“I thought someone was following us to Willows, but I doubted myself when I couldn’t spot anyone. It was them; I’d bet this fancy house on that one.”

“Are you mad?” Paige wondered.

“At them? No,” Dax pulled into the garage. “I’m mad at myself. I should have anticipated this. I should have realized Rathbone would follow us and try to take us out. If they didn’t arrive when they did —”

“But they did arrive and we’re fine,” Paige took his hand. “Let’s go thank Zeus for being a pyrotechnic maniac.”

“Yeah,” Dax followed her into the house and waited for his friends to lock down the garage and join them. “Rowans in the far bedroom and Paige and I grabbed the master. The rest are open. Find a spot to crash, then let’s talk.”

Dax was standing in front of the large window staring at the pool when Zeus and Hawk returned. “You disobeyed a direct order.”

“You’re welcome,” Hawk dropped into a chair. “That man had blood in his eyes. We watched the video, Dax. We saw him attack Paige. Did you really think we wouldn’t head out here to help? Paige is family but she’s also yours. And we all know you would have done the same — so shelf this and let’s get to work. We need a plan to deal with that maniac cop.”

“I think my baby just came through for us on that,” Zeus answered his phone and put it on speaker. “Tell me you have something we can use to arrest that dirty SOB.”

“I’ve got something you can use to arrest that dirty SOB,” Carmen grinned.

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“Are you serious?” Paige jumped to her feet and moved closer to Zeus.

“First, I want to remind Dax that he gathered up the crew and chased down Zeus when he was tracking Thor,” Carmen hesitated. “My guy said he was fine, and the rest of you guys shouldn’t worry. He insisted you shouldn’t get involved. You didn’t listen to him, and he wasn’t about to listen to you. Before you go off on him, keep that in mind. This is what you guys do. Accept it and move past your annoyance already.”

Dax sighed and moved across the room to settled into a large chair. “You’re right. It’s what we do. I’m not mad at my guys. I’m angry with myself. It’s my job to protect Paige and I failed today.”

“Hey,” Paige jumped in. “Maybe it’s my job to protect you and I failed. Did you ever think of that?”

“Well, I didn’t fail,” Carmen informed them. “I have a pretty good idea how Rathbone is selecting his targets. Do you want a few more minutes to kick yourself or should I explain?”

“Explain,” Dax smiled at the spunky hacker. Zeus definitely had his hands full with her.

“Alright,” Carmen settled into her chair. “Baby, put me up on the big screen and I’ll walk you through their system.”

“Hold that thought,” Paige answered her ringing phone. “It’s Kyra. I have to take this.” She stood and left the room.

“Larisa called me,” Kyra advised. “She’s discovered who the banker is. We’ve got two of them, Paige. We just need the third. There has to be one because the cop and the banker are pretty computer illiterate. Neither one of them would know Larisa was inside snooping around.”

“Alright, let me take this back to the group,” she glanced up when Rowan stepped through the door. “Uh, before I do that, there’s something else you need to know.”

“Hi, Kyra,” Rowan maneuvered around Paige so he could see the screen. “Paige was about to tell you I’m working this case. It’s official, so don’t think you can order me away.”

“Rowan,” Kyra sucked in a sharp breath. “You look good,” actually he looked amazing. “I’m not sure why you’re out there, but I’ll take any help I can get for my sister.”

“You look like you haven’t slept in days,” Rowan frowned. “And you’ve lost weight.”

“Wow, I don’t know how I’ll deal with all the compliments,” Kyra grumbled.

“You know my philosophy on telling the truth,” Rowan shrugged.

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Paige saw something flash in Kyra's eyes before she masked it. Was that pain, guilt? She wasn't sure.

"Dennis will be calling you in the morning," Rowan advised. "I talked him into reassigning you. You're on the case, if you want it. He's authorized you to fly out and officially join the investigation. Things are moving now so don't push back the flight. If you're coming, you need to be here as soon as possible."

"What don't I know?" Paige turned on him.

"The shoes belonged to Rathbone," Rowan told the group. "His prints are all over it. I was also able to retrieve a water bottle he abandoned before I left. The lab has his DNA and they're working to match that to the shoes. They were his shoes, he wore them, sweated in them and then used them to try to frame Kendric. I'm certain of that and the lab is working to prove me right. He'll never overcome that little mistake. They need a couple days, then I'll have enough to arrest the cop."

"Can we get RICO?" Paige pushed.

"Not yet," Rowan frowned. "But we will."

"I can help with that," Carmen jumped in. "Let me run through what I have."

"Alright," Paige motioned for her to continue.

"Okay, so the beach house in Corpas Christi belongs to Rathbone. I've been able to track his movements when he's there. He goes out every month or so on a luxury vacation. But he doesn't just lounge on the beach and enjoy that fancy house. He attends high class parties and events. You know, he hob-nobs with the rich to scope out his next victim. I've also identified a bartender you'll want to bring in. I believe he records the credit cards after wealthy clients use them at these events. He then passes them to Rathbone, who turns them over to their bank contact. I'm close on that but I got distracted."

"I have the bank contact," Kyra provided. "It's Arlo Williams."

"Are you sure?" Carmen questioned.

"Larisa is sure," Kyra corrected. "And I trust her. She's been digging for days and she's confident it has to be Arlo."

"I'll touch base with her, but if she says it's Williams, I'm inclined to agree," Carmen announced. "I was leaning that way myself."

"Okay, so there's at least one more," Paige frowned. "How do we find him?"

"And how do we make sure we have them all?" Rowan added.

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“Larisa said Kendric had a theory but you’re not going to like it,” Kyra warned.

“Tell us,” Paige demanded.

“Silas Higgins,” Kyra provided. The room went silent.

“The Congressman’s son?” Rowan frowned. “How did he land on that?”

“He’s the lead prosecutor in that town,” Kyra advised. “Higgins went to high school with Rathbone and Williams. They all played football together. Kendric said Higgins is intimately involved in his case. He also said he spotted Rathbone and Higgins at the courthouse. They were involved in an intense discussion. Then Rathbone stomped off angry.”

“That could be about anything,” Rowan disagreed.

“Higgins is a hacker,” Kyra left the best for last.

“Is he good?” Carmen demanded. “I can look into him and see what I can find.”

“Larisa said to tell you his online code name is Storm Tracer,” Kyra advised.

“Yeah, he’s good,” Carmen provided. “How did she find that? Storm Tracer has been careful for years. I don’t know anyone that knows his identity.”

“Kendric convinced her it was Higgins and she started to dig,” Kyra provided. “She’s pretty sure he’s the guy you want and she’s positive on the hacker bit.”

“Why would a congressman’s son, one he’s grooming to take his place someday, participate in a theft ring of this magnitude?” Rowan wondered. “He doesn’t need the money.”

“Boredom,” Hawk provided. “He’s a spoiled brat and he wanted to see if he could. He’s a narcissist like his cop friend and he’s just doing it for kicks? Take your pick.”

“Carmen, can you work with Larisa to nail this down? And make it airtight,” Paige decided. “With a congressman involved, we need to be sure, and we need concrete proof.”

“I’m gonna pack,” Kyra told the group. “I’ll be there tomorrow. Any chance I can bum a ride from the airport?”

“I’ll be there to pick you up,” Rowan jumped in.

Paige waited, but when Kyra didn’t object, she considered the matter closed.

“What’s our next move?” Zeus wondered.

Paige pulled out the evidence she collected from Willows. “This connects Rathbone to Willow. With this and the DNA evidence you uncovered today, I think you and Kyra can make

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an arrest once you get the results from the lab. Charge him with homicide. That will give us time to firm up the RICO charges.”

“I agree,” Rowan took the evidence.

“I’ll keep working on the money,” Carmen assured them. “Now, I’m going to sign off. I need to deal with a project for Nathan, then I’m going to get some sleep. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Dax stood and motioned for Hawk and Zeus to follow.

Once they were gone, Paige turned to Rowan. “Are you gonna be okay? I mean, working with Kyra that’s going to be—”

“I’m fine,” Rowan settled into a chair. “Maybe she’ll finally provide some answers. If not, I’ll deal. I always do.”

“I’m sorry,” Paige settled into the chair across from him. “I’m sorry I judged you and blamed you for the breakup. I’m sorry she cut all ties and never provided closure. I’m sorry that I’m not sure she’s going to give you the answers you desperately need now.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Rowan stood. “I need a little time alone, if that’s okay. Tomorrow is going to be a long, difficult day.”

“Alright, but before you go, I need to fill you in on the events of this afternoon,” Paige glanced out the window. “Um, someone may have set off an explosive device, but it was necessary. That idiot cop was trying to kill us.”

“Can it be traced back to you?” Rowan frowned. “Or them?”

“I doubt it,” Paige grinned. “Someone I’d prefer to remain nameless is careful and they know what they’re doing. The only one that will make accusations is Rathbone and he’ll blame us — me or Dax. He didn’t even know those other two were there.”

“Then we’re clear,” Rowan decided. “I don’t know anything about explosives, but I’ll be sure to look into it.”

“Thanks,” Paige relaxed. “We’re closing in, Rowan. We’re nearing the finish line and I have a feeling things are going to move quickly once you snatch up the first suspect.”

“I’m going to send someone down to arrest the bartender,” Rowan decided. “He’s low-level but he might sing once he knows he’s in serious trouble.”

“I agree,” Paige headed for the door. “Offer him a deal and he’ll sing even louder.”

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“Maybe,” Rowan wouldn’t commit. He didn’t want anyone to plead on this one. He wanted the entire group to pay for messing with Kyra’s family. He smiled and realized that’s the reason the boys set off explosives. The cop messed with their family, and he needed to pay. He could live with that. And he’d see what he could do to protect them. If he failed, there was no doubt in his mind, General Nathan Porter would step in and deem the entire situation classified and a matter of national security — or some nonsense. For the first time in his career, that fact didn’t bother him.

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“Dennis told me I’m on this case because of you,” Kyra said once Rowan pulled onto the highway. “Thank you for that.”

“They attacked your family,” Rowan shrugged. “You have a right to be involved.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered but couldn’t look at him.

“For what?” Rowan wondered. “For tossing me like a bad sandwich or for avoiding me all these years? Or maybe you’re talking about something else entirely.”

“I’m sorry for all of it,” Kyra admitted.

“I wonder,” Rowan stared out the windshield. “Will you ever explain what happened, or do you plan to leave me wondering for the rest of my life?”

She couldn’t, could she? Maybe enough time had passed she could come clean.

“Never mind,” Rowan sighed. “I found something last night that I want you to look at.”

“What is it?” Kyra frowned but took the file Rowan pulled from between the seat and the console.

“An unsolved murder,” he glanced away and focused on driving. “Victim was Sandy Nelson.”

“You think they killed someone else?” Kyra flipped open the cover and began to read. She skimmed through the report and found the evidence log. “They have DNA.”

“I know,” Rowan frowned. “That kid worked at the bank. Then one day, she just disappeared. She was only eighteen. Two months later, her body was found in a remote area just outside of town.”

“Why was it inactivated?” Kyra studied Rowan. Her heart hurt and she wanted to reach out to him, but she couldn’t.



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“The cops traced her back to the bank,” Rowan advised. “She worked for Williams. The detective suspected he was involved. Higgins refused their request for a warrant to look into Williams bank records. He said they didn’t have enough to proceed. Without the warrant, the case went cold. All they had was a statement from her mom and her sister that Sandy saw something she shouldn’t have seen at the bank and a feeling Williams was lying.”

“Higgins intervened to protect his friends,” Kyra nodded and continued to read. “But also himself. He was afraid the warrant would disclose the thefts and the fraud.”

“That’s my guess,” Rowan agreed. “I don’t think we have enough to prove our theory yet, but I was thinking we could pursue it. If we can show a conspiracy to murder, and throw in the murder of Willow, we might be able to turn it federal while we work on the RICO angle.”

“At least they’d be locked down where they can’t hurt anyone else,” Kyra agreed. “What did Paige think?”

“I brought it to you first,” Rowan admitted. “Paige is here helping you, but she doesn’t have jurisdiction. This is federal and she left the Bureau. We have to decide where to go from here and take it to the group once we agree.”

“I want to take it to the group and discuss it first,” Kyra decided. “Then we formulate a plan together. I brought Paige in on this because she’s good and if there’s any forensic evidence they overlooked in this new case, Paige will find it.”

“Alright,” Rowan wasn’t sure that was the best play, but they wouldn’t have gotten this far without Paige and her friends. “We’ll head back to the house and go from there.”

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“Yes, sir,” Rowan agreed. “I’ll keep you posted.” He hung up and glanced around the room. “Dennis is sending a couple guys from the closest office. He said the bartender is in custody and he wants us to pick up Rathbone and turn him over to be booked in a federal facility rather than the local jail.”

“And Williams?” Paige asked.

“He doesn’t think we have enough to arrest him — yet,” he added. “He wants Carmen to keep digging and he’s hoping the arrest of Rathbone will force them to do something stupid. He’s having a trace put on the funds Carmen located. If they try to move them, we’ve got them.”

“And Higgins?” Kyra asked.

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“He’s a problem,” Rowan admitted. “His dad will cry foul. We need something solid to go after him.”

“August is going to court in the morning with a motion to dismiss the charges,” Paige informed them. “Higgins will be taken by surprise. If we do this right, he won’t know his friend was arrested for the same crime until he’s standing before the judge arguing to continue. Let’s do this right.”

“I agree,” Kyra stood. “We take down Rathbone and transport, but make sure he doesn’t get his phone call until after the hearing. Then I’ll head to the courthouse and tail Higgins. We’ll see what he does once he knows his little gang is falling apart — and proceed accordingly.”

“No,” Rowen disagreed. “We’ll head to the courthouse and follow Higgins. If he slips up, we need the testimony of two agents — one of which is not a family member of the previously accused.”

“Fine,” Kyra shrugged but inside she was terrified of spending so much time with Rowan. She still loved him, but Colby Denton could end both of their careers. She wasn’t sure she could risk it.

“Dax and I will take a trip down to Corpas Christi,” Paige informed them. “I want to scour that beach house and see if I can find anything that will link Higgins to the conspiracy.”

“We’ll go with you,” Hawk decided. “As backup. Don’t worry, we’ll drive and hang back just in case you run into trouble.”

“No more explosives,” Paige warned Zeus, then frowned when the man just laughed.

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“He’s on the move,” Kyra straightened in her seat. “Don’t lose him.”

“I do know how to tail a suspect,” Rowan growled.

“He doesn’t look happy,” Kyra grinned. “I think we might have ruined his day.” She snatched up the phone the instant it rang.

“August just called,” Paige informed her. “The judge dismissed the case. Kendric is a free man. If you talk to your sister, tell them to remain where they are until we have all three of these guys behind bars. Their lives are still in danger.”

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“Alright,” Kyra agreed. “We’re following Higgins. He doesn’t look happy. And he just pulled into the bank. What do you want to bet he’s about to have a little pow-wow with the banker?”

“We’re just pulling up to the beach house,” Paige informed her. “I’ll let you know if I find anything. Carmen put a trace on the money. If they try to move it, we’ll know immediately, and it triggers the warrant. Those funds will be seized before they can ask themselves what happened.”

“Sounds good,” Kyra disconnected. “Will we get them?” She turned to Rowan. “Or will my sister have to go into witness protection for the rest of her life?”

“We’ll get them,” Rowan promised and reached for her hand. “I won’t stop until they’re safe.”

“Higgins is leaving the bank,” Kyra pulled her hand away. “Do we follow him or stay and watch Williams?”

“We follow Higgins,” Rowan decided. “We need more on him and he’s going to be the hardest to get to. Plus, Special Agents Broadhead and Conner haven’t been able to track down Rathbone. Higgins might lead us straight to our killer.”

“Alright,” they rode in silence as they followed Higgins. They were careful to stay a safe distance away, but he must have spotted them because moments later, a patrol car pulled up behind them and flipped on his lights.

“You ready to arrest a killer?” Rowan glanced at Kyra.

“I am,” she straightened and waited for Rowan to pull to the side of the road.

“Call it in,” Rowan pushed open his door and climbed outside.

Kyra called Broadhead and relayed their location. He assured her they were on their way and would be there in less than five minutes. She’d just have to stall until backup arrived.

“Lady, get out of the car,” Rathbone demanded.

Kyra pushed open her door and moved to the front of the car.

“Stop right there, unless you want to get shot,” Rathbone ordered.

“I’m Special Agent Kyra Black and that man is my partner, Special Agent Rowan Leavitt. I suggest you holster your weapon, unless you want to go up against the entire Bureau. We expect professional cooperation.”

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“Yeah,” Rathbone laughed. “And I’m the President. Get your hands where I can see them.”

“Can you see this badge?” Kyra stepped into the clearing, making sure her badge was visible.

Rathbone hesitated. “That could be a fake.”

“It’s not a fake,” Rowan advised. “I already told you I am Special Agent Rowan Leavitt and you have interrupted an official investigation.”

Rathbone pulled out his phone and called Higgins. “Yeah, they say they’re FBI. What do you want me to do?” He waited for several seconds. “They have badges. Sure. Hold on.”

“What’s the official business?” Rathbone demanded. He glanced up when a black sedan approached, pulled to the side of the road and two additional agents emerged, guns drawn.

“Put down the weapon Mr. Rathbone,” one of the agents called out. “It’s four against one. You might get a shot off but then you’ll be dead. If that’s your plan, it’s suicide.”

Rathbone frowned, studied Kyra then Rowan, then slowly slid his gun back into the holster. “I’m a cop,” he called to the new agents. “This has to be some kind of mistake.”

“No mistake,” Rowan moved behind Rathbone. “You should do the honors, Kyra.”

She moved forward and cuffed him, then passed him to the agents.

“Thanks for the assist,” Rowan shook each of their hands.

“All in a days,” Conner shoved Rathbone into the back of the car. “I’ll call Dennis if we get anything.”

“Thanks,” Rowan watched them drive away before he turned to Kyra. “I guess we head back to the house and check in with Carmen.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Kyra pulled out her ringing phone. “Hey, Larisa.”

“I’ve been helping Carmen track the money,” Larisa said, excited. “This is so much fun, now I know why you do it.”

“Right,” Kyra rolled her eyes. “Did the FBI swoop in and take it?”

“With Carmen’s help,” Larisa giggled. “Those guys are broke. Carmen said she’ll try to research the deposits and track who they came from, but she found the Alcott funds and Higgie Jr. was also siphoning from dad. I wonder if the gentleman from Texas knew his son was stealing from him.”

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“Can we prove it was Silas Higgins?” Kyra asked, excited.

“Absolutely,” Larisa practically yelled, she was so excited. “We got them, Kyra. All of them. Carmen said that since she can prove Arlo Williams transferred the money, we caught him red handed. He’s going down. And, that little transfer gave her what she needed to track the rest. Once the three of them are arrested, my family can go home.”

“Well, we just helped arrest Levi Rathbone. He’s on his way to Houston to be interrogated by Broadhead and Conner.”

“Really?” Larisa’s voice was muffled, but Kyra could tell her sister was updating Kendrick.

“Hey, I gotta go,” Kyra finally decided. “I need to contact Paige.”

“Right,” Kyra grinned. “And we need to head back to the bank and arrest Arlo Williams. I need to catch Broadhead before he leaves town.”

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“Hey, can you get that?” Paige asked Dax when the phone started ringing. “Thanks,” she said when he picked it up. “So, you were saying?” She turned to the elderly woman that lived next door to the beach house.

“That man is bad news,” Mrs. Halbert declared. “And his two friends aren’t much better.”

“Two friends?” Paige asked.

“Right,” the woman pushed to her feet and disappeared down the hall.

“Rathbone’s been arrested,” Dax stepped back into the room. “So was Arlo Williams. They’re on their way to Houston. They’ll process the duo and decide what to do with them from there.”

“Good,” Paige was about to ask more questions when Mrs. Halbert returned with a box.

“Let me help you with that,” Dax stepped forward and gently took the box from her hands.

“Thank you, sweetie,” she settled back onto the couch. “Now, let me see here. Just put that on the floor so I can reach it.”

Dax placed the box on the floor directly in front of the elderly woman.

Mrs. Halbert began rummaging around, pulling out folders and setting aside envelopes. “Okay, here we go.” She pulled out a stack of photos. “This was the Independence Day Celebration, two — no, three years ago. Yes, here it is.” She passed a photo to Paige. “That’s

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that Rathbone fella with his two friends. He cozied up to Felicity White during the fireworks and fooled that girl into thinking he was kind and proper. Then he stole a big chunk of her inheritance. She was going to use that money to help the Rec Center install one of those new heating systems, you know the ones that cool in the summer and heat in the winter. See there, that's Felicity speaking with those three men right there at the little bar."

Paige smiled. "I wonder if you'd mind if I took this with me. It would be excellent evidence that the three men knew each other; and that they knew Felicity, and interacted with her just prior to the money being stolen."

"Of course," Mrs. Halbert handed Paige the entire envelope. "Take them all. See if any of those others will help. I don't need them."

"You're a good citizen, Mrs. Halbert," Paige took the woman's hand. "The victims will be so grateful you had these."

"Now what?" Dax slid behind the wheel and motioned for Hawk to follow.

"Now we head back with all the evidence we've collected. I'm going to turn it over to Rowan and let him finish this up."

"Alright," Dax pulled onto the highway. "Do you want to stay a couple more days to finish this out?"

"No," Paige settled back in the seat. "I want to go home. Let's see how far we get tomorrow but then I think we can turn it over to Kyra and Rowan and be home by Friday."

"Sounds good to me," Dax took her hand in his, then let her sleep the rest of the way back to the house. He could tell she was overdoing it and couldn't wait to get her back home. He was worried about her and the baby.

The group entered the house and paused. It was silent and dark. Where was everyone?

Paige decided not to worry about it and headed for her room. She was a few feet away when Rowan stepped into the hall. "Is everything okay?" She frowned at the stressed look on his face.

"Yeah," he glanced away. He wasn't okay, but his problem was personal, not professional. "Rathbone isn't talking. He still thinks he can outmaneuver his way through this. The bartender, Kyle Danbury doesn't know much. He said someone paid him to collect credit card numbers and email them to a private account. He has no idea who paid him or who owns the account."

"Smart," Paige nodded. "Keep the hired help in the dark and they can't talk."

"Exactly," Rowan nodded. "Arlo Williams is terrified, but not talking. The only loose end is Silas Higgins. I think we have enough on him, but we can't actually place him with Rathbone

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or Williams. He could claim he doesn't even know them or hasn't been in contact since high school and skate."

Paige handed him the envelope full of photos. "Now you can."

Rowan shuffled through them and grinned. "We've got them, Paige. All of them. Larisa's family will be safe. Now, we just have to arrest Higgins and compile everything into a nice little packet for the AG's office. Oh, the lab got back to me regarding the DNA on Sandy Nelson. It's a match. Rathbone is responsible for her death as well. We'll include that in the official packet and charge them with all of it."

"I'm going to let you do that," Paige glanced over her shoulder when Dax approached. "We're tired and I think you guys can handle the rest from here. It's all going federal so I'm out."

"Are you leaving?" Rowan frowned. "Before we pick up Higgins?"

"We'll stay one more day, but we all need to get home." Dax linked hands with Paige. "Now, I need to get my wife to bed. She's exhausted."

"Right," Rowan stepped back, then watched the couple enter the large room and close the door. He sighed and headed for the back porch. The instant he stepped outside, he regretted it. He was about to slip back through the door when Kyra turned and spotted him. Busted.

"Hey," Kyra brushed the tears from her face.

"What's wrong?" Rowan darted across the porch and stopped in front of her. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm fine," Kyra evaded.

"You're not," Rowan settled onto the swing next to her. "Talk to me. I might be able to help."

"I'm sorry," she sniffed and looked away.

"You said that already," Rowan took her hand. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not sure I should tell you," she admitted.

"Kyra we've always told each other everything," Rowan argued. "Just because you left me, that doesn't have to change."

Kyra started to cry.

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“Hey,” he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against him. “What’s going on? Larisa is safe. We got them. Paige found some photos; it puts all three of our suspects together. They won’t get away with this.”

“I know,” Kyra sniffed and snuggled into Rowan’s chest. “I miss this. I miss you.”

Rowan jerked back in surprise. “I thought —”

“That I didn’t want you,” Kyra finished. “I know. I think I made a mistake. The biggest mistake of my life. I am so sorry. I know I hurt you and I don’t expect you to forgive me, but I truly am sorry.”

“Will you tell me why?” Rowan stared into the darkness.

“Colby Benton,” Kyra whispered.

“What does Colby have to do with us?” Rowan frowned.

“I— well, he’s the reason I left,” Kyra admitted.

“I don’t understand,” Rowan tried to pull her up so he could see her, but she wouldn’t let go.

“It’s a long story,” Kyra admitted. “Basically, he threatened us. He was going to destroy us. Well, mostly you. He said he’d forget what he saw and destroy the photos if I walked away.”

“What are you talking about?” Rowan demanded.

“He had a video and photos,” Kyra told him. “Of us. Of me. I think he was stalking me. He showed them to me and threatened to ruin our careers.”

“You walked away from us to save your career?” Rowan couldn’t believe he meant that little to her.

“No,” Kyra straightened. “I walked away from us to save your career. He had video, Rowan. He taped us, in the car while we were on duty — well, you were on duty. He said he was going to show it to your supervisor and get you fired. At first, he tried to blackmail me into dumping you and dating him. I refused and he got mad. He showed me pictures of me. Some of them were bad, like in my bathroom right after I got out of the shower. I don’t know how he got them, but he said he’d tell you I sent them to him. He was going to lie and say we were dating behind your back the entire time. And, as proof, he was going to say I sent him nude photos to flirt and seduce him. He swore, if I didn’t leave, he was going to destroy us. He would make sure you doubted me so much you’d never believe I loved you. I told him you wouldn’t believe him, that you knew how much I loved you. He just laughed at me and said to test you. He was so confident you would always choose him. So, I did.”



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“You told me he made you uncomfortable and I defended him,” Rowan remembered. “I told you he was harmless and that’s just the way he was. I also said he was important to me and I wanted you to try to get along.”

“Yes,” Kyra brushed the tears from her face. “You said exactly what he told me you would say. I realized, after it was too late, that he was jealous of you. He was determined to destroy you and take what you had, no matter the cost. I’m not sure he even cared about me. I was just a way for him to get at you. I was a means to an end — one that would have ended your career. I couldn’t let that happen. The only way to stop him was to leave you. I knew you were about to get promoted. I couldn’t take that away from you — you worked so hard for that promotion. I couldn’t let him destroy your career — and your life.”

“You could have come to me,” Rowan insisted.

“And you would have confronted him, and he would have showed you the pictures and lied,” Kyra insisted. “I decided it was better to leave and let you wonder why than to let him destroy what we shared. He would have damaged everything that we had. But if I left, at least the memory of our love would live on forever.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” Rowan wanted to scream, and he wanted to punch Colby in the face.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she admitted. “I can’t sit next to you, work with you, and see the pain and betrayal written all over your face. I’ve tried to avoid you, to steer clear of any cases you were handling but being here with you — it’s killing me. Worse, I’m causing you pain and that’s the last thing I want to do. I don’t expect you to forgive me, but I am sorry. All I can say is I left because I love you.”

“Loved,” Rowan corrected. “And you had a funny way of showing it.”

“Love,” Kyra repeated. “I will always love you, Rowan — even if you can’t love me back.” She jumped up and ran into the house.

Rowan sat there and wondered, was Colby right? He thought the man was a friend. For years, they were like brothers — until Colby betrayed him. But at the time, when Kyra asked about him, Rowan had defended him. It would be easy to blame Kyra for all of it. But he was blind to so many things when it came to Colby. He always backed his friend, no matter what. If Colby showed him inappropriate pictures of Kyra, would he have believed she sent them herself? He honestly didn’t know the answer to that. He always thought Kyra could do better. That she deserved a better man, someone that wasn’t an agent, that wouldn’t leave or get transferred to that next big case. Colby knew how vulnerable he felt and he exploited that.

And Rowan always let him get away with everything. Until that next big case. The one Colby wanted to use to make his career. He insisted it was his big break and Rowan was standing

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in his way. So, Colby stole Rowan's file, falsified reports, lied to their supervisors, and took credit for Rowan's work. That was the final straw, Rowan reported him and Colby never forgave him. Well, he'd never forgive Colby for this. The betrayal was too big, the pain too intense.

He jumped to his feet and rushed inside to find Kyra. When he reached her room, he knocked softly.

Kyra slid the door open a crack, then stepped back in surprise.

Rowan took advantage of the movement and pushed his way into her room, shutting the door behind him. When Kyra took another step backward, he advanced on her, wrapped one arm around her waist and the other behind her neck.

Kyra's eyes grew wide, but she didn't move away.

"I still love you, Kyra Black — and I always will." Then he kissed her.

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The following morning, Paige walked into the kitchen and froze. "Uh, did I step into a time machine that I wasn't aware of?" Rowan and Kyra looked cozy — and happy.

"Morning," Rowan was sitting at the table with Kyra in his lap. "Have you decided what you're doing today?"

Paige pointed at Rowan, then at Kyra. "Is this — I don't know, permanent?"

"Yes," Kyra kissed Rowan's forehead then stood. "We talked things out and decided to give this another shot."

"Good," Paige poured herself a cup of orange juice. "I miss coffee."

"We need to arrest Silas Higgins today," Rowan downed the last of his coffee. "Did you and your boys want to join us?"

"I've been thinking," Kyra set her mug in the sink. "I think Silas had to be the guy in charge. He's got the power and the influence. Plus, he's just a jerk and his daddy's important. I think he'd hold that over his friends and, con them into doing his dirty work. Plus, I hate to admit it, but he's the only one of the three with any brains."

"He's a sociopath," Paige corrected. "And that's why we're going to catch him. He thinks he's smarter than everyone and he believes his daddy will step in and save him. Carmen was

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able to tie him in with the others — through the financials. Between that and the photos, plus the rest, we've got him."

"I think he killed that other girl," Kyra glanced at Rowan. "Sandy Nelson, I think Higgins killed her, or maybe he got Rathbone to do the killing while he looked over his shoulder and told him what to do. She saw something at the bank and Willians is a snake, but he's weak. He would have called Higgins to find out what to do."

"Higgins could have ordered Rathbone to do it," Rowan provided. "But I'm wondering the same thing. I think he'd want to watch."

"I say it was a conspiracy and it doesn't matter who actually killed either of those women," Paige settled into a chair. "They're all responsible and we have the DNA to prove it. Let's find Higgins and arrest him so I can go home."

"You look tired," Kyra noticed. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes," Paige scolded. "And don't say that in front of Dax."

"Dax already knows," he stepped into the kitchen and pulled Paige into his arms. "How about you three go catch the bad guy so I can sleep in my own bed tonight."

"How do we find him?" Kyra settled back on a chair and took Rowan's hand.

Paige smiled but didn't comment. She had Carmen tracking the elusive man and was pretty sure they'd know something within the hour.

"Carmen says Silas Higgins just purchased gas at the Chevron station on eastside of town," Zeus stepped into the kitchen. "I think the guy is trying to flee."

Rowan and Kyra jumped to their feet. Paige slowly stood and headed for the door.

"Uh, babe," Dax called. "You might need these," he held up her shoes.

"Right," she rushed back and slipped into the comfortable slip-ons.

"What's the plan?" Paige asked Rowan. "Are you going to rear-end the guy and hope he crashes?"

"No," Rowan glanced at her then focused on the vehicle directly in front of him. "We have tactics to handle men like Higgins. I'm going to use one of them."

"Which one?" Kyra gripped the bar above the passenger seat and gritted her teeth.

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“PIT maneuver,” Rowan sped up and pulled to the side of Higgins vehicle. Higgins tried to accelerate but Rowan was good. He tapped the back bumper and the vehicle spun out of control and came to a stop halfway in the lane, and halfway on the shoulder.

Kyra jumped out and ran to the driver’s side, she yanked open the door and ordered Higgins out of the car.

A red-faced Higgins jumped out and slammed his hands on his hips. “Do you know who I am?”

“Uh-huh,” Paige walked up and handed Kyra a set of handcuffs. “And you’re under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Do us all a favor and exercise those rights. I seriously am not in the mood to hear about your daddy.”

“My father —” Rowan shoved him into the backseat and slammed the door. He turned to Paige. “I think you should ride in front, Kyra can drive and I’ll sit in the back with him.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Paige shrugged. “But I’m not going to argue. Let’s get this done so I can go home.”

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Several hours later, Silas Higgins had been arrested and transferred to a holding cell, his car impounded, and he was threatening to sue everyone involved. The group stepped into the house and joined Dax and his men in the living room.

“Did you catch the bad guy?” Dax glanced up.

“We did,” Paige settled next to him. “He’s not happy about it and claims he’s going to destroy all of us.”

“Sounds like a job well done,” Hawk took a long sip of his beer. “So, when do we get to blow this joint?”

“Hold that thought,” Paige pulled out her phone and saw it was Nathan. “Hey, I’m glad you called. We’re going to be heading home soon. Can you tell your friend how much we appreciate his hospitality?”

“I heard,” Nathan informed her. “That’s why I was calling. Leave the car. I’ve arranged for a chopper. It should land on the back lawn in about an hour. Be ready. I’ve arranged for the car to be transported back tomorrow. The job is done, the bad guys are behind bars, and my wife is driving me crazy.”

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Paige laughed. “Tell Sophie I’m fine and I’ll take the ride. I can’t wait to sleep in my own bed.”

“I second that,” Dax called out before Paige hung up.

An hour later, they said their goodbyes, invited Kyra and Rowan to stay as long as they wanted in the house and piled into the helicopter. Paige rested her head on Dax’s shoulder and sighed. “Don’t tell them —” she pointed to the group standing below. “But, I’m glad that case is over.”

“Me too,” Dax pulled her closer. “Now, rest. I’ll wake you when we get home.”