

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Lethal Sale* *Season 7, Episode 7*

*by:*

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Dax stood in front of his office window, staring off into the distance. He didn't even notice when Hawk walked in, hesitated, then dropped into one of the large chairs.

"You ready to talk about it?" Hawk finally asked.

Dax turned, sighed, and returned to his chair. "It's fine, where are we on the last course this year?"

"It's fine," Hawk held back a grin. "Clearly, this has something to do with that wife of yours. What's going on?"

"Why is that so clear?" Dax frowned.

"Because she's the only one that gets you all tied up in knots this way," Hawk shrugged. "So, what gives?"

"She fell this morning," Dax admitted. "And I suggested it might be time for her to start her maternity leave. Apparently, that's the equivalent of suggesting she's a sweat, sensitive, weak little woman that belongs at home, barefoot and pregnant just waiting to serve my every whim after a long day at the office."

Hawk snorted. "Yeah, that sounds so much like Paige. But seriously, how long do you think you'll be in the doghouse?"

"I don't know," Dax sat back. "Until the kid is five?"

"I'm pretty sure taking care of your wife isn't a capital offense," Hawk laughed. "I doubt you'll be in the doghouse that long."

"He's not in the doghouse," Paige said from the open doorway.

"You sure about that?" Dax focused on her.

"Positive," Paige smiled. "We don't have a dog — thus no doghouse. So, being banished there would be impossible."

"Glad you're doing better," Hawk paused at the door. "Let me know when I can have him back. We have a few things we need to discuss."

"Sorry," Paige sobered. "But this is important."

"I get you," Hawk pressed a friendly kiss to the top of her head before he left.

"Does this mean I'm forgiven?" Dax wondered.

"It means I felt guilty, and you don't need to be forgiven — I think I do," Paige slowly lowered into one of his chairs. "I'm sorry. I was upset and embarrassed that I misjudged the

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edge of the bed, and I hated feeling vulnerable and stupid. Then you came in and suggested I should just stay home for the next month, and I guess I lost it. I took it all out on you and that's not fair."

Dax stood and moved to sit in the chair next to Paige. He took her hand and stared out the window for several seconds. Then, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "One day you'll realize you never have to be embarrassed around me. You'll figure out that I accept you, flaws an all, the same as you've always accepted me."

"That's not —" Paige began.

"Shhh," Dax scolded. "As far as the rest goes, I've been thinking. Our last course this season is a little over a week away. I held off any other courses until after the baby is born. How would you feel about a compromise?"

"Meaning?" Paige asked, cautiously.

"We both reduce our hours and work more from home," Dax suggested. "I have paperwork and course outlines to complete before we start back up next year but that can be done at home. If I need to run anything by the men, I can always do it by video conference. Or just wait and walk next door once they get home. And you already bring stuff home when you're working a case. We'll still work, but we'll do more from home where you can spread out on the couch or lounge in the chair."

"I can do that," Paige agreed. "I was already going to talk to Jericho. I think this Colorado case should be the last one we accept. I guess if there's something easy, I can take that on, but this current case has a lot of information to skim through before I can even start working it. It's going to take time and I don't have a lot of that before this little person growing inside of me decides to come out and meet the world. I'll slow down and I'll talk to Jericho about shorter days."

"Thank you," Dax leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her temple.

"I need to get back," Paige decided. "Are we good now? I can grovel a little if you need me to."

"We're good," Dax smiled. "I'll stop and grab something for dinner on the way home. See you tonight."

Paige stood, walked to the door and paused. "Dax?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"I love you," she studied him. "And I hesitate to mention this, because I don't want you to go overboard, but I kind of like it when you take care of me."

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Dax grinned. “Noted. I’ll do my best to pamper my baby, but still make her work for it.”

“Good plan,” she grinned all the way to her car.

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“Paige, that package from Colorado arrived,” Margie advised the instant she stepped into the office. “I put it on your desk.”

Paige settled in and began reading through the documents that pertained to the Colorado Realtor killings. She just finished documenting the similarities in the two realtor’s schedules when Jericho returned to the office. “Hey boss, do you have a minute?”

“Sure,” Jericho motioned for her to join him.

Paige stepped inside and slowly lowered herself into one of his chairs.

Jericho watched, frowned and waited for her to get settled. “Don’t you think it’s about time you gave into nature and took some time off?”

“Funny you would mention that,” Paige took a deep soothing breath. “Dax and I talked, and I was wondering if I could cut back my hours.”

“Sure,” Jericho shrugged and settled back. “I’m surprised you’ve been working full days this long.”

“I also think, maybe —” she hesitated. “Well, I think this Colorado case should be the last one we commit to until after the baby is born.”

“If you want to bail on the case, I can call and tell them we’re putting it on hold,” Jericho offered. “In fact, if you need me to, I can tell them we’re taking a pass on it completely. I don’t want to do that because we insisted they had to jump through a few hoops before I agreed to look into it, but if you need me to be the bad guy on this — I will.”

“No,” Paige shook her head. “I want to finish this. The packet arrived today, and I’ve been sifting through the new information. I want to see this through. I’m just not sure how long it will take, and the baby is due in about a month. I think I need to slow down, maybe work a few hours from home — that’s all. Which is the reason I wanted to cut back on my hours, here at the office. It’s getting hard to sit in that chair all day and by the time I get home, my ankles look like a giant puffer fish.”

Jericho frowned. “Then why are you doing it? Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

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“Because I knew you’d send me home and I wasn’t ready to take that step,” Paige admitted. “Now, I think I am.”

“You are more stubborn than an obstinate old mule,” he sighed. “Plan on working half days for the rest of this pregnancy. That’s four hours, Paige.”

“Four to six,” she corrected. “I’ll play it by ear, but I’ll be here at least four and then I’ll work a few hours at home, lounging in my favorite chair.”

“I’ll approve that,” Jericho decided. “As long as you don’t overdo it.”

“Thanks,” Paige moved to leave.

“While you’re here, any update on the Colorado case? I know you just got started but the chief checks in about every other day and I’m expecting a call any minute.” He was starting to wonder if he should have declined the case from the beginning. It was putting undo pressure on Paige and the chief was becoming a nuisance.

“Too early to tell,” Paige pushed to her feet. “I’m still going through the new file. I’ll take it home tonight and work a few more hours. I should have an idea of what we’re dealing with in a few days. We can plan on meeting first thing if you have time. I’ll give you my preliminary thoughts.”

“Sounds good,” Jericho hesitated. “Uh, Harper’s been bugging me about Thanksgiving. She wants to bring something but doesn’t know if we’re meeting at Carmen’s house or Sophies. Have they agreed on the location yet? Or, is that still up in the air? She might invite Ryan, but I doubt that kid will grace us with his presence. And if he says no, it might just be me.”

“Carmen’s,” Paige grinned. “She called dibs last year and Sophie finally relented but insisted next year she’s hosting all of us at her house. So, no improvement on the Ryan front?”

“No. I tried, but he’s not interested so I’m not going to push. Harper will need to decide how she wants to handle it. That’s out of my control. Anyway, you know it doesn’t matter whose home we eat in,” Jericho grinned. “Sophie is going to be in charge, same as she always is.”

“I know,” Paige smiled. “I’m just not sure Carmen has realized that yet. I guess they have a few weeks to figure it all out.”

“They will,” Jericho said confidently. “Keep me posted on the new case. Just let me know when you arrive in the morning, and we’ll go over the details.”

“Promise,” Paige assured him. “And Jericho, don’t give up on Harper. It’s obvious she cares about you — even if that kid of hers opposes the relationship. She might surprise you. Now, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll gather up my homework and head out.”

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“See you tomorrow,” Jericho watched her leave, relieved she was finally going to slow down. He wasn’t willing to step in and force Paige to take time off, but he’d been thinking it was time for the last few weeks. He was glad she’d finally realized that on her own. With a sigh, he pulled up his email and got back to work.

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Paige was sitting on the couch, papers spread out all over the cushions, the floor, and the large coffee table when Dax stepped through the door, dinner in hand.

“Looks like you’ve been home for a while,” he observed. “Hungry?”

“Starving,” Paige admitted and set her work aside.

“Don’t get up,” Dax set dinner on the table. “We’ll eat in here and you can explain all of this to me.”

“I’m still working on understanding all of this,” Paige admitted.

Dax returned from the kitchen with plates and cutlery. “Tell me what you can.” He settled into his favorite lounge chair and began dishing a plate.

“I have two realtors that work for different companies that were killed while showing a new listing,” Paige began. “Well, that’s not exactly true. All of the paperwork was completed to sell the homes, but they were not listed publicly. There’s no indication they knew each other, didn’t shop at the same place, didn’t have the same friends. There’s no connection.”

“There must be,” Dax disagreed. “You guys think they were killed by the same person.”

“Both bodies were discovered inside the vacant homes a day before the listing went live. And each of the victims had a mysterious appointment on their calendars.”

“Were they selling off the books?” Dax wondered.

“I think that’s basically impossible,” Paige rejected. “You can’t sell a house without a title search and an attorney to draft the contract, a bank for the mortgage, it’s not a solo operation.”

“So,” Dax considered. “An off the books enterprise, conducted in secret, where they wouldn’t be discovered — but they had plenty of privacy.”

Paige stared at him.

“What?” Dax frowned.

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“That is the first thing that makes sense when it comes to this case,” Paige admitted. “And I never thought of it. I don’t think the case agent considered that, either.”

“You got lost in the weeds,” Dax shrugged. “Eventually, you would have gotten there on your own.”

“Maybe,” Paige sat back. “I’ve been going through the financial statements and both of the realtors have sporadic deposits that don’t match up with work transactions.”

“Which supports the mysterious secret enterprise theory,” Dax settled into his chair. “So, how will you track down the details?”

“I’ll put Detective Knight on that,” Paige decided. “Let’s put this away for tonight. I’ll talk to Knight in the morning.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll build the fire and you pick a movie,” Dax stood. “I always love it when I get to spend a relaxing evening at home with my beautiful bride.”

“Enormous, beached whale of a wife,” Paige corrected.

“I was right the first time,” Dax leaned down, pulled her forward, and gave her a gentle kiss then deepened it, wanting her to feel just how much he loved and adored her.

Paige finally pulled back. “Go, build me a fire mighty warrior. I want to cuddle with my studly husband while I watch car chases, gun fights, and things blowing up.”

“Sounds like heaven,” Dax grinned, and he meant it. He loved his life, and he knew he’d love it even more once his baby was finally born.

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Paige slowly settled into her chair and picked up her phone. She grabbed the financial data and dialed Colorado Springs PD.

“Detective Knight.”

“Hey, it’s Deputy Paige Carter. I’m looking into that homicide case involving the two realtors.”

“Yeah,” Knight grabbed his file. “Did you find something?”

“I’ve got something I think you should look into,” Paige suggested. “It’s a long shot but I think there’s something to it. I just don’t know if we can figure it out.”

“That sounds cryptic,” Knight answered.

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“There’s something hinkey with the financials,” Paige admitted. “Grab the spreadsheet you sent me on the first victim — Jessica Crow.”

“Got it,” Knight pulled up the file.

She began to point out the suspicious deposits and explained her theory that they didn’t come from home sales. “Now, go to your second victim’s financials. Kim Wallace has similar profits that can’t be matched to any legitimate transactions. I’m not saying the money’s illicit or acquired by illegal means, but they did not make that money from real estate transactions. I think it’s worth looking into.”

“I agree,” Knight continued to study the documents. “It’s the first thing those two have in common, other than their career.”

“Well, I was thinking they might have been running a little side business inside the houses,” Paige told him. “It could explain the delay in publishing the listing and the reason they had a mysterious appointment.”

“Something that got them killed,” Knight agreed. “I have a couple people I can bring back in and question. I think if I lean on them, they might open up and tell me what they know.”

“I’ll continue to go through these records,” Paige offered. “Let me know what you learn.”

“I’ll give you a call in a day or two so we can update each other on the progress,” Knight offered.

Once she hung up, Paige set the financials aside and started to skim through the interviews.

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Several days later, Paige was sitting on the couch reading through the new interviews Knight sent over that morning when her doorbell rang. She struggled to pull herself from the couch and slowly made her way to the front door.

“Go change,” Carmen pushed her way inside the house.

“I’m comfortable,” Paige objected.

“When the boys are away, the girls have to play,” Carmen insisted.

“When the boys are away, the girls need to relax,” Paige corrected. Dax and the guys left on their last training course that morning and Paige planned to enjoy a relaxing evening alone eating popcorn and reading about murder.



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“Change or go as you are, but we’re going to my house,” Carmen demanded. “Hurry up, people are waiting.”

“What people?” Paige frowned.

“Sophie and Harper got there just before I left and Katie is on her way,” Carmen provided. “I also invited Jamie, but she needed to talk to Wooly’s mom first and said she’d either head over or call back to let us know she’s not coming.”

“Our group is growing,” Paige considered. “I can’t believe Harper agreed to come. Hopefully, there’s room for one more. I know you don’t know her, but maybe next time we can invite Dean’s girlfriend — Cara. Dean said she’s having a hard time meeting people our age.”

“Call her,” Carmen offered.

“Not tonight,” Paige disagreed. “Dean’s taking her to some haunted house thing. I will invite her next time, if that’s okay.”

“Of course,” Carmen shrugged. “Now, go change. We need to go.”

“The things you talk me into,” Paige sighed. “Give me ten minutes.”

A short time later, they pulled into Carmen’s garage and stepped into the house. Paige was greeted by a feeling of relaxed friendship. Sophie and Harper were settled in the living room sipping wine and visiting like old friends. Jamie was in the kitchen organizing snacks with Katie. The two women glanced up at the sound of the door closing. Katie darted across the room and pulled Paige into a hug. Paige raised her eyebrows at Jamie, who just shrugged.

“I’m so glad I wasn’t the last one here,” Katie stepped back. “I thought I was going to be late. I know you can’t drink, so I brought chocolate. Lots and lots of chocolate! Oh, and some of that sparkling apple juice stuff.”

“Chocolate is good,” Carmen slipped out of her coat and hung it on a hook by the door. “But I told you not to buy anything.”

“I know, but Daisy’s triple fudge brownies were calling to me and I couldn’t resist,” Katie held up a plate layered with brownies.

“And now they’re calling to me,” Paige smiled and handed Carmen her jacket.

“Good,” Katie practically danced into the living room.

“She may have had a few glasses of wine,” Jamie admitted. “I hope everything is okay. Ken said Hawk’s been a bear all day and she practically guzzled her first glass the instant she arrived. I hope they’re not fighting.”

“I’m worried, too,” Carmen glanced at Katie. “Zeus told me Katie stopped in at the center this morning and she looked upset when she left.”

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“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” Paige accepted the large glass of water Carmen handed her. “We all fight with our men, which is why making up is so much fun.”

“That it is,” Carmen smirked. “But I think it’s too soon to share — I don’t want to scare the poor girl away. Discussing the sizzling details of my Greek God are so hot that girl might spontaneously combust — we need to break her in slowly.”

“You can keep that to yourself forever,” Paige carefully lowered herself into a chair. “Nobody wants to hear about naked Zeus and your reindeer games.”

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” Harper laughed.

“How much have you had?” Paige narrowed her eyes at Harper. “Because the last thing I want to do tonight is call in the sheriff.”

“That’s against the rules, dear,” Sophie sipped her wine. “Girl’s night means no men allowed.”

“I don’t think this is an adolescent club house,” Jamie dropped into a chair. “But our options, when it comes to the male variety, are sorely limited at the moment. Most of our men are traipsing around the wilderness trying to avoid frostbite so they don’t lose their toes.”

“And they love it,” Carmen dropped onto the couch. “I have no idea why, but they do.”

“Well, it’s the last one this year, so we can let them have their fun,” Paige shrugged. “Dax offered to stay home this time. I wish he’d stop worrying so much. He would have been miserable if the guys went out there without him.”

“He’s never going to stop worrying,” Sophie smiled. “Our husbands are like two peas in a pod and Nathan still worries when he’s away on a mission.”

“Yeah,” Carmen shifted and pulled her legs onto the couch. “Dax would run through fire to protect you and you know it.”

“Naw,” Paige grinned. “He’d stand on the other side and tell me to stop acting like a sissy and get my sexy butt to safety. If I didn’t act quick enough, he’d insist he’s not going to ruin another pair of boots coming after me. But, if I’d just darted across the room, he’d be there to catch me — or throw me on the ground and stomp out the fire.”

“Yes,” Carmen laughed. “That’s exactly what he’d say. And you’d listen and fly through the fire because you know he’d be there to catch you.”

“Maybe,” Paige smiled and grabbed another brownie. “But your men would do the same.”

“Naw,” Carmen settled back further. “Zeus would toss in a bomb, rush in, and throw me over his shoulder before he carted me off.”

“And Hawk would have an instant plan with a diagram of the safest route in, a fire blanket, and a large extinguisher to pave the way to rescue his damsel,” Paige winked at Katie.

“Nathan would call in an elite team of fire fighters to save the day,” Sophie added.

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They all laughed at that, knowing she was right.

“Alright,” Carmen glanced around. “Now that we’re all here, we want answers. Paige, you are first on the agenda. Stop toying with us and just tell us if you’re having a boy or a girl.”

“I don’t know,” Paige shrugged.

“But —” Carmen began.

“We don’t know. We want it to be a surprise,” Paige told them. “And it doesn’t matter how many times you ask; I still won’t know. The only person that knows is the doctor and he’s not telling.”

“Surprises are stupid,” Katie provided.

“We’ll get to you in a minute,” Jamie warned. “Why did you guys decide to wait?”

“We wanted a good surprise for once,” Paige explained.

“What does that mean?” Harper asked.

“Since I met Dax, we’ve had plenty of surprises but not many were good,” Paige admitted. “Surprise, the man that killed your mom wants you dead, too. Surprise, America’s sweetheart reporter isn’t all that sweet. Oh, she’s also the ex-girlfriend of the man you love, and she wants him back. Surprise, a terrorist has abducted your boyfriend. Surprise, your uncle came to town and is trying to ruin your wedding. Surprise, a violent sociopath you previously arrested is in town and she’s trying to kill your husband.”

“Is all of that true?” Katie asked, shocked and confused.

“It is,” Carmen tossed a towel at Paige. “But there were good things that happened, too. It wasn’t all bad.”

“It sounds bad,” Katie mumbled.

“Anyway,” Paige let out a long breath. “We’ve had so many difficult things happen; we wanted a good surprise. We’re not going to change our minds, so please just stop asking. We don’t care if it’s a girl or a boy, we’re going to love our baby either way.”

“Of course, you will,” Sophie agreed and she finally understood their decision to wait. There were other things, too. Her abduction, someone shooting at Paige and Dean, Sean going missing, and the money — something she wasn’t supposed to know about. Paige was right, the kids did deserve a good surprise for once.

“Now that we got that out of the way,” Carmen turned to Katie. “It’s your turn. Spill all your deep dark secrets. What has you so upset tonight?”

Katie glanced around, sighed and set her glass of wine on the end table. “Hawk is ashamed of me.”

“What?” Paige barked. “No, he isn’t.”

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“He is. His brother called,” Katie admitted. “He asked, or I guess basically demanded, that Hawk go home for Thanksgiving this year. He said it was time for them to spend the holiday as a family.” She glanced around the room. “Hawk said he’s going alone. He doesn’t want me there, doesn’t want me to meet his family. He brushed it off and said I could just hang out at Carmen’s all day and help prepare for the big meal with all of you.”

“Sure,” Carmen agreed. “I could use the help.”

“But that’s not the point,” Katie objected. “I want to go with him. I want to meet his brother and his father. I want him to want to take me.” She tried to blink back the tears that were starting to form in her eyes.

“You think he’s ashamed of you because he doesn’t want you to meet his family?” Paige asked.

“Yes, isn’t that obvious?” Katie whispered.

“Maybe he’s ashamed of them,” Paige suggested.

“What?” Katie frowned. “Why would you say that?”

“Did he tell you why he wanted you to stay home?” Sophie wondered.

“He said it’s not the right time,” Katie shrugged.

“Then don’t read anything more into it than that,” Carmen suggested. “Zeus didn’t meet my family until a few days before our wedding.”

“That’s not true,” Katie didn’t believe her.

“And I didn’t meet the Hamilton’s until they flew out for our wedding,” Paige offered. “Hawk is a lot like Carmen and Dax. His family situation is complicated, and I suspect he’s just trying to shield you from the drama.”

“I don’t want to be shielded,” Katie shook her head. “I want to be with him.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want,” Carmen countered. “It’s his family.”

“But aren’t we supposed to be partners?” Katie pushed. “Shouldn’t we discuss it and make the decision together?”

“I didn’t,” Carmen studied Katie for several seconds, trying to organize her thoughts.

“And Dax didn’t,” Paige offered. “Just because you want to meet Hawk’s family, it doesn’t mean the timing is right for introductions. Don’t read any more into this than that. Hawk’s situation is complicated. He was on a mission when his mom died. The family turned on him, they tried to make him feel guilty, and when he refused to apologize for doing his job, they stopped talking to him. This is a big moment for him. And if he brought a stranger to dinner, chances are good they’d shut down again. He needs to do this alone and you shouldn’t assume that means he’s ashamed of you. You should support his decision because going home, alone, is going to be hard for him.”

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“I didn’t know,” Katie swallowed hard. “Which means we have other problems we need to deal with.”

“Not tonight,” Carmen disagreed. “And not before Thanksgiving. Let him do this, for himself, for his family, and for you. Because if this relationship works out, you will inherit an estranged family if he can’t fix it. And that’s always difficult, no matter how much you love your man.”

“Which brings us to you,” Paige turned to Harper. “What’s the deal with you and Jericho?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Harper frowned.

“He said you’re not coming to Thanksgiving dinner this year,” Paige accused. “What’s more important than spending the holiday with your family?”

“I am spending the holiday with my family,” Harper evaded.

“Your son?” Paige asked.

“Yes,” Harper admitted.

“Then bring him with you,” Paige suggested. “You know he’s always welcome.”

“I don’t think Jericho would want him there,” Harper disagreed. “They don’t seem to get along. I don’t know why Jericho doesn’t like my son, but I’ve given up on those two ever getting along. Jericho refuses to try.”

“Are you sure Jericho is the problem?” Paige challenged.

“I realize the two of you are close,” Harper frowned. “Apparently, you’re the only one he will ever accept completely. Ryan has tried, but Jericho is always so negative.”

“Is he?” Paige refused to drop this. “Because from what I hear, Ryan’s the one that rejected Jericho.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Harper demanded. “Ryan has been more than open. Jericho is the one that refused to spend time with my son.”

“Hum,” Paige sat back. “I guess you didn’t hear about the Raider’s game. They’re playing the Las Angeles Chargers. Is it Jericho that Ryan dislikes or does he have an aversion to football?”

“What are you talking about?” Harper demanded.

“Jericho bought tickets to the game in December, but Ryan refused go. He rejected Jericho — again,” Paige informed her.

“How do you know that?” Harper demanded.

“Because he told me and Dax when he invited my husband to join him instead,” Paige admitted. “Look, Ryan isn’t interested in getting to know any of us. He told me that himself. He

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said once you and Jericho break up, there's no reason to remain connected — so what's the point? You're blaming the wrong person, Harper. Jericho is trying, Ryan is not. And Jericho is smart enough to know the two of you don't have a future if your son is against it."

"I don't —" Harper began.

"Want to hear anything negative about your son," Paige finished. "Maybe that's the real problem."

"Don't tell me how to interact with my child. You might be pregnant, but you have no idea the kind of sacrifices it takes to raise a child."

"Ryan is no longer a child, but he's controlling your happiness — or, more to the point, making sure you will never be happy. How long are you going to let him?" Paige asked.

"I need to go," Harper jumped to her feet, grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

"Was that necessary?" Sophie asked Paige.

"I think it was," Paige shrugged. "And don't blame me. You forced me to participate in this girl's night thing. I was completely happy relaxing at home in my pajama pants and sweatshirt."

"I think she needed to know," Katie provided. "Just like I needed to know I was being selfish when it comes to Hawk and his family. We should be able to discuss things, to talk about the hard stuff. It's that the point of girl's night — honesty and friendship?"

"Yes," Carmen decided. "Now, let's watch a sappy movie, eat too much sugar and enjoy the company of good friends."

Hours later, Paige was channel surfing, surrounded by sleeping women when her phone buzzed. "Hey, babe," she whispered, smiling.

"How's girl's night?" Dax settled into a folding chair.

"It started out rocky, but I think it ended on a better note," Paige sighed. "The girls are sleeping soundly."

"Ended? Already?" Dax frowned. "And rocky how?"

"Harper was here," Paige explained. "She started in on how Jericho is rejecting Ryan and I told her about the game. She left mad; I think. The rest of these guys had too much sugar and a lot of wine. They conked before the movie ended."

"You should crash there for the night," Dax suggested. "It's late and I'll sleep better knowing you're with friends."

"Of course, you will," Paige grinned.

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“About the rest,” Dax added. “Harper might be angry, but she needed to hear that kid of hers is a spoiled brat — and he’s driving a wedge between her and Jericho. I get the feeling that boss of yours would rather walk than push her too hard.”

“Do you think it’s the college kid verses cop thing,” Paige wondered.

“No,” Dax disagreed. “I think he’s spoiled and used to getting whatever he wants when it comes to his mother. Now she’s found herself in a situation where she can either humor her adult child and be alone forever or she can stand up for what she wants and be happy with the amazing Jericho Walters. The choice is hers. You’ve given her a little push, let’s see what she does with it.”

“I hope Jericho sees it that way,” Paige bit her bottom lip, worried butting into Jericho’s life might have been a mistake.

“He will,” Dax assured her. “It’s late and I’m freezing. Go to sleep. I’ll try to call again tomorrow night.”

“I love you,” Paige smiled. She rarely had the chance to say it first.

“I love you, too babe.”

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Two days later, Paige was sitting at her desk, skimming through her case file when her phone interrupted. “Deputy Carter.”

“Hey, it’s Detective Knight,” a deep voice greeted. “I had an idea that I wanted to run by you. I guess, well it sounds crazy, so I wanted a second opinion before I ran with it.”

“Alright,” Paige sat back. “I’m listening.”

“So,” Knight began. “The boss decided we should go through all the deaths in the area since that first murder. He’s not convinced I’m headed in the right direction.”

“He still thinks he has a serial killer on the loose?” Paige asked.

“Right,” Knight admitted. “So, I hit on something, but it seems — well, it seems like a long shot but in my gut it feels like there’s something there.”

“Run it through,” Paige suggested.

“In the interview with Rachel Avery, from the second murder. She’s the neighbor that walks her dog every morning at exactly ten o’clock.”

“I remember,” Paige shuffled through the documents until she found the statement from the neighbor.

“She said she saw a strange car in the neighborhood that morning,” Knight continued.

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“Yeah,” Paige found the section she was looking for. “A silver Jetta and she thinks it was a male driver.”

“Yes,” Knight relaxed. “There was one other witness that mentioned the Jetta.”

Paige tried to remember, that sounded vaguely familiar.

“The painter,” Knight informed her. “The guy working on the home three doors down from our crime scene.”

“Right,” Paige grabbed that statement. “He also said the Jetta was silver.”

“So,” Knight hesitated. “Here’s the thing. The night after the second murder, an Uber driver was killed. He drove a silver Jetta and he didn’t have a scheduled client for over an hour before his death.”

“Unsolved?” Paige wondered.

“Yeah,” Knight nodded. “And it looks like that case is headed for the cold file. There’s nothing to go on. The driver made a run at nine that evening. That’s the last confirmed ride on his schedule. Then, just after ten we got a call of shots fired in the area and his car was located down by the river. The area is secluded. Honestly, it’s a miracle anyone heard that shot to call it in. Anyway, the body was found slumped over the steering wheel. Our victim was killed instantly, one shot to the back of the head. I can send you the file if you think it could be related. There were about a dozen prints in the back seat — which we expected from a professional driver.”

“I think it’s worth looking at,” Paige decided. “Send me the file. Also, where’s the car?”

“Still in evidence,” Knight answered immediately. “I’ve put a hold on it. It’s assigned to another detective but if you decide it’s connected, I’ll have it transferred to me.”

“Give me a day and I’ll let you know,” Paige offered.

“We’re completely digital so I’ve emailed the file,” Knight informed her. “Give me a call once you’ve gone through it.”

“Will do,” Paige said before disconnecting. She pulled up her email, printed the entire document, and got to work.

“Paige,” Jericho called out. “Go home.”

Paige studied her desk, glanced at Jericho but knew he wouldn’t budge, and began gathering up her files. She’d take this home and work for a few more hours. But first, she was going to stop and grab dinner — she was starving. It was her last night alone and she was glad this training course was nearly complete. For some reason, spending a week away from Dax had been more difficult than usual. She was eager for it to be over — she wanted her husband back home where he belonged. One more night, settled in on the couch, eating alone, working on the new case. She could deal with that.



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Several hours later, Paige was fed and comfortable. And, she was fairly confident the Uber driver was killed by the same person that killed the realtors. She was jotting down notes when her phone rang. She glanced down, smiled and answered. "Tell me you're on your way home."

Dax laughed. "Tomorrow. What time will you get home from work?"

"Probably around two-ish," Paige set her work aside and settled against the back of the couch. "Why?"

"Just wondering," Dax evaded. "Tell me about your day. How's the case coming?"

"I can't wait for you to get back so I can walk you through it," Paige admitted. "I think we added an Uber driver to the list."

"Sounds intriguing," Dax grinned. "Tell me."

She walked him through her case, took notes and laughed until after midnight. "I think it's time to call it a night." Paige finally said. After they hung up, Paige realized Dax had called several times since he'd started this course. That was unusual and another indication he was worried about her and the baby. Maybe he also missed her as much as she was missing him.

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The following day, Paige was dragging when she headed off to work. She slept through her alarm, didn't have anything to eat besides Pop Tarts, and she was confident the Uber driver was part of the case, but she didn't have any hard evidence to prove it. The instant she dropped into her chair, she picked up the phone and dialed Colorado.

"Detective Knight," came an alert voice on the other end of the line.

"Deputy Carter," Paige scowled. The man was way to chipper this morning.

"Oh, hey," Knight's tone told Paige he was happy to get the call. "What did you decide?"

"I think they're connected," Paige admitted. "I don't have proof, nothing that will stand up to scrutiny if your boss presses, but my instinct is screaming they're connected."

"Yeah," Knight considered. "I was hoping for more, but I doubt the case agent will scoff if I ask for it. Like I said, as it stands now, that one is heading for the cold file."

"I do have an idea," Paige offered. "Something that will tie the driver to the realtor cases."

"I'm listening," Knight encouraged.

"Grab the Wallace case," Paige suggested. "The interview from the dog walker."

"Got it," Knight confirmed.

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“Okay,” Paige rummaged through the file until she got the statement she was looking for. “The dog walker said she noticed the vehicle because it was parked on the sidewalk, blocking her path, and it was partially inside Mrs. Anders flower bed.”

“Right,” Knight smiled. “And Mrs. Anders was furious. She insisted I take a photo of the damage, just in case we tracked down the horrible man that damaged her beautiful garden.”

“Right,” Paige remembered reading the report on that and seeing the images. “Well, the tire tracks were unique. There was a flat section among the tread. I was thinking, if you have the Jetta in evidence, you could see if the tires match the impression left in Mrs. Anders flower bed. That would connect your vehicle to the area on the night the murder occurred. It’s circumstantial but with the two witnesses putting a Jetta in the area, the tire tracks —”

“If they match,” Knight realized where she was going.

“I think they will,” Paige pushed. “But yeah, if it’s a match, I think you could convince a judge you have enough probable cause to get a warrant for the Uber driver’s schedule the night of those two murders.”

“It’s specific enough, I think it might work,” Knight agreed. “And it will tie the Uber driver to my case and add weight when I ask the sarge to combine them.”

“Exactly,” Paige agreed. “I’m still going through the new case and the other interviews but you get started on that and I’ll wade through the rest.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Knight said before disconnecting.

Paige spent the rest of the day going through the files. Each time she thought she might have a new lead, something in another statement or report explained the anomaly. She was about to give up and call it a day when something caught her eye. She grabbed the phone and dialed Knight. Once he answered, she rushed right in. “Who is Roger Baker?”

“Uh,” Knight skimmed through his notes, trying to locate the name. “I’m not seeing a Baker. Give me the context.”

“I was reading through one of the new interviews you conducted,” Paige explained. “With a Crystal Montgomery.”

“Right,” Knight pulled up the interview. “She said I should talk to Jessica’s friend Roger Baker. I haven’t had any luck tracking down a Baker with a connection to Jessica.”

“See if there’s a Baker connected to Kim Wallace,” Paige suggested.

“What are you thinking?” Knight wondered.

“I think Jessica Crow and Kim Wallace knew each other,” Paige began. “I think they had a side business — something they had to conduct in private. They’d get a listing and wait a day or two to put it on the market to give them the privacy they needed to make some money on the side. I’m wondering if this Roger Baker was another partner, or associate.”

“There are a million Baker’s that live in this area,” Knight objected.

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“How many of them are realtors?” Paige wondered.

“But —” Knight pulled out the list of realtors he got from the licensing department. “Well, I’ll be.”

“You found him?” Paige asked. “And he’s another realtor?”

“Yes on both,” Knight admitted. “I need to look into this. Thanks, Paige. You just gave me another lead I can follow. I’ll be in touch. Oh, by the way, the tread matched. The Jetta must have driven over a newly paved road somewhere. The right front tire had asphalt stuck in one of the treads that matched up perfectly with that smooth impression made in Anders flower bed. I’m waiting for the warrant, but it should come through any time.”

“Let me know if there’s anything else I can do from out here,” Paige offered. “But I think at this point, it’s more legwork on your end that will break this case.”

“I’ll let you know,” Knight disconnected.

“Did I hear that correctly?” Jericho said the instant Paige hung up the phone. “Are you sending the case back to the locals for follow up?”

“For now,” Paige advised. “There are a few leads that Knight can chase on his end, but I think I’ve done everything I can from here.”

“Good,” Jericho hesitated. “Then I need a minute in private.”

“Alright,” Paige settled into a chair. “What did I do now?”

“You talked to Harper,” Jericho got right to the point. “And you told her about the game.”

“I did,” Paige shifted in her seat. “Are you mad?”

“No,” Jericho shrugged. “She doesn’t listen to me, maybe she’ll listen to you. When I try, she just says I’m being negative.”

“Oh, she tried to tell me the same thing,” Paige grinned. “I ignored her. Did she take it out on you?”

“Maybe a little,” Jericho shrugged. “I didn’t ask you in here to scold you. I wanted to say thank you. Harper has a blind spot when it comes to her kid. Ryan is good at taking advantage of that and manipulating the situation to get what he wants. Until you spoke up, Harper was convinced I was the bad guy here. To be honest, I didn’t expect our relationship to last through the holidays. Maybe it will, maybe not. At least, she has a better understanding of what’s going on and the ball is in her court. That’s all I wanted to say. So, Thanksgiving is a month away, but you’ll be dealing with a baby by then. Is there anything you need — between now and then — anything I can help with, other than forced time off?”

“No,” Paige shrugged. “I’ve been banned from participating this year and I’m good with that. Just promise me you will come, with or without Harper. That’s all I need.”

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“I’ll be there,” Jericho promised. “Now, if you’ve hit a dead end on the Colorado case, go home. Relax until that husband of yours gets home. You’ve earned it.”

“I think I will,” Paige decided. “I could use the rest. But Jericho?”

“Yeah,” he raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t give up on Harper just yet,” Paige suggested. “I know she cares for you. She might not see Ryan clearly, but I think she understands more than either one of us has given her credit for.”

“Maybe,” Jericho grabbed his mail. “Like I said, it’s up to her. I guess only time will tell.”

Paige left, feeling frustrated and defeated. Harper was good for Jericho. She just hoped the first time he let himself hope for a future with someone since he lost Chaya Carter, the woman wouldn’t break his heart. She was pretty sure, if things didn’t work out with Harper, it would be a very long time before Jericho gave another woman a chance.

The instant Paige stepped through the door, she spotted Dax asleep on the couch. She tried to be quiet so she didn’t wake him but after closing the door, she turned and realized Dax was watching her. “Welcome home.”

“I don’t think it counts until you come over here and give me a kiss,” Dax grinned.

Paige set her bag on the chair and settled onto the couch next to Dax. She leaned in and gave him a long welcome home kiss. When she leaned back, she realized he looked exhausted. “You’re tired.”

“Someone kept me up past midnight and I had an early morning,” Dax admitted.

“Here,” Paige slid across the couch, grabbed Dax’s arm and pulled. He relented, shifted and settled onto the couch, his head in her lap. Paige slid her fingers through his hair. “Another successful course completed?”

“It was amazing,” Dax smiled. “The best course to date. Now, I’m off until the next year. And I get to spend all that time with my beautiful wife.”

“And baby,” Paige added.

“Tell me about the case,” Dax requested.

“I think it’s over for me,” Paige admitted. “I talked to Detective Knight today and he’s running with a few additional leads. Hopefully, they’ll pan out.” She proceeded to explain the Uber driver, the silver Jetta and the mysterious Roger Baker.

“It sounds like you pointed him in the right direction,” Dax observed. “So why do you sound disappointed?”

“Not disappointed,” Paige disagreed. “It’s just — I don’t know. I guess I don’t feel like I did anything on this case. Detective Knight discovered the link with the Uber driver and you’re

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the one that figured out there was some secret business operating out of the empty houses. I didn't provide anything this time and it feels like I failed somehow."

"Not true," Dax disagreed. "You pointed him in the right direction, that's something."

"I guess I just don't think he needed help," Paige decided. "I think he just needed the support his department wasn't giving him. He knew what direction to take the investigation, but his supervisor wasn't listening. I guess I provided moral support and a second opinion that helped him get them off his back so he had the freedom to do the job the way he wanted to."

"Then you helped," Dax insisted. "Be happy you were able to help and let it go."

"I'll try," Paige decided. "Now, enough about me. I want you to tell me about the course. First, before I forget, Jericho knows about my discussion with Harper."

"How'd that go?" Dax asked.

"Fine," Paige shrugged. "He seemed relieved. He's tried to talk to Harper about Ryan but she always shuts him down. I think he's just glad she actually heard it, even if she had to hear it from me. Now it's up to her. Anyway, tell me about the course."

"The first day was a little rough," Dax admitted. He proceeded to tell her about the course, relaying the humorous mistakes and the tasks where the guys excelled. They talked for hours, took a break to order dinner, then settled in for a relaxing movie in front of the fire. It only took ten minutes for Dax to fall asleep.

Paige watched the entire movie, woke Dax, and the two of them stumbled up to bed.

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The next day, she was sitting at her desk, organizing the Colorado file when her phone rang.

"Paige, sorry I didn't call sooner," Knight greeted. "The past twenty-four hours have been crazy."

"Sounds promising," Paige decided.

"We made an arrest," Knight grinned. "David Wallace killed Jessica Crow, his wife Kim Wallace and the Uber driver — Adam Jones. What you don't know is that he also attacked Roger Baker. I was trying to track Baker down but found him at a local hospital in the ICU."

"Wow," Paige sat back. "Did you talk to him? Did he know who his attacker was?"

"I did," Knight told her. "He didn't know his attacker. Initially, he thought it was a random mugging."

"Sounds like another dead end," Paige admitted. "So, how did that lead to an arrest?"

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“He came clean,” Knight told her. “Roger told me about the side gig. He was operating a dating service with our two murder victims. They used the vacant homes to create the perfect, romantic date location for their clients. The three of them worked for different real estate agencies, which gave them access to prime locations. All they had to do was delay the listing for a day or so and they had the perfect, secret, private venue for their clients to stage their dream dates.”

“Until the dream turned into a homicidal nightmare,” Paige offered.

“Right,” Knight sobered. “Enter the deadbeat husband — well, soon to be ex-husband — turned widower after he killed his wife. Kim Wallace was at the top of her game. She won an award for the best realtor several months before her death. Her company renegotiated her contract to give her a larger percentage of the profits and she had several wealthy clients she was working with to find the perfect home or vacation getaway — all of them would be million-dollar sales. She was in demand and raking in the money.”

“Then why the side gig?” Paige wondered.

“They’d been working that for several years,” Knight sighed. “All three of the agents were on the top of their game and didn’t really need the distraction — but they enjoyed it. They used it. Those three weren’t just operating the dating service, they were using it. Kim Wallace was putting things in order to divorce her husband, but she didn’t want to wait to have a little fun. So, she plugged her name into the pot and enjoyed a date now and then — compliments of the empty houses. She was on a date when she was killed. Well, technically, she had just finished a date when she was murdered by her jealous husband. I think the only reason the date got away unscathed was because he was a doctor and was called into work on an emergency.”

“Lucky break,” Paige stared out the window. “Why kill Jessica Crow? And attack Roger Baker? That just drew attention to the secret dating business.”

“David Wallace is an idiot,” Knight suggested. “He thought if three realtors from three different companies were murdered, we’d see random vendetta against people that sell houses and not look any closer. He never thought we’d connect the Uber driver with the other attacks.”

“He underestimated you,” Paige replied. “So did your supervisor. I’m happy you closed this one out, but I feel like bringing me in was a waste of time. I didn’t really help.”

“You came up with the secret business angle,” he objected. “And without your suggestion on the tire mark in the garden I never would have connected the driver to the murders.”

“Actually, my husband came up with the secret business angle. I just passed on his theory,” Paige corrected. “And I’m sure you would have checked the tire tracks without my help.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Knight shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. You suggested it and my supervisor finally saw the connection. That guy, the driver, was nothing more than a victim of bad luck. He drove David Wallace to the house and dropped him off. Then, Wallace worried the kid might hear about the murders on the news and talk to the police. He basically stalked that guy until he thought the time was right. Then, he pretended to run into him randomly and said he needed a ride. Wallace promised to pay Adam double if he’d just do the run off the books.

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The kid agreed and Wallace directed him to the isolated area before he shot him in the back of the head and walked away.”

“I realize murder is always senseless and stupid,” Paige tossed her pen onto the desk. “But that is so irrational and futile. The kid was so young and working hard to make a better life for himself.”

“Yeah,” Knight sighed. “The job has a way of getting to you, but that death just pisses me off. The first one, too. He killed Jessica because she was part of the dating business but also to create a false narrative. He knew the husband was always the most likely suspect, so he tried to give us something else to focus on.”

“It didn’t work,” Paige said. “Never does.”

“It did for a while,” Knight disagreed. “My boss was set on the serial killer angle. You stepped in and pulled him back so I could work the case the way I normally would — but that only happened because you agreed to help. I needed you on this, even if I did the legwork myself.”

“I’m glad it all worked out,” Paige decided. “So, he killed the first woman because she was part of the dating company. Then he killed his wife to get her money because she was going to divorce him. How does that get him anything?”

“Large insurance policy,” Knight admitted. “And Kim Wallace had a significant amount of money in the bank. He figured he’d walk away with the funds and live off that for a while. Plus, she purchased the house they lived in, and they didn’t have a mortgage. Free rent, plenty of funds, and the freedom to find a new sugar momma before it all ran out.”

“So, he killed one partner and tried to kill the other out of spite?” Paige wondered. “It would have been smarter to make it look like a random mugging.”

“I did say the guy was an idiot,” Knight laughed. “He knew about the listing, the one where he killed Jessica. He said he thought his wife had a date scheduled for that night. When he arrived and spotted the partner, he got the idea to kill her first. In that tiny pea brain of his, he thought it would throw us off and we’d never look at him once he killed Kim. He was wrong, I did look. I just didn’t find anything, not at first.”

“How did you find him?” Paige wondered. “What clicked and pointed to him?”

“The Uber records,” Knight admitted. “Once I got the warrant, I went through the records and David Wallace used the same driver to take him to both homes — near the time of death; or, at least, within the window the ME gave us. That’s why he was so worried. He thought, once we shot down the serial killer angle, we’d hit on the realtor angle and the Uber driver might make the connection. He figured he’d just have to kill the witness and then he’d get away clean.”

“That’s what they all think,” Paige told him. “There’s no such thing as the perfect murder. And we’re just lucky most killers are either stupid or they brag to their friends.”

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“Or both,” Knight agreed. “Anyway, we got him on all three murders and the attempted. Instead of heading for a slow death in the back of a filing cabinet, all three cases are closed by arrest. Now it’s up to the lawyers to hash it out. If we’re lucky, David Wallace will never see the light of day again.”

“And you get some free time to enjoy the holidays?” Paige wondered.

“Maybe,” Knight evaded. “My name dropped to the bottom of the list. If the citizens of Colorado Springs can hold their tempers, maybe I’ll get a brief reprieve before the next one. Anyway, I thought you’d want to know the details. It’s been a long night and I’m heading out to grab a few hours down while I can.”

“Thanks for the call,” Paige said sincerely. “And don’t hesitate to call if I can help down the road.”

“Same goes,” Knight offered. “Take care Paige and have a wonderful holiday season. I hear that baby of yours is about to make an appearance. Congratulations on that and I hope all goes well for you and the family.”

“Thanks,” Paige was smiling when she hung up. Another successful case closed, even if she didn’t do all that much to help this time. She stood and headed into brief Jericho and let him know she was, once again, free to help where needed.