

Fatal Hesitation

JM Dragon

Book Two of the When Hell Meets Heaven Series

Fatal Hesitation

Second story in the When Hell Meets Heaven Series

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WHEN HELL MEETS HEAVEN SERIES

WHEN HELL MEETS HEAVEN

FATAL HESITATION

ECHOES OF THE PAST

PARADOX OF LOVE

THE END GAME

WOLF AT THE DOOR



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Fatal Hesitation

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Back of the Book

Olivia Santos and Dr. Amelia West have formed a new business named When Hell Meets Heaven. Olivia does the detective work and Amelia focuses on the physiological aspects. Unfortunately for Amelia, her part of the business is almost nonexistent, which makes her question what she should do—go back to the convent or embrace her new life outside of the church.

When Olivia sets out on a new case, she quickly learns that she needs Amelia's expertise if she is going to solve the mystery. That sets both women down a path that helps them to begin to answer lingering questions about their new working relationship.

CHAPTER ONE

Staring at the sign, *When Heaven Meets Hell*, above the moderately comfortable building it adorned, the onlooker sighed. She had to admit to a degree of trepidation at the name of the agency, which she'd located from the numerous ones in the phone book. It didn't exactly give peace of mind in ones hour of need. Shaking off the initial doubts, the woman opened the door to the office area and walked in as confidently as she could muster.

Inside, she was amazed to see how normal it looked. Perhaps too normal, maybe this was the catch to knock you off balance before reality set in. Glancing around, she saw a couple of desks in what appeared to be a small reception counter that as far as she could see was unmanned. The walls covered in small landscape paintings—nothing too elaborate—soothing in their own way. She saw no angry depictions of waves crashing over gigantic rocks or stark and lonely scenery. No, these depicted more gentle scenes, babbling brooks and colorful cottage garden types. The colors adorning the walls, done in pastel greens and yellows, produced a feeling of calmness to wash over one's soul.

A phone rang and a voice appeared from nowhere, or, at least they must have been hiding because she never saw anyone. Waiting a few minutes until the call had ended the woman neared the reception counter and in a soft tone said, "Hello." She virtually jumped out of her skin when the head of a woman peeked over the top of the counter.

With an engaging smile, the person replied, "Hello."

"My goodness I didn't realize you were hiding behind the counter," the potential client remarked. Her voice initially breathless, gaining her composure soon after by catching her breath, after the surprise of seeing the woman.

Teal grinned warmly, cheerfully explaining, "Sorry about that. I like to work at my level for all the normal duties. I'm a dwarf you see," Seconds later Teal appeared from behind the counter and motioned her to the desk on the left. "How can we help?"

How they had stumbled across such the name for the agency baffled her, as the place seemed far removed from a troubled scenario. Instead, she had been greeted by soothing ambiance and now a woman though of tiny stature, was certainly big on personality and abundantly cheerful. "I'd like to book an appointment with a private detective; today if possible. I'm in town from for the day."

"Of course, I'm sure we can arrange that. Detective Santos is free... let me see now. Ah yes, she'll be available for a consultation at one or four o'clock this afternoon, take your pick," Teal announced in an upbeat professional manner, while flicking through a diary on the desk.

"One will be better for me then I can get an earlier train back home." The woman accepted the appointment gratefully.

Teal grinned as she picked up her pen. "I need a few details...nothing too personal." Teal asked her questions casually noting the answers on what looked like a form of some description. With the formalities over, the woman stood up and wished Teal a polite goodbye.

Taking only a few minutes over the relevant particulars, she was ready to leave until her appointment later that day.

“See you at one o’clock, Ms. Agnew.” The door closed quietly behind the woman.

*

Teal began to speculate, which was a small game she played, as to what type of case this would be. *Perhaps an affair gone wrong... no she’s too timid. Maybe the husband doesn’t understand her syndrome and all that went with it. Then again, it could be...*

The inner door of one of the offices adjoining her domain opened and crashed shut behind the person leaving the room hastily. From Teal’s position it looked like the session wasn’t very productive, as the man, red faced and angry, left the building without a word. A few minutes later, that same door opened and an exasperated woman with a frustrated expression on her face stood there. “Teal, any chance of a decent cup of coffee? I think I’m in need of an OD of caffeine.”

Teal chuckled softly, as she saw one of her bosses and good friend, look none too relaxed. “I think you need more than an overdose my friend. I see Mr. James was his usual bubbly self after your session.”

“Teal, how can you equate bubbly and Mr. James in the same sentence? Hmm, well at least we’re making progress.” Doctor Amelia West walked into the calming atmosphere of the room and lounged against the desk where Teal was sitting.

“I’ll take your professional word for it, Amelia,” Teal stood up placing a friendly hand on her friend’s shoulder, which she could only just reach. Fortunately, Amelia wasn’t as tall as she other was employer. Because there was no chance of the same action being taken with the private detective, no matter how much she dreamed of touching the muscles in that well sculpted body. *Eat your heart out Theron*, Teal thought as she left to make the requested coffee.

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Amelia glanced down at the diaries of both hers and the private detective, amazed to see that the detective had more appointments than she did for the rest of the week. Although, in truth, since moving away from her old neighborhood and taking up residence in a district a couple of miles away. Her clients had been severely reduced while detective’s had increased dramatically. Perhaps she should rethink her profession along with her old lifestyle. Not that she had completely cut herself off from her Order, she hadn’t. In fact, with the recent changes and the need to find out what she really wanted in her life: be it the church or... To be honest, she hadn’t decided yet. She’d had wonderful and meaningful conversations with Mother Sara, every Saturday late afternoon now for six months. Perhaps one of the Mother’s suggestions that she take a vacation wasn’t such a bad idea, especially with such a small amount of work on her books now.

A visit to the ocean with her folks, who were heading to Maine next week for a month, might be a good tonic for her. Had it really been so long since she’d visited the old haunt by the Ocean. Amelia’s memory kicked in big time as she recalled the last summer that she had been there. The weather had been glorious and life had been beckoning her to do something great with her life. As all adolescences think of it as being their right and as her parents had often told her she would be wonderful at whatever she chose to do. Then there had been Don, Don Clayton Jr. he had been her long time pal through the summers of her childhood and on through her teenage years.

Everyone thought that they would eventually end up together when they grew up. Smiling at the old memory of the young man she recalled with warm affection, she wondered what he would look like today. Had he changed in any way and where had his life taken him? Yes, she would take a vacation. It would be the ideal solution for her at this time. Old familiar places might be the tonic she needed to know where her path should lead her.

Concentrating on the diary in front of her, she shouted softly to her associate. “Teal, do you think it would be possible to rearrange my calendar for next week, no maybe two weeks, without any hassle?”

A voice that wasn’t Teal’s made her look up. Her eyes moved in the direction of the only person who had a voice like that—Private Detective Olivia Santos. “Darn it, Olivia, do you have to creep up on people like that?”

A glimmer of something, that Amelia decided was mischief, glowed in Olivia Santos’ eyes, as she neared her business partner’s position. “All part of the training my dear, Sister Amelia, are you going someplace nice, Doc?”

Amelia’s head moved from side to side as she pursed her lips about to retort something smart knowing it would be futile. Olivia Santos could be so childish sometimes. Take the flicking of her nose as an example, which she still did from time to time much to Amelia’s dismay, was all part of her agenda to find out how the detective ticked. “I’m considering taking a vacation; therefore, the answer would be yes.”

Dark eyes followed the doctor as she moved away from her locality and headed toward Teal. “Doesn’t always equate in my book; however to each their own. Any place special or... perhaps with someone special?”

Teal walked back into the reception area and listened to the banter between the two partners. “I swear the atmosphere in the room changes significantly when you two are in the room together. Would you call that good or bad chemistry?” As her bosses’ gazes turned to stare at Teal she quickly countered, “I can clear your schedule Amelia for as long as you need.”

A laugh erupted from the detective at Teal’s second remark. Through the laughter, Olivia remarked, “No clients to keep you occupied, Doctor. Want to take one or two of mine and lighten my load?”

Slightly angry at the reference to her lack of cliental, Amelia wanted to respond harshly, but fortunately, her invaluable church training took over and decided she would suffer in silence. Finally, taking a deep breath, she answered her at times insufferable business partner. “I’m taking a vacation with my folks, any objections?”

Olivia’s dark eyes smoldered in Amelia’s direction and she opened her mouth to speak when Teal interrupted her.

“Olivia, I’ve booked you another appointment at one, don’t be late. Great idea, Amelia, don’t your folks go boating in Maine this time of the year?”

Amelia smiled at her friend thankful that at least Teal was on her side. She laughed inwardly as the detective groaned at having to go through another meeting. One thing the detective hated was the initial interviews and the paperwork that entailed. “Yes they do. It’s been a while since I last took a vacation with them.” Her eyes were in a far distant place as she took the offered coffee and ambled in a better state of mind back to her office.

*

“What are her folks like Teal?” Olivia asked nonchalantly.

Teal smiled warmly, she knew Olivia's tactics. She was interested in Amelia's background but refused to ask the doctor personally. "Great, wonderful people you couldn't ask for more stable parents. I think deep down they were disappointed that Amelia went into the church like she did...they thought she had the promise of being a high flyer in her profession."

Olivia didn't immediately reply. Then she asked, "What do you think they think of her decision to join up with me?"

With her hands behind her back and her fingers crossed Teal cheerfully answered, "Oh, they think it's great." They didn't—far from it—Olivia didn't have to know that. It wasn't as if she was ever likely to meet them. Olivia Santos and meeting parents didn't quite ring the bell.

For a few moments, Olivia appeared to digest the information and with a shake of her head, glanced down at the solid list that were her appointments. "What was the new potential client like in that role-playing mind of yours, Teal?"

They both laughed as Teal's supposed secret musings that apparently weren't all that secret. She began to describe Ms. Sharon Agnew and what her thoughts were on what the case might entail.

CHAPTER TWO

The smell of the sea breeze as Amelia gulped in another lung full was a cherished memory. One she recalled when the overpowering dryness and, at times dirty air of the city, invaded her life. Amelia smiled as she waved to her parents who were about to take out their small boat for a couple of hours. They had been overjoyed at her decision to join them for a couple of weeks. She had arrived earlier that day and hadn't told them about her decision to vacation with them. Turning up on the doorstep of their condominium, had been a gamble, but one that had paid off—they had been there. Tonight they were going to the sailing club on the marina, a place she hadn't been in for over fifteen years.

The last time she was there the summer before she'd entered the convent. She had just turned eighteen and her decision to enter the nunnery was in part, made that summer. Turning to leave the jetty, Amelia strode toward the house finally settling into a wicker chair with a book at her side. She closed her eyes, relishing the peace and quiet of her surroundings. She had missed this place when she had left this life behind. As she let the smells and sounds of the area permeate into her body, it felt as though another load lifted from her shoulders by just being there.

Then her thoughts drifted to the office. Teal had arranged her diary to allow her as much time as she needed. She could spend the whole month with her parents if she required. That, she felt wasn't an option. Surprisingly, her business partner had been, for once, enthusiastic about her leaving. Too much. The woman had almost frogmarched her out of the building on Friday. Anyone would think she wasn't wanted at work, although work was a debatable expression considering her practically nonexistent case load. Her work with the church had virtually dried up and she only had a handful of old clients. Soon they would be gone too, leaving her with a very light schedule. Not even the compulsive Mr. James would be with her forever.

Her goal must be to make new contacts and start all over again. All she had to do was remind herself that she was good at what she did and her previous results proved it. The church had been rather stubborn in lending their support and it wasn't because she was taking a break from the nunnery. It all boiled down to the church elders who hadn't forgiven her involvement in the death of Father Johansson.

They had chastised her at length for not involving them earlier in her doubts and allowing him to die at the hands of Detective Santos. Although she hadn't had time to inform them of his involvement and the detective's action were in self defense, they failed to hear her explanation and had closed ranks on her. Only Mother Sara still had any time for her. After six months, she knew that the Mother wanted her to decide which road she would take in the future. Now, she was still at the crossroads she had been at months earlier, with each road offering her parts of life she wanted and other parts she didn't.

A noise woke her from her thoughts as she heard the crunch of gravel on the side drive and the sound of footsteps getting closer. Standing up, she walked the few feet to the gate at the end of the drive and peered over it to see who was visiting. As she saw the figure of a man approach, she put her hand to her mouth in disbelief.

A handsome tanned athletic looking man returned her gaze, his lips curved into a warm smile, as he neared the gate.

"Well, my folks were right. They did see you arrive this morning. How are you doing, Amelia? You look fabulous." The man's voice had a deep timbre full of

rich tones. It was a voice that you could listen to for hours and never really care what was being said.

Amelia returned the smile with a surprised but pleased one of her own. Quickly opening the gate and closing the gap between them, she hugged the man warmly. "This is a wonderful surprise. I never thought we'd meet here again. Don, you look as marvelous as always. You've become even more handsome than you were at twenty-one."

Don Clayton Jr. grinned down at the petite woman in his arms and then pushed her gently at arm's length. His glance taking in every aspect of her face and figure, and from the smoldering look in his eyes, he still liked what he saw just as he had when they were growing up. "You haven't changed a bit, Em. I wasn't sure if being a nun would have been good for you...it obviously has been. What are you doing here?"

Gently disengaging from his grip on her arms Amelia smiled at the pet name he had for her. He had always shortened her name to *Em* from the first day they met when she had been six and he had been nine. He had been her friend during each summer vacation and each year they had been inseparable. Don had been her first and only boyfriend and she had shared her first teenage kiss with him. For her it had been growing up, learning, and experiencing new things. She had never been serious about him. Don on the other hand, was serious and that last summer they were together he proposed. Trying to let him down gently hadn't been easy; eventually he'd wished her well, although at the time she had a feeling that he hadn't meant it. Still that had been years ago and he was probably married now.

"Taking a vacation. My parents probably told yours that I'm taking a break from the convent?"

"Yes, isn't that a little strange? I didn't think that was allowed."

Amelia laughed as she motioned for him to follow her to the veranda. "Just because we take our vows, Don, doesn't mean we are prisoners...but you're right it isn't a common practice. Anyway, what about you? Did you finally settle down and have a family? I remember that's what you always wanted."

There was silence for a moment and she thought she'd hit a nerve. *Maybe he's divorced or something along those lines.*

"Nope, never found anyone like you. I guess you spoiled me for anyone else." He grinned at the remark and Amelia wasn't sure if he was teasing her or not. She decided that he was. No way was she going to have her professional mind kick in—she was on vacation.

"Oh, there's a girl out there for you. Don, you just haven't found her yet." Amelia smiled warmly as they engaged in small talk. Now it really did feel like she was part of her old life again.

*

Teal had left for the evening as Olivia sank down into her leather chair behind her paper strewn desk. She contemplated the assignment her night's assignment, tailing a guy whose wife was suspicious of his frequent evenings late at the office. In her experience, it sounded like a classic affair case, though she could be wrong, but rarely was. The next weekend she was going to travel to Ransomville, a small town outside of town. She had never heard of the town until Sharon Agnew had arrived at her office with a job for her. Traveling out of town for three hours wasn't her idea of fruitful work but certain aspects of the case interested her so she accepted the job.

Picking up several folders, she tossed them into the filing basket thinking that Amelia always cleared away the old files putting them into the filing cabinet. It was a job she hated and one that her previous partner Max, had always taken care of. She remembered that Amelia wasn't there and wouldn't be back for at least two weeks. The information registered in her brain and it made her feel deflated. As much as she loved to tease the doctor, it was a defense mechanism because she didn't want Amelia knowing that she was important to her. In her mind, the doctor had replaced Max in some aspects of her life, especially here in the office. Standing up, she walked over to the window and watched the rain splash against the pane groaning at the prospect of her work tonight. She hoped that Amelia was enjoying much better weather. The ex-nun deserved the break and, perhaps when she returned her work load would increase for the better. Or, if things didn't look up, she might return to her old job as a nun. That particular thought caused her to sigh heavily. Shaking away the depressing notion, she switched her phone to the service. Picking up her outdoor gear, she left the office for the evening, as her mind now concentrating on the work at hand.

*

Amelia laughed at her parents knowing looks as they shared a light snack prior to dinner. "Okay, out with it, you're both dying to say something, what do you want to know?"

Pearson West winked at his daughter as he buried his head back in the local newspaper, allowing his wife to elaborate if she chose.

"Darling, whatever do you mean?" Shirley West attempted to mask the smile that threatened to engulf her features and give it all away.

"I mean that smug *I told you so* look. I might have been out of the family unit for a while now, but trust me it's something a child never forgets." Amelia crossed her arms across her chest waiting for the response. She knew her mom would cave—she always did. Right on cue, her mother's voice chipped in.

"Amelia, really...we just happened to notice...your father and I...that is...you've been spending a great deal of time with Don. Will you be having dinner together tonight too?"

She might have known, although she could hardly blame them for their interest. Six months away from the convent and her vows, and she was gallivanting around the area with one of the most eligible bachelors in town. "Don and I are catching up that's all. We haven't seen each other since the last time I was here. I had to be around eighteen then. It's no big deal."

Shirley West nodded. "Please remember, Amelia, you are still a nun and you need to follow some form of decorum. Don isn't exactly the shy retiring type; he's very experienced in personal relationships...at least the female type if you know what I mean. You've hardly been on the dating scene have you dear?"

In the week she'd been back in Don's company, she hadn't gained the impression he was a Don Juan; far from it. He appeared, to her anyway, tentative and shy in the emotional stakes. Did this mean he was holding out on her? Or, was he watching out for her regarding critical remarks heading in her direction from other than family members?

"Mother, I'm old enough to know what I can and can't do, and trust me, nothing sinful is going on. As you say, I'm not out for a date. He's just an old friend." Amelia winked as her mother blustered and walked away from the table. Her father's chuckle from behind the newspaper indicated he enjoyed the retort.

“What do you think of Don these days, Dad?”

Pearson lowered the paper he was reading and smiled gently. “Some people are never satisfied with what life has given them. Don’s one of those people. Maybe your coming back into his life will provide him with a direction.”

Amelia scowled. “Dad, I’m not thinking of a serious relationship with Don. No way is that in the cards now or in the future.” The very thought made Amelia’s stomach churn. She wasn’t ready for any kind of commitment except for the ones she’d already taken on board.

“Have you told him that?” Pearson’s voice rose in a serious tone. “He’s always had a crush on you and I don’t think that torch has extinguished over time.”

With a chuckle, Amelia grinned at her father as the ridiculous nature of the conversation finally sunk in. “I’m sure he’s under no premise that we are anything other than old friends. Look, I need to get changed...he’ll be here in an hour.” Noticing that her dad looked slightly worried, she kissed his cheek on the way past. “Okay, just for you I’ll make sure he knows that there can’t be anything other than friendship. Will that satisfy you?”

Pearson didn’t reply immediately and Amelia was out of ear shot he said, “Works for me, darling, but I doubt it will for Don.”

*

Teal watched Olivia move around the reception area. It was Friday and normally at this time of day the detective and the doctor would spend an hour over coffee at the end of the day discussing, as much as they could without divulging any privacy of their respective clients, their current and prospective case loads. The session was as formal as Amelia had managed to pin the detective down over how their mutual business partnership was working. As Teal watched the uncertain movements of the detective, she considered what action if any she should take to bring Olivia out of her funk. In truth, she had been like this ever since Amelia had left for her vacation. God help them if her friend decided to go back to the convent and leave this life behind her. There was no way the convent would allow her to continue with this existence.

“Any plans for the weekend, Olivia?”

Full lips pursed in the olive skin of the beautiful woman who towered over her like a modern day *Emma Peel*. She loved the re-runs of that old English TV series. Then intelligent emotionless eyes stared hard into Teal’s warm green ones, and, as she spoke, they lit up fractionally. “I’m going to Ransomville in the morning to consult on the Agnew case.”

Teal looked down at the diary and a faint smile flooded her small mouth as she shook her head at the statuesque woman. “Don’t you do anything but work, Olivia? I bet even Amelia is having fun and she’s a nun. Not that a nun can’t have fun, because they do of course, but in their own way if you know what I mean.”

“I’m sure the good Sister will appreciate your understanding of her sense of humor. Though it’s been my experience that the personnel attached to religion in general are bereft of a decent belly laugh in their arsenal,” Olivia remarked drolly.

Teal laughed at the comment because, of course, Olivia wasn’t far short of the mark in her humble opinion. “You didn’t answer my question.”

The slight drop of Olivia’s eyelids over her eyes had Teal for a moment wondering if Olivia was teasing her with a wink—her next words disproved the notion. “No time for a private life in my situation it causes too many casualties.”

Pondering the solemn words, Teal had to agree that perhaps in the detective's case she did have unfortunate accidents happen to those she loved. Though that didn't mean you couldn't keep trying; she was proof of that. "Oh, I don't know, Olivia, believe me, being a dwarf isn't the easiest when it comes to having a stable romantic attachment. Look at me, I can honestly say the last three months have been the happiest in my life and it's all thanks to you."

Olivia gave a mocking laugh, "I hardly think you meeting the architect for the changes we had to this place was my doing."

Walking around her desk, Teal stood next to the detective who was three times her size. Raising her hand and extending her index finger she stated, "One, did you not recommend the company?" Not waiting for an answer, she extended another finger. "Two, who was it that brought Phil in on the project?" Not missing a beat, she added a third finger. "And third, who owns the company, but Phil."

"Don't split hairs, Teal. If it makes you happy to think that way go ahead, I'm pleased for you. Have you told my business partner about your love affair yet?"

Teal hesitated in her answer as she mulled over that question. It shouldn't be difficult to talk to Amelia about her love life. After all Amelia was her oldest friend. Although they had never talked seriously about romantic attachments, Amelia being a nun made Teal hold her tongue when it came to romantic dalliances. Except this was different—she was in love. At the current crossroads in Amelia's life, she didn't want to throw her another curve ball. "Not yet, there hasn't been the right moment."

Olivia gave Teal a long hard look and then directed her glance away to the window. It was bright sunshine and the weekend was going to be the same. "Okay, don't leave it too long. Friend or not, she'll wonder why she wasn't taken into your confidence. Right now, she needs all the bolstering she can get into believing she belongs with this life of ours. Changing the subject, the last of the changes are due next week...are they still on schedule?"

Grateful for the conversation switch, Teal enthusiastically replied, "Yep Phil will be here tomorrow to check it all out. Amelia's going to be stoked when she returns. I'm glad I mentioned that particular item to you by accident."

Olivia gave a small smile. "Yes, so am I. Though, I have to admit I wasn't happy when you mention that Amelia loved the ambience in my private quarters, in particular the soothing music. Then I realized that Amelia has or is about to give up almost as much as I did to be here at this moment as a partnership. Yes, her leaving for a vacation was a stroke of pure luck. It means it really will be a big surprise."

"We are having a party Saturday night, want to come over for a couple of hours?" Teal decided that since there were no clients due, it was Friday, and she had to be in the office on Saturday, that closing the office half an hour early wouldn't be a problem. Teal returned to her desk and began placing her work in the cabinet that she would lock until her return. "Anyway, I thought I'd call it a day now."

"I'm not sure I can make it Saturday. Ransomville is three hours away and I'm not sure what to expect. I'll take a rain check, Teal. Thanks all the same."

"You have it. Anything you need before I leave?" There had been no need for her to ask if it was okay to leave early as she was in charge of the administration. If she closed the office early, or opened it late, neither partner would say anything. It was all in the way they split the work load.

"Have a great weekend, maybe I'll see you here tomorrow but don't count on it." Olivia walked back toward her office space and then swung around speaking again. "Have you heard from our vacationing doctor, Teal?"

Without thinking, Teal excitedly narrated her last tentative contact. “Not exactly. However, her mother answered the phone when I needed to check up on something. Would you believe Amelia was out with a man!”

The cheerful words echoed in the room and Olivia’s lips grew taunt.. Turning on her heel, she muttered, “Good for her,” as she closed her office door with a sharp click of the hinges.

Teal was so engrossed in leaving the office tidy she failed to notice the detective’s pallor at the news. If she had, interesting thoughts would have been rumbling around in her head to match up with the others she already speculated about.

*

The evening had been wonderful. From the delightful meal at the sailing club to the friendly banter, she and Don had always shared. To top it off, the glorious sunset they now looked upon from the small bridge close to her parent’s condo.

Breathing in the scent of the evening, she could smell the ocean lapping at the shore to her left and the pungent, but not unpleasant, aroma of the flowers that were growing beneath the trees lining the road to the beach. Another fragrance assailed her senses and she smiled as she figured out what it was, Don’s aftershave. At least she suspected it was the lotion.

“Isn’t it a beautiful sight?” Amelia turned to her companion and blushed slightly as she locked glances with the man at her side who wasn’t looking in any direction but straight at her.

“Oh yes, it never fails to amaze me.” His flashing white teeth against the tan bronzed skin glistened as the moonlight caught them. Her thoughts shifted for a moment to her business partner and wondered how she was doing without her to keep up on the filing.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Don remarked quietly as he saw something in her eyes that he was sure didn’t have anything to do with where and whom she was with right then.

With a faint chuckle, Amelia looked down to the beach from the bridge as she shrugged slightly. “Nothing to tell, I was thinking about work.”

Don gave her a hard look as he considered that for a moment before replying. “I see. You mean me and this marvelous evening cannot distract you from thinking about the job? It must have a powerful hold on you...or maybe it isn’t the job, but someone who works with you?” He didn’t know a great deal about her associates but he was sure she worked predominantly with women, which he gleaned from various things mentioned by his parents.

For a second Amelia wasn’t sure how to answer him. His voice had taken on a bitter edge and she wondered why. “Oh, Don, please you can’t be serious. Tonight puts everything else including the work in the background. I can’t tell you when I’ve enjoyed an evening so much. Thank you.”

What happened next had Amelia reeling, although she should have known it might happen. Don bent down and kissed her gently at first before his passion mounted. His passion set the alarm bells ringing inside her head. This wasn’t exactly how she had planned to tell him they could be never be more than friends. Trying to pull away from the embrace, his strength thwarted her. It wasn’t until she pummeled him on the chest to drag him out of his emotional outpouring that she was able to get free. *Oh great, this is way out of my league.* Moving away from him, she saw his eyes

glazed with ardor and he was struggling to keep control of his emotions. Amazingly he did, almost as quickly as he had fallen foul of them.

“Amelia, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what got a hold of me. No, that wouldn’t be right. I do know, you have. You enchanted me as a child, then as a young woman, and today the feelings haven’t changed.” He spoke softly as though she was a child as he reached out and took hold of her hand before she could prevent him.

Swallowing hard, she smiled gently. *This isn’t going to be easy.* “Look, Don, you and I have known each other for years it’s natural that you have feelings for me, but...” His fingers to her lips prevented her from finishing.

“Don’t, Amelia. Please don’t give me all that psychological babble. I know how I feel, have always felt about you and now you’re free. I want you to know that I’m waiting for you...have always waited for you. I knew you’d return to me one day.”

Oh my goodness, Amelia’s thoughts crashed around her this wasn’t what she expected. Had he carried a torch for her all those years? Their romantic liaison was never a possibility in the past and it certainly wasn’t in the future. “Don, I’m flattered...of course I am. However, I took some serious vows years ago and it might look like I’ve left that life behind, but it’s always going to be part of me. Whatever I decide to do with my life in the future, I can’t be anymore than a friend to you, Don.”

Don refused to be thwarted. “Hey, Amelia, look, I’m sorry for coming onto so strong. Let’s call it a night shall we and see what tomorrow brings. We have that invitation to go sailing with the Courtney’s in the morning at nine. Let’s get you home for your beauty sleep.”

In a way, it was a relief to Amelia that he appeared to be taking her words seriously. However, an undercurrent in his manner had red flags waving in her mind. Tomorrow was another day and being in the company of another couple was a relatively safe option. After that, she’d ensure she was never alone with him again.

“Good idea. It has been a long day.” They walked toward the condo at a pace that would have had people wondering if rain was on the way instead of a perfectly balmy clear night.

CHAPTER THREE

Sharon Agnew waited pensively for Detective Santos to arrive at her home. The detective had called yesterday to confirm her visit and an hour ago had indicated she was on schedule, the 9:00 am meeting would still be good. It was a relief that at last someone had understood her plight and was going to help. Having lived in this town for most of her life it was hard to stomach that no one believed her protestations about the predator who was stalking her. If not stalking her, at least making a good job of pestering the life out of her with messages and strange gifts left on her doorstep, mailbox, or at the school.

Even the principal of her school had written the events off as a prank by one of the kids, indicating they would stop it when the trick was no longer fun and move on—they hadn't. Whoever was doing this had continued to send the objects for the last eight months and now the situation was escalating. From small insignificant items like a comb, toothbrush, hair ribbons, the items had changed to the innards from cattle and pigs. The last one had been a pig's ear and with it a note that read *this could be yours*. She had taken the offending item and the note to the sheriff, but the police had been embroiled in the antics of teenagers threatening business' in town so that relegated her problem to the list marked *when they had the time*. That had been the last straw; she knew then only outside help could rid her of this problem.

Finding someone who could take on the case had been the difficult part. Several well known local agencies with statewide reputations declined her business. Finally, beyond desperate, with eyes shut tightly, she blindly stuck a pin in the phone book. Was it luck or divine intervention? She didn't know. All she knew was that the agency known as *When Hell Meets Heaven* would take her case. Looking at the concise printing on the detective's card, she had to admit that the name of the agency had put her off—who in their right mind would call a business that. Whatever bizarre things the mind conjured up when faced with the title, she had to admit the private detective she met with appeared capable and interested, which was the main criteria. Now, she was sure things would move along and this situation would be put to bed at last.

The sound of tires crunching on the side drive of her house had Sharon quickly appearing at the window and looking out. A silver jeep parked in the driveway and she saw the vehicle door open. A black booted foot appeared followed by the lithe figure of the private detective she had been waiting for. Twitching back the curtain, she waved at the detective who gave her a small barely discernable acknowledgement as her eyes surveyed the surrounding area. Leaving the window, Sharon headed to her front door and opened it to allow the detective inside. Now that the woman was here, she wasn't at all sure it was a good idea, what would folks in town think if they found out? What did it matter? It was blatantly obvious that they had no interest in her or her problems.

"Welcome to Ransomville, Detective Santos. May I offer you refreshment after your journey?" Sharon held out her hand and Olivia, who had quickly surveyed the area around the house, before shaking the hand in greeting.

"Sure, I'll have a lemonade. Very cold if you have one."

There was a tinkle of laughter from Sharon as she motioned for Olivia to enter and led her to the study. "No country girl would be worth her salt if she hadn't, Detective."

Not sure on how to answer that one, Olivia merely nodded and followed her client. Inside, she noted that there wasn't a piece of furniture out of place or evidence that anyone used the room her client deposited her. A vast majority of the furniture looked brand new and barely out of the packing. Others hadn't even had the cellophane taken off, notably the chairs. "Have you just bought these?"

Sharon looked at the objects in question, hesitating for a moment before replying. "I guess you could say that."

Olivia turned her head to the side and gave the woman a long hard look as she digested not the words but the manner and tone of how the woman delivered them. *Sharon Agnew was lying. Now why would she do that? Interesting.* "If you want a hand to unpack I've been told I'm pretty good in that department."

Sharon sucked in a deep breath as she saw the muscles ripple in the strong arms of the detective, *I just bet you are and others too no doubt*, she thought as she shook her head instead. "I'll take care of it later. Let me fetch you that cold lemonade. Where are my manners?"

Olivia carefully observed every item in the room. Having a great memory for that kind of thing had held her in good stead for years. As she did so, her instincts kicked in—something about the place wasn't right. She couldn't place a finger on what exactly that was but she knew what it wasn't. Maybe the fact that the woman was spooked had a great deal to do with it. In the next few hours, as she delved into the gifts and messages that Ms. Agnew saved, perhaps her intuition would solve the puzzle for her.

Walking over to a desk, which was the focal fixture of the room, she picked up one of the two photos there. It was a group photo of what appeared to be a graduation. She had one herself. Except hers hung on the kitchen wall, which was an appropriate place for it since other than the central computer console, it was the area that she spent any length of time in. Placing the picture back in exactly the place she had taken it, she selected the second photo—it was more personal. It showed Sharon Agnew when she was a little younger with two other women, perhaps her siblings, though there weren't any noticeable similar features. They all looked happy and Sharon in particular. A sound behind her had Olivia replacing the photograph carefully and turning toward the noise. A faint smile played over Olivia's lips as she saw the expression on Sharon Agnew's face—she wasn't happy. "I have a graduation picture displayed at home, is this from yours?"

"Yes, I was top of my year and had the teaching world at my feet. Or so my lecturers said at the time."

Olivia noted an underlying bitterness permeating from the woman's voice as she placed the lemonade on the highly polished coffee table. She digested every movement and gesture from the woman. She was certainly edgy. "Know what you mean. Right, how about we look over your... keepsakes?"

At the mention of the items, Sharon seemed more cheery, another oddity Olivia supposed. *Where is a shrink when you needed one?* As she thought that, a genuine smile crossed her lips as the face of Amelia West flooded her mind. A thought she banished into the background as she opened the large box stuffed with various objects and letters.

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Teal laughed as she replaced the receiver to the phone. Phil was going to arrive soon to check that all the just finished alterations were as the doctor order...or

in their case the detective. The mere mention of Phil had Teal's senses going into overload as she thought of the weekend they had shared. It had been nothing short of perfect and all she wanted was to have those strong yet gentle arms hold her again. *Argh, who said working kept you alive in this mercenary world.* She'd settle for love anytime. As she continued to wallow in her own daydreams, she failed to hear the phone when it first rang and then had to scramble to lift the receiver and sound professional when her whole body felt like jelly.

"Hello this is the WHMW agency how can I help?"

A familiar voice that held amusement answered. "You can help by not spending the whole day, daydreaming about a certain party."

"Oh, darn it, Olivia, how did you know... I wasn't any way!" Teal spluttered out in self defense. A huge grin plastered on her small face as she realized that the detective was good, way too good.

"Teal, can you do some leg work for me please?" Olivia asked politely. She would normally have asked Amelia but as the doc was on vacation, it was the next best thing.

"Sure, how can I help?" Her adrenalin received a burst that had nothing to do with sex at this unusual and rare request.

Olivia smiled into her cell at the surprised but excited tone and that was good. "I need to have a background check done on Sharon Agnew at this address. If you can't find anything give Captain Tourney a call, his number is..."

"Oh hold it right there, Olivia. How can I ask a police captain to do that for me?" Teal was astounded at the request. She knew that Olivia had friends in strategic places and apparently, according to Amelia, the captain and Olivia went back in years. However, that didn't mean she could ask for that kind of information. "What if he asks me why?"

There was a loud chuckle at the other end of the line. "David and I go back, Teal. Trust me, if he knows it's for me he'll find out. It will cost me a dinner date with him, but I'll survive."

"Oh, he's sweet on you...now I get it. No problem at all." Teal announced pleased to find out that Olivia wasn't as alone as she appeared.

There was a profound silence at the other end and then Olivia quietly said, "Just find out what you can about my new client. By the way, are the alterations to Amelia's office and her apartment complete?"

Teal had a six-month learning curve of knowing when Olivia wanted to change the subject and this was that time. "Yes, Phil will be here in a little while to check out the finished product."

Drolly, Olivia ended the conversation with a droll remark. "I suspect that isn't all Phil is checking out. Call me when you have the information... sooner rather than later, Teal, bye."

The mention of Phil's name did that somersault thing to her stomach again as she drifted off for a few seconds into her own dream world that existed just for her and Phil. *Oh if only.* Then she pulled herself back to her professional mode and began the task of finding out as much as possible about Sharon Agnew. A question tumbled in Teal's mind as she did so. *Why didn't Olivia do the research earlier?*

*

Amelia sat comfortably in the window seat of the conservatory of the condo with a book resting on her lap apparently in the process of reading. However, the

pages did not turn. To anyone looking, she gave the impression of serene peacefulness, except that was far from the truth.

Although yesterday had been a relative success in that she hadn't been alone for a second with Don, it was clear he thought nothing out of the ordinary had happened between them. His demeanor was relaxed and cheerful. A visage she wore for the public at large disappeared when she returned home later that afternoon. She feigned a headache as an excuse to reject dinner with Don for that evening. Although he seemed to take it well, she was certain he was suspicious of the well used excuse. Fortunately, she hadn't had to fabricate an excuse for her parents who had seen her lacklustre smile when she'd greeted them. They had discreetly mentioned that it would be good for her to have a long bath and relax after her day out. Dutifully she had done that and in many ways, it had been good for her—except for one thing. Her thoughts had drifted to work, or rather the agency, and the two people she missed the most, Olivia and Teal.

It was becoming clearer through this haze of indecisiveness she had worn like a mantle since leaving the convent, that very soon now she had to make a choice. There was no diverting the issue. After her vacation was over she had to decide what was best for her and the people involved in her life. Be it the convent and her order, or the agency and her friends. At times like these, she wished she had someone to confide in, someone like Sister Marie. Although they hadn't been in each other in some time, she had felt that spiritual aura the Sister wielded reach into her soul at times making her realize she had a say in what her life should be. She didn't have to hide behind the mantle of the order she had thought for so long to be her place in life. Yet, she couldn't quite divest herself from either of the lifestyles she had indulged in. If only there was a halfway house that she could happily attach to and live her life that way—both camps.

Her parents had decided to spend the evening in and they had a pleasant enough meal and watched TV together, a past time that was gentle on all of them. Her parents seemingly recognized that she had decisions to make that they couldn't help her decide. She knew that watching their child flounder and not be able to help was a particularly hard thing for them to swallow. All they could do was wait for that moment she decided to trust them with her problems knowing that might not occur. The evening slid by and they all decided that an early night would be beneficial on them all. Amelia left them for her room fighting her own brand of demons inside her head.

Don phoned early that morning and when Amelia pulled a face her mother explained that the three of them were going to enjoy family day. Then telling him he couldn't monopolize their daughter for her entire vacation. As she hung up the phone, Amelia's mother had a slightly worried expression in her eyes.

"You know Don is a lovely boy, darling," she said to her daughter. "Don't you think that you should tell him that you're not interested in him romantically?"

Amelia scowled, which was something she hadn't done in years. Not all her convent preparations and training had diminished her ability to be upset with her parent. "Mother, I tried. He doesn't seem to want to listen."

Shirley West was pleasantly pleased at the outrage on her daughter's face for it meant that her petulant child was still inside the serene public image she had shown to the world since adopting the church and God as her life. "Well you didn't try hard enough. The boy is clearly besotted. What do you think, Pearson?"

Amelia's dad slid his newspaper down slightly and looked at the two women in his life. It was just like old times. His grin was evident as he finally said, "I think

Amelia is old enough and wise enough to deal with this situation. Now, if you two don't mind, I'm checking out the stock market." He pulled the paper back up and immersed himself in the ups and the downs of his stocks.

With a puffed sound that wasn't comprehensible, Shirley continued preparing more toast.

That had been three hours earlier and now Amelia was alone with her thoughts again. She would give anything for a couple of therapy sessions with her patients to take her mind off her own problems. Perhaps that was another avenue— instead of Sister Marie, she should see therapist of her own. As the idea permeated her thoughts, she shrunk from it. *I am a psychiatrist after all, surely I can figure out my own problems.* Finally opening the book, a romance that her mother had given her, she began to read.

CHAPTER FOUR

Olivia had reluctantly left Sharon Agnew, who was attending a meeting at the local school, to take stock of the small town. From what the woman had cautiously said, there were plans well on the way for closing the school in town and bussing the children to the larger town twenty miles away. Maybe this woman had more on her mind than the person or persons who were sending her the obnoxious messages.

As she crossed the main street to check out the local sheriff's office, she was amazed that people still lived in places like this. Talk about a one horse town, the placard outside the town indicated that a mere 800 people lived here. As she scanned the main street, she saw the prerequisite barber, hotel, diner, doctor's office, sheriff's office, and a store that looked like it sold everything under the sun. A small bank flanked the end of the street on the left and to the right was the railroad depot, if you could call the small square building a station. Inside, she suspected was the last of the Western Union telegraph offices, which to her way of thinking was a completely out of date method of communication. On the western edge of the town was a church, traditional in style, wooden structure probably from the 1800's. The school was on the eastern edge of town and in an opposite direction from where Sharon Agnew lived. It wasn't that significant a point since everything was in easy walking distance for all the residents.

As she reached the sheriff's office, she stood for a moment deciding on her approach to the local law enforcement. She could be adversarial, which wouldn't take much effort from her, or she could actually be nice, which would take a great deal of effort. *I'll decide once I met the guy.* Opening the door, she stepped inside and was slightly surprised when a female voice ask, *how can I help you.*

Olivia had made the same assumption most did about her that the sheriff was a man. Quickly displacing her surprised expression with a slight smile, "Hi, I'm looking for the sheriff."

The woman stood up from behind her desk and motioned Olivia forward a beaming smile on her attractive, fresh looking features. Her bright glossy brown eyes held a spirit within them that held Olivia's attention. Usually that meant that the person was intelligent at least. "Well you'd be looking for me. I'm Sheriff Mason, how can I help?"

At least this seemed like it was going to be a pleasant experience. One thing she did know was that bright attractive women were a bonus when it came to her job. Usually she came across the dregs of society and the police she met were usually world weary men. Holding out her hand, Olivia offered it to the sheriff. "I'm Olivia Santos a private detective from Portsmouth. I'm working for Sharon Agnew."

Although the sheriff took Olivia's hand, she dropped it quickly as her client's name was mentioned. "I see. She finally decided to do something on her own about that nonsense she's been spouting about around town."

Having seen the notes and gifts Sharon received, the sheriff's description of *nonsense* appeared very wrong to Olivia. *Perhaps she isn't as intelligent as it first appeared.* "Have you seen the items she's been receiving, especially the new ones?"

"Ms. Santos, I don't think there is anyone in town that hasn't seen the box of mementos she carries with her everywhere. However, I did offer to have my deputy look into her case as soon as he was free from the trial at the county seat."

Olivia pondered that statement for a moment. “When I was on the force myself I saw this sort of thing. In my experience, it usually means trouble.”

Sheriff Mason digested her comment and then motioned for Olivia to sit. “How about we have coffee and I’ll give you a little background and you can do the same for me.”

The words didn’t hold any sting. Olivia knew that the sheriff was going to attempt to gain more information from her than she was ever going to receive regarding Sharon Agnew. Glancing at her watch, she decided time wasn’t on her side for a lengthy *friendly* chat with the local enforcement officer. “Sorry, Sheriff, I have other things to do right now. If you want to know if I’m good at what I do, you can call this number.” Olivia selected a card and tossed it on the desk of the sheriff who picked it up immediately. Before she could respond, the private detective had left.

After leaving the sheriff’s office, Olivia decided the diner was always a good source of local gossip especially in a town of this size and she was hungry. Crossing the street, she entered the diner, which had a quaint feel to it much like the rest of the town. She glanced at crowded dining area noting that it was lunchtime and the place it was filling fast. Finding an empty booth, she sat down and checked her surroundings. The place wasn’t proportional to any diner she’d been in but considering the size of the town it was appropriate. Picking up the menu, the basic diner fare didn’t surprise her. The place was clean and tidy—a little shabby around the edges giving the place character.

“Hi there what can I get you?” A waitress had appeared at her shoulder, pen poised over a note pad waiting for Olivia’s order.

“What do you recommend?” Olivia peered up into the misty grey eyes of the waitress, who was of average height and weight, pretty much nondescript after that.

The waitress took on a bored expression as she recited the regular menu items and then a couple of the chef’s specials.

“Okay thanks. I’ll have the scrambled eggs with hash browns and a side order of fries. Coffee black and thanks for your help,” she replied although it was a stretch to say the woman had been any help at all. Maybe her tone of voice or the fact she said *thank you* that made the waitress grinning at Olivia.

“Sure thing, I’ll bring that coffee.”

With a wry smile, Olivia gazed around the place and at the people seated at various tables. They all looked normal—or as normal as you could ever term a human being. Mentally sifting through the items Sharon Agnew had shown her, Olivia created in her mind a plan of action of how to find out who was doing this to the woman. The one thing that kept popping into her head was that she needed to stay overnight and take up a surveillance point near the house. She grimaced with the realization that it might be more than one night. She hoped that by Sunday night she would know the identity of the person stalking Sharon Agnew. If not, she was going to have to call Teal and cancel her schedule until the middle of the week and have her call another detective, Andy, to step in for her on the smaller cases.

Andrew Garcia had been a young man in need of direction eight years ago. She and Max, Max in particular, had entered the breach and bailed the youngster out of trouble putting him on the straight and narrow before he became a lost cause. In that time, he’d gone back to school and even ended up with a college degree. He graduated in nursing specializing in psychology. From time to time to supplement his income he had done a few simple odd jobs for their business. Now, a fully trained nurse, he was working in the psych ward after returning from a year’s sabbatical in Eastern Europe shortly after Max’s death. As she thought about the young man, she

supposed mentioning it to Amelia sometime would be a good idea since they had something in common. As she pondered that she wondered why she hadn't before. Teal was going to be surprised too, since she didn't know about Andy either.

"Here's your coffee. If you need anything else you need give me a holler." The waitress disappeared as silently as she arrived.

Sipping the steaming coffee, Olivia pulled a face as the gravelly mixture entered her mouth. *Wow, this is worse than any I've had from a vending machine.* Replacing the cup on the saucer, she felt eyes looking at her. Lifting up her eyes, she saw several people looking at her with curiosity rather than any animosity. As it was a small town, the gossip mongers would be out in strength if they found out why she was there. As with many people when confronted, they looked away and these country folk did just that. Olivia considered trying the coffee again, but decided against it, instead drinking from her glass of water. Her lunch turned out to be a rather interesting event—he received more furtive glances than a Hollywood star. As she left, she gave the waitress a large tip.

The waitress winked and said, "Anything you need just head in my direction."

Hmm wonder what 'anything' meant. Olivia had no time to dwell on such things as she made her way back to the Agnew home to make plans for her stakeout. Tonight she was going to get the sucker who preyed on the lonesome woman.

*

Teal knew Amelia was going to love the new additions to the office, hers in particular, not to mention the addition Olivia had arranged to her apartment. It would have been so easy for Amelia to go home with tail between the legs and live with her parents again once she'd effectively left the convent. However, Amelia being Amelia, she didn't want that, her words, *who wants to go back to living with parents when you're in your thirties.* Teal had offered her a place to stay as she had a spare room in her apartment, but the offer was declined. Amelia explained that living and working under the same roof with a person was too much. She needed her personal space. The notable person who didn't offer her a place to stay had been Olivia. It was true the detective didn't know Amelia that well, but even so, from what Amelia had indicated from her view of Olivia's home; she hardly used her place except to sleep anyway. Not that it would have mattered. Amelia would have used the same stock phrase she'd used with Teal. Though Teal had the distinct feeling Amelia would have taken up Olivia's offer and a part of her had been a little jealous of that aspect of her friend's surmised relationship with the detective.

What had happened had been better all around as Olivia knew of an apartment. Max's death caused a vacancy that Amelia was happy to fill. Olivia also didn't appear aggrieved that her new associate was living in her deceased partner's home. Olivia called it the right choice. Although it was close to the office, it had its good and bad points. Olivia living in close proximity was a major plus, even if the detective rarely made her presence known on the weekends. Amelia had spent a fortune on changing the décor and generally upgrading the establishment, so much so it was hard to associate the old place with the new. Now the new addition to the apartment would be a wonderful surprise for Amelia and one Teal knew the doctor would love immediately.

The insistent sound of the phone ringing had Teal heading toward her desk and retrieving the instrument. "Hello this is the WHMH agency, how can I help?"

They had decided from the early days, at least she had, that reducing the agency name to initials was a good idea, and less intimidating.

"Teal, how are you doing?" Amelia's voice sounded reassured to hear her voice.

"Amelia, wonderful to hear from you, how was your first week?" Teal was pleased to hear from her friend that she was worried about her. All the changes had to be taking a toll in more ways than her friend would probably accede.

There was a few moments silence and immediately Teal knew something wasn't right, Amelia was a spontaneous person.

"For the most part great. My folks were pleased to spend some time with me."

"Oh, there's a, but, right?"

"Can't sneak anything past you can I, Teal?" Amelia smiled at her end and shook her head ruefully. The sound of Teal's voice was what she needed.

"You never were a very good liar and I've known you for a few years now, Amelia. Do you want an excuse to come home?" There was no point pussy-footing around the issue for she knew her friend well. The renovations to the apartment were complete so it was safe for her to come back.

With a relieved sigh at the end of the phone, Amelia breathed out her reply, "Yes."

"Great. I think I can say that I need you here. Even our intrepid detective would agree if she were around. Pack your bags. Want me to book you on a flight out of there?"

"No, I'll make my own travel plans. Thanks, Teal. How is Olivia? Busy as always I suspect?"

Teal smiled. *Yep, there was more going on under the deep waters between those two. They probably don't know or understand.* "At the moment, I actually think she's taken on a job she isn't quite happy with. I've even had to call her police captain friend for information. If you ask for my opinion, she could probably do with your expert help."

"Oh you're only saying that, Teal, we both know she'd never admit that she needs my help. Though it's nice to think she might at some stage." Amelia sounded resigned to the fact Olivia would probably never say she needed her partner's help.

Teal's brow furrowed as she dwelt on that comment. Stranger things could happen. "Call her cell and say you're free and does she need any help with any leg work?"

"You know I might just do that, Teal. Thanks for the information. See you when I get back...should be late afternoon tomorrow."

The call ended and as it did, Teal wondered if Amelia really would call Olivia. It could be the moment for the ice to break and change things forever. Her mind then returned to her own dreams and a certain party.

*

Sharon Agnew watched the detective she'd hired from her kitchen window. The evening was drawing in and the woman was settling down to a vigilance of her property for the night. When the detective had told her what she planned to do, it had worried her at first. What would the neighbors think? As she thought that she dismissed the neighbors, they weren't interested in her problems. Only old man Randall never gave her the time of the day, and his ogling of her chest was the only reason for that. Certainly not for any repartee that might pass between them. Although

she'd offered to make dinner for the detective, it was the least she could do in the circumstances. The detective had declined but finally accepted a flask of coffee for during the night. As in all the good movies, the night watch was by far the hardest or that's how she perceived it to be. Switching back the curtain she'd pulled when observing the detective, she walked over to the couch and turned the TV on. At least she could lose herself in her favorite show.

Olivia shifted in her vehicle for a few seconds to get the right posture for her night surveillance. As she found the right spot, she settled back and replayed the information Teal had found out about her client. There was very little data and even David Tourney hadn't been much help. It was at times like these when she missed her connection to the fed's. There was still a tentative line of communication, which was tentative at best. That was her choice one she gladly made wanting to distance herself from that way of life. Teal had pretty much stated what was obvious at this end. The woman was a school teacher, had a blemish free career and no criminal record. According to the records, she had never defaulted on a payment and was, by anyone's standard, a law abiding citizen working through what life had to offer her. It was a dead end but Olivia knew there was more to Sharon Agnew than the lilywhite information on public record.

What she needed was someone like Amelia around to give her opinion. It would be a bonus—just one of the reasons she had no trouble accepting the doc as her business partner. In many ways, she felt their respective career paths melded together well. Not that she'd ever tell Amelia that—not yet anyway. The doctor had too many other questions running in her head that she had to answer first. If the doc decided to go back to being a fully fledged nun, it would be pointless even mentioning it. That particular thought made her cringe inside as a bad taste surfaced in her mouth. Picking up the flask Sharon Agnew had given her; she poured herself a liberal amount of coffee and drank it quickly. Replacing the cap on the flask, she glanced over to the nearest neighbor's house. A man named Randall lived there. According to Agnew, he was a bit of a pervert but harmless. Well small or not, tomorrow she'd make his acquaintance unless he was the perpetrator of the current misdeeds.

Her cell rang and normally she would have ignored it but as it was in the early stages of her vigilance she looked at the caller ID. *She must have been listening to my thoughts.*

"Hi, Doc, how's the vacation?" Olivia was pleased to take the call, it made her feel somehow whole, not that she realized something was missing.

There was a splutter before Amelia said, "How did you know it was me?"

Laughing softly at the idiotic remark, Olivia said, "Ever hear of caller ID in the convent, Doc?"

Shooting a hand to her forehead, Amelia shrugged. "Of course, stupid of me."

"Not stupid, Doc, one thing I would never let anyone say about you is that you're stupid. In my book, you are far from it. Of course, there are other things I might describe you as being... but tell me, why am I honored with a call at this time of the evening? I thought you'd be out gallivanting all over town?" Olivia grinned as she teased Amelia.

"I don't gallivant as you call it!" Amelia replied with indignation heavy in her tone.

Olivia heard the annoyance building and she reigned herself in and calmly said, "I'm sorry, Doc, please tell me why you are calling?"

Mollified, Amelia replied, "Teal tells me that you're away on a case and I thought... well I was thinking."

Olivia heard the frustration at the other end and it made her smile, *I guess I'm not the only one who has difficulty asking for help*. "You know something, Doc, I was thinking about that right now. I can do with some of your insight on this case. Pity you're on vacation." There was a sound that Olivia that to her like a yelp.

In an upbeat tone Amelia said, "That's just it, Olivia, I'm not on vacation any more, I can help you out. In fact, I'm on the road traveling home now. Why don't I take a detour and meet you?" Amelia was thanking God silently that he'd heard her prayer.

Olivia grimaced at the thought of Amelia driving through the night on her own. *Then again, maybe she isn't alone*. "Are you driving alone or do you have someone to help with the driving?"

"Oh don't be silly, Olivia, I've driven in the dark before. I'm not a child. Anyway you do it all the time."

"Yeah, I do, but I'm better prepared for any eventuality. Look, I'm in a town named Ransomville. It's a three hour drive north of Portsmouth. If you're on the main highway, you can probably take a bypass that leads here rather than go into the city first. Did you have the garage put that navigational system in the car that I bought you?" There was a silence for a few seconds, "Okay, I'll take that as a no. When we get home, I'll see to it myself. Where are you now?"

The censure evident in Olivia's voice had Amelia glancing furtively to the side roads hoping for a sign, but there wasn't any. "I passed a place called Baron's Creek about ten minutes ago if that helps."

Using her car's navigation system, she entered the name and located Baron's Creek. Several key strokes later, she had a detailed route for Amelia to follow. Modern technology was wonderful. It was so much simpler than using those foldout paper maps, which took forever to a route from point A to point B.

According to what Olivia saw, the doc should arrive around mid-morning barring any traffic hold ups. "Pull over to the side I want you to note this down."

Amelia decided there was no use in arguing and anyway she was too happy about Olivia's allowing her to help on the case. She didn't want to break the lucky streak she had going. Safely taking a rest area exit, she drove her car into the area and pulled over at the first chance she got. "Okay, I'm stopped. Let me get a piece of paper."

Scrambling around in her car, Amelia found a pad and pencil and quickly began to write precisely the details Olivia narrated.

"Do you understand all of that?"

"Sure do, I'll see you soon. Who knows, I might be earlier than you think," Amelia announced cheerfully.

"You'll get here at the time I said. I don't want to hear about you ending up in jail or worse a body bag because you decided to speed. Got me?"

"Okay, okay I'll do the speed limit. Do you know something?"

Exasperated and now wishing she hadn't taken the initiative in the conversation by inviting the doc to help her, she asked, "And that something would be?"

"You're worse than my parents. I know how to look after myself."

Olivia breathed out a silent expletive. "I'm sure you can. I'll see you tomorrow. Drive safely. Bye, Amelia," she said ending the call abruptly.

Yawning as she replaced her cell in the holder next to the wheel, Olivia felt suddenly bone weary, which was not like her. This kind of work was the bread and butter of her part of the agency. *Maybe I need a vacation*. Closing her eyes for a

moment usually worked for her. Taking a catnap on duty wasn't unheard of and by the looks of the TV flickering in the window Sharon Agnew was still up. It was probably as good a time as any to get a short nap. Reopening the flask, she poured a large cup of coffee knowing that a shot of caffeine was a wonderful pick-me-up for tiredness. She gulped the hot coffee down in almost in one swallow. She was set for the night and before Amelia arrived, she'd book hotel rooms for them if she found one in town. Strange thing was she hadn't seen one on her travels. The only thing coming close was the hotel on Main Street and that had boards over the windows. Maybe with her heavy workload she was losing her edge and it was taking its toll. Yawning once more, she settled down in the leather comfort of her car seat and took that catnap.

CHAPTER FIVE

Amelia had had several hours of mindless driving on empty roads through the night that had given her one bonus possibly two. The first, and for her the most important, had been the fact she was traveling toward helping her partner in their joint business venture for the very first time. The second, she'd had time to sift through all the things that were causing her to doubt who she was and her vocation. At the end of the day, the prime factor had been what motivated her now, not what had been the motivator when she was a teenager. It wasn't that she didn't want to follow God's path and help others and worship him for she still did. No one could ever place doubt in her faith, not even the fall from grace of Father Johansson even though that had been a tough one to take. She knew that at the end of it all the boundaries she'd vowed to keep as a nun were for her too restrictive. She watched Teal blossom over the years and change as ones does when they grow older. A part of her had always wanted to join in the fun that Teal enjoyed.

Going back to the convent, every evening if she wasn't out of town on a case had been initially easy. As the years passed, she felt irritated by that factor. From the start, she knew certain aspects of becoming a nun would be a strain and she accepted that. Yet, after fifteen years as a nun, she still felt irritated by the restriction. Had it not been for her vocation she probably wouldn't have met Sister Marie and the detective who ultimately crossed her path.

What happened after that brought about more irritations with the limitations of her life. When the detective needed her most, after Max's death, she was holed away in a convent in seclusion. When someone finally told her that Olivia needed her support,, it broke all her attempts to cleanse herself of the real world. She had known deep down then her only path was to leave the convent for good. The Mother Superior knew that, however hadn't wanted to be the one to close the door permanently on that life, even though she herself knew it was slowly closing much like a slow moving tortoise.

It was time to face the fact she was no longer a nun and had to come to terms with that and all it meant in her life. One thing she knew for sure, she'd never go on vacation with her parents if there were any chance Don. would be there. His attempts to—she didn't really know what—was a shock. Her romantic experience level at eighteen when she'd joined the convent was limited to one kiss from the man. What had just happened confounded her making her skeptical that she would ever marry and have children.. Yeah right, after all, wasn't she already married to God?

*

Turning at the last noted direction Olivia had given her last night, she drove onto a tiny street with about four residences. She didn't need to look at the address Olivia's SUV parked on the street. Heading toward it, she pulled her vehicle behind Olivia's careful not to block the SUV's path. The dashboard clock blinked out seven am, which was a good time and she didn't speed at all or not that she'd noticed anyway. Climbing out of her vehicle, she felt the muscles respond slowly along with the odd creaking of a bone as she stretched her whole body after driving for over five hours without a break. *Fresh air how wonderful!*

Glancing at the driver's side of the SUV, she was astonished to see the profile of Olivia in the vehicle and it looked to her like she was asleep. *Curious.*

Tapping on the side of the window, she tried to catch Olivia's attention but to no avail. The detective didn't rouse and that was odd, very odd indeed. Returning to her car, she opened the trunk, picked up the first aid kit, and took out a set of keys. Another of Olivia's ideas—have a set of spare keys for all the vehicles, even Teal, though it hadn't made sense to her at the time, it certainly did now. Returning to the SUV, she inserted the key in the lock and opened the door.

As Amelia opened the door, the action revealed a deeply sleeping detective. Amelia took a few seconds to gaze openly at the detective. In repose, Olivia looked younger than she would have imagined the lines that furrowed her brow most times and around her eyes, were either gone or hardly discernable. There appeared to be almost a gentle aura around her belying the woman's professional and awake demeanor. The only thing Amelia could equate to Olivia at this moment was that she looked like a beautiful princess. As the thought struck her, she pulled herself from her daydream just in time. Her hand had been about to touch the soft facial structure of her business partner. Instead, she placed a gentle hand on Olivia's shoulder and shook her. There was no immediate response. This time she used both hands and mustered as much strength as she possessed and really shook her. For her efforts, there was a groggy reaction. *Thank you, God.*

"Hey, sleepyhead, I didn't realize you slept on duty?" Amelia smiled as dark long lashed eyelids blinked slowly then staring at Amelia as if she didn't know her.

"What the hell!" Olivia sat up in her seat dramatically and then groaned as she placed a hand to her head. The pain was similar to the morning after spending the night drinking hard liquor.

Amelia gave the detective a puzzled frown. "Well I was hoping you'd be a little more civil to me as I'm here to help. However, it looks like you could do with a shower and breakfast, which is on my agenda too."

Olivia didn't understand why she was in her vehicle, groggy from sleep. The last thing she recalled was talking to Amelia and giving her directions. After that, everything else was a blur, so much so she doubted she had done her duty as the doctor had pointed out. Hopefully for her the culprit hadn't struck again or she was going to have to come up with a slick cover-up.

"I was going to book us into a motel in town, but haven't managed that yet. Let me check on the house and then we can go together after I find out what my client's plans are for this morning." Climbing out of her vehicle, Olivia felt her legs buckle. If it hadn't been for the quick observation of Amelia, who lent her support by providing a steady arm, she would have ended up on the road.

Amelia was worried now, what was wrong with Olivia? She looked terrible as if she'd been sleeping in a car, she had been, and her reflexes were slow. "Okay, want me to come up to the house and meet your client?" She decided to ignore the fact that Olivia wasn't herself—she'd broach that after the detective had showered and eaten.

"No. Look, let me fill you in over breakfast on the case and then you can do your shrink thing, deal?"

"Sure. I'll wait in my car for you," Amelia replied softly and left without another word.

A hand reached out preventing Amelia from leaving. Olivia stared into Amelia's intelligent eyes and said, "Thanks."

Amelia gave her a quiet smile they both knew the thanks were for more than the explanation just given.

Olivia groggily managed to walk unsupported up Sharon Agnew's driveway. As she did, her head hurt like hell and explaining her current situation was difficult. She didn't have a clue as to why she felt like she did and what had happened to the intervening hours since her phone call with Amelia the night before.

Once she reached the door, she groaned inwardly as she saw a small, symmetrically square package about the size of her hand. Peering down at the object, she perceived the now familiar scrawl of the author of the letters and other items that Sharon Agnew had received in the past. The only thing that went through her mind at that moment was that she had failed dismally in her efforts to find out who the perpetrator was. The proceeding thought was the person responsible must have known who she was and why she was in town and had somehow taken her out of the equation. Without another second lost, she retrieved the package just as the door opened and Olivia deftly placed it behind her back.

"Why, Detective, I was just about to check if you needed any coffee as a reviver after your all night vigil. I slept like a baby knowing you were out here protecting me." Sharon Agnew beamed a warm genuine smile at Olivia, who cringed inside. If only this woman knew just how unprotected she had really been.

Olivia gave what she hoped was a reciprocal smile in return. The headache gave her another major jolt of pain as her lips forced themselves into a smile rather than a grimace from the pain shooting through her temples. "Thanks, but I'll have to decline. My...a business associate has arrived unexpectedly and I promised to discuss her visit over breakfast."

There was no denying the disappointment on her client's face as Olivia tried to move tentatively backwards. However, as Sharon spoke again she stopped to listen.

"I take it there wasn't any activity last night or early this morning?"

That was a question and a half to answer. *Should I lie?* Who would know and would it benefit her client if she knew that another package had arrived? At least this time around, she could have the chance to open it first and check out the contents before she had to admit its existence, if indeed she ever had to do so. Closing her eyes briefly, she thought of Amelia who she knew wouldn't take kindly to her bending the truth—she'd deal with that later. "Nothing you should worry about. What are your plans this morning?"

"In an hour I'm due at a church finance meeting. We'll have lunch afterwards and then I'm normally home by two."

Olivia considered her options. She needed to speak with the doc and have her opinion about what was happening especially in light that somehow she was compromised. All she could think was that the only place she had eaten was at the diner. Maybe the waitress had been too friendly, but it would be a good place to take Amelia and have her give the place a once over. She hoped that the waitress worked that shift and Amelia could evaluate her too.

"Sounds like a plan to me. I'll follow you there and have my business meeting while you're in church. Call my cell when you are ready to leave and I'll be right behind you watching your every move."

Olivia didn't know what she'd said but the woman beamed out a brilliant smile as she accepted the instructions. As the door closed softly behind Sharon Agnew, it brought a sigh of relief from Olivia. She retraced her steps back to the two cars parked in the street.

Amelia's window wound down as she popped her head out fractionally. "Are we going now?"

Regretfully, because she sure could do with a shower and change of clothing, she shook her head no. "Can you hold on for an hour or do you want me to meet you at the diner on Main Street?"

Amelia saw the white lines around the detective's face. She really didn't look like her usual boisterous self. That worried her a great deal. "Why don't I go book us a couple of rooms at the motel, wherever that might be, and I'll catch up with you at the diner. On Main Street, right?"

Olivia felt a sense of loss that Amelia was going to leave her. She chalked it up to the effect of the headache and the disorientation she was feeling. Not wanting Amelia to know she wasn't quite to full strength, Olivia silently sucked in a breath she squared her shoulders. There was no way she'd the doc practicing her shrink techniques on her. "Yeah, that sounds great. You can get to the motel by going north Main to the end then turn right...it's about a half mile down that street."

Nodding her head slowly Amelia gave Olivia the once over with a long serious glance. "Meet you in an hour at the diner." The vehicle's throaty engine roared into life and Amelia set off in search of the motel.

Olivia stood in the road watching the receding vehicle with a blank expression on her face. She realized she was still holding the package. She'd open it while she waited for her client and tried to right her mind and body. Settling back into her car seat, she slowly and carefully noted every detail of the package. Once she completed her observations and mentally catalogued the object's characteristics she cautiously began the process of opening the box to see what lay within.

*

Amelia checked her watch and then the clock on the wall of the diner. It was well over an hour since she'd spoken with the detective. *Where is she?*

The friendly waitress had brought her a second cup of coffee and at the refill had appeared a little skeptical when she had said she was still waiting for a friend to arrive before ordering. Pulling out her cell phone, she was about to dial the code for the detective when the woman appeared in the doorway glancing around. The detective's eyes met hers just as the waitress approached Olivia and struck up a conversation with her. Amelia watched both women noting that their conversation appeared too friendly for a casual encounter. Amelia found it strangely annoying and couldn't figure out why. As she waited, her impatience grew as the two women apparently became involved in a deep conversation. After what seemed like ten minutes when in fact it was barely a couple, Olivia finally sat on the bench seat opposite her.

"Sorry I was delayed."

"I could see that," Amelia said testily. "I thought you would have at least acknowledged my presence before you idly chatted with some waitress," Amelia retorted sharply and then closed her eyes briefly at her mean spirited words.

The detective's head shot up at the caustic tone she thought she heard. No way did a nun speak in such a tone, well not this nun anyway. If it hadn't sparked another jarring motion in her head, Olivia would have thought it amusing.

Ignoring the caustic element of Amelia's comment, Olivia said, "Ok, I'm sorry for not acknowledging you first. Let's order breakfast. I need to replace the bitter taste in my mouth

Amelia felt a cold shudder go down her spine as the same waitress took an inordinately long time writing down Olivia's order. It bothered her so much that when the waitress left she asked, "Do you know her?"

"Not really. Why, is there a problem?" Olivia waited and a perverse thought went through her head, which she pushed away it was far too ridiculous anyway.

Amelia felt foolish as she peered reluctantly into the dark eyes of her business partner. "I think you should tell me what you need me for on the case?"

Olivia wisely agreed with the change of subject somehow the other conversation was taking a strange road that she didn't want to pursue. Duly the detective gave the psychiatrist a rundown of her client and what had transpired thus far. Mentally debating with herself, she hesitated, but decided to gloss over the events or lack of them from the night before.

"You say the police in town didn't appear worried about your client's claims...is that right?" Amelia found that strange. "Statistically, single women are most vulnerable and usually the local law enforcement takes cautionary action.

Olivia smiled. *Clever girl*, "It appears that way to me too. The local sheriff was more interested in me than my client."

"What did you do to deserve that? Break the law?" Amelia smiled at the detective as they exchanged a warm glance.

Olivia broke the connection she felt tugging her toward a situation that could never be. "No, merely asked a few pertinent questions of the good sheriff. She wasn't..."

"She?" Amelia squealed. Several pairs of eyes looked in their direction as she bent her head in embarrassment.

It was a shame she wasn't in the mood to tease the doc, because she sure placed the morsels on the plate far too easily. "Yep, she. They do have women in those positions, Amelia. It isn't like we live in the dark ages. Anyway, she wasn't helpful."

"When did Ms. Agnew receive the last communication from her... stalker?"

The food arrived conveniently at that moment and they both began to consume their respective meals in earnest.

Several minutes ticked by and Amelia said, "I'll need to see the items Ms. Agnew received. It helps to get to know what's going on."

"That isn't a problem. I have them in my truck. When we visit the motel, you can look them over while I shower. Incidentally, you did book us rooms at the motel right."

This time Amelia hesitated. "Yes I did. Now finish your meal. You look like you need it. Although a bowl of muesli and a yogurt aren't exactly what the doctor would order."

Olivia caught Amelia's gaze in a powerfully searching one and began to speak. "My doctor would approve...trust me on that." Her doctor would for more reasons than merely health ones.

Half an hour later, they were finished and as time was vitally important, they dispensed with a leisurely coffee to end the meal and departed in their respective vehicles to the motel. Arriving there shortly afterwards, Olivia turned to Amelia with an outstretched hand.

A blank expression crossed the doctor's face until she realized what Olivia wanted—the key to her room. *This is going to be interesting*. "We only have one key."

Stunned at the simple statement, Olivia blinked rapidly. “One key? Are we sharing?”

“They only had one room free. Apparently there is a fishing tournament in the area and... look, I took it, we both need a shower.” Amelia felt that she was explaining herself needlessly. What was wrong with sharing a room? They were both women. It wasn’t as if they were of the opposite sex. Blood rushed to Amelia’s face as she looked at the tall woman standing in front of her. There was something primitively provocative about everything about her.

Softly Olivia replied, “A shower sounds good. Lead the way.”

Stuttering slightly over the number of the room, Amelia walked decisively if not in a straight line toward their allocated room. Olivia shook her head in wonder as she watched Amelia walk in the direction of their room. *Life is certainly never boring.* Opening the trunk of her car, she took out an overnight bag, slung it over her shoulder, and then reached for the box of accumulated letters and items from Sharon Agnew’s home.

*

Amelia listened to the shower in the next room. The splatter of the water against the screen was a peaceful sound to her. From her first memories, she had always loved water. Her dad had bought her water wings when she was one year old, much to her mother’s annoyance. By the time she was two, she could swim like a duck and made other children twice and three times her age look like a fish out of water. For several years she was the top swimmer in her group and when she had decided to commit herself to God, it had been the first action deemed frivolous that she had to let go of. It brought a faint tinge of regret when she remembered her school coach hanging his head in major disappointment when she told him she could no longer swim. He shouldn’t have been too surprised, but he had been, after all, she did attend a Catholic school. There was no point in thinking about what might have been for she had to concentrate on what she needed to do now. She delved into the box of items Olivia had given her before she went to take to the shower.

Within ten minutes, everything was sorted by type and date. First were the letters, followed by the packages, and then the various trinkets, if you could call them that, lined up if what she would call a tidy mess—a little like her head. The thought brought a smile to her face and she laughed at her strange analysis of herself.

“Want to share the joke?” Olivia remarked laconically as she stood in the doorway of the bathroom toweling her damp hair.

Amelia had to admit that being a nun, even one allowed as much freedom as she had, did not prepare her for the woman standing there in a pair of... *were those boxer shorts? Surely not. Women don’t wear boxer shorts, or, have things changed that much? I must be really out of touch.* Olivia also wore a cropped T-shirt with a slogan she didn’t recognize across the chest. As before, her thoughts were definitely chaotic and all she could manage was a strangled sound of *no joke* in reply.

“Hope you’re not going to hog that bed. I was hoping to take a short nap before I go back on duty.” Olivia smiled as she said the words because Amelia looked as if she had never seen a half naked woman before in her life. The thought careened in her head. *Maybe she hasn’t! Wow, that would be some weird situation.* The room only had a king sized bed.

Flushed, Amelia began to remove the items she had carefully correlated together and stopped when a strong arm with an equally strong hand pressed lightly

on hers. "Amelia, its fine, I was teasing you. Look, let me put some clothes on and we'll go over anything you can bring to the table about this case."

"Okay," Amelia said taking a shuddering breath as Olivia went back into the bathroom to change.

A few minutes later the detective was back fully clothed in another of her dark mainly leather outfits.

"Right, let's get down to business. What can you tell me about this crackpot?"

In her element, more so because her business partner was asking for her professional help, she immediately gave a general view of what she perceived as crucial tell points in the character of this person.

"Whoever is sending these items feels very antagonistic toward your client. Though nothing specific, as a first pass everything your client does is wrong. From the brief initial correlation of the details, the evidence is mounting that the *attacks* for want of a more technical description at this time will escalate, even possibly a physical attack. Is that your take on this too, Detective?"

Olivia pulled at her lip in thought before she answered, "I agree. Take a look at this." she handed Amelia the package that was left that evening/morning when she had lapsed in her duty.

Amelia took the package and looked at the writing; it was the same as all the others down to what she thought was the identical ink. Carefully unwrapping the package, she pulled out a black plastic zipper lock bag and was about to open it when a hand paused her action. Looking up, she was in very close eye contact with the detective as a quizzical expression filled hers.

"You might want to take a deep breath and get ready to visit the bathroom in haste if you don't like body parts disengaged from the whole," Olivia stated unemotionally. In her business, she was use to this type of thing but the doc... well exish nun, might not be prepared for such things.

Wide-eyed, Amelia dropped the small plastic bag on the bed and jumped up from her sitting position. "There are body parts in there? Meaning human ones?"

Picking up the offending bag, Olivia zipped open the bag, and peered inside before calmly saying, "Looks that way to me. Some poor schmuck has lost an ear I'd say. Or, it could be the very person we're looking for."

Swallowing hard, Amelia's breakfast was making a fast track back up her throat. "I'll take your word for that. Old or young?"

Dropping the bag on the dresser after zipping it back up, Olivia sat on the bed and motioned for Amelia to do the same. "Old, I'd hazard a guess it hasn't been detached for too long, maybe twenty-four hours at the most."

The doctor resumed her sitting position on her side of the bed as her stomach began to settle some. Staring at the detective, Amelia was amazed she could assess that. "How would you know all that? Have you a degree in medicine or something?"

With a chuckle, Olivia reclined on her side of the bed and several of the neat piles moved around and slipped out of position. "Nope, but I've seen a few items in my time. I guess that means that the escalation you talked about is upon us."

Amelia tried not to stare at the piles that she painstakingly made that were now out of place. "Yes it does. When did that arrive?"

Should she save face and tell her it arrived before or after her surveillance began?? "Does it matter when?"

Exasperated, Amelia wondered why Olivia was prevaricating about such a thing. *Unless...* "It was last night wasn't it? You were asleep?"

Olivia felt her hackles rise. It was the first time she'd screwed up on a job since moving into the private detective business. Having this naïve nun point it out in such accusing terms was a hard thing to take. "Yes."

The one word answer made in an angry hiss made Amelia feel the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "I was going to ask you about that. You didn't look well when I arrived. Were you sick?" It was obviously a sensitive area with the detective and Amelia held her breath as she waited for a reply.

"I was drugged...at least that's what I think happened. How it was administered is something I'm working on," Olivia bit out reluctantly.

The silence stretched out before Amelia hesitantly offered her help in trying to analyze how it could have happened. Taking a deep breath she began, "If we go over your movements, particularly if you ate anything in the time you've been here maybe two heads might be better than one in figuring out who drugged you. What do you say?"

Another few moments of silence passed before Olivia glanced at her watch. "I need to go over to the church hall now. We can have that conversation later."

Amelia watched Olivia stand and straighten her clothes. Moving toward the door, Olivia picked up her truck key.

Amelia softly said, "It might be too late if we leave it.

"It might be, but I'll take my chances. I usually do."

The simple reply was infuriating to hear as Amelia stood up and strode toward the detective. "Is that your idea of funny? No one is invulnerable, Detective. Not even you. Okay, if you don't care about your own personal safety, what about your client's?"

Amelia's tone explosive and totally out of character and the detective peered down at the pint sized doctor. Olivia felt the urge to crush her like she would a bug. It would be so easy—the damn woman was far too maddening to have around. What had she been thinking to allow her to come and help her? It had been stupid. Instead, she did something she might live to regret the rest of her life. Without thinking, she placed her strong arms around Amelia, bent her head, and gave her a crushing kiss on the lips. As the kiss ended, Olivia immediately stormed out of the motel room without a backward glance. In any event, it was as well she left the room.

Amelia was reeling from the kiss and in shock, her legs buckled before she landed ignominiously on the floor in a heap. From her position on the floor she pressed the tips of her fingers to her lips, which seemed like they were burning where Olivia's had touched them. The strangest thing was she was not outraged as she thought she would have been, or people would have expected her to be. No, she felt elated with the sensations the kiss had created. It was in marked contrast to the kiss she'd shared with Don Clayton. She wanted to know one thing and one thing only... *why?*

CHAPTER SIX

A crash of gears and a screeching of tires had Olivia's truck hurtling up the drive of the church hall. Fortunately for her, she had the presence of mind, but only just, to slam on the breaks and stop the vehicle before it hit anyone or anything.

Standing and watching the rapid entry to the church property, Sharon Agnew's poise appeared calm. However, inside the woman was seething. She had been waiting like a lemon for the detective for over half an hour. She was paying this outsider good money to provide her with a solution to her problem and not being around didn't help her at all.

The private detective climbed out of her vehicle as if she didn't have a care in the world and Sharon moved quickly to confront her. "Glad you decided to make it, Detective Santos. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me."

Olivia heard the belligerent tone and cocked her head slightly to one side to take in her client's demeanor. Then she deliberately glanced at the broad strap on her arm, which held her watch, noting she was exactly there at the time the Agnew woman had indicated in an earlier conversation. "Sorry if you think I'm lapsing in my work, Ms. Agnew, I can assure you that I've been working on your behalf since I left you. Now, do you need to go elsewhere or is it straight home?" She hadn't changed her attitude or stance. It was purely professional and right now, she would have preferred to be a thousand miles away, particularly if Agnew was going to be a pain in the butt. With the chaotic thoughts that were streaming through her head regarding Amelia West and what had just happened between them she wanted distance.

"In the *circumstances*, I think I'd best return home." The way Agnew intoned circumstances, had Olivia puzzled. The inflection held more than the word appeared to convey.

"Anything I need to know?" Olivia asked. Maybe the woman had received another communication while at the church. It didn't sound plausible however; the doc had indicated that escalation was possible.

A hand went to Sharon Agnew's mouth, as she sighed heavily, "You haven't heard? No, no why would you...you're a stranger in town. My neighbor, John Russell, I told you about him last night, he's been found at the edge of the lake... dead."

"Is it a suspicious death?" Olivia was deeply interested now, her thoughts completely with the case at hand. In all likelihood the ear came from the man...it would make morbid sense.

Sharon shook her head. "I'm not sure. The sheriff hasn't given any specific details. The only reason I know this much is because the caretaker of the parish is his only living relative and he was informed this morning."

Olivia consumed the brief details. This shed a different light on the situation altogether. She needed to speak with the sheriff and take that damn ear with her. As she thought about the ear, she realized that in her haste to leave the motel she'd left it behind. "I need to speak with the sheriff, Sharon. However, first I need to speak with my colleague who arrived this morning. She's an integral part of the agency, in fact my business partner. We'll leave your car here in the lot. From now on, until we find this person who is harassing you, you don't go anywhere on your own, is that clear?"

Sharon beamed a bright smile, possibly too bright as she agreed eagerly.

On the short drive to the motel, Olivia debated in her head if she should call Amelia and inform her about the impending arrival. She decided against it reasoning

that it would achieve nothing. Although as the few short miles disappeared, and the motel hit her line of sight, she wished she had. What if Amelia had cut and run out on her, it was infinitely possible. As she cornered the bend she saw Amelia's rental vehicle and a small smile of relief lingered on her lips as she stopped the vehicle and climbed out. So fixated on Amelia, she failed to notice that Sharon Agnew left the vehicle and was immediately behind her. Olivia knocked on the door waiting for a reply.

Hearing a shuffle of feet in the room, the door opened and Amelia stared wide eyed at the detective. Her mouth tried to find some words but they never transpired.

"Hi, Amelia, I need your help." Olivia knew that the two key words, *your help*, would always be the doctor's undoing, no matter what she was feeling inside.

With a faint movement of her head, Amelia replied, "How can I help you, Olivia? Is this you... our client?" she asked motioning to the woman standing behind the much taller figure.

With a start of surprise, Olivia wondered why she hadn't noticed the woman in her personal space. This whole situation wasn't in her control and she needed to wrestle it back from the impending abyss. With a wry glance behind her, Olivia nodded. "Sharon Agnew, I'd like to introduce you to my business partner, Amelia West." She decided to remove the doctor tag since it might make the woman jumpy.

Sharon Agnew moved slightly and held out her hand to the petite woman who didn't look like a detective. She certainly wasn't built like the woman who had taken on the case. Neither was she as beautiful, quite the opposite really, plain being the more apt description, "Pleased to meet you, Ms. West."

"Hi, do you mind if I call you, Sharon? I'm Amelia; it's less of a mouthful."

As Olivia listened to the platitudes, it irritated her as she jangled her truck keys in her hands. "Sorry to cut the pleasantries short, but I need to see the sheriff. Amelia, will you take care of Sharon while I do that? Is the package we were discussing earlier still here?"

Amelia heard the urgency in the detective's tone as she peered back in the room seeing the offending article on the dresser just where Olivia had left it. "Sure, it's where you left it."

Amelia wasn't going to fetch it for her so Olivia brusquely brushed past the doctor and retrieved it herself. "Amelia, will you take Sharon home and I'll meet with you both after I've seen the sheriff."

It wasn't a polite question...it was a directive. Amelia's hackles rose wondering why she had to take on baby sitter duties. At the same time, she could see the logic of the proposal. "Sharon, here are my keys, the car is right there. I'll be with you in a moment after I have a quick word with Detective Santos." Amelia smiled warmly at Sharon, who she noted was looking at her with a speculative expression.

"Okay. Good luck with the sheriff, Detective, I've found in the past that she isn't usually very cooperative." Sharon walked away from the pair.

When the woman was safely in her car, Amelia asked, "What's so urgent? I thought you didn't want me involved directly with your client."

Olivia looked at the door of the motel, which was ajar and realized what a mess she was making of all this. It was as clear as the nose on her face that she worked much better alone. She always had, and suspected she always would. "I know I owe you an explanation. Can it wait until I get back from the sheriff's office? Then I promise to be straight with you... please."

Amelia caught a flash of dark eyes as Olivia finally looked in her direction. There was something going on between them that she didn't understand, and frankly

with everything else was happening in her life, she didn't want to understand. Life was far too complicated as it was. She would, expect some kind of explanation if only an apology for her behavior— technically, she was still a nun.

"Olivia, you owe me more than one explanation for your behavior. I can wait for now. Make sure I don't wait too long though. I might not be as worldly as you, but I know when I'm being made a fool of."

The weight on Olivia's shoulders lost a few pounds as she realized the doctor had let her off the hook, for now anyway. With a warm smile she responded, "You got it, Doc. One more thing, don't begin a shrink session with Agnew, not unless I'm there." Olivia's eyes bore into the doctor's eyes. "Is that clear?" Flicking Amelia's nose in that rather odd way she did, she turned and hastened to her truck.

Amelia grimaced at the action, wondering if she preferred the gesture of a kiss to the embarrassment of flicking her on the nose. She shook her fist at Olivia who grinned widely as her truck sped out of the motel parking area. Turning back to the motel room, she reached for her purse and locked the door and seconds later she was walking toward her car and the waiting Sharon Agnew.

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Sheriff Susan Mason began allocating details to several officers assigned to her from the State Police. A murder in her town wasn't something she had ever expected on her watch. In the hundred and eighty years since the town was established, they had been proud of the town's remarkable record in lack of major crime. Particularly, as today's world wasn't much better than back in the 1800's. In her view, the only difference today was the tools to help people commit terrible crimes were more sophisticated. Human nature was still as dangerous as it had ever been. Fortunately, in the past two years since she'd been sheriff the biggest misdemeanor had been a bungled attempt to rob the local bank. *Bungled* being the operative word, as the two locals, drunk as skunks, tried to get into the bank. On reflection, it was more comical than criminal.

Finally having dispatched the officers to various areas to follow up on what leads, or lack thereof in this case, she walked over to the crime scene photos on the wall depicting the deceased and all the information they have found to date. Gruesome came to mind as she looked at the head shot showing the open wound where once an ear had been. That was another mystery.

As far as she could tell, John Russell didn't have any enemies in town. He had lived in the same house for much of his sixty-five years, excluding his time in military service when he was a young man. He had worked at the local sawmill for the length of his working life and had retired eight months ago. He was unmarried and like many of the older timers, hadn't been bright enough or confident enough to go into a more populated area to find a bride. Single women in rural areas were as rare as hen's teeth. The local doctor had confirmed in the autopsy he'd carried out earlier that Russell had died from poisoning. No water was evident in the lungs indicating that he had been dead when he was placed in the river. The ear was cut off prior to death and if the man suffered only the murderer knew.

"Hi, Sheriff, sorry to bother you..."

"Hey, how did you get in here?" Sheriff Mason growled out as she faced the private detective who had arrived in town recently.

Olivia gave a shrug and motioned to the open door. "I was looking for you and there wasn't anyone to ask."

Mason gave the woman a hard stare, she'd not received a call back from the contact on the business card this woman had given her the day before. Right now, the woman was the only oddity that had turned up in town supposedly working for Ms. Agnew. Agnew just happened to live next to the murder victim of Russell making the whole scenario very curious.

"I see. What can I do for you, Ms...?" she asked feigning the recollection of the private detective's name.

Olivia ground her teeth silently. The sheriff knew her name—she was being awkward. *Two can play at that game.* "Santos, Olivia Santos, I came to see you yesterday about a client of mine."

A faint smile crossed the sheriff's thin lips. "Sure you did, I recall now. As a private detective, have you solved your client's problems so fast?" Her tone bordered on malicious. Mason walked toward Olivia, purposely preventing the detective from viewing any more of the wall photos than she already had.

"Not exactly, have you solved yours?" *Tit for tat, I could eat this woman for breakfast if she wanted to.* Fortunately for Sheriff Mason, Olivia didn't have that kind of time to spare. "Look, Sheriff, I might have information pertaining to my client's case that might be of help to you in yours."

Hands on hips, Mason gave a cynical laugh. "Really, I find that hard to believe but I'm all ears."

Olivia gave a feral smile of her own, as she tossed the small black polythene bag toward the sheriff, "Actually no. I think I have all the ears... or should I say one in particular you might find of interest."

Susan Mason was astonished as she zipped open the bag and peered inside before her face creasing in distaste.. Her eyes turned suspicious as she glanced at the tall imposing woman in her office. If she was the murderer then right now, alone in the station, she wasn't sure that she would have a fighting chance if things became messy. Her hand slowly reached for the gun in the holster on her left hip as she waited for more information.

"I'm not the threat, Sheriff. Therefore, pulling your gun on me will not instill a beneficial conversation would it?" Under the circumstances Olivia would have done the same.. "Oh, and incidentally, if you did shoot me you'd be shooting an innocent woman." *For this crime at least way,* Olivia added to herself.

"How did you get this? Where did you get this?" Susan Mason had been a good judge of character all her life, or so she told herself, and although she was as wary as hell about the private detective, a part of her told her she wasn't responsible for Randall's murder.

Olivia, not wanting to waste any more time, informed the sheriff of the circumstances and waited for her reply.

"Sharon Agnew's place you say? When was this?"

Olivia knew the sheriff was interested and there was a note in her voice that indicated she knew something else relevant as well. "This morning, I was supposed to be on surveillance."

The sheriff's head cocked slightly as she heard the word *supposed*. "Sorry to be intrusive, but supposed to be? Did you have to leave?"

"Not exactly. I think I was drugged. Either something I ate or drank... drank now that's interesting." Olivia had been so preoccupied with her own failings it had taken her away from the issue at hand. When was she drugged and who had access to her food or drink?

“Are you sure it was a drug? It might be poison. Have you been checked out by a doctor?”

Olivia had been too upset at her own weakness of being in the situation of not doing her job efficiently that she hadn't it was anything more than some type of sleeping drug.. “No time for that right now. I can do it later if necessary.”

Mason nodded. “Do you recall something that might identify who drugged you?”

“Yesterday, when we talked, you didn't appear to be too worried about the situation my client was experiencing. Care to share your views...it might prove pivotal for us both.” Olivia wanted to drag the woman out and force her to tell her everything if she didn't agree, because right now, she felt that through her own disregard for anything other than her own needs, put the doc in danger.

Susan Mason considered the request refusing to let the flashing cold dark eyes to intimidate her. She had to admit, the detective did have a style all her own, which set off warning bells in her head.

“Sharon Agnew has a record of delusion paranoia. Doctor Smith, her physician, could relate more of her case if it wasn't confidential. All I can say is, when she was growing up she's was in and out of various mental institutions. Folks around here thought she'd grown out of it since she hasn't had an episode for years. She is after all a teacher at the high school, an upstanding member of the community, and even a member of the church board. When she began her stories about a year ago, I did my duty and looked into the situation. However it appeared unfounded for there wasn't any hard evidence that anyone was leaving her messages or threatening her in any way. Then of course, I was told in confidence she had a history back when she was younger of having a very active...*imagination*...shall we say. I decided as the woman was under a certain amount of emotional stress after learning that our school was closing and that she was losing her job at the end of the year. I figured she had lapsed and it would go away when she sorted herself out.”

Closing her eyes briefly, Olivia was angry—angry as hell with herself. If she had done her homework on this woman then perhaps she wouldn't be here now putting Amelia in potential danger.

“I think you were wrong, Sheriff Mason. Agnew hasn't allowed it to go away. I believe she's gotten worse. The victim Randall, lived next door to her right?”

“Yes. Are you thinking she's responsible for his death?” Although she had fired the question as an impossible situation, she knew the possibility existed. It was becoming more and more plausible as her conversation with the private detective continued.

Olivia nodded. “Worse thing is, Sheriff, my partner is alone with her at this moment. How do you want to deal with this?” She knew how she wanted to deal with it. Drag Amelia kicking and screaming if necessary out of the Agnew house and let the sheriff deal with the woman. Although, she knew that was impossible, now that Amelia was involved. Even though Amelia hadn't decided which life she wanted to lead, there was one thing that would never change; Amelia's need to help people and that was anyone regardless of how bad a person was. Agnew fit the bill perfectly.

Blue eyes flashed at Olivia. “Can she handle herself as well as I imagine you can? Right now, we are looking at a potential serious suspect for our murderer. Fortunately, she isn't a psychiatrist because she hates doctors in general. According to Doctor Smith, she and can be pretty violent toward that sector.”

“Let's go,” Olivia ground out through clenched teeth, as she was half way out of the building.

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“Have you lived here for a long time, Sharon?” Amelia asked interested in her companion. The drive to the Agnew home had been relatively quiet, except for Sharon’s rather active interest in the detective and particularly about her health. Olivia wouldn’t have told the woman much about herself. Even after six months, Amelia had barely scratched the surface of who Olivia Santos really was.

Sharon Agnew gave the friendly stranger a noncommittal shrug as she walked agitatedly toward the kitchen. The woman hadn’t asked about a drink so she merely touched a few items and then stepped back into the study. She saw the woman was looking at some photographs. “I don’t like strangers prying.”

Amelia calmly replaced the photo where she had taken it for a better look. “Sorry about that. You look like you’re having a great time. Is this your family?”

“No!” Sharon once more left the room and walked toward the kitchen.

This time, Amelia moved so she could see what the woman was doing. Her initial thought in the car was that the woman was beside herself with worry, talking about anything but what was happening to her. Who wouldn’t be under the circumstances? However, as soon as they had entered the house, Sharon had gone from reasonably affable to downright negative. Sharon was now rearranging her kitchen utensils, particularly the chopping knives. Maybe she was one of those house proud people and it kept idle hands happy. The next words shredded that thought completely and put Amelia on cautious watch. “Why are you spying on me? Is it you that’s been sending those awful letters and objects? Why can’t you leave me alone?” Sharon pulled several faces that would have made a contortionist proud, as she paced the kitchen area with a small paring knife in her hand.

“I’ll just sit in the living room and wait for Detective Santos. Would that be okay, Sharon?” Amelia had one thought as she tentatively returned to the safe harbor of the living room—*classic paraphrenic tendencies*. The woman was about the right age, mid-forties, appearing to have ideas people were persecuting her and or doing her harm. Considering the possibility that the woman was mentally unstable, Amelia knew there was every possibility that she could in fact, manufacture the letters and objects she had supposedly been receiving. As she pondered the classic symptoms, a thought struck her and it wasn’t a very pleasant. *The mutilated ear*.

If Sharon had done this to a person, which one had to assume had been alive fairly recently, then she could be progressing into violent dementia. And right now being in the same room with her could be dangerous. She hadn’t experienced being alone with a mentally deranged person before so she considered the possibility that she could be jumping the gun and assuming things. If Olivia had allowed a discussion about whom she thought might have drugged her perhaps she wouldn’t be in this situation. If the woman gave Olivia any kind of food or drink during the previous day, that could be the answer. If so, that meant Sharon Agnew had no scruples about who she hurt or used during her paranoia episodes. It was clear that outside her domain, she could function normally or at least appear that way. Once she stepped inside her house, a different situation occurred. That begged the question, had Olivia noticed something wasn’t quite right when she had met the woman who requested her professional assistance. It was an interesting gambit and the safest course of action would be to leave and take refuge in her car until Olivia arrived. The only problem, she would be abandoning someone who needed her help? Amazingly, Amelia was the right person in the right place. It was exactly what she felt about God’s work.

Walking back over to the photo of a happy time for the woman, Amelia considered how to approach asking about it without having a knife thrown at her. As if on cue, Sharon appeared apparently without any weapon of any kind.

"Hey, Sharon I don't like to pry, but you and your friends look like you were having a great time. Were you on vacation?" Amelia watched the glazed look that clouded the woman's eyes flash brightly for a moment, but only a moment before they glazed over again. Sharon didn't get angry but was calm, perhaps too calm for Amelia's sensibilities.

"I was in college. They were my roommates. We had fun. It was a time when friends meant something."

Quickly using her expertise, Amelia smiled warmly and nodded her head. "I know what you mean."

Accusing eyes flashed angrily at Amelia as Sharon moved menacingly toward her, "You can't know what I mean. You weren't there. How can you possibly know anything... unless you're a spy?"

With a gentle smile, Amelia shook her head, "I'm not a spy, Sharon, and I'm here to help. We have to keep you safe from the people who want to hurt you...remember? I work with Detective Santos."

The explanation appeased the woman as she paced the room and finally stopped in front of a crucifix where she began to pray. It was the Lord's Prayer and Amelia began to chant silently with Sharon. Some people sang along with popular tunes, but Amelia could never resist the Lord's Prayer. That was certainly not going to be a tidbit she shared with the detective imagining the teasing she would receive if that became public knowledge. However, it did allow her another avenue of conversation. And, while Sharon was praying, she wasn't doing anything nefarious.

When the woman had finished, Amelia quietly said, "Detective Santos informed me that you're a member of the church committee. It's a very noble and selfless act to help others."

There had been a bristling of the hairs on the back of Sharon Agnew's neck. Amelia had anticipated that type of reaction as Agnew turned to stare in her direction. Facing her was the Sharon Agnew Olivia introduced her to at the motel.

"I consider myself very fortunate that I'm able to help others. Are you a member of a church where you came from?"

Was she a member of the church? *Big time.* "Yes. God's work is never done is it? There will always be lost souls waiting for us to help them or so the Mother Superior of our local convent relates to me frequently."

"Us, yes I like that. We have means to help and everyone should do their part, but so many do not. They should be punished for not doing so." Sharon was lapsing back into her delusional state. It had always fascinated her that those in the grips of paranoia and schizophrenia had a propensity to manifest God or religion in some form or other as the voice calling to them.

Very carefully, Amelia answered, "I'm afraid not everyone shares our faith in God, Sharon. However, that does not mean that those others are not charitable. I know many nonbelievers who are very generous. For some people they do not require to hold an institution, such as God, as their inspiration to do good works."

"Evil people! They are all evil people who do not believe in God. We should cleanse the world of them all! Don't you agree?"

Flashing eyes, which turned cold and hard pierced Amelia, and she was finding it difficult to hold the gaze.

Hands settled on her shoulders as Sharon shook her to answer the question, “Don’t you agree, Amelia?”

Attempting to create a springboard where she could stop the situation, Amelia tried to change the subject, “I’d love some tea and then we can talk about this some more.”

At first, Sharon didn’t release Amelia but then she moodily agreed and stomped off toward the kitchen.

Raising her eyes heavenwards, Amelia sent up a silent prayer of thanks to God. She had a reprieve for a short time. *Where is Olivia?*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Olivia had parked her vehicle around the corner from the Agnew house. She suspected they might become difficult and she didn't want to alert Sharon of her being there—Amelia's life might depend on that. The sheriff opted to bring along the local doctor and they had lost precious minutes waiting for him to secure a drug he wanted to inject into Sharon. She might have to be sedated her could be moved to a secure facility. Questioning would come later. Sheriff Mason had parked her vehicle effectively blocking the drive should Sharon bolt at the sight of them arriving at the house.

Sheriff Mason nodded to Olivia as she headed toward the front porch and tapped on the door. Mason and Doctor Smith would be right behind her when she gave the signal. It wasn't wise, at this stage, to put the private detective's partner in any more danger than she already was.

The door opened slightly and a wild eyed Sharon Agnew stared first at her, and then at the police vehicle blocking the drive. Her eyes scanned the outer perimeter of her yard trying to perceive where the police were located. Failing to see any officers, Sharon asked, "Did you arrive in that?" Sharon pointed to the offending car in her driveway.

Olivia smiled at the woman. "Nope, Sheriff Mason is at the Russell place hoping to find some clues. Looks to me like she misjudged the parking area...no harm done though, right?" Her nonchalant reply seemed plausible to the woman as she opened the door wider and allowed Olivia inside.

"Actually, I needed to have a private word with Amelia...it is about business." Olivia wanted Amelia out of harm's way and this was the only thing she could think of. Once she'd secured Amelia's safety, she could let the local people take over for it would no longer be any of her concern. The case had been strange enough.

Sharon Agnew's gaze narrowed as she furtively flashed her glance once more around her front yard. "She's about to have tea. Don't take too long." The demand in Sharon's voice angered Olivia but she kept her temper in check. It wouldn't help if she agitated the woman unduly.

"No fear of that. In fact, if that's possible I'd love a tea myself. Your coffee last night was delicious." One lie on top of another was all grist for the mill for when she met her maker. At this moment, she didn't care.

Amelia appeared at the door. Her face wreathed in a smile as she saw Olivia. "Hey there, you're just in time for tea."

Making eye contact and trying to convey the danger Amelia was in, made Olivia cringe. Being subtle wasn't one of her strong points; she much preferred action. "Yeah I heard. I need to speak with you privately. Will you please step outside for a minute?"

Amelia was as grateful for that request as she would have been if Mother Superior had given her praise for a job well done. "Of course. Sharon, I'll be right back for that tea."

A hand flashed in front of them and Sharon caught Amelia's wrist in a tight hold that would have done justice to a vice. A hissing tone accompanied the next words. "See that you are or the tea will get cold."

Bracing herself to face the deranged woman, Amelia gave her a warm smile. "I'll be back in time." She felt the grip loosen and fall away as Sharon walked briskly away toward her kitchen.

Olivia didn't waste any more time. Grasping Amelia's hand, she dragged her out of the door and virtually pulled her across the yard to the relative safety of the end of the drive. There, she rapidly signaled to Sheriff Mason, Doctor Smith, and a couple of deputies who had been at the Russell house to move in.

The next ten minutes were a blur for Amelia as she watched the disturbed woman dragged out of her house and pushed face down on the ground where the doctor administered the drug to sedate her. The violent sounds that followed the action weren't lost on Amelia. Sharon's eyes began to waver in their sedated state, and she saw the lost expression appear as an appeal for help. It cut into Amelia's heart as she felt she was the ideal candidate to help Sharon. The woman had appeared in the short time they had been in each other's company to trust her.

"Let's go," Olivia announced abruptly as she watched the deputies load the woman into the back of the Sheriff's vehicle. Her job was done, except for the statement she was going to make about her part in the day's events. Eventually it would lead to a court appearance unless Sharon confessed to all her miss deeds and there was a very real chance with the medication and counseling that would happen.

Amelia turned shocked eyes toward the detective. "We can't just leave her like that. She needs our help!"

Here we go again, Olivia thought as she traded glance for glance with the doctor. "No, she certainly doesn't need our help. We've done our part by bringing her to justice. Eventually she'll receive the proper care she needs in a medical facility."

"No! She needs my help if not yours. She trusted me, and I know I can help her get through this." Amelia appealed to Olivia's better nature, which the detective had, but hid it remarkably well behind a wall of indifference at times.

"She killed a man for no reason, Amelia. She's a basket case and yes, I know that's your field, but she'll be placed in public care. Take my word for it, even in the public system have good shrinks. Or do you think only private professionals like yourself, Amelia, are the best?" Olivia gave a shrug as she headed for her car. Amelia's rental was free of the Sheriff's vehicle and they would both go to the precinct and make their individual statements then go home. It really was as simple as that.

Duly chastised for her notion that she thought she was the only one who could help a patient made Amelia cringe at the thought. It wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last that her self-importance had come to the fore. After all, it was one of her biggest faults. Olivia had clearly made a point and one she was going to heed this time. "Let's make that statement and go home."

Hearing the resignation in the doctor's voice, Olivia wondered if she had been too harsh in her last statement. There was no doubt Amelia never gave up on cases, Teal had assured her of that, indicating that it was a character trait that had caused much of her irritation with her role as a nun. If Amelia allowed that same pressure to build in their business relationship, Amelia might go back to the convent—better the devil you know. That was hardly a phrase she'd allow Amelia hear her use regarding the convent. "Hey, look, let's make our statements and then next week after the dust settles we'll return and check on how she's doing. How does that sound?"

The beaming smile that followed from her business partner had Olivia's heart rate soaring, not that she was going to admit it. The doctor's delight at the words hit home with her in a big way. In fact, she'd even go so far as to say it made her happy

too. How weird was that? She watched for a few moments as Amelia headed for her car and then with a shrug of her shoulders she returned to her own vehicle and the journey back across the small town.

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The insistent ringing of the telephone brought Olivia out of her heavy sleep. She had ensured Amelia had arrived safely at her apartment and then left her at the door. Refusing the offer of coffee, she'd have taken up the offer normally, except she wanted to be scarce when the doctor went inside her apartment. The surprise she had arranged for her return had been set to announce itself five minutes after her arrival inside the hallway. When she'd arrived at her place, she'd felt the weariness of the last forty-eight hours take its toll. Maybe she'd go for a checkup with her doctor, who knew what Agnew had spiked the coffee with that had taken her out for the night. Sheriff Mason might be right; it might be poison rather than a sleeping drug. Flopping down on her bed fully clothed, she closed her eyes knowing she was beat and sleep wouldn't be far behind. Now glancing at the clock next to her she saw it was two hours after leaving Amelia.

She picked up the receiver by her bed and said, "Hello." Her voice laden with sleep she cleared her throat for clarity as she repeated the greeting, "Hello."

"Olivia is that you? You sound strange, are you okay?" Amelia's voice was the opposite of the detective's, not in the least tired.

A faint smile crossed Olivia's lips as she replied, "Yep, I'm okay. Tired sure but who wouldn't be after our little adventure. Though from the sound of you I'd say you were very mellow and rested, what's your secret?"

A chuckle at the other end forestalled any conversation for a few moments then Amelia gushed out dramatically, "Oh, Olivia, you know why I'm mellow as you put it. It's *all* your fault and I'm very, very grateful."

Olivia positioned herself more comfortably on her bed as she smiled slowly, "All, my fault, huh? And how do you deduce that my, dear Doctor?"

Amelia laughed at the words. "Because you're the only person I know who has a system like this. How did you know I loved that particular feature? No, no don't tell me let me have one guess...Teal?"

"Ah, not only are you a talented doctor, but you're becoming a very gifted detective too. Yes, Teal. I thought it might help you relax from the stresses of your particular profession."

In the time they had shared together over the past months, the detective could hardly be called the most caring person she had ever met. However, there were times like this one, when a small chink appeared in the armor of indifference to others that she wore effortlessly, and it made the detective ever more endearing to her. "Thank you, Olivia. I know the words are inadequate, particularly after last week I really did need the stress reliever."

Olivia heard the pent up emotions in Amelia and gave herself a slap on the back—she'd made an excellent deduction. "Yeah well maybe for a while you can forget the convent, forget your cases, and enjoy a little down time when you get home in the evening. What was more stressful about last week? You were on vacation."

Amelia hesitated over what she might say next. She hadn't been remiss in imparting the reasons for her leaving her parents and the vacation early, because they really hadn't had the time to discuss what was going on with her. Besides, Don wasn't an issue anymore. He'd get over her like he'd had fifteen years earlier. He was

probably only being nice trying to make her feel like a woman again rather than a nun. At least that's the only way she knew how to handle it. "Oh, nothing more than usual...it never quite leaves you does it. Thanks, Olivia, I'll wish you goodnight then. Want to catch up for breakfast tomorrow morning before we go into the office?"

A smirk crossed Olivia's face as she digested the offer. It was a good one but Teal had plans and it involved Amelia finding the second part of the surprise. Her office outfitted exactly the way her apartment was, and Teal had promised English muffins drizzled in butter just the way she liked them to celebrate. "Sorry, Doc, I have another appointment for breakfast...but I'll take a rain check, okay?"

Although disappointed, Amelia understood. At least one of them was busy, which meant the agency wouldn't be failing anytime soon. "I understand perfectly. Sleep well, Olivia."

"Goodnight, Amelia." Olivia replaced her receiver and sank back down into her pillow. The question was did she need any more sleep or not... not came to mind, as she decided a shower was a much more plausible option. Her mind filled with the thoughts of Amelia West and if anyone read them, the church would ostracize her.

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The working week had started well. Amelia had been over the moon with her apartment and office additions. The smile she wore for most of the week didn't wear down until they went to visit Sharon Agnew. They had a brief discussion in the car traveling to the city prison hospital, which now held Agnew, pending her trial for murder. Amelia was going to offer her services if the institution doctors were over-worked, assuming the authorities and Sharon Agnew would allow it. However, things don't exactly go the way we want them in the real world as Amelia found out.

Sharon had pleaded guilty to the murder of her neighbor Randall and placed in the city prison hospital under minimal supervision. That was their undoing as Sharon had escaped a long prison term by committing her final act in this world—her own death. She'd hung herself in her room hours prior to their arrival.

For all of Olivia's attempts to relate that it was Agnew's state of mind that made the suicide possible rather than anything Amelia could have done to save her—it hadn't helped. For the past two days the doctor had basically locked herself in her office rarely venturing out except for brief consultations with Teal.

Olivia's frustration increased with each passing hour and now she was about to enter the lion's den.

"It won't help, Olivia." Teal announced quietly from her vantage point behind her desk.

"Says who?" Olivia snarled more to herself than the diminutive woman who had spoken.

Teal gave a woeful smile, "Says someone who has known her for years. Normally she would have gone to Mother Superior and talk her problems over with her. Now, she has no one or at least nobody she thinks will understand her dilemma." Teal noticed the flare of Olivia's nostrils that her comment had enflamed.

"Look, she can't run away from this... shit happens. If she wants to function in the real world...our world, then she has to take the rough with the smooth. If you, as her friend, won't tell her that then I will!"

"I have told her that she needs to understand situations occur that she can't do anything about or save everyone she meets. Amelia is Amelia; she thinks she has failed if she doesn't give it her best shot. And, right now, I think she feels she

abandoned the Agnew woman to her fate. You have to remember Olivia that Amelia will always have that strong affinity to God and it's a sin in God's eyes to commit suicide. We have to handle her for the moment with kid gloves."

Olivia was thoughtful for a moment and then she gave Teal a long look. "Is that why you've not revealing your relationship with Phil to her?"

Teal's eyes went heavenward. "Damn, you would say a thing like that, Olivia. Actually I was going to invite her tonight..."

The door to Amelia's office opened and she stepped out her eyes cautiously glancing at each of the women. "Invite whom and to where?"

Olivia moved away from Teal's desk as she waited to see what the woman would say. *This is going to be interesting.*

"Hey, Amelia, how are you doing? I was going to invite you of course." The self-conscious laugh that followed had Olivia smirking behind her hand that she placed over her mouth.

"Okay. Where are you inviting me, Teal?" Amelia's eyes drifted slightly to the detective who appeared to be enjoying a private joke. Something she saw with Teal's body language wasn't going down well with her friend.

Clearing her voice slightly, she said, "A few of us are meeting at my place for a couple of drinks and nibbles. We're going to watch the whole first series of *The L Word*...or at least as much as we can before we all fall asleep."

Olivia choked on the laughter she had held back. *The L Word...wow that is going to be a blast. I wouldn't mind being a fly on the wall for that session.*

Distracted by Olivia's laughter, Amelia turned to the detective. "Is it a good series? I'm afraid I haven't heard of it before."

Teal ducked down behind the reception counter praying that Olivia wouldn't be her usual undiplomatic self.

"I've heard of it, I might even have seen the odd episode; however, I think it's always best to judge for yourself, and I'm sure you and the girls will have a great buddy time together."

"Hey, I was hoping you might join us too, Olivia." Teal announced as she sucked in a deep breath waiting for the response.

This time Olivia moved stealthily toward the counter and her tall frame lounged over the top as she came face to face with Teal. "Sorry, Teal, other plans," she replied loudly. Then for Teal's ears only she whispered, "Oh, I'm going to love seeing you two together after the weekend. *The L Word*, great idea for a sleep over, Teal."

Teal gave an exasperated sigh as she resigned herself to not being top of Amelia's list. Particularly as Amelia was being thrown, figuratively speaking, into a pride of horny lesbians watching one of their favorite programs on TV.

"Are you going to be there, Amelia? Tonight, my apartment at seven?"

Amelia smiled. "I'd have liked that, Teal, perhaps another time. Tonight I'm pretty drained and a good night's sleep is the only thing I'm up for this evening."

With a sigh of relief, and a memo to herself that she had to do better next time, Teal smiled and nodded her understanding. Taking the opportunity to close up the office for the weekend, she wished them a goodnight.

Olivia waited for a few moments as they silently watched Teal leave and then Amelia remarked, "I didn't know Teal had arranged for a pick up in the evenings. It's a great idea, though I wish she'd learn to drive."

"Yep, she's been taken home in style most evenings for several months now."

Amelia became thoughtful. "I guess I've been preoccupied with my own problems and haven't paid attention to what's happening around me, especially with my friends. Do you think it anyone special? I always hoped that she'd meet a great guy and settle down, have kids and all that...she deserves it."

Olivia shook her head slightly as she considered how to reply to the comment. She could take the matter into her own hands and relate that Teal's idea of a great guy needed translating to girl. Then again, why should she bother? It really wasn't anything to do with her. "You'd have to ask, Teal."

"I will. Perhaps I'll call her over the weekend and arrange to have coffee together and a friendly chat. It's been a long time since Teal and I have done that," Amelia remarked absently. Her thoughts drifted to the mess she was making of her life and how she could prevent it from spiraling even further out of control.

Olivia watched several expressions cross the doctor's features. It didn't take a degree to know she was battling inside about something or, in Amelia's case, more than one thing. Hesitating for a short time, she decided against the confrontational stance. Besides, she still owed Amelia an explanation for her own behavior at the motel. Thankfully, the doctor hadn't pressed the issue. Anyway, Teal was right, that kind of attitude wouldn't work with this woman and a part of her was glad. There had to be people out there who cared about those that appeared not to be able to help themselves even if she felt it was a pointless exercise.

Olivia asked, "Do you feel better?" Okay it wasn't the most compassionate of questions in the circumstances but it was the best she could do.

Amelia's eyes flared open wider as she gave Olivia a startled expression as thought she had forgotten the detective was in the same room with her. "Yes, I'm fine. Thanks for asking. I haven't anything else to do today so perhaps I'll call it a day myself. What about you?"

"Oh, you know me, always things to do and actions to plan for. Plus, the paperwork is piling up again and we both know how I hate that part of the job." Olivia smiled briefly as she headed toward her own office.

"If you want some help I'd be happy to do the filing for you. After all, it is my usual Friday evening pastime isn't it?" Amelia hoped Olivia would take her up on her offer. It would be better than going home to an empty apartment with the prospect of spending the rest of the weekend alone. At least at the convent, she was never alone and if she wasn't working on a case, she had her general chores to take care of. In a strange kind of way, she missed the kinship of her fellow nuns and the stability of the convent. Had she been too hasty with her decision to quit and leave it all behind? No one had said it would be easy to integrate into the outside world again, but frankly, she hadn't expected it to be this difficult either.

"Not tonight, Doc, you need the rest it's been a hell of a week. However, don't expect that to last. When you have any free time next week, I'd appreciate the helping hand." Olivia could have done with the help but the woman's bleak expression was enough to make her chose the alternative. Amelia wasn't the most attractive woman on the planet physically, that didn't matter to her. The darkness encircling her eyes and the pallor in her skin gave her an even uglier façade indicating she needed to go home.

"Yes you're probably right. Well then, goodnight, Olivia. I hope you have a wonderful weekend." Amelia had found in the months since she and the detective had become partners that it was pointless to ask about her activities concerning the weekend. She literally gave nothing away. Even if she had a romantic attachment, she

probably wouldn't mention it. Direct questioning wasn't undertaken unless you wanted to be scorched by the flames of hell, because that's how Olivia made you feel.

"Sure thing, Doc, have a good one yourself. I'll see you on Monday." Olivia, with a faint smile left Amelia standing in the middle of the open reception area.

Amelia had nothing to do but collect her things and go home.

*

Olivia answered the phone and at the same time glanced at her watch. *Damn it is nine-thirty. Where has the time gone?*

"Hello, Santos speaking, how can I help you?" Her clipped voice sounded harsh as it echoed slightly around her office.

The next few minutes on the phone had Olivia grabbing her jacket as soon as the call ended. Then with a quick flick of the button on her answering machine switched it to auto and locked up her office. She checked the outer office and windows as she set the alarm system and locked the main door to the agency leaving it behind her.

The roar of her motorcycle was the only sound in the otherwise quiet area, as she sped off into the night and a destination only she and the unknown caller knew about.

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Amelia had settled herself in her apartment in a rather listless fashion. Even the soothing sounds that greeted her didn't have the effect they were supposed to have. Summing up her current lifestyle as she showered and changed from the office had left her with the basic fact she was still trying to be both, a nun and an ordinary member of the community. She of all people knew that wouldn't work. There were times she was so sure living like Teal or Olivia was what she wanted. Then a crisis occurred shaking her resolve, making her yearn for the security of her order and her fellow nuns, particularly the guiding hand of Mother Superior. Perhaps she had made an unwise decision by going into business with the detective. Olivia's work from what she had gleaned from the records she'd filed over the past few months and her own acrimonious divorces, brutal behavior to ones fellow man, and in the last case, murder, was what the detective lived with daily. Although she shouldn't have been surprised—wasn't that how they had met.

Flicking on the stainless steel kettle placed on the counter top in the kitchen, Amelia pondered over those events and the conversation she'd had with the detective soon after they had begun their agency together...

Olivia glanced at Amelia as the woman lost in a world of her own. The doctor had volunteered to help with the dreaded paperwork that abhorred her perhaps she had even read the last case file. It hadn't been that pleasant of a case, a battered wife and kids to help escape the tyrannical spouse.

"Penny for your thoughts Doc?"

Amelia's head shot up and she gave a sheepish smile, "Sorry I was kind of daydreaming. You never did tell me what was really going on behind the scenes at the convent."

With a faint smile, Olivia walked over to the desk Amelia was using and sat on the edge as she considered the comment. "That's true I never did. I take it you want to

know all the facts?" Amelia nodded her head and Olivia continued. "Father Johansson had been using the convent as a breeding ground for drugs, a fairly low key affair, but nonetheless profitable. A Sister called Mary Claire was his accomplice inside. That's the nun we saw that evening we were outside the convent walls. Apparently, according to the good Sister, who rolled over nicely and confessed all to the police later, Sister Marie had stumbled onto the weed growing by accident a couple of months before. At first, she'd remained silent, probably didn't know what the plants were. Then eventually curiosity got the better of her and she carried out some research."

"Why didn't she ask the Mother Superior?" Amelia interjected thoughtfully.

Olivia chuckled. "Sure and who around any convent knows everything?"

"You mean Mother Superior was in on the drugs too?" Amelia's eyes nearly popped out of her head.

Amelia's naivety was one of the things Olivia liked best about her new partner. It helped her put perspective on a world gone mad, at least the world she inhabited. "No, at least not knowingly, as we know the good Father was a slick talker. He was very convincing the plants were for medicinal use within the church, and it would be a great service for the convent to help. What she didn't know was Sister Mary had been brought into the convent to ensure only she knew the real story and kept everyone out. Our friend Sister Marie became suspicious and began asking questions, obviously too many. Rumors began to surface but not the rumors you'd expect, the ones regarding the Sister's insanity. Thereby bringing you and me into this playground, except it never played out the way the Father expected."

Amelia's eyes flashed upwards to meet Olivia's as she whispered, "He never expected us to see the meeting between his henchman and the nun and have your suspicions roused."

With a wink, Olivia nodded, "Yours too of course. Because you did something, he didn't want to happen. You removed the one person who was overly suspicious out of the convent and into a potentially dangerous open arena, the real world. He wasn't to know that you were following your training and instincts and your only interest was the welfare of the nun and the baby she carried. Once Sister Marie had left the confines of the convent, she was as good as dead in the eyes of the priest."

"Oh my, God, you mean I was ultimately responsible for all those people being killed?" Her voice choked over the words as tears filled the doctor's eyes.

"Sorry, Doc, you give yourself way too much credit. There was only ever one person responsible for the deaths that day—Father Johansson. You and I were merely catalysts for events to occur. Needless to say, Sister Marie, from her safe house, gave her full account of what was happening at the convent as she saw it. No one but Sister Mary has been charged. To give the church its due, it did help in convincing the law that the Mother Superior, in particular, wasn't responsible. I believe she's been retired and good old Sister Agnes has taken over." The sarcasm at the nun's name wasn't lost on Amelia.

With a faint smile, Amelia replied, "Hmm, Sister Agnes. Thankfully I'm not in that order or convent."

Olivia moved away from the desk and back to her own, her voice barely a whisper in the still air of the room, "Thankfully for me you're no longer a nun."

Amelia thought she heard the words but could have been mistaken, "What was that, Olivia?"

Making as much noise as possible dragging several files across her desk Olivia gave a blank look. "I didn't say anything." ...

Amelia was shaken from her thoughts as the door bell insistently peeled around the walls of the hallway. Pouring the water into her coffee mug, she trotted toward her door and without a second thought opened the door wide—big mistake.

Her eyes grew wide as she focused on the person standing at her doorway. How had Don Clayton Junior managed to find her?

“Don, what are you doing here?” Her voice shook slightly as the man who towered over her gave a sneer before quickly replacing it with a sickly smile.

“Amelia, why your parents of course...they knew if ever I was passing this way I’d want to look you up. Aren’t you going to ask me in?”

No way...there was absolutely no way her parents would have given her address to this man. They knew it was over between them and leaving as suddenly as she had from her vacation had been because of Don. “I’d love too but...”

Amelia was unable to hold back the door she was about to close in his face as he stepped forward and virtually forced his way inside.

What can I do now? Okay, okay he was an old friend and probably wanted to know why she’d left so suddenly. Well that was easy, work related and she wouldn’t be telling any untruth. Walking down the small hallway toward her kitchen, Don glanced around and made noises Amelia decided were approving. Not that it mattered to her what he thought about where she lived.

“You have a great place here, Amelia. It looks like you’ve settled down well since leaving the church.” His voice, where once she had thought attractive, sounded hollow and sarcastic to her now.

“Thanks. I’ve had a lot of help. Don, why are you here at this time of night?”

The desperation in Amelia’s voice must have communicated itself to Don Clayton as his lips curled into a cruel smile. “It isn’t late, Amelia, why it’s only seven. Time enough to have a long chat with a long lost friend, wouldn’t you say. If I didn’t know you better, Amelia, I’d think you wanted to get rid of me.” His laughter mimicked his mocking expression.

Hesitating for a moment, Amelia wanted to shout at him. As far as she was concerned, she never wanted to see him again in her lifetime. “Really, Don, you know it’s lovely to see you but I have another invitation tonight.”

“Why don’t I tag along and you can show me off.” He stared at her and she was unable to prevent the displeasure she felt at the thought appearing in her eyes.

“I’ve had a hard week, Don, and my friend is expecting me in half an hour. Why don’t we catch up tomorrow morning for coffee?”

Amelia’s fatal mistake had been in believing this man was still the boy she had grown up with so many years earlier. He turned to her unexpectedly and grasped her arm in a vice-like grip, almost stopping the flow of blood. His eyes never faltered and Amelia wished fervently that she had looked away as his they hardened with what she would have said was a predatory evil expression.

“Oh no, Amelia, from now on you and I are never going to be out of each other sights. I can’t have you running away as you did last week. I told you that you were always on my mind, Em, and you are, and always will be the only woman for me. Now that you’ve left the church, we can be together and I never intend to allow a second go by without you by my side. Don’t you see Amelia, it’s our second chance, and I know that you love me.” His feverish words frightened Amelia as she wondered how she had ever allowed herself to forget all she’d learned from her profession and the months since meeting the detective. Here was a classic case of obsession and she hadn’t seen it coming... or maybe she had but hadn’t considered how dangerous it

could be. For years, her order coddled her and once inside the convent walls she had been secure in the knowledge that it was rare anything dreadful happened behind the religious walls.

Attempting to break away from Don's grip, she felt it tighten as his face moved closer to hers. She knew his next action would be to kiss her and there was no way was she was going to let that happen. "Don, look, I'll cancel my visit to my friends tonight, but I'll have to call her first. Then we can go out to dinner and talk, how does that sound?"

Amelia's fleeting hope dashed as Don shook his head. "No calls to friends, not tonight. Dinner sounds good but later. Right now, I think I've waited long enough to consummate our relationship, Amelia. Tonight is going to be the beginning of the rest of our lives together and you'll feel better once we've made love...trust me."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she realized she was woefully inadequate to be out in this world. As he dragged her toward the nearest closed door looking for what he thought would be her bedroom she silently cried, *this shouldn't be happening to me, I'm stronger than this*. She had faith in God but knew that now she needed faith in herself. As he opened the door leading to her bedroom, he cruelly pushed her inside and slammed the door shut on them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Teal stood in her kitchen listening to the laughter of her friends enjoying the simplicity of just being together socially. One friend she would have dearly loved to have here wasn't—Amelia. They had known each other for over ten years and had shared the highs and lows of college life and business events. When most people would have been politely friendly toward her, Amelia had been genuinely so. Although they had completely different goals and backgrounds it was clear their friendship was the real deal.

"Hey, babe, you look pensive. Anything I can do?" Gentle arms encased the small body and warm soft lips kissed the top of her head in tenderness.

Teal smiled slowly as her meditative state dropped away immediately as Phil's voice invaded her senses. Her lover's words, no matter what they were did that to her. "I was thinking about my boss."

With a warm chuckle, Phil gently turned the diminutive body around in her arms so that they faced each other. "Really, should I be jealous? Tall, athletic and dangerously sexy is a hard bench mark to follow, but I'll try." In response, she stole a gentle kiss from Teal.

"Oh no worries there Phil. Olivia is one of those women you dream about like a fictional heroine always out of reach. Actually, I was thinking about Amelia. She's so messed up right now and all I want is for her to be as happy as I am. I even invited her tonight...can you believe that? She'd have picked up her habit and run screaming back to the convent after a few hours with our crowd."

Phil gazed seriously at the woman in her arms. She'd spent so much time working like a demented fool that relationships had hardly entered into her mind. Teal had broken her down subtly as she worked on the renovations at the agency. And she couldn't have wished her life had taken any other turn, they were made for each other, or so she thought. "Does she know about us? Does she know about you?"

That was a loaded question but shouldn't have been. Somehow, she and Amelia had never really discussed romantic attachments. It hadn't been appropriate after all, Amelia had been a nun, and was still a nun to all intents and purposes. "I don't think she knows I'm a lesbian. We never discussed that part of our lives. Besides, she's been so preoccupied in the last few months it's highly unlikely she's noticed much going on around the place. Olivia wants me to tell her and get it out in the open. I don't want to lose her friendship, Phil. She needs my support at this time not another problem."

"You think who we are, and what we share with each other is classified as a problem, Teal? Give the woman some credit. She might be a nun, or was, but she isn't totally innocent of what happens around her. She's a psychiatrist, right?" Phil was astonished at Teal's lack of trust in her friend's judgment.

"No, no, Phil. I guess I think she's going through too much trauma in her own life that my choices are basically irrelevant in the big picture." Teal lifted her small arms and pulled Phil's head closer to hers as they shared a deep satisfying kiss.

"Tomorrow, you and I are going over to see Amelia and tell her that we're in love. In fact, we'll go one better. Teal, will you marry me?"

The squeal that followed from Teal almost deafened Phil as she laughingly lifted Teal off her feet into an embrace that told each other exactly how they felt about each other.

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“Are you sure she won’t mind, Olivia? Its late and maybe she’s gone to bed early.”

Olivia glanced at her wristwatch as they headed toward Amelia’s apartment. Once there, the detective rapped on the door firmly ignoring the doorbell before she answered, “Oh don’t worry, she’d kill me, figuratively speaking, if I didn’t bring you over immediately.”

Two women stood at the door; one impatient for the door to be answered the other apologetic wondering if tomorrow morning wouldn’t be a better time. Receiving no immediate answer Olivia ground her teeth as she this time pressed the doorbell but instead of taking her finger off the object she kept it there.

“Olivia I really think tomorrow would be more convenient. Perhaps she’s gone out. She’s a free agent now isn’t she? No Mother Superior to atone too.”

“I know she’s in there. Didn’t you hear that noise?” Olivia had heard a faint noise from inside but it could have been anything and not necessarily Amelia. Maybe she’d relented and gone to Teal’s party after all.

This time Olivia tried the more direct approach, not only did she rap harder on the door she shouted for Amelia to open up or she would be sorry. The door opposite Amelia’s apartment opened and a young couple peered out wondering about the commotion. Then as the noise in the corridor increased, Olivia heard definite footsteps inside the apartment. Well she sure wasn’t going to be the doc’s best friend after tonight. Although the visitor she brought with her would help to smooth the ruffled feathers for disturbing the neighbors.

The door opened slightly and Olivia’s eyes almost fell out of their sockets as a man as tall as she was stood there, his shirt open wide revealing a mass of hair on a bronzed body. *Nice body*. After that derelict thought, Olivia glanced around the bulk of the man to see inside. *Where was the doc?* She’d obviously been keeping secrets.

“What do you want?” Don asked, his voice showing the annoyance although his bland expression didn’t.

“Who are you?” Olivia’s voice accused. She felt the urge to punch him, but didn’t know why.

The woman at Olivia’s side intervened as the two protagonists eyed each other suspiciously. “We’re friends of Amelia’s and we thought we’d drop by and visit, obviously it’s inconvenient. We’ll call back tomorrow. Will you tell Amelia hi for us? Come on, Olivia, you can take me to dinner.”

No way, no damned way was she leaving without seeing Amelia. If this had been the cause of moroseness for months instead of everyone thinking it was the nun business, then she owed them an explanation. *To me at least*. “Sorry, but I need to speak with Amelia it won’t take a minute.”

Pushing past the man, she entered the hall and was grabbed from behind by a grip even she would have been proud of. It dragged her viciously backwards into the sinewy body of the stranger. “She’s indisposed; try back tomorrow or in your case never,” Don snarled into Olivia’s ear as he gave her a dark malevolent stare.

A muffled noise escaped Amelia’s bedroom where the door was slightly ajar and that was all Olivia needed as she kicked back at the man and hit him squarely in his manhood. There’d be no lovemaking on his part for a while. He howled in pain and released the grip he had on her as she sped to Amelia’s bedroom. The room swam in front of her for a few short moments as she saw the doctor tied to the bed, her

clothes were ripped partially with a piece of duct tape placed over her mouth. Just as she knelt to help the woman, she felt a piercing pain in her back as a foot viciously kicked the small of her back.

With the agility of a cat, Olivia rolled away from the bed as another blow headed her way and she began a tussle with the man who in theory should have been too much for her. Well, she had more moves up her sleeve than any man would expect. Her ability surprised even those that knew her prowess in the art of self defense. The anger that fueled her was a frightening thing to watch as she and Don Clayton thrashed around the room. Amelia watched helplessly as she saw them fighting and knew there wasn't anything she could do to help not even cry out for assistance.

The woman who had arrived with Olivia heard the commotion and decided to follow the noise and as she peered through the bedroom door, a gasp escaped her as she saw Amelia's present condition and the two people fighting and rolling around the room. This was no consensual act as far as she could see and the fear and desperation she saw in the eyes of Amelia had her reaching for her cell and calling 911.

Don Clayton, fueled his own energy reserves with the mindset that no one on this earth was ever going to take Amelia away from him, fought on. If he couldn't have Amelia then no one would. He directed a telling punch to Olivia's nose, which had the detective reeling. Blood began trickling at first from her nose, and then more profusely. Holding a defensive hand to her face, she saw the blood seep through her fingers onto the beige carpet. Clayton chose that moment to reach for the knife he had used to threaten Amelia into submission. She had been no match for his strength and he had felt her fear increase as each moment passed until she was as pliant in his hands as a willing participant in the act that had been about to follow.

Moving swiftly to the bed, he lunged at Amelia with the knife in an attempt to do her harm, but was thwarted in his actions as a book flying through the air hit the hand that held the knife—it dropped at the impact from the pain in his wrist.

By this time, Olivia had seen what was happening and the horror etched in her mind, would live with her forever. It was definitely something she never wanted to happen in her life ever again. Leaping to her feet and with grim determination, decided Clayton was going down, hard. With a few quick steps, Olivia was airborne as she tackled Clayton. As they hit the floor, one could hear the whoosh of breath escape. For a split second there was no movement—then, as if in answer to prayer a few quick moves by Olivia maneuvered Clayton into a secure, lock-down position. It was position she was prepared to hold until the police arrived. She heard the sirens in the background coming closer and pressed her knee harder into the man's back.

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It was midnight as Olivia quietly sat drinking coffee in Amelia's apartment. The police had taken away Don Clayton whose rage reminded her of a caged demented animal. To her, that description was being cruel to the animal kingdom. Statements were taken and Amelia had refused to be checked at the local hospital. Olivia's eyes strayed to the two women talking in the kitchen and she felt tears sting the back of her eyes—she refused to allow them free reign. What had just happened here had been beyond her expectations for this area of the city and reminded her clearly of how deceptive low life scum like Clayton could be. Amelia was violated and threatened to within an inch of her life. If it hadn't been for Sister Marie and her skills with flying books, the doctor would have suffered a debilitating injury or worse.

The maelstrom of the events threatened to overwhelm her to such an extent, crying was on the top of her list and she hated that particular weakness. All she could think of was Sister Marie's impeccable timing. If she hadn't called to say, she was in town and at the railway station and wanted to catch up with her and Amelia, the outcome would have been much different. It would have been too late to save Amelia from the ultimate violation and whatever else that bastard had decided to do with her.

A hand placed on her shoulder had Olivia's eyes rising to its owner.

"Olivia, how do you feel?" Amelia asked quietly and calmly. Though it was clear to any one the terror she had just experienced hours before would live with her for the rest of her life.

"I'm good, Amelia. Sister Marie's arrival was a bit of a surprise wouldn't you say?" *What the hell kind of answer was that Santos!* Knowing in her heart all the hopes she had Amelia would stay with them at the agency had been shredded with the events of the evening. There was no way the doctor would stay. The safest place for her was the convent. Tomorrow, she'd help her partner pack and take her home to the convent where she belonged.

Amelia had long since realized Olivia would never likely admit to anything that exhibited any sign she was hurt, even the heavy beating she had received, she'd shrug off as nothing. "Yes, she looks wonderful. I thought we'd never see her again. How and why is she here?"

Olivia winced as she shrugged the ache in her back acute. Tomorrow she was going to be black and blue with bruises everywhere. "She called out of the blue earlier this evening and said she wanted to see us both."

Sister Marie walked into the hearing range with the smile that gave her an ethereal quality covering her face. After all that she had seen this evening it was hard to understand how she could appear to remain so innocent of the world.

"I had a feeling you both needed me. It's been nagging at me for days and finally I gave in to the calling and made the journey." The quiet words echoed in the room.

Skeptical as always, Olivia shook her head, "You just wanted a change of scenery from the domestic life in the country; I've heard a few things." Olivia winked teasing Sister Marie.

Amelia turned with a surprised look on her face to stare at Olivia, "You knew all along where she was and how she was?"

Sheepishly Olivia had to admit she had known those things, from a distance of course. She had the contacts and they had given her comprehensive information on a weekly basis. "Well..."

"Why don't we dissect all that in the morning, I think we could all do with some sleep," Sister Marie remarked before the two embroiled themselves into a discussion that was best left for another day.

Amelia's body shook for a moment as she thought of her bedroom. Sister Marie and Olivia were going to stay the night to keep her company but she didn't want to go in her bedroom alone. "I'm going to stay up for a few more minutes, you both go onto bed. I'll be fine."

Olivia heard the hesitation in Amelia's words. That was the essence of what had gone wrong today between them, but not just today—since they had become partners in the agency. They had been hesitant in what they asked of each other and what they gave away. It had almost been a fatal hesitation for them and one she certainly wasn't going to allow to happen again.

“You go onto bed Marie, I have the sofa. I’ll keep Amelia, company until she’s ready for bed.”

Ten minutes passed in silence and then Olivia saw the fatigue, coupled with fear in Amelia’s eyes. “Do you want to talk about it?”

The softly spoken words reached into Amelia’s heart as she finally realized there had always been someone she could talk too in the *new* life she had chosen. That person was sitting pensively opposite her waiting for a reply. If she chose not to say anything, Olivia would not force the issue, but maybe she should. Perhaps, that was the problem between them. The detective could give the impression of complete imperviousness to the situation around her when maybe she wasn’t and didn’t know how to show she cared. At the end of the day that was all anyone wanted. Someone who cared enough about them to listen to their woes, however trivial they might appear.

“I’m scared, Olivia. I didn’t realize that someone I’d considered a friend and I grew up with could turn into a monster. How can I ever feel safe again?”

The impassioned words hit Olivia squarely in her heart for she’d been there and done that. Her brother had been her world for so long it was hard to equate his death as reality. When she finally admitted that he was gone, although broken in spirit, she tracked down the person responsible for her brother’s death to find it was the district attorney. Even now, she felt the rage she had for the man and was glad her too was dead. After her brother’s death she had never felt entirely safe either so she knew how Amelia felt. Then there was Max who was her savior by taking her under his wings helping her to feel safe again. Now, he was gone too. Where did she turn when things weren’t working out now? Her heart knew and her mind did too, but she dare not admit it. Not yet, and probably, after today, not ever. “You will feel safe again, Amelia, I promise you that. Perhaps not tomorrow or next week, maybe it will be a year from now, but eventually you will feel safe again!”

Amelia gave a faint smile the first since her ordeal, “Marie said much the same to me. She looks fabulous doesn’t she? She told me her daughter is a scary handful but Danielle has helped her. Did you know she and Danielle live together? Oh what a stupid thing to say; of course you knew.”

The words trailed off and Olivia sucked in a deep breath, which was as pain-filled physically as well as emotionally. “You have to understand, Amelia, it’s a very special program they went into. Danielle’s husband still isn’t in police custody and until he is, they are all in danger...even the children.”

“I see. Would you ever have told me?” Amelia asked quietly.

Olivia moved slowly out of her chair, injures she’d sustained earlier now making a massive claim on her body’s inner strength. “Eventually, anyway you probably know more than I do now or will before she leaves tomorrow.”

Wistfully Amelia said, “Does it have to be so soon?”

“Yes, she shouldn’t really be here now. What she did today was remarkable. Great timing I guess.”

Amelia had known from that first meeting with Sister Marie that the nun was important in her life. She had felt that the woman would enter her life again, but never could she have imagined in quite these circumstances. Perhaps that was the only way. The Sister had saved her life much as she supposed they had saved the Sister’s life previously. “I guess it was payback.”

Olivia knew what the doctor was referring to as she stood next to Amelia’s chair, “I think, my dear Doctor, you are right. However, I also think you need sleep.”

Amelia didn't dare look into Olivia's eyes from the seat she had taken earlier, "Maybe I'll sleep in the recliner tonight and keep you company."

There were a few moments of silence as Olivia contemplated the suggestion. "I think that's a great idea, except I have a better one."

Amelia genuinely smiled this time, just being here with Olivia in the same room made her feel safe, "You do? Go for it."

Olivia reached out her hand for Amelia to grasp and pull herself out of the chair, "How about we both share your bed? My body is protesting at not having any rest and sleeping on a sofa will only irritate it further. You can keep me company while I sleep, how does that sound?" It was a ploy to get Amelia to accept what had happened in her bedroom and move on.

Thoughtfully, Amelia considered the suggestion and placed her hand in the much larger outstretched one. "Thank you, Olivia."

Fully clothed, they climbed into the freshly made bed and within seconds, Amelia began to shake and couldn't stop. A strong, yet gentle arm extended itself and encompassed her in a warm friendly hold. "My shoulder is pretty good to sleep on, please take it, Amelia."

The essence of the words and the how they were spoken had Amelia's heart thumping as she accepted the comfort of the woman at her side. "Thank you again."

"No thanks necessary, Amelia. You will always be safe with me." Olivia meant every word with every fiber of her being.

Amelia pondered that for a few moments and then the image of the kiss they shared popped into her head. After all she'd been through with Don Clayton, sharing a kiss with anyone should have been locked and bolted behind a ten-foot thick door. However, her feelings regarding the action were in sharp contrast to how she thought she should feel. "You know, you still owe me explanation from our last case...you know...the kiss."

Olivia groaned inwardly this was clearly not the time to dwell on her actions during the Agnew case. Now, looking at the situation in retrospect, she was no better than the Clayton beast. "We can do that tomorrow. I was thinking perhaps after Sister Marie has gone home you could go home too." Olivia felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach although knew this was the only action she could recommend after what happened.

What she hadn't bargained on was the strain in the voice of Amelia as she replied quietly. "I can't go home. My parents are still away, what would be the sense of going from one empty building to another?"

"Actually I was thinking of your other family...you know...the convent."

Amelia stiffened in the secure and gentle hold Olivia had on her. "Olivia, I'm no longer a nun. I rescinded my vows two days after we came back from Ransomville. The only family, besides my parents, I have now is Teal...and you." Amelia hesitated admitting that she regarded Olivia as family because she knew what the detective was like when it came to close ties and relationships.

Life had a way of providing a silver lining when you least expected it and it had just arrived as far as Olivia was concerned. Sighing deeply and holding Amelia a little closer, she said, "I guess you can always spend the weekend with me and if you can't face living here again we'll make other arrangements."

Amelia smiled at the offer. It was a very generous one from the solitary detective. "Might that include sharing your warehouse space?" She was teasing Olivia. *I wonder if she knows that.*

A slight splutter was the initial reaction. “Tomorrow, ok. I don’t know about you but I’m shot to pieces right now.”

With all that had gone on, Amelia felt remarkably relaxed. She decided it was because right now and right here was the safest place in the world to her. Devilment flared in her thoughts as she turned slightly on her side and did something as daring as she had thought the detective’s action when she’d done something similar; she chastely kissed Olivia on the lips and settled quiet happily down into the crook of the detective’s arm.

Olivia, for her part, didn’t know what to make of the gesture. Was she so tired that she dreamed that Amelia kissed her. Lamely she replied, “Sweet dreams, Amelia.”

“Thank you, Olivia, it’s sure to happen now. I’ve replaced Don’s vicious lips with yours. Believe me, I know which ones I prefer. Although that doesn’t mean I’m letting you off the hook. You still owe me an explanation.”

Deciding it was best to say something, though what, had her stumped for the moment, Olivia finally said, “How about the simple version, will you go to sleep then?”

Amelia smiled into Olivia’s shoulder. “Yes.”

Clearing her voice slightly, Olivia decided on the truth. “I was frustrated with you and that’s what happens when I get that way.” Yes, perfect...that should do it.

“Frustrated? When you become frustrated, you kiss people. Do you treat everyone you’re frustrated with like that?” Amelia asked with an incredulous note to her voice. She tried to sit up but Olivia prevented her with a gentle tightening of her arms and pulling her closer into her shoulder.

“Actually, for the record, no I don’t. I usually shoot ‘em. Now, will you go to sleep?” Olivia snorted softly as the whole conversation had a surreal feel about it, but a nice feeling.

There was silence between them for a few moments then an exhausted Amelia murmured, “I guess I was one of the lucky ones. Goodnight, Olivia.”

Before Olivia could respond, she heard the low breathing of the woman laying on one of her shoulders. Exhaustion had finally taken its toll on the doctor. Whispering into the virtually silent room, Olivia said, “You were the only one. My goodness this really has been a day *when hell meets heaven*.” Her eyelids dropped and she fell into a comfortable healing sleep. Tomorrow was going to be a glorious day for the agency and their continued partnership.

Next story, Echoes of the Past

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About The Author

JM Dragon

Born in England, JM Dragon is and now a New Zealand citizen, living in the beautiful Canterbury countryside. JM Dragon loves to garden, travel and has a love of animals. Her animals, many of them strays, even the odd chicken, have proved a new focus in her life. Sharing her life with her family, two cats, two alpacas and over forty Bantam chickens in differing breeds; she's found a totally different focus in her life than when she lived in England.

Her writing is a long cherished release for the characters that invade her mind on many an occasion. Always having written stories from a child, she found the Internet a place she could share her creative world with other readers. Having stumbled across venues on the net for her writing, she found new subjects to explore. She currently loves the creative, readership and friendship genre she has comfortably taken residence in for the last twelve years.

A keen reader of sci-fi, crime/mystery, classic and romance of course, JM Dragon is here to stay and loves to experiment with storylines – who knows what she will tease us with next.



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