

Echoes of the Past

Book Three When Hell Meets Heaven Series

JM Dragon & Erin O'Reilly

Echoes of The Past

Third story in the When Hell Meets Heaven Series

JM Dragon and Erin O'Reilly



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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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Echoes of the Past

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Back of the Book

Olivia and Amelia are living together in a platonic relationship when an old lover of Olivia's, Parker Davis, asks for help. The deep sensual feelings Olivia had for Parker and buried for many years begin to surface and she is faced with a dilemma. Will she act on the carnal desire that Parker invokes in her or will she turn to Amelia? This fast moving story has twists and turns and some you won't see coming.

CHAPTER 1

Parker Davis sat in an old, used Winnebago parked at Pete's Auto Repair observing the apartment building across the street. For almost six months, she tracked Sophie Durant from one backwater town to the next always arriving anywhere from a day to a week too late. All indications now pointed to Sophie staying with her friend Camille Peterson in the apartment building she now observed. As she sat and watched, a melancholy of sorts floated over her—Portsmouth was home ten years earlier. *Pull yourself out of it Parker, now is not the time for a stroll down memory lane.*

In her five month search, Parker had exhausted all the usual suspects and began seeking out obscure friends that Sophie had as a child. Camille Peterson was a classmate of Sophie's from kindergarten to her sophomore year in high school. When she approached Camille's mother on the pretense of a class reunion she hit the jackpot. The woman was more than happy to talk about her daughter's early years and all her friends. To Parker's surprise, Camille and Sophie were life long friends that maintained a close friendship past high school.

So far, she hadn't spotted the woman, but her gut told her that with patience Sophie would eventually appear. *You're the most patient person I've ever known* her old partner would say. This was the fifth day of her surveillance and she knew the faces, names and schedules of everyone who lived in the building. She watched each morning as the Peterson woman left for work and return late each afternoon. Even though she had no visible sighting of Sophie, she was certain she saw two silhouettes in the window of apartment 2B.

It was mid-morning and Parker drummed her fingers on the dashboard wondering, not for the first time, if she was on the right track. Evelyn Durant, Sophie's stepmother, hired her to find her missing stepdaughter indicating that her husband was broken hearted by his daughter's disappearance. From her initial meeting with Evelyn, Parker did not like the woman and couldn't shake the feeling that there was far more to the story than merely finding someone. Nevertheless, when the woman offered ten thousand dollars upfront, Parker took the money. Evelyn Durant was so generous that Parker could afford to pass up on other cases. This is like a gift from the gods and I won't let it slip through my fingers.

A police vehicle drove by and Parker sighed. *I can't believe it is ten years since I left the Portsmouth police force.* She vividly remembered riding in a squad car with her partner as they patrolled the streets. *Those were great times until...* When she saw Sophie Durant on the walkway across the street, all her thoughts retreated to the back of her mind.

"Ha, I finally found you Sophie," Parker said with satisfaction. She lifted the Nikon to her eye, pressed a button and the shutter sprang to life rapidly capturing each movement the woman made. Only when the woman was speeding away in a crème colored Altima, did she lower the camera.

In one motion, she rested the camera on the seat, picked up a small silver object and flipped it open. A smile crossed her face as she watched the steady bright dot move

farther away. "Now don't you stray too far," she purred. "I have a small job to do then I'll find you again."

She opened the door, eased her long, lean muscled body out of the Winnebago and let her eyes scan the area. Satisfied that no one was paying her any attention, she fitted a tool belt around her waist and put on a cap with the electric company logo over her short black hair. With the deliberate casualness of someone with the supreme confidence in whom and what they were, she walked across the street and up the very sidewalk that her target had just used. It had always been her opinion if she acted as if she belonged, no one would notice her. She made a career out of being nondescript, looking like she belonged wherever she went—essentially she was forgettable. Her eyes constantly shifted as she took in every aspect of her surroundings. Once she reached the staircase that lead to the second floor, she took the stairs two at a time. Her senses were on heightened alert when she knocked on the door of apartment 2B. She did a quick survey of the hallway then inserted a slender piece of metal into the lock and began to manipulate it until she heard a click. Again, she looked around before quickly opening the door and entering the small apartment.

Her dark eyes surveyed the room until she found what she was looking for. It only took her a few seconds to remove the plate over the telephone outlet and insert a small listening device. With practiced efficiency, she did the same in both bedrooms and the kitchen before she left locking the door behind her. She looked at her wristwatch and smiled. "Four minutes, I believe that's a new record." A smile crossed her face as she remembered her old partner's words. *You know Parker, you can out strategize the best of them, but when it comes down to implementation, you suck.* "How is that for execution?"

When she reentered the Winnebago, she flipped open the device tracking Sophie's movements and saw that the car had stopped about a mile away. She quickly took off the utility belt and cap then bent down to replace the heavy work boots with a worn pair of Nikes. In no time at all, she was in a rusted out van heading toward the place where Sophie had parked. When she pulled into a grocery store parking lot, Parker grinned for she knew the store. Absently she bit her inner cheek as images of the past tried to haunt her. She shook her head to remove any traces of the past - nevertheless they still loomed. *This town certainly has a way of dredging up old memories whenever I'm here.* She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before she blew it out. *Those memories have no place in my life now.*

She pulled on a large floppy hat that had long black hair extensions cascading from inside the brim and looked in the rearview mirror. *How can you be so intuitive about most things and lack in disguises is beyond me.* The memories flowed unchecked and she growled at the image she saw. *Enough of this nonsense, I need to go check out where the woman I'm pretty sure is Sophie Durant went.* To complete the look, she shrugged on an oversized raincoat and added gigantic white sunglasses. She learned long ago that the more ridiculous she looked the less likely anyone could give an accurate description of her face. She looked at herself in the mirror on the visor and laughed. *And, I certainly fit that bill.*

As she entered the store, she snagged a basket and began her search while throwing various items into the cart. She rounded a corner and paused when she saw the woman that she thought was Sophie Durant inspecting the cantaloupes. She pushed her cart toward the melons and covertly pushed the button of a camera hidden in her lapel

before she picked up a cantaloupe. When the woman lifted her head, Parker snapped another picture, but knew she wouldn't need it—Sophie Durant stood across from her. Parker seized the opportunity to capture her gaze and smiled broadly. "How do you know if they're ripe?"

"It's a crap shoot," Sophie said.

There seemed to be a momentary glint of fear in the woman's eyes, but it disappeared quickly. With a laugh, Parker said, "Good, you've confirmed my suspicions."

Sophie nodded, put a cantaloupe in her basket and casually walked away.

A woman who seemed to appear from out of nowhere, stood next to Parker and said, "It is hard to tell with store melons."

Parker looked at the woman and frowned. *How long has she been there? I can't believe I missed her. These twenty-four hour surveillances must be getting to me.* "So it is a crap shoot then?"

The woman laughed again. "Yeah, it is. The best thing to do with them is take it home, put it on the counter and when you smell cantaloupe it is ready," she said with a quiet confident air.

Parker's eyes gave the woman the once over. *She certainly isn't a beauty in the classical sense, but damn she has my attention with that marvelous smile and those twinkling brown eyes.* She removed her sunglasses and said, "Thanks, I'll do just that."

"Here," the woman said handing Parker a cantaloupe. "This one should be ripe in a day or two."

"I'm pretty sure you chose that one for yourself...I'll find another."

The woman laughed again and gestured to the bin holding the melons. "I'm sure I can find another. Please, take this one."

Parker shrugged slightly and took the offered melon. "Thanks." She scrutinized the woman again before saying, "Have a great day and thanks again." She pushed her cart away, but after she went a short distance, she stopped and looked back at the woman. *Hmm, I wonder if she'd give me her number. Damn, if I wasn't working a case I'd...* All thoughts stopped when she spied Sophie heading toward the cash registers.

Shit! I need to get to the van. She abandoned her cart and hurried toward the exit. She knew better than to let outside forces compromise her case and she almost let the mystery woman do just that. Her old partner's words echoed again. *You always allow yourself to get distracted Parker. You can't do that and be a successful police officer....someone like your partner will end up dead.*

* * *

From her vantage point in the Winnebago, Parker munched on a sandwich as she watched Sophie's friend Camille arrive home. She adjusted her headphones and turned the volume up slightly. Other than the sound of a television, Parker hadn't heard anything from the apartment since Sophie returned from her shopping trip. She listened intently hearing the door open and the woman say, "I'm home."

The voice she assumed was Sophie's seemed agitated. "I've been spotted and I need to leave."

"Spotted...who was it?"

“Some woman at the grocery store spoke to me.”

“And that makes you think you were made? Did this woman do anything other than speak to you?”

“No! You don’t understand Cammie. I’ve been going to that market every week since I came here and the people there are always the same...until today!”

“You never saw her there before? What did she look like?”

“The only thing I remember is a big floppy hat with hair extensions.”

“Shit!” Parker said as she slammed her hand against the table.

“Hair extensions were in the hat?”

“Yeah...at least that is how it looked like to me...she wore oversized sunglasses too. Doesn’t that sound like a disguise to you?”

“Maybe she was just eccentric. I’ve seen more than my share of weirdoes in this town”

“NO! I’m telling you she was watching me! I need to get out of here fast before my evil stepmother shows up on your doorstep.”

“Hold on a minute,” Camille said. “If you’re dead set on leaving at least let me find you a safe place to go. All I have to do is make one call and it will be all set up.”

“I don’t know.”

“Trust me, ok?”

The next thing Parker heard was, “Aunt Gin, I need a favor.” She moved the mouse of her laptop and started a search for Camille Peterson’s relatives. It didn’t take long for her to find Virginia Grayson who lived in a small town about two hours away. Her attention then turned completely back to the women’s conversation.

“It’s all set up. You can stay at my aunt’s boarding house in Waterston.”

“Waterston...never heard of it.”

“Not too many have and that is good for you. I have next Wednesday off. I will take you, introduce you to my aunt and get you all moved in. My aunt is great and I know you will get along with her...everyone does.”

A long pause had Parker turning up the volume up. What she heard was unmistakable—kissing. “She’s gay?” Parker said as she flipped through her files and found pictures of Sophie at all kinds of events. “She is always with men ...there’s no mention of her being a lesbian anywhere. She must be a master of disguise if she kept that a secret.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” she heard Camille say.

“I know, but I have to keep you safe. My stepmother will stop at nothing until she finds and kills me.”

Parker sat up straight. *Kills her? Why?*

“Come on Sophie we’ve talked about this before...I can’t see her hiring someone to murder you.”

“Because you don’t know what she’s capable of! Trust me; she will stop at nothing until she has all my inheritance.”

Parker flipped through her notes and until she found the financials on Sophie. She only read a few lines when she heard the sounds of kissing again followed by the familiar groans of a sexually charged situation. Unable to concentrate, she put the file down and, feeling like a voyeur, closed her eyes and leaned back in the seat. It wasn’t too long before her body reacted vicariously to the sounds. The zipper to her jeans came down,

and her fingers slid inside. The face of the woman she spoke with in the grocery store floated into her mind. *Hmm, I wonder what her name is.* She thought as her fingers glided inside.

CHAPTER 2

The resonance of pulleys turning and a motor pulsing out energy to maintain the task broke the silence of the warehouse apartment. Inside the building, a woman's ears picked up the sound and she sighed heavily. Then, with a shake of her head, she rose out of the comfortable armchair and entered the spacious work area that dominated the warehouse conversion. The atmosphere changed significantly for only moments before she felt relaxed and at ease with her surroundings. Now, the businesslike environment made her heart pump into action. The green lights that blinked rapidly on the console in the center of the area indicated the activation of the garage door as safe. It was one of the various gadgets defining the owner of the building.

Amelia watched quietly as the roar of a motorcycle engine cut through the other sounds in the building and slid, with feline grace, into the spot marked for it. A figure clad in black from head-to-toe fluidly disengaged from the machine. At a glance, it looked as if rider and machine were the same. With negligent ease, the figure removed the black helmet and a swathe of riotous black hair swung around the beautiful Latino featured face - Olivia Santos was home.

From her vantage point just outside of Olivia's peripheral vision, Amelia watched in silent fascination. Her business partner and friend and ...well who knew what else they were to each other, appeared tired. Amelia wasn't surprised since Olivia was out on a case, or at least that's what she implied, for the past thirty-six hours. Dark circles under the eyes, indicated the fatigue. Outside of that indicator, the woman's movements as she headed for the central computer console, showed little stress to the body.

"Hey, you don't need to lurk in the shadows I know you're there."

Amelia almost jumped out of her skin at the unexpected observation. With a rising of her eyes heavenward, she stepped forward into the glare of the overhead lights at the central core of Olivia's *toys*. "I hate it when you do that," Amelia said.

Olivia eyed the woman idly as a faint smile crinkled the corner of her eyes while her lips barely registered the emotion. Then, she returned her gaze to the data computing on the console from the portable storage device she slipped into the USB port. "Yep, I know."

As Amelia moved forward, she caught the faint aroma of perfume lingering on Olivia. *Odd, I've never noticed that smell before...hmm, expensive.* She asked, "Was the surveillance successful?"

Olivia digested the question for a few seconds as her glance caught the interested ones of her business partner. An amusing thought filtered into her brain. *Are you fishing Amelia? If I told you the truth, I wonder if you would still stick around.* "Yes it was. How was your weekend?"

Amelia inwardly sighed. *Nothing new there, she doesn't give anything away even to me and I work alongside her. Damn, she annoys me sometimes.* With a bright smile she replied, "I met a new friend today." *Ok, so she isn't a friend and I hardly spoke more than a few words, but Olivia won't know that.*

“Really and who exactly is this friend and where did you meet?” Olivia didn’t take her eyes from the data on the console; however her mind focused on the new turn of events.

Amelia walked around Olivia’s chair and saw the change in body language. It was hardly discernable, but she knew exactly what to look for. Something about her comment had hit a target. *I wonder which target that is exactly.* “Oh, I was shopping and we struck up a conversation...you know how that is.” She felt her nonchalant air and increased excitement in tone was a fitting disguise.

Olivia swung around to face Amelia with a hooded look in her narrowing eyes. “Shopping huh? You picked up a complete stranger...what’s his name?”

“I did not pick up a complete stranger! I had a conversation with a person about melons that was all. Do you always have to bring everything down to...to sex?” Amelia belligerently replied.

This time Olivia chuckled. *Melons huh, close enough.* “Ok, ok I apologize if I made the wrong assumption. “This new *friend*, are you going to call him?”

Amelia shook her head. *How can Olivia be so good at what she does when she jumps to so many conclusions...wrong ones at that?* “For the record, it was a woman not a man and well...”

“Well?” Olivia visibly relaxed with the mention of woman. *Excellent, no threat...no threat at all.*

“Are you hungry? I have those melons I bought and I was thinking maybe we can celebrate now that you’re back.” Amelia felt foolish as she tried to figure out why she said what she did. *The woman in the store was a stranger and one I’m unlikely to see again and frankly I have no real interest in her. Besides, she was wearing ridiculous white sunglasses and it had to be a wig under that hat.*

Olivia flexed her back muscles and with a distinct grin she used only for Amelia, she placed a hand on the smaller woman’s shoulder. “Sounds good, I’m starving. You have to be careful who you meet out there Amelia, not everyone is what they appear to be.” As they walked toward the stairs to the kitchen, she said, “What are we celebrating?”

Amelia didn’t reply immediately. *Isn’t that the truth? Take you for instance. One day, one day soon I’m going to find out what makes you tick.* “We’ve been together for two years. Who would have believed it? Oh by the way, I like that perfume you’re wearing it suits you.”

Olivia was thankful that she was behind Amelia as the comment made her cheeks take on a faint red hue. With a slight clearing of her throat, she quietly replied, “Is it? Well that surely is something to celebrate.” As they entered the kitchen in friendly camaraderie, she asked, “Did you buy any of my favorite pasta when you were shopping?”

CHAPTER 3

The next morning Parker listened to the conversation between Sophie and Camille.

“Cammie I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

“Why?”

“How certain are you that I’ll be safe at your aunt’s house?”

“One hundred percent, no one will find you there.”

Parker heard the distinct sound of a kiss.

“But, what if...” She heard more kissing sounds.

“The only way anyone will track you there is if I tell them and trust me I will never do that.”

“It’s five days until we leave, what if that woman from the grocery store comes looking for me?”

“She won’t get near you.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I am going to be with you every minute until then...and no one gets by me. Come on, I’ve already cleared it with my boss. It’s take your friend to work week.”

Once the two women left, Parker quickly crossed the street, climbed the stairs and entered the apartment to retrieve the listening devices. When she returned to the Winnebago, she put in a call to her client Evelyn Durant. “Hello, Mrs. Durant this is Parker Davis.”

“I hope you have good news for me you’ve been at this for almost eight months and so far you’ve done nothing but spend my money.”

Parker sucked in a deep breath. *I really don’t like this woman.* “As I told you from the start Mrs. Durant, it is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Each time I have tracked her to a specific location it seems she leaves just before my arrival...it is as if someone tipped her off.”

“Well I certainly haven’t.”

“That’s not what I am saying. You need to understand your stepdaughter is smart and doesn’t want to be found and she’s doing a damn good job of doing just that.”

“I’m not interested in your excuses Ms. Davis, I want results or I will find someone who can deliver them.”

Like you haven’t already tried! “Well, that’s your choice Mrs. Durant. I had a sighting of her last night, but now she’s gone.”

“You saw her and didn’t grab her...why?”

“Too many people were around.” For Parker, the truth was that she didn’t like kidnapping for there was always the risk of witnesses. She preferred to gain their confidence first then, tell her client where to find the person.

“So you let her get away! Who was she with?” Evelyn screamed. *Anyone who gets in the way and helps that bitch of a stepdaughter will feel my wrath.*

“I’m not sure of the name...it’s an old school friend...hmm, the last name is Peterson or something like that.” *Damn, what an idiot, I shouldn’t have told her that. Now, what do I do?* “The friend is irrelevant since Sophie has already gone.” The

conversation was making Parker tense and she felt a knot grow in her stomach. "Listen Mrs. Durant, I have some good leads on her whereabouts."

"Then find her and call me the moment you do. I'll want her restrained until my people arrive. Is that understood?"

"Yes ma'am."

"The next call you make better be the news I'm expecting or you'll wish you never accepted the task and wasted my money," Evelyn said with icy venom.

Parker felt a chill run down her spine for she knew without a doubt that what she heard Sophie say was right - the woman would kill her. She looked at the small cell phone in her hand and sighed. "At least she doesn't know where I am. Pity I gave the old battle axe her friend's last name." *Don't you get it Parker you need to be tight lipped?* Her old partner would say. "Oh well, it doesn't matter she'll be old news once Sophie leaves." Her mind floated back to the last update she gave the woman. Unlike other cases, Parker played this one close to the vest never divulging too many details about where she was or how she determined where to look. "I hope that will keep Sophie safe for the time being." From out of nowhere, she heard her old partner's voice. *Parker don't get involved just do the job!* She snorted and shook her head. "What the hell am I thinking? Keep her safe...she's not the one paying me! Just whose side am I on?"

* * *

"What's so interesting around here?" Pete asked when she paid for the use of the Winnebago and van.

Parker fixed the man with a menacing look. "The deal was, I pay you top dollar and you ask no questions." She held the money back. "If you want to change the terms let me know and I will adjust the payment accordingly."

"No, no," the greasy, small man said. "No questions just like we agreed."

"Good." She gave him his money then began to walk away, but stopped. "If anyone comes looking for me Pete...I'll know who told them."

Pete adjusted his cap and gulped. "Not from me...I know nothing."

"Then get lost," she growled. Once the man had disappeared into the garage, she set about the task of wiping down both vehicles. The night before, under the cover of darkness, she retrieved her '88 Cabriolet from the garage she rented and loaded it with all her belongings. After Pete's questions, she was glad she drove the car back to the garage. *All I need is for him to know the make of my car and the license number.* Not that it would matter for she used a fake ID when she bought it. Her old partner's voice rang in her ear. *Overlook nothing Parker... the little details will hang you.*

Once she was satisfied that she left no traces in either the Winnebago or van, she began the mile walk to the garage and her car. The walk gave her time to reflect on the case so far and come up with a viable plan for what to do next. Normally she would have told her client every detail, but this case was anything but normal. The fact that Sophie spotted her so easily was upsetting. "I can't believe she saw through me like that...I must be losing my touch. Damn it! Maybe I should just tell Evelyn where she is and be finished with it." She shook her head. "No way am I doing that...something tells me that Evelyn is a psycho. I shouldn't have mentioned her friend. Oh, what the hell, she's hardly going to do anything to her...Sophie is her target." When she opened the garage door

fifteen minutes later, she still didn't have a reasonable plan. *She'll just send someone else to find her...damn, what do I do now? What the hell, the woman said spare no expense so what's another few days on the expense account...can't hurt...besides, I want to know Sophie's side of the story.* Wouldn't be the first time I changed sides overnight and probably won't be the last." Once again, she heard her old partner's words. *That tender heart of yours will always get you in trouble. Stay focused and uninvolved.* Parker laughed. "Now that I'm leaving town O, I hope you'll become a forgotten memory again." After she got in her car, she put the key in the ignition and the engine roared to life.

As fortunes would have it, Parker didn't have any other cases and the money she'd been paid upfront would keep her solvent a while longer. "So why not find out more?" *Don't be so damn inquisitive Parker. You need to let it go and move on. You can't solve everyone's problems sometimes there is no solution,* her partner would say. "Not this time. I know there is treachery lurking just below the surface of this case. I've got two hours to kill before I get to Waterston and that's plenty of time to come up with a plan." What she heard in Sophie's voice the night before was a genuine fear of her stepmother. Add to that, her gut feeling that Evelyn Durant's real motives were nefarious, and she knew there was more to the situation than what she first thought. *My conversation with Evelyn this morning made that abundantly clear and I always did like a good mystery.*

She knew the Durant family was an old money family from the mainline of Philadelphia. Smart investments in banking and real estate made the original Augustus Durant a fortune that remained even though the depression was in full swing. Sophie's father, Augustus III, headed one of the largest investment banking conglomerates in the world. When the matriarch of the family, Christina died, she left her entire fortune to Sophie and not her son. I need to research that further. *If she has all that money, why is she hiding out in a town like Portsmouth? Shouldn't she be living it up on the Riviera surrounded by bodyguards?* She involuntarily scratched her head and laughed. *As my dad would say; if it smells like a dead fish, looks like a dead fish then it must be a dead fish.*

"Something certainly smells bad with this case." She shrugged. "It has to be greed. Her father is wealthy in his own right, but Sophie told her friend that Evelyn wanted all her money." She snorted. "Bet there's a prenup."

As she drove into the small town of Waterston, Parker's eyes scanned the town until she found the local dining establishment, Good Eats. A smile played around her lips when she saw the sign—Help Wanted. She drove on down the highway until she came to a place where she could pull over. She rummaged around in the backseat until she found a blonde wig and make-up bag. Within minutes, she had transformed herself into a big haired blonde with red lips and a beauty mark just to the side of her upper lip. Once satisfied with her look, she started the car and headed back to the restaurant. "It's show time."

With a smile, she opened the door to Good Eats and quickly scrutinized the area noting there were only two men sitting in a booth next to the window. She sat at the counter nearest the door and pulled a menu from between two bottles of catsup.

"Hello. Welcome to our town," a bright voice said.

When Parker looked up, she saw a somewhat rotund woman with bright red hair, even redder lipstick and a nametag that said Dolly, smiling at her. "Thank you."

"If you're hungry you've come to the right place. Our special today is pot roast. It's real good if I do say so myself." The woman laughed. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Coffee would be good," Parker said, flashing her biggest smile.

In an instant, the woman placed a cup of coffee on the counter. "There you go. You want more time to look at the menu or do ya know what you want?"

"Actually, I was interested in the help wanted sign."

Dolly's face brightened. "You lookin' for work?"

"Yes ma'am."

"My husband passed away five months ago leaving me to do all the cookin', the table waitin', and bill takin'. I had a gal helpin' me, but she up and quit three days ago leavin' me high and dry. Some of the folks that come in here don't mind the wait, but most do. Business has gone way down since that gal left."

"Sounds like you're overwhelmed," Parker said.

"I sure am. I need someone to wait tables...can you do that?"

"Sure can."

Dolly clasped her hand to her heart and Parker waited for a hallelujah. Instead, the woman said, "My prayers have been answered." She held out her hand. "I'm Dolly Madison." When she saw the smile cross the woman's face she added, "Can you imagine with a name like Dolly I marry a guy with the last name of Madison. Lord, I've had my share of jibes over the years."

With a genuine laugh, Parker extended her hand. "Parker Davis."

"I can't pay you much Parker, but them that comes in here tip real good."

"I'm sure it will all work out. What are the hours?"

"We are open at six so I'd need you here by five thirty. We only serve breakfast and lunch so we close at two...oh and we're closed on Sundays."

"Sounds good. Now, all I need is a place to stay." With a questioning look she said, "Can you recommend a place?"

"I sure can. Miss Ginny's is just down the street. I'll call her and set it all up for you."

"Thanks, that'll be great," she said breathing a sigh of relief. *All I need to do is get myself established.* Here ears perked up and a smile crossed her face as she listened to Dolly on the phone. *She's good people Ginny and an answer to my prayers. Great you have a room. I'll send her right over.*

Dolly turned back and smiled. "Gotcha all set up at Ginny's." She scribbled the address on the back of a counter check. "Here's the address. You can't miss it ...two blocks down on the left."

Parker took the offered paper. "Thanks this is great. The moment I drove into town I knew this was just the kind of place I'd been looking for."

Dolly patted the younger woman's hand. "And you are a godsend. Can you start tomorrow?"

"I'll do you one better. As soon as I get my stuff stowed in the room, I'll come back."

"You would," Dolly said as her eyes opened wide. "Thank you, thank you and God bless you Parker."

The look on the woman's face made Parker stand up and move a few steps back. *I think she might kiss me or give me a big hug...that I can do without.* Parker shrugged. "I guess I better go and get myself settled so I can get back here."

* * *

Miss Ginny's Boarding House was a big rambling two story Victorian painted slate blue with rose trimmed windows and shutters. Parker's eyes scanned the area noting that a small garage was located behind the house with the only exit being the driveway. The home was located on the main thoroughfare making it easy to leave in a hurry if she needed to. The car door creaked when she opened it. *That's what I get for buying a junker.* She walked up the three steps to the front porch and then knocked. A woman, who Parker thought was in her fifties, opened the door.

"Hello, I'm Parker Davis," she said with her biggest smile. "I believe Dolly spoke to you about me renting a room."

"Yes, yes she did. Come on in. The rent is a hundred a week in advance and that includes your evening meal," she said peering over Parker's shoulder. "Is that your car?"

"Yes," Parker said creasing her brow. "Is it a problem if I park there?"

"Heavens no," Ginny said. "I was thinking you could use the garage. I don't drive so no one uses it. Why don't you pull it into the driveway then you can unload your belongings."

"Sure, I can do that." When Parker arrived back at her car, she shook her head. *This is a definite case of damned if you do damned if you don't. I don't like the idea of there only being one way out, but what good fortune. By parking in the garage, it will add credence to the idea that I've been here longer than a few days.*

The room Ginny showed Parker was located at the corner of the house on the second floor. It was small, but the two rooms had a homey feeling. "How many other boarders do you have Mrs. Grayson?"

Ginny laughed. "Call me Ginny everyone else does. Mr. Gordon is way down at the other end," Ginny said pointing to the far end of the hallway. "This room over here," she pointed to the room next to Parker's, "is vacant, but a friend of my niece is going to be staying there in a few days." She looked in the room Parker was assigned. "I serve dinner each night at six, but not on Sunday. You are welcome to use the kitchen, but I expect you to clean up after yourself. We also have laundry facilities...you will have to provide your own detergent."

"Well, I don't cook so that's not a problem, but I do like clean clothes. Do you have a line for hanging them?"

Ginny's laugh was long and deep. "Sure do. It sounds to me like we'll get along just fine. Holler if you need anything," she said then she left.

Once Parker was finished putting her things away, she left the room quietly and tiptoed to the room Sophie would be using. Just as with her room, the door was unlocked so she let herself in and placed a bug in each of the two rooms. With a satisfied smile she left the boarding house to go back to Good Eats and the noon crowd.

Dolly escorted the last customer to the door before locking it. She eyed Parker. "How was your first day?"

With a half smile, Parker said, "You sure do get a lot of people in here. Don't know how you did it yourself. To answer your question...I'll be back in the morning."

"When you come in the mornin', I'll get you more acquainted with the place and pay you for today," Dolly said. "I have a doctor's appointment in ten minutes so I can't do it now."

"No problem. You want me to clean up the kitchen before I leave?"

Dolly frowned. "I guess not...I couldn't pay you for doin' that."

"Consider it a thank you for giving me a job and finding me a place to sleep."

"Be sure and lock up when you go."

"Not to worry. I will make sure everything is locked up tight."

"Bless you," Dolly said as she looked at her watch. "Will you look at the time, I'm gonna be late if I don't leave right now."

Parker watched with a satisfied smile as the woman scurry out the door. "This is going to work out perfectly."

* * *

At five thirty the next morning, Parker arrived at Good Eats. "Good morning," Dolly bellowed over a mixer. "Get yourself an apron from under the counter." She waved a wooden spoon in the general direction. "You did a wonderful job cleaning up. Thank you."

How can she be so bubbly this early in the morning? "You're welcome."

Dolly had turned off the mixer and joined Parker. "You'll need a nametag. I'm sorry, but you'll have to be Rose 'cause that's the only tag I have."

"Rose it is then," Parker said laughing.

The first customer gave Parker a second look then a once over. "Where's Dolly?" he asked gruffly.

"Good morning. Take a seat and I'll get you a cup of coffee."

He looked at her nametag. "Another Rose," he said shaking his head "...where's she get 'em all."

Parker smiled and walked over to the coffee pot. Just as she was pouring a cup, another customer came in and she heard, "Hey Joe, Dolly's got herself another Rose." It wasn't long before all the tables were full of men who stopped in before work.

The lunch shift wasn't as busy, but by closing time, Parker sighed in relief. She questioned the wisdom of her choice of occupation as she slumped in a chair. The day was successful in that she was certain that she made a good impression on all the customers. From the feel of the pocket in the apron, she made good tip money.

"You did good," Dolly said as she placed a plate of food in front of her new waitress.

Parker looked at the woman and smiled. "Thanks. I had no idea you would be so busy. I think most everyone in town must have been here sometime today."

Dolly laughed and patted Parker's hand. "Not quite everyone. You eat up and I'll get you your pay for today and yesterday."

It had been a long time since Parker felt such an overwhelming weariness. She looked at the plate of food and realized her only choice was to comply with Dolly's order. "Thanks, it sure smells good."

CHAPTER 4

The jingle of keys at the heavy door made Olivia smile. She walked from her office at When Heaven Meets Hell and casually leaned against the counter in front of the reception desk waiting for the door to open. *She's back at last.* Her smile never wavered as the door finally opened and in stepped the woman she had been expecting. "Teal you decided to return to work! We've missed you."

Teal Roland mentally released the nervous breath she was holding as she arrived at the office after her extended vacation. She grinned at her tall, beautiful boss. "Glad to be back boss, but we...are you sure about the we? The last time we were in contact, Amelia was less than friendly. Where is she anyway...in her office?" she said mockingly. They both knew that Amelia never made it to the office until eight thirty and it was barely seven thirty.

Olivia pushed away from the counter and towered over their efficient personal assistant. Teal ran all the office administration and, if they would admit to it, their lives too. "Unlikely, she hasn't changed in that respect."

Teal walked over to the reception area and stowed her personal belongings. Then, with a look of dread mixed with joy, she saw the amount of paperwork stacked in her trays. *Overflowing is an understatement.* "Has she changed at all?"

The quiet question came from a woman Olivia respected for both her professionalism and friendship. She silently debated what to say next.

With her hand held as high as possible for Olivia to see, Teal remarked, "You don't need to answer that...she hasn't has she. I'm a fool to think that the last ten years of our friendship could sway her into accepting Phil and me as a committed couple. Well, it's done now she either accepts it or..."

Pain was evident in the words that floated into the silent room. *I feel sorry for Teal.* It had been a shock all round when Amelia took a belligerent stand regarding Teal and Phil's commitment ceremony. Her refusal to attend the ceremony and her ignoring Teal the weeks before verged on homophobic. Neither woman wanted to associate that behavior with Amelia. *I really should speak to her about it. But shit, I really don't want to hear what she has to say on the subject.* "Or, you intend to quit on me?" Olivia asked raising an eyebrow. "You can't leave me with a homophobe on my own. Who knows what I might do." She winked to take the sting out of the words, but they both knew the only solution was to confront Amelia.

Teal laughed at the comment. Olivia had never directly admitted her preferences, but Phil, who had known Olivia for at least five years, knew she was a lesbian, but didn't advertise the fact. "I think that would be too drastic don't you. Incidentally, I heard that a certain mutual acquaintance of ours had a marvelous weekend."

Olivia frowned slightly then seriously replied, "Did she say that or was it your interpretation of the hours we spent together? Besides, it was a mutual one off for us both...you know...a stress releaser."

A shake of the head was Teal's immediate reply. "Wow, I'd hate to be one of your cast offs. Stress releasing, huh. What would make you a one woman, woman Olivia...or should I say who?"

A sparkle entered the deep, dark blue of Olivia's eyes as she shrugged. *I tired that once, it didn't work.* "Now that you're back Teal, there's plenty to do. If you need help with the dragon when she arrives, I'll be close by." Olivia swiftly retreated to the sanctuary of her office.

Teal giggled at the description. *Amelia might be many things but a dragon—yeah right.* She looked at her in-trays. *Darn I only had one of those suckers when I left.* She groaned at the bulging mass of paper. *Oh, it's lovely to be back.*

* * *

Amelia, with a sense of trepidation, parked her vehicle next to the office and waited. After a few seconds of thought, she realized that she was frightened. *I'm frightened of my old friend. How can that be? It's not rational. I wish I'd gone to her ceremony. It was stupid, blind, and anal not to mention all the other things I can think of to describe my crass behavior. What do I say now? I was ...what was I...can I even put a name to it?* Her head jerked as she mentally derided herself for her sheer unworldly understanding of life in general and particularly her own. *I want to say forgive me, but how can I say that? Teal will think I'm just saying it to make things less uncomfortable in the office.* Her eyes popped open wide when she thought of how jammed packed Teal's in-tray was.

I wish I were still a nun! Maybe that's the crux of the matter...my calling was to be a nun and I let my incredible arrogance tell me otherwise. Why did I choose something other than God's calling? Her eyes scanned the building where WHMH claimed the lower floor. *The problem isn't a place or a thing it's the people. Two people in particular and I can't decide what to do. What kind of shrink am I anyway? Pathetic and not worthy of the trust they put in me. I know it and I still want to be like them and know what life is like. I want to share it...all of it. If only I wasn't so afraid of...* The realization hit her and she gasped. *Me! I'm afraid of being me!*

Her eyes looked at the car's clock and she frowned - eight-twenty nine. *I am not going to be late! I refuse to add that to my list of crimes.* She rushed out of her vehicle and mounted the steps. With a deep intake of breath, she reached for the door knob. *Well, here goes* she thought as the door to the outer office opened easily. Then, she heard the familiar tones of her friend, cursing one of them for their lack of detail. *Probably Olivia, since paperwork isn't her strongest suit.* She took a deep breath and moved further into the office placing her briefcase on the counter top. "Hi Teal, welcome back," she said. Amelia inwardly chided the lack of sincerity her clipped tone evoked. *I may not sound upbeat, but nonetheless I mean what I say.*

Teal looked up toward the voice and mentally chastised herself for the terrible thoughts she had at her friend's expense. With a bright smile she responded, "Good morning Amelia, thanks."

Hesitation wasn't a good trait in a psychiatrist, but right then Amelia felt more vulnerable than her patients did. "Did you have a good...vacation?"

You really can't say it, can you Amelia? Oh, I feel sorry for you my friend, I really do. How can someone so balanced in most things and be as charitable as you are in almost everything else, have this phobia? Well I can be charitable too. She let Amelia

off the hook. "Great thanks. Looks like I'll need another one after I get through the mountain of work you both left for me."

A ghost of a smile etched itself across Amelia's features as she realized her friend gave her a way out. "Teal, most of that is Olivia's except for the receipts and stuff I pretty much dealt with mine. My business partner is less adept in that area."

"Who is less adept my dear Doctor West?"

The rich voice was unmistakably Olivia's and Amelia spun around to face the taller woman. *Damn she's smiling that way again.*

With a twinkle in the eye toward Teal, Olivia moved closer to Amelia. "Are you implying I'm not good at something? I'd really like to know what it is so I can hone my skills."

Amelia's breathing became noticeably shallow as Olivia moved within inches of her. Flustered, she replied, "We all know clerical work isn't one of your stronger points."

"Ah, paperwork," she said shaking her head in agreement. "Well, I figured that Teal doesn't want to feel that her time here is wasted," she said solemnly. "What's your excuse?" Olivia loved to tease Amelia. It was one facet of her relationship with the woman that she found endearing.

"Why not tell Teal about your date this weekend." *There, I've finally said it! No way was Olivia working this weekend.*

"Ohhh goody, office gossip, you got to love it. So spill the beans Olivia," Teal gleefully intoned. *I already know the details or as much as Terry let slip, but it will be fun to see if Olivia can get out of this one.*

Olivia gave Amelia a long, steady stare. *Now you're playing games aren't you Amelia. You're afraid to ask me to my face, but in a room with other people sure...dangerous my dear doctor, dangerous.* "Now a lady never discusses such things in public."

Amelia snorted at the reply. "So it was a date! Ha, I thought so when I smelled expensive perfume. Usually you smell of fresh herbs." Teal and Olivia both stared at Amelia. With a shake of her head, Olivia headed for the outer door. "I'm out of here. I have work to do. See you both later."

"Yeah, me too, I have a patient coming shortly. I'm glad you're back Teal, I really am. I was wondering if you and Phil wanted to come over for dinner next weekend." Amelia picked up her briefcase and held her breath as she waited for the response. *Please Teal, accept the olive branch.*

Perplexed at the attitude change, but willing to try anything to show Amelia that being gay wasn't the crime of the century she nodded. Who knows Amelia, you might even realize a thing or too about yourself. "Phil's going to Vegas can we take a rain check?" she said.

Amelia closed her eyes briefly. "Sure a rain check it is. I'll see you later Teal." She walked toward her office then turned back. "I'm sorry about the ceremony Teal. Maybe if you'll give me a chance I can explain."

Teal smiled warmly at her friend. "You got it babe, now go do your stuff. I know I need to do mine."

The shadow, which had plagued them both, lifted slightly as light began to filter through.

CHAPTER 5

Over the next two days, Parker learned most of the customer's names and easily laughed and joked with them all. "No one would know you just got here." Dolly told her on the third day. "You even won over old man Winston. Lordy, I don't think I've ever seen him smile like that before."

Parker laughed. "Tom just needed a nudge." She shrugged on her jacket and said, "I best be going its laundry day." The truth was Sophie and Camille were due to arrive and she wanted to be in place before they got to the house. "See you tomorrow."

As she neared the boarding house, her heart leapt into her throat when she saw the crème colored Altima in the driveway. *Damn, I thought they'd get here later.* Sucking in a deep breath, she opened the front door, entered and almost ran headlong into Sophie Durant.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Parker looked at Ginny and said, "I didn't know you were having company."

"No need to be sorry," Ginny said with a smile. "This is my niece and her friend that I told you about." She wrapped her arm around Camille. "Cammie this is Parker Davis she has the front room." Then she turned to Sophie. "I'm sorry I don't remember your name."

"Sophie Durant," the woman said holding out her hand. "It looks like we'll be neighbors."

Parker felt her body relax when neither woman showed any sign that they recognized her. She had only seen Camille from a distance and now that she saw her close up, Parker wondered what Sophie saw in her. Where Sophie was tall and curvaceous, Camille was small and on the chunky side. *If Sophie dressed better and wore make-up, people would sit up and take notice of her. Camille on the other hand is rather homely.* "Nice to meet you neighbor," Parker said as she shook the slightly smaller hand. "Well, I better get going it is laundry day." She looked at Ginny and smiled. "It's such a warm day I think I'll hang them on the line."

As Parker mounted the stairs, she heard Cammie say, "She seems like a nice person Sophie. You'll have someone your age to talk to."

The next person she heard was Ginny. "Well let's get you settled shall we. Cammie, now that your friend is staying here, I hope I'll see more of you."

"Count on it Aunt Gin," Camille said.

Parker let out a sigh of relief. *Well so far so good, they didn't ask how long I've been here.* Once she was in her room, she gathered her clothes and before she finished she heard the three women go into the room next door. With her clothes stuffed into a basket, she waited until she heard them in the hallway again and opened her door. "Ginny," she said.

"Yes dear."

"I'm out of laundry soap. Do you mind if I borrow some of yours? You know I'll replace it." Her words were loud enough for the other two women to hear. *This will help solidify in their minds that I've been here longer than a few days.*

"Certainly, come on, I'll walk down with you."

Parker smiled broadly. "Thanks. Isn't it a great day to hang out laundry?"

"Yes, it is a beautiful day. You know, I was thinking that maybe we could use the grill tonight."

"And, I'm just the girl to do the grilling," she said with a fond smile. Inwardly she chuckled for Ginny unknowingly was playing into her ruse.

* * *

The dinner of grilled chicken was excellent. Parker hoped that she could use the meal to study Sophie, but that didn't happen. Only Camille joined them. "Sophie has a monster of a headache Aunt Gin. When we're done do you mind if I take her a plate?"

Parker helped Ginny clear the table and do the dishes before she went back to her room. She put on headphones and listened to the conversation in the next room.

"Come on Sophie, you have to eat something. My aunt is a wonderful cook."

"I'm sure she is Cammie, but I'm just not hungry."

"Why?"

"After you leave I will be alone."

"No you won't. Parker seemed like an interesting person at dinner. And, I'll come every weekend."

"You will?"

The answer to the questions was clearly a kiss. *Now why doesn't that surprise me?* Parker thought as she stretched out on her bed. It wasn't long before she heard Sophie say, "What you got there?"

"Oh, I thought you might like feeling this inside."

Parker felt her heart crank to a higher beat.

"Cammie we can't...not in your aunt's house."

"Don't worry her bedroom is downstairs on the other side of the house. Besides, she went to bed two hours ago...she won't hear us."

"But, what about that woman next door?"

"What about her? She can find her own lover." Parker heard Camille chuckle. "Unless you think she'd like to join in on a threesome."

"Nope, I want you and that strap-on all to myself."

Parker listened to the pair making love and once again felt like a voyeur. Her mind flitted to the woman she met in the grocery store. There was something so compelling about her that Parker envisioned her face often. She would never see her again and as her hand slid between her legs and she sighed. "It would be nice to have you in my bed mystery woman," she mumbled as her fingers began to move deeper.

She heard Sophie groan, "God Cammie deeper go deeper and harder."

Parker's fingers and hips moved to the sounds until she came at the same moment Sophie did.

* * *

The next morning Parker was busy serving breakfast when to her surprise Ginny, Camille and Sophie came in. She smiled and said, "There's an empty booth over there, I just need to wipe the table." She moved quickly toward the table and did a once over with

a wet cloth, placed silverware wrapped in a paper napkin on the table along with menus before signaling the women. "You all want coffee," she asked as they sat down.

Sophie watched as the women moved easily among the tables stopping often to chat with customers. To Sophie, it looked like the woman was flirting with people. *I guess that's a good way to get tips.* As she continued observing, she felt a bit envious of how comfortable the woman seemed with other people.

One man said loudly. "Will you marry me?"

"What would your wife say, Harvey," Parker said with a laugh as she lightly slapped the man's shoulder.

Wow, look at her, she seems so at home with them. I've never had the need for lots of friends...I rather have one or two good ones. She looked at her friend. *Like you Cammie. Perhaps if I were more outgoing I wouldn't be in this predicament.* She sighed and focused on the woman who was approaching them with three mugs of coffee.

"Here you go ladies," Parker said with a beaming smile. "Have you decided yet or do you need more time?"

As each rattled off what they wanted, Sophie focused on the nametag. *Rose?* She immediately felt her back straighten in fear. Then, as casually as she could, she said, "Rose, I thought your name was Parker." A laugh that seemed to emanate from deep inside was Sophie's answer. "I don't get it...what's so funny?" she said annoyed by what she took as mocking from the woman.

"I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you it's just you're the first to ask that question." Parker shook her head. "The only nametag Dolly has is this one so voila, I became Rose." She laughed heartily and walked away toward the kitchen.

Sophie looked at Camille's aunt and said, "Mrs. Grayson do you think she is telling the truth?"

"Young lady, if you are going to live under my roof, you'll have to call me Ginny."

"Ok, Ginny, do you think she is telling the truth about the nametag or is she..." Sophie felt Camille's hand touch her thigh in reassurance.

"I don't think she is a threat to you," Camille said softly.

"Lord no, she isn't lying. When Dolly and her husband opened this place they tried to do everything real fancy like." Dolly laughed. "In case you hadn't noticed this isn't a fancy town. Anyway, they ordered special nametags for themselves and their one waitress, Rose. Well, Rose left to get married and they had a nametag. So...to make a long story short, all their help from then on became Rose."

Sophie felt her body relax. "Thanks, I'm sorry. You know my situation Ginny so I can be overly cautious at times."

Ginny reached across the table and patted Sophie's hand much as a mother would. "You have nothing to fear from Parker or as we call her in here, Rose."

* * *

Over the next several weeks, Sophie and Parker began a tentative friendship. They would see each other at dinner and occasionally Sophie would arrive late in the morning when the place was empty for breakfast. It was during those times that they started to get

to know each other better. Parker would serve Sophie her meal, sit down and relay all the local gossip.

One such morning, Parker said with a laugh, "I got a marriage proposal today."

Sophie raised her hand to her mouth. "Another one, wow Parker, you sure do have the knack for romance," she said with a laugh. "How many does that make now? Who's the lucky guy?"

"Tom Winston," she said with a wink.

"Parker, he's old enough to be your grandfather!"

"Were you here spying on me Sophie?" she asked with a chuckle. "That's exactly what I told him."

Sophie laughed. "Oh, so you broke his heart."

"I don't think so. He left me a twenty dollar tip. Dolly said since her husband died Tom asks her once a week to marry him."

When they both stopped laughing, Sophie's blue eyes captured Parker's attention. "What?"

"My friend Cammie said she'd visit me every weekend."

Parker lifted an eyebrow. "Why hasn't she?"

"I told her not to." Sophie's blue eyes focused on the table.

It was the first time Sophie confided anything personal and Parker knew she had to proceed cautiously. "Why did you do that? I thought you were close."

Sophie shook her head then smiled at the woman across from her. "I...I was wondering if you would like to go have a beer after dinner some night," she said lowering her eyes.

Bingo. "Sophie," Parker said and waited for Sophie to look up. "I would love to go out with you...what about tonight?"

* * *

That night after dinner the two women made their way to the other side of town and The Happy Hour—the only bar for miles around. Except for a man sitting at the bar, the place was deserted.

"Grab that table over there," Parker said. "I'll get us some beers. Do you want anything special?"

"Nope, whatever they have on tap is fine with me."

Parker sat down, lifted her mug and said, "To good friends and good times."

They sat in companionable silence and that gave Parker the opportunity to study Sophie. She covertly looked at the woman and took her in as a whole. The voice she thought she left in Portsmouth chimed in. *You have to see the big picture Parker...you are too interested in snippets of a person or a case. You let yourself get bogged down in the details.* This time however, she did look at the whole and liked what she saw. She guessed that Sophie was an inch or so shorter than her five nine with eyes that were the color of a deep cold lake on a clear day. Unlike Parker's short hair, Sophie's was a luxurious wavy black that just kissed her shoulders. *I wonder if she gives it a hundred strokes each night.* Her breasts were ample, but not too big and her body was soft. She certainly wasn't overweight by any means, but her body lacked the definition of muscles. Sophie's face intrigued her the most. Despite the outward appearance of serenity, Parker

saw just below the surface sadness. Over the weeks of their growing friendship, she would occasionally see the surface crack to expose a frightened little girl. *The devils in the detail and there are too many particulars missing.*

Parker said, "Is it too forward of me to ask why you came here?"

"To have a beer," Sophie said teasingly.

"No I meant why you came to Waterston."

"Yeah, I know what you meant," she said softly. "I'm hiding out," she said conspiratorially.

Parker creased her brow. "Really," she said with a raised eyebrow. "From who...a boyfriend, the IRS, a jealous husband or the feds?"

Sophie shook her head and laughed before she let out a long sigh. "I wish it were that simple."

Parker felt the blue eyes probing her. "Don't we all," she said softly. "I'm a good listener."

Sophie struggled internally with whether to trust Parker or not. Finally she said, "It's a really long and complicated story...you sure you want to hear it?"

"Yes."

The tale of a father who had no time for a daughter once her mother died unfolded. Sophie spoke of how she lived with her grandmother and never really saw her father except maybe on holidays. "At first, I told myself that he was so heartbroken after my mother's death that I was a constant reminder for him. Then one Christmas, I told him how much I missed him and wanted to live with him. He told me that he never wanted children and that having me was my mother's idea." Sophie wiped a tear from her cheek. "My mother was gone for twenty years before he remarried so I guess that gave me some comfort in his love for her. Two years ago he married Evelyn...she's in her early forties, which is a good fifteen years younger than him." She shook her head. "The only relationship my father and I had was work related. Once *she* came on the scene he had no time for me period," she spat. Sophie looked up when she felt a warm hand on hers.

"I take it you don't like her."

Sophie snorted. "To put it mildly." She blew a long breath through her full red lips. "Anyway, through some medical magic Evelyn bore my father a son. You would have thought a miracle happened the way my father paraded around with that kid." She shook her head. "I'm being too harsh on the kid it isn't his fault. When my grandmother died that same year, she left her entire fortune to me, which really pissed my father off. He is the executor and gets a hefty chunk for that, but he...she wants it all. Somehow he got my grandmother to add a codicil stating that I'd get three hundred thousand of the inheritance for the first year after her death and if something happens to me during that time, it will all revert to my new half-brother." Sophie's voice lowered. "She's been trying to kill me ever since."

"Your stepmother?"

"Yes," she whispered. "She's sent people to find me...but I've outsmarted them all."

Parker studied the woman again and wondered how she managed to elude her for so long. *In the time I've known her, she hasn't seemed devious but...* She took in the total woman again and realized how she managed to achieve her success—mediocrity. *She*

dresses shabbily and doesn't wear make-up so she doesn't stand out in a crowd. She's taken a page out of my book. “Wow Sophie, that sounds like a good reason to hide out.”

Sophie saw a questioning look on Parker's face. “Go ahead its ok to ask questions.”

“With all that money why didn't you just go to the Rivera or somewhere like that with body guards to protect you.”

“That would make me too visible. Believe me, she'd hire an assassin and it wouldn't matter how many guards I had, I'd be dead.” She fixed Parker with a stare. “So I hide out in obscurity until the time is up.”

“How much time is left before the year is up?”

“A little over two months,” she said before she lifted her mug and took a long swallow.

“You want another?” Parker asked. Her mind was a mass of confusing thoughts that all centered around the woman across from her. *What's really going on with me? I'm supposed to be tracking her and taking her back to Philly.*

Sophie sighed before she finished the last of her drink. “No, I think we should get you home since five o'clock comes awfully early.”

“Yeah, you're right. Hey, thanks for the evening I had a good time.”

“You weren't bored by my story?”

“Nope, not at all.”

As they walked back to the boarding house, Parker's mind swirled around Sophie's revelations. *She certainly sounds convincing and I never have completely trusted her stepmother. Now what should I do? I need a new plan that's for sure.*

Sophie stopped, scratched her head then cocked her head. “Why do you wear that silly wig and all that make-up?”

With her thoughts interrupted, Parker laughed. “Studies show that waitress' with big, blonde hair and red lips get more tips.” She paused for a moment. “Big tits help too,” she said heaving her chest out. “It's all padding.”

Sophie chuckled as she surveyed Parker's breasts. “You sure it isn't your winning personality? I've seen the way you charm everyone. I'd think if you were bald with a flat chest they'd still react to you.” Parker let out a loud laugh as Sophie reached up and removed the wig. “I like you better this way,” she whispered.

Parker felt exposed as if Sophie knew her true purpose. *What are my intentions? I certainly don't think I can turn her over to her stepmother.* A soft hand caressed her cheek only to be gone instantly.

“I guess we should get home.”

Bewildered and caught off guard, all Parker could say was, “Yeah I guess so.” She fit the wig back on her head and they began to walk again.

Just as they rounded the corner and went toward the front porch of the boarding house, Ginny came rushing out and engulfed Sophie in her arms. “Oh, Sophie I have such terrible news,” she cried.

“What...what is it?”

“My darling, sweet Camille was murdered.”

Shocked, Sophie shook her head. “No, no that can't be true! I just spoke with her this morning.

Parker watched as the two women made their way to the porch before they clung to each other out of mutual desperation. Her mind immediately shifted into private investigator mode as she let her eyes scan the street, yards and the houses looking for anything that didn't quite seem to belong. From her vantage point by the curb, she saw nothing. Taking her cell phone out of her jean pocket, she dialed a number.

"Hello, this is Parker Davis."

"Ms. Davis, have you found my wayward stepdaughter yet?" Evelyn Durant said sarcastically.

"Well, I had her tracked to a friend's apartment in Portsmouth only to find that the friend was murdered."

"Ah, yes little Ms. Peterson...such a pity."

Parker swore she heard the woman laugh. "It's kind of hard to find Sophie if her friends..."

"Just stop Ms. Davis," Evelyn said impatiently. "I no longer need your services. I've found someone who is much more capable. Send me a bill and I will send you a check for the balance I owe you."

The phone went dead and the only sound Parker heard was the katunk-kathunk of her heart. *I need to get Sophie out of this town. Camille Peterson would still be alive if she didn't tell her assailant where to find Sophie. What reason would there be to kill her unless it was to keep her from warning Sophie?* She felt a pang of guilt. *I told Evelyn about Camille. If I hadn't done that, I bet she'd still be alive.* "I'm going to need help," she said softly. She flipped her phone open and scanned for a number she swore she'd never call.

Thousands of memories flooded her consciousness as she listened to the sound of ringing. *I promised myself I'd never speak to her again, but I have her number so what does that say about my resolve?* When she heard, "Santos," a lump lodged itself in her throat.

* * *

Swallowing hard, Parker tentatively said, "Hey, it's Parker."

Olivia felt her eyebrows shoot up at the name. *It can't be, not her, she wouldn't have the nerve!* "Parker...as in middle name Judas?" Her voice was calm and under control, but her heart raced as she waited for the reply.

"Please don't hang up on me." The smoky, sexy voice of Olivia Santos made her tingle as images of them naked and in each other's arms flashed. "There's been a murder and you're the only one that can help."

"Give me one good reason why I should even have a conversation with you! You're a private detective go do your own shitty research," Olivia snarled. *After what she did to me, Parker is the last woman on earth I'm going to give the time of day.*

How does she know I'm a PI? Parker blew out a long breath as she recalled the day she turned Olivia into the authorities. "I know I have no right to ask anything of you O and you know I wouldn't ask if there was any other way, but..."

Olivia clenched the receiver in a vice-like grip, and interceded. "You have no rights over me period! You didn't then and you certainly don't now. Go away Parker, you

and I have nothing to say to one another.” A tentative knock on the door had Olivia’s attention drawn to the opening door.

“You’ll be paid ten thousand up front,” Parker blurted out hoping to stop Olivia from disconnecting. “This involves an heiress, a wicked stepmother and murder. Does that interest you at all?”

“I knew you were nuts ten years ago Parker, but an heiress, wicked stepmother and murder. Give me a break,” Olivia replied. Amelia shot her head around the door with a look of apology when she realized she’d interrupted a conversation. “Hi, what’s the problem?” Her voice softened dramatically as she gave her business partner a small smile.

Amelia grinned, hearing part of the conversation. *Wow, that sounds like an interesting case...it reminds me of Shrek.* “Great you’re still here...I just wanted to remind you about dinner tomorrow night, seven at our...your place.” Amelia reminded her friend, knowing Olivia’s penchant for taking off at short notice on a case.

Olivia frowned and then nodded, “Sure I’ll be there as promised.” With a wink, Amelia closed the door.

“Have you heard of the Durant family?” Parker said not waiting for a reply. What she heard, was Olivia obviously speaking to someone else. *Hmm, I can tell from the tone of her voice, that she likes this person. I remember how the pitch of her voice always gave her true feelings away. I wish I could get her to speak to me like that again. Otherwise, she may not help me.*

“Who, hasn’t!” Olivia replied, but with less venom than her previous comments.

Phew, she’s still listening. I’d better make this good for I know I’m on a short leash with her. “I’m protecting the daughter Sophie. She thinks her stepmother is trying to kill her and claim Sophie’s fortune for her own son.” *Come on O take the bait you always loved a good mystery don’t let me down now.* “You still love mystery novels don’t you O? This one is the real deal.”

“Remember one thing Parker, you don’t know me or what I like and dislike any more. What’s your involvement in all this?” *Maybe this will get me away from Amelia’s formal dinner party tomorrow night.* She took the hook. *Formal was never my strong suit. Promises can be broken and at this moment, more than any other, I know that’s the truth.* She was speaking with the woman who broke her heart and until recently made her distrust every other human being.

“Damn it Olivia, you always were a hard sell,” Parker said in irritation. “Evelyn Durant hired me to find her stepdaughter under the pretense of Sophie’s father’s heartbreak. I have since found that her true motives are completely different.” She cleared her throat. “A woman that Sophie was staying with in Portsmouth has turned up dead.”

Yeah hard, the only hard one is you, but you’d never see it like that. You make everyone think butter would melt in your mouth, but I know differently. “You changed sides again didn’t you? No, you don’t need to tell me I already know that a leopard never changes its spots. So what do you want from me?”

I’m not going to rehash the past with her, it’s pointless. “I want you to look into the murder. I need to know if they know where Sophie is now.”

Olivia considered the request for all of a second. “Find someone else! I’m too busy to work for you.”

She knew that the hatred Olivia felt for her ran deep. *Who can blame her, but I did it to save her. I wish she'd see that.* "This case demands the very best Olivia and you are the best," Parker said softly

"If you think pandering to my ego will work, think again. The only way I'd take on any work you've touched is if I never have to have any contact with you again. Personally, I'd rather you were six feet under and I pulled the trigger," Olivia replied in a remarkably calm and level tone.

"Listen O, I know you hate me and no matter what I do that will never change. I wouldn't be calling you if this weren't important. Sophie Durant needs saving and I can't do that on my own. The bottom line is that without your help, she's dead." Then she whispered, "I don't think I'm good enough alone." She sucked in a deep breath. "She has nothing to do with our history O... Sophie's an innocent." She let go of her pride and said, "I'd check it out for myself, but I'm not in Portsmouth. It really wouldn't matter if I was since I don't really have any connections there anymore...at least any that will speak to me.

With a derisive chuckle, Olivia replied, "Now why aren't I surprised." The word innocent caught her attention and she wiped a hand over her mouth in resignation. *Damn if only I'd never met Amelia and her constant reminders about innocent people.* "Give me the details and who's handling the case here. I'll call you when I'm done, what's your number?" *Having a conscience is the pits.*

"Thanks, I don't have all the details yet, we just found out about it. The woman's name is Camille Peterson."

"Parker when this case is over I'd seek different employment. Maybe work in politics...it's more in your line...they change sides as often as you do," she snarled. "I'll deal with this and you go and babysit your friend Sophie." She ended the call and checked her caller ID noting the number. *Crap Parker, you can't even do the simplest of things.* She shook her head in disgust. *Never ever, display caller ID. You've forgotten the basics. Does that mean you're letting yourself get personally involved? We both know that's always a no-no.*

* * *

Parker didn't have time to dwell on her conversation with Olivia - there were more pressing matters. She approached the two women and wrapped her arm around Ginny's shoulders. "Come on, let's get you inside," she said softly.

Ginny blinked back her tears. "Yes, I need to get ready. My sister and her husband are picking me up in a little while. I can only imagine the pain Doris is going through...Cammie was her only daughter."

"I want to go with you," Sophie blurted.

Parker led Ginny to the door, but when Sophie tried to follow, she held her back. "We need to talk."

"Not now, I've got to pack."

"You can't go."

Sophie snapped her head around and glared at Parker. "I certainly can!" Her response was strong hands holding each of her shoulders. "Let go of me!"

"We need to talk," Parker said again. Her eyes narrowed. "Has it occurred to you that your friend was murdered by someone looking for you?"

Horried by the remark, Sophie said, "No! How can you say such a thing?"

"Because it's true."

"No," Sophie wailed. "She wasn't murdered because of me!"

"I know she was."

"How can you know such a thing...unless..."

"Unless I work for your stepmother," she said quietly before shrugging in guilt.

"Nooooooooo, you can't."

"Yeah I can...I'm one of the people she sent to find you," Parker said softly.

Sophie felt the anger rise and tried to free herself. "Let go of me! I thought we were friends and all along, you worked for her! You're a despicable excuse for a human being." Fear and anger filled Sophie's face. "Damn it, I trusted you and took a chance on you. How can you do this to me?"

"Listen to me will you!" Parker growled. "If I wanted to hurt you or tell your stepmother would you still be here?"

Sophie was in no mood to listen as her body shook with anger. "I don't believe one word you say!" she said as she wiggling in an attempt to get free.

"Will you stop for one minute and think rationally." Her dark eyes captured the blue ones. "I never trusted her and when I met you I realized there was more to the story than she told me. I took the time to know you and find out more. I wasn't going to hand you over to her! Something told me she is evil!"

"Bullshit!"

For a long time, Parker gazed into Sophie's eyes. "It's the truth. I no longer work for her, but someone else is and they tracked you to Portsmouth." She relaxed her hold on Sophie's shoulders. "It isn't safe for you to go there."

Sophie's mind was still reeling with anger, but a part realized the truth of the softly spoken words. *If she wanted to hurt me or turn me in I wouldn't still be here.* She closed her eyes and whispered, "Then why are you still here?"

"To protect you," Parker said softly.

"For how long?"

"As long as it takes. I don't know who she's hired, but when you're found, and you will be, I won't let them get to you."

Sophie collapsed into Parker and began to sob. "She was my friend...I loved her...how could this happen...how?"

Words were no longer necessary as Parker tightened her arms and lightly kissed Sophie's head. *I need to get her out of here to somewhere safe.* Then a car stopped in front of the house and Parker quickly turned and put herself between the car and Sophie. "Stay behind me until we know who it is," she ordered.

CHAPTER 6

In the dark of the night, Parker saw what she thought was a man getting out of the vehicle. The light from a streetlight a hundred yards away cast a shadow on the individual that made him appear gigantic. She could feel Sophie behind her hovering closer as the man rounded the car and opened the rider's door. The interior car light illuminated the face of a woman.

Sophie peeked around Parker and when she saw the man and woman, she attempted to go to them. A strong hand stopped her. "No!"

"It's okay Parker, they're Cammie's parents," she said as she bolted for the couple.

Parker watched as the three clung to each other. She could clearly hear the sobs and the older woman saying, "*Why?*" Once again, she scanned the area. *They shouldn't be out in the open like that. We have no way of knowing who might be watching.* She breathed a sigh of relief when they finally made their way to the porch and Sophie ushered them inside. Parker touched Sophie's arm and whispered, "Come back out."

While she waited for Sophie's return, Parker planned where they would go. Her conversation with Olivia, which brought old feelings to the surface, unnerved her. Until Olivia called with information about the murder, they would stay put, although... *If the murderer is already in town...what is the best way to protect her?* "There hasn't been enough time for that to happen," she reasoned. "Whoever it is, they'll wait to see if Sophie goes to the funeral - that's what I'd do." When the screen door squeaked open, she turned to see a distraught Sophie standing there.

"Who were you talking to?" Sophie asked.

"Just now or when I was on the phone earlier?"

"Yeah."

Parker felt her face heat up. "Just now I was speaking with myself. Earlier I spoke with someone I know in Portsmouth that can find out what the police know. Once she calls back, I'll know how best to proceed."

Sophie's brow furrowed as she cocked her head to one side. "You're certain they know where I am?"

Parker took a step closer to the woman. "Yes, otherwise they wouldn't have killed your friend. Once she gave up the information..."

"She wouldn't have told them...she promised."

"Perhaps they didn't give her the chance."

"They killed her so she couldn't warn me?"

"Yeah." Parker moved close enough to put her hands on Sophie's shoulders. "I won't let them get to you," she said her gaze holding Sophie's eyes.

Sophie sighed and allowed tears to run down her cheeks. "Maybe I should just go back and settle this so no one else gets hurt...or worse." She leaned into Parker, rested her head on the broad shoulder, and shook as she sobbed harder.

"Shh, we'll make sure no one else is harmed."

“How can you say that?” Sophie sobbed. “Right now everyone I’ve met here is in danger.” Her watery eyes opened wide. “That means you too! You should go now Parker and not stay around you’re life is at stake.”

“No one is going to hurt you, me or anyone else. The danger is anyone knowing where you are and we aren’t going to let anyone know that Sophie,” Parker said softly. She wrapped her arms around the smaller woman. “As soon as I hear back from my contact we will know what to do. Right now I want you to go inside and get your things packed...we might have to leave in a hurry.”

Sophie lifted her head and looked at Parker. “Are you sure you want to get involved in this? If you stay with me you will be targeted just like Cammie.”

If they know I’m here...I already am a target. “Yes, I’m sure.”

* * *

The next morning at five-thirty, Parker arrived at Good Eats and told Dolly all about Ginny leaving in the middle of the night. Dolly’s hand flew to her mouth. “My goodness that sounds horrible.” Then her eyes bugged out. “That’s Sophie’s friend!”

“Yeah, I’m afraid so,” Parker said somberly. “Dolly...Sophie might be in trouble and if she is I may have to leave without much notice.”

“Don’t you worry, friends are too precious,” she said. Dolly grabbed at her heart when she heard a knocking at the door.

Parker patted the older woman’s arm. “It’s just some of the early birds.” She lowered her head and looked into Dolly’s eyes. “You ok?”

“Ye...yes, I’ll be right as rain in no time. You go ahead and let them in and I’ll finish up my preparations.”

It was about midmorning when the door opened and a man, Parker had never seen before, came inside. All her warning flags went up and she knew instantly why he was there. She’d seen his type before—shifty eyed; dark and trying to look casual. “Mornin’ want some coffee?” she asked.

The man gave her the once over lingering on her chest then said, “Yeah.”

Parker put the cup of hot brew in front of the man and said, “Know what you want?”

The man lifted his head and pulled something out of his shirt pocket. “You seen this woman round these parts?”

Before she looked, Parker knew who was in the picture. “Hmm, no can’t say that I have, but I’ve only lived here five years...let me go ask the owner maybe she’ll know.” She turned and walked a few steps then turned back. “You know what you want yet?”

“Whatever the special is,” the man said coldly.

“Good choice you can never go wrong with a special,” she said over her shoulder as she continued to the kitchen. “Dolly we need one special,” she said loudly. “Oh, and this guy out here wants to know if you know the woman in his picture.”

Dolly came out of the kitchen and nodded. “Well I know everyone around these here parts so I’d be the right one to ask.” Parker handed her the picture and held her breath that Dolly wouldn’t have a noticeable reaction to the picture. Without hesitation, Dolly said, “Well you know it looks kinda like Lucas Tanner’s little girl Suzanne, but she

hasn't been around here in years." She walked over to the man, handed him the picture and looked him square in the eyes.

Parker felt a shiver run up her spine. If there was one thing about Dolly that everyone liked, it was that she never held anything back. *God no Dolly, don't blow it by saying something we'll both regret.* Once she heard Dolly's words, she blew out the breath she was holding.

"You want wheat, white or biscuits?"

The man took the picture and held it up. "You sure you haven't seen this woman here in town," he pressed.

Dolly pointed to the large front window. "I've lived in this town my whole life and everyone has come in here or passed by that window at one time or another. Now, if it's the Tanner's little girl you're lookin' for, she hasn't been around these parts in a long time. If it's someone else, than I can't help you cause that's who she looks like to me." She put on her *so there* face, turned around and went back toward the kitchen. "Since you didn't say so you're gonna get biscuits...made 'em myself and they're darn good."

Parker shrugged then went back to her task of rolling silverware in napkins for the lunch crowd. Once she served the stranger his meal, Dolly called from the kitchen. "Rose, I have that order ready to be delivered."

"Okay," Parker said. She was glad that her back was to the man and he didn't see her look of surprise. She went to the pass-thru and Dolly handed her a white bag.

"Now you make sure he pays you. He's gonna tell you I said he can have credit, but that ain't how it works."

Parker laughed. "Ok boss," she said. "Be back in a few." She left the restaurant and when she was out of sight, looked at the bag. In small letters Dolly wrote, *I figured you needed time to take care of your friend. If I don't see you again, I want you to know you're the best waitress I ever had.* She smiled. "Don't worry Dolly; I won't leave you with that creep too long."

Within minutes, Parker opened the front door of the boarding house and saw Sophie sitting in the front room. "Sophie, get your things together now," she said emphatically. "There's a guy at Dolly's looking for you."

Sophie stood and walked rapidly toward Parker. "I thought you said they would wait for me to show up at the funeral."

"There must be more than one. This guy is probably a lackey and not the main investigator. Good thing we packed everything into the car last night." Parker slid her hand in her pocket and fished out her car keys. "Here," she said foisting the keys toward Sophie. "Take the car and park in the high school parking lot. Make sure you park in the middle of all the other cars so you'll be less noticeable. As soon as I am certain it's safe, I'll come get you."

Sophie took the keys and gave Parker a weak smile while piercing her with blue eyes. "It's nice to have someone helping me...thanks."

Out of her comfort zone, Parker looked away and mumbled, "I gotta get back...I don't want to leave Dolly with that guy too long." She gave Sophie a quick pat on the back and said, "Be careful," before she left.

Sophie said, "You too," as she followed the woman out of the boarding house.

* * *

Parker walked past the window of Good Eats and couldn't believe her eyes when she saw Dolly sitting with the stranger. They were apparently engaged in a conversation and that made her uneasy. *Shit, what's she saying to him?* When Dolly saw her, she smiled and winked.

"Well I see Rose is back," Dolly said as she saw the front door open. "Did he pay you?" she asked.

"Yep...but no tip."

Dolly laughed and said, "Sounds typical." She nodded at the stranger. "Sean here tells me he is looking for the girl in the picture so she can be reunited with her family."

With her most sincere look, Parker said, "Good luck. I can't imagine what it would be like not to have your family around."

"Good lord, look at the time," Dolly said as she got up. "It's almost time for the lunch crowd." She smiled down at the man. "Sean," she said extending her hand, "I hope you find her."

The man's face softened and Parker could tell the man was clearly smitten with her boss. *Way to go Dolly.*

"Can you tell me where a motel is?" he asked still smiling at the older woman.

"Well, about all we have is Ginny's, but no one is there...they all left last night for Portsmouth to attend a funeral."

"All the boarders went?"

Dolly laughed. "No, her only boarder, Dale Gordon is in Florida at the moment."

The man scrunched up his face. "I see."

Parker spoke up and said, "You want some more coffee or anything?"

"Huh," he said noticing Parker for what seemed like the first time. "Yeah, sure coffee's good," he said.

Parker delivered the coffee and when she saw him take out his phone she began wiping off the adjacent table so she could listen to the man's conversation.

Sean took the coffee, added sugar and muttered, "Shit what a waste of time this was." He picked up his cell phone and made a call. "Hey, the bitch must have lied to us 'cause she's not here." He listened for a moment. "Yeah, yeah I know, but so far no one around here seems to know her. I'm going to go check the aunt's house, but the old lady left last night to go up there for the funeral." He dabbed perspiration from his forehead with his napkin. "If she was here she probably went with the aunt back up there. Okay, I'll meet you in the usual place." He paused then added, "And Shamus..." He looked at the silent phone and said, "Asshole!"

Shamus, who in the hell is that? Well it's a relief to know he's going to leave at least that way Dolly and Ginny will be safe. She asked, "Anything else I can get ya?" When he shook his head, she smiled casually and went back to setting up tables.

Parker knew that no matter how convincing Dolly was, a good detective would check things out. When the man left and got in his car, she hugged Dolly and said, "I'll be back some day that's a promise." She left and hurried down a back alley until she was at the back of the boarding house. Sure enough, the man's black SUV was in the driveway and she saw him knocking on the door. *I'd go in and take a look around* she thought as the man tried the doorknob. The door was unlocked - Ginny always left it that way. She watched the man go inside and she patted her pockets. *Shit, why didn't I think*

to keep a tracking device with me? Damn it! Once she saw the man leave the house and back out of the driveway, she changed her position. She watched as the man's vehicle head out of town toward Portsmouth. When she could no longer see the SUV, she made her way to the high school and Sophie.

* * *

Since neither woman had eaten, they decided after driving an hour to stop at a small restaurant

"The food here certainly doesn't compare with Dolly's," Sophie said with a yawn as they left.

Parker looked at the woman with her. "I bet you didn't get much sleep last night," she said with genuine concern. "Once we get back in the car why don't you try and close your eyes for a little while."

Sophie nodded. "I don't know if I can sleep. I'm too wound up right now." After they drove for a half hour Sophie asked, "Where are we going?"

"Some place safe." Parker looked at Sophie and gave her a smile. "I don't think they will find us there." She shrugged. "At least until the provisions of your grandmother's will are met."

Darkness rapidly closed around them and the only light seen on the roadway was the illumination of the car's headlights. For most of the four-hour journey, Sophie did as Parker suggested and slept waking only when they stopped for gas. When Parker steered the vehicle onto a dirt road she lifted her head. "Where are we?" she asked.

"It's my parent's farm." Parker switched off the headlights and navigated by years of memory.

"Why are you doing that?"

"It's too late to go to the house."

"Late, it's barely eight."

Parker smiled. "Farm folk get up early and go to bed earlier. If I leave the lights on, they will shine directly into my parent's room. We can spend the night in the barn."

"The barn? I can't spend the night in a barn. How will I go to the bathroom and where will we sleep?"

"You'll see," Parker said as she coasted the car to a stop. "I'll get the doors."

Once they were inside the barn Parker said. "Here it is my home away from home." She laughed. "Many a night I would end up in here when I came home too late or had too much to drink."

"Where will we sleep?"

Parker's eyes drifted to the hayloft. "Up there."

Sophie gulped. "With all the mice and bugs?"

"Nooo, that's what barn cats are for." Parker took Sophie's hand. "Come on you'll love it."

Surprised that the hayloft was nothing like she imagined, Sophie let out a sigh. "I've always heard that sleeping on hay was comfortable...guess I'm going to find out first hand."

"Yep." Parker spread out a double sleeping bag and two pillows that were stored in a large container.

“You were serious! You have been here before,” Sophie said as she crawled inside the sleeping bag. Once Parker slid in next to her, Sophie closed her eyes, only to have them open wide. “What was that?”

Parker laughed and put her arm around Sophie. “It is just an owl.” She pulled the woman closer. “Go to sleep, I promise I won’t let any of the barn beasts harm you.” In no time, she heard soft snoring sounds and relaxed her arm slightly. “I won’t let anything happen to you Sophie,” she whispered. Her mind focused on Olivia and the fact she hadn’t gotten back to her. *I know she hates me...probably just said she’d help to get rid of me.* Her eyes fluttered. *I’ll figure that all out tomorrow when...* Within seconds, she was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 7

With her gaze fixed on the perfectly organized dinner table, Amelia applauded herself that she could handle the preparations and all that went with her first actual dinner party. Teal and Phil would be arriving at any moment, which caused a frown as she peered at the clock wondering if Olivia would make it. Their conversation had bordered on surreal when they discussed it a week earlier...

* * *

"I've invited Teal and Phil over for dinner this Saturday, will you join us?" Amelia was hoping that Olivia would say yes. *It isn't that I'm afraid of having dinner alone with the other two women, after all Teal is a great friend. However, having Olivia there always makes me feel more confident. I thought I'd gone past the need of another's support to get me through a situation.*

Glancing up from the magazine she was reading, Olivia shook her head. "Sorry you're the one making amends not me."

Amelia's lips curled and her stomach churned at the distasteful, but true comment. "I don't think that it will be a topic of discussion all night. Besides, you're not working on a major case now...unless of course, you have a date. Ah, that's it; you'll be on another date." Acid dripped from her tongue - she was jealous. It was a foreign emotion for her, but when she analyzed her thoughts, nothing else made sense. *Bottom line, I don't want to lose the close friendship I have with Olivia. If someone comes into the mix, it will make our relationship untenable.*

Olivia placed the motorcycle magazine on the coffee table and gave her full attention to her friend. Then, with a twinkle in her eye, she replied, "You think I'm going out on a date again? My, anyone would think you were jealous. As it happens, I'm not. I've tentatively arranged to have dinner with David when he returns from vacation. He muttered that it would be around that time. However, if it's so important to you, I will reschedule. Besides, I'm interested in what you're going to say to Phil on the subject."

Amelia heaved a silent sigh of relief. *Oh David, well that is a different matter.* The captain of police was a long time friend of Olivia's family and he considered Olivia the sister he never had. "It really isn't a big deal. Teal and I have spoken about it and I've apologized."

"Oh, you apologized and now everything in the garden is rosy. Wow, I knew shrinks could weasel out of conversations with ease, but I never had you down for the type to use that tactic. Figures I guess...the true colors always come forth eventually." Olivia shook her head and reached for her magazine.

Amelia, with an agility that surprised Olivia, sprang out of her chair and stood immediately in front of her. "For the record, I didn't and don't weasel out of anything. I'm hurt that you think that I'm like that. Why is it that you never asked me that question? You just went along with my wishes and didn't say a damn thing. Why was that Olivia? Am I just a nuisance factor to you and my feelings and thoughts don't matter?" For some weeks now, it had irked her that Olivia hadn't bothered to ask her why

she'd taken the stance she had. *Sometimes I feel like I'm invisible to her and nothing I say or do matters. Maybe if she had talked to me about it I might not have...goodness what am I saying this isn't any of her fault*

This time Olivia, with cobra like ease, stood up from her seated position towering over Amelia. They were so close that they could hear and feel the other's breath. "Yes, I thought you made a bad call. Teal is, your friend and what made her happy should have been enough for you. As for why I never talked to you about it..." A heavy lidded look came over Olivia's eyes as they searched out Amelia's chocolate brown ones. "...I'm your friend and we have different views on what we do with our lives and what we believe. I'm the last person on earth to judge another in that respect."

The quiet, serious words fluttered into Amelia's ears. It was like a faint wind in the air as Olivia's breath fanned one side of her face. A tremor ran through her body and she felt mesmerized by close proximity of her friend. In a shaky voice, she quietly replied, "I let my old life dictate my new one. I'll be forever sorry that I didn't have the courage to break away from those traditional views."

Olivia saw the tears well up in Amelia's eyes. It was her downfall and she knew that it always would be. It was like a door sliding shut on one way of life and opening onto another. *Somewhere in-between I'm lost and this woman is the path toward my future.* For a split second, she resisted the temptation to kiss her on the lips, before pulling Amelia into her arms for a hug. She kissed the top of her head and whispered, "I'm here Amelia. I always will be. Just remember that whatever you want breaking I'm the woman to call, okay."

Olivia made her feel secure and warm along with several other emotions she wasn't able to understand, but it didn't matter. Right now, she was happy, elated even and Olivia held the key to that. "You'll make it for the dinner?"

With a reluctance that she felt deep within her core, Olivia released Amelia and with her finger traced the tears of her friend down her cheek. "I wouldn't miss it. Now, go dry those tears. Don't you know that the streaked look went out years ago?"

* * *

The beep of an alarm on the centre console drew her attention from her musing to the event at hand. *That must be Teal and Phil.* Then a buzzing of the intercom to the building had her quickly reaching the center console and checking their identity. With a smile, she reset the alarm and opened the inner door for them to enter. As she walked the short distance from the console to the entrance to greet her guests, she heard the familiar click of the mechanism. "Phil, Teal thanks for coming. I'm afraid Olivia hasn't shown yet, but she promised so she'll arrive anytime now I suspect. She loves making an entrance." Amelia said rapidly. Her nerves at meeting Phil again almost made her feel incoherent. *When did I become so ill at ease with people I call friends.*

Teal giggled as she removed her outer coat and hugged Amelia tightly. She whispered, "Its okay babe, Phil doesn't bite, at least ..."

Amelia's nervousness disappeared with Teal's rejoinder. "Come inside you've never been here have you Teal? You'll love it. I'll give you the grand tour and if Olivia isn't back then we'll start without her."

Phil grinned as she handed Amelia flowers. “Yep it’s some place alright. I helped her design it and build the shell. I can see she’s added things over the years.”

“Thanks Phil. It’s really good to see you again.” She knew the comment was lame but it was true. *I’m ashamed of my behavior regarding their romance.*

Phil’s eyes gentled and crinkled at the corners as she smiled widely. “Same here Amelia. Oh, we have something else for you.” She handed Amelia a small brightly wrapped present.

With wide eyes, Amelia stripped off the wrapping and opened the box. Inside was a large piece of cake. “Is this from the ceremony?” she asked quietly.

Teal watched the emotions run over her friend’s face and smiled. *We did the right thing* she thought as she listened to her partner say, “Yes it is. Teal made sure we saved a piece for you. She figured you’d hate to miss out on such a treat.”

Tears threatened to flow. Amelia, who was at a lost for words, smiled her appreciation instead. “I’m so sorry Phil...really I am. I was such a fool and I wish with all my heart that you remain as happy as you are now for the rest of your lives together.”

“Let’s go and take the tour. I’ve been fascinated by this place ever since you raved about it,” Teal said. She gave a bright grin and winked at Phil, before taking Amelia’s arm as they toured the warehouse conversion.

* * *

Olivia sat in the jeep contemplating her next move. With a cursory glance at the dashboard clock, she cursed under her breath. “Damn she’s going to kill me.” The dinner party was due to start in the next half hour and there was no way she’d make it back. *Maybe for dessert.*

Retrieving a folder from the passenger seat, she flicked it open and studied the contents. It didn’t make very nice reading, Camille Peterson had been tortured by someone who knew their trade. *It will be next to impossible to track whoever did this.* The details she’d gleaned from the police along with her scouting the Peterson apartment were sparse. Fortunately, David was back in the office and he’d agreed to her visiting the crime scene. He had given up his last couple of days of vacation to take over the case. After her initial discussion with David, she’d gone off and made her own brand of enquiries by using contacts that the police couldn’t use. All leads were dead ends until the last one a couple of hours earlier. That led her to a fleabag hotel thirty miles south of Portsmouth. As she’d expected, the person she was seeking had flown the coup. At least the proprietor had a vague description of a white male with a broad Irish accent. He thought the man was probably in his mid to late thirties and drove a blue corvette with out of state plates. It wasn’t much, but enough for a start.

Her gut was telling her that this wasn’t an ordinary hit. It smacked of big financial backing that bought the best. The family Parker mentioned certainly had the money. *Even the best have a record somewhere and I know just who to ask.* Her fingers quickly dialed a contact at the DOCO, a covert organization she’d spent five years working full time for before she met Max. Now they had a mutual pact; if she needed them, she called, if they needed her special brand of skills, they called her. It was going to get her killed one day but she knew everyone has to die sometime. A few minutes later, she had a name - Shamus O’Donnell. The man was Irish born, trained by the IRA as an assassin and

among the five best in the world. Numerous countries wanted him, but he hadn't dirtied his hands on US soil—until now.

"Parker you've hit a sack of shit and if you're not careful you'll become another notch in his belt. I'm not sure that even I can help you on this one,"

As she sat in her Jeep and went over the notes in the folder, her mind tumbled over events of the past. It was a chaotic time that led her to the lasting hatred she felt for the woman who was her first love.

* * *

We shared so many good times at the police academy and had similar dreams. God she was such a tease I'm surprised she chose me, but she did and a year later, we ended up lovers. That was until that fateful day that turned both our lives upside down. My brother's death set events in motion of vengeance and pride, which led to me gunning down the DA responsible. The only person I trusted with my living hell had been Parker. What did she do with my lover's confession? She sold me down the river to the authorities, claiming it was for my own good, and to save me! It was so easy to hate her rather than admit I was at fault. In fact, Parker, though I'll never admit it to her, set me on a path that led me to this moment and the people I share my life with now. In my own way, I forgave her a long time ago. However, I'm never going to give her the satisfaction of hearing those words. Until Max and Amelia, in particular Amelia, entered my life, I distrusted every single person on the planet, even old friends, for a long time because of her.

* * *

"Here I am thinking about trust and at this very moment, I'm letting the only person I truly do trust down. Nothing I can do with this case now and it's time I get home. I wonder what's on the menu for dessert." Throwing the folder onto the passenger seat, she switched on the engine and the Jeep roared into action. She sped away from the seedy motel parking lot to a much brighter and happier part of town.

* * *

Amelia laughed at a very amusing story Phil was telling about a trip they'd made on their vacation. Teal, for her part, was embarrassed as it was all about her and a goat.

With a groan, Teal squealed, "Enough! Wasn't it bad enough the damn goat nearly bowled me over and gored me." Her eye tracked to Phil whose eyes were brimming with merriment as she recalled the memory.

From her vantage point at the head of the table, Amelia saw the sparkle of love and happiness spark between them and her thoughts and eyes drifted to the empty dinner place at the table. *There had better be a good reason for you being late. Why haven't you called to let me know why you've stood me up Olivia?*

Teal saw the subtle shake of Amelia's head and the direction of her gaze. "She can take care of herself Amelia, you don't need to worry," Teal softly said.

“Yes I know, but she promised. A phone call would have been better than this...this waiting. It’s almost eight-forty-five and I don’t know about you two, but I’m starving.” Amelia stood up and walked toward the kitchen stairs.

“Need any help?” they both asked in unison.”

With a weak smile, she shook her head. “I’ll be back in a moment with the first course.”

Teal watched her friend mount the stairs and although she was putting on a brave face, she knew that Olivia’s non-appearance had upset Amelia. She had always found their interaction from that first day interesting. Now, after they had shared the same home for almost a year, it wasn’t getting any weaker, especially from Amelia’s point of view. *I think she might be too dependent on Olivia now - that’s dangerous.*

“Penny for them, love?” Phil asked as she reached across the table to interlace their fingers.

With a tender smile, Teal replied, “I think the both of them are in deep waters Phil and something has to give or they will both drown.”

With a frown Phil asked, “I don’t know what you mean by deep waters.”

“Trust me, when Olivia arrives you’ll see for yourself.” Teal grinned as the door to the kitchen opened and Amelia headed down the stairs with a fully laden tray of food.

With a swift glance toward the oncoming Amelia, Phil whispered, “You think she’s going to turn up?”

“Oh yeah. If she promised Amelia she’d be here, even if it’s only in time for coffee, she’ll make it happen.” Teal turned her attention to the wonderful aroma of their first course. “That looks and smells wonderful Amelia?”

A beep from the security console in the centre of the building, indicated someone or thing had entered the security barrier. Seconds later, the doors opened and the purring of a slow moving vehicle entered the premises.

“I can’t believe it. What does she do...smell the food as it’s arriving on the plate.” Amelia sighed though the thought of Olivia arriving made her feel giddy inside, as she set the tray down and waited for their wandering friend to appear.

Moments later, Olivia popped her head around the dining room door. “I know I’m real late. I had a case thrust on me sorry.” Her eyes briefly showing apology to Teal and Phil before capturing Amelia’s for a long serious glance the curve of her lips tugging into a small smile. “The food looks great and what a magnificent table arrangement. Give me ten minutes to shower and I’ll be with you I promise.”

“Go...don’t be surprised if we don’t leave you any of the first courses.” Amelia felt the depression she’d been sinking into drift away. In its place, a light-hearted energy enveloped her.

With a wink, Olivia shut the dining room door and disappeared.

Teal looked across at Phil and grinned as her eyes filled with the words, *told you so.*

* * *

After the meal was over, they moved into the lounge with coffee. The sparse furniture proved to be a problem as there was only one two-seater sofa and an armchair.

Teal grinned as Amelia looked perplexed. “Phil and I will share the armchair.”

Olivia quickly interceded. "You're guests, you take the sofa. Amelia can have the floor."

Amelia moved nodded then giggled. "I love sitting on the floor...call it a nun thing. Please take the sofa and I'll fetch the coffee."

Several minutes later, Amelia re-entered the room and a smile tugged at her lips when she heard the three laughing. *This dinner party giving isn't as hard as I thought it would be. Maybe we can make it a more regular occurrence.* "Coffee as promised and I know of at least two people who have a sweet tooth," she said looking at tray laden with small chocolate wafers.

Olivia grinned and waved for Amelia to sit. "I'll pour. You've done quite enough for today." Her ice blue eyes held Amelia's for a few moments then with a wink motioned for her to sit beside the armchair. It was an unconscious gesture because it was something they often did when they shared the room together. "Thank you Amelia for a marvelous dinner it will keep me in good stead for my trip tomorrow."

Eyelids opened and closed rapidly as Amelia asked quietly, "You're going away? Where? Is it a case? Do you need my help?" She collapsed on the floor next to the armchair and waited while Olivia poured the coffee before she sat down.

Olivia grinned at Teal and Phil. "Always twenty questions isn't it Teal."

Teal smiled as she nestled closer to Phil. "Yes, twenty questions, but I have to admit I'm fascinated too...I wasn't aware of a new case."

Olivia passed Amelia a coffee and gave her a reassuring smile as she retook her seat and bit into a chocolate wafer. She tried to decide how much she could say without alarming not only Amelia, but the others as well.

"Is it the Shrek case?" Amelia asked as she moved closer to Olivia's legs and rested naturally against them as she sipped her coffee.

"Wow, a Shrek case? Are we going after animated ogres now?" Teal giggled as she snagged a wafer from the plate.

With a long-suffering expression, Olivia rolled her eyes in Phil's direction. "You see what I have to put up with."

Phil chuckled. "Sure, but you love it, right Olivia?" Her eyes traveled to the easy closeness of Amelia in Olivia's personal space.

The warmth of Amelia's back against her pant legs made Olivia aware that they did this usually when they were alone and the others in the room might misconstrue the gesture. *What the hell, who cares, we're friend's nothing more.* "Yep, wouldn't have it any other way."

"Well is that a yes or no?" Teal asked again with a snicker.

Olivia sipped her coffee. "If you call a murderer an ogre, then sure."

Amelia whispered, "I call that an ogre. How long will you be gone?"

The words hovered between them. Without thought for what the others would think, Olivia touched Amelia's cheek. "I'll be back before you know it. It's just another case Amelia and yes, before you say it, if I need you I'll call."

"Thank you. Hey, we've gone all quiet. Come on who knows a good joke," Amelia felt the knots in her stomach ease a little at her choice of words, then turned her attention back to their guests, trying to revive the sagging atmosphere. *Olivia's news isn't going to stop us from enjoying the rest of the evening.*

The gentle caress of Olivia's hands threading her long hair through her fingers on the nape of her neck settled the nerves that always jumbled around inside when Olivia went away. This time it was worse for there was something important Olivia wasn't saying. *One way or another I'm going to find out just who the person is behind the Shrek case.*

* * *

An hour later, while Teal and Phil were on the journey home, Teal gave Phil a serious glance. "Do you know what I'm talking about now?"

Phil sighed. "Yep I do. For a homophobe, your friend has one weird way of carrying on. What I don't get though is Olivia's actions in all this. I've never seen her allow anyone that close to her personal space before."

"Please Phil, Amelia isn't a homophobe. Remember she explained, all that religious brain washing over the years. It had to have still made a mark even if she isn't a nun anymore. Besides, Olivia sleeps with people from time to time. I figure that's as close as one gets to personal space." Teal laughed at the absurd comment.

"Not what I meant and you know it. Sleeping with someone for sexual gratification doesn't necessarily mean that person gets inside. I think Amelia's inside and Olivia has locked the door behind her."

"Do you think they love each other?" Teal asked quietly. In her heart, she knew the answer, but didn't want to voice it for fear of jinxing the possibility.

Phil grinned. "In their own way, yes. As to, if, it's the way you and I love each other...time will tell my love. All I care about right now is getting my woman home and showing her how much I love her."

"Sounds like the perfect plan to me." Teal felt that warm rush through her veins as she relaxed into the love she shared with the woman beside her. *I hope one day you and Olivia feel like this Amelia. I'd even pray for it if it wasn't for the fact you'd think it blasphemous.*

* * *

"What time do you leave?" Amelia asked Olivia quietly as they cleared away some of the debris of the evening meal.

Olivia picked up several items of cutlery and didn't speak. She finally decided it wouldn't be worth the aggravation if she continued to ignore the question. "I'm leaving at first light," she said looking at her wristwatch. "That's in a little over four hours."

Amelia gave her friend a long, hard stare. "You need to get some sleep. I know you didn't come home last night and god only knows if you've had any sleep in the last thirty-six hours."

With a chuckle, Olivia stopped what she was doing. "Always looking out for me huh?"

"If I didn't who would? Will you go to bed for at least the four hours, please?"

"How do you know I wasn't going to bed?" The sardonic glance she received made her smile. "Ok, busted. I was going to check some details out on the case first."

Amelia scratched the back of her head. "Come on, I'll clear this stuff tomorrow. You and I are going to do some research. That way I'll be guaranteed that you'll at least take a nap."

"You do? How do you work that one out?" Olivia said with a frown.

"Because, you hate me being a back seat driver when you research, stands to reason you'll send me to bed and if I go you have to go, am I right?" Amelia grinned and walked toward the area that housed all of Olivia's gadgets.

Belly laughs echoed in the dining room as Olivia, with hands on her hips and a bemused expression, watched her friend leave the room. "My god she knows me better than I know myself." She quickly following Amelia out of the door and caught up with her. "I have another idea. How about we have another coffee and then I'll give you the details of the case I'm working on. After that, you go to bed and I go deal with the ogre. Do we have a deal?"

Amelia pursed her lips for a moment. "On one condition?"

"And that is?" Olivia waited.

"I'd rather you made hot chocolate ...it makes me sleep better."

"Makes me sleep better too. Ah, that's your game is it? Ok hot chocolate it is." With a grin, Olivia headed for the kitchen stairwell as Amelia went back to the lounge. One way or another they were both getting their own way.

* * *

Olivia opted for using her motorcycle for speed was of the essence. Her call to Parker's cell had gone unanswered and that had pissed her off. Her radar detector beeped for the second time and she sped up knowing the speed she was doing would only create a blur on the radar. If Parker were still in town where the Peterson's aunt lived, it would be the logical first call. And, if she had figured that out with ease, a contract killer of the caliber of O'Donnell would have done the same. *He's probably a step ahead of me.* As her bike ate up the miles, Olivia wondered about the background of the hit. *Why would someone want to have the Peterson woman eliminated? The only possible reason to torture her that way was to get the answer to a question.*

The cruel bastard didn't need to cut off her hands and feet or pull out her nails. *Other less dramatic tortures would have sufficed.* The final decisive deathblow had even made her feel sick - he'd slowly severed her head. *Violence has its own means to an end. I know that I've practiced enough of it myself. What this sick bastard did made him little more than the bottom of the food chain as far as I'm concerned. If I have the opportunity, I'll see that his miserable life ends with a few torture tricks that he probably thinks someone like me wouldn't know. Besides, no one would know except an odd friend or two at DOCO.* They would clean up her mess especially as she called them and told them she was working for them on this case. Parker's money was immaterial. *I'll give it to Amelia for one of her charities.*

When a sign popped up in front of her, Waterston 75 miles, she checked her speedometer and grinned. *What's wrong with adding another twenty miles to my speed?* "Let it rip baby!" With her head down, she felt one with the bike, as they roared down the highway

CHAPTER 8

Something isn't right but what. Then, with a start, Parker opened her eyes and focused on rafters of the barn. She breathed in the sweet smell of the straw and sighed, "Home." Suddenly, she realized what wasn't right—*Sophie is gone!*

Parker stood up quickly and in a loud whisper said, "Sophie...Sophie where are you?" When no reply came, she scampered down the ladder and took in the barn, her car and the slightly open door. "Sophie," she called out a bit louder - nothing. Her eyes focused on the back seat of her old car and saw that Sophie's belongings were gone. "SHIT! Where'd you go?" *Sophie is missing and it's my fault. I should have stayed awake. Damn it!* Just then, the door opened wider.

"So, you finally woke up sleepyhead," Sophie said with a chuckle. "We thought you might sleep the day away."

Parker fixed her gaze on Sophie before she approached the woman and took her by the shoulders. "Never, ever do that again!"

Puzzled, Sophie said, "What?"

"Leave and not tell me where you are going! The people after you Sophie are real and they are killers...don't you get that?"

For a long moment brown eyes competed with blue for superiority. "I'm sorry," Sophie whispered. "I didn't think."

"Well you better start thinking," Parker bit out. She relaxed her hold and sighed. "I thought they found you."

"The only one that found me was your mother."

"My mother?"

"Yeah, I woke up and was looking through my things for a change of clothes when she came into the barn. She said she knew you were here and was checking on you."

"Knew I was here?"

Sophie laughed. "Apparently she always knew when you came home. She said it's a mother thing." When she felt Parker release her shoulders and her face soften, she let out a breath. "Anyway, she sent me out here to get you up. Breakfast is almost ready and your brother and his wife are on their way."

Parker shook her head. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Sophie furrowed her brow. "For what?"

A reassuring arm went around Sophie's shoulders as they walked out of the barn. "You'll see." As they neared the house, Parker asked, "How long did you and my mom visit?"

"Hmm, oh I'd guess about an hour maybe more." When Sophie saw the look on Parker's face, she laughed. "Oh yes, I know all about her Parkie-poo."

"I always hated that name it reminds me of a poodle mix."

* * *

Sophie watched as Parker and her mother hugged. *I can still remember my mother*, she thought as melancholy washed over her. *I wonder if she knows how lucky she is*. She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't hear the door open, but the ear piercing shrill got her attention immediately. When she turned, she saw a very pregnant willowy blonde rushing toward Parker.

"You've come back home," the woman gushed. "I've missed you so much." Then the woman wrapped her arms around Parker's neck and gave her a long kiss on the lips. When she pulled away, she took Parker's hand and put it on her swelling abdomen. "We're having a baby."

The next person Sophie saw was a behemoth of a man who lifted the two women off the ground. *This must be the brother and his wife*.

When the man finally lowered the women, Parker smacked him on the shoulder. "You shouldn't be squeezing Crystal that hard...in case you didn't notice she's with child." They all laughed and hugged again. Once the love fest was over, Parker turned and proudly said, "Sophie Durant this is my baby brother Frank and his wife Crystal."

"Come on everybody find a seat, breakfast is ready," Ruth Davis said.

Sophie's eyes bulged when she saw the amount of food on the table. *Do they eat like this everyday?* Sophie wondered as she covertly watched the family interact. She paid particular attention to the pregnant woman who was sitting so close to Parker that Sophie thought she might be in her lap. Crystal used every opportunity to touch her sister in-law and would frequently pull Parker's hand to her belly and squeal, *she's moving*. Sophie's eyes scanned the faces of Parker's parents and brother to see if they thought the actions of Crystal were in any way weird—apparently not.

Once the meal was over, Sophie said, "Would you like some help with the dishes Mrs. Davis."

"No thank you dear, I have it under control." The older woman turned to her daughter. "Sophie probably would appreciate a nice warm shower after sleeping in that cold barn. Will you show her where everything is?"

Parker escorted Sophie to what the family laughingly called the suite. "This seems like a strange set up...I mean you basically have two houses together."

"Years ago my grandparents moved out here and they put on this addition complete with two bedrooms, a living room, bathroom and kitchen." Parker laughed. "It became known as the suite when for laughs one year my mother turned back the sheets and left chocolate on the pillows." Parker showed Sophie into the bathroom and opened a closet door. "Everything you'll need is in here...just help yourself."

"Thanks, I'll go get a change of clothes."

"Why don't you stay in the back bedroom? That way, if anyone comes after you, they will have to get by me first." Parker took her cell phone off the holder and saw it flashing.

At the same time Sophie said, "Your sister in-law is very fond of you."

Parker looked at her phone. *2 missed calls*. She looked at the caller ID. *Shit, it was Olivia*. Distracted she said, "Is she? I hadn't noticed."

"Well yeah, I think she's in love with you," she said with her blue eyes fixed on Parker.

"You're crazy! She's just a touchy feely kind of person. Besides, she's married to my brother and they're having a baby."

Sophie let out a derisive laugh. “Ok, have it your way, but if someone kissed me the way she kissed you it would have definitely turned me on.” She shrugged and went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Hmm, a kiss is all it would take. I’ll have to remember that when this is all over. Parker laughed. “No way,” she said to the closing door. She touched her lips then shook her head as she remembered the morning so far. *No, she’s not in love with me...is she?* “I haven’t time to think about this now,” she said as she dialed Olivia’s number. She heard the no nonsense clipped voice of Olivia. *You’ve reached When Heaven Meets Hell and the desk of Olivia Santos. If you leave your name and number, I’ll get back with you shortly.* “O, this is Parker returning your call. I’ll have my phone with me all day.”

CHAPTER 9

The motorcycle came into the town of Waterston in a blur as machine and rider appeared as if a devil in a tornado entered town. As Olivia slowed to a speed fitting the local town law she glanced around and noted it was a small town like many in the area. A main street, a school, church and a few houses scattered around. At the end of the street, she saw a sign that looked a good place to stop - the local diner. Seconds later, she pulled up in the restaurant's parking lot and gave the town another cursory glance. *Yep, just like all the others.* With feline grace, she dismounted her bike and let down the kickstand. She positioned the bike, her pride and joy; in such a way that she thought she would see it from most of the seats in the establishment. She removed her jet-black helmet with the insignia WHMH book-ended by flames on one side and an ethereal light on the other. Her hair cascaded onto her shoulders as she shook her head, then stowed the helmet in the pannier on the back and retrieved her cell phone from the same place. She flicked it on and retrieved her messages including the one from Parker. *Hmm, only a few minutes ago.* Her glance took in the diner as the superb smells tempted her grumbling stomach. *I'll get some coffee and call her when I get inside.* With ease, she removed her jacket, slung it over her shoulder and entered the diner.

* * *

Olivia sat in a booth waiting for the coffee she ordered. Her eyes barely registered the interior of the building as she reached inside her jacket for her cell phone. Before she had time to dial, the woman who greeted her headed her way.

"Looks like you've had a rough one," Dolly said as she placed the coffee carafe on the table along with the menu. "I'll just leave this here for you. Let me know when you're ready to order."

When Dolly didn't move away, Olivia glared. *What does she want...a tip already?* With a look of irritation, Olivia glanced at the woman and sarcastically replied, "Looks like you've had a rough one too." She placed her attention back to her original goal of calling Parker for the third time.

"Yeah, I lost my help yesterday." Dolly just shook her head at the woman and left for the kitchen. *I sure could use Rose's help about now.* When she got to the kitchen, she looked at the woman via the pass-thru. *I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of that one.*

Olivia ground her teeth, which was an irritating habit that she knew annoyed Amelia. A habit she did when she was tired and exasperated with things in general. At the thought of Amelia, a brief smile tugged at her lips as she waited for the call to connect.

Parker listened to the sound of the shower stopping and felt her phone vibrated before it rang. It was Olivia's number. "Hello." She needed to speak with Olivia, but at the same time didn't want Sophie to overhear the conversation. *Until I have all the information, it is best if she is out of the loop.*

"It's me, where have you been? No don't answer that I can find you if I need to." Olivia quietly, but resolutely informed her old lover. "Bottom line Parker, is you're up to your eyeballs in shit, big time

After blowing out a breath, Parker replied, "Yeah, I figured that one out all on my own." Her eyes shifted toward the bathroom door and watched as a towel clad Sophie stepped out. "What have you discovered? Was she murdered," she whispered.

Olivia hesitated for a few moments before she replied. "Yes. Tortured too, you might want to keep that from the girlfriend."

"Girlfriend, where the hell did that come from?" Parker hissed.

"Look, the facts speak for themselves. Sophie Durant's picture is all over the Peterson woman's place...many are of them together. I call that a little more than childhood friends don't you. Anyway, you're diverting the conversation from the real problem, which is why you're in the mess you're in and what to do next."

"I knew they were lovers," Parker admitted. She watched Sophie's bedroom door open. "This is very complicated." When Sophie went back into the bathroom she added, "The stepmother wants Sophie dead so she can get her hands on her money. She has to stay safe for two more months."

Olivia frowned. "Makes more sense out of why someone is paying heavily for a hit and eliminating anything that comes in their path. Two months can be a lifetime if we don't get proof quickly. Does she have any solid evidence that the cops will accept?"

The whirring of the hairdryer allowed Parker to speak more freely. "She has nothing that can be solidly tied to the stepmother. I've tracked her over the last six months..." Silence came from the bathroom. "Listen, I can't talk much longer. I'd rather not let her hear the conversation until we have a plan set in motion. There was nothing that the stepmother said specifically to me that said to kill her. I always had the gut feeling that is what she intended."

"How the hell did you let yourself get in this situation Parker?" When she didn't hear a reply she said, "You have a plan?" Olivia scoffed shaking her head at the words. *God help us.*

"I got into the situation because I need to pay for my office help, rent and I do need to eat occasionally," Parker said angrily. "Damn it Olivia, if I had a workable plan I certainly never would have called you! Can you ever get past our history?"

"My god at last you've said something with a ring of truth in it. As to the past, that's dead and buried. I'm not sure R.I.P was on the headstone, but I'm here talking to you aren't I? With the aim, I might add, of keeping your sorry ass alive, so give up on the sanctimonious crap will you Parker. You and I need to talk seriously. How feasible is a face to face?" Olivia scratched her forehead and frowned when she saw the waitress coming in her direction.

"You ready to order," Dolly asked as she passed by Olivia's table.

When Sophie turned off the hair dryer, she heard Parker's voice angrily speaking to someone. *Should I open the door and interrupt the conversation she's having and risk getting involved in whatever dispute she's having or...should I stay put?* She put her ear to the door as she did many times as a child when her grandmother spoke with her father. *Who is she talking to?*

When Parker heard the hair dryer go off she kept her eyes on the door. She wasn't ready for Sophie to be part of her conversation with Olivia. From the phone she heard

Olivia talking to someone whose voice she recognized it, but wasn't certain from where. "Yeah, we can meet," she said with quiet resignation. "Right now my goal is to keep Sophie safe."

Usually multitasking was one of her strong suites, but now, having two running conversations, was next to impossible. *I'm too god-damn tired for this.* Olivia gave her attention to the woman waiting to take her order. "Hash browns, scrambled eggs and a side of mushrooms." She turned her attention back to Parker and completely ignored the older woman still standing by her table. "I'm in this place called Waterston and we can meet here at the diner." *What the hell is the name of this place?* Her glance returned to the woman who was giving her an impatient look. "What's the name of this place?"

"Good Eats," Dolly said proudly. "I'll get your order going as soon as I tend to the man over there."

Olivia nodded, "I'm in a place called Good Eats. Will that pose you a problem? When can you get here?"

"I can't believe it!" Parker exclaimed. "Let me speak with the woman who took your order."

"Why?"

"Dammit O, for once just do what I ask."

Olivia looked at the woman who was coming back by her table. "You're going to think this is strange, but my...friend needs directions to this place." She held up her phone. "Please."

Tentatively, Dolly took the small phone. "Hello."

"Dolly it is so good to hear your voice this is Parker."

Dolly's eye widened. "Parker is that really you?" she said loudly.

"Yes, it's important that you keep your voice down. I need your help."

"Sure, anything."

"That man that was in there the other day looking for Sophie, have you seen him again?"

"Yes, he's here now," Dolly whispered. Her eyes darted to the man, who was now giving Olivia's booth the once-over.

Parker blew out a breath. "The woman who gave you the phone can be trusted Dolly...she's one of the good guys. If she needs any help with information, please tell her everything you know. I'll see you soon Dolly and thanks. I need to speak with my friend now."

Dolly loudly said, "We're right in the middle of town you can't miss us." She passed the phone back to the dark brooding woman, whose eyes were now staring at the man who instigated her Rose's sudden departure. "Here you go I've given the directions. I'll be back with your meal."

"Ok, what now Parker? For the record, I think they made you in this town." Olivia continued to scan the booth opposite her although the man had turned away from her concentrated gaze.

"I can guarantee that no one made me Olivia," Parker said feeling her irritation with Olivia escalate. *Why did I ever think we could work together again?* "The only reason Dolly knows me is that I worked there! I'm not inept and I resent your implications that I am."

Olivia felt a rising anger of her own to match the one she heard in Parker's tone. "I'm going to ask this once and once only...got me Parker?"

Exasperated by the conversation and regretting ever calling Olivia, Parker blew out a long breath. "Ask away," she said tersely.

"Are you romantically involved with the woman you're protecting? And don't give me that crap about you're not sleeping with her, just tell me if you have feelings more than the norm for our type of work?" Olivia replied quietly.

"I learned a long time ago not to let my heart rule my judgment O, you more than anyone else should know that." She sat on the couch and put her feet up on a table. "All I want to do is keep her safe and end up with enough money for my efforts to pay the bills."

"Then you've changed Parker. The woman I once knew always put the heart first it was the quality I lov.... Ok, but remember this piece of advice and trust me it comes from one who knows. When your mind is involved in that way Parker you do things you never would have imagined possible and I don't need to spell it out for you, do I. If you're honest with yourself, you'll know I'm telling you the truth and once you do that, I can do my job." Olivia's thoughts turned to an image she had of Parker - not the woman that betrayed her, but the young woman she'd fallen for in the beginning.

After digesting the words, Parker let her eyes wonder to the bathroom. *Am I interested in her sexually? No, my head is squarely on the job.* "I'll say it again so you will have no doubts O. I am not interested in Sophie Durant sexually or any other way. Right now, she is vulnerable and I would be a real shit to take advantage of her. All I want to do is keep her safe. I won't let anything or anyone get in the way of that."

From the bits and pieces Sophie could make out, she could tell that whomever Parker was speaking with was annoying her, which meant they had a history. *What to do, what to do? Should I stay put...no I'll open the door and go into my bedroom.* With that, she opened the bathroom door and without looking toward Parker went to her room.

Olivia smiled tightly. "How much do you still trust me Parker?"

Parker watched as Sophie went into her room and closed the door. *I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe.* "That has never been an issue for me...I never stopped trusting you O."

Olivia sighed silently. *Well that's something anyway.* "I'm taking charge of this situation...all of it. All I need you to do is stick to Ms. Durant like glue...she doesn't breathe unless you can hear it got me?"

Parker's back went rigid at the words. "I need your help," she confessed. "But, this is my case. We will work it together."

"And, we will. I can't protect Ms. Durant, but I can find the person who killed her friend and when I do, I'll ensure we get the confession of the stepmother's involvement. But, if you'd rather I babysit the woman and you do, the dirty work, go for it. Fire away boss?" she spit out sarcastically. Then she added, "Are you afraid I'll make a play for her or take the money? As we both know Parker, I'm not like you...I don't have a heart. I sold mine to the devil years ago."

Parker ignored the comeback. "We both know that rehashing the past won't accomplish anything so let's not go there ok?" Parker said softly. "Dolly told me the man that was looking for Sophie two days ago is sitting in the restaurant right now." A chill ran up her spine as she realized that Olivia could be in danger. "From what you told me

about what happened to Camille I think we can assume he's dangerous." She swiped her hand across her face. "I...please be careful...I don't want you getting hurt."

For the first time, Olivia smiled properly as her white teeth gleamed against her olive skin. *That's real funny Parker, funny. Now, I know you don't know me at all. A good thing because I don't think you'd like the road I've traveled.* "I'll do that. Believe it or not, Parker, I do prefer being alive at the end of the case and not planted six feet under. After I take care of this guy, we'll meet here and discuss the next move. That'll give you time to come up with a plan... you always were better at plans than me."

Parker felt her shoulders relax. *It is just like old times...* she felt a chuckle wanting to break loose. *You always wanted to take the lead when it came to danger and go headlong in without a thought of what might happen.* "Listen, why don't you come here, that way you can meet with Sophie." She paused then added, "I'm assuming that the guy there has a partner and knows where he is. I think meeting in Waterston is a bad idea."

A frown filtered over Olivia's features. *It's been a while, but it will be good to see Parker's folks again, can I do that and not get involved once more.* "I'll take care of this guy and see you at your folks place this evening. I take it the barn is still habitable for the night?"

With a crease of the brow, Parker asked, "How do you know I'm there?"

A chuckle passed her lips as Olivia, with a smile, shook her head. "Predictability my dear Parker, for you always did run home to mom and dad when there was no one else to turn to. Happened all the time when we fought - it was the perfect hideaway."

All Parker could do was laugh. *It feels good to have her on my side again.* "To answer your question, the barn is still habitable, but why not come to the house...I'll wait up for you."

"Sounds like a plan to me, I'll see you later," Olivia replied quietly.

"I'll be waiting," Parker said before adding, "O, thanks I..."

Olivia cut her off. "Yeah, well I'm in it for the money. Just remember that and we'll both do just fine. My meal is getting cold I'll see you tonight."

Parker felt her mind and body go cold with Olivia's rejoinder. *Guess I read her wrong.* "Yeah, see you later."

Olivia was about to end the conversation abruptly, but decided in a split second that would be a bad call. "Yeah, bye." Then hit the end button and held the silent device in her hand. Until that moment, she hadn't realized that her heart had been thumping at a tremendous rate. *God I hope I don't regret meeting her again...especially at her folks place. There are too many happy memories to stir up and neither of us needs that in our lives now.*

Confused, Parker tried to make sense of the conversation, but mostly of Olivia's reaction. *It was almost as if we never parted.* Just then, the door to Sophie's bedroom opened. Her eyes fixed on the woman and she smiled. "Hi. I've just spoken with the person who is going to bring to justice the people who murdered your friend and are trying to murder you. She should be here tonight."

CHAPTER 10

Sophie stood by the couch with her hands on her hips. "What's the name of this savior?" She watched as Parker patted the cushion next to her. "First tell me what I want to know."

Not only were Parker's emotions raw, but from the time she first heard Olivia's voice the night before they seemed to be all over the place. *I can't believe she still has a hold over me.* "Please Sophie, will you sit down with me so we can talk."

"Is it that bad?" Sophie asked as she sat down.

"Depends on your definition of bad," Parker said before her eyes captured the woman. "You know it was a little more than forty-eight hours ago that we were sharing a beer at that little bar. I think we were developing a friendship don't you?"

"Yeah," Sophie sighed. "It seems like a lifetime ago doesn't it?"

Parker nodded. "Will you tell me about Camille and your friendship with her?"

"Not until you tell me who is coming to save me and why."

How much do I tell her? "Years ago I worked for the police department in Portsmouth." *Shit, this is hard.* "My partner from that time is going to help us out...her name is Olivia Santos."

"How much is this Olivia Santos gonna cost me?"

Parker snorted. "Nothing, I'll pay her."

"Why do you have to bring someone else into the mix? You know I've done pretty good all by myself over the last ten months."

"Maybe so, but I did find you in Portsmouth and had many opportunities to pass that information on to your stepmother."

Sophie wrapped her arms around her bent knees and shivered slightly. "Instead she found Cammie," she whispered. "Do you know how she died?"

"You loved her?"

"Yes, she was my best friend ever since grade school. Even when my grandmother insisted I go to a private school and Cam couldn't, we were still close." She wiped away the tears that brimmed in her eyes. "I went to Penn and she went to Temple, but we still were friends. It wasn't until she moved to Portsmouth that our friendship became distant."

"Then why did you end up there?"

"I didn't think anyone would find me there...it is as simple as that," Sophie said as she swiped away the tears. "I'm tired of being on the run and alone. Cammie offered me a place to stay and to be with someone that had the same memories. In the end, all I did was to cause my dear friend's death," she whispered.

"If I hadn't found you would you have stayed with her?"

With watery blue eyes closed, Sophie said, "Only until the year was up. I loved her, but wasn't in love with her if that makes any sense."

Not really. How can you live with someone and make love to that person and not be committed to her. "Were you lovers?"

Sophie's eyes opened wide and fixed on Parker. "What does that have to do with anything?" she growled. "Here I am in the middle of nowhere with people I don't know

and my best friend was murdered because of me and you want to know if we were lovers? What kind of question is that?"

The fire in the woman dissipated as fast as it rose and Parker eased her arm around the trembling woman's shoulders. "I'm sorry I asked you that. I was out of line."

With her head resting on Parker's shoulder, Sophie said, "What happened to her?"

With eyes shifting away from the woman, Parker tried to compose her thoughts. *How much do I tell her...how much does she need to know?* She looked directly at Sophie when she lifted her head. "They tortured her." Parker watched as Sophie's eyes filled with horror before tears began to well. "They wanted information from her..."

"Noooo," Sophie sobbed as her chin fell to her chest. "She deserved better."

"Yes she did, and it is up to us to make sure no one else is harmed. That is why I called Olivia. She is a master tactician with resources and capabilities that I know will keep you safe."

"When do I meet her?"

"Tonight."

CHAPTER 11

Dolly confirmed that the man in the booth was the same person Parker mentioned. *He is one of two things. A private detective plod like Parker, hired for much the same reasons by the stepmother, but with about fifty percent fewer skills. Or, this is the interesting part and infinitely more informative, he is an associate of O'Donnell.* As she watched the man at his table, she silently decided that O'Donnell had a flaw. *If this is the caliber of man he uses for back up, I won't have any trouble working with that. Everyone has a flaw, even me. Fortunately, for me, mine is a good two hours away in another state safe at home.*

As she considered all plausible options open to her, she looked at her watch. It was ten-o'clock Sunday morning and Amelia would be having brunch at home. The picture was so clear that it took her breath away. It made her wonder why she was sitting alone in a town she'd never been in before, helping someone who really wasn't part of her life anymore, when she could be there sharing some down time with her friend. *Friend yeah right, it is becoming harder and harder to ignore the fact that we are close friends. Not of a sexual nature true, but everything else that goes with living together. I figured she'd be gone after a month, now ten months later, I'd be devastated if she left.*

"Hey honey, he's gone. Shouldn't you be trailing him or something?" Dolly said. Olivia dragged her thoughts to the present and looked at the woman.

"Thanks Dolly, I figured I'd give him a head start." *Yeah right. Crap I almost fell in the same trap as I warned Parker about. I'm daydreaming like a lovesick teenager. I can't let myself do that again.* She quickly selected several bills from her billfold and handed them to Dolly, "I'll be back another time...the cooking's great by the way."

Before Dolly could say another word, Olivia bolted out of the establishment as the older woman peered at the notes in her hand. Her legs nearly gave out on her as she spied two hundred dollar bills. "Oh my, that's more than I make in a week."

Olivia wasn't far behind the man who was loitering in the parking lot. He looked at her as she went toward her bike and sat astride it as if she were moving on. He nonchalantly dismissed her presence and headed to the back of the diner. Olivia swiftly dismounted her bike and sped stealthily, like a lion on the chase of prey, after him. The man didn't know what hit him when he reached for the handle to the back entrance to the diner. The hand around his neck prevented him from going further until his captor drug him easily to the ground.

"What the fuck!"

Olivia placed a booted foot on his throat. "Could be that you're fucked! Didn't your daddy tell you it wasn't polite to speak to a girl like that, asshole?"

The man felt the downward pressure on his windpipe as the she-devil bore her weight directly on his windpipe. Air was now at a premium as he felt his lungs contracting like a fish out of water. His hands pulled at her booted foot with as much power as he could muster - the boot didn't move.

"If you answer my questions you might get out of this alive. Who are you and why do you want to know if a certain woman has been in town?" Olivia slowly released

the pressure of her boot and watched in primal satisfaction as her prey gulped down much needed air.

After several moments, the man glared at the tall Latino woman who had outsmarted him. *Shamus is going to kill me for my lack of attention. I should have known she was trouble just by looking at her.* “What business is it of yours? I don’t have to tell you anything.” The man spat out defiantly and wished he hadn’t when he saw the feral glint in the blue eyes above him.

“Too bad...I wanted you to give O’Donnell a message for me.” Olivia saw a flicker of emotion in the man’s eyes. *He’s working for O’Donnell...his damn eyes betrayed him.*

“What message?” he croaked out just before she returned pressure to his sore windpipe. Olivia began to flex her toe allowing him a little air before stopping it for longer periods. The man looked at the woman’s face and realized that she enjoyed torturing him. His mind shouted out silently as he saw the expression in her eyes. *I’ve seen it before in my cousin’s when he’ killed that girl.*

Olivia gave a chilling laugh as she callously replied, “Hmm, I wonder if we want a verbal message or will a written notation do.” Her hands went inside her jacket pocket and pulled out a small knife. The blade glistened in the sunlight filtering through the cracks in the wooden fence. “Just out of interest, what are you to him?”

Sean wasn’t like his cousin, for he didn’t enjoy the torturing part of the work. *I can’t betray him... I’ll be a dead man for sure.* “I never said I knew him...well. He’s my boss and I work for him. I do the legwork that kind of thing. I don’t kill people,” he exclaimed in genuine fear.

“Pity, I was hoping you might be more than a foot soldier. They’re ten a penny therefore he’s not going to miss you is he. Guess that means a notation will do. Ah, it’s the luck of the draw my friend.” Olivia angled the knife ready to strike a blow.

The gurgling sound from the man, squirming under her boot for enough air to speak, made a cruel smile cross Olivia’s face. She released the pressure a little. “My name’s Sean O’Donnell, Shamus is my cousin. I don’t know why he wants to find that woman. I only know that he’ll kill anyone who gets in the way.” Silently he added, *even you, you evil bitch.*

“Does he know where you are? What have you told him?” Olivia spied an opening for the information they needed.

“He knows I’m in this town, but not that I located the woman. I told him all the family has gone back to Portsmouth for the funeral. I figured she’d be there too, being all cozy and all with that Peterson woman.” The man couldn’t help as prejudice seeped into his tone.

“You don’t like gay people Sean?” Olivia asked in a neutral tone.

His lips twisted into a grimace. “No, it’s a blasphemy against God. They should all be exterminated like Hitler tried with the Jews.”

“Does your cousin feel the same and is that why he butchered her?” Olivia felt all her control slipping. Any thought of this man leading a normal life after the interrogation was over was nonexistent. *If he remains alive is dependent on what answer comes next.*

“In his own way, he screwed her first then mutilated the bitch. Said she needed to know what it feels like to have a man inside her before she died.” The man’s blind bigotry incensed Olivia.

Staring up to the heavens, Olivia raised her hand ready to pierce the man's chest to kill him with one swift mark. But, the face of an angel appeared before her. That was how she always thought of Amelia when she entered her consciousness. She removed her boot and released the man while silently cursing her reformed ways. "Tell Shamus the she-devil's right behind him so he'd better not kill anymore innocent people."

The man idiotically thought he could get the upper hand when the Latino woman turned her back on him. He lunged at her with the switchblade he took from his pocket.

Damn what a pity, Olivia thought as she felt the thrust of the blade pierce her leather jacket and lodge in her shoulder. *Did he have to do that? This jacket cost me a fortune*. With alarming speed, she swung around dislodging the man's feeble attempt to incapacitate her. "You got your second chance and you wasted it, sorry." She swiftly wielded her weapon and slit his throat in one exact move. He slid to the ground with a shocked look, as his blood rapidly seeped onto the pavement.

Instincts kicked in, as she considered her next move. *Drag the body to a dumpster maybe or... he has a car*. Olivia fished in his pocket and retrieved the car keys and minutes later, she moved the car to the back of the building and dumped his body in the trunk. Fortune was on her side as she spied a horse trough several yards away. With a mixture of disgust and satisfaction she washed away the blood on her hands. Then, she dialed her associates within the DOCO to enlist their help in removing the body without anyone knowing it had ever been there.

She took a minute to pop her head in the door of Good Eats. "Dolly, I'm leaving my bike out front is that ok with you?"

"Sure is honey. I'll keep an eye on it for you." Dolly smiled then asked, "Did you catch up with Sean?"

"Yeah I did...in fact he's letting me use his car."

Dolly's eyes narrowed. *That's odd. I thought she was...oh never mind I have too much work to do to worry about anyone else*.

With little more than a mild backward glance, she backed the vehicle out of the parking lot and drove toward the outskirts of town. On her way into town, she'd noticed a wooded area, which would be as good as any to keep a low profile until the clean up team turned up. Ten minutes later, she pulled the car off the road and sent a text of her grid coordinates to the controller.

As Olivia sat in the car, she contemplated what just occurred and berated herself for her actions. *That sucked! Damn, I was hoping not to kill anyone just yet. We get some kind of reprieve though. I'm sure the coroner will keep the Peterson woman's body for autopsy so the funeral won't be for another three days at least. I think good old Shamus is hoping that Sophie turns up so he can take her down there. That's the place for me right now, but first I have to see Parker*. She shook her head. *Now, that's a nightmare waiting to happen. I know her folks will be glad to see me. I haven't touched base with them since...since Amelia came to live with me*. Wiping a hand over her eyes, she sighed and realized for the first time that she had a wound. *For god's sake that's all I need...he's ruined my jacket!*

Olivia stepped out of the vehicle, shrugged out of her jacket, and examined the tear in the expensive black leather. Then, as a second thought, she checked the wound on her back as best she could. *Damn, I'm going to have to pack that...I've no time to stop and let someone stitch it*. She used a pack of tissues to stem the flow of blood and after an

hour, it seemed to stop. When she noticed two cars approaching, she dragged on her jacket and waited for them to stop. *At last, they're here!*

Half an hour after providing all the details they needed to begin surveillance at the funeral home and the cemetery in Portsmouth one of the men, Dan Estevez gave her a lift back to town. She knocked on the window and waved at Dolly before she revved up the motorcycle and headed out of Waterston toward her meeting with Parker.

CHAPTER 12

The Davis family along with Sophie Durant sat at the dinner table. Sophie watched as everyone else filled their plates and ate with gusto. *And, I thought the breakfast was huge.* She eyed everyone and thought *I can't believe that no one is a fat slob.*

"Dig in," Ed Davis said. He pointed his fork toward his son. "Otherwise, Frank will gobble it all up."

Frank sputtered his protests then shrugged before he laughed. "It's mom's fault, she's too good a cook."

"Sophie, where do you live?" Ruth asked.

"My family is in Philadelphia," she said eyeing Parker.

The less they know about her the better. "Mom, you ready for more company?"

Ruth looked at her daughter and frowned. "Who?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

When the eyes of the older woman landed on her, Sophie wanted to crawl under the table. *I thought she liked me.*

Parker reached across the table and patted her mother's hand. "Don't worry Mom...it's someone you haven't seen for a long time - Olivia."

Sophie watched as the older woman's face lit up. *Hmm, she must know the woman and obviously likes her.*

"Oh, Parker, that is wonderful news...we haven't seen her in such a long time." Ruth felt her cheeks grow rosy. *I hope Olivia doesn't let the cat out of the bag that she's been keeping in touch with us since she and Parker went their separate ways.* "When will she arrive?"

"Not until late so you won't see her until tomorrow morning."

"No, no I'll stay up till she gets here."

"Mom, there's no way of knowing how late it'll be." Parker shrugged. "She said she'd stay in the barn till morning."

"That's ridiculous," Ed said. "You stay up till she gets here and make sure she has a proper place to sleep."

"Oh, I don't know," Crystal interjected. "I think the barn is a good place for her."

The venom that laced the pregnant woman's voice was unmistakable. *I don't think she likes the woman, Sophie thought as she looked at Crystal. Nope, her eyes aren't green, but I know the sound of jealousy when I hear it. Hmm, I wonder what the Santos woman's relationship with Parker is.* When she noticed the look Parker shot Crystal, she let a thin smile curve her lips. *Ah-ha.*

"No one stays in the barn in my house!" Ruth exclaimed.

"Unless it's Frank," Parker added trying to diffuse the tension.

"Or you Sis," Frank added. "I seem to recall you spending lots of nights up in that loft."

Parker chuckled. "Yeah, and apparently I wasn't as sneaky as I thought." She looked at her mother and winked.

As the meal continued, Sophie watched as Parker moved her food around with her fork until Ruth put her arm around her daughter's shoulders. When her mother whispered in her ear, Parker nodded then let a thin smile cross her face. Sophie's eyebrows creased—she hated being out of the loop. *Bet it has to do with that woman coming here tonight.*

* * *

It was half past ten and Parker looked out the curtained window for the umpteenth time. "She'll be here when she gets here," Sophie said. When Parker pierced her with an angry look, she saw red. *How dare she look at me like that? I'm the one who is a target.* "Maybe you should go outside and walk out to the highway and wait for her there," Sophie said sarcastically.

Parker shook her head and gave Sophie another angry look. "What's up with you?" she replied turning her head back to the window. "I can do without your caustic remarks, Sophie." *This isn't like me at all ...why am I so anxious? Because, she left me and I never let go. Ten years later and I still feel as though I'm stuck in the mud where she's concerned. I know she's found someone else. Do you ever think of me O or is hatred your only feeling?* She looked into the dark night and sighed. Guess I'll know soon.

* * *

Olivia glanced at the huge sycamore that was the sign to turn down the Davis' road to the farm. She turned her bike into the long tree lined dirt road glad that she didn't have to get off and open the gate. *They must have left it open for me.* Her face grimaced in pain as she felt the stone chippings of the drive rattle her body. It was in stark contrast to the smooth tarmac she'd traveled on for hours. Within seconds, she saw the welcoming lights of the farmhouse and a slight grin tugged at her lips. *Ah, mom never would have let me sleep in the barn.* She decelerated and the bike moved closer to the house and her meeting with Parker.

The roar of the motorcycle made Parker's heart skipped a beat. "She always did prefer that hog over a car," she said to no one in particular. Seeing Olivia again had her stomach doing the same flip flops that it did when she heard the woman's low smoky voice on the phone. She opened the door, and went outside and was slightly annoyed when Sophie chose to tag along. When the motorcycle came to a stop, she felt her chest constrict as she struggled to breathe.

The powerful machine rested in the glow of the outside lights of the farmhouse. Through her visor, Olivia briefly glanced at the two figures standing on the porch. *How quaint, a welcoming committee.* The pain in her left shoulder made her cringe as she dismounted the bike and ensured it was in a safe position. She turned to the people on the porch and with a deft movement from years of practice regardless of the pain, removed her helmet and shook out her hair. Her cold blue eyes met the woman she had seriously considered killing ten years earlier. *Damn, she looks good, always did always will...it's definitely the bone structure.* "I see you waited up for me," Olivia drawled as she moved with cat like grace toward the steps.

Parker watched the sleek body clad in leather move and felt out of her element. *Do I hug her; shake her hand or...god I'd love to kiss her. Shit I don't know what to do.* She gulped in a deep breath and turned to Sophie. "Here comes your savior."

Sophie watched when the woman took off her helmet and had to stop herself from gasping. *She is absolutely magnificent*, she thought as she felt her body react in pleasure. Then the mystery woman approached them much as a lion would its prey, and Sophie shivered with delight. "Does she always present herself like that?" she asked.

"Like what?"

"A predator," she whispered.

There was no time for an answer as Olivia was upon them.

Olivia saw the twitching muscle in Parker's jaw - a sure tell that she was nervous. "Savior is hardly the word I would describe myself Parker. I see mom didn't want me to stay in the barn?"

At a loss for words, Parker could only shake her head as she tried to reign in her emotions. "Well, someone needs to save her Olivia and I can't think of a better person." She turned to Sophie. "Sophie Durant this is Olivia Santos."

The words *mom didn't want me to stay in the barn* rang in Sophie's ears as she extended her hand to the woman. "I'm pleased to meet you Ms. Santos." She felt a jolt course through her body when they shook hands. *My, my, you are one hot woman.*

When Olivia extended her left arm without thinking, she felt the pain in her shoulder again. *That damn wound is beginning to irritate me.* She briefly accepted the introduction as her eyes scanned the woman in front of her. She could see why Parker got herself involved in saving her. She had the air of someone you wanted to protect, same as she did Amelia. "Good to see you Ms. Durant. Parker, has mom any of her special coffee brewed? I'd murder...sorry I need the caffeine fix?"

"Sure," she said as she opened the screen door wide. Once inside, Parker said, "Everyone is asleep," in a quiet voice. No sooner had she said the words, than her mother's voice floated into the kitchen.

"I heard your bike," Ruth said as she entered the kitchen in her bathrobe. "Olivia, I'm so glad to see you." She embraced Olivia and let the hug linger before she let go. "Are you hungry? I can fix you some leftovers real quick."

Olivia's eyes smarted from not only the pressure Ruth put on the knife wound, but at the woman's heartfelt and natural welcome. "I'd love one of your special brews Ruth, but don't do anything special for me...I'm sure Parker still knows how to fix coffee."

Ruth took a long hard look at Olivia then furrowed her brow. "You never could hide anything from me young lady ...I can tell you're hurt. While I get your coffee, take that jacket off and let me see what I can do for you."

Parker looked at Olivia again and saw the slight crack in her facade. *Mom's right, she's hurt.* "What happened to you?" she asked.

With a throaty chuckle, Olivia kissed the older woman on the cheek. "Busted huh. Fell off the bike...you know how that goes." She lied as she carefully slid out of the black leather jacket. The blood from the wound had liberally soaked the back of her shirt. She heard the sucked in breathe of Sophie Durant behind her and Parker's words echoed in her ears. After the long journey, she was fatigued so she didn't answer immediately preferring to sit at one of the kitchen chairs. The fact that she hadn't had more than a cat nap for the last forty-eight hours only added to her exhaustion.

Sophie's hands went to her mouth at the sight of the blood stained shirt. "You got that from falling off your bike? I thought bikers wore leather for protection from that sort of thing." She looked over at Parker and saw the concern on her face.

"I'll fetch the bandages and antiseptic," Parker told her mother. As she left the room, she looked over her shoulder and saw the exhaustion on Olivia's face. "When I get back and we have you all patched up O, its bedtime for you."

Sarcastically Olivia threw out, "When did you become my mother?"

Ruth shook her head. "Some things never change," she said with a laugh. "You two stop the bickering right now or I'll send you both to time out."

"Only if she does," Parker said laughing as she left the room.

Olivia forgot that a stranger was in the room and she let her guard down. "How's she been Mom? I don't remember her ever being so tightly wound," she asked softly.

"To tell you the truth, I'm worried about her too. There's an edge to her I haven't seen since you..." She shrugged. "Well, she usually is mellow. I think she has taken up your habit of not sleeping much."

Sophie heard the concern in Olivia's voice, but heard something else. *Caring, yes there definitely is caring. I wonder what the story is between them.* Her eyes studied Olivia. *I'd like to make a play for her. Wonder if she's available.*

"Can't say it's one of my better traits. I can fix that if you want...I think I remember how." An amused note filled Olivia's voice as she recalled a good memory of their times together. *Sit Parker on a sofa and stroke her belly in a circular motion and she was away with the fairies. It worked every time back then.*

"Ok, I've got all the stuff we need to patch you up," Parker said placing the bandages, tape and antiseptic on the table. "Off with the shirt." She watched as Olivia carefully pulled the shirt over her head and gasped when she saw the wound. That didn't happen from any fall off her bike. *Looks more like a knife wound to me.*

"Do you need my help," Ruth asked.

Parker positioned her body between her mother and Olivia. "Nope, I got it." With gentleness, born out of genuine affection, she began to clean the wound. "You really need stitches," she whispered in Olivia's ear. "I've put butterflies over the gash to keep it together and that should hold you until you see a doctor, but don't wait too long."

Olivia looked directly into the eyes she once adored. "Yeah I know...I'll take care of that tomorrow."

"I can call Doc Pritchard and take you there."

"I said, I'd take care of it," she growled quietly. Parker's touch was reminiscent of a long time ago and she wasn't following that path again.

"Sure. All done," Parker said as she retreated to Sophie's side.

CHAPTER 13

Teal gave a snort of annoyance as she gazed at the invoices that Olivia hadn't adequately explained. Her attention so taken with the problem she failed to hear someone enter the reception area. She jumped when a familiar face popped over the counter.

"Hi Teal, betcha never thought you'd ever see me here," the young woman announced.

Teal caught a surprised breathe and smiled wanly at the woman. "Hi Jerry, what brings you to this part of town?" Her eyes quickly veered off to Amelia's door. *Crap, I hope she doesn't see you here.*

The young woman grinned impishly as her blonde hair bobbed around her shoulders. Conspiratorially she replied, "I was hoping to surprise you know who. Is she in?"

Just as I thought...crap. I hope Amelia doesn't get finished any time soon. She doesn't need to see her. "Actually no, no she isn't. I can give her a message when she gets back if that helps." Teal backed up her offer with a tentative smile.

The young woman's crestfallen expression said it all. "I figured. She hasn't been in touch for over a week." Then she smiled optimistically. "At least its work, and not that she doesn't want to see me."

"Jerry, Olivia won't be happy you came here. This is where she works and she's very strict about not letting pleasure interfere with that. I'll tell her you came by and I'm sure when she gets back, she'll call you." Teal gave the younger woman a reassuring smile.

Jerry Nixon looked around the reception area. "Cool place... I've never been in a private detective's office before. Betcha see some interesting things around here don'tcha?"

Teal shrugged as she moved around the counter. "Sometimes, not often...most of our cases are quite mundane, which is why you need to go Jerry." Then her eyes closed as she heard Amelia's office door open as she gave her goodbyes to her last client of the day. *This I can do without right now!*

Amelia walked into the reception area and turned to Teal who was speaking with a beautiful young blonde woman. *She doesn't look like she's been out of high school long.* "Sorry to interrupt Teal, Ms. Smith needs to sort out her next couple of appointments and she's on a tight schedule."

"Perfectly ok, we just finished up...haven't we?" Her gaze sought out Jerry's to confirm what she had said.

"I guess. Well tell Olivia that I came by and that I'd love her to call as soon as she gets back...tell her I'll make it worth her while." Jerry grinned and smiled at the older woman who had entered the room. "See you at your place on Wednesday for the usual girls' night out Teal."

With a whisper, Teal answered, "Sure Jerry, see you then." Turning her attention to Amelia's client, she hoped that Amelia hadn't picked up any vibes. *No way am I going to explain Olivia's actions...no way in hell am I going to jump into that mix.*

Amelia stood unmoving in the reception as two things registered in her brain. Neither made any sense, but conversely, it made perfect sense...she didn't want to acknowledge the prospect. *That young woman knows Olivia in a familiar way and they wear the same perfume...or do they?*

As the woman walked toward the door, Amelia couldn't stop from walking quickly toward her. "Hi Jerry, I'm Amelia West, Olivia's business partner. Do you want to leave her a message? If it's important I can usually contact her when she's not in the office."

Both Jerry and Teal glanced at Amelia for very different reasons.

"Awesome. Will you tell her Jerry misses her and that the bed feels cold without her in it? Have her call me at the apartment when she gets time, thanks." Jerry grinned and left Amelia standing at the door like a statue. She moved only when her client, Ms. Smith cleared her throat for Amelia to move out of the way.

Teal heard the exchange and wanted to curl up in a ball and die. *If that's how I feel, God only knows what Olivia will think and say when she finds out.*

"Amelia, are you ok?" Teal asked tentatively. She walked from around the reception counter.

Amelia turned to her friend and gazed at her dazedly while swallowing hard to lubricate her throat—vocal cords refused to function.

Teal took pity on her friend. *This was going to happen one day, but certainly not like this. I hoped that Olivia would be the one to explain, she's had plenty of time.* "How about a coffee, I'm sure it's been a long day for you." Her hand tentatively settled on Amelia's forearm.

With an aggrieved look in her eyes, Amelia shrugged off the hand. "Why didn't she tell me Teal? Does she trust me so little that she couldn't confide in me about this? We live together!"

The anguish in her friend's voice tugged at Teal's heart and she sighed heavily. "I'll get that coffee for us Amelia...I think we both need it. Do you know when Olivia's due back?"

Amelia's eyes welled with tears as she shook her head. "Why would I know that? She obviously doesn't trust me." A glint in her eyes indicated that she made a decision. "Strike the coffee Teal...I'm leaving for the day. I'll see you tomorrow." She quickly sidestepped any attempt Teal made to stop her. She went into her office, collected her purse and car keys then, rushed past Teal without another word.

"Oh, that could have gone better!" Teal pressed a button on her switchboard to connect with Olivia's private number. It was the number used for emergencies only and she knew Olivia checked the voice mail regularly. *I think this is a full-blown emergency don't you Olivia.* "Hi it's Teal...I think you should come home as soon as you can. Jerry came by the office and ...Amelia knows."

* * *

The bar Amelia went to was less than a block away from her home. She should have parked the car in the garage of the warehouse, but didn't feel the need. She supposed the bar was like all the others, but she couldn't be sure since she hadn't ever been to one.

She slid onto a stool at the bar and flung her purse on the countertop. A few seconds later, the bartender wiped the spot in front of her with a towel. "What can I get you?"

Amelia hadn't thought that far ahead, in fact, as she glanced around, she realized that being here might have been a bad idea. The other parties in the establishment consisted of blue-collar workers, who she suspected were enjoying a beer after work. The others, who looked like they were permanent fixtures, were alone and sitting at the bar.

"Lady, I haven't got all day, what'll be?" the bartender asked brusquely.

Amelia looked at the man and gave him a half smile. "Sorry, a beer will be fine?"

The bartender growled, "What kind?" Amelia was at a loss for words. *I don't know!*

A voice at her side startled her. "The lady looks like a Corona gal to me Mike. Go ahead and make it two."

Amelia looked and nodded to the woman who she surmised must have just walked into the bar. *I don't recall seeing her when I came in.* "Thanks, I don't drink much."

A soft chuckle followed the comment. "Wish I didn't myself, but it's an occupational hazard." The woman shrugged and smiled. "I own the place. I haven't seen you here before...are you new around here?"

"No, not exactly. I was brought up in Portsmouth about three blocks away but...as I say, I don't drink much." She thought *what a lame thing for me to say* as she smiled at the woman.

The bar owner gave her a speculative glance and smiled warmly. "Yeah, you can live in a place for years and not know what's around the corner."

Without thinking Amelia replied, "Goes for people too."

A measure of understanding lit the bar owner's eyes as she sat next to Amelia. "Yep, I understand that. My name's Faith, Faith Western."

Not wanting to be impolite, Amelia turned to the woman, smiled slightly and offered her hand. "Amelia, Amelia West."

Although there was a fleeting moment of intense speculation in Faith's eyes, she didn't say anything. When the drinks arrived, Amelia reached for her purse. "This ones on me, if you like it here you might come back. A good marketing ploy my accountants tell me."

"Thanks." Amelia sipped her drink in silence. *I am in a fit of depression and this woman is being friendly. Right now, that's exactly what I need. A few drinks with a stranger and maybe I'll forget what I heard earlier.* "I saw karaoke on a poster on the door when I came in?"

Faith smiled. "See yourself as a singer, Amelia? We could sure do with some new blood. We're getting tired of the same old stuff. Will you still be here...it doesn't start until eight."

With a glance at her watch, Amelia saw that it was barely four-thirty. "Sure I've no one to go home to. It'll be fun."

With a knowing look in her eyes, Faith moved her stool a little closer. "Yes, I think tonight might be turning out to be brighter than I thought myself." With a flick of her hand, she motioned for the bartender. "Mike we need the song sheets, Amelia and I are going to rock the place this evening."

CHAPTER 14

Olivia glanced around the kitchen, it was familiar and homey - *the heart of a home Ruth always says*. Then she peered at the two women at the table with her. One she knew well, or as well as anyone who had run the gauntlet of the emotional spectrum of love and hate. The other, was as unfamiliar as Parker was familiar. She knew only the essentials of the make-up of the woman and for now, that had to be enough. "We need to plan a strategy." Her fingers drummed on the coffee cup. "What have you come up with Parker?"

"I have a few ideas," Parker said as she watched the drumming fingers. *That certainly hasn't changed*. "We need to find a safe house that is invincible." She held her breath hoping that Olivia would take the bait. "We can probably stay here for a few weeks, but eventually they will come looking for me." She shook her head. "It won't take a really good investigator long to figure out I am involved somehow."

Olivia caught Parker's gaze. *Hmm, I wonder how much you know about my situation these days*. "And, your strategy is?"

Parker moved closer to Olivia and began to jot down what they knew along with different scenarios. "We know that Sophie's friend in Portsmouth was murdered by an unknown person or persons. Add to that, the man who came to Waterston looking for her and left only to come back. Olivia, you said that Dolly told you the man asked all over town about Sophie, right?"

"Yeah, Dolly felt certain he never found anyone that said they ever saw her." Olivia chuckled. "She said all it took was telling one busybody that a stranger was looking for a woman so he could kill her and the whole town knew. Small towns have a habit of closing ranks when they need to."

Parker smiled. "That sounds like Dolly." She fixed her brown eyes on Olivia. "Do you know if the guy left town or is he still there?"

Olivia looked away. "He won't be a problem," she said in a matter of fact tone.

"How do you know that?" Parker asked. When Olivia looked her square in the eyes, she had her answer. *She killed him*. She cleared her throat. "Ok, moving on..." she said trying to stop the bile she felt trying to rise to her mouth. "I suppose the question now is, how long before they figure out that Sophie is with me."

"Do you have any reason to think they will?"

"When we heard about the murder, I called Sophie's stepmother and that's when she fired me because she had someone else on the case." She shrugged. "All she knows is that I tracked Sophie to Portsmouth." She recalled the conversation with Evelyn. "I'm certain she knew of Camille's murder...she said *what a pity*..." Parker trailed off as she once again felt like she might throw up. She concentrated on the pad of paper and rapidly wrote what she thought would work to their advantage. "I've written three ways we can keep Sophie safe for the next two months," she said sliding the paper over to Olivia.

Blue eyes scanned the page. "I'm not sure any of these are workable Parker...they're way too complicated."

"The only complication I can see is that we don't know who the new hire is," she countered. "I think number two is our best bet for keeping her safe," she said circling the

number. "Once we find out who the new person is, we can confront Evelyn Durant and turn her over to the police. I overheard that guy at Dolly's say the name Shamus...maybe he's the hit man." When Parker turned her head to make her point, she found Olivia close enough to feel her breath fan her face.

Sophie watched in fascination as the two women interacted. It was clear to her that despite some of their negative comments about each other, there was a deep abiding bond between them. *Although I'd rather they didn't treat me like a four year old and leave me out of the loop. They act as if I wasn't here in the room with them.*

"Sure, that can be organized, but it will take more than four days to accomplish." Olivia frowned as her mind flashed over several possible solutions to the short term problem. *One thing is for certain, I'm not telling Parker who the hire is even though she knows the name. She'll freak out if she knows his background.*

Parker frowned and pulled back from Olivia. "Four days...what are you talking about? Didn't you hear me say we can stay here longer than that?"

Olivia raised an expressive eyebrow at the belligerent comment. *Always the same, some things never change.* "The funeral is in three days...maybe a few more if the coroner doesn't release the body right away. After that, I'd say you will have twenty-four hours tops to find this safe house you need or..." Olivia nodded in the direction of Sophie. "...things will not be too pretty around here. I'll not allow you to bring that kind of danger to your parent's door again. Do I make myself clear?"

It had been a long time since Parker felt her blood boil, but Olivia certainly had changed that. She leveled her eyes on the woman. "Don't you ever insinuate that I would do anything to jeopardize my family again!" She felt her heart hammer in her chest as she scraped her chair back, walked to the door and stared out. When she composed herself, she turned around. "Do you think they're on to me already?"

Olivia stared into the depths of the coffee cup—it had no answers. *That is such a predictable reaction Parker.* She glanced up and caught Sophie's eyes staring at her with annoyance laced with what she thought was hatred. *Nothing new in that.* "In one word Parker, yes. The guy who was in Waterston was too close not to have been tipped off about something. It might have been sheer luck, but I think the assassin is a notch above what you might be used to Parker." Her look intensified. "You should really leave now...but it's your case, your call."

Parker blew out a breath. "It doesn't take a genius to figure that they got the information from Sophie's friend." She heard Sophie gasp. "Apparently the guy that went to Waterston looking for her came up empty. I think the question should be, why would they link me to her?" She looked at Sophie. "What do you think?"

Sophie narrowed her eyes and glared at Olivia. When she turned her gaze back at Parker they softened. "Cammie died because of me. I would hate to have anything happen to anyone else. It's probably best if I just leave and be on my own, that way..." She swiped a tear off her cheek. "I've done pretty well so far by myself and I bet I can keep doing it for another couple of months."

"No!" Parker thickly shouted.

Oh, for god's sake Parker, stop being so dramatic! This is a case and your client can do as she pleases! Will someone up there please save me from partners that let their emotions rule over logic? "Parker's right Ms. Durant, you wouldn't last another day on your own. Like a hound dog, they have your scent and you can count on them finding

you. Right now, we need to move you into a safe location within the next thirty-six hours. I've dealt with the Waterston problem so we at least have that breathing room."

"Exactly! There's no way they know I am involved in this. I think we'll have more than thirty-six hours to implement whatever plan we decide on."

Olivia, forgetting the injured shoulder, stood up and winced at the pain.

Parker saw the grimace and had no choice but to approach her old lover and gently cup her arm. "You ok?" She dropped her hand when Olivia's eyes told her *don't come any closer*.

"Of course," Olivia ground out as she pursed her lips in pain. *I could do with a nap* she thought as she unconsciously moved closer to Parker.

For Parker, it was second nature and she put her arm around Olivia. "Sure you are. Why don't we take this up in the morning when we've all had a good night's sleep?" She leaned in slightly and closed her eyes when she sniffed the woman's hair. *Damn, you always do this to me...I wonder if you know*. "What do you say O?"

"I for one, vote yes," Sophie interjected. "This certainly has been a day of surprises." Her words sounded hollow as she felt a surge of jealousy at Parker's familiar attitude toward the dark woman.

Any other time, Olivia would have shrugged off the blatant incursion into her personal space, but all she cared about was ridding her body of the sheer exhaustion she felt. *God I wish I was home and Amelia was beside me. No offense Parker... you and I are old news...* She felt the familiar comforting arm on her shoulder and wondered, *or are we?* "Sure, I could do with a few hours sleep before I go back."

Parker smiled. "Glad you see it my way," she said resisting the urge to lean her head on Olivia's shoulder. Then she moved away and looked at Sophie. "With Olivia on our side we'll all be safe...she's the best there is at this." She felt a yawn fight its way to the surface. *I sure hope I sleep tonight, but I'm too wound up*. "We are all staying in the suite," she said. "Remember that O?"

A brief memory of good times drifted through her exhaustion. "Yeah, I remember. I know the way and I'm going to take a shower." She walked out of the room without a backward glance. She was too damn exhausted to worry about the pleasantries of goodnights.

Sophie couldn't believe the audacity of the dour woman. "Obviously she never had any lesson in decorum," she mumbled.

"She's tired," Parker said defensively. "Usually she would have said goodnight."

"Ok, go ahead and have it your way," Sophie said raising her eyebrows. "But, I think she owes you an apology for her rudeness."

Parker shook her head. *How can I defend her? Sophie is right*. "Come on let's go to bed too."

"Is that an invitation," Sophie said with a grin.

"Not tonight."

Sophie winked and said, "Ok, but it's your loss."

* * *

Olivia opened the familiar door to the suite and leaned against it once it closed. She was exhausted physically and mentally. Being back at the Davis' house had been a

bad move on her part. *Too many memories.* She blew out a breath, went in to the bedroom that she and Parker always shared and stripped off her clothes. *A good hot soaking shower should do the trick.*

The warm water beat against her skin and she instantly felt the stresses and strains of the day disappear. *Why did that man have to come after me...I didn't want to kill him.* She avoided the injured shoulder as the water cascade down her body. Lathering the rest of her body, she tried to squelch all the memories of the past that seemed to echo in her mind. *I won't go there. You will never hurt me again, Parker...I'll never trust you with my love again.* She shut off the water, toweled off and opened the door.

When Parker and Sophie entered the room, they stopped in their tracks as a naked Olivia came out of the bathroom. Olivia heard sharp intakes of breath and spun around. "Never seen a naked woman leave a bathroom before?" she said sarcastically. She turned away and reached for the clothes she left scattered in the bedroom.

Sophie, clearly embarrassed, made her way to her bedroom. Parker just stood there trying to make sense of her body's reaction to the naked Olivia. "Yeah, I've seen my share of naked women," she finally said. "All I need from the room is a pillow then I'll leave you in peace," she said as she walked past Olivia.

"Cut out the martyrdom Parker, get over here and share this damn bed." Olivia motioned to the king sized bed. "Don't worry. I have no intentions toward you other than we both get a good night's sleep."

With a gulp, Parker looked at the bed. "No, you go ahead I don't think I can sleep just yet."

Olive squared her shoulders making her breasts move provocatively. "Do you still trust me Parker?"

"I never stopped," she whispered, as her eyes caught, like a deer in car headlights, on Olivia's breasts. *Oh god, why do I torture myself...I know she hates me.*

"Excellent, then you'll remember that I have the formula for making you sleep like a baby, right?"

Parker managed a slight smile. "Yeah, I do," she said as she undressed and crawled under the covers. "I'm all yours."

With a gentle touch, she began making concentric circle on Parker's belly. Surreptitiously she looked at the naked body that at one time she wanted and needed to touch and feel. Her eyes lingered on Parker's breast. *Still firm and oh so inviting.* She saw Parker's eyes begin to flutter and she knew that in a few moments she would be sound asleep. *Works every time.* A memory that had been fighting to emerge ever since she heard Parker's voice the day before would no longer stay buried.

* * *

Her mind flashed back to a convenience store robbery and the car chase that followed. She and Parker chased the man for several miles with sirens blaring and the police radio squawking. The perpetrator finally stopped his car, jumped out and began running. "What an idiot," Olivia said as she slammed on the breaks and opened her door. "He thinks he can out run me." She laughed and set out after the suspect. Once the man was in sight, she shouted, "Stop police," but he continued running.

Olivia felt the tightness and swelling of arousal as she closed in on the man. When the suspect reached an eight foot fence and tried to climb up, Olivia launched her body in his direction and grabbed hold of his legs. Once she wrestled the man to the ground and had her knee in his back, she felt herself come.

Olivia and the suspect walked back to the squad car and she saw Parker lounging against the car with her legs crossed at the ankles. "Good job," she said with a grin. "You know mister, if you're gonna try and outrun her you need to lose about fifty pounds."

Once the man was booked and they did all the necessary paper work, they headed for home. They would usually change into civilian clothes before they left, unless there had been a chase. Olivia wasted no time in getting to their apartment, undressing and then taking Parker to bed.

Snake like, she started at Parker's feet and slithered up the naked body letting her wetness glide along the muscled legs, across hips, up her belly, between the valley of her breasts and finally coming to a stop at Parker's mouth. She closed her eyes as she felt a tongue lick her until it rolled and neatly slid inside and kept time as Olivia's hips began to move.

"Oh god Parker," Olivia said raggedly before she lost all sense and erupted.

Not yet satisfied, Olivia let her body slide back down until their eyes met. Her body was one with her lover who she hungrily kissed tasting what Parker just tasted. She moved her left leg so it was between Parker's legs and began to grind against the wetness she felt. In response, Parker mirrored her partner's movements until she felt herself come—Olivia did not. The lust Olivia felt after a chase was unquenchable and all Parker could do was go along for the ride. Her fingers snaked between their sweaty thighs, found their way inside Olivia and remained there as her lover pumped and jerked until she exploded in one orgasm after another.

"God, how I love you," Olivia said as she collapsed on top of Parker. Her breathing was hard and fast, but the hand rubbing her back soothed her. "I never want to lose you Parker, you are everything to me."

* * *

Olivia took in the whole of the sleeping woman and felt her body react. The memory and the sleeping naked woman's body made her wet and fill with desire. I need relief. Her eyes focused on Parker's left breast and she smiled. *I see that nipple still needs coaxing.*

CHAPTER 15

The vibration of her cell phone distracted Olivia from her wanton need for Parker's body. For a few precious minutes, she'd forgotten all that had happened in the ensuing years and indulged in memories - good ones. So much so, they almost became recent ones again. The persistent motion of her phone brought her back to the present. *It has to be either Amelia or Teal.* She looked at the soundly sleeping Parker and her eyes took in the naked body once again. With a sigh of regret, she deftly moved Parker on her side and wrapped the blanket around her. She grimaced at the pain in her shoulder and eased off the bed before reaching for her phone. "Santos."

"I have only one thing to say to you Olivia. The eagle has landed." Teal announced dramatically.

Olivia quietly made her way out of the room and stood in the farthest corner of the living room. *Great, Teal being smart...that's all I need to top of the day.* "Don't be cryptic Teal. What do you mean the eagle has landed?"

Teal felt her tension ease when she heard Olivia's voice in its usual brisk manner. "She knows, at least I figure she's worked it out since Jerry wasn't subtle."

"What do you mean? I take it the *she* is Amelia and just where did she and Jerry meet up?" Olivia's eyebrows met. "Did you have one of your Wednesday evenings early Teal and invite Amelia? If you did so help me..." Olivia took a deep breath and didn't finish. *It might not be as bad as it appears.*

"Don't you check your voice mail Olivia? I sent you a message earlier today and, just so you know, it hasn't anything to do with me...besides, I'd never ask Amelia. Jerry came by the office this afternoon and I tried to get rid of her before Amelia appeared. Just like most things in life, things never quite work out the way you hope," Teal replied.

"That ditzy blonde came to my office!" Olivia's eyes darted around the familiar room as she sucked in a deep breath. "Exactly why did she do that?" Olivia retorted angrily. *Jerry is great in bed and ok for a few dates, but I'm not into long-term relationships. If I were, it certainly wouldn't be with someone like her.*

"As crazy as this might sound, she wanted to see you. When she left, there was no doubt in Amelia's mind that you'd slept together...at least once."

Olivia ground her teeth. "Oh shit! Where is she now?" she whispered loudly.

"Jerry or Amelia? Ok, I know. Amelia is at the nunnery..."

Olivia cut in, "What? She's gone back! I don't believe it!" *She wouldn't do that even if this were a shock!* Agitated, Olivia said, "Damn, can't you speak with her Teal? She trusts you and I'll explain when I get back."

Teal scratched the side of her head as she looked down at the sleeping Amelia. "You never let me finish Olivia. I'm with Amelia and she is sleeping it off. Apparently, she got drunk and gave a mean karaoke performance of *You Don't Own Me*, according to the good Sisters who picked her up."

Olivia couldn't help it. Of all the images she had of Amelia, drunk at a karaoke bar wasn't one of them. She laughed as she asked, "You're joking right? Just how did the Sisters know to bail her out?"

"I wish I were," Teal said with a smile. "That's exactly what I thought when Sister Angelica called me. It's a long story. Amelia hasn't changed who her immediate contacts are for an emergency. With her parents out of town they called her work contact." She laughed derisively. "Lucky me."

Olivia sighed heavily. *That figures. Sometimes, you just can't shake the last vestiges of an old life.* Her eyes traveled to the bedroom and the sleeping Parker. *Nope, sometimes it catches up with you and the results...well they certainly are surprising.*

"When are you coming home, Olivia?" Teal asked.

Olivia stopped her train of thought and shook her head. "I'll leave here in under an hour which will put me back at the office for a late breakfast. Coffee on the boil might be good for more than just me Teal."

"You got that right boss. I'll have to leave her here tonight since she's not fit to move. Good thing she wasn't sick...I really hate puking drunks." Amelia groaned and the very thing Teal hated, happened. "I have to go Olivia. You have a safe journey see you in ...later today I guess." Her eyes flicked to the mess on the floor and then at her shoe. *Crap, why is something that looks like carrots always in the mix!* Teal pushed hair away from her eyes and checked that Amelia wasn't in any danger. She headed for the door and a bucket and mop. *You owe me major boss...both of you!*

* * *

Parker groaned as a hand forcefully shook her shoulder. "Parker, wake up! I need you to wake up right now."

She blinked the sleep out of her eyes. *Damn I was enjoying that dream.* She opened her eyes and looked up at Olivia. *Hmm maybe it wasn't a dream after all.* "What's happened? Did they find us? Is Sophie ok?" Her mind suddenly jumped to all the wrong conclusions as she sprang up in bed.

"Hey, it is ok there isn't a fire or any murderer in the house. Something has come up that needs my immediate attention. I need to leave now."

"Is it the case?" Parker, now wide-awake, asked. Even though she barely had any sleep, it was deep and refreshing and that was what she needed.

Olivia smiled slightly. "No, it's personal business in Portsmouth."

The quiet response had Parker dissecting every syllable. "Won't they want you to rest? You aren't exactly one hundred percent. I mean before you attempt a six hour journey at..." her eyes traveled to the clock. "It's two...I bet you haven't even slept."

"People like me only need a bare minimum. You must remember that I was never a long sleeper. When this is over, I'll take a break, maybe even a vacation." Her thoughts turned to Amelia and the fact that her friend had gone to a bar alone. *Not a good sign...it's not good at all.*

"After this is over, we'll all need a vacation," Parker said with a wink. "Who knows, we could take it together...like old times." Parker regretted the impulsive words she hadn't meant to voice. She stared into the cold, hard look on Olivia's face and shrugged. "I didn't mean it the way that sounded."

Mentally and physically exhausted, Olivia allowed her mind to fall over the mental precipice she'd set when Parker betrayed her ten years earlier. *She thinks she can waltz back into my life as if nothing ever happened.* She took in Parker's naked body. *I*

wonder if you realize how close you came to having a bullet in your head Parker. I doubt it...for you never did think I was capable of killing even after I did. Thankfully, you know very little about what I'm capable of doing...particularly now. She waved off the comment and said, "I've got to go."

Parker, suddenly cognizant of being naked, grabbed the sheet and wrapped her body in it. *Stupid*, she thought as she mentally smacked her forehead. *Why did I have to say that!* "What about Sophie and her problem?" she asked quietly.

Olivia picked up her jacket on the chair and snorted when she saw the rip again. "I'm not abandoning you Parker or your little friend next door. I merely have other responsibilities that need my attention. I'll be in touch with the details of the safe house within the next twenty-four hours. When I give you that information, I'll expect you there within twelve hours. If you're not..."

The unfinished sentence charged the air and hung there as Parker felt her shoulders defensively tighten. "If we're not then what...we're written off like yesterday's trash?" Parker knew Olivia well enough to know if people let her down or didn't comply exactly with her demands she'd walk away without a thought.

"Dragging out the same old stuff Parker, you really don't have a clue about the person I am today. For the record, I'd send out a search party and that will be costly. I've written down my emergency cell number. No matter what, this will be answered." Olivia threw the small blank card except for the number toward Parker.

"Ok, what if something happens and I need to contact you and you don't answer?" Parker asked.

Olivia nodded accepting that might happen. "Call 555-7282. It's the direct line to my associate Doctor West."

"A doctor...wow, I'm impressed" When she saw Olivia's cold hard stare in reaction to the question, Parker realized that her previous assumptions about Olivia's partner were correct. "What exactly do I tell her?"

"Simple...you tell her that I told you to call her for help. She'll be on the case immediately."

"What if she doesn't believe me?" she asked. Parker shook her head and added, "I'm not sure involving another party in the already complicated case is wise."

Olivia stretched and found the pain in her shoulder bearable. "We worked out a code - mysteries of the universe."

Parker softly laughed. *Who the hell thought of that?* "And if she's not there?"

Exasperated, Olivia flung a disgusted look at Parker as she headed for the door. "Teal's number is 555-8282 and her code is *small but mighty*."

"Ok, I get the picture. I'll only call them if I can't contact you, right?"

"Precisely. Now, I need to go. Will you give my apologies to your parents? Tell your mom that I'll see her soon."

Never one to give in lightly, Parker had a final question. "Just out of interest, what's your code?"

Olivia opened the door. "Give it a rest Parker, I'll be in touch." She smiled slightly as she closed the door. Her mind uttered the words Parker wanted to know - *darker than dreams*.

CHAPTER 16

Sophie woke the next morning feeling more refreshed than she had in a long time. She stretched, closed her eyes and contemplated exactly why she felt so good. *It has to do with Olivia Santos...how strange that is.* She had a distinct dislike for the dark mysterious woman that arrived the night before, but the woman made her feel safe—extremely safe. Her thoughts turned to Parker and she smiled as she wondered about the obvious bond her friend had with the dark woman who arrived the night before. *I wonder if they realize how much electricity they generate. Maybe today I will figure out just what their story is.*

She got up and started dressing, but paused when she saw her reflection in the mirror. “Who do you think you’re kidding...you’re jealous of Olivia.” She snorted and shook her head. “You want Parker all for yourself.” She winked at her image. “And you shall have her.”

When Sophie entered the kitchen she said, “Something sure smells good.”

“Oh good morning dear,” Ruth said over her shoulder. “I’m making blueberry pancakes, they’re Olivia’s favorite.”

Sophie said, “Sounds good to me too. I didn’t hear either of them moving around.”

“That’s good. They both need a good long sleep. Did you see the dark circles under Olivia’s eyes? And, my Parker...I’ve never seen her so on edge. She’s usually really mellow when she comes home.” Ruth turned to face Sophie. “Olivia is just the cure she needs.”

A small polite smile crossed Sophie’s face. “It seems to me that they are really good friends.”

Ruth turned her attention back to the stove and flipped over a pancake. “At one time they were very close, but something happened and...well,” she sighed, “no need to dwell on the past. Olivia is here now and that is all that matters.”

Both women turned when they heard, “Good morning.” Parker stood in the doorway. “Mom, are those your famous blueberry pancakes?”

“Yes, I remember how much Olivia likes them,” Ruth said as she looked beyond her daughter. “Isn’t she up yet?”

Parker shook her head. “She had to leave early this morning. There was some sort of emergency. She said to tell you she’d see you soon.”

Unable to hide her disappointment, Ruth asked, “Did she get any sleep?”

“No, but I will call her later to make sure she made it to Portsmouth safely.” Parker felt her stomach churn for she knew she wouldn’t call. *Olivia made it clear she would call me...besides I don’t think she’d appreciate me calling to check up on her.* She bit her lip. *I’m the last person she wants calling her. Last night she all but confirmed what I already knew. She has someone new in her life...do I care?* She felt the knot in her stomach double. *I’ll talk with mom later. She’s always been a good sounding board for me when it comes to Olivia.* Unwilling to explore the answer further, she turned her attention to Sophie. “Good morning, did you sleep well?”

Sophie’s face lit up. “Yes, I had a wonderful rest. It is so calm and peaceful here that I feel more relaxed than I have in a long time.”

A genuine smile crept across Parker's lips. "I'm glad you feel that way," she said softly. "After breakfast I'll show you around the place."

Just then, Crystal came charging into the kitchen. "Who the hell was that on the motorcycle making such a racket? Frank had his shotgun out ready to shoot them."

"Oh Crystal, stop being so dramatic," Ruth chided. "It was Olivia. Remember Parker said that she was coming for a visit."

A look of disgust crossed the pregnant woman's face. "Olivia," she snorted. "I should have known." She looked around. "So where is the perfect Santos?"

* * *

Later that morning Parker drove Sophie around the farm in her dad's old Ford pickup. "Parker?"

"Mmm hmm."

"I'd have to be deaf and dumb not to see that you and Olivia have a history."

"I already told you that we were partners on the Portsmouth police force."

Sophie reached over and touched Parker's arm. "That's not what I meant," she said softly.

The old truck came to a stop. "What exactly do you mean Sophie?" Parker's eyes narrowed and locked Sophie with a scowl.

"You two have an undeniable chemistry," she said defiantly.

Parker did not intend on sharing anything about Olivia with the woman. "That's not a subject that's open for discussion." She pursed her lips and nodded. "First you tell me about you and Camille."

"She was my best friend...nothing more."

The brown eyes refused to let go. "Now is not the time to lie to me Sophie."

"Ok, we were lovers! Satisfied...is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Will you tell me about her?"

Sophie adjusted her position then looked out of the window. "Cammie always had a crush on me...she knew I didn't feel the same." She returned her gaze to Parker. "She took me in and we became lovers...more out of need on my part than love." Her eyes filled with tears. "She had pictures of me at every stage of my life...I needed to feel connected and she gave me that."

Parker's defenses let down some and she put a comforting arm around Sophie. "We all do what we have to so we can survive," she said softly.

"Is that what happened to you and Olivia?"

"No, I wish it were that easy." Parker blew out a breath and sighed. *I need to let O go...maybe its time to talk about her.* "She is the love of my life." She looked past Sophie to the distant trees. "She killed someone and I turned her in. I saw it as saving her she saw it as betrayal. Until I called her the other night, we haven't spoken in ten years." Their eyes met. "Just because you have a misunderstanding doesn't mean you stop loving someone."

"You still love her?"

Parker creased her forehead. "She's moved on."

Sophie let out a derisive laugh. "You may think she's moved on, but from what I saw last night, that's hard to believe."

Parker put the old truck in gear and let out the clutch lurching it forward. “I don’t think so...she hates me!” she said. “Right now, the most important thing to me is keeping you safe. Olivia has ways of doing that and I don’t. Therefore it was necessary to involve her.”

Sophie grabbed the dashboard as they bumped along the dirt road. “What do you mean?”

Once again, Parker pressed the brake pedal and stopped the truck. “I wish I could, but I can’t guarantee that you’ll be safe until the conditions of your grandmother’s will are met. Over the years, I’ve kept track of Olivia and I know that she possesses contacts, resources and skills that I don’t.”

Sophie’s mind flashed back to the morning and how safe she felt knowing Olivia was there. “Can’t ask for much more can I?”

“Neither of us can,” was Parker’s soft reply.

CHAPTER 17

Olivia parked the motorcycle in its designated bay within the warehouse apartment complex she called home. Exhausted head to toe, she blew out a breath and then chuckled as she recalled Teal's account of rescuing Amelia. Teal spoke with Sister Angelica when she collected Amelia and the negativity that the order felt about the depravation of one of their own was unmistakable. Although Amelia had given up the order, Teal had the distinct impression of once a nun always a nun. One of their own waking up in the convent with a hang over hadn't settled well with any of them...especially Amelia. The downside of Amelia's adventure was that she was in no condition to work and Teal had to scramble to cancel all her appointments. *I can see it all now, Teal in a spin and Amelia with a face as long as a wet weekend, wish I'd been there.*

When she dismounted the bike, Olivia winced at the pain in her shoulder. *It's getting worse. Damn, I'll need to go to the doctor and get it looked at. Maybe I should've have taken Parker up on the offer of a doctor.* A part of her was wary of the new situation of Parker back in her life, while another felt its rightness. She walked over to the central console and checked for the email she was expecting from her associates. As predictable as always, her private, secure inbox was flashing. *Should I look at the mail or find Amelia...choices...choices.* The mail won out as her fingers raced over the keyboard entering her code. She saw the familiar name and opened the message.

The package you forwarded is secure.

No sign of the other package...will continue to monitor for its arrival.

Expect imminent danger. Old partner now part of the equation.

In deep thought, Olivia stroked a hand down her chin as her eyes scanned the mail. It wasn't until she heard the rattle of shoes on the metal staircase that she became aware of another's presence.

"I wasn't expecting to see you," Amelia remarked in a cool voice. Amelia allowed her eyes to wander over every inch of the woman she thought trusted her as a friend - she saw a stranger.

Olivia closed her eyes. *I wonder how sensitive a chat this is going to be,* she thought before swinging around to face the woman. "No, I came back earlier than expected. I heard you were partying last night?" She tried a smile and it froze on her face as angry glittering eyes caught her gaze.

Amelia's lips curled in snarl. "It's none of your business if I chose to party or not! What I do in my own time is my affair! I hope you didn't make a special journey to keep me out of trouble because, I don't need your help."

Ok, this isn't going to be sensitive...it will be more like a head bashing against a wall talk. Right now, I can do without that. "I believe you have a message for me?" Olivia asked quietly.

As if in a Mexican standoff, brown locked with blue. They held each other that way for a few moments while all the senses in their bodies responded to the raw charge

passing between them. Amelia was the first to drag her eyes away, as she looked every where but at Olivia.

"A friend of yours...no, let me rephrase that, a girlfriend of yours...Jerry. Yes, that was her name, would like you to call her. She said to tell you that the bed was cold without you in it." The coolness of the words belied her rapidly beating heart or her pent up anxiety. Once she had confronted Olivia with the information, she felt her shoulders drop in relief as she turned her head away.

Without thinking, Olivia moved quickly and had to suck in a deep breath as the pain in her shoulder hit her hard. "Thank you. Is that all you wanted to say to me?"

Not realizing that Olivia was in such close proximity, Amelia spun around and the sensual overload it caused had her taking in a sharp breath. "I'd like to know just one thing...why Olivia?"

When Olivia saw Amelia's brown eyes fill with anguish and plead for understanding, she bitterly regretted her act of omission. It wasn't Amelia's words, but the expression of betrayal in her eyes that cut her to her heart. *I know damn well, how that feels. It hurts to the core of your very being.* "I won't insult your intelligence by asking exactly what you're talking about Amelia. I didn't think it mattered who I slept with or what my sexual orientation was. We're friends Amelia and business partners. What we both do in our private lives, as you rightly pointed out, isn't either of our businesses."

Amelia growled her irritation. "Damn you Olivia, that's a cop out. You can do better than that...I deserve better."

"Do you? What gives you the right to judge me? Have I ever asked you who you preferred to go to bed with or why you decided celibacy was for you. Isn't me being me enough for you Amelia? If we are true friends, it should be."

Amelia stepped back as if Olivia had slapped her. *She's right...why does it matter.* "I have a headache; I'm going to take a nap."

Olivia watched as Amelia took several steps knowing that it wasn't the end of the conversation - it was the beginning. "I'd never bring anyone here that would make you embarrassed Amelia...if that's what you're worried about."

Amelia felt her back go ramrod straight. "I can't have this conversation now Olivia." She lightly pressed her hand against her churning stomach hoping to quell the emotional upheaval she felt.

"Ok, maybe we should table it for good." Olivia watched as Amelia silently strode to her bedroom and slammed the door. *Hmm, that wasn't so bad. Man, she looked terrible. Hangovers can be a bitch.* She returned to the console, flicked on the speaker phone and deftly dialed a number. *I need to get Parker away from the farm and some place safe. I owe her that much. Then I'll take care of Amelia...I know just the remedy.* An indulgent smile hovered on her lips as she shook her head as the picture of Amelia drunk and singing karaoke entered her head again.

* * *

Parker heard her phone ring and raced out of the bathroom naked. "Hello," she said breathlessly.

"It rang six times. I thought I told you to have the phone with you at all times," the low smoky voice said.

"I was in the shower. Did you expect me to take it into the bathroom?"

Olivia considered switching off the speakerphone, but when she glanced in the direction of the firmly shut door, she left it on. She needed to walk around to reign in her anger. "Frankly, yes."

"Well, I'm sorry Olivia, but you did say you'd call in twenty-four hours and I thought I'd at least have time for a shower."

"Well, you don't have time. For the record, you must do as I say and keep that phone with you twenty-four seven. When I call, I expect an immediate answer and not wait for you to answer as you see fit," Olivia angrily retorted.

What the hell did I do? "Hey, I don't treat you that way, so knock it off! Who rattled your cage anyway?" Parker said tersely.

Olivia snorted like a bull in a rage, at the confident way that Parker seemed to assume that the last ten years never happened - they had. "I'm not in a cage Parker, never have been...never will be. You think you know me so well don't you...well think again!" she spit out angrily. "Are you ready to leave?"

Sophie opened the door and said, "Hey Parker do you think..." She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw the naked woman. *Wow, naked woman are everywhere around here.* Her eyes gave Parker a deliberate once over. *Not bad...not bad at all.* "Sorry," she said. When their eyes met and she saw the anger, she backed out of the room.

Parker felt her jaw torque in anger. "Listen, I never said I think I know you...in fact...oh screw this, I should have known better than to call you." She ground her teeth. "Just forget it Olivia! I'm sorry to have bothered you!"

"If you put the phone down on me Parker it's the last thing you'll ever do," Olivia threatened. She closed her eyes and tried to put the lid on the angry emotions that boiled over into the conversation with Parker.

Parker blew out several breaths before she answered. She decided an angry retort of - *what are you going to do kill me too* - would be pointless. "I need your help O," she said in a calm, measured voice. "Either you want to help or not...it's your call."

It would be so easy to walk away and leave Parker to her own devices. She's given me the perfect out. She closed her eyes. *You always did that Parker. Even when I killed the DA, you gave me an out - turn myself in.* She opened her eyes and turned them to the closed door of her friend and business partner. *What would you do Amelia? Abandon the innocent because of a personal argument - highly unlikely. I guess even if you never speak to me again that I'll follow your path of doing the right thing for the right reasons.* In a much calmer tone she said, "I want you and Sophie to leave the farm by the morning and arrive outside our old precinct in Portsmouth as soon as possible. Call my number or one of my associates when you get there. Someone will come to take you to the safe house."

Parker felt tears well up before they cascaded down her cheeks and she angrily swiped one away. "Thank you. We should be there by two...three at the latest. I don't drive as fast as you," she said with a forced laugh.

Glad for the relief that allowed her facial muscles to change from a frown, Olivia smiled. "That's good to hear. If you speed and had an accident on the way here, I might feel guilty," she said with a softer voice.

"One thing you can count on O, is my driving safely."

"I'm sure there are other talents of yours I can count on and before this is over we'll need them all. When you get here I'll update you fully on the situation your friend and you are in." Olivia mentally decided in those few seconds that it was pointless not using Parker's skills. *I never like to waste resources.*

"Sounds good," Parker said as she bit her lip in thought. "O..."

You never disappoint me do you Parker...you always want to know more. "Yes?"

"Thank you for giving me a chance. I know you and I have issues and you have every reason not to help me." She paused. "I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate everything you're doing." She added softly, "When you got here last night I could tell you were spent. Then, you turned around and drove back to Portsmouth. Please try to get some sleep."

A door opened and Olivia watched as Amelia moved in her direction. *Tired doesn't even come close, exhaustion would be a better choice of word.* "Save it Parker for when you get here." Amelia stopped and stood near Olivia and allowed a hiss to escape. Olivia looked up at Amelia in query. "Anything I can help you with Amelia? I'm nearly finished here."

Amelia glared at her. "I can't believe that you're inviting a strange woman here! You said you wouldn't?"

Parker listened wide-eyed to the conversation Olivia was having with another woman. *That must be her new love interest.*

"I'm on the phone with a client, can we talk afterwards please?" Olivia asked distracted between business and personal problems along with her waning physical and mental state.

Amelia retaliated, "Even though you lied to me, I was prepared to trust you Olivia I really was. It certainly didn't take you long to arrange a rendezvous...I think you've a compulsion,"

Olivia took umbrage to the remark and turned to face Amelia squarely. "Compulsive, me! Give me a break! You're the compulsive one in this partnership, ask anyone."

Fascinated by the conversation, Parker noted Olivia's mood. *I remember how she would come back to the apartment and I'd always know by the tone of her voice what her physical condition was. It's clear that she's exhausted, in pain and she cares about this woman named Amelia. Wonder why they are arguing about me...I'm certainly no threat. Olivia has made that clear enough.*

The headache that caused Amelia to return to the room for medication was pounding like a thousand drums in her head. She sucked in a deep breath before replying. "You have the nerve to say that to me...me! I'm not the one who labels every damn thing in the place and has to have every room just so. If I put a magazine in the wrong spot on the coffee table, you have to move it to the magazine rack. I can't even have my personal knick-knacks in the bathroom because you need it orderly. I call that compulsive. Take it from me that I know these things if you remember what I do for a living."

Olivia angrily bit out, "If you feel that way why didn't you tell me that I irritate you. Oh, and you could always leave you know...I'm not holding you prisoner."

Amelia felt outrage at the answer. *Oh, she wants me to leave now so she can have a string of girlfriends over.* "You'd like that wouldn't you? Then, you can have girls over anytime you please."

Not for the first time, Parker felt like a voyeur and wondered how to let Olivia know she was privy to the conversation. She smiled. *She always tells me not to get involved personally.* She snickered. *From the sound of it, she's in hook, line and sinker. Maybe I can cough or clear my throat or sneeze...that would be subtle.* The little devil on her shoulder said, *go ahead do it* and she coughed loudly.

Distracted by the sound from the loudspeaker, Olivia realized that Parker was privy to the spat she was having with Amelia. *Crap that's all I need. But, she has given me a great idea.* "You know, I love...the way your mind works. Have I ever told you that? Give me a minute please." She saw the look in Amelia's eyes and added, "Just don't argue ok."

Stunned, Amelia nodded mechanically as she wondered *where did that come from?* Nevertheless, she felt the words send a soothing balm over her ruffled emotions.

Olivia took a deep breath. *So help me if you say anything Parker,* she thought before returning to the conversation. "Do you understand my instructions Parker?"

Parker smiled. She knew what Olivia really meant - keep your mouth shut. "Yep, I understand them perfectly. See you tomorrow." When she closed the phone and felt a chill run over her body and her eyes open widened. *Shit, Sophie saw me naked.*

* * *

Olivia shut off the connection and paused for a moment. "I understand why you're upset with me Amelia. Believe me I do."

Amelia heard the sincerity in the words. The few seconds of patience she exercised as Olivia finished her phone conversation settled her nerves enough to speak in what she thought was a logical way. "It's like you don't trust me. Do you know how hurt I was finding out like that? I really thought you and I could say anything to each other."

Yeah, but you find my ways irritating and have never mentioned it. It works both ways my friend. Olivia grinned. "Yeah, I heard you got stoned in a bar across the street and gave a mean karaoke."

A hint of a smile traced Amelia's lips. "Apparently so, I think I scandalized the bar when the Sisters arrived to collect me. I'm not sure who was more surprised, them or the nuns." Moving closer to Olivia, she placed a hand on her shoulder and immediately Olivia winced. "You're hurt?"

With a frown, Olivia nodded. "Yeah, I have to get to the doctor. Want to drive me and we can discuss the case? I'm gonna need your help."

Amelia felt her world right again as the previous disagreement pushed to the back of the queue. *This is how it works between us - nothing else is important.* "Sure, but we need to collect my car from the bar's parking lot."

"We'll take the jeep." Olivia reached for the keys and handed them to Amelia.

Wide-eyed, Amelia stared at the keys. "You're going to trust me with the black monster?"

Olivia softly replied, "Yeah and with a lot more." She walked along side Amelia and allowed her to open the door to the door for her. "I think you named it the Shrek case. I'd like your take on the situation."

CHAPTER 18

That night, as she discussed with Sophie, Olivia's call, Parker avoided the woman's eyes. Speaking with Olivia while undressed was so familiar to her that she tuned out everything else. The last thing she ever expected to happen was for Sophie to see her naked. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Sophie wanted more than a business relationship. *That can't happen. Especially not now - Olivia is back.*

On the other hand, for Sophie, seeing Parker's buff body only solidified the notion that she wanted to get her into her bed. She leaned into the woman next to her and allowed her breast to rest on Parker's arm. "Hmm," she whispered, "this is nice."

Parker moved as close to the couch's arm as she could - Sophie moved closer. "We'll need to leave first thing in the morning and that means we pack tonight and get the car loaded up."

When Parker turned her head, Sophie leaned in and kissed her. The kiss was exactly as she expected—warm wet and sensual. "Shall we move into the bedroom?" Sophie asked.

To her surprise, Parker said, "No."

She ran her finger along Parker's lips. "Just you and I snuggled together making love...how divine," she cooed. "Come on, I promise you will love **every** minute. All we have to do is lock the door and no one will know."

"I will," Parker said as she stood up and moved away from the woman. "We need to get some sleep it will be a long day tomorrow."

"It's all the more reason why we should sleep together so we will be well rested in every way when we set out."

"Sophie, it is my responsibility to keep you safe. In order to do that effectively, I must keep my emotions in check. Having sex with you will not make me emotionally distant; it will distract me from what I need to do to be successful. If I allow myself to go to bed with you, I will have to tell you to find someone else to protect you. Is that what you want?"

Sophie folded her arms across her chest and stuck out a lip. She let her gaze hungrily ravage Parker's body lingering over her breasts and crotch. "What I want is to make love with you all night long."

"That will not happen. Who knows, maybe after we get whoever is trying to kill you and get evidence on your stepmother I will take you up on it...but not tonight."

"Fine," Sophie said before she stomped away. Over her shoulder she said, "It's your loss Parker."

* * *

Now in the car, Sophie looked out the window ruminating about why Parker refused to sleep with her. *Anyone can see she still has feelings for Olivia. Well we shall see about that...when I want something I get it and Parker Davis will not be the exception.* "I still don't understand why we had to leave at this ungodly hour," Sophie whined. "What's the big rush? Just because Olivia says jump doesn't mean we have

to...who put her in charge anyway! What harm is there in getting there at five instead of two?" she said stifling a yawn. "After all, a girl needs her beauty sleep."

Parker suspected that Sophie's outburst was a result of her refusal to sleep with Sophie the night before. *That doesn't matter - all focus has to be on getting to Portsmouth safely.* She looked in the rearview mirror noting that it didn't appear that anyone was following them. "Look at you sitting there with your arms crossed pouting like a spoiled brat." Parker countered. "How on earth did you take care of yourself all those months?"

"I took care of myself just fine thank you," Sophie spat.

"By pitching a fit when you didn't get your way or had to pick up and leave when you thought you were spotted?" Parker shook her head. "I sure read you wrong Sophie."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I thought you needed help...protection. Just how did you manage to stay hidden for all that time Sophie? By finding some idiot like me or Camille to hook up with until you grew tired of them."

"Stop the car!" Sophie screamed. "Stop it right now! How dare you insinuate that I used Cammie? For god's sake she was murdered because of me!"

Parker knew her foul mood for the last twelve hours was directly associated with the conversation she had with Olivia. *Why do I let her get under my skin?* She glanced over at Sophie who had tears running down her cheeks. "Listen, I'm sorry. I didn't want to leave either."

"Then why have we?" Sophie whispered. "I liked being at the farm...and I liked getting to know you." She pressed two fingers against her eyes in an attempt to stave off the tears. "All the time I've been hiding, I never had anyone to protect me until Cammie." She blew her nose and turned watery eyes on the driver. "I like it...being taken care of...no one ever did that before."

"I thought your grandmother took care of you."

"Being responsible for someone doesn't mean you care about them," she whispered. "I guess my grandmother loved me, but I was more of an after thought than anything else."

"Didn't she protect you from your father?"

"No, I was a pawn in their chess game for the queen." She rested her head against the back of the seat and closed her eyes. "When my grandmother left me everything, it was checkmate for that gave me control over all her businesses. Essentially, I became my father's boss." She turned her head and watched the passing trees.

"I don't understand. If you own everything why did you leave...who's minding the store?"

Sophie laughed. "There are CEO's, CFO's and all kinds of lawyers to do that." She shrugged. "You see, the final twist in their chess game was the codicil to the will. In her own warped way, I think grandmother wanted to tempt my dad into finding a way of getting rid of me."

Parker frowned as she tried to digest all that Sophie said. "I can't believe that...why would she do that?"

"She always blamed him for my mother's death and wanted him to pay. That's why she left it all to me. My grandmother loved to manipulate people and situations...she was a master in doing that. Even in death, she's still has control." Sophie wiped the tears

from her cheek with her hand. "I'm tired of running...I just want this all to be over...the best thing for me to do is go back to Philly and deal with it."

With a slight turn of the wheel, Parker guided the car to the shoulder and stopped. "Look at me Sophie." When she refused to make eye contact, Parker placed a hand on Sophie's cheek and gently turned her head. "No one is going to harm you in anyway."

"How can you say that? They murdered Cammie didn't they? It's very likely they will do the same thing to me."

"Not on my watch," Parker said firmly. "They will expect you to be in Portsmouth for the funeral...they're counting on that. That is why Olivia wants us there...she has a safe place for you to stay and we can keep an eye on whoever your stepmother sent."

"How do you know that and why does she have to be involved?"

"Because she's the best and right now that is what you need. Trust me, Olivia wouldn't tell me to come there right away if she didn't have a place for you to stay." Parker stroked Sophie's cheek. "I won't let anything happen to you, I promise."

Sophie closed her eyes and leaned into the hand. "At this point, I am too tired of running away to argue anymore." She opened her eyes and looked at Parker. "I do trust you though."

"Glad to hear it. Now, let's get a move on...I don't want to be late."

As Parker put the car in gear and started down the highway again, Sophie said, "Late, can't keep her waiting can we?"

"Not if we want her help."

"That sounds like an ultimatum to me."

"Take it anyway you want Sophie," Parker said. "But, that is what we are doing."

Sophie just looked at Parker who kept her eyes on the road. *I wonder if she realizes how intense the issues between them are.* She leaned back, yawned and closed her eyes. *Will this ever end* she thought before sleep overtook her.

* * *

Sophie's eyes opened and for a moment - she didn't know where she was. *Oh yeah, we're on our way back to Portsmouth.* She looked over and studied the driver as she remembered the night before. She felt her cheeks grow hot. *I wonder if she regrets not taking me up on my offer.* She reached down and pulled the lever that let the seatback rise.

Parker looked over and smiled. "Did you get a good sleep in?"

Sophie shook her head and said, "I'm hungry maybe we can stop at Good Eats and have some of Dolly's wonderful chicken noodle soup."

"We can't do that."

"Why not? Your friend Olivia said she'd taken care of that man."

"That guy worked with someone Sophie and he might be there. If you show up in town then everyone there that you care about will be in jeopardy."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Hey, I want to apologize for acting like a brat earlier." A weak smile crossed her lips. "I...I just feel like I don't have any control."

"Do you want me to back off?"

Sophie reached over and touched Parker's arm. "No, I want you on my side...you make me feel safe."

Parker briefly looked at the woman next to her. "In about thirty miles or so there's a decent place to eat." She looked at the dashboard clock. "We are making good time and I think we both will need to stretch our legs by then."

Sophie's face lit up. "You know, a big juicy hamburger with greasy french-fries sounds really good to me."

* * *

Parker watched with amusement as Sophie finished off the last of her double cheeseburger. "Where do you put all that?" she asked with a laugh.

"Are you going to eat your pickle?"

"No, go ahead and take it."

"I just love pickles," she said as she snagged the pickle.

With a laugh, Parker picked up the check. "Then it's a good thing you're with me."

Sophie reached across and plucked the check out of Parker's fingers. "This one is on me." When she saw a touch of irritation in Parker's eyes she said, "Please let me do this for you." She batted her eyes. "It's the least I can do...you've done so much for me."

"Ok, but you know I'm still using the money your stepmother gave me and it only seems fitting that she pay for your meal."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Sophie said as she fished her wallet out of her bag. "I'd just as soon not have anything to do with her."

"I can understand that." With a quick glance at her watch, Parker said, "I don't want to be late so we'd better get a move on."

Once they were back in the car and heading toward Portsmouth, Sophie took a deep breath. "I know we spoke of this earlier, but I still don't understand what's so important about being there at a certain time?" Her answer was a glare. "Hey, I'm sorry didn't mean to touch a sore spot."

Parker ground her teeth, looked at the road ahead and looked in the rearview mirror. After thirty minutes of silence she said, "I don't want her angry with me."

"Is she that important to you?"

Parker blew out a breath. "It's complicated. I want her to help us and if we are late she might not."

"We don't need her Parker. We can just drive west and see what's out there. I bet we can make two months pass by real quickly that way."

"Do you honestly think that after chasing you down for ten months she will suddenly stop? The next two months will be crunch time for her...going west will not stop her," she said. "You don't know it yet Sophie, but we will need Olivia if we are to stop your stepmother's plans."

"I bet you are just good as she is."

Parker looked over at her passenger. "No, I'm not Sophie...I don't have the stomach for what she can do or her resources."

* * *

Parker guided her car through the streets of Portsmouth to the place she once worked. She pulled the vehicle into a spot directly opposite the building. "We're here," she said. "Nothing seems to have changed since I was here last." She pointed to a window. "See that window up there on the third floor? O and I used to work there."

Sophie heard the fondness in her companion's voice when she spoke of the past. "You miss it don't you?"

Brown eyes captured blue. "Sometimes, but...everything just went bad. It's kind of hard to think of the good times and not be reminded of the bad." She held up her cell. "I guess I better call. O will be surprised that I'm here early." She dialed Olivia's private number and frowned when she got voice mail. "That's strange she said she always answers that number." She dialed 555-7282 and when she heard 'hello' she said, "Dr. West this is Parker Davis. Olivia told me to call you if I couldn't reach her...she said to say mysteries of the universe."

Amelia smiled at the code. *Another of Olivia's quirks.* "Hello Ms. Davis, you made good time, Olivia didn't expect your arrival for at least another hour or so."

"Sorry," she said feeling stupid. "Olivia is such a stickler for promptness and I arrive early." *Shit! All I need is to piss her off because I'm early.* "Should I wait until she can speak with me?"

Amelia felt her face contort in surprise as her lips tugged into a smile. "I hardly think the fact that you made good time warrants you having to wait." Amelia chuckled then added, "I see you know Olivia pretty well?"

"Ah, yeah I guess I do." *Damn, I hate not knowing the person I'm dealing with.* "Are you the one I need to speak to about what we should do next?"

The tentative question made Amelia smile even more. *Hmm maybe she's afraid of Olivia...she can have that effect on people.* "Yes, I can deal with the next stage of the journey. Is the car you're driving a rental?"

"No, why?" She looked toward Sophie who raised her eyebrows and smiled before mouthing, *what's going on?* Parker shook her head and held up one finger. "I'm getting directions," she whispered holding her hand over the mouthpiece.

Amelia frowned, "I hope you're not very fond of it. Olivia wants you to leave it in a no parking zone and wait near the inside entrance of the library across the street from the precinct."

She glanced down the street and saw the library. "Sure, no problem the car is a junker that I picked up a week ago under an assumed name...no loss to me. Will we meet you in the library then?"

"Yes, I've been given your descriptions by Olivia." Quickly checking the time, Amelia continued. "I'll be there in twenty minutes tops."

"Ok, can you make that thirty minutes, I need to wipe the car down."

Amelia laughed, "I was supposed to remind you of that if you hadn't mentioned it. I'll see you and Ms. Durant shortly, goodbye Ms. Davis."

Parker felt her blood pressure rise. *Does she think I am stupid! Of course, I know not to leave any traces behind.* She ended the call and turned to Sophie. "We need to go to the bus station and stow our bags in a locker then move the car and make sure that we leave nothing behind that could lead to either of us."

"Then what," Sophie asked as she took the plastic gloves that Parker handed her.

“We go to the library.” She rummaged through a bag in the back seat and pulled out her blonde wig. “Put this on and wear your sunglasses...we can’t take any chances.”

* * *

The call Amelia received from the Davis woman was earlier than Olivia expected. When Amelia asked about the timing of their arrival, Olivia sarcastically called Parker *a tortoise on wheels*. *You were wrong Olivia. I’d call her more like a race driver*. She turned her head and glanced at the half open door of the room where Olivia was soundly sleeping. *I half expected you to wake up when I was speaking. I knew you were tired, but I think it is more like total exhaustion. Well, I have it covered now and when you get up, they’ll be here*. Selecting the keys for her vehicle, she headed for the car and the library.

Twenty-five minutes later, having found parking almost impossible, Amelia entered the library and glanced around for the two women. When she saw them, she almost burst out laughing at their absurd garb.

With amusement brimming from her eyes, she headed to the two women sitting on a bench trying to appear nonchalant. *In those get ups, I bet they receive interesting stares*. Seconds later, she stood in front of them. “Hi, do you have the time please?”

Parker couldn’t believe her eyes when she looked up at the woman who asked the time. She attempted to speak, but words would not find their way out of her mouth. *I can’t believe it, I know her! Crap, I hope she isn’t the person we are to meet*.

“It’s one twenty-five,” Sophie offered.

Amelia smiled. “Thanks. I said I’d meet some friends here in thirty minutes and I’m five minutes early. You couldn’t point me in the direction of the bathroom could you?”

All Parker could do was stare. *What’s wrong with me? Snap out of it!* “Hmm, yes, I believe it’s down that way,” she said pointing toward the center of the library. “Actually we were going that way, why don’t I show you?”

As she smiled her gratitude, Amelia had a distinct impression she’d seen the woman before. *It’s the eyes—hmm, I don’t remember ever meeting anyone by either of their names before*. As they walked at a steady pace toward the bathroom, Amelia searched the area for any evidence that anyone was following them—she saw none.

“I’ve been watching everyone since we arrived and I don’t see any threat,” the taller of the two women whispered before she opened the bathroom door.

Once inside, Amelia watched as the taller one checked for any evidence that anyone else was inside - there wasn’t.

“It’s safe,” Parker said before extending her hand. “I’m Parker Davis and this is Sophie Durant.”

Unable to suppress the laughter anymore, Amelia giggled as she shook each of the woman’s hands. “I figured you were Ms. Davis.” She smiled thinly. “When we entered the bathroom, you reminded me of Olivia.”

With her eyebrows creased, Parker cocked her head. “I do?” She shrugged. “Never saw the resemblance.”

Sophie irritated by the woman’s laugh asked, “Exactly what is so funny?”

“Actually it isn’t the resemblance. Hell would have to freeze over before Olivia would look like the two ugly sisters.” She looked at Parker. “It’s the way you checked

out the room - she does it everywhere we go. I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself properly, I'm Doctor West...Amelia West." Amelia grinned as she shook her head at the disguises again.

"I hope you don't take exception to our apparel my dear Dr. West. I'll have you know that some of the finest designers of our time made them." Parker grinned and waved her hand down her body then did the same to Sophie. "As you can see, we are dressed for a night of partying.

"Yeah, and I am the blonde bombshell of the pair," Sophie offered.

Those eyes again they are so familiar. Amelia giggled at the repartee from the one called Parker Davis. Sophie Durant was a little drier, but who wouldn't be in her position. "I'm afraid all I can offer you are three square meals a day and a bed. The partying is more Olivia's forte."

Parker laughed. "Your offer is exactly what I am looking for Dr. West." She felt Sophie touch her arm. "My friend Sophie is more the party type."

Sophie slapped Parker's arm. "I am not." Then she chuckled. "Well if the company is right..."

Amelia saw the interaction and mentally noted their body language toward each other. "I'll let Olivia show you the sites...you can ask her anyway. We need to go now. My car is parked in the furthest part of the lot so I'm afraid so we have a fair walk."

Just then, the bathroom door opened and Parker instinctively put herself between the door and the two women. When an elderly woman walked in, she relaxed her stance. "No problem with a long walk," she said. "We need to get Sophie out of the public view," she whispered as she held the door open.

As they walked rapidly toward her car, Amelia glanced again at the disguises. "If I were you I'd removed the ..." she pointed to the extra clothing. "I'm sure you wouldn't want Olivia seeing you like that," she said quietly so that only Parker could hear.

For a moment, Parker felt taken aback by the off handed comment. *Does she know about our history?* She looked at Sophie who was walking ahead of her. *I guess we do look rather ridiculous, but it was all I could come up with at the last minute.* "Dr. West, we left our bags in a locker at the bus station. We can change into our regular clothes there."

"I don't think that's a good idea right now. Either Olivia or I will collect your belongings later." She looked at the two again and smiled before shook her head. "Never mind, Olivia could do with some light relief when she sees you." Once she opened her vehicle, she motioned for them to get in. "Let's go home shall we."

CHAPTER 19

A buzzing noise woke Olivia out of her dreamless sleep. Disorientated, she looked around to verify that she was actually in her own home - she was. *Why didn't I go to bed?*

In a slow fluid movement, she raised herself from the sofa and flexed her back cautiously. The sharp pain in her shoulder had diminished to a dull thud. In its place, was tightness from five stitches that she received the previous day. *I can live with that. Just as well, I'm a quick healer.*

Must be Amelia, I wonder how long I've slept? Doesn't matter I feel a hundred times better than I did. Olivia glanced at her attire of shorts and a cropped Navy t-shirt. *Amelia insisted I chill for a few hours and I did that.* As her eye caught the time, she gaped in amazement it was almost two. *Lunch...she's probably gone out for lunch.* Then she reached for her cell frowning as she saw the reference to a missed call. It was Parker's number. *Crap now she's going to crow that I don't answer my damn phone.*

What she hadn't expected when she approached Amelia's car, was two other figures in the vehicle. *Goddamn it, who are they?* Her eyes took in the ridiculous clothing and accessories that she was sure were a throw back to the sixties. *Oh no, that trip to the convent brought out her old habit of helping the down and outs. This is probably her way of atonement. Well, I promised no girlfriends so she can promise no charity cases in our home.*

Amelia stepped out of the vehicle. "Hi there, good you're awake. Did you sleep ok? How's the shoulder?"

Olivia frowned slightly. *More to the point, who are your new friends?* "I'm good, you should have woken me," she replied levelly.

"I guess I should have." She walked around the vehicle and stood within a foot of Olivia. A soft sigh of appreciation passed her lips as she felt her friend's strong aura envelope her. *Good, she looks back to normal.* Then she captured Olivia's eyes. "You needed the rest. I figured I could handle this." She motioned for the two women in the car to get out.

"Handle what?" Olivia tore her eyes from Amelia and scrutinized the women exiting the car. Her eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets as she realized who they were. "Oh my god I don't believe it - Parker!" Her hands waved over the outfits. "What the hell is all this about?"

Parker was in a state of disbelief for a completely different reason. On the journey to the safe house, she'd asked Amelia about the place they were going.

* * *

"Oh you'll be fine it's the safest place in this town and probably the state. I should know since I live there." Amelia grinned as she negotiated the turn toward the building.

Parker frowned. *So, she's the Amelia I heard Olivia arguing with. I knew that Olivia lived with someone...but this woman. Hmm, I need to find out more.* "You're allowing us to move into your place? Did Olivia mention that we're in trouble?" When

she saw the car drive up to the building she knew was Olivia's, she smiled. *Exactly where I hoped she'd put us.*

Amelia replied casually, "Of course." She pressed the button on her dashboard that would de-activate the security in the building and allow them entrance.

Parker glanced at Sophie who gave a bemused expression at the turn of events. *I wouldn't want to put up strangers in my home...especially fugitives.* Sophie casually asked, "Do you live alone? I guess with all this security this can't be a safe area."

This time Amelia laughed as the doors began to open, "It's a great neighborhood, very friendly. My partner is a security guru...you'll see and understand shortly."

* * *

Parker couldn't believe that Olivia was standing there. *She said partner. Is Amelia Olivia's partner as in partner?* The reference to their dress made her grind her teeth in irritation. She turned to Amelia and asked, "If someone asked you to describe either Sophie or myself what would you say?"

Amelia gave her a strange thoughtful glance as she considered the question. *A rather odd question really, hmm what do I think.* "I would say...that on reflection..."

"Amelia for god's sake stop beating about the bush, they look like a pair of clowns. Where on earth did you learn to dress like that Parker? That look went out with the sixties," Olivia snapped. *I can't believe Amelia went out and got them without telling me. Apparently, she didn't understand how dangerous this is when I explained the case.*

Parker shook her head at the rejoinder. "Amelia, will you shut your eyes please."

Amelia shook her head in amusement. *I'm not getting into a spat between those two.* "Look, I could do with some refreshment and I'm sure Sophie could too." Amelia smiled at the silent woman then back to the belligerent attitude of Parker. "Ok, ok. If this is a game between you two, let's get it over with shall we. I've shut my eyes...now what?"

Parker smiled her satisfaction then reached out and touched Amelia's arm. "What color are Sophie's eyes? Is her face round, thin, fat, pock marked or smooth? How tall am I?"

Olivia initially watched the exchange with boredom then, when Parker touched Amelia, she felt her hackles rise. *You are not going there Parker so don't even try!*

Amelia pulled out every damn file she had on memory of the two women and for the life of her couldn't actually recall their real features. "I think you're both around...my height, average kind of build that kind of thing?" She opened her eyes and smiled. "Ah, I see. I get the message, but it wasn't me who said anything about your attire."

Parker laughed. "Remember your old motto Olivia? Dress so they don't recognize your face."

A scowl replaced the bored expression on Olivia's face as she tightly replied, "We all use our skills as we see fit and that was never my motto. You made good time...what happened, did you finally find a decent car that allowed you to drive the speed limit," she said sarcastically.

Amelia watched the stand off. *Oh, she's mad now that's interesting. The Davis woman is the first person other than me that actually gets under Olivia's skin. Hmm, I wonder what the story is between them. Then again, do I really want to know - yes, I do.*

In an effort to calm herself, Parker drew in a deep breath and looked at Amelia. "I thought I heard something about refreshments." Then she turned her attention toward Olivia. "I won't speak of your habits if you don't speak of mine."

Amelia grinned and turned to Sophie. "Would you like to freshen up Sophie? We can leave these two to argue about goodness knows what. I'm sure I have something else for you to wear." When she saw Sophie smile she added, "Then maybe we can all settled down and relax for a minute."

Olivia totally ignored the comment and retorted tightly, "I've got work to do." She turned on her heel toward the center console and sat.

This is really too much to take in, Sophie thought. *I see that the animosity between Parker and Olivia is still the same. I do like Amelia though.* "Yeah, thanks I'd like that." As they walked away, Sophie said, "You really don't like this get-up do you?" Both women laughed and went into Amelia's room.

Standing alone, Parker watched Olivia at what she assumed was the hub of the building's security. It was clear to her that Olivia didn't want her there. All the words that had gone unspoken over the last ten years screamed for release. *What I wouldn't give to see that look you saved just for me in your eyes again.* She closed her eyes and sucked in a breath. *I'm crazy for allowing these feeling to surface again.* She looked at the woman hunched over a keyboard again. *For the umpteenth time I'll let you go O ... I can do that. Sure I can...yeah right.* She heard Amelia and Sophie laughing and smiled as she turned away from Olivia and went to join them.

* * *

After a delicious meal, Amelia, Parker and Sophie sat on a comfortable couch listening to relaxing music. From Amelia's point of view, the meal progressed remarkably cordially after Olivia decided to be pleasant toward their guests. *It's only because I goaded her into it while we made dinner together.* She looked in Parker's direction and saw her casting a glance in the direction of the closed door. *They're all the same.* "Hey Parker, why don't you go ask Olivia if she wants to join us for coffee. I'm sure she's checking on her mail or something like that.

I'm not sure I want her to join us. I don't know if I'm up for another sparring match. She looked at Amelia and smiled. "You have great taste in music Amelia. What piece is this? I don't believe I've ever heard it before."

Music was one of Olivia's favorite leisure activities and one that they shared. *One of the few things we do have in common.* "It's wonderful isn't it? Rachmaninov's-piano concerto number two. Actually, both Olivia and I love it...she bought it for me one Saturday at a classical music fair about a year ago." As she recalled the memory, a wistful expression crossed her face.

"Will you two excuse me," Sophie remarked. She rolled her eyes and shook her head at Parker's unsubtle flattery. "I need to use the bathroom."

Parker carelessly threw back, "Don't be long," before turning back to Amelia. The woman's fond words about Olivia made her feel a bit of jealousy. *I'm not sure which one I'm jealous of...O or Amelia.* "Are you and Olivia partners in every sense of the word?" she blurted out.

“Well yes, I guess we are. We are business partners and we live together and share the daily stuff around the place except for the security...that’s all Olivia’s.” Amelia answered innocently. She was unaware of the meaning behind *every sense of the word*. “Would you believe that I’ve even taught her how to cook the odd dish?”

All Parker could do was smile at the woman’s apparent naiveté. “The Olivia I knew never entered a kitchen unless it was to have a meal.” She eyed Amelia. “Do you find it hard to work together and live together at the same time? I know it was hard for me and my partner to do that.”

Sophie stood at the edge of the room listening to Parker’s pitiful attempts to find out if Olivia and Amelia were lovers. *I’m not even annoyed with her. The way those two look at each other, Parker hasn’t a cat in hell’s chance of coming between them.* She coughed and when they both looked at her, she said, “I think Parker wants to know if you and Olivia are lovers.”

It was a like a punch to the stomach on a raw wound. Amelia realized that the association she had of partner was in total contrast to what the other women did. *Is that what they think? Olivia and I are sleeping together as well as...oh no I’m an idiot of course that’s what most people think who know Olivia. Dumb, dumb and even dumber.* With cheeks flaming, she stood up and walked unsteadily toward the door. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom. Please make yourself at home.” She fled before anyone else could comment.

From her vantage point at her console, Olivia heard the distinctive rat, tat, tat on the floor of Amelia’s gait. “Hey, everything ok?”

Amelia’s response was a shake of her head as she made her way to her room and slammed the door.

Olivia’s temper flared as she stood up and roared into the room where the visitors were. “So help me Parker if you’ve hurt her in any way you’re dead!” she growled.

Both Parker and Sophie looked up saw an enraged Olivia. “Oops,” gulped Sophie.

“Oops?” Olivia scowled. “Is that all the goddamn you have to say? Fuck you Parker! I don’t know why I ever thought I wanted to help you.”

“I need to see Amelia,” Parker said through gritted teeth. She refused to allow Olivia to provoke her into a senseless argument.

Olivia glared at her old lover. Just who does she think she is, demanding like that? “You think I’m going to allow you within a foot of her unsupervised! Think again.”

Sophie moved slightly to shield Parker fearing Olivia would become violent. “It wasn’t her fault. I misinterpreted something and my question upset her...I’m sorry.”

Parker ignored Sophie as she gently moved her out of the way and took a predatory stance before piercing Olivia with her eyes. “Get over yourself Olivia! For once in your life, let someone else take the lead. That attitude along with your out of control temper is what got you in trouble ten years ago!” she spat. “I want to see Amelia and I will! Either you tell me where she is or I will start opening doors till I find her!”

Sophie’s eyes bugged out. In the short time she’d known Parker, she never heard her raise her voice or get angry. “Hey,” she said touching Parker. “We can work this out without coming to blows can’t we?”

For Olivia, the unexpected body blow from Parker’s words reminded her of their acrimonious past. It didn’t ignite the fire of her temper, but deflated it totally. Her body

sagged against the wall just as if someone had physically hit her. *Who am I to dictate to Parker? These women require my skills not my emotions.* “She’s in her room....”

Sophie watched Parker leave abruptly then her eyes turned to the woman she considered both scary and dangerous. Now, she saw her in a different light. *She’s just like everyone else...she’s unable to stop the steamroller of her inner emotional needs.* The revelation didn’t change her opinion - *I still don’t like her.* “I’m sure it’s going to be ok,” she said with a slight shrug. *That was dumb! From the way Olivia backed down, I’d guess Parker hit a raw nerve and I come up with it’s going to be ok.* She inwardly shook her head while fixing her eyes on Olivia. For a split second, she saw a bleak expression cross Olivia’s features.

Olivia’s cold and unfeeling response was in total contrast to her facial appearance. “I need to know everything, and I mean everything, you know about your stepmother. I want to know her habits, routines and anything else about her. Go back as far as you can remember and include your stepbrother too.” Her jaw set as she sank into her favorite armchair. *Two can play at their games.* “Also, tell me about your father. Is he involved too?”

Sophie, with a wide unbelieving expression, felt her body automatically fall back onto the sofa. *I see she’s back to scary mode.* With a deep sigh, she haltingly began to dredge up old, unwanted memories of the woman who wanted her dead. “To my knowledge my father is not involved...but I wouldn’t put it past him. It all started when my mother died...”

* * *

Parker made her way toward Amelia’s room. She knocked lightly. “Amelia, it’s Parker, may I come in?”

There was silence from the room.

“Please Amelia, we need to talk.” When she still received no reply, she put her hand on the knob, opened the door and went in. Amelia was lying on her bed with her face hidden by a pillow. Parker crouched beside the bed and softly said, “Hey, I’m sorry.”

“Didn’t your parents bring you up to understand another’s personal space?” Amelia said through the pillow. “Go away please.”

“I won’t leave until you speak with me Amelia.” She reached over and gently pulled the pillow away. Empathy filled Parker’s heart when she saw the tearstained cheeks. “I once was on the police force and when we were searching for clues I would be single minded in the pursuit. My partner would always tell me that if I concentrated on the miniscule I would overlook the obvious.”

Amelia’s curiosity got the better of her as she responded to the softly spoken words. “Have you found something obvious you’ve overlooked?”

“Not me Amelia, you and Olivia.” She gently touched the woman’s cheek and wiped a tear away. “I was in disguise when you gave me a cantaloupe you chose for yourself. At the time, I thought you were one of the kindest people I ever met. I wished that I had more time to spend with you. You seemed like an angel to me.”

A spark of remembrance ran in Amelia’s consciousness. *That’s where I’ve seen her before.* A weak smile played on her lips. “Oh, that’s why you looked so familiar to

me. I saw through your disguise you know. In fact, I mentioned you to Olivia. Funny really, because I called you a friend and I hardly spoke more than a sentence or two with you.”

Parker grinned. “You saw through the disguise, but you didn’t see me, did you?”

“I saw into your heart and that was enough for me Parker. We each follow a path and ways, which define the people we instinctively know as good.”

Parker could see Amelia’s innocent appreciation of humanity reflecting in her eyes. With a nod, Parker acknowledged the compliment. “Not too many people bother to see another in that light Amelia.” She reached out and took the woman’s hand. “I’ve been around you and Olivia for what,” she looked at her watch. “About three hours and the obvious thing that I see is a deep loving relationship. Naturally, I thought that you and Olivia were partners in life as you are in business. I’m sorry if that upset you...I upset you. I never intended that to happen.”

Amelia graciously accepted the apology. “I should have known that people might think that, but you see, up until yesterday, I didn’t even know Olivia was ...well. I won’t say that you’re wrong about me loving her because you’re not. You need to understand how I see this relationship.”

“Tell me.”

Amelia drew in a deep breath before staring off into the distance. “Sometimes it feels like I’ve known Olivia forever. The fact is we met a little over two years ago when I was a nun.”

A nun...did she leave the convent because of Olivia? Parker kept her eyes steady and her emotions in check. “Go on,” she said quietly.

“To cut a rather long and terrible story short, my life was turned upside down, although I was going through an inner turmoil anyway. People I trusted...we both trusted, betrayed us, and people we loved and respected died. With the aftermath, all we both knew was that together we could face the world and all its problems. Alone, I doubt either of us would have been much of a survivalist. Of course I love her, she’s the most stable part of my life and I think I am for her too.” She shrugged. “I doubt she’d admit that openly.” Amelia gave a tight smile and looked over to Parker who appeared to be lost in her own memories.

“That partner I spoke of used to tell me that by taking chances we experience the best life has to offer.” Parker paused as she pondered the wisdom of admitting who the partner was. *That will serve no purpose.* “Are you afraid to admit your love to Olivia?”

Amelia laughed softly. “I still don’t think you understand Parker. What we share is far more complex than physical love. It goes beyond that. What should I call it? Hmm, let me see now...an eternal need. Yet, it’s as simple as adding one and one together - we make the perfect pair.”

Parker listened to the heartfelt words and wanted to cry. Instead, she took a cleansing breath and said, “Being in love encompasses more than a physical desire, but at the same time it is through touching that we convey our deepest feelings for another.” She paused to collect the raw emotions that threatened to engulf her. “I think it was Helen Keller that said something like...if you stay in the shadows you will never see the sun. Come out of the shadows Amelia and let the love you feel for Olivia shine on your face. Don’t wait...opportunity can slip through your fingers and then it is lost forever.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” The comment took Amelia so off-guard that she tried to divert the conversation away from herself. “Has that happened to you?”

Parker refused to let the discussion turn in her direction. “Are you afraid of the way Olivia makes your body feel?” As the brown eyes met, she held them. *I won’t let you off the hook that easily.* “It is a strange sensation isn’t it...when you are so overtaken by her presence that you think you’ll never breathe again.”

I can’t allow her ideas to influence the way I live my life and my upbringing in the church. What Olivia and I share has to be enough for us both. “Both Olivia and I have issues from the past to deal with. Until we do well...” She spread her hands out in a resigned gesture. “Take you and Olivia for instance.”

With a shake of her head Parker laughed. “Is our acrimonious relationship that obvious?”

“To me yes. Do you know the name of our Agency?” Amelia chuckled changing the sensitive subject matter.

“Yeah, I do. WHMH, right?”

Amelia nodded. “Ah, but do you know what the initials mean?”

Parker grinned. “Nope, but I bet you’re going to tell me.”

With a smug expression on her face, Amelia replied, “When Hell Meets Heaven. Kinda fitting don’t you think.” She smiled. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Caring enough to make sure I was ok...and for the apology.”

“Like I said earlier, I wished we had more time to get to know each other.” She tipped her head to the side. “Perhaps after this is all over...who knows what the future holds.”

Out of her element, Amelia said, “We’d better go join the others before Olivia takes it into her head that I need saving.”

This time Parker laughed as they headed for the door. “All I need is for her to think I’m invading her territory.”

“I won’t tell you how long the last person was in the hospital the last time she tried to save my honor.” Amelia chuckled alongside Parker as they left her room.

With a pang of jealousy tugging at her heart, Parker thought, *I wonder if Olivia knows just how lucky she is to have Amelia’s love...bet she doesn’t have a clue. Take a note out of your own book O and stop overlooking the obvious.*

They entered the room hand in hand. With a twinkle in her eye, Parker said, “Don’t worry Mom. We kissed and made up.”

* * *

Amelia silently watched Olivia at the console - it was one in the morning. From her vantage point, she considered her options. *I could breeze by and say goodnight as I usually do, or I could say nothing and go to bed. She was so reticent when Parker and I returned. I’m not even sure she wants to speak with any of us, except maybe Sophie. They looked tight when we returned.* That thought created a pang in her chest. *Am I losing you Olivia? What’s happened to us lately? You haven’t changed...but I have on my views on life and... us. Parker is right. You do make me feel things that I’ve never felt before. Does everything always have to be about sex?*

“You’ll bore a hole in my back if you don’t shift your gaze...unless that’s the intention.” Olivia swung her chair around and gazed in Amelia’s direction with an unreadable expression.

With a gentle smile, Amelia shrugged. “I’d never intend that,” she replied softly. She walked over to within a foot of Olivia. “How’s the shoulder?”

“It’s tightening up a little,” Olivia grudgingly admitted. “I think the doctor needs to hone his skills with the needle.”

Tilting her head to one side, Amelia gave her a serious look. “Want me to take a look at it? I might not be adept with the needle, but I can probably see if the stitches are getting infected?”

Under any other circumstance, Olivia would have gratefully accepted the offer, but she didn’t want the others to misconstrue the situation. “I’ll manage. Hey, it’s late and you need to get some sleep.”

“What about you getting some sleep too?” Amelia smiled warmly at the concern she heard in Olivia’s voice.

Olivia removed her eyes from Amelia and glanced back at the console. Several messages from DOCO needed her immediate attention regarding O’Donnell. “I’ll go to bed as soon as I’ve dealt with the mail...and before you say it, I promise.”

“Olivia about today...about Parker...”

A hand in the air silenced the rest of the words. “It’s not my business Amelia. I tend to forget you can handle most things.”

There was a heavy silence between them as Amelia contemplated the bleakness of the words in her heart. “Most things yes, though not every thing. I’ve still got you on my side for those times, right?”

Olivia felt her throat go dry, as she wanted to shout, *until the end of time*, but instead avoided looking directly at Amelia. She said, “Sure, until you find someone else more suitable.” She felt her heart breaking with the realization of the truth of her words. *One day there will be someone for Amelia and it won’t be the likes of me. Even Parker is better suited for you Amelia and that’s saying a lot. There are times even now when I hate Parker as much as I once loved her...talk about irony.*

Amelia pursed her lips. *There will be a time when we’ll have to talk seriously about what each of us want. It’s too late and this is an inappropriate time. I wish Parker and Sophie weren’t here. I’d make you listen to me Olivia and understand, because I think you’re the only one who ever will truly understand me.* “Goodnight Olivia.” She gently placed a hand on the uninjured shoulder and squeezed. “Don’t stay up too long, ok.”

The touch, which felt like it scalded her skin, had Olivia almost jump out of her seat. She unsteadily whispered, “I won’t. Goodnight Amelia, pleasant dreams.”

The rat-tat tat of Amelia’s steps taking her across the floor to her bedroom allowed Olivia to pick up her scrambled nerves and concentrate once again on the information on the screen. *Damn, you get under my skin Amelia. Thank god, you don’t realize that or I’d lose you too and then I’d be lost forever.*

CHAPTER 20

Sophie was the first to wake and quietly made her way to the kitchen to make coffee. She noticed a newspaper lying on the console in the other room and took it with her. While the coffee brewed, she looked at the front page. Funeral for Slaying Victim Tomorrow. Her hand went to her mouth as she gasped at Camille's face smiling up at her. "Oh, Cammie," she sobbed.

"Hey," a soothing voice said. "What's the matter?"

Turning around, she saw Parker and collapsed against her chest. The taller woman's eyes looked over Sophie's shoulder and read the headline.

"I have to go to say goodbye," she sobbed.

"I don't think it is wise for you to go to the funeral."

A petulant expression overtook the anguished one. She lifted her head to pierce Parker with a glare. "I'm going and you can't stop me! Don't you think they've taken enough of my life already?"

"And, how do I protect you Sophie? Even with Olivia's help, we can't cover all the areas that we'd need to keep you safe." When she saw Sophie's jaw set she added, "All it would take is someone with a long distance rifle on a roof or in a window. Your life would be over just like that." She snapped her fingers to emphasize the point. "If you're out in the open, it will be impossible to stop."

"Have you ever considered that I already think my life is over? Living like this for all these months has taken its toll. I'm tired of it Parker. Tired of running away and not facing up to that witch," Sophie said bitterly.

Parker embraced Sophie and gently rubbed her back. "Shh, we're going to get through this," she whispered. "Remember, I promised to keep you safe."

Olivia entered the building in stealth mode via the side entrance. She adopted doing that to accommodate Amelia's sleeping pattern, which was much longer than hers was. Each morning at six am, she'd be off either to work or taking a run - today she ran. The exercise helped release built up tension and she had plenty in her life. While she took off her running shoes, she heard voices and listened just as any good private detective would. Then she quietly made her way to the kitchen.

The strong hands that held Sophie made her feel better, but for quite different reasons than the one Parker offered. With an unsteady breath, she replied, "Yes, you promised, but what about my promise to Cammie...or the one about not having anyone else getting hurt. I'm going Parker and neither you nor the Latina Amazon is going to stop me."

Parker couldn't believe her ears as she stepped back and held Sophie at arms length. "Latina Amazon? Where did you come up with that?" She felt anger well up. "I'll have you know that you're damn lucky to have Olivia on your side." She leveled her eyes at the woman. "I can't believe you said that."

"I don't care what you think right now Parker; you're too damned wrapped up in your own stupid life. Besides, you're only doing this for the money, which means you work for me so you'll do as I say." Sophie interjected unhappily.

Olivia was incensed. The comment about her stature and ethnicity, which she had to admit, was a new one, along with the tone of the spoiled brat's voice, had her hackles rising. "Lady, you'll do what Parker tells you or you can leave this place, right now and to hell with you! Believe me...hell is exactly where you'll end up within twenty-four hours."

Dumbfounded, Parker shook her head twice. *What's going on here...why is O defending me?* "Sophie, is that what you want?"

Sophie was at a loss for words as she faced the angry woman who had surreptitiously entered their conversation. *How dare she listen in on a private conversation? Damn sneak.* With a deep breath, she looked at Parker and said, "Please, let me go to the funeral. The last thing I can do for Cammie is to pay my respects." Then she glared at Olivia and said, "If it was her funeral," she hooked her thumb in Olivia's direction, "you'd want to do the same regardless of the danger, wouldn't you?"

She has me there. Parker's eyes softened, as she looked first at Sophie then toward Olivia. "I would be at her funeral come hell or high water...nothing would keep me away," she replied quietly.

Amelia heard the raised voices and ventured out of bed as she sighed heavily. *This wasn't a good move... Olivia allowed business to enter the privacy of our home and now it's become a battlefield.* She pulled on her dressing gown and made her way to where the three others were. It looked like a stand-off, but experience told her that Olivia wasn't happy. "Hey guys, good morning. Is anyone in need of a caffeine fix?"

Parker's face lit up with the arrival of Olivia's partner. "Good morning. I'd love a cup. I think Sophie already has a pot going."

Sophie, thankful that Amelia had eased the tension, seized the opportunity. "Yes it's on the boil I'll fetch it if you like."

Amelia slowly walked toward Olivia and stood close enough so that their hips almost touched. With a twinkle in her eye, she whispered, "Good morning, did you run off all that built up tension this morning?" With a teasing smile, she walked toward Sophie who was trying to peel away from the quartet. "I'll help you Sophie."

Parker took the opportunity to approach Olivia. "I think we need to come up with a coherent plan. Do you think it would be too risky to use Sophie as bait to find the killer?"

Olivia still watching Amelia, felt her anger abate somewhat. She let Parker's question whirl around in her head before saying, "Everything to do with this case is risky Parker. I need you to look at the information I've received from some of my contacts. We'll build a strategy for the funeral after that."

Not prepared for the jolt she felt, Parker reached out and lightly touched Olivia's hand. "Sounds like a plan and I have to admit I would love to know more about your gadgets." She shrugged and added, "Just how do I get my hands on some of them?"

Olivia looked down at the hand on hers and a fleeting memory of how her body was set aflame with passion when Parker touched her struggled for acknowledgment. *I wonder if I allowed myself to let go would the spark reignite. I've buried it and it will take a giant excavator to find. What about my feelings for Amelia?* She mentally shook her head. *I'm not going there, too much pain and heartache for us both.* "You can see, but can't touch. There are some toys in life that you can't buy with currency," she replied cryptically.

As they entered the area of the console and Olivia's 'toys', Parker let out a genuine laugh. "You always did know how to pique my interest didn't you. Look, but don't touch, sounds like a challenge to me."

Olivia gave Parker a hard stare. "Some challenges can be deadly Parker. We need to formulate that plan," she retorted heading for the stairs. As she walked toward her equipment, she thought about some of the items that were still in the prototype stage. *The only reason I have them is that DOCO makes them available to me as payment for any task that they want me involved in. Usually means the equipment is associated with death. Something Parker wouldn't and shouldn't understand.*

"Wow, I can't believe all this," Parker said with wide eyes. She looked at Olivia and creased her brow. "How did you get all this stuff," she asked. "Are you sure I can't touch...I'd love to see how that one feels in my grip."

Olivia watched the genuine fascination in Parker's eyes. *I remember when I had that kind of appreciation in my eyes. Damn, that feels like a century ago.* "I'll let you loose on some of this stuff after we plan out what to do tomorrow. Right now, we need your planning mind focused on what to do, ok?"

Parker stopped and waited until Olivia turned to her. "Olivia, I want you to know how much it means to me...I mean you're helping me out." She bit her lower lip. "Sometimes it feels like old times, but I know it is a moment I can't get back." She blew out a breath, pursed her lips and shrugged. "I guess we better get started on making a plan."

* * *

Amelia and Sophie arrived downstairs with the coffee and several slices of toast. As Sophie went to the dining room with the heavily laden tray, Amelia approached the console and the two women.

Unconsciously, Amelia placed a gentle hand on Olivia's forearm and smiled into the eyes that turned to meet hers. "I think you and Parker need to eat breakfast and definitely have that caffeine fix." When she received a curious look, she added, "I know you do." She raised her eyebrows fixing them on Olivia expecting her usual negative reply, but there wasn't one. "Right?"

As Olivia looked at Amelia, Parker's words kept echoing in her head. *It is a moment I can't get back*, played like a broken record. She felt unsettled and knew that the words hit a cord regarding a situation she needed to rectify sooner rather than later. Because of the mental distraction, she let her guard down and said, "You're always looking out for me aren't you Amelia?"

Amelia became self-conscious when she realized Parker was there and moved away. Quietly replying, "Someone has to and I'm happy to serve. Come on you two or the toast will be cold." She headed toward the dining area without looking back.

"I guess we should do as we're told," Parker said avoiding Olivia's eyes. *It's clear to me she's moved on. What a dope I am.*

* * *

Olivia glanced up to the kitchen and for a moment watched Amelia and Sophie who appeared to be sharing a joke. *Crap, what wouldn't I give to be doing that instead of listening to Parker plan something then find a hundred reasons why it isn't going to work.*

Parker knew that the irritation of spending four hours without a break was getting to Olivia. Working side by side with the woman felt so natural and right that she lamented that they were no longer together. When she saw Olivia's attention turn to Amelia, it felt like a body blow. "Are you listening to me?" she snapped.

Olivia returned her gaze to Parker. "When you finally decide on a plan YOU think is executable, I'll be fully attentive. Have you come up with something you find satisfactory?" she asked. "We've talked around the houses for the last three hours Parker. I think the first plan you came up with was the best. I think with my contacts, we can keep Sophie...and yourself relatively safe. There are no promises here though, I hope you know that."

"We need a plan that will produce as little collateral damage as possible. This rain is supposed to continue for several days and that is to our advantage. Hired killers use one of two weapons, a long range rifle for distances or a hand gun for close up. Rain means umbrellas, which is to our benefit since this Shamus fellow can't go for a distance shot. He will want to make a visual before he makes the kill. The downside is that civilians might be in the line of fire and like it or not Olivia their safety is important to me." She shook her head. "Can we justify harming an innocent," Leveling her eyes on Olivia. "And, just so you know, I want in on the action...I don't need your contacts to keep me safe. I am capable of doing that all by myself."

Olivia sighed heavily. *Parker sometimes I think you and I are on a different planet, but I'm glad that you never changed.* "There are no guarantees in this world especially in this situation."

With eyes fixed on the furthest point in the building, Parker blew out a breath. "Sure, let's go with that plan. We'll need to let your contacts know...I take it you'll do that."

Olivia inwardly sent out a thank you that they'd finally fixed on something. "The plan is executable. Yes, I'll personally inform everyone that needs to know."

"Ok, sounds good to me." She already knew the answer, but figured she'd ask anyway. *Maybe I'm wrong.* "Do I get to be in on the meeting with the people who we'll be working with?"

"No!" Olivia stood up, flexed her muscles and felt a tug on the stitches. *Damn I'm going to have to do something about them.*

Parker's eyes seemed to blaze in anger. "No? Just how am I supposed to work with people I don't know?"

"You don't work with them, I do. Your priority is to stay with Sophie and ensure she doesn't get in the line of fire." She saw movement toward the kitchen door and, glad of the break, moved away.

"That is unacceptable! I will not sit back and let people I don't even know do my job! I will be in on the capture or chase or whatever happens. This is my plan and mine to execute!"

Olivia turned around and pierced Parker with a soul-searching look. “You want in do you? Do you want me to explain what *in* means Parker? If you get involved on that level there’s no going back.”

“It’s my client, my job...my call!” She eyed Olivia in question. “How can you know that?”

The old familiar hatred she had for Parker exploded into rage. “Know, how do I know? Ten years ago I sold my soul to that particular devil and trust me, there’s no return.”

Parker felt her heart pierced and the sensation was so real that she had to look to see if blood was seeping onto her shirt. Defeated by the words and unable to stop the lone tear that streaked down her cheek she looked back at Olivia. “I’m sorry for making you go there,” she whispered.

Olivia’s lips twisted in self-derision. “You didn’t. I walked into that fire pit all on my own when I shot my brother’s murderer.”

Parker felt Olivia’s pain of loss as acutely as her own. “Is there any chance of redemption?” she asked softly.

“I’m working on it a step at a time.” Her eyes lifted and settled on Amelia as she walked down the stairs with Sophie behind her.

There was nothing Parker could say - Olivia would never accept her help. *But, I can try can’t I?* “I...I want you to know...I”

“Know what Parker? What exactly do I need to know? Do you want to know if I could toss you to the baying wolfs and still live with myself?”

Like you did to me. The inference hung between them with each understanding the implication of the past.

Parker looked again at her shirt sure this time she would see blood oozing—she didn’t. “How can I get out of this place?” she asked softly.

Olivia, surprised at the response, saw the anguish on Parker’s face. *Maybe she’s going stir crazy. I can understand that.* “I’ll let you out. When you’re ready to come back, press the button on the door and it will activate the security sensor so we know you want back in.”

Amelia chose that moment to shout, “We have lunch...either of you interested?”

Parker gulped back the emotions she felt. “I’m really not hungry...please tell them I’ve gone out for a walk.” She refused to look at Olivia and nodded at the control panel. “Will you open the door please?”

Softly Olivia answered, “Sure.” She pointed to the side door she used earlier and activated the switch that unlocked the door. “You be careful out there, ok.”

Without a word, Parker walked toward the exit and disappeared through it.

Olivia saw and heard the door bang close and her eyebrows knitted as a sudden chill spread over her body.

“You coming,” Amelia called.

She turned toward the sound of the voice that she always found soothing. “Yeah, be right there.” She looked back at the door and shivered once again before leaving the area. *Crap Parker, you pick the damndest times to run away...I wonder why this time.*

CHAPTER 21

Cold damp air hit Parker squarely in the face as she exited the warehouse. The rain that had been falling all day turned into a fine mist that coated her bare arms. "Shit!" she screamed. "Damn you Olivia Santos! Damn you to hell!" The flood of tears that she held off for the better part of the last four hours finally cascaded down her cheeks as she lifted her head to heaven. "How could you ever think that I would sit by silently knowing that you killed someone?" she said toward the building's camera. "If you're watching Olivia, tell me why? Why did you ruin everything and then walk away like it meant nothing?" She extended her middle finger toward the camera. "Fuck you!"

She looked down the street and saw the blinking lights of a bar about a half block away. "Yeah, a good stiff drink is what I need."

By the time she walked to the bar, Parker's clothes and body were wet. A warm blast of air along with the heady smell of beer greeted her when she opened the door. Once her eyes adjusted to the dim light she looked around. It was like every other bar she had ever been in; wooden chairs arranged around tables that were dark and probably sticky to the touch.

She took a seat at the bar and instantly heard a woman's voice ask, "What'll it be?"

"Whatever you have to take away the pain," Parker said without looking up.

The reply was a throaty chuckle. "Well, that depends on what kind of pain you're in."

She lifted her eyes and gazed at a tall brunette woman with laughing green eyes staring at her. "Love gone wrong...broken heart...unrequited love...betrayal...you pick, they all apply."

"I've got just the thing."

When the woman came back, she sat a shot glass and a bottle of beer in front of Parker. With a practiced touch, the woman filled the glass with Cuervo Gold.

"So, this will cure me, huh?" She fished in her pocket, found a fifty and laid it on the bar. "Keep 'em coming until this runs out," she said before lifting the shot glass to her lips.

"Are you driving?" the woman asked.

"Nope," Parker said as her eyes captured the woman's gaze. "I'll even buy you one," she said as she downed the tequila. "It's the good stuff so come on and drink with me," she said as she looked around the bar. "It's only you and me in here."

The woman's laugh was genuine as she poured herself a shot. "I don't get a lot of customers in the middle of the afternoon," she said as she filled Parker's glass. "Once the factory a couple blocks down ends a shift, I'll be real busy." She lifted her glass. "I'm Faith, I own the place. Don't believe I've ever seen you in here before."

"Well, that's because I've never been in here before, Faith." She laughed and took a swig of the beer. "I'm Parker."

"So, Parker, tell me about this guy that broke your heart and drove you to drink?"

The sneer that crossed Parker's face disappeared as quickly as it appeared. "That's funny," she said. She held up her glass and nodded toward the bottle.

Faith poured another and watched as Parker quickly threw it back. "Have you had anything to eat today?"

Parker rubbed her eyes before she shook her head when she felt her stomach protest at being empty. "Do you serve food here," she asked as she finished the last of her beer. She held the bottle and shook it. "And, I'll need another."

Faith pulled a Corona from under the bar and opened it before giving it to Parker. "We don't serve food, but we do have a lovely selection of beer nuts, pretzels and chips though."

Parker laughed. "I've had all the nuts I'll ever want." She looked around the bar. "Hey, since no one is here, you want to go to that little Italian place I saw on the corner?"

Once again, an unadulterated laugh filled the room. "Exactly how can I do that...who'd mind the store?"

"You own the place. Close it for an hour or two," Parker said and fished in her pocket. "Here," she said putting a wad of bills on the bar. "This will more than cover any business you might lose."

Faith's eyes gave the woman across from her the once over. "That is a tempting offer, but..."

Parker interrupted, "No buts just go with it."

For a long moment, Faith just looked at Parker while she debated the wisdom of closing her bar. "Let me see if I can find you something to eat. We always have some sort of cold cuts in the frig." Faith started to pick up the bottle of tequila and Parker immediately grabbed it.

"Leave it. I'll let you know when I'm done."

In a few minutes, Faith returned and placed a paper plate with a sandwich in front of Parker. "Sorry, ham and cheese is all I have." She grabbed a bag of chips from a rack. "I'll even throw in a bag of chips."

"How generous." Parker picked up the money on the bar. "Take it out of that."

"It's on the house."

Parker nodded a thank you before taking the bottle and pouring liquid into two shot glasses and picking one up. "Here's to true love," she said before she swallowed the tequila. Then she took a bite of the sandwich, and smiled. "So how'd you come to own a bar in..."

* * *

Olivia sat down at the table without a word. Her mind filled with thoughts of Parker. *Why did she really want to go out? She was acting weird those last few minutes that's for sure. Damn, but she always did take the world and everyone in it too seriously. That's why she's in the wrong profession. She made one hell of a cop but on her own, out there...not Parker she's far too nice. She gazed at Sophie and snorted. She's a prime example of why Parker shouldn't be in this line of work. The woman is nothing but trouble with a capital T. I hate people with money who haven't worked hard for it themselves.*

"Will Parker be joining us?" Sophie asked. When she received no reply, she looked across at Amelia who was sitting next to Olivia.

Amelia shrugged then dug her arm into Olivia's ribs. "Sophie asked you a question are you going to answer her?" A sweet smile pulled at her lips until she felt the heat of the glare from Olivia.

"Sorry, I was preoccupied. No, she sent her apologies. She's not hungry right now...went for a breath of air."

Sophie gave a petulant scowl. "Damn, I made a special treat for her. She has a sweet tooth, but then you know that don't you? I mean, you did live together so you'd know that."

Amelia raised her eyes at the revelation, but instead of commenting picked at her salad instead. Her mind churned, desperate to ask several pertinent questions.

Olivia's hackles rose. *I don't much like you Sophie I think you're a spoiled brat and right now I think you're more in danger from me than Shamus O'Donnell.* Her voice dropped to a quiet menace. "I did know that, thank you for reminding me...on both counts." She placed some of the salad on her plate and proceeded to eat mechanically.

Sophie felt a chill go down her back. The cold, blue gaze that caught hers for a few moments dropped to dissect the food on her plate. "I'm not hungry either. I think I'll take a nap." She stood up and left but not before she snagged the dessert, she'd baked.

* * *

"That was great, thanks," Parker said with a forced smile. "Are you a good listener, because I have a story for you. She eyed Faith, who smiled gently in encouragement and continued. "Ten years ago the love of my life walked out on me and I thought it was over."

"But, it wasn't."

"Oh, I kept tabs on O's whereabouts, but yeah, it was over until circumstances brought us together again four days ago. Then bam, like a shot in the gut, all the old emotions and feelings bowled me over."

Faith poured Parker another shot and watched as the woman across from her downed it in one gulp. "What did he say?"

Parker laughed and shook her head. "There you go being funny again." Parker took the last bite of the sandwich, shrugged and said, "She's moved on."

Faith said, "Ouch that must have been hard to take."

"Yeah, once I realized I hadn't resolved my feelings for her, it was like the dagger pierced my heart all over again." Parker looked around and saw a jukebox. "If I find a good song will you dance with me?"

For a moment, Faith didn't know what to say. All it took was one look into Parker's forlorn eyes for her to make her mind up. "Sure why not? Just make it an upbeat song and not a sad one."

Parker stood in front of the jukebox with its flashing bright lights and looked over the selections. She chose three songs and turned to find Faith standing behind her. When she folded her arms around the woman, Parker felt the sadness she refused to acknowledge overwhelm her. As they moved in time to the music, she closed her eyes remembering how two nights earlier Olivia laid next to her rubbing her belly. When the music changed and Roy Orbison and k.d. lang began to sing Cryin' the need to feel Olivia close again seemed to engulf her. She moved away from Faith and looked down to

see if her broken heart was bleeding. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Lately, no matter how hard I cry, it never seems to be enough."

"Hey, it's ok." Faith pulled Parker back into her arms. "I like dancing with you."

The woman holding her allowed Parker to hide the tears. "I didn't realize how much I missed being with her," she whispered before burying her head in Faith's shoulder. "Thank you," she whispered.

Faith pulled back slightly and smiled before she leaned in and kissed Parker's cheek. "No one here is going to judge you so go ahead and cry...it's good to let it out."

* * *

Neither Amelia nor Olivia spoke, each contemplating several tumbling thoughts.

"I guess she has a sweet tooth too..."

"...Look, I was going to tell you," they both said at the same time.

Olivia pushed away her plate. "I think it's catching this lack of appetite business."

It would have been so easy for Amelia to cause a commotion over Olivia's failing to mention that Parker was that close a friend. *Perhaps she's an old lover...they have that kind of body language.* She mentally shrugged. *After all, I might be reading more into that as others have with me and Olivia's living together. They lived together, which means, knowing Olivia as I do it must have at least been a serious friendship.* "You should eat Olivia," she whispered softly. "You barely had breakfast and making plans, then implementing them requires nourishment."

Olivia felt her throat constrict as she tried to reply. *She's given me another get-out of jail free card. How many more are you going to give me Amelia before you decide I'm just not worth it?* "Thanks Mom," she replied. With a deft move, she pulled the plate back and began to munch on a lettuce leaf.

"I'm going into the office this afternoon. I've brought a couple of my clients forward so that I can be at the funeral in the morning."

Olivia swung her body around to within inches of Amelia. "It's too damn dangerous...you're not going! How can I do what I have to if I'm worried about you as well as them?"

Amelia heard the panic rise in her partner's voice. "I'm sorry, but when did you become my keeper Olivia. I'm going. I'm perfectly capable of standing next to a grave to support these people and pay my respects. You just do your job and I'll do mine."

"For god's sake Amelia, this isn't a family picnic and you're no longer a nun responsible for saving people from themselves. This situation is fraught with untold dangers and I'll be damned if I'm going to let you become a target as well as Parker and that...that woman," she spit out.

Amelia hackles rose at the reference to her old profession, but heard the bitterness at the end of the sentence. "What exactly do you have against Sophie? Is it because she gave away another of your secrets or...that she has a thing for someone you cared about. Maybe cared is the wrong word...you might still care and it's getting up your nose. Have I hit the nail on the head Olivia?"

Olivia wanted to strangle Amelia. Instead, she stood up and walked to the other end of the room. "I don't care about Parker...I mean I do, but not how I once did. How

can you continue to love someone when they betray you and worse - betrayed your heart?"

Amelia heard the pent up pain of years gone by. "I'm a good listener, why don't you tell me."

"What will that do exactly? If I shed some of the weight I carry on my back in the form of a confession, I'll feel lighter. Give me a break Amelia. I told you when we first met that I didn't need a shrink and that situation still applies," Olivia replied acidly.

"I never said it would, but to share your pain with a friend, one who cares about you, might make you feel less alone. I think that's your problem Olivia...you won't let anyone in because you're afraid that if you do it will happen all over again. I'm not Parker. I don't know what she did or you perceive she did to you, but I will never knowingly hurt you. You have my solemn promise." Amelia caught Olivia's angry gaze and allowed her love for her friend to show.

Olivia felt the gentle entreaty and knew the truth behind the words. *It is too late, too damn late.* "Parker was the one who told the police that I'd shot my brother's killer. I told her in confidence as a lover shares secrets with someone they love and trust. She chose not to keep my secret and when they arrested me...well...it was the last time I saw her until the other day."

Wow. Now I understand the body chemistry they have - a love-hate kind of relationship. "If you had seen her immediately afterwards, what would you have said?" Amelia asked quietly.

A feral look appeared in Olivia's eyes. "There wouldn't have been words Amelia, I'd have shot her like I did my brother's killer. As it turned out, I think she received the worse of my actions because of what she did. I..." she shrugged. "Well, I went away."

"What happened to Parker?" Amelia was intrigued. She was seeing a part of Olivia's life that she had been unaware.

A defeated air surrounded Olivia as she sank into the nearest chair at the table. "She committed the worse sin possible in the eyes of some cops. She gave me up to the authorities without giving me the chance to do it myself. From what I heard later, they made her life hell. Somehow she survived it and ended up here."

"Would you have turned yourself in?" she asked starkly.

"No, the scum deserved everything I gave him. He robbed me of my brother I returned the favor and took his life. Don't you say an eye for an eye in that damned bible of yours." Olivia's words rang with power of revenge, remorse far from her heart. Amelia's heart broke for both women. *What Olivia did in an act of revenge shattered both their lives. Does she understand that or is she still so angry with Parker that she can't see anything but hate? It's hard to tell right now.* "I guess at the time what happened to Parker would have made you happy."

"Yeah I was happy. The place where I was at that time was still in the vengeful mode. I have to hand it to her though. It took some guts to ask me for help. If the circumstances had been reversed, I wouldn't have," Olivia remarked quietly.

"I think you should tell her that and tell her that you're proud of her and what she did with her life after you effectively destroyed both your lives. Don't you think she deserves that Olivia?" Amelia smiled slowly as she placed a hand on Olivia's uninjured shoulder. "I'm proud of how you've turned your life around Olivia, and the person you are today."

Olivia felt the words keenly. *Amelia's right, I did destroy both our lives. I should talk with Parker and tell her that. As soon as she gets back, I'll do just that.* Amelia's words helped her achieve what her best efforts over the years hadn't. *She's allowing me to forgive myself and get on with my life. It's time I did the same for Parker.* Her hand touched the fingers on her shoulder and rested there for a few moments. "Thanks. I guess talking to a friend isn't so bad after all."

Amelia chuckled softly. "I guess not. Now, will you eat something- please?"

Olivia sighed and gave her friend a grateful smile. "For you, I will. Pity Ms. High and Mighty took that dessert away. I was looking forward to a piece of that carrot cake."

"I'll bring you some when I'm done at the office, now eat." Amelia grinned as she pushed the salad plate toward Olivia.

* * *

When other customers began to come in for an after work drink, Parker took her seat at the bar and kept her glass full. *For ten years, I've carried around the love I feel for her. Olivia decided that it was over and that was all there was to it.* The vision of the day that ended her happiness filled her consciousness.

* * *

"How could you do this to me Parker?" Olivia screamed as the detective put her in handcuffs. "I trusted you and this is how you repay me!"

With tears streaming down her cheeks, Parker said, "I had to O, you gave me no choice. You know me...you know me."

"Not anymore," Olivia spit out. "I never want to see you again! If I do you're dead."

She stood at the window and watched as the officer escorted Olivia to the squad car. "I told you that I'd tell the police if you didn't turn yourself in...why didn't you believe me." By the next day, the story that Parker had sold out her partner for a slimy DA who deserved to die spread throughout the department—she became persona non grata.

On several occasions, she tried to visit Olivia at the jail, but no one would allow her visitation. She waited for the trial in hopes that she could see and speak with Olivia, but there wasn't a trial. From what little she could garner, Olivia agreed to a plea deal.

When the first friend Parker made when she began on the police force joined the rest of the department in giving her the cold shoulder she was determined not to let it affect her. But, after a month of the silent treatment along with finding feces in her locker or on her car each day she went to work, she quit and moved back to the farm.

It was two years before she took a job in Philadelphia as a private investigator. During that time at home, she used all her resources to find Olivia and came up empty with every turn. When she received a mysterious note that simply said contact this number and your search will be over, she took the message as a hoax. Yet, over the next week, her mind kept coming back to the note. "I know I've heard it before but what the hell I'll give it a shot!"

The rest was history. Now as she dialed the private instigator's office number and held her breath. When she heard the familiar voice on the recording say, Aderton and Associates, leave a message at the beep and we'll be back with you shortly. Olivia was finally back physically in her life again and this time she wasn't going to allow her to leave!

* * *

"That was the last time I saw her," she whispered to the shot glass. She looked at her watch. "I should check out that church." She stood up and the room began to spin.

Strong hands grabbed her. "You better sit down and let me bring you some coffee," a soft voice said. "Besides, it's raining."

"Not a problem," Parker said with a wave of her hand. "I don't have far to go." She gave Faith a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thanks." When Faith nodded she added, "You're a great dancer...can I come back sometime and dance with you again?"

Faith smiled. "You get over her first."

* * *

When rain started pelting the metal roof all the walls reverberated magnifying the sound. Sophie heard the sound and glared at Olivia. "She's been gone a long time, aren't you worried?"

Olivia avoided looking at her. "No, I'm sure she is over at the church or the cemetery. Parker is a master tactician and she doesn't leave any stone unturned. She needs to be certain that everything goes according to plan tomorrow."

No sooner had Parker left the bar then, the clouds opened wide and a cold rain poured down. With a shivering body, she stood close to the building near the door she went out four hours earlier and pressed the button.

All eyes turned toward the control center when a loud buzz echoed throughout the warehouse. "I bet that's her now," Olivia said. She went to the control panel and activated the camera aimed at the door. Her eyebrows creased as she saw Parker huddled next to the door. "You stay put," she said as she pointed at Sophie. She pushed the button then, with cat like ease, pulled a blanket off the back of the couch and hurried toward the door.

"Parker where on earth have you been?" she exclaimed in irritation "You look like a drowned rat." She took the blanket and tried to put it around Parker's shoulders.

"Stop it," Parker shouted as she pushed the arm away. "What are you doing O, putting on a show so the others think you're a caring person? You've made it perfectly clear on more than one occasion over the last four days exactly what you think of me, so stop this holier-than-thou crap! Ah, I know, it's for the nun right! What a pathetic person you've become!"

"Suit yourself I don't need this from you," Olivia quietly replied.

"Great, we agree. Now get away from me and go back to playing housie with the nun." Parker looked around and noticed that Amelia's car was missing. "Oh, I see she's not here. Does she make you hot and bothered O? Too bad she isn't interested in bedding you...I know how much you enjoy frequent fucks. You know she'll never be as good as I

am in bed, don't you. What would a virgin like her have that could keep a fiery woman like you satisfied?" Parker's eyes widened. "That's it! You want to add a notch on your belt with a virgin!" she growled. "Just leave me alone I don't need anything from you!"

From her vantage point on the couch, Sophie listened to the heated exchange and had to keep herself from going to the aid of Parker. The look in Olivia's eyes when she told her to stay put scared her so much that she didn't move an inch. When an obviously furious Olivia came back into the room, Sophie gave her an open mouth expression. *I don't care what she does I'm going to Parker.* She stood up and glared at Olivia. "Where's Parker," she demanded.

"In her room."

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing."

As Sophie pushed past the woman she muttered, "Lair."

* * *

Sophie didn't knock, but opened the door and went in. Sitting in a chair shivering and soaking wet sat Parker Davis. "Look at you," Sophie softly said. "Let's get you out of those wet clothes."

"No, I'm ok."

"Don't be silly." With great care, Sophie undressed the woman then gently dried her off with a soft, fluffy towel. "Come on, let's get you in bed."

Even under the blankets, Parker still shivered. Desperate to help, Sophie began looking in the drawers and in the closet for an extra blanket.

"They're in the linen closet," a low smoky voice said.

Startled, Sophie turned toward the voice and saw Olivia standing in the doorway. "Can you get one...she was soaked to the bone and can't get warm."

"Sure."

While waiting for the blanket, Sophie sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed Parker's body. "Are you feeling any warmer?"

"A...a little," Parker chattered as she pulled the covers closer.

"We're getting you another blanket." Sophie turned to see if Olivia returned and nearly jumped out of her skin. "I didn't hear you come in," she said gulping in a deep breath.

"I brought two." Olivia's eyes turned to the woman in the bed and gentled. She finally said, "Let me know if you need anything else."

Sophie leveled her eyes on Olivia and pierced her with an angry look. "This is all your fault," she said between clenched teeth. "All she asked for was your help."

"And, I'm giving it to her. If she wants to go out in the rain the day before a big job and get drunk it has nothing to do with me!"

"It has everything to do with you and you know it," Sophie ground out. "Please leave and close the door behind you."

Olivia stood in the doorway debating if she should dismiss Sophie and be the one to help Parker. *She doesn't want me to help...her new girlfriend has it all under control.*

Sophie turned away from Olivia and spread the two blankets over Parker. When she heard the door close she stood up, undressed, crawled in next to the still shivering woman and pulled her close. "There, do you feel warmer?"

"Yes."

"I once heard that this is how people who are stuck in the snow without heat get warm," Sophie said as she rubbed her hand up and down Parker's back.

The two women lay close until Parker finally stopped shaking. "Thank you," Parker whispered.

"After all you've done for me, I don't need thanks. It feels good to take care of you for a change."

"Guess I will have a lot of apologizing to do tomorrow."

"To who?"

"Olivia for one... I should never said that to her."

Sophie moved so she rested on her elbow. "How can you feel that way Parker? She has done nothing but put you down and glare at you here and at the farm," she bit out angrily. "You owe her nothing."

Parker closed her eyes and thought, *I betrayed her. I owe her everything* before she began shivering again.

Sophie put her arms around Parker again and held her close. Sophie's lips kissed the cool cheek, then move to Parker's forehead and finally found their way to the lips. "Hold me please."

Out of a wanton desire to feel close to someone, Parker complied, put her arms around Sophie and gently kissed her. She felt acute pain as all the words Olivia said kept running through her head. *You made it clear O that you don't want anything to do with me. From the indifference, I see in your eyes, I think you wish you'd never seen me again.* She felt Sophie's lips kissing a shoulder. *Are you enough Sophie? I'm sick of years of one stands. Sophie could offer me so much more, but can I learn to love you. A vision of Olivia filled her mind. I guess its back to one night stands.*

Wordlessly, she began exploring Sophie's body with soft touches and kisses. When she felt Sophie respond, her fingers moved lower only to have them stopped.

"No, let me love you Parker. You just lay there and let me love you."

She had no fight left so she did as requested and closed her eyes as Sophie's lips continued to assault her body. Just as with everyone since Olivia, Sophie didn't measure up. As she felt the tongue lick her, she let her body drift into the feelings the tongue and fingers elicited in her.

Parker knew that if Sophie continued she would come so she reached down and pulled her head up. "Not yet, let me touch you." After Sophie crawled up her body, Parker began her exploration.

Their love making wasn't a display of fiery intense passion, but of a slow, gentle discovery. Then, out of mutual need and desperation, they clung to each other as both felt the rush born out of want and need.

Sated, they laid together wrapped in each other's arms. Parker kissed Sophie's head as the overwhelming feelings of sadness and pain engulfed her. *She never gave me a chance to explain or say goodbye.*

"Now that's the perfect way to get warm," Sophie purred as she kissed the arm holding her.

Her lonely soul cried *I love you Olivia* as a lone tear rolled down her cheek.

CHAPTER 22

Amelia parked her vehicle in her place in the warehouse and was surprised that all the lights were low, even at the center console. *Hmm, I would have thought Olivia would be there. She usually is if she's home at this time.* A quick glance at the dashboard clock showed it to be eight pm. She climbed out of the vehicle, picked up the container with the slice of carrot cake and sighed as she flexed the muscles of her back. She walked over to the consol and placed her car keys in the appropriate spot. *Yes, I know Olivia; there is a place for everything.*

She debated whether to make coffee, take a shower or just chill for half an hour, first. Her mind was still coming to terms with the fact that Olivia and Parker had been lovers. Her heart, on the other hand, probably never would. That fact alone had her emotions zigzagging in a pattern she'd never experienced before. *I can't decide if I'm envious, angry or just plain shocked.* She automatically headed for the couch deciding on the chill factor. Upon entering the room, she flicked on the low lights and gasped as she saw Olivia. "Hi, what are you doing in the dark?"

Olivia had been thinking and when the sun went down, she hadn't noticed enough to turn on any lights. Her eyelids fluttered at the rush of light and shot her head around to gaze at her friend. "I was thinking, just didn't notice."

Hmm that sounds pensive. I wonder where Parker and Sophie are, it's a little early for bed. Amelia stepped closer so she stood beside Olivia's armchair. "Do you want company or would you prefer to sit in the dark again?"

A debate went on in Olivia's head at the question. *Do I want company - no not really? Do I want you in the room with me - yes definitely? I guess that's a contradiction.* "I always love your company you know that. Come on, sit and tell me about your afternoon. What time is it anyway?"

With a smile, Amelia sat on the floor at the foot of Olivia's chair and nestled into the strength of her long legs. "Eight, you know I can't tell you about my clients. By the way, Teal wants to know when you're going to be done with this case. Apparently, Mr. Ryan is calling every two hours for your help. I think she's getting desperate."

Olivia smiled. *Somehow, Teal and desperate don't mix.* "I'll call Teal the day after tomorrow. We should know then if it's all over or if we have to take drastic measures."

"Dare I ask what the drastic measures are?"

Olivia absently trailed her fingers in Amelia's hair. Although neither woman would admit it, the small gesture settled them both. "New identities for them both and get them the hell away from here...the farther the better."

"Don't you think that's over the top? It reminds me of Sister Marie and what you did for her." A gentle sigh escaped. "Her baby will be almost two years old by now. I guess it's not a baby anymore."

"Nope not a baby."

"Just out of interest where are our house guests?"

"They decided to turn in early. There's a lot at stake tomorrow everyone needs a cool head."

Amelia nodded her head. "Good idea."

"Tomorrow might not go cleanly Amelia. The guy who's after them is a true professional...he's among the top five assassins."

Amelia's gaze settled on Olivia and her quiet retrospect. When she realized the full meaning of the words, her eyes opened wide. In horror she said, "You have a table of assassins."

This time Olivia smiled affectionately. "Not exactly, but you need to know the enemy's potential."

"I've never asked Olivia, but these people who are helping you, how do you know them?" Amelia refused to allow Olivia to turn away. She knelt in front of her and gently pulled her friend's face toward her—their eyes locked.

Do I lie, do I tell. How would she feel if I told her I was on one of those lists too? "After I murdered that man and the authorities had me in their custody I was given two options...prison or go to work in covert operations." She shrugged slightly. "As you see, I'm not in prison."

Amelia unconsciously rubbed her thumb over Olivia's clenched jaw. "These people are old colleagues then?"

The gentle touch of her friend had Olivia's senses hot-wired. *It wouldn't take much to bend a little and steal a kiss.* "Kind of, I call on them when I need them..."

"And, they call on you when they need your skills I presume. Is this co-operation for life?" Amelia queried. She felt her breathing became shorter as Olivia's presence drew her in.

"My life...perhaps, or until they decide I'm no longer suitable. I guess I haven't outlived my usefulness yet." She shrugged as a self-deprecating smile crossed her face.

A tear rolled down Amelia's cheek at the price her friend had paid for that folly called revenge. *Oh, how I wish I'd known you then Olivia. Maybe things would have been different. Although would it? You still went ahead when you were in love so how could I have saved you. Parker couldn't hold you with the most powerful remedy of all...love.*

Olivia was horrified to see the shadow of hurt in Amelia's features. "Hey, it's ok. I brought it all on myself by taking another man's life. There has to be a penance Amelia or our world would be lawless. At least I get to lead a fairly normal life." She smiled fondly. "It allowed you to enter my life, right?"

With a sob, Amelia buried her head on Olivia's shoulder. "You'll always have me," she whispered. They held each other in quiet reassurance of their friendship. They both knew it could easily change if the circumstances presented themselves.

CHAPTER 23

Parker opened her eyes and immediately closed them. Her head was exploding. *Damn, why did I drink so much? My head hurts and my mouth tastes like...* her eyes flew open and she cautiously moved her head—Sophie was not there. Then her eyes rested on the woman curled up in the overstuffed chair in the room. *Shit! I can hear Olivia now...never become personally involved.*

Even though the room was spinning and her head felt like a bomb had just gone off, she got out of bed and made her way to the bathroom. She needed a shower to wash away the cobwebs that were clouding her thinking. *I have to be at the top of my game today.*

Sophie heard the shower and waited for Parker to reappear. “Hey, how are you feeling?” she said with a bright smile.

“Why are you sleeping in the chair?”

“With all the grief Olivia has given you, I thought it best not to have her see us in bed together.” She stretched. “Good thing I did because she came in twice to check on you.”

Parker creased her eyebrows. “She did?”

“Yeah, she came into the room and stood by the bed both times.”

A shrug along with a sigh was Parker’s reply. She pulled on her clothes then looked at Sophie. “After today we can leave here and Olivia will have to find someone else to be the target of her disapproving glares. You should get a shower and dress.”

Sophie looked at her watch. “It’s only four.”

“Yes and the funeral is at eleven. If we are going to make this plan work we need all the time we can get.”

With a pout, Sophie got up. “Ok, but only on one condition.”

Exasperated, Parker said, “I really am not up for this.”

A sly smile crossed Sophie’s face as she moved so she stood in front of the woman. Then she leaned in, wrapped her arms around Parker and kissed her. When she pulled back she said, “When this is all over I intend on doing more of that with you.”

Parker patted Sophie’s backside and shook her head. “You will, huh? Go and get ready so we can start the day.”

* * *

Parker spied Olivia sitting at the control panel typing what she assumed was an email. She wasn’t sure if Olivia would want to see her, but she spoke anyway. “Good morning,” she said. “We have a big day ahead of us.”

The sound of a familiar voice in the low lighting felt ethereal almost. However, for Olivia that term and Parker just didn’t quite fit. “Yes we do. I’ve advised my associates of the plan, and although we gave them short notice they’re in the process of setting everything in motion.” Olivia answered.

“Good. I think we need to go to the church and cemetery. Who knows, this Shamus guy might be there already...probably is.” She shrugged. “That’s what I’d do.”

Olivia lifted an eyebrow, *Hmm that was good. I'm surprised, especially after she tied one on yesterday. She always could hold her liquor.* "I agree. Amelia has found some old clothing she hasn't taken back to the church, which she'll pass on to Sophie. Does she know anything about the plan yet?"

"Yes, I spoke with her earlier. This is all happening so fast and that makes me uneasy." Parker cleared her throat. "I don't like a situation where we haven't dotted all the i's crossed all the t's."

"Fast isn't always a bad thing, especially under these circumstances. We have support and technology in the equation that O'Donnell won't expect. I'm counting on him thinking that it is only you and you're a hick private detective," Olivia said. She turned her attention to the console when she heard the alert of a new message. Deftly she punched in a code and watched the message appear on the screen.

Operatives' activated - screening in progress.

"Well, you always were the more confident one."

Olivia scowled. "Confidence is a question of experience in my opinion. My skills, for want of a better term, have been honed in a much wider field than yours."

You might be surprised at the skills I have Olivia. "That is why I called you O. I know I'm delinquent in lots of ways." She shrugged. "I'd still be back at the farm thinking we were safe."

"Delinquent is not a word I'd used to describe you Parker nor should you be so hard on yourself. You were and are a master at tactics. I respect that skill. If I didn't, do you think I'd be putting Am...everyone in danger. My associates are in place, now all we need is for O'Donnell to show. We'll bag him and then get him to implicate the stepmother."

"You make it sound so easy and it isn't. Let's not forget that everyone there will be in danger until he is unarmed...especially Sophie. You think I don't see through you O, but I do...all you really care about is your precious Amelia's safety. "

The antagonistic words washed over Olivia. *Under normal circumstances, I would have punched your lights out for that Parker. Right now, we need to cooperate with each other and I can do that, personal issues have no bearing on what we need to do.* "You and I will sit down and thrash out what you think your beef with me is, but now, is not the time. If you can't keep your personal opinions in check tell me now, because I sure as hell don't want a liability by my side."

Parker ground her teeth and flexed her jaw. "Liability. Now that's an interesting word choice Olivia." She took a deep cleansing breath. "Rest assured that as soon as O'Donnell is in custody and has implicated Sophie's stepmother, I'll leave. There will be no need to sit down for I already know how you feel." She rubbed her temples. "I need a cup of coffee," she said.

"Here, I made this up for you...I thought you might need it this morning." Olivia threw her a small packet containing a powdery substance. "You always could hold your liquor Parker, but you were as grouchy as a bear in the mornings."

After catching the packet, Parker cocked her head in question. "You remember that?"

With a tight smile, Olivia replied. "Sure, I remember lots of things about you...about us. You never forget the past Parker, but you have to live for the future. It's the only thing that keeps you going, trust me on that."

Parker nodded and held up the packet. "Thanks. You want me to bring you a cup too?"

"Yeah, do you remember how I like it?"

"Yes," she said. "The funny thing about the past Olivia...if it is left unresolved you never get over it." She tilted her head and pursed her lips. "Be right back with the coffee then we need to check out the sites."

Olivia nodded. "I take it Sophie is up. I'll need to go wake Amelia she's not an early riser. For a nun, you'd figure she would be wouldn't you." An amused smile curved around her lips. She stood and headed in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER 24

Amelia watched as Olivia and Parker stood together going over the plan for the day. Now that she knew about their past, she watched them in a different light. Their body language told her that there was a definite connection between them - *a slow dance of seduction*. She saw the way they would almost touch, the looks they gave each other and their familiar, comfortable relationship and she felt like an outsider. "I thought Olivia only was that way with me...how wrong could I have been," she whispered.

When they were finished with the final details, Olivia and Parker advanced toward the two disguised women. It was Olivia that took the lead. "Do you understand what will take place?" Olivia asked. They nodded. "Good. Do you have your bullet proof vests on?" Again, they indicated yes. "I will go ahead and make sure all my people are set up at the church and cemetery. Parker will bring you," she pointed to Amelia and Sophie, "to the church." She looked at them intensely. "Under no circumstances will either of you do anything that will put yourself in danger or in the line of fire." Her eyes narrowed. "Is that clear?" When they shook their heads in agreement, she put on her helmet, mounted her bike and once the door opened, sped away.

Parker watched Olivia go. Part of her understood the need for someone else to take charge of her case, but a greater part was livid. *My case and she leaves me behind to be a nursemaid*. She turned to Amelia and Sophie. "You two ready?"

Amelia, said, "Yes." *Yesterday she was a protector of Sophie and today...she's...a threat*. She had never felt jealous in that way before, but now she did and didn't know what to do with the emotion. To her, Parker was a rival and a threat to her relationship with Olivia. *How can I feel this way about her? I had an instant reaction about her goodness in the grocery story where we first met. Didn't she come to me and calm me after Sophie's crude comment? Wasn't she the one that told me to tell Olivia about how I feel about her?*

Sophie folded her arms. "Why do I have to wear this ridiculous costume? Just look at my face with the gigantic mole on my nose...and, this vest thingy is too tight. Can't I change into something nicer?"

With irritation clearly etched on her face, Parker put her hands on Sophie's shoulders. "If I had my way Sophie, you wouldn't be going at all so stop your complaining and get your butt in the car."

Amelia took Sophie by the elbow and led her to the vehicle. "No one will know it's you Sophie...isn't that the point?"

"Yes," Sophie said before she slammed the door.

Parker passed Amelia on her way to the other side of the car. She reached out and gently squeezed her arm. "Thank you," she said with a smile. "She is a bit of a prima donna."

Amelia continued to the other side without reaction or a comment. Once seated in the vehicle, she looked at the woman. *Am I upset with Parker or with Olivia?*

* * *

The chapel looked innocuous enough - like any other Protestant church. The white wooden structure lost some of its brightness due to the dull, rainy day that greeted the mourners. *Somehow, Olivia thought, the gray day reflects the general disposition of most of the people here.*

She silently watched people she didn't know file in and take their seats after they passed by the casket. Some touched, while others prayed, but most just walked solemnly by. When the door of the chapel finally closed and the minister stood at a small pulpit, everyone became silent. Olivia looked around at the pews filled with friends or family of Camille Peterson—standing room only. Her eyes traveled to Parker who had strategically positioned her body so she could protect both Amelia and Sophie. *I wonder if any of us would draw this many mourners?* Her eyes focused on Amelia. *Most definitely, you would...you are a good hearted soul.* She didn't know enough about Sophie to speculate but she did know Parker. *Probably neither of us would find one row filled. Our line of work doesn't exactly encourage friendship.* Olivia slid behind a stanchion and began her systematic search of faces. *You're here somewhere O'Donnell, the problem is where.*

While the choir sang Amazing Grace, she covertly brought her hand to her face and quietly said, "Dan, have you anything on your side? Mine's clear."

A reply immediately vibrated in her earpiece. "No, he might be waiting for the burial."

Olivia considered that as she scanned the people on her side again. A tiny smile gathered on her lips when she again spied Amelia and Sophie standing near a side entrance. It wasn't hard to miss them since they were the only ones there wearing a habit. *I wonder if I ever told you how cute you looked in that—nope, not a good move. Even Sophie looks innocent enough in the black and white garb. The Mother Superior would be spitting feathers right now if she could see how we are using the clothing.* Her eyes drifted to the stained glass window and a picture of Jesus ministering to the sick. *Yeah, you're probably not happy either.*

"My gut tells me that with this weather he'll try here first. It's what I would do. Wouldn't you, Dan?"

Dan whispered, "Yep, I sure would."

"Trust me he isn't far away...I can feel it." She switched channels and whispered into the miniature microphone on her wrist, "Stevie anything with the facial recognition software yet?"

Immediately, a female voice answered, "Not yet, but I still have half of the faces to check. I'll inform you when I locate him."

Her gaze settled on Parker. *I know she doesn't like the job, but it is the most logical place for her. If anything happens, I know Parker will have Amelia within her grasp and will keep her safe.* She looked at the woman who once was her lover as she stood between Amelia and Sophie and any danger. *That's my girl.* Olivia's mind somersaulted as the words echoed in her brain. *After all this time Parker, you still have the ability to make me sit up and take notice.* "Parker, everything is green so far. Has Sophie mentioned if anyone near the family isn't a relative or close friend?"

Parker scowled as the earpiece echoed in her ear. *She let her gaze fall on Olivia. There's no doubt in my mind that if anything happens to Amelia, Olivia will shoot me dead and ask questions later.* "No, the family is here. Parents, aunt and as far as Sophie

knows the other people in the front two rows are close friends of Camille or the family. I think he's waiting for us to take it outside...too many witnesses here."

Amelia nudged Parker in the ribs gently. She nodded toward the minister who began speaking. She was certain that the people around them were giving Parker severe glances—they weren't. Her religious training said to show the proper respect when in church and that included no talking. *Perhaps under these circumstances, God will forgive us.*

Olivia heard the young preacher begin and chose not to reply. She continuously scanned the crowd and frowned when she saw an odd movement from a figure dressed much like all the men in the room—dark suit, dark tie. She lifted her hand to her mouth and said, "Dan, move to the right a couple of feet and check out the guy...wait, wait he's moving." With a swift movement, she re-positioned herself to see the man clearly.

"That's O'Donnell," Stevie said into everyone's ear. "It's a one hundred percent match."

Seconds later, Olivia and Dan moved forward. She glanced in Parker's direction, and saw her old partner touch Amelia's shoulder and the two nuns immediately fell to their knees. *I knew I could rely on you Parker. I'll have to tell you that when this is over.* "Let's get him."

Parker looked to her left and spotted O'Donnell and moved to shield both the praying women. She reached inside her jacket and allowed her hand to rest on the nine millimeter in the small of her back. She saw O'Donnell move for the door near them and was tempted to take him there. *After all, he's the reason I'm here.* When she saw the other agents closing in on him, she waited.

O'Donnell spotted the two figures behind the stanchions and the others heading toward him, he immediately made them out to be Feds. He opted for plan B—go to the tree line a hundred yards from the burial spot where he left a high powered rifle ready and waiting. A satisfied grin crossed his face knowing he had chosen the perfect vantage point in the church to make a getaway. With a turn and a push, he shot out of the side door. He saw pursuers following him out the door. *Who the hell are they?* He reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a cylinder. He stopped, turned in their general direction and let the powerful pepper spray lose on them. A sneer crossed his face as he watched his pursuers react to the spray.

Olivia glanced across at Parker who was urging the two nuns to stand up. "Parker, get them to a safe location now!" she shouted into her wrist. Olivia rapidly switched channels. "Dan, remember our earlier discussion?"

"Yep."

"Ensure that no harm comes to them. Parker's going to want to get in on the action. Under no circumstances allow her to come to any harm or you'll face me. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Dan answered.

Parker shot Olivia a look of disgust before she whispered, "Let's go."

Amelia looked anxiously at Olivia and was dismayed to see that her friend was already at the exit. *She has always checked on me personally...why not today.*

Sophie defiantly stood still. "I will not leave until the service is over."

“Damn it Sophie, stop arguing with me! This is the real thing and your life and all those in this chapel are in jeopardy. So get your ass out the door!” Parker whispered forcibly.

Amelia gave Parker a severe look for her language in church then gently touched her arm. “Let me.” She linked her arm with Sophie’s and began walking toward the exit. “The service is still going on and everyone is wondering what the uproar is all about.” She saw Sophie try to turn around and look. “Don’t turn around...you’ll be spotted.” Once they were outside, she let go of Sophie and looked at Parker. All thoughts of her animosity toward the woman erased as she acquiesced to their protector. “What now?”

* * *

Both Parker and Dan Estevez eased their guns out of their holsters and rounded the corner to the side of the church where the other agents exited. When Dan saw his compatriots crouching on the ground, he wanted to go to them, but he understood the importance of the mission and stayed with the three women. When the acrid smell of pepper spray wafted in their direction, Parker led the two women to a safer location. Parker heard the squeal of tires and looked in time to see a Vet speeding away followed by a black motorcycle that left a spray of water in its wake.

She turned to Amelia and Sophie. “Now, I’ll make sure you and Sophie get back to the warehouse and that no one is waiting for you there. Once you’re inside, engage every security device and don’t...I repeat, don’t allow anyone in. The only two people you respond to are me or Olivia.”

“Does that include the phone?” Sophie asked trying to be part of the conversation.

“The only calls you answer are those that come on Amelia’s private line...and you say nothing until you hear the code.”

“I’ll do that,” Amelia said.

“Come on, I’ll take you to your car.” Parker scanned the street and thought she saw the faint remnant of the motorcycle’s taillight.

Dan touched Parker’s arm. “You’re supposed to go with me.”

Parker nodded. “After we get them situated and safe we can join the chase. The direction they’re going is toward the warehouse so we shouldn’t be too far behind.”

Dan wiped his brow. “Olivia said I shouldn’t let you do that,” he said as they followed Amelia’s car.

Parker fixed him with a look. “Now there’s a surprise. Is she your boss now?”

“No.”

“Glad to hear that. I am going to see this to the end and that means we catch O’Donnell and deal with him.”

Dan shook his head and picked up a mic. “Bravo two, what’s your twenty?”
Either way I’m a dead man.

* * *

The moisture on the road after a long period of dry weather meant that the surface was slippery particularly around bends. Throwing caution to the wind, Olivia, with her head down, focused on catching up to O’Donnell. She would bring him down along with

anyone else involved. The chapel was about a mile from the center of town and close to a thriving suburban area. She noted, with mild surprise, how remarkably light the traffic was. *Good, that reduces the potential for causing any civilian casualties.* She glanced at the speedometer and saw that O'Donnell was traveling close to seventy. Olivia ground her teeth as she revved up the bike to begin the maneuver to overtake the Vet. *Once I get along side of him, I'll steer his sorry ass into the side of the hill.*

As she closed the distance, she anticipated the capture. For a few seconds she sped alongside the vehicle as the final bend before Portsmouth proper came upon them. For a split second, she turned her head and gazed through her dark visor at the man behind the wheel. "I've got you now you son-of-a-bitch." She pulled forward to use her bike as a roadblock not anticipating the greasy, wet surface. As she hit the brakes, the bike skidded catastrophically across the path of the speeding vehicle. By a miracle and the odd inch or two, she crashed into the side of the hill rather than under the Vet's wheels.

As the bike hit, Olivia felt the full force of the impact on her helmet as her body crashed against the hard rock. Then her body listlessly settled in a watery culvert.

Minutes later, several vehicles with flashing lights in pursuit of O'Donnell rushed past her limp, unmoving body. One of the cars skidded to a stop and a lone figure emerged. "I'll take care of her. You go on," a woman's voice said before she raced toward Olivia.

* * *

When Amelia took an unexpected turn, Dan said, "She's supposed to go to the warehouse."

"Don't worry it is the same shortcut she used to go to the church." Something caught Parker's eye and she twisted her body to see what it was. "Shit that's Olivia's bike," Parker said. "We'll have to make sure someone helps her," she said.

Dan picked up the mic. "Green team what's the condition of the fallen one?"

A women's voice replied, "Banged up, probably a concussion."

Parker, feeling better about Olivia's condition, let out a breath. *Now it's up to me to take O'Donnell down... besides, it'll work better this way. The mission always comes first...right.*

Once Parker and Dan made sure that Sophie and Amelia were safely ensconced in the warehouse, they set out to catch up with the others.

"Take a left here," Parker ordered. "We should come up right behind them."

Dan nodded and once he spied the other black sedans, he sped up.

As the vehicles raced through the middle of Portsmouth in hot pursuit of O'Donnell, Parker felt exhilaration.

"The suspect is turning onto Canal," a voice said over the radio.

"Yep, got it," Dan said as the car screeched around the slick corner. As they followed the bumpers of the other cars Dan said, "I don't have a good feeling about this."

"O'Donnell is one bad dude, but he hasn't met me yet." She thought of Olivia injured on the side of the road and sent up a silent prayer for her wellbeing. Then her mind flashed back to ten years earlier and a similar car chase she and Olivia made down that very street. She remembered holding on as Olivia sped up saying, *He's made one big*

mistake...this is a dead end street. She spoke into the mic, "There's a park in another block...with no outlet."

"Guess O'Donnell wasn't expecting us so he couldn't utilize his exit plan. He should've known better and had a backup for his backup," Dan said.

Parker remained quiet as she watched the familiar area fly by her. *I remember how pumped we were when we got home.* She shivered with the memory. *God was that ever a passionate night.*

The car came to an abrupt stop and she flung her door open and got out with her gun drawn.

"Olivia said I should stop you from trying to be in on the chase," Dan said.

"While you're telling me about Olivia's orders there's an assassin running toward the woods... we're wasting time ...let's go."

Dan's eyes fixed on Parker. "If anything happens to you, Olivia will have my ass. Who do you think will protect me if you're dead?"

"The suspect is getting further away. Can we just go and take care of O'Donnell and have this conversation later?"

Dan motioned to the right. "Red went left, blue straight ahead, we go right," Dan said. The rain had picked up making visibility poor. "There." He pointed to an area filled with dense trees and large boulders.

"Got it," Parker said as she ran parallel to the area.

The sound of gunfire rang out and they took cover. Parker got off several rounds before crouching behind a tree. From his position, Dan signaled Parker to continue right as he moved forward.

The rain, soaked ground made her movements noiseless and she went from tree to tree. She felt endorphins rush through body and mind pumping her so high that she felt invincible. *No way is this creep going to get away. Olivia will see me for who I am and not some farm girl who can't take care of herself. She'll find out what's she's been missing all these years we've been apart.* She ducked as numerous shots filled the air with loud pops. After she molded her body against a large tree, she peered around and saw the flash that preceded the firing of a bullet. She lifted her wrist and whispered, "I've got a bead on him. He's behind the second big boulder to the right of middle."

She heard, "Stay put Parker let me take it from here."

Yeah right. For Parker, the moment she realized Olivia was injured the mission took a back seat. *I shouldn't allow myself to think like that but I have no doubt that O'Donnell ran Olivia off the road. No one hurts someone I love and gets away with it.* Her eyes narrowed as they scanned the area between her and O'Donnell's position. *A piece of cake.* She quickly mapped out a plan of attack then carefully moved between the trees and rocks. She stopped when the man was in her line of vision. With one hand holding her weapon and the other propping it up, she held it in the direction of the suspect. "End of the line O'Donnell."

Shamus turned his head and saw a woman standing ten feet away with a gun trained on him. "Ah, you're the Davis woman that Mrs. Durant foolishly hired. I told her she needed a real professional and not some loser amateur." He furrowed his brow. "You must have had help to pull this off Davis. Never mind, I'll take care of them after I'm done with you." He shot a few rounds toward the others before his blue eyes turned cold and dark. "I figured you betrayed Ms. Durant and took up with her daughter. It wasn't

hard to figure that out since your apartment was empty and the girl in your office didn't know where you were," O'Donnell said derisively. "Pity about her...if only she told me what she knew," he taunted.

"You killed her?" Parker said.

The man shrugged one shoulder and leveled his gun at her from his crouched position. "She was most uncooperative," he said with a sneer.

Bile filled her stomach and she resisted the urge to throw up. Instead, she tightened her grip on her Sig Sauer. "Evelyn Durant hired you I take it."

"Someone had to do the job, you sure couldn't."

"You're a hired gun not an investigator, why does she need you?"

"Are you dense or something?" Shamus spit out.

"No." She felt ice in her veins as she thought of Camille Paterson and her office help, Reggie Bullitt. *Bastard...you're going down.* "Put the gun down and raise your hands," she said in a cold, calm voice.

With a loud laugh, Shamus stood up and said, "We both know you won't shoot me bitch...you don't have the stones." He leveled her with a cold gaze. "Your style is betrayal...isn't it Davis. You don't discriminate...partners, clients you treat them all the same. You turned on your partner didn't you...what kind of shit would do something like that," he taunted.

Parker gulped at the truth of what he said and Olivia's words rang in her ears. *Never let the enemy see your weakness Parker. It can make the difference between life and death.* "I won't tell you again," she said with a low ominous growl. "Throw the gun down, butt first!" *The mission, don't forget the mission it is paramount.*

"No! You'll have to kill me and we both know you'll never do that," he said with a sarcastic chuckle.

Parker's finger began to squeeze the trigger.

BANG...BANG...BANG.

CHAPTER 25

Amelia walked around the warehouse like a caged animal. Her gut aching from a combination of emotions, most of which she didn't understand herself. When Parker shielded them from a perceived threat, she felt terror and when they violated God's sanctuary, she was angry. However, Olivia's ignoring her in the presence of danger, caused her the most acute pain.

I guess her confession last night embarrassed her so much she can't look at me. Knowing Olivia, she'll want to forget it ever happened. On the other hand, it is possible that her total focus on what she had to do didn't allow her the luxury of checking on me-yeah right and when has that ever happened since we've met. Her stomach reacted violently as she considered the worse possible scenario - Parker's appearance. *Maybe that triggered the old love Olivia once felt. She might want to rekindle the romance.* She wrapped her arms around her stomach. *If she does, will I be able to cope with that. What a selfish idiot I am not to expect her to look elsewhere. How can I deny her a physical relationship with Parker when I can't give her what she needs? Take that Jerry woman for instance.*

Sophie broke into her thoughts. "Amelia, want any coffee? I need something to do other than wait for Parker to come and tell us that they have that murderer and my stepmother."

Amelia bit her bottom lip. "Thanks, I'm a little edgy too."

Ten minutes later, they sipped coffee as they anxiously waited for word of what was happening. *A stranger walking in on us might think they'd interrupted a women's coffee morning.* Amelia thought.

Amelia is a nice woman and she gave me her support all morning. I should apologize for my rudeness. "I'm sorry we...that is I, jumped to the wrong conclusions about you Amelia. I didn't know you were a nun before."

Stunned at the apology, Amelia didn't know how to answer. Perplexed, she asked, "What are you saying? If you're a nun you can't love anyone else?"

Not wanting to offend the woman again, Sophie replied, "No, no I meant another woman...romantically. It goes against the church teachings doesn't it? At least that's what I hear when it's discussed in the newspapers."

"Yes it does. Nothing can prevent your mind from ignoring the standards we are taught to believe in...the heart on the other hand is a different matter altogether. Anyway, though not required, thanks for the apology. I wish someone would call, it feels like we're frozen in time." Amelia diverted the conversation to a different topic. *I can't go there, not now. If I ever did, it wouldn't be with this woman. I'd be having the conversation with Olivia because she's the only one that matters.*

"I know what you mean. I wish I'd been able to stay for the burial." She scrunched her face into a frown. "Who am I kidding; I should never have gone and destroyed that final journey for Cammie and her family." Sophie's voice rose in her frustration. "I'm just a selfish bitch who always wants her own way."

Amelia heard the irritation and self-loathing and shook her head. "Hey, don't beat yourself up. Maybe this way they'll catch her killer. If Olivia has anything to do with it, all this will be a bad memory by this evening."

Sophie heard the confident assurance and replied, "You think the sun shines out of her ass don't you? Why?"

Hmm not exactly the way I'd put it but she's not wrong. "Because, she always does I guess," she said. "The only way she'll fail me or you is if she's..." She lifted her eyes heavenward. "We won't go there."

"If she's dead...that could happen to Parker too." Sophie reached out and squeezed Amelia's hand. "You know when you look at them together with their supreme confidence you can't help but think it will all work out."

Amelia closed her eyes for a second at the word *dead*. *Won't happen, can't happen...but it might.* "Yes." Her cell rang. "Sorry." A reassuring smile crossed her face when the caller ID showed Teal's name. "Hi Teal, what is it...Mr. Ryan again?"

At her end, Teal frowned. "No. Look Amelia, I've received a call from St Mary's hospital."

Amelia's heart thudded and then stopped beating. "What's happened?"

"There was an accident," Teal said cautiously. "Olivia crashed her bike. I don't know all the details. They found her business card and rang the office for next of kin." She laughed slightly. "You know Olivia...she doesn't take any personal stuff with her..."

"Teal, I need you to get here as fast as you can."

"What about the office we have..." Teal looked around the reception area. "...three people hoping to get an appointment today."

Amelia had no interest in the office or the people waiting. "Forget the office Teal! It's not important right now! I need you to get over here as fast as you can...please."

The worry in Amelia's voice communicated down the line. "Ok, give me half an hour tops and I'll be with you."

Amelia's ashen features had Sophie holding her breath in anticipation. *By the look on her face, it can't be good.* "What's wrong Amelia?"

With a composure that she dredged up from an unknown source, Amelia stiffly replied, "There's been an accident. I need to go out. An associate of ours will arrive soon so you won't be alone." She turned away from Sophie and walked with unsteady steps toward her room. *Now's a good time to pray.*

All Sophie could do was watch. *Just who the hell was in an accident?* When she considered the question, she knew it couldn't be Parker. *Amelia wouldn't have reacted like that.*

* * *

Teal arrived at the warehouse and pressed the side doorbell. Within seconds, she heard the security latch unlock and entered. As soon as she walked into the main area of the building, Amelia pounced on her.

"Is there any more details Teal? Is she badly hurt? What did they say exactly?" Amelia asked with a shrill, agitated voice.

Sophie waited in the wings. Amelia did venture from her bedroom and told her, as she suspected, that Olivia was injured. *I wonder what that midget woman has to say.* She gave Teal the once over. *She has great clothes sense pity about the stature.*

"They weren't very forthcoming with information. They won't tell you anything unless you're a relative and the patient consents to them imparting the information. From what I gathered, they want to keep her overnight." Amelia's hand shot to her mouth as panic set in with the realization of the seriousness of the situation. "Her injuries aren't life threatening, Amelia." Teal said. *If she gave me half a chance, I could have told her all this over the phone.*

"Oh, ok that's good...isn't it? You're certain that she just needs to spend the night?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll fetch a change of clothes and her nightwear...what am I saying...she doesn't have nightwear."

Teal smiled slightly at that revelation. *I wonder how you know that.* "You sit down and pull yourself together and I'll take care of it Amelia. You're in no condition to drive. Once I've pack a small bag for Olivia, I'll drive you to the hospital."

"No! I need you to stay here with Sophie."

With a puzzled frown, Teal looked past her friend and realized someone else was silently watching them. With a nod of acknowledgement, she asked, "And just who is Sophie and why do I need to stay?"

"The case Olivia was working on Teal...remember?" Amelia left for Olivia's room in search of the items she needed, without another word.

"Oh, not the Shrek case!" Teal watched Amelia leave and shook her head. "I thought I was doing that." Her gaze fixed on the other woman. "Hi Sophie, I'm Teal an associate of Olivia and Amelia."

"Hi." Sophie's brow furrowed. "What's all this about Shrek...what's a Shrek?"

Teal smiled, but before she could answer, Amelia came back and grabbed her car keys. "Thanks for doing this Teal. I will activate the locks from the car." She pointed to a button on the console. "This is the button that will disarm the alarm. Under no circumstances allow anyone in unless it's me, Olivia or Parker...Sophie knows who Parker is." She quickly ran toward her car, climbed in, started the engine, opened the garage door and left with a screech of the wheels.

Sophie stood with her hands on her hips. "I wanted to go too, but she didn't give me a chance."

Teal nodded. "Happens like that with those two. Tell me about this Parker person so I'll know her when she arrives."

Sophie's face softened and she smiled. "Well, she's a little taller than me with short black hair and a beautiful face. She is keeping me safe from my stepmother...she and Olivia worked together a long time ago and Parker asked for her help on my case."

Never one to pass up an opportunity, Teal noticed the blush on the woman's face. "Are you a couple or is she just your protector?"

Sophie felt her cheeks burn. "Well...we have been intimate."

I knew it! I can always spot them! "Right my dear, the Shrek case huh."

"Exactly what is a Shrek?" Sophie asked again.

"Does an heiress, a wicked stepmother and a murder sound familiar to you?"

Sophie frowned. "Why?"

"Just come with me and you will learn about all things that is Shrek. You're in for a treat especially here. Olivia has the best money can buy in the home theatre equipment. Just step this way." Teal steered Sophie toward a small theater. *I get to watch the movie again...lucky me.*

CHAPTER 26

Dan Estevez, with his gun still pointing at O'Donnell, hurried to the spot where the man laid. Even though there was a gaping hole in his head, he nudged the man with his foot and kicked away his weapon before he put his Glock back in its holster. Satisfied that Shamus O'Donnell was dead, he looked toward the area where Parker had stood.

"No, no, no," he bellowed. He ran toward Parker's prone body, certain that a bullet hitting her vest only stunned her. "It's all over Parker we got him." When he turned her over he saw the blood on her shirt. He shouted, "We've got one down." *This isn't how it was suppose to go down.*

Dan ripped Parker's shirt open and tore at the Velcro straps that held the bullet proof vest in place. Once he exposed Parker's chest, he took the remnants of her shirt and pressed it against the oozing blood. "We need to get her to the hospital immediately," he shouted.

From the group of four other agents Stevie Jenkins stepped forward. "St. Mary's is on Concord about three blocks from here," she said.

"Damn you, O'Donnell. Why didn't we know he would use amour piercing bullets? Can someone tell me who the fuck was responsible for getting that information! SHIT! Get me his gun." His eyes traveled to the large muscular woman kneeling beside him. "Put pressure on the wound while I pick her up?" He secured Parker in his arms and looked at the rest of his crew. "Don't just stand there like fuckin' idiots...you know what to do. Make certain that you leave no traces." He nodded to the blood on the ground. "Especially that."

The car sped down the road without lights flashing or the siren blaring. They were fortunate not to have alerted the local authorities when they chased O'Donnell. Dan knew that Olivia's friend, Captain David Tourney, at the police department knew of their mission and agreed to let them deal with O'Donnell. *How the hell she managed that is anyone's guess.* He knew if the papers ever got hold of that information a juicy scandal would erupt.

Stevie called the hospital to alert them of their situation. "How are you going to explain the gunshot?" she asked.

"Attempted suicide," Dan said. "We can't compromise the mission."

Parker's eyes fluttered open and, as the first wave of pain hit, she scrunched her face in agony. "Did we get him?"

"Yes, he's dead."

She swallowed. "Good." Her eyes focused on Dan. "Olivia won't be happy. Where are we?"

"On the way to the hospital," Dan said. When he noticed her eyes closing and her breath becoming shallow, he said, "Stay with me Parker. Open your eyes...come on Parker open them." He breathed a sigh of relief when her eyes blinked open just as they arrived at the hospital. He looked out the window and he saw a gurney and several people waiting for them.

Once Parker was loaded onto the gurney, Dan followed them into the hospital. A man, that Dan thought was too young to be a doctor, examined the wound. "We have an

artery bleed,” he said to the other medical staff. “She’s lost a lot of blood...hang a bag of ringers on one side and let’s get some O neg going too. Nancy, type and cross match her and alert OR that we’ll be sending her up.” The doctor looked at Dan. “Who are you?”

“I’m the one that found her.”

“Do you know if she has any allergies or medical problems?”

“I’m certain she doesn’t.”

“How did this happen?”

“She’s been depressed over her boyfriend leaving her...guess it was too much.” He shrugged and blew out a breath. “Is she going to make it?”

“Right now I’d say her chances aren’t good.” The doctor shook his head. “Men usually go for the head and women for the body.” He looked at Parker’s face. “I wonder if she thinks he’s worth it now.” He scribbled on a chart before placing it on the gurney. “Let’s get her to the OR.”

* * *

After making the necessary calls, Dan paced the floor of the waiting room. *If she dies, Olivia won’t be the only one to kick my ass.* He looked at the wall clock and snorted. *I guess she’ll be in there for a while. I better find Olivia and face the music.* He picked up the hospital phone. “Can you tell me what room my sister Olivia Santos is in?”

He stood at Olivia’s door and before he entered he took a deep breath. “Hey how are you doing?” he asked tentatively.

Amelia looked up at the man who had a grim expression that belied his upbeat greeting. She gave him a weak smile and turned back to her friend before she answered the man’s question. To a stranger, Olivia’s hooded expression would make one wonder if she knew the man, but to Amelia it was obvious that she did. “The helmet took the brunt of the hit and she’s bruised from head to toe, but otherwise ok. The doctor that examined her said she was lucky. When the medics got to her, she had a problem remembering so the doctor wants her to spend the night for observation.”

Olivia grimaced, “I’ve not been stricken dumb Amelia.”

Amelia winced at the censure then gave her friend an apologetic smile before she squeezed the larger hand. “Sorry, I guess you being here kinda makes me nervous. Why don’t I go get a coffee while you two visit?”

“Your business partner?” Dan asked.

Olivia blinked at the man she knew as a friend and gave him a dour smile. “Yes she is. Have we caught O’Donnell?”

“She seems nice.”

Her head was pounding and all she wanted to do was sleep. *I just know if they’d let me sleep everything will be in order again when I wake up.* “And the mission?”

Dan shuffled from one foot the next. *Damn, Parker should be here explaining this not me.* “Hum, yes, but we had to kill O’Donnell.” He saw Olivia’s eyebrow rise in question. “But, Parker got him to tell her who he was working for.”

A spark of interest flickered in her eyes. *Way to go Parker.* “You got a recording of his deathbed confession I assume?” *Something isn’t right. Someone like O’Donnell doesn’t do confessions.*

He averted his eyes. "No, but we all heard him...the Durant woman was definitely involved. Apparently he also killed a woman that worked in Parker's office."

"Christ Dan, didn't you learn anything when we worked in ops together? You can't convict a person on hearsay...especially if they're dead." Olivia allowed the frustration of being confined to the hospital transmute to anger toward the man. "When Parker gets here she better have a plan set in stone that will get that bitch."

Dan sucked in a deep breath. "She won't be coming...O'Donnell shot her."

A myriad of emotions tumbled in Olivia's already scrambled head as she tried to take in the blunt statement. "Dead or alive?"

"Someone neglected to find out about that shit using armor piercing bullets, Olivia. Parker took a hit in the chest." He could see the concern on her face. "She's in surgery...it doesn't look good," he said.

Olivia closed her eyes. *Oh my god I should have known. Why didn't I take that precaution into the equation?* "How close was she?"

"Ten feet, she managed to get a shot off before his bullet hit her." He saw a moment of horror cross Olivia's face. "She missed."

"She missed, how the fuck did she miss that close? No, don't answer that Dan. Why, in god's name did you allow her to get that close? You heard my instructions clearly didn't you?" Olivia's voice dropped to menacing tone as she glared at the man.

Dan felt his face flush. *I'm in deep shit so I'd better watch where I step. The mission is uppermost so I need to keep with the plan.* "She wouldn't listen. With you out of the picture and another helping you we were short by two." He closed his eyes. "She was amazing Olivia, you should have seen her. She tracked him and got the drop on him without him knowing she was there. She missed because my bullet hit him first." He took a deep breath. "I take full responsibility."

I need to see Parker and not lay here like a dumb melon. "I need my clothes. Throw me that bag over on the chair," Olivia shook her head in an attempt to clear the cobwebs and let the light in. "You said you shot him...exactly where?"

"The head." *I know where she's going with this. Never mind, I know what to say.*

Olivia's eyebrows knitted. "You did know that we needed him for information didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then why the fuck did you go for a head shot?"

Dan wiped a hand over his face. "He was going to kill Parker and I wasn't going to let that happen. At the time, a kill shot seemed appropriate."

"No one is so important that we jeopardize the mission," Olivia growled. "When will she be out of surgery?"

Amelia chose that moment to re-enter the room. "Hey, what's going on?"

Dan looked at his watch then at Amelia and nodded in her direction. "Is it ok to speak?" When he saw Olivia nod, he said, "She will be out of surgery anytime now. It depends on how much damage the bullet did."

"The moment she's out of recovery I want you back here with a wheelchair. Then you will escort your sister to the room. Once we get there, you will ensure that no one disturbs us until I'm done. Do you think you can follow those instructions to the letter?" Olivia snarled.

“What’s going on? Which room, why?” Amelia felt the sparks of anger flying from Olivia’s bed toward the man - *her brother*.

Once Dan left the room, Amelia looked squarely at Olivia. When she caught her partner’s eyes, she was unable to prevent her frustration and anger from showing.

“It doesn’t concern you Amelia. Your priority right now is to go home and keep Sophie safe.”

Amelia didn’t like Olivia’s tone or the expression in her friend’s eyes. “I’ll do no such thing until you explain what’s going on Olivia.”

Olivia glared in annoyance at Amelia. *No one speaks to me like that!* “For god sake, will someone today just do what I ask? Maybe then we won’t have anyone else hurt.”

“All I want is a simple explanation as to why you want me to leave. Won’t Parker be back at our place by now checking on Sophie?” *In all the time that I’ve known Olivia, she has never been this cruel.*

The crack in Olivia’s fragile emotional balance appeared as she bleakly stated, “Parker was shot. Her chances aren’t good. Please, just do as I ask Amelia. Right now my place is with Parker...I owe her that much.”

Amelia’s hand shot to her mouth as she realized the enormity of those few words. She moved instinctively toward her friend’s side and placed a hand on the one clutching the blanket. “I’m so sorry Olivia. Can’t I stay please...for you?”

The touch ignited that flame inside of Olivia that gave her extra strength. *Right now, I need it for Parker. Amelia will have to understand that.* “I don’t need you Amelia. Please go.”

Amelia blinked back tears when she heard the final dismissal in Olivia’s voice. “I understand...you still love her don’t you.” Without waiting for an answer, she rushed out of the room as eyes unshed tears flowed.

* * *

In an operating room a voice said, “She’s losing pressure.”

“We’ve got a bleeder,” the surgeon said.

“Pressure is 80 over 60.”

Another voice said, “Her heartbeat is erratic.”

“Damn it we’re losing her.” When the monitor gave a long, slow steady beep the surgeon said, “She’s crashing.” He took the internal cardiac paddles and pressed them to her heart. “Clear,” he said watching the monitor for any sign of life. “Again.” After one more try a steady beep, beep filled the room. “Hang more blood and let’s get her closed.”

* * *

Dan looked up and saw the surgeon heading toward him with a grim expression. He said, “How is she?”

“We nearly lost her several times. I repaired what I could. The bullet exploded inside causing extensive damage. We did what was necessary to keep her alive. Once she gets stronger, we’ll have to go back in and repair the rest. We found the biggest fragment

of the bullet lodged near her spine. I won't lie to you, she's critical and right now she's lucky to be alive."

"Can I see her?"

The surgeon patted Dan's shoulder. "When she's out of recovery they'll move her to ICU. That should take an hour or so."

"Thank you," Dan said softly. He sent up a silent prayer. Once he was out of the waiting room, he made a phone call. "She's out of surgery...it doesn't look good."

Dan entered Olivia's room with wheelchair in tow. "The surgery is over and she'll be in ICU in about an hour," he said to the obviously agitated Olivia.

"Good that gives you time to assemble the team while I contact Parker's parents. I want Stevie, Chris and Sally to go to Philadelphia and locate the Durant woman. Once they set up surveillance, I'll want to know if she so much as sneezes." Olivia moved off the bed too quickly causing her to close her eyes as a wave of nausea washed over her.

"I'll set that in motion and when I get back I'll take you to intensive care."

"It's wheels up for the jet. I want them to pick up Parker's parents. Tell Tom to head southwest and when you come back I'll give you the exact coordinates." Olivia turned her back on the man. "Get going and make sure the rest do their jobs too."

* * *

Before Dan walked out of the hospital, he sent a text message to the rest of the team to meet with him at a predetermined location.

Stevie was the first to arrive. She looked at the man sitting next to her in the command center van. His voice said calm and collected, but his face said something altogether different. "Is she pissed?"

Dan sighed. "Yep, but we expected that."

Stevie shook her head. "Was she more angry with you killing O'Donnell or the serious injury to one of the team?"

"Both." He looked past the woman. "I think an operative being shot wasn't something she anticipated...I know I didn't, not with someone like Parker." His eyes rested on the younger woman and saw no emotion on her face or in her cold blue eyes. "Do you feel anything?"

Stevie shook her head. "No, I don't. It is part of what we do Dan. We save people and sometimes a death or injury occurs. I can't allow myself to dwell on that...I couldn't do my job. "

Dan shrugged. "Yeah you're right." Inside he felt sorry for the woman. *So jaded...I guess that makes this job more palpable. I'm glad I don't go out in the field that often anymore.*

The rest of the team arrived and gathered inside the roomy van. "How's Santos doing," one man asked.

"She has a mild concussion along with bruises and minor lacerations. They want to keep her overnight."

"What about Davis?"

"Not good."

Dan looked at the group and cleared his throat. "Tom, I need you up in the air as soon as possible and head southwest. I'll radio you with the exact coordinates within the

hour.” He looked at Stevie. “I want you, Chris and Sally to go to Philly, find the Durant woman and keep tabs on her until Olivia arrives.”

“She’s going after that woman without any concrete proof of her involvement?” Stevie said. “Am I missing something here?”

Annoyed, Dan flexed his jaw. “We agreed to help Olivia on this mission and it is not finished yet. The Durant woman needs to be brought to justice.” He gave Stevie a hard stare. “If you don’t want to piss off Olivia more than she already is, I’d get my butt down to Philly. Eric, you need to speak with Olivia’s contact at the police department and make sure they bury the shooting. I told the doctor it was a suicide attempt so he’s obligated to report that to the police...we don’t want them snooping into our business.”

“No problem Dan. I know David Tourney well. He cooperated with us at the funeral so I see no reason for him not to now.”

“Good. I take it that you have cleaned the site.” Everyone nodded. He said, “Ok. Tom let me know when you’re on the ground. I’ll expect reports from you three when you’re in Philly and Eric let me know if we need to persuade the police by calling in a few favors.” Dan blew out a breath. “Ok, you all know your assignments...you’ll be advised of any changes.”

Dan opened the door to the van and slid out. He took a quick look at his watch before taking a deep breath. “Man, I hate this.” When he reached the door to the hospital emergency room, he went inside to face Olivia again.

* * *

Olivia sat in the wheelchair beside Parker’s bed. The low lighting embellished by the monitors checking her vitals and the odd beep from the equipment were her only companions. Her eyes cast to the clock on the wall of the intensive care nursing station. Unable to hide her frustration anymore she said, “It’s been over an hour why the hell aren’t you waking up Parker?”

Parker was in a dream state. As she felt her consciousness wanting to leave the beautiful visions, she tried to fight it—she lost. When she opened her eyes she stirred slightly and saw Olivia sitting next to her. *Why is she here?*

The movement of the eyelids had Olivia glued to Parker’s face. The relief she felt when the eyelids opened and she saw Parker’s disorientated brown eyes gaze at her was palpable. The tears she’d kept in check slowly ran down her cheeks. “Hey Parker, at last. Bet you thought you’d skip town on me before I got a chance to speak to you huh?”

Her dry mouth made it difficult to form words. “O,” was all she could whisper.

A thousand things traveled through Olivia’s mind at that precise moment and she didn’t know what to say. She closed her eyes briefly then gave Parker a small smile. “Do you need a drink?”

Parker nodded slightly. “Yes.”

Olivia poured water into the paper cup on the bedside table and gently placed the end of a straw against Parker’s lips. “I’d better call the nurse. They wanted to be informed if you woke.”

With a shaky hand, Parker grabbed Olivia’s wrist. “No...I want to tell you...that I have...” To weak to continue, she closed her eyes and could not stop the lone tear that trickled down her cheek.

“Hey it’s ok. What do we need the nurse for anyway? I know you’re going to be back on your feet in no time. What do you want to tell me?”

Parker heard the words from the one person she trusted with her life and struggled to open her eyes. She stared into the blue pools that once held so much love for her and more tears fell. “I love you,” she said.

Olivia felt a constriction in her throat as she heard those three words.

It took all Parker’s energy to continue speaking. “I never stopped.” She closed her eyes.

The words pierced Olivia’s being, slicing her in half. For a long moment Olivia was speechless. *Should I say what’s in my heart or not?* “I called your parents, they’ll be here soon.”

“Mom’s gonna be pissed.” Parker tried to smile. “Bet she cries,” she said. Her eyes drifted in and out of the clouds that kept calling her name.

“Yeah, Ruth’s not going to be easy on me for putting you in a situation that might get you...,” Olivia said. She refused to think of Parker in any way but alive and well.

“I knew the risks. Dying is the chance we take.” She knew she needed Olivia to know what went left unsaid for ten years. She dug deep down for the strength to continue. “You didn’t do anything O.” She struggled to continue. “I betrayed you...” She couldn’t stop the onslaught of tears. “...I love you.” Parker heard her own words echoing around her and desperately wanted to say more. *Don’t leave me* she screamed noiselessly before her mind sank deep into an abyss.

The bleakness of the words and their meaning wasn’t lost on Olivia as she took Parker’s hand and lifted it to her lips and kissed it reverently. “Don’t you know that I’ll always love you Parker? You were my first love and until the day I die you always will be, that can’t ever change.” She buried her face in the hand trying to stave off the tears that threatened to flood the sheets.

For what seemed like an age, Olivia remained in that position until she realized that Parker’s breathing was shallow. *Something’s wrong*, her mind warned as she hit the button for the nurse.

A nurse, dressed in brightly colored scrubs, came into the room, pushing past the man standing in the doorway. “What’s the matter?”

“She woke up and now she’s gone again - do something.”

Calmly the nurse checked Parker’s vitals. “Ms. Davis can you hear me.” When she had no response, she took Parker’s hand. “If you can hear me Parker, squeeze my hand.” The nurse turned to Olivia. “I need to get her doctor.”

Olivia’s eyes fell on the pale features of her old lover. *Don’t you dare leave me Parker...I still have things to say to you.* “Why...what’s wrong?”

The kind eyes of the nurse smiled at Olivia. “Let me get Dr. Holmes. She’ll answer all your questions.” She patted Olivia’s shoulder. “This is not unusual when there’s been massive trauma. I’ll get the doctor.”

Something inside Olivia snapped at the words *massive trauma*. For a few seconds her eyes drank in the sight of the woman who, whenever she thought of her, was certainly not like this reflection of a waxwork. Her image had been one of intense vitality and a trust of the world at large. *This isn’t right and I know who’s responsible.* “Dan, get in here...there’s work to be completed.”

As Dan started into the room, a woman with a long white lab coat over green scrubs stopped him. "You can't go in there. I need to examine my patient."

Dan looked through the doorway to Olivia and shrugged.

Dr. Holmes looked at Olivia hovering near the patient's bed. "Please step out while I examine my patient."

"I'd have been gone if you'd allowed him to come in and push me." Her glance passed over to Parker one last time. "Take good care of her Doctor," she said.

The doctor looked sharply at Olivia. *Was that a threat or a plea?* "I'll let you know when I'm done with the exam. Will you be close by?"

Dan quickly took the opportunity to retrieve Olivia and wheel her toward the door. Olivia quietly answered, "I'll never be far away."

As they entered the corridor, Dan switched his cell back on and immediately it beeped with a text message. Once he retrieved the message, he showed it to Olivia.

"That makes my mind up...get me out of here now. Let's go."

"Don't you want to wait to see what the doctor has to say?" Dan asked. As if on cue the double doors opened and Parker's doctor came out.

Dr. Holmes looked at the dark, pensive woman who she was sure she didn't want to cross. "Right now her mind has shut down while the body heals."

Olivia nodded. "How long?"

"No way of telling."

Olivia sucked in a deep breath. "Thank you." Once the doctor left, her eyes flashed up to Dan. "Nothing I can do here now, but, I can do something that will make Parker happy when she wakes. I'm going to Philly. Take me to the heliport then come back and watch over Parker. When her parents get here, I want you to speak with them directly about what happened. Under no circumstances should they hear from the doctors that Parker tried to commit suicide." She thought for a moment. "You should tell them she was on a covert assignment and that was the reason you told the doctor's suicide." She leveled cold blue eyes on the man. "Nothing happens to Parker or her parents. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Dan said. "I won't let you down."

"You already did when you let her go after O'Donnell."

CHAPTER 27

Amelia considered going back to the bar to forget her troubles in a wash of alcohol again. *It didn't solve the dilemma then and it won't now.* From her perspective, at that moment she was a spare wheel in Olivia's life that much her friend had pointed out in stark clarity. The words still echoed in her head, *"I don't need you Amelia. Please go."*

As she pulled up besides a building, she was vaguely surprised to see that it was home. *Home, its Olivia's home not mine.* A gremlin in her head kept repeating *I'm just here because she allows it.* She instinctively deactivated the security, watched as the garage door went up and parked more by instinct than purpose. Amelia stepped out of the vehicle and sighed heavily as she saw Teal and Sophie heading in her direction. *Explanations, I can do without that right now.*

"Hey how is she, I wasn't expecting you back so soon." Teal asked. Her ready smile quickly replaced by a frown when she saw her friend's face. "There hasn't been complications has there?"

"No, no she's doing great. She'll be back tomorrow, they're just keeping her in overnight for observation...they do that with concussion victims." Amelia replied mechanically.

Teal let out a sigh of relief. "That's great news, isn't it?"

Amelia nodded. "Yes it is. Look, do you both mind if I take a nap, I'm exhausted. All in all it's been quite a hectic few hours." It was her excuse to sidestep any more questions - it didn't happen.

"Have you seen Parker? I was expecting her to check up on me, if not in person at least by phone," Sophie asked.

Amelia wanted to give Sophie a reality check. *Telling her that Parker is fighting for her life, won't accomplish anything - it will only exacerbate it.* "I'm sure she'll be in touch as soon as she can, Sophie. If she hasn't called by the morning, Olivia will know why and you can ask her."

Leaden footsteps took her toward her room and once inside she sank onto the bed. With her head turned to the pillow, she cried like a baby at the possibility that she was losing Olivia. *Have I already lost you?*

Teal watched Amelia leave, a thoughtful expression crossed her face then she turned to the other woman in the room. "Sophie, how about making us a cup of coffee."

Sophie, aggrieved at being in the dark, shrugged. "I'll do better than that. As we haven't had anything since early this morning, I'll make us snacks."

"Excellent idea. Do you mind if I leave you for a few minutes?" Teal smiled warmly. "I've just remembered a message that I need to give to Amelia."

Sophie responded with a smile of her own. "Take your time. I like to prepare meals and always work better in the kitchen on my own."

Teal waited for Sophie to climb the stairs and enter the kitchen before she tentatively tapped on Amelia's bedroom door. When she didn't receive an answer, she opened the door, popped her head around it and with difficulty saw that Amelia was on the bed. By the muffled sound, she knew that her friend was crying. *This isn't how she should be feeling if Olivia is ok. What's really going on?* She stepped inside the room and

walked the few feet to the bed and asked, “Amelia why are you crying? Is Olivia ok? You can tell me, please.”

From the depths of her despair, Amelia heard the entreaty bordering on worry in Teal’s voice. She pushed the pillow away and quietly replied, “She’s fine it’s nothing but a mild concussion and we both know she has a hard head.”

Thank god for that, Teal silently thought before peering up to her friend. “You know, I’m not good at talking to inanimate objects Amelia. Will you at least sit on the edge of the bed and speak to me.”

With a heavy sigh, Amelia moved to accommodate the request. “I need to be alone right now Teal, please.”

“We’re friends Amelia, and friends don’t leave without trying to help when they see someone in pain. I’ve known you enough years to figure out something has broken your heart. Just tell me who and I’ll make them pay.”

A tiny smile flickered around Amelia’s lips at the diminutive woman’s defense of her honor. “That’s a bit drastic Teal. You have to give your heart to someone or something for it to be broken.”

“Ok, then what’s happened to make you cry?”

“I guess for the first time, I found out where I am in the scheme of things around here. I feel inconsequential.”

Teal rolled her eyes. “What a crock that is Amelia. If Olivia was here and she heard you say that, she’d be taking you to task for it. You are as important in the scheme of things, as you call it, as the rest of us...more so from certain people’s point of view.”

“That’s just where you’re wrong Teal, she doesn’t give a damn.” The words seemed pathetic and selfish.

“Who...Olivia? Give me a break Amelia, we both know different and if you don’t I can tell you...” Teal didn’t finish as Amelia interrupted her.

“She said, and I quote. *I don’t need you Amelia. Please go.*”

Teal frowned heavily. *No, no way...I’d stake my life that Olivia loves Amelia.* “Look Amelia, it’s been a rough day she probably wasn’t thinking straight after a blow to the head. Are you sure, that’s what she said? In what context did she say it exactly?”

“Those were the exact words and in context to me being there for her...especially now,” Amelia said.

“Especially now? Why now?”

“Parker was shot, she’s critical. Olivia wanted to be with her.”

Teal’s mouth had dropped open in astonishment. “Why didn’t you mention that? That poor woman in the kitchen is waiting for Parker to get in touch.”

“I can’t tell her. Sophie will want to go to the hospital and that wouldn’t be a safe place for her right now. I suspect it will be in the morning.” Amelia tried to calm her own shattered emotions as she focused on the completion of the mission.

Then it dawned on Teal what the impact of Parker’s condition would have on Olivia. *She’ll think she is responsible.* “Look, Olivia’s one of those people who doesn’t want anyone hurt on their watch. You know that Amelia...I know you do. She’ll want to ensure that Parker is ok that’s all.”

More to emphasize it on her own psyche than for Teal’s benefit, Amelia whispered, “Parker was Olivia’s partner ten years ago. When I say partner I mean like

you and Phil...they lived together. She didn't want me there because she's realized that she still loves Parker and I'd be an embarrassment."

"My god, I didn't know Amelia, but that doesn't make any difference to what you and Olivia have together. She cares about you Amelia." Not knowing what else to say Teal shrugged. "Besides, I know that Parker and Sophie are sleeping together, surely that means something."

"I've watched Parker. No matter what you say, she loves Olivia. It's in the way she responds when Olivia is close to her or even speaks." *Because that's exactly how I feel.* Amelia felt the wave of anguish wash over her again as tears fell unchecked. "For Olivia's sake, I hope Parker makes it. They both deserve to be happy and I think that Olivia realizes she still loves Parker too."

Teal didn't hesitate. She literally jumped on the bed and placed her smaller arms around her friend. Amelia took comfort in the sympathy of her friend and leaned into Teal's embrace. "It's going to be ok Amelia, it really is. Everything will return to normal when this case is over you'll see."

"It can't ever be again Teal. I feel so lost. What will I do without her in my life if she doesn't want me here anymore?" Amelia sobbed into the small woman's shoulder. *I can't even admit to my dear friend Teal, that I love Olivia. I couldn't bear it if she felt sorry for me.*

Teal didn't say anything as she silently comforted her friend. Her thoughts shouted, *oh my poor Amelia...you think this isn't a broken heart. What will we do with you?*

* * *

Dan Estevez readjusted his legs as he sat in a chair outside Parker's room. When the hospital staff asked why he was there, he flashed a badge and said he was protecting the woman. *How gullible they all are. Just flash a badge with an official looking ID and no one questions or checks you out.* He saw a man and a woman who he guessed were in their fifties, hurrying toward him. When they got to the door, he stood up and said, "Mr. and Mrs. Davis, I'm Dan Estevez...a friend of Olivia Santos." He offered his hand.

Ed Davis ignored the proffered hand. "Where is our daughter?" he demanded.

"Oh Ed," Ruth said. "He isn't usually this rude you have to understand we're worried about our Parker."

"Yes, I appreciate that," Dan said. "Would you both come with me to the family room so I can speak with you in private?"

Ruth's hand went to her mouth. "Oh, my god...Parker has died."

"No, no she is very much alive. I just need to tell you about the circumstance revolving around her being injured."

Ed pushed past Dan "We'll see our daughter first then we can talk."

Ruth patted Dan's arm. "We just want to see her for ourselves. You can understand that can't you?"

Dan nodded. "I'll be right here until you're done."

After Ruth entered the room, Dan heard a loud sob and clenched his jaw. *Damn you O'Donnell I hope you rot in hell.*

* * *

Ruth took Parker's hand and held it close. "Ed, look at our little girl...she's so still,"

Ed said nothing as he fixed his eyes on his daughter while gnashing his teeth in anger.

"Parkiepoo, its Mom, can you hear me?" Teary eyes looked at Ed. "Do you think she can hear me?"

"She hears you," an unfamiliar voice said.

Ruth looked toward the door and saw a nurse. "What do I say?"

"Just speak to her like you normally do. The conventional wisdom says that coma patients hear everything you say to them."

Ruth's hand went to her mouth again. "When will she wake up?"

"No telling," the nurse said. "Do you mind stepping outside for about five minutes I need to check her vitals?"

"Come on Ed let's speak with that nice man outside."

* * *

Dan escorted Parker's parents to the family room and closed the door. He said, "I want to tell you how Parker was injured."

"You better tell us everything if you know what's good for you." Ed said.

Dan's eyes fixed on the older man realizing he was close to exploding. "I plan on doing just that Mr. Davis." Dan cleared his throat and began. "Your daughter and Olivia Santos were protecting a woman named Sophie Durant from an assassin."

"That's the young woman Parker had at the house," Ruth said.

"The man they were looking for killed a friend of Ms. Durant's whose funeral was today." He looked at his watch. "There was a shootout and your daughter had the man cornered. He was the person that shot her...then I shot him dead." He heard Ruth softly crying and noticed that Ed's face was stoic. "Your daughter was directly responsible for tracking him down. It was because of her determined pursuit that we got a confession about who he worked for."

"He should rest in hell," Ed said.

Dan nodded. "I'm sure he is." After a cough Dan continued. "It was because of Olivia's connection with an organization that works undercover that we were able to track and find the man. When we brought your daughter to the hospital we thought it wasn't prudent to tell anyone about the operation." He tugged at this collar trying to make it feel less constricting. "We told them that Parker attempted suicide," he said. "I wanted you to know what really happened so if any of the hospital staff mentions suicide you will know that was not what happened. We've replaced your daughter's initial doctor with one that works directly for our group."

"I don't understand," Ruth said. "Did Parker work for the group too?"

"No."

"Then why was she there?"

"Olivia Santos."

Ruth nodded; she didn't need further explanation for she knew Parker was there to be near Olivia." *My daughter still loves her... I saw it in both their eyes.*

Quiet prevailed in the small room. Ed finally stood up, approached Dan and held his hand out. "Thank you. I'm sorry about earlier and being rude...I'm just worried about my little girl."

Ruth asked, "Where's Olivia?"

"She's gone after the person that hired the assassin."

With an understanding nod, the couple stood up and started for the door. Just as Ed Davis took hold of the doorknob, Dan added. "Oh, Mr. and Mrs. Davis there's one more thing you should know..."

CHAPTER 28

The droning of the engine of the helicopter and the whirling of the blades above Olivia, amplified the pain in her head. For the second time on the journey, she reached for the pills Dan acquired before leaving the hospital. Just as she popped two more in her mouth, the pilot pointed to the landing pad.

"That's where we'll put her down," he said.

About time too. "You'll be contacted when we need a collection," Olivia said. Her gaze scanned the miniscule figures waiting on the roof of a federal building. Minutes later, she saw the thumbs up to vacate the transport. She hopped onto the landing pad making sure her head was low enough from the back draft of the revolving rotors.

Two people moved forward to greet Olivia. "Is everything set up?"

Stevie looked at the woman whose face seemed etched with anger. "Yes, we know her whereabouts. Chris is there now and told us that the woman just got home."

"Who else is in the building with her?" Olivia barely looked at her colleagues as she walked rapidly to the elevator.

"As far as we know," Sally said, "there is the household staff that consists of two women, the cook and the nanny. The child is in the house and there's also a gardener on the grounds."

Olivia glanced at Sally as a frown knitted her brow. "I take it there is an adequate exit plan in place?"

"Yes, everything is set in motion." She pulled out a schematic of the area. "We also have a way to get in undetected."

Stevie added, "Whenever you say, it will be a go."

Silence greeted their plans for a few moments as Olivia felt a searing pain in her head. *Damn concussion I hate headaches.* "Good, how far away are we from the residence when we hit street level?"

"We have a van in the garage and it should take about thirty minutes to get to the house depending on the traffic," Sally said.

Stevie added, "She went to the bank this morning and I managed to plant a small tracking chip on her clothes." She waited for a response of, *what if she changes clothes*, but got none. "Chris is monitoring her movements in the house with a remote device."

With a low curse Olivia growled, "Damn Philly and its narrow one way streets. We'd be better off on motorcycles. I take it the driver is familiar with the foibles of this city?"

"Yeah, I went to Penn so I know all the streets."

Olivia gave Sally the once over. The woman was new to her ops team transferring from one of the other six teams or the HQ team. *It doesn't really matter where she's from as long as she does her job.* "Stevie advise the pilot we'll be ready for pickup again in two hours."

Stevie gave Olivia a furtive glance then quickly strode toward their vehicle to make the call. *I'll be glad when I don't have to put up with her high and mighty attitude anymore. This is all her fault anyway for underestimating O'Donnell.*

Sally said, "You do realize that the mansion has a gate? Two hours is optimistic at best."

The bomb that had been ticking in Olivia's head exploded at the young woman's words. Her lips curved into a snarl. "Two hours is all you have. If you're incapable of meeting my targets go back to where you came from or better yet, join something that you can take your time in - origami might be more in your line."

Sally gaped at the rejoinder. *Who the hell does she think she is? I've heard all about Santos and her cowboy ways.* "Chris is inside the grounds. He has the code for the gate when we get there he'll open it then we'll have to go about a hundred yards to reach the house. Fortunately, there's lots of cover so we should go undetected. We noticed that the door near the pool is always open and that will be where we enter."

"Then the only thing that remains unproven is your driving skills, let's go." She climbed into the back of the vehicle where Stevie was waiting.

Bitch. "I can assure you that my driving skills are more than adequate. No matter what I drive I never get lost, have an accident or fall off a motorcycle." Sally locked her eyes at the woman in the rearview mirror before buckling her seatbelt.

Olivia leveled a glacial glance in the young woman's direction. *A low blow - I like it.* "You're on the clock as of now."

Sally threw the vehicle into gear and the wheels squealed as she drove toward their target.

* * *

The dark van stopped in front of the gated mansion's driveway. Olivia glanced at her watch. *Nice...twenty-two minutes.* Each woman affixed a headset and did a sound check. Then, from inside the van someone said, "We're here Chris."

Chris Archer whispered, "The gate to the side of the bigger one is open. I'm about twenty-five yards to the left of that."

Once the three women exited the vehicle, Olivia spoke into her headset. "Chris you take care of the gardener and Stevie along with Sally will neutralize the inside help."

They approached the smaller gate, pushed it open and moved to the left toward a stand of trees. Chris waved them over indicating that they should keep low. Stevie crouched next to the man. "What do you have?"

"The gardener is about fifty feet over there."

Olivia ground her teeth at the reply. "What part of neutralize the gardener didn't you understand Chris?" Her eyes scanned the terrain for any other obstacles. *If you want a job done, you have to do it yourself and they call themselves the elite of DOCO! God give me strength.*

"I did, just give it another minute." He pointed to the man tending the roses and said, "Five, four, three, two, one...there he goes." The gardener collapsed backwards.

"What did you do to him?" Stevie asked.

"It's a prototype of a spray that renders a person unconscious for forty-five minutes and when they awake they have no idea that it happened." He grinned. "Pretty neat isn't it?"

Stevie grinned. "Do you have any left for us to use inside?"

“Sure do.” He handed the two women aerosol cans. “Just be sure you don’t use too much. We don’t want them out any longer than we need to get the job done.”

“We’ll be careful,” she said. “Come on let’s get going, we have less than forty-five minutes.”

“She’s in the master bedroom.” Chris started for the house along with the others.

Olivia made a mental note to add that concoction to her next shopping list with DOCO. She continued her private surveillance of the area and the home in particular. *Obviously, they aren’t expecting any serious crimes around these parts or they would have better security implemented.* Then, she returned her attention to her colleagues who were now out in the open and heading toward the house. *Why is everyone around me so eager to rush things? Damn you Parker! I wonder how you’re doing. You really should have left it to the experts.* “Where do you think you are going Chris?” she said.

“I’m going to the house to help out,” Chris said as whipped his head around to look at Olivia. *Who the hell does she think she is to question me?*

“Hey, we’re wasting time here.” Stevie’s bravado was short lived when she saw the scowl on Olivia’s face.

As Olivia stepped closer to the figures, she felt the tension building particularly in Chris. “I asked you to secure the perimeter Chris. You have extinguished the known threat. What happens if someone unexpected arrives and you’re inside? You stay here and deal with it...end of story.” Her glacial eyes moved to Stevie and Sally. She flicked her head toward the house. “You have two minutes.”

Stevie and Sally ran toward the house and gained entrance before neutralizing the cook and the nanny. “All secure.”

As Olivia entered the building, she spoke to Stevie. “Check on the child. I don’t want anything tragic happening to an innocent. Sally, you keep a close eye on the nanny and the maid. I’ll contact you next when we need to exit the building...you be ready.”

* * *

Olivia activated the recorder in her pocket and quietly opened the bedroom door. Evelyn Durant, who sat at her desk compiling a list for the nanny, felt a slight breeze on her cheek and unconsciously wiped a hand across it. She had exactly one hour to get into the city and meet her husband at the art museum. Her ears perked up when she thought she heard a strange sound. A quick glance of the room showed nothing out of place. Just as she finished the list, she felt something cold against her neck.

“Shamus sends his regards from the grave Evelyn. I’m here to replace him.” Olivia’s intimidating voice was cold and menacing. She felt her finger twitch eager to squeeze the trigger of her Glock semi-automatic. *It would be so easy to end it now.*

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Evelyn said. “Exactly who is this Shamus person and where did we meet?”

Cool and aloof...she’s good I’ll give her credit for that much. Olivia, with the gun never leaving the woman’s skin, stealthily moved to face Evelyn Durant. “If I mention Sophie, inheritance and assassin would you remember?”

Evelyn assessed the woman with the gun and felt a small shiver run down her spine. She found herself drawn to the cold blue eyes. *I saw that same look in Shamus’*

eyes-inhuman. “You certainly don’t look like an assassin,” she said. She fixed Olivia with her own cold, hard stare. “You’re guessing and this is all some elaborate ruse.” Olivia gave the woman a feral grin. “Is that a chance you want to take Evelyn,” she purred.

“How do I know that he is dead? Maybe this is a deception to extort money.”

Olivia reached inside her jacket pocket and took out the cell phone used to capture images of Shamus’s body. “See for yourself.” She held the phone so Evelyn could see the picture. “If I go back one you’ll see his useless cousin Sean.” She flicked the button. “See they’re both dead.”

Evelyn looked briefly at the pictures. She sighed and let her eyes gaze over Olivia’s face and body. “What, exactly do you want from me?”

Olivia tipped her head to one-side not hiding her deliberate assessment of the woman from her head to the heaving breast implants. *Fear, is that fear I see in those deliciously formed breasts?* She flicked her tongue over her lips and caught eyes that held veiled panic. “For starters I’ll complete the task you gave Shamus, but I’ll want more than what you were paying him.” Her voice changed from menacing to sultry and playful as the tip of her gun made small circles on the woman’s cheek.

Evelyn still wasn’t convinced. “I don’t respond well to demands.”

This is taking far too long. “Fine by me...but don’t forget that I’ve got her and you want her. It’s your call as to what I do next. I can keep her safe for the next few months or ...”

Evelyn let out a nervous laugh. “You don’t have her.”

Olivia smiled, glad that she had the foresight to take a picture of Sophie in a staged hostage condition. She pulled the picture out of her pocket. “It’s dark and a bit grainy, but you’ll get the general idea.”

Evelyn’s eyes darted from the picture to the cold blue eyes of Olivia. “I’m not interested in keeping her safe. You’ll need to deal with her before August third...can you do that?”

A thin smile played around Olivia’s lips and she raised an eyebrow, “of course.”

“You can play with her anyway you want, but her body needs to be found no later than the end of July.” Evelyn leveled Olivia with a hard look. “How do I know you can deliver?”

Olivia winked. “I’ve never had any complaints.” She moved her gun down along Evelyn’s neck to rest in the valley between her breasts. “All I need from you is confirmation of your arrangement with Shamus and your agreement to my payment terms.”

Evelyn gulped when the cold steel touched her breasts it felt strangely erotic. “You give me confirmation the job is done and I will pay you.” A quick glance at the clock brought a smile to Evelyn’s face. “The nanny should be here any moment so you either agree to my terms or leave...I’m sure you don’t want anyone to identify you.”

Gotcha! The scent of victory permeated the air as Olivia moved to within inches of Evelyn’s face. She could feel the breath of the woman on her cheek and it made her nauseous. “Forget the nanny Evelyn. It’s just you and me, and right now, I’m the one with the upper hand.” The gun moved under the flimsy bra and stopped over a nipple. As the cold touched on the sensitive skin, the other nipple became visible through her silk shirt. “Shamus liked to play with little girls I prefer mine more...” Her eyes greedily

rested on Evelyn's breast. "Mature," Olivia said. *This is working out better than I imagined. Homophobes were so predictable...they're always scared shitless by ignorance.*

Evelyn grabbed the barrel of the gun. "Get that thing away from me!" she ordered. She couldn't disguise the panic in her voice. "I want the body to be found to prove she is dead. Is that clear?"

"You grab the barrel again and I'm not sure I will be able to keep my finger from pulling the trigger." Olivia let out a cruel laugh. "You really don't like your stepdaughter do you. Hmm, I wonder if I should just keep her safe." She let her eyes feast on Evelyn's breast again. "No, she's not my type. Enough of this small talk...either you agree to my terms or not." Olivia shrugged. "Either way I get paid."

"She's offered to pay you?" When Evelyn saw Olivia nod she eyed the woman who she was certain wanted to harm her. *I can't let that happen.* She said, "I'll match whatever Sophie offered along with the hundred thousand I still owed Shamus ..." Her eyes opened wide and she shivered as she considered another option. *Has someone else sent her here? Gus...no he wouldn't do that.*

A feral look glinted in Olivia's eyes when she heard exactly what they needed to indict this woman for conspiracy to commit murder. "Oh Evelyn, I certainly don't want your money."

Fear permeated Evelyn's eyes and face as a hand clutched the opening of her silk blouse. "What do you want then?"

Olivia closed in on Evelyn and ran her tongue along the woman's cheek. "You Evelyn...and right now, I've got you." Her hand turned like a vice around Evelyn's wrist as she spoke into her mike. "Stevie, Sally we have what we need, time to leave." Although her earlier injuries protested, Olivia managed to pull the stunned woman from the chair, drag the awkwardly walking woman out of the room and down the stairs to the two waiting women. "Let me go," Evelyn screamed. "Are you going to kill me after you and your friends rape me?"

Stevie's eyebrows shot up as she heard Evelyn's panic filled screams. *Christ what did Olivia say to her.* "Want me to deal with the mouth?"

The distaste Evelyn's comment had on Olivia's already overworked system had her almost puking on the stairs. *In your dreams, you bitch.* "Take her away and use that stuff on her and keep her as far away as possible from me." She looked at Sally. "Get this tape to the local police. It will be interesting to see how they treat one of their elite involved in such a scandal."

"You got it," Sally said.

Stevie grabbed Evelyn and covered her face as she squirted a small amount of spray in Evelyn's direction. *I'm going to love watching you go to prison. The girls inside will have a field day with a rich bitch like you...you'll deserve everything you get.*

Olivia adjusted her headset. "Chris I need you to keep the child safe until one of the help wakes up and is fit to take over. If they spot you show them your police ID." *Thank god, that's over, now to get Parker back on her feet.* She closed her eyes for a few seconds recalling how she'd left Parker. Then grimaced as another scenario she'd set in motion came to the forefront of her thoughts. *That is another matter outstanding, but that will have to wait.*

CHAPTER 29

Amelia was grateful that the lights in the console area of the warehouse were dim—her head was exploding. The result of the tension caused by crying required attention. “I need ibuprofen.” She glanced around. *I wonder if anyone else is here?* The answer to her question came instantly when she saw two figures in the kitchen. She really didn’t want to face any more questions, she sighed before climbing the stairs listlessly.

“I wish I knew where Parker is,” Sophie said. She saw Amelia arrive, but ignored her and carried on speaking and walking with purposeful strides. “I thought for sure we’d hear something by this morning.”

Teal smiled her welcome to her friend. The dark shadows under Amelia’s eyes and the pallor of her skin worried her. “Hey how you doing?” she asked.

“I’ve a headache, otherwise fine and dandy.” She smiled warmly at her friend. *I’m so glad Teal stayed around to keep Sophie amused. I don’t think I could have taken the woman all by myself today.*

“Well I’m not ok,” Sophie interjected. “I want to know what’s happening. I hate them keeping us in the dark like this. After all, it’s my life that’s on the line.”

“I’ll take care of that headache for you Amelia. Why don’t you and Sophie go downstairs and I’ll bring us coffee and breakfast...oh, and the ibuprofen too.” Teal didn’t allow either of them to argue as she motherly waved them toward the exit.

While she walked down the stairs, Amelia listened in irritation as Sophie whined behind her. “I don’t know how you do it...living in this place. It’s like a god damn jail.”

Amelia scowled at the comment and her thoughts about Sophie were less than charitable. However, she refused to have Sophie draw her into a reply. She silently sent up a prayer. *Please God help me have patience with this woman.* A few moments later when they entered the dining room, she settled silently into a chair.

“I bet you’ve heard from Olivia, haven’t you.” Sophie paused then added, “I’m the one paying the bill so I don’t understand why you are all keeping me out of the loop.”

That is it...that’s the last straw! “For the record, I don’t work for you and you aren’t paying for my services. This is my home and I’ve generously allowed you, a stranger, a safe haven because a friend asked me for help. If I have contact with anyone, including Olivia, it’s my business not yours.”

Sophie’s mouth flew open as she stared at the woman across from her. “I...I thought you were a nun. How dare you speak like that to me? Have you forgotten that I’m the one whose life is in danger? Do you think I like being here one second longer than I have to be?”

“I’m not a nun! I’m also not beholden to you in any shape or form. In fact, if it was up to me I’d have taken you to a hotel by now. However, some promises I like to keep no matter how distasteful they might be personally.” *Stupid woman...she doesn’t have the brains to work out that it isn’t all about her!*

Sophie felt the sting of the words and realized she hit a nerve. She moved a few steps closer to Amelia and said, “Hey, listen, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have spouted off like that. I’m just really worried about Parker.” Sophie bit her lower lip. “My stepmother already had someone I love killed, I don’t think I could bear it if it happened again.”

Amelia felt uncomfortable at the apology and the woman's professed love for Parker. *How do I get out of this without giving the game away? Damn you Olivia, sometimes what you ask is too much.* "Look, we're both a little fraught with anxiety right now. I hate it when Olivia gets hurt. She isn't the best patient in the world and I have to live with her."

Blue eyes refused to look up as Sophie wiped away a tear. "For over ten months I've been on the run trying to stay one step ahead of whoever my stepmother sent after me." She lifted her head. "This is the only place where I've felt completely safe. I know it is your home and you've graciously let me...us stay here. It must be hell for you knowing that the person you live with and love is injured." She reached her hand across the table. "Can we be friends?"

A hand went out automatically at the gesture of friendship as Sophie's words tumbled mercilessly in her head. "I know it's been tough for you, but believe me you're in good hands."

Without thinking, Sophie got up, went around the table and bent down to give Amelia a hug. "I know I am," she whispered. "We'll both get through this."

"Right now, waiting seems to be our lot in life doesn't it?" As she said those words, she made a decision. "Look I'm going to go to the hospital. Olivia will need a ride home once she's released this morning. With luck, she'll have the answers to all your questions. Please just be patient a little longer."

With a soft smile, Sophie said, "I'll do what it takes to get this done."

"Here we go ladies," Teal said. The tray she carried was almost as big as she was. "Anyone interested in scones, hot coffee and jam?"

Amelia smiled warmly at her friend. "Teal you're the greatest. I'm going to collect Olivia from the hospital. Will you please stay with Sophie just a little longer?"

Teal hopped up on to a chair next to Sophie. "Sure, Sophie and I are buds." She eyed Amelia. "You do remember that we have a business, clients and all that good stuff?"

"Good stuff, huh? I promise I'll be back before lunch. Save some of those scones for me will you, they look delicious." The tension headache she woke up with was remarkably disappearing. Amelia grinned at her friend. "I'll take a coffee with me, but first I need my purse."

With a laugh that belayed her size, Teal watched Amelia leave. "I guess she thinks work can wait." She turned to Sophie. "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry."

Sophie winked and stabbed a scone with her fork. "Beat you."

"Hey, no fair, my arms are shorter."

* * *

"Ms. Santos checked herself out AMA," the nurse brusquely informed her. Amelia stood at the nurse's station perplexed. "What was her condition when she left?"

"We don't know since she chose to leave before the doctor checked her."

Why did you do that? Where are you Olivia? She frowned as her thoughts pulled up various scenarios of Olivia lying in a gutter unconscious. *I've heard of that happening to concussion victims.* "I'm sorry to bother you again, but do you have any idea what time she left?"

The nurse eyed Amelia. "I have better things to do than discuss a patient who caused nothing but grief while she was here." When she saw the concern in the brown eyes, the nurse smiled in sympathy. "No one really knows. She left in a wheelchair to see another patient and never returned. I do know she's not in the hospital...security searched and didn't find her. Now, if that is all, I have to get to work."

Parker! I should have known. "No, that's all, thanks for your help." Amelia strode off with purpose toward the elevator before she realized she didn't know where Parker was. *If her injuries are as severe as Olivia indicated then she should be in ICU.* She quickly scanned the hospital information board, found what she was looking for, and after a few minutes of waiting in irritation, entered the elevator.

Amelia fished in her purse before she entered the ICU. Once she found her identification badge, she clipped it to her collar. *Good thing I have hospital privileges here.* She pushed the door open and located the nurse's station. With a nonchalant voice said, "I'm Dr. West, which room is Parker Davis in?"

"Room seven."

Certain that she looked guilty as sin, Amelia waited for the nurse to ask what kind of doctor she was or why she was there. Instead, the nurse said, "Her parents are visiting her and you'll have to show your ID to the guard at the door."

"Sure no problem," she said.

"It's the last door on the left."

Amelia felt that her lie of omission was about to bite her back. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.* "Thanks."

It wasn't hard to know which room was Parker's for it was the only one with a man sitting by the door. The man looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place him. When she got to the room, the man, who towered over her, stood to his full height and barred her entrance.

"Only family allowed,"

The hard look on the man's face made it unreadable. The more Amelia stared at him the more she thought she'd seen him before. "I'm Dr. West."

Dan Estevez eyed her guardedly as he studied the ID on her collar. *I know I've seen her before.* He looked at the badge again and saw her first name. *She's Olivia's business partner. Maybe she's been in touch with Olivia and has a legitimate reason for being here.* For a moment, Dan considered why the woman would be there. Olivia hadn't said anything about her partner coming here. *I'm certain she would have.*

Amelia saw the serious unbelieving look on the man's face. *Crap, I thought I was being so clever.* "Look, it's important I see my patient. Are you going to let me in or not?" Amelia countered.

"Doctor West, if you're looking for Olivia she had to leave on urgent business."

Amelia's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "How did you... Oh yeah, that's where I've seen you before...you're the man that was in her room yesterday?" Amelia felt relieved that at least someone knew Olivia's whereabouts. "I came to take her home and found she checked herself out." She shrugged. "I thought Parker would be the best place to start. Was Olivia ok when she left? Do you know when she'll be back?"

Dan shook his head. *I guessed right about why she's here.* The woman's concern about her partner however, was a new development. *In all the time I've known Olivia, she's never allowed anyone close enough to feel that way about her. Hmm, maybe if it*

comes down to it we can use that knowledge to our advantage. “She’ll be back when our work is complete. Parker is in a coma and there was nothing for her to do here.”

A gasp of anguish had her hand flying to her mouth as she digested the news. “Will Parker make it?”

An older woman opened the door to Parker’s room. Ruth, who heard voices outside the door, hoped it was a doctor with some good news. Instead, it was a stranger speaking with Dan. “Who’s asking if my little girl will make it?”

Amelia gave the woman a compassionate glance. “My name is Amelia West. Your daughter is staying with us in town.”

Ruth turned the name over in her head and then she recalled why it sounded familiar, “Ah, Olivia’s Amelia?”

“Yes, yes that’s right.” Amelia caught her breath at the words. *How wrong can you be? If this woman is Parker’s mother, how has Olivia spoken with her about me? We only met two years ago.*

“Dan, it’s ok. I think Olivia would vouch for her integrity don’t you.” Ruth gave the man a motherly smile before he sat back down.

Minutes later, after meeting Parker’s father, she stood with Parker’s parents looking at the motionless woman. Amelia felt her heart break for many reasons, but the pain emanating from Parker’s parents affected her most.

“I don’t know what religion you are, but would you mind if I prayed for your daughter?”

Ruth gave Amelia a warm hug. “Thank you. We will pray with you...right Ed?” She looked at her ashen-cheeked husband.

A brittle “yes,” was all he could muster before he returned his gaze to his daughter.

The three moved to a corner of the small room to send their message to God for leniency and healing. As three sets of eyes focused on Parker, Amelia crossed herself and said, “In the name of the Father, the Son...”

* * *

She heard a low moan and the nurse, Susan Martinolli, turned to see the comatose patient beginning to stir. She walked quickly to the side of the bed and said, “Parker can you hear me?” When she didn’t receive a response she took the woman’s hand and said, “Parker if you can hear me squeeze my hand.” The nurse felt a barely discernable grasp and smiled. “Good. Can you open your eyes for me?”

Parker heard a voice she didn’t recognize, but tried to comply with the request. She willed her eyes to open and when they did, she stared blankly at a young woman with blonde hair and green eyes. She closed her eyes again and said, “Oh, yeah I’m in the hospital...someone shot me.”

When Susan heard the words, she frowned. *This was a suicide...she shot herself. Ah that will be why Doctor West is here, I did wonder. Great we now have a delusional patient as well as critical.* She held a cup of water with a straw near her patient’s lips. “Drink this slowly.”

With effort, Parker sucked in the water. “Thanks,” she whispered. She allowed her eyes to drift away from the nurse to the glass window and the people standing on the

other side. She recognized her parents and knew she'd seen the woman with them before, but couldn't place where.

"I'm going to page your doctor. I'll be right back."

The patient grabbed the nurse's wrist. "My mom and dad...I want to see them."

The nurse hesitated. "Sure, I'll tell them you're awake...they've been worried about you."

She watched as the nurse spoke with her parents and when her mother hugged the woman, she smiled. *That's my mom.* Her eyes fixed on the other woman standing next to her father. *That's Amelia...she looks like an angel.*

Ruth Davis walked quickly to her daughter and engulfed her in a gentle hug. "My baby," she said with tears in her eyes. "You had me worried, but now I know you'll be ok."

Parker swallowed and ran her tongue over her teeth and around her mouth to give it moisture. "Mom, I love you."

As he stood on the other side of the bed, Ed Davis wiped a tear from his eye. "Hey, how's my princess?"

She reached out and took her dad's hand. "I love you Dad." She looked over at her mother who was still crying. "Don't cry...I'm in good hands." Her eyes focused on Amelia who was standing at the glass looking in. "Amelia."

Ruth smiled. "She has been such a comfort to us...she prayed with us for your recovery. Her voice and manner was so reassuring that she gave us hope." Ruth wiped her eyes with a tissue. "And, you woke up."

Parker sucked in as deep a breath as she could. "I need to speak with her."

Ruth leaned in and kissed her daughter's cheek. "I'll send her in." She looked toward Ed. "Let's give them some privacy."

With a smile and a wink Ed said, "We'll be right outside when you're done."

* * *

When Ruth Davis told her that Parker wanted to see her Amelia frowned. *Why does she want to speak with me?* She reluctantly complied and entered Parker's room. "I told them I was your doctor so I could speak with your parents," she offered.

Parker closed her eyes and gave Amelia as much of a smile as she could manage. "I'm glad you did, where's Olivia?"

Would it be prudent to say she is completing what you started? If it was a role reversal and Olivia was lying in the bed, would I want to know? Yes. Amelia smiled slightly and quietly replied, "I believe she's completing the assignment. That's according to her associate outside the door."

Parker shifted slightly at the answer. *That's Olivia, never leave until the final curtain falls.* "I vaguely recall she fell off her bike. Was she hurt?"

Amelia felt her anxiety grow over Olivia's disregard for her own health. "A concussion and she was supposed to stay overnight—she didn't." she said with a shrug. "Anyway, no one can stop her when she decides something needs doing." *There isn't one person, barring maybe Parker, who could stop her. My opinion obviously no longer counts - if it ever did.*

Parker struggled to speak. "Yeah, I understand that." Her memories clouded her face as she felt sadness etching into the lines.

"Yes I'm sure you do." Amelia smiled slightly and squeezed Parker's hand in understanding.

Parker raggedly whispered, "I need to tell you..."

When Parker's breathing quickened and she seemed to labor for each breath, Amelia gently touched her hand. "Why don't we talk when you're stronger?"

"No, I need to tell you now." Parker gasped for air and focused on Amelia's face. "I was Olivia's lover."

Amelia felt her body stiffen with the words. "I know," she whispered.

Parker struggled to speak. "It isn't what you think" She closed her eyes as a pain surged through her chest.

All Amelia could do was shiver. *I don't want to have this conversation with her...I know how Olivia feels.* "She loves you Parker."

"She isn't in love with me...that's over."

Amelia wanted to run and hide. However, she remained quiet as thoughts of the two together rattled in her brain. *I've seen how they react to each other. I know they are still in love. I can't have this conversation now. I'm such a coward about my feelings for Olivia.*

"Love her," Parker whispered.

Just then, Parker's DOCO doctor entered the room and Amelia breathed a sigh of relief. "You need to step out while I examine my patient."

"Certainly," Amelia said. She looked at the pale woman and gave her a weak smile. "I need to leave."

Parker's eyes pleaded for understanding. "Don't make the same mistake I did."

Amelia shook her head and leaned in and kissed Parker's cheek. "She loves you not me. She'll come back for you."

"You really need to let me examine her," Dr. Bastrop said.

CHAPTER 30

Olivia and Stevie boarded the helicopter as the blades whirled above their heads. Evelyn Durant was in police custody for conspiracy to commit murder. The tape Olivia provided them would help in sending the woman to prison. The authorities needed Sophie's statement and it would be Stevie's assignment to make sure the woman returned to Philadelphia safely.

The entire ride back to Portsmouth was in silence. Olivia's mind however, was circling like a hawk over its prey. She considered all the possibilities. *Parker wasn't so bad in the field, she needs re-training, but she has an aptitude. I know I didn't get to see her in action but Dan's observations are enough for me. When she gets better and leaves the hospital, I think I'll ask her to join WHMH. The workload is crushing these days...I'm hardly ever home. With another partner, I'll be able to spend more time at home. Amelia is sure to agree if it means I can spend more time with her. Who knows, it could bring other fringe benefits. Amelia seems to like Parker and she appears to like Amelia. God what am I saying...a ménage- et- tois...I don't think so. I'll have to watch Parker...she's always been a flirt. Hmm, lots of interesting possibilities. I think we can dump the past and look toward a bright future.*

"Almost there," the pilot said.

As the helicopter touched the tarmac, Olivia looked at Stevie. "Do you understand your mission?"

Stevie frowned for she'd had her fill of the morose woman. "Yeah, I'm not stupid. How difficult will it be to collect the woman and get her back to Philly?"

Under normal circumstances, Olivia would have put the woman in her place with a glacial stare and sarcastic words. She was too tired to give anything but the minimal response. She opened her phone and snapped a picture of Stevie then sent it to Amelia. "I have no interest in your intelligence only in your performance." After she exited the helicopter, she dialed Amelia's number.

"Olivia, are you ok?" Amelia asked anxiously.

"Yes. I've sent you a picture of the woman who will collect Sophie."

"Where have you been? I've been worried about you no one would tell me anything."

"Please have Sophie ready to go when Stevie Jenkins gets there." Olivia deliberately kept her voice calm and businesslike for the benefit of the younger woman standing next to her. However, her thoughts were in total contrast. *All I want to do is come home Amelia, but right now I need you to understand for a little while longer as I tie up the loose ends.*

Amelia frowned at Olivia's cold matter of fact tone. "Does that mean you'll be home soon?"

"As soon as I get Stevie on her way I'm going to the hospital."

Alarmed, Amelia said, "Have you had a relapse?"

"I need to see Parker... she takes precedence," Olivia said. "I don't know when I'll be there so don't wait up."

"I met Parker's parents and they seem like really nice people. Do you want me to come to the hospital after Sophie leaves?"

"You saw Parker?" Olivia could feel her blood boil. *How dare she get into my business?*

Amelia heard the anger. "Yes, I was worried about you and wanted to see if she knew anything."

"Just make sure Sophie is ready to go. Stevie will be there shortly." She didn't wait for a reply. When the pilot emerged, she said, "Wait here for Stevie and another passenger. Then take them both back to Philly."

The man nodded. "How long?" he asked Stevie.

She looked at Olivia. "Will she be ready when I get there?"

"Yes."

"It shouldn't take anymore than forty-five minutes tops," Stevie said.

"I need to refuel. I'll be back here in thirty."

Olivia didn't wait, as she headed for the door. In her last conversation with Dan, she learned that Parker had a major set back. *I have to get there and tell her how I feel.*

Once Olivia was out of sight, Stevie opened her phone and dialed. "She's on her way to the hospital now."

* * *

With rapid strides, Olivia ate up the long corridor that led to the ICU. She pushed the double doors open and went inside completely ignoring the protesting staff.

"Olivia," a woman's voice said. "Wait up."

When she stopped and looked around, Olivia saw Karin Baker, a woman she met at one of Teal's Wednesday night get-togethers. "I don't mean to be rude, but I really don't have time to talk right now."

"If you want to visit someone in here you need to sign in. If you don't they will call security to escort you out of the hospital," she said.

Olivia sucked in a deep breath to calm her rapidly, climbing blood pressure and shook her head. "My...I need to see someone, can you help me Karin?"

"What's the name?"

"Parker, Parker Davis." When she saw Karin's facial reaction turn serious, she held her breath for a moment. "Is she still alive?"

"Yes. You must be the Olivia she's been asking for."

Olivia felt her shoulders relax. "Can I see her please?"

"Sure, I'll take care of the details here."

Ed and Ruth Davis were standing by their daughter's bed when Olivia entered the room. She said, "Hi." When the couple turned around with ashen looks on their faces, her smile disappeared.

Ruth spoke first. "Olivia is here baby." With tears glistening off her cheeks, she turned to Olivia. "She's been asking for you."

Somehow, Olivia made her feet work and she moved closer to the couple. "How's she doing?" Her eyes settled on Parker.

Ed patted her on the shoulder. "We'll wait over there," he said indicating the chairs in the corner of Parker's hospital room.

Ruth impulsively wrapped her arms around her daughter's friend and whispered, "Thank you."

"Hey." Olivia picked up Parker's hand.

"You came," Parker said.

A smile that was a mixture of sadness and joy crossed Olivia's face. "Evelyn Durant is in police custody. I have her on tape admitting everything." She smiled. "We always did make a great team Parker. I've been giving this some serious thought and wondered if you would like to work with me."

Parker closed her eyes and struggled for a breath. "Good, now Sophie will be safe... yeah we did. I think I'd like working with you." She began to shiver. "I'm so cold," she whispered.

Ice blue eyes looked at the numerous blankets covering Parker. "Want me to get you another blanket?"

"Hold me."

The feelings and emotions coursing through Olivia's mind were foreign to her. From a place deep inside she said, "You got it." She looked at Ruth and Ed, for their nod of approval and when it came she crawled next to Parker and wrapped her arms around her. "Are you warmer now?" she asked.

Parker's ragged voice said, "Yes." She turned her head and moved so her lips and Olivia's touched in a warm sweet kiss. "I've always loved you O."

Olivia frowned, *maybe this isn't the time or maybe it is perfect timing for what I need to say to her*. "There was nothing to prepare me for what happened back then Parker, but I eventually forgave you. I now know that what you did was for the best."

"Enough forgiveness to love me?"

Olivia's mind ran riot as she held Parker to her. *Don't you know that I'll always love you Parker? You were my first love and until the day I die, you will always be a part of me*. Before she could say what was on her mind, Parker spoke again.

With each breath Parker took in, she gurgled, rattled and wheezed. A lone tear rolled down her cheek. "Tell her O...tell her."

Olivia felt her eyebrows meet. "Tell who?"

Her reply was a long droning beep from one of the monitors. She didn't have time to react as a code blue team rushed into the room.

"Please move away," Karin ordered.

In disbelief, Olivia got off the bed and moved to where Ruth and Ed stood wrapped in each other's arms. She stared numbly at the people who moved into the room like a well choreographed dance.

Just as they were about to put a tube down Parker's throat and start compressions, everything ceased when a loud voice boomed, "Stop!" Vince Bastrop, Parker's doctor, stood in the doorway. "She's DNR."

Karin frowned. "That's not what it says on her chart."

The doctor held up a paper. "She signed this earlier today...her parent's are witnesses. I'm sorry I didn't get it into the chart, but I had an emergency in another part of the hospital."

The attending physician took the paper. "All seems in order. I'm calling it...time of death eight twenty-two."

One by one, the monitors stopped and silence enveloped the room. Ruth and Ed moved to the bed and looked down at their daughter. Olivia stood frozen in place not wanting to accept what had happened. When she heard the low sobs of Ruth, she went to the man and woman she had always considered family, and put her arms around them. Time seemed to stand still as the three looked down on the woman they all loved.

Olivia tried to hold her emotions in check and treat the situation much like any other—she couldn't. "When you are ready call me and I will make sure the plane is available for you to take Parker home."

With mournful sobs, Ed engulfed Olivia in his arms. "Thank you."

After Ed let her go, Ruth hugged her and kissed her cheek. The two grieving women held the each other in an embrace for several minutes. Then Ruth whispered. "Go home to Amelia. She will help you through this...she was a great comfort to us earlier."

Olivia let Ruth go and turned to the bed, bent down and kissed Parker's still warm cheek. She mouthed *I'm sorry* before she turned away. "I..." she started to say. "Please let me know if you need anything." She kissed Parker's parents then left the room.

Karin saw Olivia emerge from the room and approached her. The cold hard face that she saw frightened her. *The only time I saw anyone look like that, they went out and killed someone.* "Olivia, I'm sorry...I know how you're feeling," she offered.

The icy blue eyes of the dark woman stared at her. "How the hell would you know what I'm feeling," she growled. With one swift motion, she pushed Karin out of the way and walked away rapidly.

Dan, who had been watching the scenario, could only shake his head. *Shit! At least O'Donnell is dead and that's a win- win situation...for most of us anyway.* He hurried out the doors and down the corridor. I need to make that call now. "Santos has left the hospital."

In the ICU, the staff covered Parker's body and waited for someone from the morgue to collect her. Karin, still in shock from Olivia's reaction, picked up the phone to call Teal.

"Karin, we need you in room three."

Karin put down the phone. *I'll call her during my break.* She felt cold run down her back as she recalled Olivia's eyes. *I hope no one crosses her...there's no telling what she might do.*

* * *

Karin finally had a moment to collect her thoughts. The ICU was hectic and full of drama that night, but Teal's friend Olivia was never far from her thoughts. *I need to call Teal and alert her.*

She dialed the number and heard a sleepy voice say, "Hello."

"Teal, this is Karin."

"Oh yeah, hi Karin...what time is it?"

"Listen, I'm sorry to be calling so late, but something happened here that I think you should know about."

The seriousness of her friend's voice made Teal sit up straight. "I'm almost afraid to ask," Teal said.

"Your boss...I mean friend Olivia was in here visiting a patient."

“Yeah, I know, her friend Parker.”

“Yeah, that’s the one.” Karin hesitated wondering about the wisdom of divulging a patient’s information. Then she remembered the angry, feral look in Olivia’s eyes. “She died in Olivia’s arms,” she said.

“Oh no, that’s awful.” She thought about her earlier conversation with Amelia about the woman. “Was Olivia’s business partner with her?”

“No, she was alone and that is why I thought I should call you.” She took a deep breath. “I’ve seen my share of people who have lost a loved one and for the most part they act in one of three ways. They are either stunned, tearful or want revenge. Olivia was none of those Teal. I’ve never seen anyone whose eyes and face looked as angry as hers did.”

Teal digested the information and looked at the clock. *Eleven-thirty, everyone over there will be asleep.* “Thanks for telling me Karin, I’ll take it from here.”

“You’re welcome Teal. I just hope Olivia doesn’t do anything crazy.” She started to hang up then she added, “From what I saw, Olivia really cared about Parker.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Goodbye Teal, I’ll see you next Wednesday.”

“Yeah, goodbye,” Teal absently hung up the phone.

“What’s that all about,” Phil asked.

“Olivia’s friend died. Do you think I should call Amelia?”

“No, it’s late and don’t you think Olivia already told her?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll speak with them in the morning.”

* * *

The anger and insurmountable ache of not knowing what was happening was something that Amelia had never felt before. Olivia wasn’t being fair! *How could you just go away and leave me, without an explanation when you’re injured? Didn’t you think I cared? Then you call and tell me you’re returning to someone else.* The uncharitable thoughts she experienced about Parker didn’t entirely make sense to her. It was all new terrain just like her life. She now knew how Sophie felt when she’d waited for news of Parker and they’d used stalling tactics. *I can’t go on like this Olivia. Maybe it’s time you and I went our separate ways.*

Once again, she felt like a caged animal as she paced the console area becoming more frustrated with each step.

* * *

Why did she have to die? It should have been me. I deserve to die for all my deeds. Hell isn’t good enough when my time comes. The intensity of her self-hatred rung in Olivia’s head as Dan drove her home. They hadn’t spoken since she’d asked him for the lift. She guessed he felt just as responsible for Parker’s demise as she did. *He deserves it too ... he didn’t heed my instructions.*

Now, all she wanted was to go home and crawl into her bed. She’d take as many sleeping tablets as she could without committing a foolish act and wake up to the

soothing sight and sounds of Amelia. The guilt she felt weighed heavily as the distance from the hospital became greater, much like the chasm that death brought between her and Parker. *Thank god, I have your quiet understanding to keep me going Amelia because I'm not sure I could live anymore if you weren't there.*

"Olivia we're here." Dan quietly pointed out as he pulled up next to her building.

Olivia turned her gaze from her inward thoughts to the reality of the situation. *He looks like shit...I bet I don't look much better.* "Thanks Dan. I'll be at headquarters in the next few days to file the reports." Her hand tugged at the door handle and it sprung open.

Dan, unable to meet her eyes, nodded. "Stevie should be in Philly soon do you want me to..."

"No! I'm done with this case and so are you. Stevie can handle the rest of the operation." Olivia replied.

"Sure. Well, I guess I'll see you around Olivia."

The tempo of his voice finally invaded her own sorrow as she turned to him. "Don't beat yourself up over this Dan," she said. "It's the nature of the beast - we lose people."

This time Dan looked at her directly. *Sure and are you accepting that as the truth - I don't think so.* "I know, but it doesn't take the edge off losing a good person. Take care of yourself Olivia." As he guided the car away from Olivia he thought, *I wonder how long before she works it out. I sure don't want to be around for that...she's one evil bitch when backed into a corner.*

She watched the vehicle drive away. I can feel it in my gut there's something he's not telling me. *I'm done with this he can wait for another day.* Then her eyes drifted to the building she called home. For the first time in the ensuing hour since Parker left them, she felt that she could go on. "I can do that because I have you Amelia. I wonder what you'd think of that confession." Her footsteps moved automatically toward the side door and she entered the security code.

* * *

Amelia watched Olivia walk over to the console, press several buttons and then bend her head toward the screen. *That's it the very last straw! She can't even say hello until she reads her damn email.* With speed that she didn't realize she was capable of, she arrived at the console. "So, you decided it was a good time to come home. Don't you know how worried I was about you? For goodness sake, Olivia you could have had a major relapse out there. Don't you care what happens to you or how we all feel about you?"

Olivia felt wounded by a sharp knife as the censure in Amelia's voice pierced far more than her ears. She blinked back the tears that she allowed to fall and reset the security alarm. She didn't turn around. *What's the point?* "I'm tired Amelia, can we have this conversation tomorrow?"

"No! No, we can't. I've been out of my mind with worry. You left the hospital without a word only to return and take up with your old girlfriend," Amelia responded angrily.

"I needed to finish the assignment. As you already know, Parker couldn't do it. Thank you for going there. Her parents were grateful," Olivia replied. "Your praying with them gave them comfort during a difficult time."

Amelia scowled in the half-light of the console's blinking lights. She couldn't make out Olivia's expression and that irked her even more. "I would offer my help to anyone in pain you know that. What I want to know right now is do you want me to leave so you can continue your relationship with Parker?"

So why aren't you offering it to me? I need you the most right now. However, Parker's name and the essence of the question sparked the last vestiges of Olivia's anger. She brushed away the tears and spun around to face Amelia with her ice-cold eyes glittering dangerously. "Is that what you think I want?"

"Yes, in fact I know it. Parker loves you. I think she hopes that one day you'll be together setting up a life again. Don't let me stop you! I'll be out of here in the morning,"

Olivia saw the blind anger registered in Amelia's eyes. "Then go, get lost! I don't give a damn Amelia. Besides, I don't want a homophobe around...it cramps my style. Didn't want to tell you before, but living with a chaste nun is hell." Olivia crossed her arms. .

Amelia saw a cold, uninviting expression appear on Olivia's face as she spoke. That hit harder than the angry words, as her heart did a somersault at the pain they caused. *All I wanted was one word Olivia - stay.* "I hate you Olivia, you're the first person in my life I've ever felt like that about. I'm glad you want me to go because I would have gone anyway." She didn't feel or mean the caustic bravado her words conveyed, but once said she had to stand by them. She fled to her bedroom and slammed the door.

Olivia watched the whole scenario like a scene out of a play where she was a spectator. *Well, you can't hate me more than I do myself at this moment Amelia and it's for the best. You're better off without me, everyone I love dies.* As the words floated in her head, she automatically went to her bedroom and sank down fully clothed on the bed. With the bottle of pills clutched in her hand, she reached for the water on her bedside table.

* * *

The helicopter had been in flight for Philadelphia for about two hours. The pilot said, "Dan needs to speak with you."

Stevie frowned. "He does, that's odd." She made her way to the cockpit and took the headpiece from the pilot. "Hey, Dan what's up?"

"I just wanted you to know that Davis died. Olivia said the rest of the operation is yours."

With a quick glance at Sophie, Stevie shook her head and rubbed her neck. "I'm sorry to hear that. Once I deliver the package to the police I should be done except for the paper work. Of course, I'll keep in contact to make sure that all runs smoothly. Thanks for the information." She handed the pilot his headgear and made her way back to Sophie.

"What's up," Sophie asked. "Or is it a state secret?"

Stevie shook her head. "It's no secret," she said. From the short amount of time she was with Sophie, she liked the woman. Telling her the news would not be easy for Sophie who had asked at least twenty times if Stevie had any word about Parker.

"If it's not a secret then tell me." Sophie cocked her head and smirked. "Pretty please...with cherries and whipped cream on top."

The irony of Sophie's insistence on knowing the secret was not lost to Stevie. *You really don't want to know.* "Hmm, I have some bad news." She refused to make eye contact.

"Did the evil stepmother get bailed out and run away?"

"I wish it were that Sophie." She clenched her jaw. "I thought that once this operation was over we could recruit Parker to work for us."

"Oh that is a wonderful idea Stevie...I can attest for her professionalism and knowledge of how to protect someone," Sophie said. It dawned on her that the woman had said she had *bad news*. "Was she in an accident?" she whispered.

"She was shot by O'Donnell."

Sophie gasped. "Why didn't anyone tell me? Turn around this minute! I need to go back." She began fumbling with her seatbelt.

Stevie put her hand on Sophie's in an attempt to calm the agitated woman. "We can't turn around Sophie."

"I beg to differ with you! We will turn around this moment. Hey, you up there in the cockpit turn this thing around we need to go back to Portsmouth."

The pilot turned and looked at Stevie who shook her head.

"Why are you telling him that? I need to go back and see Parker!"

"She died an hour ago."

"No," Sophie wailed. "No, no, no you have it all wrong." Sophie closed her eyes in an effort to stave off tears. "Why didn't anyone tell me? Did they think it wouldn't matter to me? Well, it does." Her shock turned to anger. "That damn Amelia had to know! And that fucking Olivia, how I hate her guts for letting this happen." Then tears started to flow unchecked. "I was just getting to know her," she sobbed.

All Stevie could do was pat the distraught woman's hand and be there for her. "Look, after we get to Philly, I'll make some calls and find out when and where the funeral is. Then I personally will escort you there."

Sophie's grateful eyes looked at Stevie. "Thank you."

CHAPTER 31

With zombie like precision, Amelia woke, showered and had her first cup of coffee before leaving for work took control. When she glanced at the clock, she groaned. "It's only six-ten, I can't remember the last time I got up this early except in my novice days."

She looked around for any evidence of activity - nothing. *Olivia is usually up and around by now. Olivia!* She let out another groan of deep misery. Their argument the night before had cumulated in the rash statement - she was leaving. *Was it rash though? Haven't the cracks in our relationship been appearing for some weeks? I don't know why she won't be honest with me and admit that she loves Parker and wants to start again.* That thought ran a tremor through her body that made her heart jump in reaction. *She doesn't want me here and I don't want to be here like this...at least we agreed on something.*

She sipped the hot coffee feeling abject misery crashing around her. *I'm glad I'm alone right now. Others would think my world was ending—it is.* "I guess the best thing for me is to leave everything and that includes our business partnership." *Teal should stay. She likes Olivia and they work great together. I bet Parker will fit in so perfectly that they won't even miss me.*

She sighed deeply and automatically reset the coffee pot for Olivia before setting off on her journey to the office. Traffic was light as Amelia steered her vehicle into her parking spot. As she looked at the two other spaces, sadness enveloped her. She normally was the last to arrive. *Today I'm going to be first for the last time. Talk about irony.* It was a little strange for her to open up the office, but she managed to remember the security code and entered the lower floor that they owned.

I remember when we argued about rental or outright purchase. Olivia wanted to rent. A precaution she said in case I change my mind. I said it wouldn't happen. She was right to doubt me. After she flicked on the lights she passed Teal's office space. *I'm going to miss working with you Teal, but you'll understand you always have.* Her leaden feet took her to the corridor where her office door and looked to the far end of the hallway where Olivia's office was. On impulse, she walked past her door and tried to open Olivia's—locked. *I should have expected that.* Retracing her steps, Amelia unlocked her door and stepped inside. The aroma of the leather furniture and the polished wooden surfaces filled her nostrils. She felt tears roll down her cheeks as she hugged her arms around her middle. When all around her was changing, she could enter her office and know she was safe in her own environment. *I'm going to miss being here.*

On shaky legs, she walked toward the bookcase and began fingering the old and well used volumes. With a resolve, that she dragged up from a place deep inside, she began to take them off the shelves.

* * *

Teal didn't know what to expect, after hearing the devastating news of Parker's passing. *Olivia will probably take some time away...she will if Amelia has anything to do*

with it. As she turned her vehicle toward her parking spot, she was shocked to see Amelia's car parked there. *Why isn't she at home comforting Olivia? She never gets up early.*

After entering the first floor office suite, she didn't immediately see anyone, but the light was on. She walked a short distance and heard the gentle thud. *What's she doing?*

Teal knocked on the door but didn't wait for a reply. She opened it and dropped her head around the opening. "Hey, I wasn't expecting you."

Amelia, with a book in hand, stopped and turned to face Teal. The quiet comment was almost her undoing as she drew in a deep breath. "I have stuff to do. Besides, it makes a change for me to be early."

"Yeah it does, but frankly I thought you'd want to be with Olivia," Teal replied as the rest of her small body joined her head in the room. She spied the numerous books strewn across the desk and a box that was on the floor. "What's going on Amelia?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing! Its time for a change that's all." *I am not going to cry...I will not. How can I admit Olivia wants me out of the way for good?*

Taking steady steps toward her friend, Teal knew something was drastically wrong and it had to involve Olivia. *Surely, any problem could have waited until after the funeral...this is weird.* "Has this anything to do with Parker?"

That woman, again...will her name ever feel anything other than a hot poker to my heart? "Yes, Olivia has decided that she's more important therefore, I'm leaving." Amelia flung the book she held down on the table and it bounced once before landing with a thud and breaking the spine as it hit the floor.

Teal asked, "You're leaving I don't understand?"

"I'm leaving the business and Olivia's home. When I find new premises I'll have you send my things. Olivia and I decided last night that it was the best thing for us both. Besides when Parker moves in..."

"Hold up there babe," Teal said as she edged closer to her friend. *Doesn't Amelia know Parker died?* "When Parker moves in? Let me get this straight. You think that Olivia is going to take up with Parker again. Didn't you see her after she came back from the hospital last night?"

Something in Teal's tone caught Amelia's attention. "Yes. She made it clear, or at least I made it clear for her, that Parker still loved her therefore she didn't need me around as a spare wheel. She agreed."

A hand went to Teal's mouth as she stopped a squeal of distress. "You and Olivia argued last night over Parker?" Teal saw the pain etched on Amelia's features.

Amelia said, "She said I cramped her style. I guess she's right. I'm an ex-nun on the run from my own emotions and I can see how that would cramp anyone's style. I said I'd leave today and that's what I'll do. She and Parker will be great to work for Teal. You'll like Parker, she's like Olivia, but lighter if you know what I mean." In the cold light of day, she wasn't so sure her angry words of the night before were what she wanted. She was still angry at Olivia's belligerent attitude, but she knew that would pass.

Teal closed her eyes. "Parker died last night Amelia. She died in Olivia's arms. There's never going to be *them* again. What I don't understand is why she didn't tell you."

Parker's dead. Oh, no Olivia would have blamed herself. My god what a fool I was. I was blind...a selfish fool intent only on my feelings while completely disregarding what she was going through. I should have seen the anguish...why didn't I see her pain. "What am I going to do Teal, I didn't know. She just let me rant and rave, why did she do that?"

Amelia's distress filled the room as Teal rushed forward and hugged Amelia around the waist. For a few seconds they remained like that until Teal sighed. "You need to go home and speak with her. She needs you right now."

"I don't think she thinks that Teal."

"Maybe not, but we both know that you can help her through this. It's who you are. Your empathy with people crushes any other emotion that gets in the way. Please Amelia, go. The friend who told me about Parker said she was worried about Olivia."

Amelia's eyes flew open wide in shock. "What do you mean?"

Teal shrugged. "She said Olivia looked like she could kill someone or might do something...perhaps even herself. Did you see her this morning?"

"Oh no, she can't...God, please don't let her do that," Amelia cried. "I didn't see her and that is unusual, but I was so hurt and angry that I never considered that she was there. I need to go. I'll call you Teal...I promise." She fled the room leaving Teal with the chaos inside.

* * *

Amelia was surprised she hadn't received a ticket after she broke every speed limit on her way home. Once at the garage door, she fumbled with the security key to open the doors. Inside she ignored her designated parking slot and parked in the middle of the garage. *Olivia will be furious at my action if she's home...she'd better be.* Without looking around, she shouted, Olivia...Olivia...you up yet?" The words echoed off the building's walls—no reply.

With her heart beating rapidly, she took a deep breath, knocked gently on her friend's bedroom door, and entered. "Olivia, are you..." The crumpled bedclothes were the only evidence she'd slept there.

She didn't hear the shower running and she hoped she wasn't in the bathroom. A multitude of horrific scenarios traveled her thoughts. With a tremulous quiver of her lip, she wondered what she might find if she opened the door. A part of her expected to see Olivia slumped on the bathroom floor - she wasn't. *Thank you God, thank you, I owe you big time.*

Ok so she's not answering and it looks like she isn't here. Then Amelia saw the open drawers and blinked rapidly as she headed for them. They had a ransacked look of someone packing at speed. *She's left me!* As the voice in her head announced the fact, Amelia felt an incredible loneliness invade her.

She walked like a zombie when she finally exited the room for the computer console. Only then did she notice for the first time that the Jeep was gone. *Was it there when I left earlier?* Hard as she tried, she couldn't remember. *My blind rage was in control...I didn't see anything else.* With trepidation, she opened the mailbox they used for private messages between them. It blinked - **No Messages.**

In a blur of tears, Amelia picked up the phone extension and dialed Teal. “Hello this is When Heaven Meets Hell how may I help you?”

When she heard Teal’s voice she thought, *I think that’s exactly what I’ve done right now met hell head-on*. In a voice that was strange to her, she said, “Your friend was right Teal. Olivia was involved in a killing, but she didn’t instigate it...I did. I think our relationship is dead.” Then she burst into tears as the grief of the tragic situation hit her hard.

CHAPTER 32

The church, filled with somber people grieving the passing of one of their own. For Ruth, Ed, Frank and Crystal the day was surreal. Parker was voted the most likely to succeed in high school along with the best girl athlete and the outpouring of people attested to the fact that she was important to far more than her immediate family. Before the service began, many of the attendees paid their respects to the family.

Sophie Durant stood in the line nervously waiting to speak with Parker's family. With the help of Stevie, she made her statement to the police before traveling back to Parker's hometown. Stevie was her rock and Sophie felt a genuine fondness for the woman although they had only known each other for a brief time.

Finally, it's my turn. "Mr. and Mrs. Davis, I am so sorry for your loss. I didn't know Parker that long, but in the time that I had with her I found her to be a wonderful, loving woman. She was someone I will always remember for her humility and kindness."

With stoic faces, the couple shook the woman's hand. "Thank you, Sophie. We are grateful for your kind words and support," Ruth said.

Sophie's heart broke for the Davis', but she had said what she needed to. *No sense telling them we had a brief affair.* As she walked down the aisle, she looked for Stevie and smiled briefly until she spotted someone else—Olivia Santos.

* * *

The night before the funeral, Olivia watched through a window as the family sat with the coffin. She was glad to see that they kept the coffin closed. *I want to remember Parker the way she was not as a cold, unmoving body.*

The next day she discreetly joined the entourage shortly after the hearse left the funeral home. When they arrived at the chapel, she watched as the family entered the small building behind the coffin. A debate went on inside her head as to if she could actually attend and pay her respects without losing it altogether. *Public displays of emotion are not my scene.* What she hadn't expected was the arrival of Sophie Durant and Stevie.

She placed a hand on the younger woman's shoulders. "What are you doing here Stevie?" Olivia asked.

Surprised, Stevie jumped slightly before spinning around to see Olivia behind her - she gasped. "Olivia, I didn't expect to see you here."

"The unexpected occurs, isn't that why this is happening? You didn't answer my question. Why are you here? We never attend funerals of colleagues. It isn't wise in our line of work," Olivia said.

Stevie nodded her head in agreement. "Yeah, I know, but I told the Durant woman I'd make sure she got here." She looked at Olivia and wondered if she'd changed her clothes or slept since Parker's death. *It doesn't look like it* "I am certain there are no other assassins out there, but I didn't want to take that chance."

Olivia stared at the woman speculatively. *So good old Sophie has moved on...Stevie's too good for her.* "I've been checking. Believe me if I could prove there

was anyone else they wouldn't be alive now." She had the feeling that Evelyn wasn't in it alone, but couldn't come up with any proof. "It's over. The Durant woman can get on with her life." She lifted her eyes. "Speak of the devil."

"That's good to know." Stevie too saw Sophie making a beeline for them. "I think you might want to make yourself scarce. She doesn't have a very high opinion of you right now."

"You think I care about her opinion. The only opinion that matters to me ..." She caught Sophie's loathing eyes as the woman reached them.

"How dare you show your face here," Sophie growled.

Stevie moved between the two women. "Listen, I know you both have strong opinions about the other, but this really isn't the time or the place." Her voice softened. "Why not wait until later."

"There will never be another time." Olivia's eyes locked on Sophie. "Just say what you need to Ms. Durant and I'll ensure we are never this close to each other again."

Olivia's calm response had Stevie's senses on edge. "Are you certain you want to do this in here?" She eyed the church full of people. "You two should take this outside."

Olivia felt several pairs of eyes on them. "Stevie's right," she whispered. Without another word, she slipped away and sat in a pew mingling with strangers.

Once they left the chapel and most people were in their cars, Sophie grabbed Olivia's arm and screamed, "You murderer!" How dare you come here and act as if you cared about her! We both know you didn't." Sophie gritted her teeth. "You're the only one responsible for her death...how can you live with yourself?" She moved closer and began pounding Olivia on the chest. "How could you have been so cruel?"

"It's time to go," Stevie said. "The helicopter is waiting." She touched Sophie's arm. "Come on we need to go now."

For her part, Olivia allowed the physical act of aggression and anger. *At least this way I get bruising on the outside as well as the inside. It's no more than I deserve.*

With a hateful look, Sophie glared at Olivia one last time. "May you rot in hell for what you've done Santos." Then she took Stevie's arm and turned away

"You need to take care of yourself Olivia. I'm sure your friend Parker didn't think the same way as Sophie. I'll see you around," Stevie said.

As the rotor blades swirled into action, Olivia climbed into her jeep and followed the other mourners to the cemetery.

* * *

From the limousines window, Ruth saw the altercation between Sophie and Olivia. She was disappointed that Olivia didn't come into the house with them, but she knew that mingling with others wasn't her style. She excused herself, filled a plate with food and headed for the barn. *I know her and know where to find her.*

When the squeaking barn door opened and allowed the bright sunlight to filter inside she saw Olivia sitting alone on a hay bale with a devastated expression. "I've brought you a plate," she said.

Blue eyes, filled with unshed tears, stared for a moment blankly at the older woman. *Parker would have looked like that if...* Olivia said, "...you didn't have to do that Ruth. I'm not very hungry."

Ruth took in the whole of the woman who was like a daughter to her. “Olivia, you look awful. When was the last time you slept or ate?”

“Does it matter? Nothing much matters anymore.” Her grave words echoed dully off the barn walls as her mind counted the people she’d loved and lost not only to death, but in Amelia’s case, life too. *How much worse can my life become?*

Although her nerves were still raw, Ruth knew that she might lose Olivia too if she didn’t speak. She sat next to Olivia and put her arm around her shoulders. “We need to talk,” she said. “There are things you need to understand.”

Olivia swallowed hard. *Do I want to hear this? Can I take it?* “Ok.”

Ruth wiped away a tear before she began. “When Parker was here last week,” she cleared her throat. “It seems so much longer than that,” she said. She shook the thought away and continued. “We talked about you. Did you know that she and your old partner Max were friends? He called her weekly to let her know how you were.”

A frown appeared on Olivia’s forehead. “I never knew that,” she replied.

“She was there at his funeral in one of her ridiculous getups. She saw how devastated you were and wanted to comfort you. When she saw you with a woman she saw your body language and knew that you had found love again.” She smiled. “Her exact words to me were... *I hope she gets it into that thick head of hers that she can’t hide her love away. She needs to tell people that she loves them.*”

Olivia blinked back the tears that threatened to wash away her last vestige of hold she had on her emotions. “I wish she had talked to me...I needed a friend that day.”

“Parker knew that you were over her and needed to move on.” She dabbed a tear away. “For my daughter, she lived in what might have been for that was her comfort zone. She let out a long sigh. “When Parker arrived at your home last week she called me and said she had met Amelia and was happy for you.”

The comment had Olivia closing her eyes in acknowledgement. “I came here to say goodbye to my first love. I tried to tell her that I forgave her and that she did save me. I’m not sure she understood. I needed to let her go along with the past. We chose different roads Ruth, she remained the same and I turned into a monster. I’m glad she never became like me...taking a life is...” She briefly closed her eyes in an attempt to stave off tears. “She didn’t deserve to have blood on her hands.” She allowed the tears to freely fall.

Ruth patted Olivia’s hand. “I don’t think she wanted to let go of the dream of you.”

For a long time they sat silently each with their memories of Parker and how much they would miss her. “She also told me last week, that if anything ever happened to her that I needed to make sure you knew she loved you and wanted you to find happiness with Amelia.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “I think she knew she was going to die,” Ruth whispered.

Olivia turned to the older woman and reached for her before hugging her in shared grief. “Yeah, she always did plan everything down to the last detail. That’s my Parker. Do you remember that damn rooster she bought me...?”

They reminisced for a while until Ruth stood up. “I really should be getting back to the house. She took a few steps then turned back around before slipping her hand into her apron pocket. “Here,” she said. “There was an incident when you and Parker were on the police force and there was a shoot out and one of the officers was killed.” She saw

Olivia nod in acknowledgement. "After that, Parker told me that she didn't want to die without telling you how much she loved you." Ruth wiped away tears. "She asked me to give you that letter if anything ever happened to her."

Ruth moved closer to Olivia, leaned in and kissed her cheek. "I love you. Promise you won't be a stranger."

"I won't," Olivia whispered.

With a gentle smile, the older woman nodded. "Oh, Frank and Crystal are going to name their baby after her." Ruth let a small smile cross her face and pressed her hands to her cheeks as the tears began to flow again in sentiment rather than grief. "I'd better get back to the house." She left this time without turning back.

Olivia smiled slightly at the new information. "You're right again, Amelia. When one door closes, another one opens. I hope it's a girl and she turns out just like you Parker."

EPILOGUE

Olivia drove to the warehouse with a forlorn hope that everything was just as it was before Parker entered her life again. Before pressing the security access code, she stared hard at the building. A deep-seated fear settled in the pit of her stomach as her thoughts turned to Amelia. *Did you leave me five weeks ago? Maybe you remained once I was out of the way.* “I guess the only way to find out is to go inside.” She entered the code and moved her vehicle slowly into the assigned spot. Her heart sank as she saw two empty places. One belonged to her beloved Harley, which was beyond repair, and the other for Amelia’s car. *Ok, that doesn’t mean anything. It’s only six and she sometimes is stuck in traffic or has a late client.*

Walking into the main area, she glanced at the console, where lights flashed continuously, automatically carrying on as programmed. *Looks like it’s still in the mode I placed it when I left.*

With a shaking hand, she pressed the internal memo board - **No Messages.**

That’s understandable. After all, I haven’t been in touch directly with her. With the way I’ve treated her, I wouldn’t blame her if she never wanted to speak to me again.

Her thoughts flashed over the previous weeks. She woke the morning after the argument, set on making Amelia understand why she was as she was. “Parker’s death took more of a toll on me than I expected...I wanted to apologize—you were gone. You never wake early and all I could figure was that you meant what you said. God help me. I ran away from Amelia, Parker, her death and worst of all myself.” Her mind wandered over the few days she’d spent at DOCO headquarters and her report. They needed her help on a case and taking it seemed the best solution. Parker’s funeral was the day before she joined the others in the field. It was her only contact with anything familiar. She’d sent a cryptic message to Teal for her to look after the office, as best she could until she returned. “The question at that time was, would I?”

There were times when it would have been so easy to place myself in the firing line. Each time I did, I saw your face Amelia. How am I going to live any kind of decent life if you aren’t here to help me?”

Once the work was successfully completed, and she filed her report, her mind drifted to the letter Ruth had given her. She pulled it from the pocket inside her jacket that was closest to her heart and ripped open the seal. She saw Parker’s distinctive writing and began to read the contents.

* * *

O-

If you are reading this, it means I didn't duck fast enough or my draw was a bit slow. I know you're shaking your head and saying can't you ever take things seriously. Yeah, I can, but I put myself in your place and thought that maybe a little laughter might help. Tonight I watched, as you sat in that ugly old green chair you love so much with your leg sprawled over the arm while you read one of

your motorcycle magazines. I thought how lucky I am to have you in my life. After college, I drifted from town to town and job to job never finding the happiness, I hoped to find.

Then, I saw you smile and I knew that my search was over. You are my life Olivia and I never want to be without you near. I know that sometimes situations and people change, but no matter where I am, I will always love you and that includes the great beyond.

You try so hard to keep me from seeing the ugliness of life. Did you know how worried I was each time you took off after a suspect? My heart was in my throat because I knew what a daredevil you are. Will you do me a favor O, please be careful out there, it's a dangerous world and even you can't miss the bullet every time. You are such a wonderful loving woman with so much to give and for me to share that with you is my greatest honor.

I guess I am rambling. What I am trying to say is that I will always have your back. When you narrowly get out of a jam, know that the angel on your shoulder is watching out for you.

*I love you Olivia Marie Santos,
P*

* * *

Olivia allowed the words to permeate her thoughts and she made a far reaching decision. *DOCO has to go - immediately. There's no place for it in my life if I want to make amends with Amelia- and I do.*

With a new resolve and courage she thought she lost, she stood before the director and made her proclamation. "I'm not going to work for you anymore," Olivia said through clenched teeth.

"Surely there is something we can do to persuade you to continue your work with us," the director said.

"What part of I won't work for you anymore didn't you understand?"

"Is it the money? You're due a raise...and we can sweeten the pot with additional incentives. There are several new prototypes due out in a month that we'd like you to test for us."

Olivia held up a hand. "I've more than fulfilled my obligations and I won't be back...end of discussion," she said with an icy gaze.

"No one walks away," one man said.

The disbelief she saw in the eyes of the director and two of the team leaders brought a feral smile to her face.

"Watch me...the only way you'll keep me is in a body bag." With a nod, Olivia turned her back on the life she had known for ten years and walked out the door. *They expect me back—not this time. I'll terminate all contact.*

* * *

A frail woman who was sitting in the shadows moved toward the others in the room. "Do you think she'll be back?" she asked.

"You know her."

The woman moved cautiously to the window and looked through the grimy pane to the street below. As she clung to the sill for support, she watched the black Jeep leave the building and move away. She unconsciously touched her chest. "She only thinks it's over."

"How can you be so sure?" the director asked.

"The one thing Olivia hates is loose ends. Right now she is in emotional flux and not thinking straight." When she could no longer see the Jeep, she turned back to the others in the room. "She has unfinished business with DOCO. One day when she least expects it, all the pieces and questions will begin to surface and she'll have to know the answers." A thin smile crossed the woman's lips. "Then, she'll be back and she'll be ours again. No one can prevent it - least of all her," she whispered.

* * *

Now, Olivia was trying to piece her life back together. The only piece that really mattered though, might not want to return to the jigsaw puzzle she called her life. *Who can blame her? I'm not sure if I want to continue that lifestyle either.*

With a heavy sigh, she walked over to the bedroom door that Amelia used and tentatively opened it. The bed was orderly as usual with nothing out of place. She drew in a shallow breath, closed her eyes for a second or two before opening the wardrobe. Several outfits hung there, but they were old. To the best of Olivia's memory, her friend had never worn them. She also saw a couple of the dress suits Amelia wore for work. However, she saw none of the clothes that Amelia had worn recently. *Maybe she just hasn't been back for these.*

Her feet took her listlessly to the drawer used for her underwear, t-shirts and other stuff. On opening each one, she realized there was a chance, a slim one, but one that indicated Amelia hadn't left for good. Many of the items remained.

I guess I'm going to have to wait. I could call Teal. No, I'll wait. I guess that's what I've made Amelia do. It's only fair that I do my share. She lay across the bed waiting for Amelia to arrive home - if she ever did.

* * *

Amelia tortured herself repeatedly as to why she'd never admitted the truth to Olivia or herself. *I miss you so much. I can't make it right, not now...not after what I said.*

Her heavy steps took her to the edge of the shore and she felt the lapping of the waves caress her toes in her sandals. It was the perfect place to get her head around everything. Her parents gave the keys to the condominium without preying into the explanation of why she turned up on their doorstep at midnight requesting the use of the vacation home for a few days. *I'm going to have to explain when I go home, but now I need to elucidate my inactions to myself first. What kind of psychiatrist am I that I can't solve this?*

Teal was the only one she'd informed of her sudden vacation. *What was the point in placing a message on the computer for Olivia? It is clear that she didn't want to talk or come home so why should she have any interest in where I am.* Olivia had simply left that fateful morning after their argument and hadn't returned. All she knew via Teal was that Olivia had gone to Parker's funeral. She'd been gone five weeks without a word except a cryptic one for Teal to keep the business ticking as best she could. *I can't blame her. I bet she feels like everyone she loves leaves her in one way or another. First her brother, then Max and now Parker and all I did was make it worse.* "I abandoned her."

The sky above turned into an indigo color as darkness fell. Amelia stood in that one spot simply breathing in the aroma of salt, sea and fresh air. The crash of the waves on the rocks to her left felt like the last week of her life. All preconceptions seem to wash away and what remained was life in raw reality.

How have I given up so much of my old existence and yet still cling to the shroud of its demise as a security blanket. I thought giving up my life in the church would have been the hardest decision I'd ever have to make. How wrong could I be? I've never actually given up on anything. I might not call myself a nun, but I still hang mentally to the way I lived my life then. Amelia walked a little way along the beach as her feet made contact with the odd shell that crunched under foot. It was one more example of how she was feeling. *Self-analysis is the pits!* Her eyes floated up to the sky that had fully turned into the inky depths of night except for the odd star that pierced the blanket of nightfall. *I really need to go back.* The thought passed like a shooting star. *Exactly where, do I want to go back?* There was only one place - Olivia.

She retraced her steps and felt the peace of her final admission sink in. Ten minutes later, she opened the back gate from the beach to the patio of her parent's condominium. The light she left on in the kitchen was a beacon of sorts to a place she found refuge for a time. She unlocked the door and looked around the comfortable rooms. She wandered in them all, memories, fortunately for her all good, surged through her as she picked up items of places and things they'd done as a family over the years. Framed photos carried a theme through the whole building - happiness.

I want to do that with someone I love...walk through a kaleidoscope of wonderful memories and collections that I've built over the years. Her eyes captured the picture of her mom and dad sitting on the beach with arms wrapped around each other and smiling happily. Her heart beat erratically for a few seconds as she replaced her parents face with her own image and one more. The rightness and harmony she found when she did caught her breath in the back of her throat as she whispered to the empty room, "I love you Olivia. Not just love you...I'm in love with you. I want to share all this with you."

She finally said the words that hid behind the shroud she'd refused to give up. The death of her old life finally floated away and disappeared for good. She automatically reached for her purse and pulled out her cell. She dialed the short code she had for Olivia's private cell. As expected, the answer machine kicked in, but it didn't matter, not now.

Amelia made a valiant plea to her friend. "Hi, it's me. When are you coming home? I...I want, no need, you to come home Olivia. Back to those who love you...please. I know I made a big mistake and it's my fault you haven't returned, but we need to talk, it's important."

With her old life in shreds, she smiled. For the first time she felt that whatever happened, it was as it should be. *The outcome might not be positive, but at least I know I can go forward. No, Olivia and I can both go forward whatever we decide regarding our relationship. She doesn't deserve to have another echo of the past on her shoulder for years.* Her mind was now a safe haven for the future

She jumped slightly when her cell rang. Olivia's name popped on the screen and she answered, "Hi that was quick?"

Olivia drew a deep breath when she heard Amelia's voice. Her chaotic thoughts fell away as she lay on Amelia's bed in their shared home. "Yeah, where are you?"

The sound of the smoky voice filled Amelia with a yearning to see Olivia's face and stare into the depths of her blue eyes, often, filled with ice, but with her, never - except for that last time. "I'm at my parent's condo at the beach. I thought after ...we all needed a break."

"This break is it a prelude for leaving altogether? Teal sent me a message she suggested that you may leave the business." Olivia held her breath waiting. Their last discussion had been acrimonious with things said that probably damaged their relationship for good.

"Never!"

Olivia felt tears roll down her cheeks at the definitive answer. "I'm glad. I'm home by the way, when will you be back?"

Amelia smiled as her happiness bubbled over. "I left the car in town and took the train. With luck, I can be back tomorrow afternoon."

Olivia warmly replied, "I'll collect you. Give me a call when you board the train, please."

Softly Amelia said, "Thanks, I will. Olivia?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you came back...to us."

Olivia smiled slowly. *I came back to you Amelia no one else.* "And you're welcome. Now get some sleep, we'll talk tomorrow."

Amelia ended the call and sank back into her chair. *God I wish I'd called earlier.* She smiled in anticipation of seeing Olivia again - it had felt like a lifetime.

* * *

The train station bustled with people moving like ants through the various terminals. Although the town didn't have the volume of traffic of a larger city, there were plenty of people using this form of transport to commute from the numerous destinations.

Olivia paced the platform where Amelia's train was due to arrive. She glanced at the large clock on the wall—two minutes late. A scowl of frustration gathered on her face until she heard the distinctive sound of an approaching train. She turned in the direction of the stopping train, crossed her arms over her chest and silently waited for Amelia.

A few minutes later, the doors opened and people spilled out of the doors like liquid. Men with briefcases rushed passed her, woman with shopping or children trickled by as transport staff trundled trolleys along laden with parcels. None of them of interest to Olivia until a familiar figure exited a car half way down the platform. A feeling of well-being flooded Olivia when she saw her friend. An unbidden smile appeared on her

face as she strode down the concourse. Within seconds, she faced the one person with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life.

“Hey there, how was the journey?” Her voice dropped an octave or two and her eyes sparkled in welcome. She desperately wanted to hug her friend, but was afraid of the reaction.

Amelia felt her breath catch as Olivia stood directly in front of her. All she could do was return the glowing smile, her toes curling in response to their closeness. She said, “Great, nothing to report.”

Olivia didn’t move as she drank in every feature of the smaller woman. *Where, do you begin to tell someone that life wasn’t worth living, without her in it?* “I’m pleased about that. They wouldn’t want to face my wrath if something had gone wrong.” *How inane that sounded.*

“I missed you,” Amelia replied. She disregarded any decorum and with a sob of joy, she dropped her small case and threw her arms around the taller woman in a fierce hug. “Do you know how I’ve been feeling since you went away? I’ve missed you so much!” Her voice broke when she allowed her inner emotions to surface.

The instinct, especially after recent events, to push emotion away reared its head, but Olivia stomped on it aggressively and returned the hug. She bent and kissed the top of Amelia’s head before she whispered, “Yeah I think so. I missed you too and I almost lost it when I got home and you weren’t there. I should have called you. Will you forgive me?”

Amelia moved reluctantly from their tight embrace and stared up into Olivia’s face. “Only if you’ll forgive me for my stupidity. I’m so very sorry about Parker.” Her eyes took in the emaciated skin on Olivia’s face. *She’s lost too much weight.*

Amelia saw Olivia’s eyes cloud with what she was sure was the remembrance of pain. Then Olivia said, “We both said things that I suspect neither want to bring up again.”

Parker’s words rang in her ears. *Love her.* With a deep breath, Amelia whispered, “I love you Olivia and no matter what happens I want you to know I always will.”

Olivia felt her inner core shrink slightly at the words. *Is there a, but, in there somewhere?* “That’s good, right?” Her blue eyes captured Amelia’s brown ones.

Amelia felt the smile tug at her lips at the quiet question, “Yeah it’s good in fact it’s the best. I think anyway.” They stared into each other’s eyes until Amelia decided to take a chance and step over the line into another life. Her hands moved to tangle behind Olivia’s neck as she gently tugged her head. They were inches apart as she breathed out before their lips engaged, “I dream about you twenty-four seven Olivia Santos, you are my life.”

The explosion of senses as their lips met left both women shaking when they finally broke apart. It took a few moments for Olivia to assemble a coherent thought from the exquisitely chaotic mess her mind was in. “Do you mean that?”

Amelia saw the incredulous look in Olivia’s glassy eyes. It was a look she felt sure mirrored in her own. Her heart was still trying to calm down as she felt the overload of passion take her down a road that was achingly recognizable yet deliciously untried. With a gentle finger, she traced the familiar lines on her friend’s face as she placed them finally on Olivia’s lips. Then Amelia smiled tenderly, as she felt a returning pressure from Olivia’s lips. “Oh yes, I know it’s probably hard for you to believe, me being that

chaste nun and all.” Her eyes twinkled as she watched Olivia’s eyes roll at the comment. “We need to talk let’s go home.”

With sparkling eyes, Olivia picked up Amelia’s case and slipped her hand into the smaller one as they headed down the platform to her jeep. When they reached her vehicle, Parker’s words echoed in her head. *Tell her.* Before Amelia climbed in the vehicle, Olivia enclosed her in a loving hold and snatched a tender kiss. “Home is where the heart is and mine is anywhere you are.” *We need to talk. Things might not be as easy as it appears right now. The main thing is that we are together and that is enough for now.*

The vehicle moved away to the promise of a brighter future as the echoes of the past faded into the distance - *or did they?*

Next story, Paradox of Love

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

About The Authors

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.

Erin O'Reilly

Now residing in the Texas Hill Country on Lake LBJ for the last five years, Erin previously lived in various cities around the world. When not enjoying the lake, she owns and runs a computer consulting business. A lifelong bird watcher, Erin also likes to cook, sew, read, and do various crafts in her spare time. Erin belongs to the Sapphic Readers, which is a lesbian book club in Austin, Texas.

First challenged by a friend to write a story, Erin has since written numerous online and published works. Her story *Deception* was a GCLS Finalist in 2008. That book also garnered the Sapphic Readers Award in 2009. Story creation involving strong characters always seems to dictate the story and invade her mind at all hours. It always amazes her when the characters she is developing suddenly take on a life of their own and lead the story down a completely different path. She thinks that, when the story is completed that the characters making an impact on the storyline improves the story.



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