

# ~ Forgive Us Our Trespasses ~

## by Cheyne

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FANDOM: Law & Order: SVU

PAIRING: Olivia/Abbie

WARNING: Sex between two women who are deeply in love. Violence.

DISCLAIMER: All main characters belong to Dick Wolf, NBC and Universal and have been temporarily kidnapped by me (I wish...don't think I'd ever ask for ransom...)?

SPOILERS: Way post "Loss." Sequel to "Texas Hold 'Er," about four months later, following the chapter, "The Win." A special thanks to Nameless Hermit for letting me borrow Logan Jessup. Written and originally posted in 2005.

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### **Chapter I. Hallowed Be**

Being typically male, the very first thing they noticed about the crime scene was a naked woman. As they inched closer, the two state troopers, rested their foot-long mag flashlights on their respective shoulders and focused their powerful beams in the direction of the body. The next thing they noticed was the lack of any blood. The closer they got, it also became obvious that she had been posed. Both men were puzzled by the position of the body at first, as her feet were almost up against the wall. The victim's legs were spread and in the shape of a perfect V. Her arms were straight out from her shoulders in a perfect line, palms up and her head was the lower most point. She lay in a perfect black circle spray painted around her to encompass the still form of what once was a living, breathing human being. Now her eyes were open and vacant, devoid of any life, her lips slightly parted, devoid of any breath and her throat was slit.

As Trooper Michael MacEvoy keyed the mic on his radio and called the situation in to the dispatcher, Trooper Andy Grier threw up in the corner. It was his first ... and, he prayed, last ... dead body. When MacEvoy returned his portable to its holder on his belt, he shook his head at his young colleague. "You live around here, son, you better get used to blood and guts. This is deer hunting country."

"That's not a deer," Andy rasped, spitting out, hopefully, his last mouthful of the impure substance that had protested to remain in his stomach. He wiped his eyes, then cleared his throat. "Any idea who she might be?"

"What ... you think I automatically know every naked woman in this area?"

"To hear you talk at the bar, you do."

MacEvoy looked back at the woman, running the light slowly over her body again. "Hmm...a natural blonde...you don't find them too often anymore."

"You're disgusting. Have a little respect," Grier told him, his head still spinning. "She could be your wife...or sister...or daughter, for God's sake." Then Grier shook his head. "Oh...that's right, you don't respect them, either."

Shooting him a look of disdain, MacEvoy lit up a cigarette. "You stay here and protect the crime scene. I'll go up and wait for the big guns."

"Yeah, you do that, Mike," Grier mumbled, glad to get rid of him.

Shaking his head, MacEvoy slowly walked up the stairs and outside into the crisp, early morning air. As soon as he was a good twenty-five feet from the structure, he retched violently into a shrub. It wasn't his first dead body, but he never got used to it.

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Despite still missing the hustle and bustle of the big city, not to mention the conveniences of having whatever kind of business or vendor you needed at your fingertips, Olivia Benson loved her house in the woods. It was different from anything she had ever experienced as a child, teenager or adult. Until four and a half years earlier, she had been strictly a city girl, not counting the four years she spent at Siena College in upstate, near Albany. Although, Loudonville could never be compared to New York City, neither could it be called the boondocks, either. Where Olivia lived now, forty-four months after resigning from Manhattan Special Victims Unit, was considered 'in the sticks' even in terms of the locals.

The town her property was on the outskirts of, was small and spread out. There was a downtown area made up mostly of old, family-owned businesses, a movie theater, the police station, courthouse and a few square miles of row houses. The inner hamlet remained quaint and archaic. But less than a mile from the heart of City Hall, in all directions, progress into the 20th Century was being made (it was too much to hope for anything more advanced, after all, only being less than a decade into the new millennium). Malls were popping up with not just any stores but SUPER WalMarts and enormous warehouse stores like Sam's Club. There were fast food restaurants now decorating every corner regardless of what route one was taking out of town and even some of the bigger chain restaurants were starting to lay down roots ... Applebee's, Ruby Tuesdays, Olive Garden, Outback...

She had only lived here a little over four years but she hated to see new development and technology take over the pleasantly old-fashioned atmosphere she had already grown accustomed to. Well, at least she lived far enough away from the active and unwelcome rapid growth of the town and she worked even farther out of the city limits, so it didn't slap her in the face every day. Not like it did her partner. Who had woke up in a very grumpy mood. And was currently lying in bed with a pillow over her head.

Olivia walked upstairs to the loft bedroom holding a hot mug of coffee in one hand and a fourteen-month-old baby girl in the other. "Come on, Abbie, get up," Olivia commanded, soothingly. "I'm going to be late and so are you."

Olivia pushed the pillow away from Abbie's face and all she could see at first was raven-colored hair looking like it had been caught in a blender. A hand emerged from beneath the covers, pushed a hank of mane to the right and one eye squinted through the darkness. "Come on, Liv, I'm exhausted."

"I know, Sweetie, but I've let you sleep as long as I can. I have to go and Sierra is wide awake," Olivia told her partner, as she kissed the little girl on the forehead. Sierra was their daughter, a biological child of Abbie's and an anonymous sperm donor, a baby the two women were raising together as a family. The beautiful little girl was a miniature version of Abbie Carmichael, hair as black as coal, big brown eyes, an adorable smile (especially since there were now five teeth in there) and dimpled cheeks and chin. She was clearly the pride and joy of that household. "Here, I brought you coffee."

Sitting up, Abbie brushed her hair away from her face with one sweep of her hand and accepted the mug from the strikingly sensuous woman who was offering it to her. Olivia let Sierra crawl out of her arms onto the king-sized bed, where the child made her way to the top of the mattress and sat by Abbie, staring up at her. Looking down at her daughter, Abbie couldn't help but break into a grin. "You," she said to Sierra, her voice trying to be reprimanding but was laced with a smile, "don't you know what sleeping through the night means? I thought we had passed that phase." At Olivia's chuckle, Abbie looked over at her. "And, you," she addressed her lover, with less humor in her tone, "of all nights for you to be so damned frisky."

"You didn't seem to mind it last night," Olivia reminded her, an intimate smile lingering on her lips.

"Yeah, well..." Abbie took a sip of her hot beverage. "That was before little miss 'I think I might grow up to be an opera singer' exercised her lungs all night."

"You should have made me get up with her a few times ..."

"Don't you dare go any further, Olivia," Abbie warned. "You could sleep through a tank blowing a hole in the side of the house. I find it remarkable how utterly content you are in this environment. In New York, you'd be awake with your gun drawn if a gnat sneezed three miles away." She looked back down at Sierra, who had cuddled up to a teddy bear that had been left on the bed. She had her thumb in her mouth, a habit her mothers were desperately trying to break her of, and when she saw Abbie looking at her, she pulled her thumb out and giggled.

"Mama..." was all that came out of her mouth.

Abbie melted. She set her mug down, reached over and picked the little girl up and held her lovingly. Kissing the top of the child's head, Sierra then snuggled in to her mother.

It amazed Olivia how easily she could fall in love all over again. But this woman and this child warmed her to the core of her very being. She reached over and gently tugged Sierra's thumb out of her mouth. She leaned in closely and said, "No," very softly but firmly, kissing the little girl on the forehead. Olivia then lifted her face to Abbie's and gave her a tender kiss on the lips. "I have to go," she said, unnecessarily. She stood up.

"Fine," Abbie responded, somehow suddenly in a much better mood. "I can make it a late day. Prentiss owes me, I'll call him and have him take my morning class."

"That'll work." She nodded her head toward Sierra, whose thumb was slowly finding its way back to her mouth. "She's been bathed and changed but I couldn't get her to eat."

"She hasn't eaten yet and you bathed her? That was a wasted effort."

"Not for me," Olivia smiled. "I love you, Abbie. I'll call you later."

"Love you back." She faced Sierra toward Olivia. "Say, 'Bye, Mommy, see you tonight'." Abbie held up Sierra's hand and waved it at Olivia.

Sierra grinned at Olivia and in the sweetest little voice said, "Bye bye."

"Bye, Sunshine."

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As Olivia pulled out of the long stone driveway that connected the cabin to the country lane that would put her on a main road, her cell phone rang. "Benson."

"Hey, Chief, it's John." Even though John was such a common name and there must have been hundreds, if not thousands, who lived in the county, she recognized the voice as belonging to John Hollenberger, the county coroner. They did not talk much, especially on the phone, but he had a distinct way of calling her 'chief.'

"What's wrong?" She asked immediately. There were not many murders in Olivia's jurisdiction as the Cumberland County State Police Chief Investigator. In fact, since Olivia's appointment to the position, exactly 43 months ago, she had investigated nine homicides, which occurred in areas not presided over by city police or sheriffs. All the other deaths were attributed to accidental, suicide or natural causes. John never personally called her on those, he always waited until she got to her office and left a message for her to contact him.

"You know where the old, abandoned holy rollers' church used to be? Out toward Newville?" the medical examiner asked her.

"Uh..." Olivia was racking her brain. The entire area was a plethora of churches, all sizes and denominations. "More specifics, please."

"Head down 641 until you hit the crossroads where that old barn blew down last month. You know the place I mean?"

"Yeah." Olivia was almost to Route 641, as they spoke.

"Take a left at the crossroads and come down until you get to the...uh...Cornell's Butcher Shop. Turn right. About another two mile down the road ..."

"Okay, I gotcha now. That old stone church that everyone says is haunted."

"That's it. Well, it's going to be more of a legend now."

"Why's that?" Olivia asked, cautiously, already guessing the answer.

"Because we found a dead body here this morning."

Olivia glanced at the dashboard clock. "I'll be there in about fifteen. Don't let anyone touch anything."

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Arriving at the crime scene, Olivia parked her SUV an appropriate distance away. The personnel milling around the immediate area consisted of the two state troopers who responded to the call and found the body, the town constable, the county sheriff, a reporter assigned to the local newspaper and a few lookie-loos, who appeared to be in deep conversation with the constable.

"Mitchell," Olivia called out to him in a tone of voice that sounded admonishing. The town constable, who was a good ol' boy about five years Olivia's junior and who gave the impression of being severely pussy-whipped, jumped at the sound of his name and immediately ran to her side. All Olivia could think of when she saw him was Barney Fife reincarnated. Eddie Mitchell loved to gossip and had many times, leaked information that should never have been revealed. He was the kind of guy who got the job because no one else wanted it and felt it made him very important to know details of a specific crime, which he would then, indiscriminately, talk about to anyone who would listen.

"Yes, Chief."

"I haven't even heard about what's going on yet. Please tell me that your little crowd of friends over there don't know more than I do at this point."

"All I said was that a body was found in the basement of the church. But most of that was heard on the police scanners."

"Eddie, do not say another word to anyone, do you understand me? I mean it. If this is a homicide, and forensics fail us, our only hope to finding the perpetrator is information we might have that the general population doesn't."

"I understand, Chief."

"You better. Because I promise you, I will have your hide if you don't."

His eyes snapped open wide. He knew she wasn't kidding. "Yes, Chief Benson."

She turned away from him, heading toward the side entrance of the church, where Grier and MacEvoy were standing. "Mike. Andy. What have you got?"

Michael MacEvoy was a balding, middle-aged man who had the beginnings of a spare tire forming around his waist. However, he still looked good in his uniform and he still wore it proudly. But MacEvoy was a sixth generation Pennsylvanian, born and bred in Bloserville, a town which Abbie would describe as 'no bigger than a fart.' MacEvoy loved women. As long as they knew their place. Women should cook, clean, fuck and bear children. And no more. The fact that he was now answering to a woman, that a woman was actually his *boss*, was a bitter pill for him to swallow. He was constantly borderline insubordinate to her and his opinion of women was only slightly higher than his hatred for minorities. Olivia tried to tell him that the civil war ended long before he was born and that the North won but that didn't earn her many points with him. Not that she cared.

Andrew Grier, however, she had hope for. He was young, in his early twenties, had been raised by a single mother, was married to his high school sweetheart and extremely respectful of authority and anyone else who earned his respect, male or female. Olivia felt Andy would go far...just not in this area.

Both men knew Olivia was a lesbian. It was a fact she chose to neither hide nor embellish on. It also wasn't something Olivia announced upon her appointment, either. Eddie Mitchell had found out from talking to the neighbors across the street from the Benson-Carmichael cabin and he took it upon himself to "out" her. Gaining community acceptance was a little difficult after that but Olivia just did her job to the best of her ability and persevered and it gradually became a non-issue with a majority of people.

Mike MacEvoy looked at his boss, wished he could slam her up against a wall right now and show her what sex really meant, not to mention doing the same to that hot babe she lived with, and shrugged. "We got a call at about five this morning, right?" He looked at Grier for confirmation. "Neighbors complaining of lights and strange sounds coming from the direction of the church. They could see the flickering of light through the basement windows. So they called us. We were all the way on the other side of Shippensburg, grabbing some coffee at the Sheetz over there when we got the call. By the time we got here, it was dark and no one was around. So, we entered the church, scanned the first floor where pews and pulpit are and when we found nothing out of place, we went to the basement. That's when we both saw her."

Olivia looked at Andy for confirmation. He nodded. "Who's in the basement right now?" she asked.

"Just Hollenberger," Andy answered.

"Okay, you two continue what you're doing and let me go talk to John."

"Yeah, thanks for the direction, Chief," MacEvoy commented, sarcastically, "I wouldn't have been able to figure that out for myself."

Olivia stepped into MacEvoy's space, not intimidated at all by his seven-inch height advantage. "Michael, you are on very thin ice with me. Do not push it," she told him, evenly. As she walked away, she turned around to catch his appreciative once-over of her anatomy. "And stop giving me that 'I want to slam you up against a wall and show you what sex really means' look...it's pissing me off."

As she disappeared into the side door of the old church, MacEvoy's toothpick fell from his mouth as he gaped at her. His eyes then narrowed and he bellowed, "Mitchell...!!!"

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Olivia descended the staircase slowly. She saw the bright lights emanating from the basement area and knew Medical Examiner/County Coroner John Hollenberger was photographing the crime scene. He felt Olivia's presence before he saw her. He was down on one knee, poised over the body when he snapped a picture and then broke the eerie silence by asking, "Tell me, Detective Benson, what do you see?"

He purposely referred to her by her former title because he knew that she secretly preferred it. He then stood up and backed away a few steps before he looked at her.

Reaching the bottom step, Olivia studied the scene and looked at Hollenberger and said, "She's been posed."

"Is that all?" he asked, in not so much a challenging manner as a curious manner.

Olivia circled the body. "There's no blood. Anywhere."

"That's obvious." Hollenberger was a gentleman close to retirement age. He loved his profession and would be the type of worker who would probably die on the job. "Anything else stick out to you?"

Slowly approaching the county coroner, Olivia slowly continued to circle the body, giving it a wide berth. "She's been posed to represent an inverted pentagram."

"Very good," Hollenberger smiled. He shook his head, "I love working with you..."

"Thanks, John," the former SVU detective nodded. "What do you think?"

"They don't pay me to think, Chief. They pay me to analyze and report."

Olivia looked at him, amused. "I know what they *pay* you for. I want to know what you *think*."

"It's been rumored that Satanism has been being practiced in the basement of this church for the last year."

"Satanism? Human sacrifice? You think devil worship is being practiced here?" Olivia asked, skeptically.

"I'm only telling you what I hear."

Olivia nodded. "I'm guessing you think she was killed elsewhere and moved here."

"That would follow my initial findings, yes."

"Do we have any idea who she is?" Olivia wondered out loud.

"Not yet...but I really don't think it will be all that difficult to identify her. We do have a few things to work with."

"What do you think? Eighteen? Nineteen?" Olivia surmised.

"Yeah, that's pretty much what I thought, too." Hollenberger sighed. "Olivia, I am a very religious man. The thought of anyone worshipping the devil makes my skin crawl. But...if you're going to pursue this from that angle, there is a guy in town who owns and runs a shop that deals in Tarot, crystals, runes, the metaphysics and all that other alternative stuff. He's a good man, a very knowledgeable man. He can tell give you information you wouldn't normally have access to. I trust him implicitly. His name is Duane and his business is called Dragon's Leyr. It's on Lowther Street, near the post office. Talk to him. I would be surprised if he couldn't shed some light on this."

"Do you think he might have anything to do with this?" Olivia inquired.

"It would greatly surprise and disturb me if he did. He is much more a historian than a practitioner."

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It was John Hollenberger's job to take command of the crime scene once he arrived. That wasn't difficult for John to do, being a former crime scene investigator in Philadelphia. He'd seen his share of dead bodies, a lifetime full of horrors in twenty years. He retired at forty-three years old and moved away from the urban area to a suburb of Harrisburg. Within a year, he was climbing the walls with boredom and his wife was threatening to kill *him* if he didn't find a hobby or *something* to occupy his time and get him out of the house. To her dismay, that something he found was a county coroner's position, a job he had now been at for ten years.

For the first six years of his job, he constantly butted heads with the former chief investigator. Wally Whistler (yes, that was his real name, he told everyone who gave him that *look*, after introducing himself) took over the job from his father and Wally's brother, Charles, had been in



line for the medical examiner's position John got instead. Wally never let him forget it nor did he ever miss an opportunity to make John's job harder by fighting him every step of the way.

When Wally and his brother, Charles, were caught with two under aged girls in Wally's office, while on duty, Wally was given the choice of resigning his position and leaving town or being fired, facing charges and taking his chances with a town magistrate, who just happened to be one of those girl's Godmother. The Whistler brothers packed up and moved out of state quietly, leaving the position of chief investigator vacant.

A few local men were interviewed for the job but they didn't have the right qualifications. Then John heard that a woman from New York had been hired for the position, which caused an earthquake of disbelief and negative commentary because, after all, these were country boys from the "old school" and, well, having to answer to a woman was just wrong. Olivia Benson's transition had been a lot smoother than John had expected it would be but he was sure that had much more to do with her looks than it did her abilities or the experience she brought in with her.

She was just starting to settle in nicely and hit her stride when word spread like wildfire that the new, gorgeous, hot-bodied, unmarried chief investigator was a lesbian who had bought and lived in the old Schallert place with her female lover. Who must obviously have been the stunningly beautiful woman she was always seen around town with, that new law professor at the college.

It only took a day for the male fantasy factor to wear off and then the problems started. It was bad enough these guys had to take direction from a woman but a *lesbian*? Well, that was just too much to ask. Olivia found herself suddenly doing most of the grunt work and dealing with attitudes that were stubbornly, and ignorantly, Neanderthal. After two weeks of a mysterious 'blue flu,' she called a mandatory meeting and advised her subordinates that she was there to stay and they could work with her or not but the ones who didn't would find their asses on the street looking for another job, she didn't care who they were related to or how much time in service they had. She told them that maybe their wives, mothers, sisters, daughters or girlfriends would tolerate that kind of treatment and behavior but she would not and, as their boss, did not have to as she had the power and the authority to make things happen. She didn't like pulling rank but the situation called for it. Three troopers requested a transfer, which she gladly approved ... when adequate replacements were found ... but the rest hung in there with her and with a few exceptions (Mike MacEvoy being one), the work relationship became mutually respectful and rewarding.

Through all the turmoil, John Hollenberger had been unyieldingly supportive. He liked Olivia Benson. She was a smart, principled, classy woman. She had paid her dues handling metropolitan felonies and, he was sure, she had seen crime scenes a lot worse than he had, especially since her specialty dealt with a lot of children, some dead, the rest left wishing they were. John couldn't have cared less about Olivia's orientation or what she did in the privacy of her own home behind her own bedroom doors, that was her personal life. Just like he felt it was nobody's business what he and his wife did in their own home, behind closed doors. One's sex life, or speculation of, was a subject that should not have been a discussion at work. As far as John was concerned, the topic of sex should rank right up there with religion and politics...someone was always going to disagree and there was always at least one person

intolerant of anyone who did not think and believe the exact same way he did. Unfortunately, that area seemed much more contemptuous regarding those three subjects than most he had ever lived in.

Olivia enjoyed working with John, too, although he wasn't nearly as nice to look at as Melinda Warner had been but he was certainly as knowledgeable. They complimented each other with their ethical professionalism. They assisted each other on investigating all deaths, whether the cause was by criminal means, violence, unattended or suicide. Olivia kept copies of all John's death statistics and incident reports, which he was grateful for. First of all, no one else before her seemed to care and second, sometimes, depending on who was related to whom, his paperwork had a tendency to disappear. Since Olivia didn't seem to be intimidated by anyone, the few times it was 'suggested' that she lose paperwork on a case, resulted in a tone of voice very few had the experience of hearing, nor did they ever wish that experience again. It was polite but deadly and her words were always the same, a phrase that had been used on her by her former captain, Donald Cragen, and she never forgot them: "You just used your get out of jail free card and there's only one in the deck." Word spread quickly that the boss couldn't be bought and the 'suggestions' stopped coming.

## **Chapter II. Kingdom Come**

Even after taking the morning off to sleep in, cuddled with her daughter, Abbie was still late getting to her afternoon class. Logan Jessup, the more than responsible older teenager who lived down the road and often cared for Sierra, the dogs, the horses and the property, was at the house in plenty of time, but Abbie just couldn't seem to get out of her own way. Even Logan was at the bathroom door, prompting the former practicing attorney to get a move on. Once in the relaxing, hot shower, Abbie just didn't want to leave the stall.

Hurrying down the stairs from the bedroom loft, affixing an earring to her left lobe, Abbie, dressed in a very nice, casual pantsuit, began repeating instructions she'd given to Logan when the girl had first arrived.

"Abbie, relax. You already told me all this. I'll play it by ear about Sierra's nap and check the horses in an hour."

"Right. Okay." Abbie grabbed her car keys and her brief case. She stopped at Logan who was holding the baby and kissed her daughter lovingly on the forehead and cheek. "Let Bart out of his pen when I leave. He's taken to biting my tires lately and I've already had to replace one and ..."

"I know, Sirius gets his heart pill with his dinner," Logan stated, referring to the German shepherd, "and Gracie needs to be separated from the rest when they're fed or she'll bully them and eat all their food, too. Abbie...go...!!" Logan laughed as Abbie started down the walkway to her car and then stopped and turned around.

"Should I be upset that she doesn't cry anymore when I leave?"

Logan grinned and rolled her eyes. "No, it's not you, now go."

As Abbie backed out of the driveway with the speed and precision of Jeff Gordon, Logan waved and Sierra tried to imitate that gesture. It was so sweet, Abbie almost pulled back in the driveway and took the rest of the day off. Both Olivia and Abbie knew that Sierra would soon be taking her first steps and they both wanted to be there for that. They had both told Logan that if the baby started walking when neither was around, they didn't want to know, just let Sierra surprise them alone or together like it was her first time taking steps without any assistance. As traditionally unconventional as this couple was, Logan couldn't help thinking just how normally they behaved as first time parents. As Abbie drove away, Logan smiled, shook her head and looked at Sierra. Kissing her several times on her cheek, Logan said, "your mommies love you so much. You're such a lucky girl," as she strolled down to the dog pen with Sierra in her arms to let the barking black lab out.

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Abbie stopped at her office to check her voice mail, email and any other messages that may have been left for her. She barely made it to her classroom before the clock registered 3:15.

She was halfway through her Administrative Law class when she noticed that one of her favorite and best students was missing. Again. For the third day in a row. She had been so scattered and rushed when the class started that the girl's absence had not caught her attention.

Amber Barclay was a very smart young woman. She was shy, quiet, a little introverted but she seemed to come alive in Abbie's class. Amber was like a sponge the way she soaked up knowledge and retained the day's assignment as though it was a gift from heaven. She reminded Abbie very much of herself, her first year of college, which earned her a special place in Professor Carmichael's theoretical heart. And, Amber had sought her out a few times in her office to talk. Amber needed to confide in someone who understood. She had developed deep feelings for another woman and was frightened. Homosexuality was a sin, that's how she had been raised. She *couldn't* be a lesbian but she also couldn't deny her feelings for this woman any longer. Was it a crush, Abbie asked, because that's kind of a normal phase in sexual development. It was the look in Amber's eyes when she asked, "is it a crush when dreams of having sex with them occupies almost all of your waking and unwaking thoughts?" It was then Abbie instinctively knew it was *she* the student had fallen for. Abbie kindly and compassionately advised her to see one of the campus counselors who dealt in that area, that it was unethical for Abbie to advise her in something of such a personal nature. Amber nodded quietly and never brought it up to Abbie again.

But Abbie had gone home that night and related that particular meeting to Olivia, who was sympathetic and understanding but, nevertheless, kidded Abbie unmercifully about the 'straight' student with the hots for her. It wasn't the first time a student had expressed a more than academic interest in the comely Professor Carmichael and probably would not be the last. A few ... all male ... had even been bold enough to ask her out on a date. Joking with them, telling them No thanks but she admire their taste, she let them down easy, always reiterating the school's fraternization policy and punctuating that with the fact that she was in a very loving, committed relationship. They had all heard rumors about the professor's sexual proclivities ... news like that

about a woman so intriguingly beautiful can't be kept secret for very long, not in that town, anyway ... but the young men, especially, were not to be deterred. If nothing else, at least they could have their fantasies.

Interrupting her own train of thought, Abbie looked over the class. "Has anyone seen Ms. Barclay?"

Unusual for Professor Carmichael to stop mid-subject like that, it caused everyone to take immediate notice. If *she* was concerned, maybe they should be, too. They looked at the empty seat Amber normally occupied, then at each other, then back at their enchanting teacher. Some of the boys in class got hard just looking at her. A majority of the female students who were pursuing these young men secretly despised her for having that kind of effect on those future male lawyers but, despite that ridiculous jealousy, they didn't hate Abbie. She was tough and she demanded a lot but she was also one of the fairest instructor's on campus. A student earned their grade in Abbie's classes, nothing was taken for granted or given away for free. And they respected her for that.

"Mr. Enslinger, you and Ms. Barclay have worked on a few projects together, have you seen or heard from her?"

Josh Enslinger, a handsome, strapping young man, who was a cornerback for the Dickenson College football team, shook his head, bewildered. "Actually, Professor, we stopped hanging out together a little while ago, so I haven't really been keeping up with her."

Not wanting to spend any more class time, dwelling on it, Abbie nodded, "Okay, I was just wondering, it's just odd that - well, never mind. Moving on..." Abbie filed it away. Maybe Amber was ill. There had been a nasty strain of flu circulating around campus. She focused and addressed her class. "Yesterday one of you asked about Voir Dire. Anyone have an idea of what that is?"

A hand raised in the back.

"Yes, Mr. Westermeier?" Abbie pointed at him.

"Well...in French, Voir Dire means 'speak the truth'."

"Very good. Speak the truth. Voir Dire is a process of preparing for trial. Its purpose is to establish if the potential juror can be unbiased...fair...impartial. So each person is questioned in the courtroom. The questions can be asked by the judge, the defense attorney, the prosecutor ... it all depends on the jurisdiction. What these jurists expect of these potential jurors is to speak the truth. Everyone wants to ensure that whoever gets selected for the panel is agreed upon by all parties involved. Which can be a very frustrating and complicated process when your selection of potential jurors is getting thin."

"What kind of questions are asked?" a young, strawberry blonde asked in the front row.

"That was going to be my next question to you, Ms. Kourhran. The questions usually start out as simple ones. Generic. Such as 'how old are you?' or 'are you married?' or 'what do you do for work?' or 'what is your educational background?' along those lines. Tell me what kind of questions you think should be asked."

"Um...does the person know or are they related to anyone involved in the case?" Debbi Kourhran asked, almost meekly.

"Yes. Does the person know, or are they related to in any way, the defendant, the witness, the attorneys, the judge, investigators or police officers involved in the case. Good. What else?"

It was Matt Westermeier again. "What is the person's knowledge of the case?"

"Yes. What have they heard on the news, read in the newspapers, heard from whatever source. What else?"

"Has the person ever been the victim of a similar crime?" asked Leighton Tustin the Fourth, a young man in the back of the class who looked no older than fifteen (but then they were all starting to look like children, as far as Abbie was concerned) but definitely had the name of a future politician or at least one that would look like it belonged as a partner of a law firm.

"Or any crime for that matter," Abbie interjected. "The person's experience with the judicial system may prejudice them in some way. Anything else?" There was silence. "Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? Bueller?" It took a moment for the class to get the reference to classic cinema, then they laughed. Finally, a question from the middle of the class.

"Has the person ever been arrested or convicted of a crime?"

"Yes and depending on the circumstances, doesn't automatically eliminate the person from the pool. What about physical or medical conditions? Should that have any bearing on a person's ability to serve?"

A collective acknowledgment and a few mumbles of 'Yes,' and Abbie nodded, feeling the momentum of the class starting to propel forward. She still couldn't stop thinking about the possible reason why Amber Barclay had missed three days of class.

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Back in her office, searching her database, Olivia found no missing person information that matched any photograph or description of the unidentified young woman who was now lying in the morgue. Looking over the crime scene photos and her notes, she retrieved a local phone book, looked up the number for Dragon's Leyr, and was about to dial when her phone rang.

"Benson," she answered, thinking it was John, calling to give her either more information on the murder or the victim's identity.

"Hi, Olivia, it's Logan." It was the relaxed tone of the teenager's voice that let Olivia know there was no emergency at home.

"Yeah, sweetie, what's up?"

"Don't mean to bother you at work but the FTD guy unexpectedly pulled in the driveway to deliver flowers and Bart bit through his tire. It went flat about a quarter mile down the road and he called me, screaming. I told him that I'd let you know."

"Who sent flowers?" She asked, less concerned about paying to replace a tire.

"I didn't ask and I didn't look. I didn't think it was any of my business."

"I now deem it your business. Go look."

Returning to the phone, Olivia could hear Logan opening the card. "Huh...no name. It just says, 'You won'."

"Won?" Olivia sounded more confused than Logan. "Won what?"

"I don't know, I thought you'd know."

"Interesting. Is it a nice bouquet?"

"Well, it's not like stems and thorns with all the roses cut off or anything but the flowers don't look fresh...a few daisies, carnations. Did you have a bet with Abbie or anything?"

"Not that I remember. Maybe she'll know what they're about. I'll ask her when I get home."

"Okay. Um...about the guy with the flat tire?"

"I thought you painted a sign halfway down the driveway that said, 'Stop! Blow your horn'."

"I did. Well, I ran out of room on 'horn,' so technically, it says, 'Stop! Blow your hor'."

"Blow your Hor...?? Great. That looks good on a cop and law professor's property," Olivia commented, dryly.

"I thought you saw it. I told Abbie, she nailed it up, anyway."

"Well, I've *seen* it, I just never bothered to *read* it as it didn't pertain to me."

"God, Olivia, some detective you are..." Logan laughed.

"Hey," Olivia grinned back, "that's enough." She studied the crime scene photos again. This girl was around Logan's age. That thought made her shudder and she shook it out of her head. "How's the baby?"

"She's good. Fussy. Probably because she's teething. Didn't go down for her nap easily but I put your Toby Keith CD on and it bored her right to sleep."

"Hey, that's Abbie's Toby Keith CD and don't say that to her 'cause them's fightin' words."

"I know. That's the first thing I plan to tell her when she gets home...other than the flowers and the flat tire."

"You're a brat." Olivia smiled. "Everything else okay?"

"Fine. Want me to take anything out of the freezer for your dinner? I can have it thawing out in the sink for you when you get home."

Olivia looked at her watch. Four-fifteen. Abbie should be home soon. "No, sweetie, thanks. If Abbie didn't tell you to take anything out, I'm sure she has dinner planned. Thanks, anyway."

"No problem, Olivia. Sorry to bother you at work."

"You're never a bother, Logan." Olivia smiled, hanging up the phone. Flowers. 'You won.' What the hell was that all about?

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Olivia curiously walked into the shop on Lowther Street called Dragon's Leyr. She had passed this place many times in her journeys through town but never paid much attention to it. The exterior facade was very deceiving as it made the store appear extremely tiny. Once Olivia entered, she was amazed at how spacious the interior really was. There were at least four separate rooms that Olivia could immediately see, each with their own theme: Candles, Crystals, Metaphysics and Herbs. In the back were a few smaller rooms, whose themes revolved around the occult.

A young man in his early twenties with a retro Beatle haircut, greeted her. "Hi. Can I help you?"

Olivia extended her hand and introduced herself, asking him if his name was Duane Lukather.

"No, no," the boyishly cute, young Paul McCartney look-alike smiled at her. "I'm Stephen. Duane's in his office. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Letting Mr. Lukather know I'm here would be great, thanks."

The smell of burning sandalwood incense filled the room as Olivia looked around at all the very interesting items decorating the shelves and walls. She wasn't exactly sure what she envisioned but when Duane Lukather entered the area of the cash register at the store, and stood before her,

it wasn't this. He was an average-looking man, nothing distinguishing about him at all. She had guessed him to be somewhere in the vicinity of her age. He had sandy colored hair that was starting to gray around the temples, he had hazel eyes and there was nothing outstanding about his features or presence. She was expecting someone a little more charismatic, possibly even somewhat sinister. There was nothing the least bit maniacal, eerie or even mysterious in this man's demeanor. He wasn't even Goth. She was almost disappointed.

Holding out his hand to her, Duane smirked. "You were expecting someone a little more Marilyn Manson?"

Olivia accepted his warm, firm handshake. "Actually, yes, I was."

He gestured her to the back where his office was. "I love wrecking perceptions," he laughed.

They settled in the surprisingly comfortable atmosphere of Duane's office, Olivia sitting opposite her host.

"So, what can I do for you, Detective Benson?"

Scanning her surroundings, Olivia focused on Duane with more than mild interest. "How did you know I was a detective?"

"Oh, I could feed into your imagination by telling you that I sensed it but I spoke with John Hollenberger about twenty minutes ago, after you called."

"Checking me out, Mr. Lukather?" Olivia asked, amused, raising an eyebrow.

"Please, it's Duane. And, like you, Detective, I like to know who I'm going to be dealing with."

"Then you already know why I'm here and what you can do for me."

Duane nodded and smiled. "Touché, Detective." He leaned forward. "May I see the photographs you brought?"

"Certainly." Olivia retrieved them from her briefcase and handed them to Duane, who leafed through them, his brow knitting with what appeared to be frustration. "What?" Olivia inquired, cautiously.

Quickly looking at the pictures again, Duane set them on his desk. "This is very troubling. For several reasons."

"I'm listening," Olivia told him, crossing her legs and folding her hands on her lap.

"Well, first, of all, John told me that there was no evidence of sexual activity so she wasn't an altar."



"A what?"

Duane smiled, patiently. "An altar. Let's start with some of the basics. You see that she has been posed into the form of an inverted pentagram."

"Which is a sign of evil, yes?"

"Actually? No. The five-point star is known as the pure pentagram. Historically, it represents a man, standing on two widespread legs, his arms are outstretched and his head is the upper most point. It is supposed to depict the goodness of man, the point at the top aspiring heavenward."

"Makes sense," Olivia agreed.

"Whereas the inverted pentagram is supposed to portray just the opposite. At its very worst, it represents a symbol denying the trinity, which is why the point is downward, to condemn the father, son and the Holy Ghost to burn in the eternal flames of hell."

"And that's not evil?"

Duane smiled, "that depends entirely on who you ask. Now, sexually, the inverted pentagram is the symbol of Baphomet, the goat. The horns of the goat represent the satanic symbol for lust. Some misguided disciples use Satanism as an excuse to satisfy all carnal urges. I think that is what this is set up to look like, trying to make this woman look like an altar."

"Is it normal to murder the altar?" Olivia asked, starting to become very intrigued by what she was learning.

"No. There are many segments of a mass. During the repudiation segment, a female disciple is chosen to be the altar ... the center of worship ... and she is entered by the high priest. The ritual is supposed to represent the refusal to accept Christ as the savior, the refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the lord."

"I'm not sure I understand the connection ... how could intercourse represent any of that?"

"Well...the penis entering the vagina is equated with the snake entering the Virgin's womb condemning, damning, cursing Christ to everlasting death."

"Sounds to me as though it's just an excuse to control and degrade a woman through sex."

"These women don't see it that way at all, Detective. Their being chosen to serve as altar is the highest compliment."

"But you indicated that this girl was set up to look like that...?"

"She was not entered by a high priest, or anyone, at least recently, according to John and, obviously, her throat was cut. That is not a segment of any ritual I know of."

"Human sacrifice is not a part of Satanism?"

"Again, no. Anyone who practices that kind of behavior is not a true Satanist. Something like that is most likely done by someone or a group of people who get their idea of Satanism by what they have seen on television or in movies, heard in music or read in novels. They've bought into the sensationalism of what they've seen or heard, manipulate it into their own angry, sexually perverted, possibly homicidal agenda and run with it from there. They take extreme liberties with what their Christian upbringing has taught them about Satan."

"I don't understand."

"Even though Satanism is an existing, practiced religion, true Satanists don't worship or deify Satan."

"You're not making this much clearer because that doesn't make sense to me."

"Satan is a Christian construct, an invention of Christian religion. Satanists don't believe in Satan as a deity, although they do honor some of the characteristics the Christian Satan represents. It is widely believed that the modern image believed to be Satan was born from the Catholic church attempting recast Pagan deities as demons when they overthrew and reclaimed Pagan lands."

"Really?" Olivia was fascinated.

"According to all my sources and studies, yes, really. There are Satanists in the community and a lot of them shop here. Along with Neo-Pagans, Wiccans and a lot of other alternative but legitimate religions. To my knowledge, none of them have ever practiced any form of sacrifice, human, animal or otherwise. They don't molest, abuse or sexually harm children in any manner, they don't hold rituals or sacred rites in cemeteries and they don't desecrate the dead. Most of these religions are nothing but life-affirming faiths that honor the land and all its creatures. They are extremely misrepresented and misunderstood...I'm sure you can at least sympathize with that aspect of it."

"Meaning?" She tried not to sound defensive but the last thing she expected was to be categorized with Satanism.

"Meaning the misconceptions you must endure all the time ... especially in this area ... about the lifestyle you were born to live and chose to acknowledge. I'm pretty sure you've been accused of all kinds of things just because of who you are."

"Just what exactly did John tell you about me?"

Duane smiled, warmly. "That information, Detective, did not come from John. That knowledge of you, your partner, your child is old gossip in this town."

"So, in your opinion, what do you think happened here?" Olivia wanted to change the subject. The mention of her daughter surprised her and was off-limits in a majority of her professional

conversations. She did not get the impression that Duane had any ulterior motives by mentioning her family, she firmly believed he was only trying to make a point.

"My instinct tells me that this girl was murdered by someone very angry with her, possibly felt betrayed by her or considered the direction in which she was going sacrilegiously contradictory to his or hers and let it up to look like she was a part of a 'satanic' sacrifice, or what his or her perception of this practice was." Duane observed Olivia absorbing all this. "Has she been identified yet?"

"No, unfortunately," Olivia shook her head. "John's still working on that."

"John is a skilled and resourceful man. If she has an identity, he'll find it." Duane stood up at the same time as Olivia and they walked out through the store again. "Anything else I can do for you? Anything you need from my store?" He asked her, congenially.

"No. Thanks." She was about to thank him for his time and information, when a thought struck her. "Just out of curiosity, what would you recommend for a baby who doesn't sleep through the night?"

"Your daughter is how old now? A year?"

"Fourteen months. She had finally seemed to get into a good cycle and now, she's waking up again and..." Olivia trailed off, suddenly wondering why she was discussing Sierra's habits with this total stranger.

"Before you put her down for the night? Try bathing her in lavender."

"Lavender?"

Duane went over to one of the shelves and pulled a bottle down. He brought it back to Olivia. "Try this. Three drops in her bathwater. It should do the trick." She started to protest but he put his hand up gesturing her into silence. "Please. I insist. If it doesn't work, you can bring it back. If it does, then you can purchase the next bottle."

Accepting it from him, Olivia looked at the small jar with the computerized, homemade label. "Thanks. I'll give it a try."

"Great. Anything else I can do for you, detective, don't hesitate to let me know."

"I won't. Thanks, Duane, you have been very helpful and insightful."

"Glad to be of service."

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Pulling into the driveway, a little after six o'clock, Olivia made it a point to look at the sign Logan had painted. It did indeed say, "Stop! Blow Your Hor." Chuckling, shaking her head, she parked her car next to Abbie's, in the spaces provided under the deck.

Reaching the top step, Olivia could smell something delicious wafting out through the closed door. Entering the house, she inhaled deeply. "Abbie, whatever that is, it smells wonderful."

Appearing around a corner, Abbie had Sierra in front of her, holding Sierra's hands, as the little girl was trying to take solid steps.

"Did she walk yet?" Olivia asked, excitedly.

"Nope, not yet." As if to demonstrate, Abbie let go of Sierra's hands and she wobbled, almost taking a step, then just sat down. Reaching down to pick her up, Abbie kissed her daughter's forehead. "Soon, baby girl, I know you're trying." She approached Olivia and gave her a long, lingering kiss hello as Olivia gently took the baby from Abbie.

"Hi, Sunshine," Olivia said, giving her daughter several kisses on each cheek. To which Sierra responded by letting loose with a couple sentences of nothing understandable except to her but the expression on the little girl's face told Olivia that she had a story to tell. "Really?" Olivia played along, while Abbie tended to the stove. Sierra bounced up and down in Olivia's arms, raising her voice excitedly with every word of gibberish that left her mouth. "That's what you and Logan did this afternoon? That sounds like fun, sweetheart." The thumb then quickly went into the mouth and Olivia just as quickly responded by gently pulling it out. "No," she whispered, firmly, into her daughter's ear.

"NO!" Sierra shouted at no one in particular.

"Funny how she can say that word so clearly," Abbie commented, stirring the marinara sauce.

"Speaking of Logan, did you read the sign halfway down our driveway?"

"You mean, 'stop, blow your hor'? That sign?"

"And you put it up anyway?"

"Why not? I thought it was funny and, obviously, no one looks at it. She said she told you about the flower guy and the tire."

"Yes, she did. I called him and told him to send us a bill. What's with the flowers, anyway?" Olivia searched and her eyes focused on a sorry excuse for a bouquet. Two of the flowers were already dead. "Remind me to never order you flowers from that place," she remarked, still holding Sierra as she approached the table to look at the card.

"I don't know who sent them, Liv, so I have no idea what that card means. Logan said she talked to you and you were just as puzzled as I was. I was thinking that maybe they were delivered to the wrong address but by the time I got home, the flower shop was closed.

"Strange. I'll call them tomorrow and see what I can find out. How soon before dinner?"

"About five minutes."

Olivia nodded and put Sierra down on the floor where she crawled toward one of her favorite toys in the living room. "Let me wash up and I'll put Sierra in her high chair."

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They had been eating dinner for maybe ten minutes, always getting enjoyment out of watching Sierra feed herself with her fingers. She loved any kind of pasta and would devour the meal with abandon. She would only be given a little sauce not so much because of the spices and acid content upsetting her stomach, more so because it would usually end up everywhere but in Sierra's mouth.

"I think she's going to be left-handed," Abbie stated, watching as the baby shoved a small pasta shell in her mouth.

"Nothing wrong with that," Olivia smiled at the beautiful woman across the table from her. "I fell in love with a leftie. However, she does spend more time with you, maybe she's just mimicking what you do."

"Maybe...but I doubt it." Reaching for another piece of garlic bread, Abbie said, "Hey, what's this I hear about a body being found in that old holy roller's church?"

"Boy, news gets around this town fast."

"You've known that for a while, it still shouldn't be surprising you. All kinds of wild stories are flying around about it."

"Like what kind of stories?"

"The most popular one seems to be that it was a human sacrifice."

"We're not exactly sure what we're dealing with yet. She was killed somewhere else and then moved to the church, that much we know. And she was posed in the shape of an inverted pentagram."

"Wow. Sounds like devil worship to me."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, too, until I spoke with Duane Lukather."

"Why does that name sound familiar to me?" Abbie looked at Sierra, who now wore pasta sauce like war paint. "Is that good, honey?" Her daughter looked up at her with her big brown eyes and smiled at her, displaying a mouthful of mostly chewed food. "That something else we're going to have to break her of," Abbie commented, returning her attention to Olivia. "Who's Duane Lukather?"

"He owns the Dragon's Leyr on Lowther."

"Oh...that guy. I've heard about him around campus. That he's very strange and he's a Satanist. How'd you get hooked up with him?"

"John Hollenberger recommended I go see him. And I actually found him to be quite charming and extremely knowledgeable and helpful. And, he advised me that he felt the girl who was murdered was made to look like a sacrifice but that he doubted she was. He said he knows of no cults in this area that perform a ritual anywhere close to that. He said that Satanists come in his store all the time, as do other alternative religions, and that people's idea of what these groups worship is a wide misconception."

"Could he just be saying that to, maybe...I don't know, throw you off track?"

"I didn't get that from him, Abbie, I really didn't. And John said he doubted that Duane would have anything to do with anything like this."

"Anything to do with the occult? The thought alone just gives me the whim-whams. I can't help it. It was the way I was brought up ... worshipping the devil? It's just not right."

"You were brought up what...?"

"Presbyterian."

"Presbyterian...isn't that Catholic Lite?"

"No, that's Episcopalian. And you're Methodist, right?"

"My mom was a Methodist but I got out of that organized religion trap early, remember? We talked about that a few times."

"We need to talk about Sierra and how or even if we are going to introduce her to a church and which church because..."

"Abbie," Olivia began, in that 'I'm tired of rehashing this' tone, "You know how I feel. If you can find a church in this area that is accepting of our lifestyle and will not fill her head with hate and intolerance, I'm all for it. But until that place is found, I do not want to expose our daughter to the type of church experiences I had. I agree that she needs to understand the concept of God and Jesus but you and I together can probably do a better job of instilling moral values in her than

some preacher who screws her head up with his interpretation of the bible and manipulates scripture to further his own ignorant agenda."

"I didn't think Fred Phelps lived in this area," Abbie grinned at Olivia's passion regarding this subject.

"He doesn't have to. His clones do."

Not wanting to get Olivia any more fired up with that subject, Abbie reverted back to the earlier conversation. "Any idea who the victim is?"

"Not yet. She had no prints on file, which isn't surprising, she was naked, so there was no ID around anywhere, I checked my Missing Persons file and no one fitting her description came up anywhere. There is an odd shaped birthmark on her abdomen and a few small scars here and there, so when we do get an idea, she should be easy to identify through those, although not easy on her parents."

"Who obviously don't know she's missing yet. Or don't care."

"Or did it and tried to make it look like it was a cult of some sort." She set her fork down, finished with her dinner and she looked at her perfect baby daughter, still enjoying her meal. "I can't fathom someone doing that to their child...but I should be able to...I certainly saw enough of it at SVU."

"Yes, you did. We both did." She reached across the table and took Olivia's hand. "Anything else stand out about this girl?"

"No. She was pretty. We're guessing about eighteen or nineteen. Blonde hair, brown eyes, slightly built and she had a tattoo around her left ankle of a chain of butterflies."

Abbie's hand suddenly felt like ice in Olivia's. "No. No, it can't be."

"What? What can't be? Abbie, what's wrong? Do you think you know her?"

Withdrawing her hand, Abbie sat back in her chair and folded her arms tightly across her chest. "One of my first year law students, the one you always tease me about? Hasn't been in class in three days. None of the other faculty whose classes she is in has seen her, either. She has a butterfly chain tattooed around her left ankle." Abbie's eyes were suddenly full. "You don't happen to have any crime scene photos in your brief case, do you?"

"Yeah, I do, but ..."

"Let me see them, Liv. Please."

Olivia hesitated and then nodded. Abbie had seen hundreds, if not thousands of crime scene photos so she knew the attorney wouldn't be shocked by the horror of it. And, if Abbie could

provide her with a possible lead to the girl's identity, that would be an immense help. Olivia was more concerned that it would bring back unwanted memories of finding Toni Ricci, Abbie's former girlfriend, lying on the floor of a supposed safe house, with her throat slit. Pushing her chair back away from the table and standing up, Olivia retrieved her briefcase and pulled out a folder. "I'll go get Sierra cleaned up and changed and ready for bed," Olivia said, softly, as she handed the folder to Abbie. "Take your time."

Abbie accepted the folder marked 'crime scene photos' as Olivia removed their daughter from her high chair and took her into the bathroom to draw a bath. Abbie heard Sierra begin to protest and knew that Olivia was undressing her. Sierra hated her nightly bath because she figured out that meant she was going to go to bed soon after and did not like being left in a room alone, even if it was illuminated by a Winnie The Pooh nightlight.

Opening the folder, the first picture Abbie saw was a close up of the gaping wound across the victim's throat. The second photo showed the body the way they found it, in the inverted pentagram, but with the shadow from the camera angle, the victim's face was not clear. The third photograph was a close up of the butterfly chain tattoo. Before Abbie reached the next picture, tears were rolling down her face.

Doing as instructed, Olivia took the bottle of lavender oil out of her blazer pocket and put three small drops in Sierra's bath water. Picking up her crying daughter and soothing her as she set her in her little bathtub, she heard Abbie cry, "Oh, God! Oh, God, Olivia, it's her!"

### **Chapter III. On Earth, As It Is**

Once Sierra was down for (hopefully) the night, Olivia sat on the couch with Abbie in the dark, holding her. She knew this had hit Abbie hard, not because she had any amorous or inappropriate feelings for her student but because of the nature of the crime itself, the disrespect shown in not only the mode of murder but in her vulnerable nakedness and that it was this particular young woman. One who had come to Abbie for guidance, advice and direction, confided a secret that was tearing her up inside and Abbie had turned her away concerned with the possible propriety implications. Sent her to speak with a campus counselor about her feelings regarding, well, Abbie. She *knew* Amber would never seek refuge with anyone else, she was almost too embarrassed to broach the subject with Abbie, a known and proud lesbian. Who else on campus was going to show her that kind of compassion and discretion?

"Honey, you have got to stop kicking yourself. You are not responsible for this," Olivia smoothed Abbie's hair, then traced the path of a tear down her lover's cheek.

"I know," Abbie sniffed. "I'm just...I should have helped her work through her feelings."

"And even if you did," Olivia pointed out gently, "it doesn't mean she would have ended up any differently. It's not like she killed herself because she couldn't face it."

"But what if she asked someone to kill her because of it? What if someone, on their own, killed her because of it?"



"Then we will find out and we will get them," Olivia told her, reassuringly. "We can play 'what if' all night long but it's not going to give us any answers." She pulled back and looked in Abbie's eyes. "Are you going to be okay?"

Wiping her eyes with a tissue, Abbie nodded. "I will be. I just don't want to think that she thought my referring her to someone else was a rejection because it wasn't, it...it's...I..."

Olivia kissed Abbie lovingly on the cheek. "I know. I understand."

"I'm glad I don't have any classes tomorrow and I can stay home with the baby."

"Me, too." Olivia leaned in and gently touched her lips to Abbie's. "I should call John and tell him that you've identified her. Maybe he knows her parents and can contact them."

"Him. She only has her father. Her mother died about five years ago."

"God. Poor man. And now he's lost his daughter."

"Don't feel too bad for him, Liv. From what I understand, he is fanatically religious and he and Amber were estranged because of it."

"Because she thought she might be gay?"

"No, because she got a tattoo and because she is...was educating herself. She said her father was very strict. In his eyes, women were put on earth for one purpose and one purpose only and that is to serve man. He told her tattoos were work of the devil and she didn't need to go to school to learn how to be a wife and mother."

"Oh my God," Olivia said, disgusted. "That seems to be a general consensus around here. No wonder a lot of women in this area are so repressed."

"And oppressed and depressed," Abbie added. "I've heard from more than one source that her father was a real piece of work."

"Enough of a piece of work to have murdered her?"

Abbie shrugged. "I don't know. If he is as God-fearing as he claims he is, wouldn't murder be against his principles?"

"Who knows when people are that fanatical? They seem to make up the rules as they go along."

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Abbie Carmichael was not a weak woman. So when she had these bouts of fragility, Olivia knew to take them seriously and to treat her partner accordingly. Abbie was beating herself up over Amber Barclay and Olivia knew there wasn't much she could do to ease Abbie's emotional pain. Developing a nasty headache from the tension and the crying, Olivia gave Abbie a couple sleep

aid laced aspirin and put her to bed. When she descended the stairs from the loft, she checked on Sierra, who was sound asleep, grabbed the portable phone and sat on the couch, dialing John Hollenberger's home phone number. After two rings, Phyllis Hollenberger, John's wife, answered the phone. Olivia identified herself and asked to speak to John. Realizing if Olivia was phoning John at home at that hour, it must be urgent, so she held her tongue about calling so late and found her husband in the den, on his computer, playing a "CSI" computer game.

"Hi, Chief, what's up?" John asked, amiably.

"I think Abbie knows who our vic is." Olivia went on to explain to him how her partner recognized the young woman first from the tattoo and next from her face.

"I know Wade Barclay," John told her, referring to Amber's father. "He's a 5150. A real nut job."

"Officially? Or just in your opinion?"

"Mine and most of the town. He's a holy roller. Belonged to that church we were at today before they moved to a more modern building. He's the worst kind of hypocrite because he uses God as the ultimate guilt trip." John sighed. "That poor kid. She seemed like a really nice little girl."

"She was a student of Abbie's at Dickenson."

"Really? Wade actually allowed her to go to school?"

"Actually, she was working her way through law school, her father be damned. Abbie indicated that's why they were estranged. Do you know anything about her mother?"

"Lorena? Yeah. I investigated her death."

"Suspicious?"

"I thought so. But Wade and Wally Whistler were hunting buddies and my paperwork conveniently disappeared. Lorena Barclay was a controlled, beat down woman, Chief. She tried to take Amber and leave him many times and he just psychologically beat her down until her only escape was pills and suicide attempts. One night, Amber found her mother lying over the tub in the bathroom, having fallen off the toilet, where Wade left her, unconscious, instead of getting her to a hospital, because he was too tired to deal with it. In her unconsciousness, she fell forward, hitting her neck on the bathtub rim, cut off her airway and helplessly choked to death. That was my ruling."

"So what happened?"

"Amber called the paramedics and they revived her and got her to the hospital but she had been deprived of oxygen too long and she was brain dead. Wally ruled the death accidental and said she died of a heart attack. That woman's heart was as healthy as a newborn's. And you know how I know? Because Wade's minister finally talked him into donating Lorena's organs and she saved

the lives of seven people, one of them receiving her heart. If she'd had a heart attack, her heart could never have been donated."

"Do you think Wade Barclay is capable of killing his own daughter?"

"Chief, I think Wade Barclay is capable of anything because he is convinced he has a stairway to heaven and anything he does is 'the Lord's will'."

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The next morning, Olivia once again brought Abbie a cup of coffee and Sierra up to the loft bedroom before she left for work. Abbie's eyes were dry and stung from crying the night before. She sat up in bed and observed Olivia who cooed and talked to their daughter until Abbie was a little more awake. She felt a rush of warmth flush her body at the sight of her partner with their daughter. It just re-enforced the unconditional love that surged through her for Olivia Benson. Abbie could not imagine life without Olivia in it. She took a sip of coffee and said, "I love you."

Olivia looked over at Abbie, seeing the deep affection in her dark, expressive eyes. She smiled. "I love you, too." She returned her attention to Sierra, who was sitting on her knee, bouncing. "Go give Mama kisses," Olivia told the little girl, as she placed Sierra on the mattress.

"Come here, baby girl, Mama needs your hugs and kisses," Abbie held her arms out and Sierra crawled to her. Picking her up, Abbie placed the baby on her lap.

Sierra looked up at Abbie and reached up and touched her nose, patting it with baby gentleness. "Mamamamamamama!!" Sierra said, amused by the sound of her own voice.

Watching as Abbie lifted Sierra's shirt and made raspberry sounds on her belly and Sierra giggling almost uncontrollably, Olivia couldn't help but chuckle. There was nothing more infectious than a child's laughter.

"Did she sleep through the night?" Abbie asked, suddenly.

"She did, indeed," Olivia responded, triumphantly. "Listen, Abbie, I spoke with John last night and he knows Wade Barclay. We're going to bring the photos to him so that he can make an official identification."

Abbie nodded. She pulled Sierra close and rubbed noses with her, giving her an 'Eskimo kiss.' "I still can't believe she's dead, Liv."

Reaching over and patting Abbie's thigh, Olivia said, "I know, sweetie, it's hard. But whatever happened, we'll get to the bottom of it." She looked at Sierra who was shaking her head at Abbie, imitating the movement of Eskimo kisses even though their noses were no longer touching. "Come give Mommy hugs and kisses goodbye, Sunshine." Olivia reached over and gently pulled the little girl toward her and kissed her loudly on the cheek and then forehead. "Pretty soon you're going to have enough hair to actually brush," she said, pushing the silky strands around on

Sierra's head. Letting the baby crawl back to Abbie, Olivia stood up and leaned over to her partner. Abbie lifted her face to touch Olivia's lips, which met in a long kiss.

"Love you," Abbie said, automatically.

"Love you more," Olivia countered.

"Not possible," Abbie smiled. "Call me later, okay? Keep me up to date."

"I will."

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Michael MacEvoy, Andy Grier and another state trooper, Shaun Heiffelfinger, were at the office when Olivia arrived. Shaun seemed like a decent guy. He was big, muscular, kept his hair cut close to the scalp but not completely shaved. Having served four years in the Marine Corps, the last two as a military police officer in Iraq, not much phased this young man of twenty-eight. When people referred to him as an ex-marine, he always corrected them with a smile, saying, "there's no such thing as an *ex*-marine." It was true. Once a marine, always a marine. His bearing, his attitude and his appearance reflected that.

Shaun had lost the top portion of the index finger on his left hand when a shell exploded near a convoy he had been participating in, in Baghdad. He was lucky. Three members of his unit had driven over the incendiary device when it activated. There wasn't much left of them but it was trying to pull one of his buddies from the burning wreckage that caused irreparable damage to his first digit, resulting in the top half being amputated. He knew it could have been a lot worse. It didn't stop or deter him from performing any of his duties or requirements but it also didn't stop him from earning the nickname of Shaun Half-a-finger, either. Olivia thought that was insensitive when she first met him but not only did he not seem to mind it, he actually got a kick out of it.

Shaun was also very respectful of Olivia Benson. Having seen what he had seen, having been through what he had, having a lesbian for a boss was the least of his issues. And what he had experienced by working with Chief Benson, he only could have wished some of the officers he had served under in Iraq had been as level-headed and as accomplished as she.

Unlocking her office door, the three troopers followed their boss inside as she turned on the lights and removed her blazer, placing it over the back of her chair. She took a folder out of her briefcase, instinctively sensing MacEvoy's eyes giving her body a once-over.

Without even looking at him, she said, "Michael, if you don't quit that, we are going to have some serious problems." She then sat at her desk, laid open the folder in front of her and smiled up pleasantly at him.

"How do you *do* that?" he asked her, not even attempting to hide or cover up the fact that ogling her was exactly what he had been doing. He looked to his left, then his right to see both his

younger colleagues staring at him, grinning. "What?!" He spread his arms out, trying to pretend he didn't know what they were smiling at.

"Okay, it's going to be a busy and tough day. The victim has been tentatively identified as Amber Barclay ..."

Two audible gasps went up and one of them was not Andy.

"Wade Barclay's daughter?" MacEvoy inquired, almost holding his breath.

"It is only a tentative identification, gentlemen, it is not official. Do you know her?" The question was directed at MacEvoy.

"Not personally. I know her father."

"Do you know him well?" Olivia wondered.

"As well as I want to. He's...he's...not a nice guy," MacEvoy admitted.

"In what sense?"

"Well," Shaun spoke up before MacEvoy had a chance, "I went to high school with his son, Jeremiah."

"He has a son? I thought Amber was an only child..."

"Nooooo..." MacEvoy shook his head. "Amber's mother was Wade's second wife. He has four other kids from his first marriage. Two boys, two girls."

"Where are they?" Olivia asked.

"Scattered all over," Shaun volunteered. "None of them will have anything to do with him."

"And why is that?"

"Because he's nuts, Chief. He raised and treated his daughters like slaves and second-class citizens and his sons like his personal servants. The man only recently began to hold down a full time job and that's only because his wife's life insurance ran out and there was no one left to support him. Every single kid he has bid him good riddance as soon as they were old enough to leave the nest and support themselves."

"Where do his kids live?"

"Jeremiah is in the Navy and stationed in San Diego. He's the only one I know about because we have sporadically kept in touch," Shaun offered.

"Sarah, the oldest, lives in Germany with her second husband," MacEvoy intercepted the conversation. "Rachel is living somewhere in British Columbia and Seth is, I believe, married to the daughter of an American diplomat and living in South America somewhere."

"Would any of them have cause to want to harm Amber?" Olivia asked.

"No. I could only see them wanting to, maybe, help get her away from him," MacEvoy answered.

"I agree," Shaun concurred.

"What about his first wife?"

"Pamela? She's remarried and living in New Hampshire with her *normal* husband of twenty years. I think the only time she came back to this area was about fifteen years ago to settle all the legal stuff when her mother passed away. To my recollection, she didn't hang around any longer than she needed to and she had no contact with Wade."

"And you know this how?" Olivia asked, unnecessarily. Then she nodded and finished the sentence with MacEvoy.

"Because it's a small town," they both chorused.

"If nothing else, we need to locate Mr. Barclay and have him positively identify his daughter," Olivia instructed.

MacEvoy looked at his watch. "I have an hour before I clock out. I'll drive by his house and see if he's there."

"I'll go by his work and see if he's there," Shaun stated.

"And I'll...?" Andy began, a little lost.

Olivia smiled at him. "Stay here and help me field phone calls. I have a feeling it's going to get crazy around here."

She wasn't wrong. Within the hour, nearly two hundred calls flooded the State Police line, wanting to know more about the evil murder that had occurred at the haunted church. Olivia finally put a recorded message on the information line, advising callers that they could not release any details at that time but if anyone had any information to please contact her at another number. She also set up a voice mail on that line, too. Otherwise, she knew she would never get any work done.

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Abbie called Olivia on her cell approximately three hours after her partner had left the house. "How's it going?"

"It's crazy. As expected. How are you doing?"

"I've had better days. Thank God for Sierra."

Just the mention of their daughter's name made Olivia smile. "What's she up to?"

"I think the more appropriate question would be what's she *not* up to? She is into everything. She is going to be a detective like you, I'm sure...everything is an investigation." Hearing Olivia chuckle was music to Abbie's ears. "We just came back from feeding and watering the horses. She has taken to kissing Cherokee on the soft bridge of his nose and he actually seems to like it." Cherokee was their young Pinto pony who would eventually be Sierra's horse.

"I'm glad they're bonding," Olivia commented, visualizing her daughter leaning over in Abbie's arms and giving the brown and white animal a sloppy wet baby kiss.

"Any luck with Amber's father?"

"No. We haven't located him yet but I don't think that means he's in the wind or anything. I've been told that he likes to fish on his days off, so hopefully, we can find him on one of the lakes or rivers or streams around here."

"God. I still can't believe she's dead." Olivia heard the catch in Abbie's voice.

"I'm sorry, honey. I really am. I know she was important to you. We will find the bastard or bastards who did this, I promise you."

"I know you will, Liv. If anyone can get to the bottom of this, I know you can." Abbie glanced at her watch. "Can you escape into town and meet us for lunch?"

Rubbing her eyes, Olivia said, "Oh, that would be great. But I can't. You wouldn't believe the attention this case is getting. If we dine at a public place? We'll never get any peace."

"You're right. I hadn't thought of that. Okay. What do you want for supper? Anything in particular?" Abbie's voice went from casual to immediately reprimanding. "Sierra! No! No!!" Olivia knew Abbie was walking with the portable phone. "I said, No!"

"What's she doing?"

"Pushing all the buttons on the DVD player and yanking on the tray when it comes out. Listen, I'll see you when you get home."

"Okay. If you need me to stop and get anything on the way, let me know," Olivia told her. "I love you."

"Love you, too." With that, the phone call was terminated.

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A knock came on Olivia's office door just as she was about to leave for the day. She looked up to see a local newspaper reporter leaning against her doorway. "Chief Benson," he acknowledged in a condescending tone of voice that made her brain itch.

"Ah...Mr. Hauser. I expected you much earlier."

"Believe it or not, I am on vacation. But my editor knows that we have a...special...rapport, so he called me specifically to ask if I could do this story."

"Special, huh? Since when does 'special' translate into 'annoy the living shit out of each other'?"

"Tomato, ToMAHto, you get the idea..."

"I have no comment at this time."

"Yeah, I called your voice mail."

"You should have listened, I still have no comment at this time. The next of kin has not been notified yet, why would I talk to you first?"

He grinned. "Because I'm 'special'?"

"Frank, I'd love to give you an exclusive ... if I had one," she said to the thirty-ish man with the curly dark hair and the round glasses that teetered on the edge of his nose, "but I don't."

"Hmmm...elusive *and* evasive. I have questions about the possible occult connection to this murder..."

"And I have no answers for you," Olivia told him, smiling, not unpleasantly. "It is premature for me to comment or speculate on an ongoing investigation."

"Pat answer..."

"Well, as usual, sorry you wasted your time." Olivia ushered him out of her office and closed the door, locking it behind her. "If I have more information tomorrow, I'll be sure to ..."

"Call my editor and let him know," Hauser recited, dutifully.

"God, you're good," Olivia smiled at him, as she walked to her car.

Frank Hauser watched her drive away, leaving him with a half-day of his vacation wasted and no more leads than he'd had two hours before. But it was worth it, he smirked to himself. Olivia Benson was way too easy on the eyes not to take the chance that she'd actually have something for him.



~~~~~

Abbie had dropped Sierra off at the faculty daycare center early and headed to her office to prepare for her morning Advanced Criminal Procedure class. She slowed cautiously as she approached the entrance, seeing that the door window, which had her name on it, had been smashed.

Carefully stepping to the door, Abbie looked inside to see the office unoccupied. She then used the cuff of her sleeve to gingerly open the damaged door, as to hopefully not disrupt any fingerprints and flipped on the light switch, taking in the mayhem before her. "Son-of-a-bitch," she whispered, frightened and angry at the same time. Carefully avoiding shards of glass, Abbie took a step inside the room, not touching a thing. Taking it all in, she observed what once was her well organized office, with books, notes, plaques, certificates and photographs now all smashed and strewn about the floor and her desk, the activity obviously done in a destructive manner. Spray-painted in black paint on her wall above her once functional computer were several inverted pentagrams.

As Abbie absorbed all this, one of her fellow faculty members approached her, looking at her office. "Holy Shit, Abbie...what's going on?"

"I don't know," Abbie said, almost in shock.

"Have you seen your classroom?"

Racing two buildings down, Abbie practically slid past her classroom door on the newly buffed hallway floor. The room where Abbie taught her Criminal Law and Administrative Law classes were also vandalized and demolished. Someone had gained access to the building and specifically targeted and decimated her classroom. Once again, several inverted pentagrams had been spray-painted on the walls and desks and other items, along with the words, "You won."

#### **Chapter IV ... Give Us This Day**

Before she even realized it, Abbie was standing in the outer office of the supervisor of campus security, pacing like a large wild animal in a very small cage. She had tried to call Olivia and advise her of what was happening but Olivia was in a meeting and unavailable. Abbie knew, of course, that if she had an emergency, there was no way in hell she couldn't get a message to her partner but the more she thought about this incident, the more she wanted to handle it herself. Finally, a quarter after eight, forty-five minutes before Abbie's class was to begin and fifteen minutes after the supervisor should have reported to work, he strolled in, unlocking his office door. He didn't really acknowledge Abbie but he didn't ignore her, either.

Instead, he looked at the young man sitting at the desk outside his office, finishing up an activity log. "Yo, Crandall, what's up?" the supervisor nodded.

"Nothing. This lady needs to talk at you. Says it's kinda urgent."

Abbie dropped her arms to her side, incredulously. She looked at the young security officer, most likely a student at the college. Kind of urgent? She then looked at the supervisor, who seemed to be assessing her like juicy grade-A meat. "Well, come on in," he invited her, somewhat voraciously.

Greg Van Horn set his briefcase down by his desk and gestured for Abbie to take a seat.

"I'd rather not, thank you," Abbie responded, angrily.

"So what can I do for you, Miss -?" He waved his hand in the air, as though finding out her name was of no importance to him.

"Carmichael. Professor Carmichael," Abbie corrected.

Now his eyes flashed recognition. They reflected surprise. So *this* was the legendary Abbie Carmichael. Much nicer than he'd expected. Much, *much* nicer. Were dykes supposed to look like this? Regardless, he obviously did not feel the need to show her the respect her title required. "So, what's up?"

His lackadaisical attitude set her teeth on edge. "What's up?" she repeated, not too nicely. "Sometime during the night, my office and my classroom were destroyed. And someone spray-painted inverted pentagrams all over everything!!"

"And?" he asked in anticipation, as though that weren't enough. He sat behind his desk and powered up his computer.

"And...??" Abbie literally laughed out of frustration, looking heavenward, as if guidance (or at least, restraint) could be found there. "And...everything in my office and my classroom was *destroyed*! Ruined. All my books, my notes, my computer, anything personal I had in my office...!"

Punching a couple of keys on his keyboard to get his screen where he wanted it, he looked up at her, in what appeared to be a cross between a leer and a sneer. He waved her off. "These things happen."

Blinking in disbelief at his dismissal of her situation, she found herself speechless. Counting to ten and taking a deep breath, she glared at him. A look that seared him to the bone. Her eyes narrowed, infuriated. "My office and classroom were vandalized, ransacked, graffitied...I've lost years and semesters of work, of research, of lesson plans, of...of..." she was so rabid, she could barely concentrate, "and all you can say is 'these things happen'?"

He studied something on his computer monitor and then sat back in his chair. "What would you like me to do?"

Abbie wanted to crawl over his desk and throttle him. "Your job!!"

"And what would you know about my job?"

Not being able to comprehend the total patronizing tone to his voice, Abbie squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. "You *are* campus security, aren't you?"

"That would be correct."

"Don't you think, then, if not even out of a sense of duty, just maybe out of courtesy, that someone from your department should take a report? Take photographs? Create a folder? Contact the local PD? Was anyone from your department even out patrolling last night??"

"I'm sure my staff was doing their job." He appeared to be much more interested and concerned with what was happening on his computer screen than anything Abbie had to say. "Look, honey, it's just some college kids having a little fun with you. You're too used to living in a big city. Made you paranoid. This is a small town...these kids are just trying to rankle you."

Abbie lost him at the word, 'honey' and was reeling from trying to control herself and maintain some semblance of professionalism. "So, what you're telling me is that because this is a small town, kids here don't have the same criminal tendencies as big city kids?"

Van Horn leaned back in his chair, pointed a finger at her like a gun and said, "You got it."

Abbie looked around his office, looking for the hidden camera. No one who held a position this high could possibly be this moronic. She was sure she was being *Punk'd*.

If this guy was real, he was a lawsuit waiting to happen. *And at a law school!* Whose insipid relative must he have been to get this position? "What are your qualifications for this job?" she asked, her smile hiding sudden homicidal urges.

"Fifteen years as a patrol cop, ten years in security management."

"All here, in this town?"

"Why go anywhere else?"

"Gee, I don't know," Abbie made sure he knew her tone was overly sarcastic, "maybe if you had served as a cop in Paducah, Kentucky or Littleton, Colorado, you'd think a little differently about what small town kids are capable of."

Van Horn shook his head, chuckling. "Just like a woman..."

"What??!!"

"You've got to relax, honey. Tell you what ... you get another one of them scary devil signs in your office or your classroom, you come and see me, all right?" He had actually fluttered his hands on the word 'scary.'

Abbie had reached her breaking point. "Are you patronizing me, you lazy, insufferable..."

Van Horn held his hand up to her. "Okay, now let's not get personal here, honey ..."

Abbie leaned on his desk, inches from his face, her look unmistakably hostile, her voice low and lethal. "You call me honey one more time and I will kick you in the balls so hard, they'll be hanging out your nostrils ... with room to spare, I'm sure."

Swallowing hard, Van Horn leaned back, away from her. "Is that a threat, Ms. Carmichael?"

"No, it's just some dumb woman, having a little fun with you. And it's *Professor* Carmichael, you incompetent, misogynist piece of shit!"

"Nice language," he responded, no longer feeling he had the upper hand. "I'll make sure I document this little meeting and pass it on to the president of the college."

Standing up, Abbie regained her posture and bearing. "Please do." She turned and started to walk out of his office.

"You know, hon- Ms. Car- Professor Carmichael, maybe if you were more of a...well...a lady, you wouldn't be targeted for these kind of pranks."

Spinning on her heel, she faced him again, the look on her face even more incredulous than any previous moment in his office. "What?! More of a what?!!!"

Van Horn's expression was cold now. Defensive. Accusing. "You know what I'm talking about. Your...lifestyle. You're *relationship*...with that woman, Benson."

"That's *Chief* Benson to you. So you're saying I deserve to be harassed and threatened and targeted because I'm a lesbian?"

He visibly flinched at that word. "You figure it out."

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Immediately following her run-in with Van Horn, Abbie checked on Sierra in the campus daycare center to make sure she was okay. From a picture window, at the lobby desk, she watched her daughter, sitting on the carpeted floor with a little boy who looked as though he wasn't much older than a year, and offer him a toy, a small stuffed mouse. Abbie smiled proudly at the fact that Sierra was trying to share. When the little boy paid no attention to her, she reached out again, holding out the animal toward him. When he didn't acknowledge her this time, she hit him with the stuffed toy, startling him and making him cry. Abbie's hand automatically covered her mouth in dismay. She knew Sierra hadn't hurt him because the toy was extremely soft and plush but Abbie was a little startled, herself, by the aggressive action. Yup. Just like a true Carmichael, Sierra was not about to be ignored.

Just seeing her daughter calmed her down to the point where she felt she was able to teach her nine o' clock class. Thankfully, this classroom had been left alone and she wondered if the reason for that may have been that Amber Barclay didn't take this class.

As the students filed in, they all seemed unusually subdued. She knew that an official announcement had not yet been made regarding the identity of the victim but as life went on in this town, rumors were rampant. Added to that, they would have had to have been living in a cave not to have heard about the vandalism of Abbie's office and other classroom. She wondered if she should address the events of the morning and get it out of the way and then decided not to. It would be way too disruptive for everyone.

"Okay," Abbie began after everyone was seated, "Burger vs. U.S., 1935. Why did I ask you to read over this case? What would it have to do with today's topic?"

The class appeared to be a little surprised that Professor Carmichael seemed so calm and collected after everything they heard about that had gone on that morning. Glances were exchanged everywhere and finally one student raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Wenner?"

"Professor Carmichael...are you okay? We heard about ..."

Abbie curtly cut him off. "Yes, I am fine. Come on, people, we have a lot of ground to cover this morning, let's stay focused. Burger vs. U.S.?" She scanned the room and selected the student who seemed as though he was trying to not be noticed. She smiled. She was just in the right mood for someone who wasn't prepared. "Mr. McGregor?"

He looked at her with an 'oh, shit' expression. "I'm...I...uh...am not sure..."

"See me after class. Ms. Summers?"

"Because it states that, 'A prosecutor's proper interest is not that he shall win a case but that justice shall be done'," she responded, confidently.

"Correct. And what body of law was responsible for that statement?"

"The U.S. Supreme Court," Amelia Summers answered again.

Another hand raised toward the back of the class. "Professor Carmichael?"

"Yes, Ms. Morales?"

"Is it true that you tore Van Horn a new one in the security office?"

*That* hadn't taken long to get around campus. "What occurred between Mr. Van Horn and me has nothing to do with this class," she tried not to sound dismissive, she just didn't see any point in getting into this discussion with her students.

"Professor Carmichael?" another student spoke up.

"Yes, Mr. Tedore?"

"We heard a rumor that the body found at the church was a student at this school. Is that true?"

"Even if I did know that, I would not be at liberty to answer that question. Now, can we move on, please?"

Kevin Tedore persisted. "Professor, are the people who murdered this girl at the church after you now?"

"Do you understand that this is not a discussion we are having?" There was a tightness and hint of exasperation in her voice.

"Professor?" It was Anna Morales again.

"What?!" Abbie snapped, not meaning to.

"We're just concerned. We don't want anything happening to you. You're one of the best instructors on campus..."

Now she felt bad. She drew a deep breath. "I apologize. I didn't mean to sound so surly. It has been an ...interesting... morning. I appreciate your concern. But I am not in any danger."

"Is that because you have personal state police protection?" A handsome male student toward the front asked. A collective gasp went up in the classroom and when Abbie looked into this young man's eyes, she instinctively knew it had been said without malice, he had an impish grin on his face, which made her break into a smile in response. She bowed her head, amused. Now the students really exchanged looks. Was Professor Carmichael actually blushing?

When she looked up, the class was staring at her, stunned. She broke into another smile, shaking her head. "Burger vs. U.S. Let's discuss this case."

~~~~~

It had been a dead end day for Olivia and her staff. They had been in and out of meetings all day with every different law enforcement organization and affiliate in the county. Comparing notes and past cases, no one had dealt with this type of modus operandi before. They entered the meetings stumped and left them at the end of the day, just as stumped, if not more.

John Hollenberger finally made contact with Wade Barclay, drove to his house, showed him photographs of the body and Barclay confirmed that the girl in the pictures was his daughter,

Amber. He showed no emotion when viewing the photos, seeming almost cold and detached when making the identification. John related his meeting with Wade to Olivia before she left work for the day. It was just one more strange event to culminate the end of an even stranger work day.

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Olivia reached the deck of her house to find the door unlocked. Before she entered, she cautiously moved to the kitchen window, looking through it for anything out of the ordinary. She saw Abbie, seated at the computer in the living room. Relieved, Olivia walked inside, closing and locking the door behind her. She placed her bag of take-out on the counter and turned to see Abbie concentrated on the monitor, burning up the keyboard with her typing. "Hey...I'm home."

"Hi," Abbie responded as though she were distracted and angry.

Taking the cartons of food out of the bag, she looked around. "Where's the baby?"

She wandered into the living room and kissed Abbie on the top of the head.

"She's down for a nap," Abbie told Olivia, her words coming out short.

"What's going on? You seem ..."

"Furious? Frustrated? Homicidal?"

"Well, I was going to say a little out of sorts but I guess those three words give me a much clearer picture. Who are you writing to?"

"I'm drafting a detailed account of my meeting this morning with the supervisor of campus security and I am taking it to Bill Hoeflich."

"The President? Wow. What'd this guy do?"

"Everything but his job. You got my voice mail about my office and classroom?"

"Yeah, Sweetie, I did. I'm sorry I couldn't get back to you. I sent Heifflefinger over to document everything."

"Which was the proper thing to do. This guy couldn't be bothered! He was condescending, arrogant, insulting...he called me *honey*...!"

Olivia immediately put her hand to her mouth to stifle her amusement. She knew Abbie was livid and did not want to escalate her partner's mood any more than it already was. Too late. Abbie saw her.

"You find this funny, Olivia?"

"No...no...I don't find it funny that you have to deal with such an ignorant, chauvinistic asshole. I'm...um...just wondering if he left his office still in possession of his manhood. I have seen you emasculate the best of them."

"He said he's going to report me."

"For...?"

"He thinks I threatened him."

"Did you?"

Not answering, Abbie returned her attention to the computer monitor.

"Abbie?"

"I didn't threaten him, per se...I just advised him that I was capable of relocating dick and the boys to a northern most region."

Olivia couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, Abbie..." She leaned over and planted a loving kiss on her partner's lips. Instantly, Abbie calmed down. Breaking the contact, Olivia said, "I brought home some manicotti for us and some spaghetti for Sierra."

"Thanks. I'm starving."

Olivia slid out of her jacket and laid it over the back of the love seat. She then walked quietly into Sierra's room and watched her beautiful baby daughter sleep. She did not hear Abbie come up behind her but only reacted slightly when Abbie slid her arms around Olivia's waist. "God, she is so precious. So beautiful," Olivia stated with quiet pride.

"Isn't she?" Abbie agreed, her voice soft. "She's fourteen months now, Liv...what do you think about having one more?"

Olivia turned in Abbie's arms, studying her. "You mean it?"

"Yeah. I've been thinking about it a lot. I don't want her to be an only child and I know you don't, either. If we're going to have one more, let's do it before there's too much of an age gap."

Looking deeply into Abbie's eyes, seeing only affection, admiration and want, Olivia became emotional. "I love you so much, Abbie."

"I love you, too, Liv. More than you'll ever know."

"If we're going to do it, then let's make the appointment."

"Wow. That was easier than I thought," Abbie commented, surprised.



"Did you think it was going to be an issue?" Olivia asked, gently, tracing the contours of Abbie's face with her finger.

"I wasn't sure. We've been dancing around the subject now for the last couple of months and we always push it forward to a future time."

"That's because I've been being selfish and I haven't wanted to think about how I'll have to adjust my work life and schedule with being pregnant and all."

Abbie smiled. She hugged Olivia fiercely. "I know I've always said that you have to carry the next one, but...if it's okay with you, I'd really like to do it again. I loved being pregnant."

"I know you did. And damn, if you weren't insatiable in your second trimester. Nearly wore me out."

"I remember," Abbie grinned.

"Sweetie, if you want that responsibility again, it's yours. But I am ready to keep my end of the bargain."

"I know you are and I love you even more for that."

Olivia held Abbie close and kissed her tenderly, yet passionately. "I would love to have another baby with you."

Abbie leaned in for another kiss when they heard Sierra starting to stir. Looking over at their daughter, they saw that she woke up, immediately alert and looked around her crib. Spotting her mommies, she rolled over and pulled herself up to a standing position. She bounced up and down, smiling.

"Hi, Sunshine," Olivia beamed at her. She stepped closer and picked Sierra up out of the crib, giving her daughter a hug and a kiss. Sierra immediately clung to her. "Let's change that diaper and then get some food into you so you can fill it up again."

"I'll change her," Abbie offered.

"No, I don't mind." Olivia looked at her daughter, who was patting Olivia's face. "Mama's had you all to herself for a couple of hours. It's my turn."

Observing Olivia interact with Sierra almost brought tears to Abbie's eyes. How did she get so lucky to end up with such a strong, capable, beautiful, loving woman? Olivia obviously worshipped the ground that little girl crawled on. As she watched her partner clean Sierra up and change her, Abbie marveled at Olivia's loving interaction with their daughter. Even something as disgusting as changing a dirty diaper and Olivia was glad, almost grateful, to do it.

Sierra jabbered while Olivia kissed her little feet and tickled her bare belly, which caused excessive giggling between both mother and daughter. Continuously amazed at what a natural parent Olivia was, Abbie could not help but become instantly flushed with love for her partner.

Looking up, Olivia saw Abbie leaning against the doorframe, staring at them, grinning.

"What?" Olivia inquired, as she fastened Sierra's diaper and picked her up.

"Nothing. I'm just glad we're together."

Olivia looked at her puzzled, wondering where that came from, then looked at Sierra. "Tell Mama you're happy we're all together, too."

Sierra reached for Abbie. "Mama!"

Taking her from Olivia, she kissed their daughter and headed out to the kitchen for dinner. "Wait until Mommy hears about you in daycare this morning..."

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After settling into bed, Abbie lay in Olivia's embrace, resting her head on her partner's strong shoulder, her legs entangled in Olivia's. Sighing contentedly, Abbie kissed the dip in Olivia's collarbone. "What did you find out about the flowers?"

"Just as we figured, the flowers were ordered over the phone and paid for on a stolen credit card. Our tracking hit a dead end. Our resources are so limited compared to what I'm used to."

"What's your gut, Liv?"

"My gut? My gut keeps bringing me back to dear old daddy but right now, the only thing we have on him is that he's teetering on the edge of fanatically insane. But we're going to bring him in tomorrow and feel him out. Have you ever met him?"

"No. And from everything Amber told me about him, that's a good thing."

"Can you think of anything Amber told you that might give us any reason, other than my gut, to tie him to this?"

"Just that he's a very angry person and radically religious."

"Which describes more than half the people in this valley." Smiling, Olivia felt the featherlike touch of the tips of Abbie's fingers making little circles on her ribcage, lower abdomen...

"Looking for anything in particular, or just browsing?" she asked, kissing the top of Abbie's head.

As Abbie's fingers dipped into the moist heat, continuing to make little circles, she said, "found it."

## **Chapter V. Us From Evil**

Escorting Wade Barclay into the conference room of the trooper barracks, MacEvoy shut the door behind him. He gestured to a seat that Barclay plopped down in and then waited.

Olivia entered the room, closing the door behind her, carrying a folder in her hand. "Mr. Barclay, my name is ..."

"I know who you are," he spit out, unpleasantly. He looked at MacEvoy. "Can I be questioned by someone else?"

Glancing at MacEvoy, a little taken aback, Olivia returned her attention to Barclay. The hateful look in his eyes was very unsettling, to say the least. "Do you have a problem with me, Sir?" Olivia asked, addressing him respectfully, a courtesy he didn't deserve.

"Yes."

"Have we met before?"

"No. But I know who you are and what you are."

Olivia would have laughed in his face if the reason they were all there had not been so tragically serious. "And what would that be, Mr. Barclay?"

"An abomination. A sin. I would actually prefer not to be in the same room as you."

Olivia shrugged. "Well, that's unfortunate but you don't have a choice."

Barclay looked up at MacEvoy, disgusted. "What kind of man are you, Mike? You not only let a woman give you orders but a woman of this caliber, to boot?" He shook his head.

MacEvoy was more annoyed than provoked. "Shut up, Wade. You either cooperate and answer the Chief's questions or I'll hook you up right now for the nine unpaid traffic tickets you have."

Olivia suppressed a smile. MacEvoy could be a real jerk sometimes but when it came down to it, he always had her back.

"Fine, I'll cooperate," he conceded, sourly, "but you ask the questions, not her."

"You are not in charge here, Mr. Barclay," Olivia advised him, still keeping her tone agreeable and courteous.

Barclay stubbornly folded his arms across his chest. "Well, then, I'm not talking to you."

MacEvoy took a menacing step toward him. "What are you, ten years old!? Sit up in that friggin' chair and act right or I'm going to start smacking you around like a redheaded step-child! What ails you, Wade??"

Even Olivia was a little astonished at her trooper's outburst but she tried not to react as such. She glanced at Barclay, who was now looking up at her.

"Did you hear that? He just threatened me with bodily harm!"

"Who me?" Olivia pointed to herself. "I didn't hear a thing. You're not talking to me, remember?"

Looking back and forth between Olivia and MacEvoy, Barclay let out a big, disgusted sigh. "All right. Fine. Ask me your stupid questions."

Both Olivia and MacEvoy remained standing as Barclay sat, giving them a psychological advantage over him. She placed a pre-autopsy photo of Amber Barclay from the shoulders up in front of Wade, carefully gauging his reaction. Just as John had told her, there was none. "You have identified the person in this photograph as Amber Lorena Barclay, is that correct?"

"Yep. That's her, all right."

"And Amber is your daughter?"

"Was. Was my daughter. But she was dead to me a long time before she...well...died."

"And why is that, Mr. Barclay?"

His expression and tone became defiant again. "Because she betrayed me, betrayed her upbringing, her commitment to our Lord, Jesus Christ. First she gets a tattoo. Then she tells me ... not asks me, *tells* me that she's going to get a job and put herself through college and then she gets recruited by one of your kind."

"My kind? You mean a cop?" Olivia asked, knowing exactly what he meant.

"No."

"A New Yorker? A brunette? Tall?" Olivia prodded, knowing she was pushing his buttons.

"NO!" He slammed his hand down on the table. "A LEZ-BEE-YAN!!! Is that better?"

God, this guy is an asshole, Olivia thought. "Yes, I think it is. Especially if you're the alternative," she replied with a straight face. It took Barclay a few minutes to comprehend she was insulting him. If it wouldn't have provoked the situation any further, MacEvoy would have given her a high five.

"Maybe I should ask for an attorney," Barclay smirked.

"Maybe you should," Olivia shrugged. "It is your right to stop talking whenever you wish and request the presence of an attorney...except you haven't been arrested for anything, Mr. Barclay. All we are doing here is trying to get some background on your daughter so that we can hopefully find her killer. The community is just a *little* upset about this whole situation and we would like to catch this person and get on with life here."

Barclay stubbornly folded his arms again, shaking his head. That wasn't quite the reaction he expected from her.

"What do you mean 'recruited,' Mr. Barclay? Was someone handing out flyers on campus? Did someone go around to the classrooms, making a speech about inducting women into our little circle?"

Barclay looked at her, surprised. Is that what they really did? His eyes got big. "That's probably exactly what happened."

Olivia looked up at MacEvoy too stunned to laugh at the idiot sitting in the chair.

Shaking his head, MacEvoy said, "Wade, you're overactive gullibility gland is working overtime. Stop being a damned knucklehead and give her your warped version of how you think Amber was recruited!"

Her most troublesome trooper was surprising her today every time he opened his mouth. Here was a man who she thought felt exactly the same way about gays as Wade Barclay obviously did and yet, he not only seemed to be defending her, he was treating Wade like an ignorant, uneducated child. She knew MacEvoy didn't like her so the only thing that made sense to her was that he liked Barclay even less.

Barclay looked at MacEvoy. "You know how *those* people do...she was seduced."

"Seduced how?" Olivia prodded. To her knowledge, Amber had not sought out anyone else following Abbie's professional (which unfortunately also turned out to be personal) rejection.

"She was seduced into thinking she was *born* that way. No one in my house, in my family was born that way. The devil was living inside her to make her believe and act like that. Thought she was in love. All because of your...your..."

"My what?" Olivia asked, in as civil a tone as she could muster. Call her anything you want but don't ever, *ever* talk about Abbie or their daughter. Olivia's hackles rose immediately.

"That woman you live in sin with!"

"My partner?"

"Whatever you people call each other. She filled my daughter's head with disgusting, blasphemous things. She disobeyed me, stopped going to my church, openly defied me. The devil got into her so I'm not surprised she ended up like that." He pushed the photograph back toward Olivia. "If anyone is responsible for her death, it's you and your...woman friend."

Taking a deep breath, Olivia looked at him directly in the eyes. "I am not going to justify myself or my partner to you. This is not about us."

"It's everything about you! She only started behaving this way after you two moved to town."

"Which is also, I believe, not too long after your wife died?" Olivia asked him.

Barclay looked up at her sharply with an expression that made the little hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "You leave Lorena out of this!" he seethed. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Olivia knew she had made her point. She smiled at him. "Maybe nothing. I'm just throwing it into the mix. So, Mr. Barclay, where were you on Monday night between the hours of eleven P.M. and three A.M.?"

"Thought you said I wasn't a suspect?"

MacEvoy and Olivia exchanged glances before she returned her attention back to Barclay. "I never said that. I told you that you weren't under arrest."

"Family members are almost always questioned first, Wade," MacEvoy advised, "unless we have a suspect in custody or someone specific in mind."

"I was home where every good Christian man should be at those hours."

"Anyway to corroborate that?" Olivia asked.

"No. I never thought I would need corroboration. Besides, I heard it was an occult murder, devil worshippers."

"That's just a rumor. We have no evidence to support that," Olivia told him.

"No evidence? I heard she had been murdered and put into the shape of that...inverted pentagram."

"Anyone could have posed her like that," Olivia advised, wishing that little tidbit of information had not gotten leaked.

"Yeah, but I also heard there was no blood and isn't that what those Satanists do? Sacrifice humans and drink their blood?"

Olivia and MacEvoy immediately looked at each other, startled. That wasn't information that was leaked. To her knowledge, the only people who knew there had been no blood at all at the scene were Mike, Andy, John, Olivia and the killer. "How did you know about that?" MacEvoy inquired, suspiciously, thinking the only way Barclay could have known that was if he had been there.

Barclay's eyes lowered and quickly darted back and forth, as though he had been caught. But a complacent smirk crossed his lips and he looked up at the two people standing before him. "Eddie Mitchell told me."

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"How the fuck did Eddie Mitchell get in possession of that information?!!!"

MacEvoy knew his boss was livid because she rarely swore in front of her staff. He was just as angry. That had been their ace in the hole, thinking only the murderer would know that detail. "I don't know, Chief, I don't know how he could have. Grier and I never left the crime scene unattended and I know he never got downstairs to the basement."

"Could he have gotten access to the report?" Olivia was pacing in the conference room after Barclay had left.

"It's possible but I don't know how."

"Get him in here immediately," Olivia demanded through clenched teeth.

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Eddie Mitchell closed the door behind him and stood self-consciously before Olivia. He looked like a little boy who'd been sent to the principal's office.

"God damn it, Eddie, did I not ask you specifically to keep your mouth shut on this case?"

"But, Chief...I never said nothing to nobody. I swear."

"Oh, really?" Olivia asked him, knowing he couldn't be trusted with keeping any kind of a secret. "Then how did Wade Barclay know that there was no blood at the crime scene? Actually...how did *you* know that there was no blood at the crime scene?"

Mitchell was gaping at her, totally befuddled. "What are you talking about?"

"How did you find out that there was no blood at the crime scene?"

"I...I didn't know there wasn't any blood. How is that possible? Her throat was slit."

"You're telling me that you had no idea about that detail of the crime scene?"

"Honest to God, Chief, I swear on my mother's eyes, I did not know that." Mitchell started dancing around nervously, as though he were ready to piss his pants any minute.

There was a look in his expression, his demeanor, which compelled Olivia to want to believe him. "Wade Barclay told us you told him that there was no blood at the crime scene."

"That's impossible. I have not seen Wade to talk to in over a month and even if I had seen him, I couldn't have told him that because I had no idea, myself."

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After securing a search warrant, Barclay's mobile home had been torn apart, looking for anything that would tie him into the crime scene. In the backyard, just beyond the fringe of where the woods began, underneath the decaying, stinking carcass of a dead deer, was a knife that could have been the murder weapon. In the large shed that sat on the side of the house, fox pelts were found hanging, drying on a line, a result from Wade's trapping practices. In the tool box beside the cutting table, were two knives with dried blood on them. They could have been the murder weapon. But after careful analysis, it was a knife found in the utensil drawer in the filthy kitchen that turned out to be the murder weapon. Wade thought he had wiped that clean. A few sprays of Luminol proved he hadn't.

They found Wade Barclay at his church, praying. His pastor was with him. Olivia, MacEvoy, Grier, Heifflefinger and a barrage of other law enforcement personnel had entered the sacred structure.

MacEvoy placed Wade under arrest, took him into custody and transported him to the state police barracks for processing. Asked if he wanted a lawyer, Barclay shook his head and stated he just wanted his minister there with him. Even when Reverend Smith advised him to seek legal counsel before answering any questions, Barclay declined. He told him the Lord was the only counsel he needed. That statement even made Reverend Smith roll his eyes.

"Mr. Barclay," Olivia began, seated across the conference room table from him, "did you also send flowers to my house with a card that said, 'you won'?"

"I did."

"And was it also you that destroyed Professor Carmichael's office and classroom that following evening, spray painting inverted pentagrams and the words, 'you won'?"

"I did."

"What was the purpose of those particular acts?"

"I felt the devil influenced my daughter. I felt your...Professor Carmichael...had the devil living inside her because of what she seduced my daughter into thinking. My precious sweet baby. Defying me, betraying me. Telling me what she was going to do, who and what she was becoming...throwing it in my face like...like a vat of acid. Defying God's law, breaking Jesus'



rules. She became the devil. The devil started living inside her. I couldn't have that. Not my child. So, in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, I disowned her. And then I exorcised the devil's blood out of her."

"How did you do that, Mr. Barclay?" Olivia's voice was calm and professional which completely contradicted her internal emotions. Her insides were shaking with rage that this man did what he did to his own flesh and blood just because she no longer agreed with his overbearing, unreasonable and archaically unrealistic religious convictions.

"I was driving through town Friday night ..."

"Friday, the 17th?" Olivia interrupted, verifying the date.

"If that's what last Friday was, yeah. I saw her in the college crosswalk on High Street, walking toward the arts building. I pulled over and honked my horn. At first, she pretended she didn't hear it but then she came over to the car. I asked her to get in, that we needed to talk. I told her I'd buy her supper. I knew she was struggling with finances, wasn't eating properly. I finally convinced her and she went with me to the diner up the road. All she had, though, was a cup of coffee." Wade lifted his cuffed hands to scratch an itch at his hairline. His eyes looked full.

"Then what happened?" Olivia prodded. She did not want to be in the room with this man any longer than she had to be.

Suddenly, his moist eyes seemed to steel over and the look in his eyes was unmistakably nefarious. He bored a hole through Olivia with his stare and then looked back down at the table. "Her response to my kindness, to my telling her to come home and let me take care of her again, to come to church with me and pray for her wicked, possessed soul, was to laugh in my face. Told me if I couldn't accept her the way she was, I didn't need to accept her at all." He then laughed, shaking his head. "She told me that *I* was the one who was sick, *I* was the one who would never get to heaven, *I* was the one the Lord would reject. She said *I* was the one who wasn't *normal*. She told me that you and your...girlfriend...managed just fine in today's world and that she's rather be like you two any day than like me."

"So, that was the meaning behind 'you won'?"

Wade nodded, then continued. "She got up and left the diner and I followed her outside. I slapped her several times for saying such blasphemous things to me and I grabbed her and threw her into the car. I told her if she wanted to live with the devil inside her than she was welcome to it but no child of mine was going to be *that way*... I drove her to Gabel's Stream and I released her soul back to the Lord."

"How? Exactly how did you do that, Mr. Barclay?" Olivia questioned, needing to get him to admit to the murder in the exact manner in which it happened.

"She looked up at me, desperately and cried in a whisper, 'Daddy, please...' Daddy. Now I was her daddy again?" He shook his head, disgusted. "She wasn't my little girl anymore. So I took my

knife and drew it the width of her throat, cutting the carotid, knowing she would bleed out fast. Her blood washed downstream with the current."

"Why did you take her to the old church?"

"I heard that cults were practicing Satanism there. I figured if she wanted to behave like the devil possessed her, they could have her. Her soul went to Jesus Christ. Her body went to Lucifer."

"So you set it up to look like a ritual?"

He shrugged. "They might as well have done it. I thought they'd consider it a gift."

"Mr. Barclay...do you feel any remorse at all for your daughter's death?" Olivia asked him, wanting to do the same thing to him that he did to that innocent girl.

He looked at her again, his eyes casting an ominous glare. "Do you? It was your fault I had to do it. Your and you girlfriend's."

Olivia was done. She looked up at MacEvoy and shook her head. Standing up and pushing her chair in, she looked down at Wade, almost sympathetically and said, "Mr. Barclay, if you really want to see where the devil lives? I suggest you look in a mirror." With that, she walked out of the room, feeling sick to her stomach.

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"I guess I'm really not surprised," Logan Jessup told Olivia, who was giving the teenager a ride to one of her other jobs. Both she and Abbie arrived home late, Abbie not feeling well at all, which resulted in Logan reporting to work twenty minutes after her scheduled start time. "He was always a creepy guy."

"How well did you know him?" Olivia inquired.

"As well as I ever wanted to. He and my father actually hung out a couple times when I was really young. I'd go over to his house and visit Amber. She was only two years older than me, you know."

"Yes, I know," Olivia turned on to the avenue where the diner was where Logan put in a few hours every week. She and Abbie were hoping they could entice her away from all the other jobs she worked by offering her a full-time position with them taking care of Sierra, the dogs, the horses and the property. Fortunately and unfortunately, the young woman was very loyal and responsible to her other employers. "What kind of memories do you have of Amber?"

"She was always very quiet. Both she and her Mom were. Like they were always afraid to say anything without checking with him first. They had a lot of animals, too."

"Dogs and cats?"

"And ducks and chickens and geese and emus."

"Emus?"

"Yeah. I hated those things. They let them run around free in the woods. It was like visiting Jurassic Park. They were so fast and the way they would dart around the woods from tree to tree? It was like you were being stalked by velociraptors."

The vision in her head made Olivia laugh out loud.

"I'm serious," Logan insisted. "They'd sneak up behind you, too. One day, I was standing there talking to Amber and one came out of nowhere and plucked the scrunchy right out of my ponytail and then ran away."

They pulled up to the diner, Olivia putting the car in park. "Are you sure you don't want me to come in and explain?"

Exiting the car, holding the door ajar, Logan smiled. "Nah. He knows if I'm late, it's legit. Hey, tell Abbie I hope she feels better."

"Will do, sweetie, thanks. And thanks for staying over. If there are any problems, you let me know."

Logan smiled wider and shook her head. "Don't worry. Ain't no way my boss is ever going to mess with you."

## **Chapter VI. Forever, Amen.**

*One month later.*

After Olivia put Sierra to bed, she walked back out into the living room, noticing that the only source of light was from three tri-wicked, fat candles, one being on the coffee table and the other two on the end tables surrounding the couch. Also on the coffee table, sat an open champagne bottle, sitting in an ice bucket, and one glass already poured.

Smiling, curiously, looking around, she turned just in time to see Abbie descending the loft stairs, wearing, obviously, a brand new and very sexy piece of lingerie. The sight made the detective immediately, if not unconsciously, catch her breath. In her eyes, there was nothing more exquisite than Abbie Carmichael by candlelight. The way the shadows played against her perfect features was more than breathtaking, it was almost paralyzing.

Electrified by this vision moving toward her, Olivia's eyes gravitated to Abbie's smile, which was filled with allure and promise. Finally regaining the use of her voice, Olivia asked, "What's all this?"

Walking past her, silently, Abbie picked up the glass of champagne and handed it to her partner of five years. Studying her, Olivia accepted the glass and took a sip. "Where's yours?" She wondered, after she saw Abbie make no move toward pouring herself a glass.

"I'm not drinking any tonight."

Olivia's eyes narrowed in suspicion. Abbie Carmichael not drinking one of their favorite champagnes, saved for celebrations and special occasions? "Abbie...? What's going on?"

She took Olivia's hand and gently pulled her to the couch, where they sat down. "I have something to tell you."

"Okay..."

"Kiss me first?" Abbie asked, moving closer to Olivia, who put her arms around her.

Olivia tried to scrutinize Abbie's expression. "Why do I feel as though I should be preparing myself for something..."

"You should be," Abbie confirmed. She leaned in, touching her lips to Olivia's in a kiss that was so light, she almost didn't feel it. Although her body was certainly reacting as though it had. Not moving her head or position, Abbie kissed her again, this time, much more of a declaration of the love and desire she had for her lover.

Reaching her hand behind Abbie's neck, Olivia put just enough pressure there to hold their faces together. The kiss, alone, was an intimate ballet of love. Abbie had a way of moving her lips and tongue against Olivia's that could send the detective nearly out of her mind with want. Knowing where this was leading ... at least eventually ... Olivia's free hand moved down the V of Abbie's silky negligee top and glided inside to cup Abbie's breast.

Breaking the kiss, Abbie still smiling, said, "not yet."

"Then don't tease me like that," Olivia softly commented, nuzzling Abbie's neck, kissing her just below her ear. "What have you got up your sleeve, Counselor?"

"I do have something but it's not up my sleeve."

Nipping at Abbie's earlobe, she ran her tongue lightly down the attorney's neck to her collarbone ... a *very* sensitive area for Abbie, she knew. Hearing her partner moan slightly, Olivia smiled against her lover's throat. Five years together, with many more of dancing around being together, and Abbie Carmichael still excited her as much, if not more, than the first time they made love.

"Remember we talked about having another baby?"

"Mmmm hmmm, I said make the appointment." Olivia was still kissing and nuzzling Abbie's throat.

"What if I told you that the appointment had already been made and that I saw Dr. Fontana the next day?"

Olivia slowly pulled back, studying her lover. "How could you get in that quickly?"

"I told you. The appointment had already been made. A good two months in advance. If you agreed, I wanted to get in to see her as soon as possible before you changed your mind. If you had disagreed, I would have cancelled it."

"And when do we have to go back and do the insemination?"

"We don't."

Olivia looked and sounded lost. "We don't?"

Abbie shook her head, then broke out into a beaming smile. "I'm pregnant, Liv."

Stunned, Olivia opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.

"Remember when we were working on getting pregnant with Sierra, Dr. Fontana did that ultrasound-guided egg retrieval on both of us? We opted for the cryopreservation egg banking? Well, we were coming up close to the two year mark, which is why I made the appointment when I did. Dr. Fontana fertilized your eggs with the same sperm donor who fathered Sierra and then implanted them into me almost four weeks ago. Remember you came home from work one day and I wasn't feeling well? That's the day I went. I'm pregnant, Olivia. With your child."

Still not being able to articulate any words, Olivia's eyes filled with tears.

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

"It is..." Olivia barely whispered, "it's a wonderful surprise, Abbie."

"So I thought you'd want to celebrate..." Abbie couldn't get the words out before Olivia hugged her fiercely, leaning Abbie back to a supine position.

"I wish I could really explain to you how much I love you, Abbie. There are no words and even if there were, eternity is not enough time."

"You can show me how much," Abbie caressed Olivia's cheek, brushing away the wetness from her tears.

"You want to stay here on the couch?"

"Why not? It's not going to be too much longer that we can get away with doing it on the couch. When she starts walking? All bets for privacy are off."

Olivia could have looked into Abbie's eyes forever. They reflected such strength, intelligence, love, admiration and tonight, arousal. She began kissing Abbie again with a hunger that only she could satisfy.

"Don't you even want to finish your glass of champagne?"

"That can wait. I can't."

Abbie's smile was deep as she stared at Olivia's striking face, studying every inch of it, even though she had memorized it long, long ago.

Unbelting the scant piece of clothing Abbie had on, Olivia opened the garment, marveling at Abbie's nakedness underneath, a sight that always enhanced Olivia's desire. She softly and lovingly traced Abbie's now flat stomach, the touch alone causing Abbie's nipples to come alive, a reaction not lost on either woman. Bending down, Olivia gently took a nipple in her mouth, flicking it with her tongue, sucking tenderly, nibbling delicately ... all gestures she knew would drive Abbie to the brink. Releasing her left breast, Olivia gave equal time to her right one, Abbie clutching the back of Olivia's head to her, lost in the sensation. Again Olivia laid back and traced Abbie's abdomen.

"We have a baby in there," Olivia whispered, tapping her finger near Abbie's navel, eyes filling up once again.

"Your baby, Liv. Your child."

"No. Our baby. Our child. Just like Sierra."

"I know. But you need to know how sexy I feel carrying your baby inside me."

"God, I love you *so* much." Olivia dipped her head again, sealing her lips to Abbie's breast. Working her partner up again, Olivia's hand slowly moved down toward the heat between Abbie's thighs. She gently made circles in the triangle of dark curls she found there, then slid her fingers on the surface of Abbie's folds. "Mmmm," Olivia moaned, still lavishing attention on Abbie's breast.

"See what you do to me?" Abbie whispered, hoarsely, impossibly aroused.

Olivia began slowly stroking the wetness, picking up her pace only slightly when she felt Abbie get swollen and hard.

"God, Liv, you always make me feel so good," Abbie exhaled, as Olivia increased her tempo. Deciding not to enter her and stay where she was, Olivia could tell Abbie was getting close. Her breathing was ragged with quiet moans and she was rocking against Olivia's rhythm. Lifting her head, Olivia began kissing Abbie deeply, passionately, knowing she needed to pull her face away just as Abbie began to climax.

Clinging on to Olivia as though her life depended on it, Abbie rose up, arched her back, broke the kiss and, with her lips right next to Olivia's ear, she released quietly, her body tense with waves of pleasure, softly murmuring her affection and emotion to her lover.

Olivia lay on top of Abbie, caressing her, as Abbie's body calmed down.

"Are you going to get undressed, Liv?" Abbie asked.

Picking her head up, mesmerized by the glow emanating from her partner, Olivia smiled, shaking her head. "Not just yet." She leaned in and kissed Abbie very tenderly, with so much love behind it, Abbie thought she might actually start to cry herself. They stayed in that position for several minutes, just kissing. It didn't take much coaxing for Abbie to be ready again. "A little chilly, are we, Counselor?" Olivia smiled, feeling Abbie's taut nipples against her own chest.

"Oh, yeah," Abbie grinned. "Why don't you warm me up?"

Sliding her hands between Abbie's legs again, she sighed. "Don't need to. Obviously, you're already there." Olivia slowly, carefully, seductively began bestowing long lingering kisses down Abbie's body. When she reached her ultimate destination, she inhaled deeply, intoxicated by the rich scent of Abbie's obvious arousal. Olivia glanced up at her partner just as Abbie's head fell back, anticipating Olivia's next move.

After a few teasing swipes with her tongue, Abbie moaning at the contact, Olivia parted her, savoring the distinct taste of Abbie that got her excited every time. She could feel herself starting to soak through her panties and her own enthusiasm mixed with Abbie's encouraging groans urged her to work faster. Alternating between lapping and sucking, knowing the spot and action that made Abbie react the most favorably, Olivia's head began bobbing slightly, rhythmically. As Abbie reached down and touched her lover's hair, a sure sign she was close, then tightened her body in preparation, she became more vocal as her insides began to get that heightened tickling sensation that radiated from her toes to her brain. She unconsciously bucked against Olivia's mouth, propelling Olivia to work a little harder counteracting that movement. She could feel Abbie building to this one and Olivia knew it was going to be intense, which made her all the more determined to do it right.

Abbie lifted her hips off the couch as Olivia stayed right with her, now thrusting her tongue harder, faster, sucking, licking, sucking, when Abbie finally exploded in orgasm, a reaction that lasted almost a full minute. Then, just as Olivia was slowing down, she felt Abbie brush her hand over Olivia's hair again and she held her breath and constricted her vaginal muscles. Olivia smiled, delighted to take Abbie there again and then eased away, climbing back up the tall Texan's body.

"That was a really good one," Abbie told her, still panting.

"I know. I was there," Olivia grinned at her, removing her slacks and underpants, and then unbuttoned her shirt.

Abbie slid Olivia's shirt off her shoulders, unhooked her bra and then crawled onto Olivia's lap, straddling her.

"Oh, you want more?" Olivia teased.

"No." Abbie had a twinkle in her eye. "I mean yes, but later."

"Tell me what you want, Counselor?" Olivia's voice was low and husky.

"I want you," Abbie tapped Olivia's breast with her index finger, "to do yourself."

"You do? And what will you be doing?"

"Watching," Abbie told her, grinning wickedly.

"Hmmm...we haven't done this in a while. It will be reciprocated, yes? Then I'll get to watch you?"

"Whatever you want, Olivia." Abbie raised up, slightly, her eyes following Olivia's hand as it slid down to her own wetness and began to stroke. There was a look Olivia got on her face when pleasuring herself in front of Abbie that made her irresistibly hot. It was a satisfied expression that settled in once Olivia found her spot, rhythm and the right pressure for that particular time.

Looking deeply into Abbie's eyes, Olivia sexually manipulated herself, rubbing a little harder, a little faster, closing her eyes slowly, her breathing quickening. Watching her lover stimulate herself made Abbie wet all over again. When Olivia began rocking against her own fingers, Abbie leaned in and began kissing her partner urgently, sensually and placed her hands on Olivia's sensitive breasts, circling, kneading, rolling. When Olivia climaxed, Abbie continued to play with Olivia's nipples, not releasing her mouth from their kiss.

Moving her body as close as she could to Olivia's, Abbie lowered herself onto Olivia's hand, still moving, still stroking herself, except now, Abbie felt the back of Olivia's fingers against her own soft, wet flesh. Olivia moaned loudly, rhythmically into Abbie's mouth, finally breaking the kiss when she could no longer breathe.

As Olivia's fingers slowed to a stop, Abbie sat back on Olivia's knees again, raised her torso slightly and took over touching herself where Olivia's knuckles had left off. Abbie was still so wet, so aroused from her previous sessions, mixed with what she was doing now, Olivia could not only see her fingers working, she could hear them, too.

Olivia held on to Abbie's hips but her concentration didn't stray from the movement of Abbie's fingers. Abbie came quickly and hard and then wasted no time pushing Olivia backward to a lying position on the couch and going down on her. She knew just where to put pressure that would get the most results from her partner. When she found her pace, she then inserted two fingers inside Olivia and curled them upward, stroking and thrusting.



Because Olivia was already extremely, *extremely* aroused from watching Abbie, she came twice in less than two minutes. First from the oral contact and then a powerful vaginal orgasm followed.

They lay on the couch, spent, wrapped up in each other. Olivia lazily reached over to the coffee table and took a couple sips of her champagne. A smirk curled her lips and then erupted into a full-fledged smile.

"What?" Abbie cocked her head, looking at her lover.

"We're going to have another baby," Olivia chuckled, very pleased with the situation.

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The End

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