



Summary: Olivia has to come to terms with her feelings.

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Doris Wolfe was happily enjoying the first uninterrupted cigarette she'd been allowed to have all day. She'd just left one of the most tedious meetings in Springfield history and while as a rule she rarely smoked in public; the petty squabbling amongst the city council had her coming close to lighting up right there in City Hall.

She exhaled blissfully and then almost choked when she saw a familiar figure standing desolately in the gazebo.

Regretfully putting out her cigarette, she approached her friend carefully, not wanting to scare the woman, nor intrude if she truly wanted to be alone. She stood for a long moment, studying Olivia as she looked out of the gazebo but not really seeing anything.

“Smoking’s bad for you, Doris” Olivia stated suddenly without even turning around.

Doris chuckled, not surprised in the least by her friend’s perceptive nature. “So I’ve been told. Several times, actually, but considering the fact that I’ve just spent all day with a room full of overgrown children, I’m furiously debating whether to tell my daughter I’ve been lying to her her whole life and the fact that I haven’t had so much as a date in nearly two years, I mean a girl needs some kind of outlet.”

Olivia finally turned around and smiled at the Mayor. She never would have guessed in a million years that Doris Wolfe would become one of her closest friends and ally’s. Apparently secrets did make strange bedfellows, considering the bizarre way they had forged this friendship.

“I never took you for a woman who enjoyed pleasure walking, Doris. What brings you out this way?”

“I suppose you wouldn’t believe I’ve decided it was time to get out and mingle with my constituents?”

Olivia snorted in response and Doris grinned. “Fair enough. Actually I got fed up dealing with the City Council and I decided to leave and get some lunch at Company.”

“You just walked out?” Olivia asked with a laugh, impressed as always by the other woman’s lack of ‘give a damn.’

“Hell, yes. It’s good to be Mayor.”

“Okay. But why are you here? Spying on me?”

Doris didn't miss the narrowing of impressive green eyes and knew to tread carefully. "Of course not, Olivia. I really was just passing by and I saw you. I thought I'd stop and say hello. But now that you mention it, for someone who's finally able to be with the woman she loves, you're not looking very happy."

Olivia looked closely at her friend and not seeing anything but true concern, she sighed and sat on the bench, relieved when Doris followed suit.

"I am happy," Olivia said cautiously.

"But..."

Olivia sighed. "I can't help it," she said, almost afraid of Doris's reaction.

"Help what?"

"I am glad Natalia's back. I really am and so is Emma. It's been a really good week for us and we've spent most of it just talking about everything and she can't stop apologizing for how she left." Olivia stopped as she thought of the many times she'd caught Natalia looking at her with a regretful, almost fearful look on her face and tears in her beautiful brown eyes. Just the image broke her heart. She could never bear to see Natalia cry.

"So, what's wrong, Olivia?" she asked bluntly.

"I love her, Doris. More than I've ever loved anyone. More than I can even tell you."

"I know that," Doris said soothingly. She felt her own throat tighten when she saw the tears in Olivia's eyes. "So what's the problem?"

“The problem is, I can’t seem to get past what she did.” Olivia jumped to her feet and she began to pace, one hand running through her hair agitatedly.

Doris watched the woman’s movements in confused concern. “What do you mean?”

Olivia stopped pacing and sat back down. “She left me, Doris. Without a word, without a note, without even a goodbye. She wouldn’t even answer my calls.”

“You said she explained all that.”

“She did. She had been told...well, she’d received some news that scared her so she went to the church, like she always does and talked to Father Ray. I don’t know what he said to her, but I imagine he had her so screwed up and confused about me and our relationship and Rafe that she didn’t know what else to do but leave.”

“Without telling you.”

“She told me she couldn’t. She was afraid that if she told me, I would either feel betrayed or I wouldn’t want her anymore. She was afraid of what I’d say and I believe her. Natalia is a very strong woman. The problem is, she doesn’t know that and she tends to let her fears and terrible advice given in the name of religion, control her actions.”

“So...” Doris prodded, fighting her curiosity about the news Natalia had received.

“So, knowing Natalia like I do, I understand why she left without telling me. The problem is I’m not sure I can truly forgive her completely for it. Not yet. God Doris, she hurt me more than anyone ever has. She didn’t trust me enough to talk to me. She couldn’t even tell me goodbye.

Instead she left me here all alone where I had to continually put up with her son's tantrums. Then when I needed her most, after Jeffrey..."

Olivia stopped and lifted a shaking hand to her mouth as if to stifle the cries that wanted to escape.

Doris gently reached out to pull Olivia's hand away and held it in her own. She wondered if these two women were ever going to be allowed to be happy.

"Olivia, what you're feeling is understandable. You have every reason to still be angry and hurt."

"I know, but I don't want to lose her again. I do love her and I know she loves me but how am I supposed to truly commit to her when every day I'm going to wake up wondering if she's going to leave me again?"

Doris's heart ached for her friend. "Have you said any of this to Natalia?"

"No. I can't."

Doris briefly wondered if anyone in Springfield was able to just tell the truth about anything.

"For heaven's sake, Olivia why not?"

"What am I supposed to say? I love you, Natalia, but I don't trust you anymore?"

"Is that the truth? You really don't trust her?"

Olivia pulled her hand away and stood up, walking to the place where Natalia first said 'I love you, Olivia.' At those four little words, the sharp

coldness that she'd been feeling quickly turned to a glowing warmth. At that instant Olivia knew for the first time in her life what it was to be truly happy.

"I don't know, Doris. I know she'd never cheat on me, but no. I'm not sure I trust her not to run away again if things get too hard and I don't think I could survive that again."

"Let me ask," Doris asked cautiously. "Have you and Natalia umm..." Doris gestured awkwardly.

Olivia fought the urge to snap at the question, but she knew the other woman wasn't being nosy. At least not completely. "Not that it's any of your business, but no, we haven't."

Doris's eyebrows shot up into her hairline. "You guys *still* haven't...? Good Lord, Olivia."

"Well, it's not like it hasn't come up," Olivia protested defensively, "It's just that when the moment finally becomes right, I.. I can't do it."

Doris stood and joined Olivia by the railing. "Olivia, you have got to talk to Natalia about this. Don't you see you're doing the same thing she did?"

Olivia laughed shortly. "Not hardly. I'm still here aren't I?"

"Are you?"

Olivia spun around. "What are you talking about?"

"Think about it, Olivia. By keeping these feelings, these doubts to yourself, not letting yourself fully love her, part of you is running away, just like she did."

“That’s not...” Olivia stopped, unable to form a reasonable argument.

“Okay, so I ask again, what am I supposed to do?”

“Talk to her, Olivia. Tell her what you’re feeling. You two are just going to keep running in circles if you can’t be honest with each other until one of you gives up.” Doris took a deep breath hoping she wasn’t about to cross a line.

“This is a relationship like you’ve never had before. Not just because it’s with another woman, but because it’s based on true love for both of you. Don’t let secrets and half truths ruin that. And before you say it, yes Natalia screwed up. Big time. But you can lead by example, Olivia. You show her that she can always talk to you about anything, just like you can talk to her. Show her that nothing will drive you away as long as she’s honest.”

Olivia’s eyes grew wider as Doris’s speech went on and she couldn’t help but smile a little. “Why, Doris, I had no idea you were such a romantic.”

Doris snorted. “Well, as I once told Buzz Cooper, you don’t know everything about me.” She grew serious again, not sure why this had become so important to her. “Olivia, I’ve seen a lot of screwed up relationships over the years, and interestingly enough, you’ve been involved in most of them,”

Olivia shot Doris a look that told her she wasn’t particularly amused and Doris just laughed. “The point is that you and Natalia have something special. Something that I’ve never seen before. You’ve completely raised the bar for me and everyone else in this town regarding what love should be. Don’t destroy that by keeping things to yourself. And while it’s not really fair, it’s going to have to be up to you to convince Natalia to do the same thing. If I’m not mistaken, that tendency to hide your feelings almost stopped you both from getting together in the first place.”

Olivia studied the Mayor carefully. She had come to know Doris very well over the last few months and she secretly admitted she was glad she had the opportunity to see the caring woman that lay hidden beneath the mask of ice.

“You’re right, Doris.”

“Finally, I get to hear you admit it.”

Olivia rolled her eyes and ignored the comment. “I do need to tell Natalia the truth. We both deserve that.”

“You do,” Doris agreed.

“I can’t deal with pretending everything is okay when it isn’t. Natalia is an intelligent woman. She knows that I’m holding back from her and I can only imagine what she’s thinking.” Olivia looked almost hopelessly at Doris.

“God, I don’t want to be mad at her any more,” Olivia continued. “I don’t want to be afraid. I just want to love her and for her to love me.”

Doris shook her head and smiled. “I still can’t believe you’re the same Olivia Spencer that used to terrify most of Springfield.”

Olivia snorted. “And I continue to talk to you why, exactly?”

Doris laughed. “Because I don’t lie to you.”

“I wish you’d try on occasion,” Olivia muttered and then sighed. Stiffening her shoulders she turned around.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’ve got nothing to lose, right? If things continue on as they have been, I’ll lose her anyway,” Olivia said sadly.

“You two were made for each other,” Doris assured her. “Don’t let that go without a fight.”

Feeling slightly better, Olivia smiled at Doris. “When are you going to fall in love so I can stick my nose in your business?”

Doris laughed. “Let’s get you settled first, okay?”

Olivia knew Doris was still battling her own demons over who she was, so she didn’t poke her. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

With a parting smile, Olivia turned and left the gazebo with a determined focus. She pulled the cell phone from her purse and dialed.

“Natalia? We need to talk.”

Pretend Like It's The Weekend Now *by gilliganekane*

“Pizza tonight?” she texts in between meetings, her fingers flying over the keys of her Blackberry while Greg hustles people in and out of her office, his mouth set in a thin line, because playing ‘sheep dog’ to her isn’t something people generally enjoy.

Unless they’re people like Natalia; people who give it straight back. Two minutes later, her phone beeps at her. “Absolutely not,” she reads out loud, frowning.

“*Absolutely not*, what?” Greg asks nervously from the doorway. She glances up and her frown grows deeper. “I wasn’t talking to you,” she bites out, noting with annoyance the way he seems to deflate in relief at her words.

“Well, I’ll just – I’m going to get your next appointment?” She raises one eyebrow slowly and he nods over and over again, scurrying out the door. She looks back down at her phone and sighs, wondering why she gave Emma a cell phone in the first place.

The door opens again, but instead of Greg and – she checks her day planner – Tyler Michaels, the new handyman, it’s Emma. And Emma isn’t smiling.

“What?” she barks out, before realizing who she’s talking to. She closes her eyes, lets the frown slide off her face and softens her voice. “What’s up Jellybean?”

Emma doesn’t smile or move from the doorway, just crosses her little arms over her chest and juts one hip out. If Olivia wasn’t curious, she’d find this hilarious, because sometimes, Emma is so much older than the age on her birth certificate indicates. “Okay,” Olivia starts slowly.

“What’s wrong?”

“You forgot what today is,” Emma accuses.

Olivia frowns again, the movement pulling on the edge of her mouth, turning it down. Her fingers trace down today’s column in her planner, but she can’t find anything about today being special.

“Em, I...”

“You *forgot* that today is Pancake Day and you want to have *pizza* for dinner.”

Oh. She blinks a couple of times and looks down again. Today is Wednesday which, does in fact, mean that it’s pancakes for dinner day and she was just rude enough to suggest anything else.

The door crashes open again and this time Natalia is standing in the doorway, looking between the two of them, her own mouth turning down, because today, along with Pancake Day, is apparently National Frown Day. *People need to start giving me memos on these things*, she scoffs silently.

“Uh, hi?” she greets stupidly.

“You wanted to have *pizza*?” Natalia asks as soon as the word *hi* comes out of her mouth and Olivia leans back a little. Emma seems smug and relaxes a little.

“It’s *Pancake Day*,” she announces once more, spinning on her heel and marching out the open office door.

Olivia just blinks a little more and wonders when and *how* she became the villain of the day.

Usually, it’s a role reserved for Alan.

“Sorry about that,” Natalia sighs, dropping into the chair in front of her desk. The younger woman smiles sheepishly as she brushes her hair out her eyes. “She had a bad day at school.”

If she wasn’t so confused about the sudden mood change, she’d be asking a million questions, all of them “*why?*” but she just keeps staring as if Greg is going to come back and say *Happy ‘Baffle The Hell Out Of Your Boss’ Day!*

“Uh, hi?” she tries again, and this time, Natalia smiles widely and tilts her head to the left.

“Hey back,” she grins. “So, some kid at school told Emma that purple was a ‘girly’ color and she was upset about it, because,” she pauses and thinks. “Well, I’m not really *sure* why she was upset, but she was and then she got your message about pizza and it kind of just, spurred her on.”

“What? Someone made fun of her?” Olivia asks angrily, catching up with the conversation.

“Slow down; she’ll be fine,” Natalia says gently. “She’s just got a little mad that you forgot Pancake Day, especially since you promised you’d cook this time.”

“No, I didn’t,” she says quickly, then sighs, because she *did* say that.

“Oh.”

Natalia grins again. “Yeah. *Oh*. So, whenever you’re done here, how about we head out and make some pancakes?”

She finds herself nodding – even though she has no idea what just happened in the whirlwind of the last five minutes; even though she doesn’t understand the reason Emma is – *or was*, she decides – upset or the reason why Pancake Day slipped her mind, or even the reason she agreed to make pancakes in the first place.

She finds herself nodding, even though she has three more appointments and paperwork that just keeps piling up on her desk; even though she was going to order a pizza because she was going to stay late to get it all done and just hang in her office with her daughter.

She finds herself nodding and closing her planner and finding her keys in the bottom of her purse and shutting her computer down and putting her coat over one arm and locking the office door behind her.

Emma’s waiting at the front desk. She smiles sheepishly and ducks her head a little and giggles when Olivia reaches forward and chafe’s her small cheek with her free hand.

“Pancakes tonight?” she asks, even as she doesn’t stop walking, only stopping a moment to make sure Natalia and Emma are right beside her.

Emma smiles. “Absolutely.”



Olivia Spencer looked up from reading the contract sitting on her big oak desk and stared hard at the blonde woman sitting across from her.

“Get out.”

The other woman merely smiled seductively and slowly stood. Olivia couldn’t believe she had ever found this viper, this pathetic Reva Shayne wannabe, worth a minute of her time. Now the evidence of her scheming mind and obvious treachery was lying on the desk in front of her.

“For now.” The blonde walked to the office door and turned as she opened the door, fingers trailing along the warm wood. “But I’ll be back, Olivia. Make no mistake.”

Olivia stood as the door quietly clicked shut. Walking over to the mini bar she tossed some ice into a glass and poured herself a scotch. *What a fucking mess.* She needed time to think and figure this all out, to find a loophole. There was always a damn loophole somewhere. It would take time she couldn’t really afford to lose unfortunately. There was the

Mayor's reception Saturday night and she still hadn't found the right dress for that event. And a potential investor wanted to meet for brunch Sunday and a round of golf. Schmoozing and glad handing was not conducive to figuring out their next step.

Sighing, Olivia wandered back over to the desk, her eyes falling on the silver picture frame. She picked it up and ran a thumb along the cool brushed surface. It was one of her favourite family photos. Natalia, Emma and herself in the gazebo, the day they had planted flowers in the park just before the Fourth of July. Before her world fell apart. One of the other parents had taken the shot and sent it to her. Olivia had nearly deleted it in anger at the time, but instead she had broken down into a weeping puddle for about ten minutes.

Water under the bridge, Olivia. She swallowed down the old pain and placed the chilled glass against her forehead, wishing not for the first time that Natalia was there. Her BlackBerry vibrated quietly and she quickly brought up the message waiting there.

What would Miley do?'

Olivia snorted at Emma's text message. What indeed?

Swirling the dark amber liquid in her glass, Olivia stared out her office window at the skyline, still getting used to her view of this new city. She checked her watch and realized that a Friday night movie was probably about to start at the farmhouse. God, she wished she was home right now.

Putting her drink down, Olivia quickly typed her response.

The Hoedown Throwdown?

She smiled softly. Emma's obsession with Miley Cyrus seemed to be never ending. Then again she remembered her own fascination with

Kristy McNichol back in the day and could relate somewhat. Her phone buzzed again.

Still trying to teach Natalia the steps. Are you sure she can dance?

Olivia laughed out loud.

“Oh, Emma. Trust me, the woman definitely knows how to move.”
Olivia’s thumbs flew across the small keypad with her reply. ‘*Show her how it’s done Jellybean*’.

Putting her phone down, Olivia turned her attention to her computer, quickly bringing up travel information. There was a flight leaving in two hours. She could just make it if she hustled. She hesitated, knowing she should stay and take care of business, be the hard-nosed executive everyone expected her to be. Her phone buzzed again.

OMG Mom! Natalia spun into the Virgin Mary and it flew off the side table! Lol! Stopping now to make popcorn. <3

Smiling, Olivia clicked on the reservation confirm button. She felt better already.

It wasn’t the crunch of the gravel under her feet as she finally stepped out of the car and headed up the walk to the farmhouse. Nor was it the smell of popcorn that permeated the house as she headed quietly up the stairs. It wasn’t even the vision of Natalia asleep in their bed, snuggled up with her pillow all warm and inviting, although that was pretty close.

No, it wasn’t until she stretched out on her side of the bed and felt the soft puff of breath against her cheek, and watched in wonder as deep

chocolate eyes sleepily blinked open and Natalia smiled at her with, dear God, those dimples. Then, and only then, was Olivia home.

“Hi...,” Olivia whispered as her spinning crazy world finally came to a stop.

“Hi...,” Natalia shifted slightly under the crisp sheets, inhaling deeply as she slowly woke up, convinced she was still dreaming. At least until long fingers started sliding over her hip and she realized this was no dream. “Olivia?”

“Mmm hmm...” Olivia nuzzled along the collar of the small tank that Natalia was sleeping in. Cold fingers slipped under the stretchy material, finding soft skin below.

“Oh my God, what are you doing here? Not that I mind...at all.” Natalia gasped, wide awake and arching into the strong hands cupping her breasts, slowly squeezing and rolling sensitive flesh, stealing any rational thoughts from her mind as her body luxuriated in the attention.

“Loving you.” Olivia murmured, sucking a delicate earlobe into her mouth and nipping slightly. Her mind finally slowed, her worries slipping away as more important things claimed her thoughts and they quickly became lost in each other’s touch.

They watched the sun come up in each others arms, listening to the birds wake up chirping happily in the trees by the window, dozing a little or softly kissing and snuggling, just breathing each other in.

“I still can’t believe we actually got here sometimes, y’know?” Olivia mused, sweeping a dark lock of hair from Natalia’s forehead and tucking it behind her ear.

Natalia stared off into the distance for a moment, remembering all the speed bumps and road blocks they had maneuvered, mistakes made and overcome and all the dark days in between. Shaking herself out of the past she turned to find green eyes watching her softly.

“I thank God everyday.” Natalia trailed her fingers along Olivia’s cheek before pulling her closer, their lips meeting, chasing any lingering regrets away.

Little feet went dashing past their bedroom door and thumping down the staircase, soon followed by the faint sounds of Hannah Montana singing below. Emma’s laughter floated up and soon her voice could be heard quietly singing along too.

“Do you think she’s got those dance steps down yet?” Olivia smiled into Natalia’s dark hair, dropping a soft kiss there.

“I still get that slide step wrong. It’s like I get out of sync somehow.” Natalia rolled to her back, running through the dance steps in her head as she clapped her hands softly in time to the beat coming from downstairs.

“Did the statue of Virgin Mary get damaged?” Olivia raised an eyebrow as she watched Natalia flush with embarrassment and then grin, the dimples nearly making her heart explode.

“No, but there’s a scratch on the floor where her head hit.” Natalia pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed.

“Mary’s pretty hard headed is what you’re telling me then?” Olivia teased as Natalia rolled her eyes. “I knew I liked her for a reason.”

“Don’t start.” Natalia half rolled onto the older woman, staring into the green eyes twinkling with mischief. She dipped her head and tenderly kissed the full lips below.

“Now, you sleep in for a bit longer. I’ll get some coffee going and breakfast started.” Natalia nuzzled along the strong jaw, leaving a trail of butterfly kisses before reluctantly sliding out of bed. Olivia watched her tug on a favourite pair of jeans and a t-shirt and head downstairs quietly in her bare feet.

Olivia’s eyes blinked closed and she let her mind start to drift, just listening and absorbing the sounds around her. There were quiet voices talking, Emma laughing, music trickling upstairs with the smell of coffee brewing. God, she’d missed this so much.

Rolling out of bed, she realized she didn’t want to miss a second more of it for a little thing like sleep. Olivia found a pair of track pants and a tank top, made a quick stop in the bathroom and then headed downstairs.

“Mom! You’re home!” Emma launched herself at Olivia, arms wrapped tight around her waist.

“Hey Jellybean!” Olivia kissed the top of her youngest daughter’s head. “I think you’ve grown again while I was gone!” She dragged her fingers through the girl’s hair and just stared at her beautiful daughter’s smiling face.

Natalia wandered out with a mug of coffee placing it carefully onto the coffee table. “Were we making too much noise?”

“Not at all.” Olivia leaned forward for a soft kiss in thanks and ignored Emma’s rolling eyes as her daughter turned away to find the remote. She and Natalia exchanged a look, both knowing what would already be in the player.

“Boom boom clap, boom de clap de clap...” Emma smiled up at Natalia, who came to stand to her right, getting into position beside the excited girl.

Olivia settled back on the couch watching her two girls in the living room as they showed her their new dance moves. Her eyes lingered on Natalia, clapping along with Emma through the Hoedown Throwdown, blue jeans hugging in all the right places, body swaying to the music, toned abs peeking out every now and then.

Her heart memorized the sight of the two of them laughing together as Natalia missed the slide step yet again and Emma just shook her head, before spinning around together in sync once more. And then before Olivia knew it the song ended and her two dancers dove at her, landing in a pile on top of her on the couch.

Giggling and laughing as she started the tickle fight in earnest, Olivia had no doubts that she had made the right decision. She could deal with everything going to hell in a hand basket, as long as they had each other.



April 1st. What was it about that date that turned people into morons? Olivia had been pondering that question all day; since the moment she'd arrived at the Beacon, in fact, to find a lobby flooded with...well, there was no nice way to say it...sewage.

Of course, the hotel had had to be closed and all the guests moved – at her expense – to her rivals. Clean up crews were already working, but it would be weeks before the hotel could re-open. She was losing a conference and three weddings over this, plus rooms and rooms of guests and – she estimated – about \$50,000 all told. All because some kids from Rhode Island had decided that the bathrooms off the lobby were just the place to do a little April Fools pranking.

“Well, boys will be boys.”

Olivia glared at the man opposite her in patent disbelief. The pencil she'd been idly twirling between her fingers as she explained the situation to him abruptly snapped.

“What?”

Her voice was low and dangerous. The man – Chuck Barrington – didn't seem to recognise the peril he was in. He shrugged.

“You know how it is. High spirits. You have kids yourself?”

“I have two daughters. Who would never destroy someone else's property.” Her lips twitched in what could only be described as a snarl. Chuck squirmed just a little.

“You have insurance, don't you?” he snapped. “What's the big deal?”

Olivia slowly rose to her feet and glided round her desk. “Breathe deeply through your nose, would you Chuck?” she instructed softly, leaning over his shoulder from behind. He turned a little green around the gills. “*That's* the big deal.”

She crossed the room in two long strides and opened the door, admitting Mallet and two uniformed officers who'd been waiting in the hall outside. “Wh-what?” sputtered Chuck as he spotted the cops. “What's going on?”

Olivia smiled unpleasantly. “Did you know that cherry bombs are illegal, Chuck?” Her smile turned even nastier as he paled. “I just know my friend Detective Mallet is anxious to find out where your sons got hold of them.”

“They're just kids!” Chuck exclaimed.

“Which is why we're going to talk to you,” Mallet replied, dropping a meaty hand onto Chuck's shoulder.

“Expect a visit from my lawyer, too,” Olivia called as Chuck was led away down the hall. “I'm suing you. And just so you know? You could have avoided all this if you'd apologised instead of pulling that macho

‘boys will be boys’ crap.” She slammed the door before he could reply and stalked back to her desk.

A whole afternoon of phone calls, paperwork and damage control later, Olivia was more than ready to drag herself home and crawl into bed. She hoped Natalia was in the mood to pamper her a little. Maybe a bubble bath, maybe a foot massage... She closed her eyes and sighed, the mere thought of her lover’s touch uncoiling one of the knots of tension rolling round in her gut.

But then, Natalia had been strangely quiet and distracted that morning. A vague idea that there was something she’d forgotten nagged at Olivia, adding to the headache she’d been nursing all day.

It was nearly seven by the time she arrived home. The farmhouse was oddly dark. The nagging worry about Natalia returned with a vengeance. Her car was there, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. A frown creased Olivia’s brow as she stepped out of her car and slammed the door.

“Natalia?” she called as soon as she opened the door, but she quickly fell silent. The farmhouse was not dark after all. There were candles of all shapes and sizes lit all over the room, casting shadows here and there and flickering in the slight breeze still coming in the open door. Olivia closed it quickly, not wanting to ruin the scene Natalia had so carefully laid.

Quietly, Olivia slipped off her shoes and padded to the stairs. There were candles sitting on each step, leading her with the force of a magnet to where she knew Natalia must be waiting. Her bare feet twitched a little as she climbed the first few steps – there was something unfamiliar strewn over the steps, something she hadn’t seen before in the half light. Frowning, she reached down to pick up whatever it was.

Flower petals.

Tears nipped at Olivia's eyes. She'd been married five times. She'd thought she was in love for at least three of those marriages. But it was nothing compared to this. No-one had ever made her feel like Natalia did – decent, peaceful, worthwhile. And loved. Above all, loved.

Their bedroom was home to yet more candles and petals. They were all over the floor and the bed, and even attached to stems and in vases. Olivia blinked when she realised that they weren't roses as she'd first assumed. They were daisies. Orange Gerber daisies.

“Hey.”

Olivia's head snapped round at the sound to see Natalia emerging from the bathroom. She was dressed simply, as if for bed, in a pair of loose boxer shorts and a tank top. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, revealing a long neck leading to bare shoulders and a chest tinged with a light blush. Olivia could see a slightly elevated pulse fluttering in her lover's throat.

“Hi,” she said, her voice low and gravelly.

Natalia hopped up onto the bed and crossed her legs. She didn't smile. She seemed just as distant and distracted as she had been that morning. Olivia frowned. “Are you okay, sweetheart?” she murmured, taking a step forward. Natalia made a little half shrug.

“Do you know what day it is today?” she asked softly.

Olivia's mouth straightened into a thin line. April 1st. April Fool's day. She knew all right. This had been one of the worst ever: worse than last year when she'd had to pretend to be happy for Natalia and Frank at the

engagement party she'd thrown for them; worse than the year before when...when...

When Gus died and you got his heart.

Her hand flew to her mouth and she gasped. "Oh my God, Gus," she choked out.

No wonder Natalia had seemed so far away. No wonder she'd felt all day like there was something she'd forgotten. How could she have let this particular date slip from her mind?

Natalia sighed and wrapped her arms round her stomach, hugging herself weakly. Olivia was by her side in an instant, pulling her close and raining kisses onto the top of her head. "I'm so sorry," she whispered over and over again as she felt Natalia slip her arms round her waist and cling to her. Her eyes flickered closed and she could feel the borrowed heart in her chest begin to beat faster. Gus's heart.

"Two years ago today, my husband died," Natalia whispered against Olivia's stomach.

"I'm sorry," Olivia murmured. She didn't know what else to say. Natalia shook her head and pulled back, looking up at Olivia with a small, sad smile.

"Do you know I had your life in my hands that day?" she asked softly. Olivia swallowed and nodded.

"Yes," she replied. "You had a choice. You could have given his heart to someone else. You could have refused to donate at all." She shrugged. "I've told you before; I owe you my life."

“You don’t owe me anything,” Natalia whispered and reached up, wrapping her hands round the back of her lover’s neck and pulling her down for a soft, tender kiss. “I love you...”

“I love you, too.”

Natalia bit her lip as she pulled back. “There’s something I haven’t told you about that day,” she admitted, frowning slightly. She took a deep breath. “I was going to say no.”

Olivia stood up a little straighter. “Oh...”

Natalia closed her eyes. “I’d decided it was too much to ask,” she said softly. “I went into that room and stood over my dying husband and I prayed to do the right thing. But I was so, so angry. And I decided I wasn’t going to do it. I was going to let you die.”

Olivia ran her hand gently through Natalia’s hair and cupped her cheek. “It’s okay,” she murmured gently. “I understand.” She was rewarded with a brief, trembly smile.

“I know you do,” Natalia said. “But I want to tell you why I changed my mind.”

Olivia nodded. “All right.”

Natalia shifted a little and patted the spot in the bed beside her. Olivia obediently sat down and took the warm hand that was offered to her. Natalia squeezed gently, seeming to draw strength from the touch.

“It was Emma,” Natalia said. “I came out of Nicky’s room, and she was there. She was coming to see you. It would have been the last time she saw you, I think, if...” She trailed off, unwilling to finish that thought. Olivia stroked her knuckles with her thumb.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” she whispered. Natalia nodded slowly. She turned towards her lover, catching and holding her gaze with warm, glassy brown eyes.

“She’s an angel, your daughter, you know that right?” Olivia smiled.

“I know.”

“She was God’s messenger that day,” Natalia continued. “The answer to my prayers. She stopped me from making a huge mistake.” She paused as she reached over to the closest vase and plucked a flower from it.

“She was bringing you flowers,” she said softly. “Gerber daisies. And she stopped, and gave me one. That’s when I knew...I couldn’t let you die.”

Olivia blinked, and a single tear escaped from her eye and trailed lazily down her cheek. “So you gave me his heart...” she said. Natalia nodded.

“I gave you his heart,” she repeated. “And I didn’t know then that one day I’d give you mine too.” She raised her hand and laid it softly on Olivia’s chest, right where she knew a pale, faded scar lurked under her clothes. Olivia’s breath hitched.

“I love you,” she said, and a few more tears escaped her watery eyes.

“I love you, too,” Natalia murmured, and kissed her. For long moments they lost themselves in the intoxicating depths of each other, and when they finally separated Olivia found that she was practically in Natalia’s lap. Natalia smiled gently as she pushed her lover’s hair back from her face and behind her ears.

“Today could be a sad day, if I let it,” she said. “But I’m not going to. Today isn’t ever going to be about death. It’s going to be about life. Your life.”

She reached over again to the bedside cabinet and pulled a thin, gift-wrapped box from the top drawer. “What’s this?” Olivia asked, wiping her damp eyes with her sleeves. Natalia smiled.

“A gift,” she said. “Open it.”

Olivia fumbled with the wrapping paper, trying to take it off neatly. She couldn’t make her fingers work right. Eventually she just tore it, and Natalia giggled softly.

Olivia held her breath as she pulled her gift from its wrappings. It was a solid, cherry wood frame, but there was no picture inside it. Instead there was a single dried flower. An orange Gerber daisy.

“I don’t know why I kept it,” Natalia whispered. Olivia coughed to clear her throat.

“Is this...” she began, but couldn’t find the words to finish the question. Natalia nodded.

“This is the flower that saved your life,” she said.

For a long moment Olivia wasn’t sure what to say or do. Eventually she gently placed the frame on the table by the bed and turned to her lover. Natalia opened her arms and Olivia sank into them gratefully, nuzzling her throat as she pulled her closer.

“I’m alive,” she whispered, breathing deeply through her nose. The room smelled of flowers and melting wax, but overwhelming all that was Natalia. Sweet, beautiful Natalia kissing the last tears from her

eyelids. Sweet, beautiful Natalia gently removing her blazer and shirt. Sweet, beautiful Natalia hovering over her as she laid her back onto the bed, her eyes smouldering.

“You’re alive,” she said firmly. “And I love you. Let’s celebrate.”

Olivia melted into the pillows. “Let’s,” she said, and opened her arms.

Fade to black...



Olivia heard a bump from downstairs and immediately sat up in bed. She shivered from the cold seeping in around the windows of the old farmhouse and instinctively wanted to curl up around the warm body of the dark-haired woman next to her, until she heard another bump. She nudged the sleeping form next to her until she rolled over.

Olivia mouthed to Natalia, “Did you hear that?”

The other woman scrunched up her eyebrows and shook her head, then she sat up too when she heard muffled voices. Her first fear was that burglars had broken in. There had been a rash of them in town and this

was always a bad time of the year for break-ins. Natalia held up a finger to her mouth urging Olivia to be quiet as they quietly scurried around the room for robes and slippers. Olivia grabbed a baseball bat from next to the bed since Natalia wouldn't let her keep her gun.

Tip-toeing carefully on the wooden floor, Olivia eased the door open and stepped out as close to the wall as possible, followed by Natalia. There were more muffled noises from below. She leaned close to the banister to look over the edge. Partially hidden by the balsam fir Christmas tree, Olivia and Natalia stepped closer.

Natalia barely held back a gasp by putting her hand over her mouth. It didn't stop the tears from forming though.

"So what paper do you want on this gift?" Rafe held up a comfortable looking set of pajamas.

"I like this one. It's very...mom," Emma stated definitively, pointing at a whimsical paper covered in Tigger and Pooh.

"Okay, if you say so, munchkin." Rafe folded the set of pajamas carefully and placed them in the box to get ready for wrapping. "I can't believe you made me buy Olivia SpongeBob pajamas."

"She loves SpongeBob, and you wanted to do something nice...but not *too* nice."

He gave her a pointed look, but agreed, "Okay, okay. You're right."

"Of course I am." Emma looked at him measure and cut the paper, obviously thinking. "So, are you coming to dinner tonight?"

Rafe looked around the room, his eyes landing on the New Year's Eve picture, before closing his eyes, "I don't know, Emma. We'll see."

She narrowed her eyes at the older boy, "I don't believe you." He couldn't look at her as eyes so much like her mom's saw right through him. "Will you do it for me?"

He looked at her then, "What? Why would it matter to you?"

"Duh! You're so dense, Rafe. I love you and you're family to me. You're like my brother, and I want us all together for Christmas. Even Ava's going to be here." Rafe could tell that the young girl was fighting to hold back tears and finally, he took a deep breath.

"I love you too, Emma. If it's what you want. I'll do it for you."

She nodded her head and scooted across the carpet to wrap her small arms around his neck. They stayed like that for a few moments. In the shadows, Olivia pulled a crying Natalia into her arms before leading her back to the bedroom to leave their children to finish what they started.