

Beginnings

By Wonko

Act 1

When Olivia thought back on it later, she was impressed at how long it'd taken for the awkwardness to set in.

All afternoon she had managed to avoid thinking about the monumental step she'd just taken. And because of the organised chaos of the move, the physical exertion of the softball game, and the mental effort of entertaining such a large group of people at dinner, she'd had plenty of other things to occupy her mind.

But now the guests had all gone home, Emma had escaped upstairs to unpack her things, and it was just her and Natalia, alone, sharing the task of washing dishes just like they'd done a million times before.

And yet, somehow, not.

Olivia tried to tell herself that everything was the same. Indeed, an outsider looking in would have seen nothing amiss – two women standing side by side: one washing; the other drying. But Olivia's thoughts were not still – they churned in her mind like the soapy water spinning away down the drain as Natalia exchanged dirty water for clean. She couldn't help but go over the events that had led her to this moment.

The move had been completed fairly smoothly, with lots of help from various people: some expected like Doris and Blake and Ashlee; some...unexpected. Like Rafe.

Rafe was certainly a puzzle. The last time Olivia had seen the boy he'd been spitting venom, crowing in triumph over the unexpected pregnancy that was bound, in his mind, to send his mother reeling back into Frank's arms. What could possibly have happened in the short intervening weeks to turn him around so utterly that he was helping her to move in with his mother and choosing her to play on his team in a softball game?

Perhaps nothing more than what had happened to Olivia herself. She, after all, had effected a similar rapid change of heart.

But no...that wasn't quite true. Her heart had not changed.

What she had changed was her *mind*.

I don't trust you. The words haunted her still. They woke her up in the night now and then, bouncing around inside her head like shrapnel. Sometimes they were so perilously close to the surface that she wasn't sure how she stopped herself from saying them out loud, although she was sure they showed in her eyes.

But she had made a conscious decision to ignore the angry, wounded part of her that continued to urge her to hold back from Natalia. She had decided to take her own advice and do the opposite of everything she'd done before. So she had let go of the bitterness and the pain – crushed them beneath a love so complete and overwhelming that it dwarfed every other emotion.

And it had led her here. To an evening at the end of summer, a house filled with boxes waiting to be unpacked, and a woman painstakingly washing what seemed like every dish they owned and passing them to her to dry.

"You're stacking them all wrong," Natalia murmured, almost to herself. Olivia's spine straightened.

"I thought we agreed that I am the master of dish stacking," she said, glancing at Natalia with half lidded eyes and bumping her playfully with her hip. A slow laugh bubbled up and spilled from Natalia's slightly parted lips.

"Mistress," she corrected. "And I only said that to make you happy." She shrugged, then continued in a quieter voice. "I'd do anything to make you happy."

Olivia felt that simple statement almost physically. She blinked slowly, watching Natalia's hands as they dipped again into the warm water. They were reddened slightly from the heat, and a little puckered around the finger tips. She remembered all the times she had watched those hands before, and all the places she'd imagined those hands exploring.

She wondered if Natalia had ever imagined the same things.

They'd talked about the sexual side of their relationship before, but briefly, and any conclusions they'd reached had been chased away by Rafe and his reaction. What did Natalia expect from her now? Did moving in mean *moving in*? Or was this something else altogether – some kind of rerun of the first time they'd lived together, with Olivia playing the role of the caretaker this time to Natalia's pregnant damsel in distress?

“Natalia,” Olivia began hesitantly, but was interrupted by Emma’s running feet barrelling down the stairs.

“I unpacked my toys, mommy,” the girl said excitedly as she raced into the room and wrapped herself round her mother’s waist. Olivia’s hand angled down automatically to stroke through her daughter’s hair.

“That’s my girl,” she murmured. Emma beamed up at her mother with the pure, unadulterated joy of a child that knows she is safe and loved and protected. It was a smile Olivia hadn’t seen in long months and it made her heart ache in ways that were both wonderful and terrible.

“I have Spanish homework,” Emma said, looking from her mother to Natalia with a hopeful expression. Natalia shook a few water droplets from her hands and dried them on a convenient towel.

“Oh really? I wonder who you’d like to talk to about that...”

Emma giggled and Natalia grinned. Olivia busied herself stacking the last of the dishes while Natalia led her little girl to the table. For a few moments she allowed the easy, familiar sounds of their little family to wash over her and it was almost – *almost* – like old times.

“I’m just going to head upstairs and unpack a few things,” she said softly, trailing her hand down Natalia’s arm as she passed. Natalia looked up at her with a smile, tangling their fingers together just briefly before she let Olivia go.

Olivia ducked her head into Emma’s room before she began tackling her own belongings. The girl had been busy it seemed – the room looked practically identical to how it had been when they’d lived at the farmhouse before. Only the empty boxes carefully stacked in the corner hinted that the room had not been slept in the previous night.

Emma had missed the farmhouse terribly, Olivia knew that. The child hadn’t given her any opportunity to forget it; always dropping hints of anvil-like subtlety in the months after they’d left, when Olivia and Natalia were still dancing around each other, unsure of where they stood.

Not that Olivia really knew where she stood now.

Leaving Emma’s room as she’d found it, she headed for Natalia’s bedroom. In a fit of wild optimism she had instructed her makeshift movers to put her things in there. But now, as

she loitered in the doorway, looking at the unfamiliar furniture and decor, nothing about it felt right.

If she unpacked her things in this room tonight then she would set a number of things in motion. Things she wasn't at all sure she was ready for. She thought of what it might be like to lie down beside Natalia tonight, to kiss her, to make love with her, and her heart began to beat a little faster. And then she thought of the baby that would be between them – literally – and her libido evaporated like a puddle in mid-summer.

No. She was definitely not ready for that.

And so, with a sigh, she gripped one large box and dragged it across the hall.

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“So I say...*me gusta el helado...*” Emma repeated hesitantly. “Is that right?”

Natalia nodded with a proud smile. “That’s right, baby,” she said. “And that’s a very good accent.”

Emma beamed. “I’m supposed to write five of my favourite foods,” she said. “How do I say tuna-noodle casserole?”

Natalia hesitated. “Uhm...why don’t you just put *me gusta la cazuela de mi madre?*”

Her heart swelled as Emma immediately bent to write down her suggestion. *She’s really mine*, she thought giddily. *And so is her mother.*

“Time for bed now, Jellybean.”

Natalia looked up, surprised to see Olivia back so quickly. “That was fast,” she said, with a slight frown. Olivia shrugged carelessly with one shoulder.

“I’ll do the rest tomorrow,” she said. “I’m pretty tired.”

Natalia’s frown deepened. “Are you okay? Did you remember to take your pills today?”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Yes, mommy, I remembered to take my pills today.”

Emma giggled softly. “She’s not your mommy.”

Olivia turned to her daughter, sporting a mischievous grin. “No, she’s *your* mommy now, right? ‘Cause if she was *my* mommy that would make you and me sisters. And that’s not right at all.” She completed the tease with a fierce tickle. Emma laughed helplessly as she slid off the chair and bolted to the stairs. “Get into your PJs!” Olivia called after her. A muffled, incomprehensible yell was the response.

Natalia’s smile was wide and happy. “I love you so much,” she murmured. She stood and took two steps forward, so she was in Olivia’s personal space. Olivia stiffened just a little, but Natalia chose to ignore it. “So much.”

Olivia cleared her throat and looked down at her hands. “I love you too,” she replied softly. Natalia ducked her head down a little, searching for Olivia’s eyes and finding them.

“Hey,” she said. Olivia’s lips twitched just a little.

“Hey,” she repeated. Natalia moved forward a little more, so that finally they were touching. Their hands met between them in that old familiar way of theirs, and Natalia smiled.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” she murmured. Olivia looked away with a rueful grin.

“You know...neither can I.”

Natalia frowned and was just about to ask what she’d meant by that when Emma’s yell interrupted. “Mom! You need to tell me a story!”

Olivia pulled her hands from Natalia’s as she headed for the stairs. “More than one, I bet,” she said, throwing a small smile over her shoulder. “She’s so excited it’s going to take hours to get her to sleep.”

But in this prediction, Olivia was quite wrong. Emma was extremely excited, that was true, but it turned out to be the kind of excitement that drains rather than the kind that energizes. Halfway through *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Emma was fast asleep, clutching her pillow and breathing slow and deep. Olivia gently closed the book and kissed her daughter’s smooth, warm forehead. When she turned to the doorway she found Natalia there, leaning against the door frame, watching her.

“She had a big day,” Natalia whispered, leaning over to turn off the light as Olivia approached.

“We all did,” Olivia agreed. There was a slight edge in her voice that Natalia didn’t understand, but she chose to smile invitingly rather than press the issue.

"So...do you want to come to bed?" She glanced over her shoulder as she left Emma's room, watching Olivia following her.

"About that..." Olivia murmured hesitantly. She ran her fingers through her hair as they both came to a halt outside Natalia's room. "I...I don't really know what you expected...I mean, we haven't talked about it..." She sighed, and finally met Natalia's eyes. "I moved my stuff into my old room," she said at last.

Natalia's face fell. "Oh," she said, and that one syllable seemed to contain months' worth of disappointments. "But I thought-"

"I need time," Olivia interrupted. "And...space."

Natalia stared blankly straight ahead, and this time couldn't ignore the hints of fear and doubt creeping into Olivia's voice. She longed to ease them somehow, but she had no idea how to go about it. All she had to offer was love. But love, she knew, was not the problem.

For a moment Olivia thought Natalia might repeat her earlier order to screw time and space. Her spine had straightened immediately after she'd spoken, and there had been a little fire in her eyes. But then she slumped. The fight seemed to bleed from her, and she just looked tired. "All right," she said. "I...I'll wait." She shrugged. "It's only fair, right? I...I made you wait for me."

Olivia shook her head. "That's not what this is about," she insisted. "It's not about tit for tat, okay? I just...I need..." She trailed off helplessly, then curled her fingers round Natalia's jaw and tugged her head up. "I'm here," she offered. "I'm with you, okay? I love you. So...give me a smile. Please?"

It took Natalia a couple of tries, but eventually she managed to do what Olivia wanted. It was a pale, watery smile, but a smile nonetheless. Olivia returned it with one of her own, and impulsively leaned forward to press a brief kiss to her forehead, just like she'd done to Emma.

"Goodnight," she said, backing away towards her own room. Natalia cleared her throat.

"Goodnight," she replied, and watched Olivia retreat into the second best bedroom. She stood and stared at the closed door for a long time, but finally was forced to admit that Olivia wasn't going to change her mind, wasn't going to come rushing out and sweep her off her feet with heated words and passionate embraces.

Damn.

Resolving to say an extra *Hail Mary* in her night prayers for that mental slip, Natalia quietly stole into her own room. The room she had so hoped to be sharing with Olivia now.

A stalemate of a kind seemed to have been reached. Natalia lay awake for a long time, tossing and turning as she imagined Olivia in the room opposite. Was she sleeping peacefully now? Or was she as disturbed as Natalia herself?

Sitting up, Natalia ran her hands through her hair with a sigh. Blindly, she reached for her rosary beads and began to pray a decade. This was always her routine when she couldn't sleep. Other people counted sheep; Natalia prayed.

"Please help me to be patient," she whispered into the stillness, after all the *Hail Marys* and *Our Fathers* and *Glory Bes* had been said. "I know this is what you want for me. So just..." She paused, searching for the right words. "Let her come to me," she said at last. "Just let her come to me. Amen."

With that, she curled herself around a hastily grabbed pillow and finally drifted into a fitful sleep.

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Olivia arrived at The Beacon the following day feeling like a world class idiot, and the belief in her own dire stupidity only intensified as the day wore on.

For months – *months* – she had been dying to kiss Natalia. She had fantasised about it, dreamed of it, longed for it. She had been aching for Natalia's lips since the moment she'd stopped kissing them the first time, if she was honest - which was something she had resolved to be, at least with herself. Last night Natalia had practically tied herself up with a silver bow and what had she, Olivia, done? Kissed her forehead and said goodnight.

"You're an idiot," she said aloud.

"What?"

Olivia's head snapped up and her eyes widened as she took in Ashlee Wolfe's hurt face. "Oh God, Ashlee, I didn't mean you." She shook her head ruefully. "Sorry. I was just...talking to myself."

Ashlee sat back in her chair. "Oh," she said, in a confused tone. "So, why are you an idiot?"

Olivia coloured slightly and shook her head. No way was she talking to Ashlee Wolfe about her love life. Doris Wolfe, perhaps - if she believed for one minute that Doris wouldn't make fun of her mercilessly. But Ashlee? No way.

"Let's just go back to what we were talking about," she said. "Uhm...what *were* we talking about?"

"Natalia's baby shower," Ashlee replied quickly, stopping with her pen poised over her very professional looking reporter's pad. "Are you sure you want to hold it here? Wouldn't the farmhouse be better?"

Olivia shook her head. "If we hold it at the farmhouse Natalia will end up cleaning up after everyone. Besides, I want it to be a surprise." She trailed off as a goofy grin spread over her face.

Ashlee smiled. "It's so romantic," she gushed. "Giving Natalia everything she never had when she was pregnant with Rafe...she's gonna love it."

Olivia's smile faded. "Do you think Rafe would come? I know it's supposed to be women only, but...I think she'd like to have him there."

Ashlee shifted a little in her seat. "I'll talk to him," she said, and something in her tone made Olivia's ears perk up.

"You been doing that a lot?" she asked. Ashlee shrugged non-committally.

"He actually gave me some decent advice...you know, when I found out about my mom." Her eyes widened. "Oh my God, please tell me you already knew. I don't want to go around outing her everywhere. I mean...oh shit!"

Olivia considered letting the younger woman squirm a little longer, but finally relented. "It's okay, I know," she said soothingly. "Your mom and I are friends, actually."

Ashlee nodded. "I know. It's...it's good. Mom hasn't ever had a lot of friends."

"Neither have I," Olivia said, a little sadly, but then shook herself. "So Rafe gave you good advice? Why do I find that hard to believe?"

Ashlee grinned. "I know, he's not really the advice type, is he? But it was good, having him to talk to, knowing he knew what I was feeling..."

Olivia leaned slightly forward. "How did Rafe find out that I was moving back to the farmhouse?" She and Natalia had discussed telling him about it, but had come to an agreement that it would be better to present it to him as a fait accompli. She remembered Natalia's delighted surprise when he'd not only shown up but had seemed to be fine with the whole idea.

"I called him," Ashlee admitted. "After you called my mom. I...I told him he needed to take his own advice. Not make everything about him, you know?"

And suddenly Rafe's presence began to make a little more sense. But still, she could sense there was something else, waiting to be discovered. To ascertain that, however, she feared she'd need to speak to the boy himself.

"Well, thank you," she said. "I know Natalia really appreciates that he was there." She leaned back in her chair. "Now...about the baby shower.."

She laid out her plans, and watched Ashlee urgently scribbling them all down. This was going to be the biggest, grandest, best baby shower Springfield had ever seen. She would make sure of that.

And when she got home tonight she would stop being an idiot.

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Around four hours later, Olivia found herself hesitating at the farmhouse door, her hand poised to knock before she stopped herself. A blush rose on her cheeks as she realised what she'd been about to do. She'd driven to the farmhouse purely on automatic pilot. "*I'm going home, see you tomorrow,*" she'd said to Keira and had then done just that. Gone home. To Natalia.

But she didn't have to knock. This was her home; she had keys in her purse. Unless... Of course. Natalia had left the door unlocked. Making a mental note to talk to the other woman about that, Olivia stepped through the door and threw her purse onto the couch. A faint smile tugged her lips upwards as she breathed deeply through her nose. Natalia was baking bread. How utterly wonderful.

"Honey, I'm home!" she called playfully.

The response was instantaneous. "Hey," Natalia said, slightly breathless as she appeared in the doorway. Her face was a little pink and there was a smudge of flour on her right cheek where she'd obviously rubbed at it while she was kneading the dough. Olivia felt her stomach drop as she took her in. She was so absolutely beautiful. Natalia. Her *girlfriend*

she'd said to Jonathan just the day before. She remembered hesitating slightly over the word, testing it out. She tested it again now, looking at it from different angles in her mind, her heart beginning to beat faster at the wonder of it all.

"You're my girlfriend," she said aloud, with a hint of awe in her voice. The colour in Natalia's cheeks deepened, but she didn't look away.

"I'm your girlfriend," she repeated firmly.

For long moments they stared at each other, feeling the familiarity of the house and their togetherness, along with the unfamiliarity of the tension and awareness between them. Neither was sure who took the first step. And in the end it didn't matter, because they ended up in the same place – standing mere inches apart in front of the sofa, breathing the same suddenly thick air, feeling the same heat.

"You've got a little flour...just there..." Olivia murmured as she brought her left hand up, curled her fingers round the other woman's jaw, and brushed her thumb rhythmically across her cheek. She watched the flour spread out, fade, then disappear. Natalia's breath hitched.

"Gone?" she asked breathily. Olivia nodded.

"Gone," she confirmed, but she left her hand where it was. Natalia's eyes were wide, her pupils dilated. Slowly, Olivia brought her right hand up to mirror her left, and then she was cupping Natalia's face and moving forward. "This is familiar," she murmured.

Natalia nodded. "Very," she agreed. Olivia could see the desire in her eyes. She searched their depths, looking for any hint of hesitation or fear or doubt. Her heart leapt when she found none.

"Don't push me away this time," she murmured, her mind returning for what felt like the millionth time to the only occasion she'd felt Natalia's lips beneath her own. Natalia had kissed her back that cold January night, Olivia was sure of it. Fear had immediately taken over and she'd pushed her away, but for a scant moment Olivia had felt the other woman respond and suddenly everything had been clear, perfectly in focus for the first time. How different things might have been if Natalia hadn't allowed fear to take over that night, so many months ago. How much pain, doubt, and heartache could have been avoided.

But then, maybe different pain, doubt, and heartache would simply have taken their place. There was no point in second guessing their journey now. All of those steps, both forward and back, had led them here; to this singular evening in the dying days of summer.

“Never,” Natalia promised, dragging Olivia back to the moment. “I’m not going to push you away.” She sighed as she leaned forward a little. Olivia could feel her breath on her lips, and a shudder danced down her spine as she was struck by the visceral memory of feeling that same sensation once before – in a hospital bed in March while she pretended to be asleep. Her eyes fluttered closed, but snapped open when Natalia spoke again. “I love you, Olivia.”

Olivia swallowed hard. “I love you, too,” she managed to reply before closing the last few millimetres and claiming Natalia’s lips for that long awaited kiss.

In the back of her mind, Olivia had worried that their first real kiss, when it came, could not possibly match up to all of her hopes and fierce longings. Surely the bar had been raised too high after all those months of anticipation. No kiss, no matter how good, could ever live up to all of the dreams, the desires, the postponed moments.

But then Natalia brought one hand up to brace herself against her shoulder and curled the other round her neck and Olivia stopped thinking, stopped comparing this kiss to all those myriad imaginary kisses. This kiss was real. And, in the end, that was what made it perfect.

Natalia made a small noise of surrender, almost a whimper, and her lips parted in silent invitation. Olivia pulled her closer, sliding her hands from her cheeks to the back of her head, threading her fingers through the dark river of her hair. “Oh, God,” she moaned softly, and kissed her again.

Natalia felt like her heart was trying to beat out of her chest. She vaguely wondered if Olivia was feeling it too, then began to worry about the other woman’s pacemaker. But then, Olivia was probably experienced in kisses like these. It was surely only Natalia who felt dismantled, deconstructed, like Olivia had just taken her apart piece by piece and rebuilt her with all the same materials in a slightly different configuration.

But then she felt Olivia tremble in her arms and she realised that this was mutual. All the delightful, terrifying things she was feeling were reciprocated by the woman she loved. A thrill of power danced through her, but was quickly chased by the warmth of the knowledge that Olivia had an equal power over her. There was no disparity. Not in their lives, not in their love. And not in this kiss.

Olivia’s eyes were glazed when she pulled back and her lips were wet and swollen. Natalia immediately felt her stomach contract and she surged forward to kiss her again, her hands falling down to her waist. Her nails dug desperately, almost painfully, into Olivia’s sides. She gasped into the kiss when Olivia’s grip on her hair tightened, but she didn’t pull away. Nothing could have made her pull away now – the bread could have burned; Father

Ray could have burst through the door quoting Bible verses; the house could have caught fire. Nothing was more important than this moment, this kiss, this woman.

Olivia finally wrenched away to breathe, throwing her head back as she desperately pulled air into her lungs. Natalia nestled blindly into the crook of her neck, kissing and nibbling every piece of warm skin she could reach. Olivia moaned, digging her fingers even deeper into Natalia's hair.

"Are you trying to kill me?" she panted, laughing when she felt Natalia smile against her neck.

"No," Natalia replied, lifting her head to regard the other woman with dancing eyes. "It's just...we've been waiting so long. I want everything...all at once."

Olivia released the breath she'd been holding as a gentle sigh. "I know," she murmured. "I feel like if I don't grab you now, you might just...slip away somehow..."

Natalia hid her face in Olivia's hair. "I'm not going anywhere," she promised, her voice thick with what she desperately hoped weren't tears. She wouldn't allow Olivia to see them if they were. She didn't want sympathy. She didn't deserve sympathy. Any pain she felt at Olivia's lingering lack of trust was entirely self-inflicted, after all.

"I know," Olivia replied in a soft whisper, but that doubt Natalia had sensed last night was back, creeping into the corners.

So Natalia did the only thing she could do. She wrapped her arms round Olivia's shoulders and kissed her again, and again, and again, until she had chased away every feeling but love, tenderness, and desire.

"Natalia, I think the bread's done."

Olivia pulled away with a quiet gasp. For a moment she was frozen and stiff in Natalia's arms, and then she physically forced herself to relax. "We'll be right there, Jellybean," she said with a quick smile.

When Emma disappeared back into the kitchen, Natalia risked a glance at Olivia. She was breathing a little harder than usual, although Natalia wasn't sure if that was because of being caught by Emma or the lingering after-effects of their kiss.

"She didn't...I mean, she wasn't surprised, was she?"

Olivia shook her head. “Our daughter’s a smart girl,” she offered. “She knows what ‘being together’ means.” She laughed softly. “She’s seen me ‘being together’ with enough people in the past.”

Ordinarily Natalia would have felt some jealousy at the reminder of Olivia’s extensive romantic history, but only one part of her little speech had penetrated her foggy consciousness.

“Our daughter?” she repeated in wonder. “Did you say...our?”

Olivia smiled almost shyly. “Well...yeah. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

For a long moment Natalia was too choked up to speak. “Yes,” she spluttered eventually, and almost launched herself into Olivia’s arms. She grasped her face between her hands and kissed her, smiling and laughing at the same time. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Emma’s voice drifted through from the kitchen. “Natalia, can I take the bread out of the oven?”

Natalia tore her lips away from Olivia’s. “No, sweetie,” she called back. “Just wait – I’m coming.”

Olivia followed her silently into the kitchen, watching with a small smile on her face as Emma and Natalia rescued the bread before it burned. For the hundredth time, she found herself amazed by how right it felt – her and Emma and Natalia. A family. A late conceived family, but a family nonetheless. It didn’t matter who had given birth to Emma. She was equally theirs.

Olivia’s eyes strayed to the swell of Natalia’s belly, and a darker thought crept into the back of her mind. She tried to push it away, but it insisted on slithering in until at last she was forced to acknowledge it.

Emma was *theirs*. But the new baby...the new baby was just Natalia’s.

And *Frank’s*.

She let the thought linger for a moment, feeling it fill all the previously warm places in her heart with a cold, creeping dread. Then, slowly and deliberately, Olivia pushed the thought away. “It smells great,” she said with a smile, grabbing one of the warm rolls that Emma and Natalia had just placed on the cooling rack.

“Hey,” Natalia admonished, swatting her lightly on the arm. “You’ll spoil your dinner.”

Olivia stuck out her tongue, Emma laughed, Natalia flashed a dimpled smile, and everything was so close to perfect it almost hurt.

But that dark thought clawing at the locked door in the back of her mind tainted the moment. When Natalia looked away, Olivia glanced at the crucifix on the wall and did something she hadn't done in years.

Please, she prayed. Let me feel how she wants me to feel. I can't lose her after everything...not over this. Please.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again all traces of what she'd been thinking were gone from her face. "So," she said cheerily. "I think we could do with some soup to go with all this lovely bread..."

And, as she began to help Natalia prepare the rest of dinner, she forced herself to hope that everything would be okay. It had to be.

It just had to be.

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ACT 2

They fell into a comfortable routine over the next couple of days and nights. Natalia would get Emma up for school, and then deliver Olivia a cup of coffee and a good morning kiss. Olivia would eventually drag herself out of bed in time to have breakfast with her daughter and girlfriend before Emma had to dash off to school. Then Olivia and Natalia would get ready for their respective jobs, stopping to kiss again on the way out the door. In the evening they would kiss hello when Olivia returned from work (Natalia was always home first) and they would make dinner together, help Emma with homework, talk, laugh, kiss some more, and finally retire to their respective beds. All in all, they were a very happy, satisfactory few days, even though they did no more than kiss. Of the dark thoughts that had crept in after their first kiss, Olivia made no mention or sign. Instead, she busied herself with preparations for the baby shower, throwing herself into them with gusto and passion.

It wasn't until two days before it was due to take place that the first spanner appeared in the works.

"I don't care how pissed Nick Patterson is," Olivia growled. "The banquet hall is unavailable on Saturday, and that's that."

Greg wrung his hands and winced at the harsh tone tainting Olivia's voice. Why did she always shoot the messenger?

"Yes, I've told him that Ms. Spencer, but you see, he *did* reserve it over six months ago and it is *very* short notice, and-"

Olivia held her hand up to quiet him. "Don't care," she said firmly. "I need the banquet hall for Natalia's baby shower. It's my hotel, isn't it?" She slammed her hand down on the desk, making Greg jump. "Now, give Mr. Patterson a refund, apologize a lot, offer him a fifty percent discount on his next reservation, and get Margaret at Towers to accommodate him instead. Tell her we're overbooked and doing her a favor."

Greg nodded and quickly scurried from the room, passing a happy looking Doris Wolfe on the way out.

"Knock knock," Doris chirped from the doorway, making no effort to actually knock on the door. Olivia glanced up and managed a smile for her friend.

"Hey," she said, gesturing to a chair. "To what do I owe the pleasure, Madam Mayor?"

"Oh, just catching up," Doris replied breezily. "I haven't seen you since you moved back into the love nest. Not that I blame you," she added hastily. "I bet Natalia is one hell of a...*distracting*...woman." Doris got a faraway look in her eyes, and Olivia grimaced.

"Please don't think about my girlfriend with that look on your face," she said, a little sharply. Doris laughed.

"Oh please, she's hardly my type," she said smoothly. "I need someone a little less...you know, *good*. Someone who'd buy you a birthday cake instead of baking it, you know?"

Olivia snorted. "Got someone in mind?" she asked. Doris's eyes glinted.

"I might," she said, and for the first time Olivia noticed the suppressed excitement in her voice. "And maybe you'll meet her soon."

Olivia leaned forward. "Spill it, Wolfe." Doris shook her head.

"I...I'd like Ashlee to know first," she said softly. "She deserves that, I think."

Olivia nodded. "Okay, fair enough," she conceded. "Where is your daughter today anyway? She's supposed to be helping me plan this baby shower."

Doris blinked. "Oh yeah; that's another reason I'm here," she said. "Ashlee asked me to tell you she can't come over until three, but she's booked the caterers, and the decorators should be here tomorrow at two."

Olivia crossed a couple of items off a long list, nodding in satisfaction. "Okay..." she mumbled. "Just have to handle the invitations..." She looked up sharply. "You're coming, aren't you?"

Doris smirked, imagining the circus Olivia Spencer could make of a simple baby shower. "I wouldn't miss it for the world," she said. "And did I hear Greg right? You're blowing off Nick Patterson for this? Nick Patterson the Republican Congressional Candidate?"

Olivia shrugged. "So?" she muttered. "It's not like he won the election."

Doris raised an eyebrow. "Since when do you think like that?" she asked. "Today's opposition are tomorrow's government, Olivia – and Nick Patterson will *definitely* be running again."

"Natalia is more important than schmoozing some GOP homophobe," she snapped. "Have you seen his voting record in the State Assembly? I don't need business from someone like him."

Doris sat back in her chair, frowning. "Okay, when did you become the poster child for gay pride?" she demanded. "If you're going to reject custom from every homophobe around, you're going to go out of business pretty quickly." She raised one eyebrow into her hairline. "You're smarter than this," she said. "Now why don't you tell me what this is really all about?"

For a moment Olivia looked like she was ready to continue arguing, but then she slumped slightly. "I just want the baby shower to be perfect," she admitted, in a monotone. "I want it to be everything she ever dreamed of. She never had anything like this when she was pregnant with Rafe. And she deserves..." Olivia trailed off, swallowing hard. "Everything. She deserves everything."

Doris leaned forward and gently covered Olivia's hand with her own. "I don't think Natalia expects anything so grand," she said carefully. "She has simple tastes. She's looking for a simple life. Decorators...caterers...isn't all of this just a little over the top?"

Olivia shrugged with one shoulder, and suddenly Doris understood. Olivia knew it was over the top. It was *deliberately* over the top. She was doing all this to cover for something else.

“What is it?” Doris said. Olivia stiffened and pulled her hand away, but didn’t pretend not to know what the Mayor was talking about.

“It needs to be perfect,” she said quietly. “Because Natalia thinks *everything* is perfect. She thinks we’re some kind of slightly twisted 1950s nuclear family – me, her, Emma, Rafe, the baby...and *Frank*.” She practically hissed the last name in the litany, and Doris was taken aback by the hint of venom in her voice.

“But you like Frank,” she said. Olivia smiled, but there was no joy in it.

“Sure, everyone likes Frank, right? But if I’d wanted him to be tied up in my family I wouldn’t have dumped him.”

“Or left his father at the altar,” Doris interjected helpfully.

“Right,” Olivia acknowledged, smirking ruefully. “But now...he’s gonna be there. All the time. He’s got a bond with Natalia that I can never share. No-matter what she thinks...that baby is *theirs*. It’s not *mine*.”

Doris’s eyes widened, and she understood. “Hence the epic baby shower,” she murmured, thinking privately that Olivia must have come top of the class in Overcompensation 101. “I assume you haven’t shared any of this with Natalia?”

Olivia barked out a laugh. “How can I?” she said. “She’s so happy. She thinks everything is okay. And it’s not. It’s just...not.”

Doris watched her friend’s face crumple as the mask slipped. Before the tears came, she grabbed Olivia’s hand again and squeezed. “Now listen to me,” she insisted forcefully. “You can’t let her go along thinking everything’s fine. This isn’t going to go away, I promise you. It’s going to come to a head, and when it does you can’t let it be a surprise to her. That’s not fair.”

For a moment Olivia made no reply. She studied her friend’s earnest face for a long moment, wondering where the authority and awareness in her voice had come from. Personal experience? If so, what role had she played in that little drama: the clueless, naïve innocent? Or the silently doubting Thomas?

“I know,” Olivia admitted at last, squeezing her friend’s hand gratefully before she let go. “I just...” She swallowed hard. “I can’t lose her now, okay? I need to get over this by myself. So...let me just get through the baby shower, and maybe then I can start...to feel how she needs me to feel.”

Doris shook her head. "Olivia," she began, but the other woman held up her hand to forestall her objection.

"I know, okay?" she said. "Look...I need this to work, and I'm trying. But I need to do this my way, all right?" She ran her fingers through her hair with a sigh. "I just want her to be happy," she murmured. "That's all I've ever wanted. And if that means pretending that she and Frank and I can play happy families, that's what I'll do."

Doris opened her mouth to speak and then, upon seeing the determined set to Olivia's jaw, quickly closed it again.

There was no point trying to get Olivia to change her mind, she decided. The woman was famously stubborn. She just hoped that Olivia would come to her senses on her own, before the budding resentment she was so obviously feeling for Frank and the baby blossomed into something that could choke the life out of her and Natalia's fledgling relationship.

"I hope you know what you're doing," she said at last. Olivia snorted and let out another humorless laugh.

"You and me both," she sighed. "You and me both."

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Natalia blended together the ingredients for her marinade with a practiced air. Soy sauce, acacia honey, ginger, and corn starch combined to form a light brown paste which she slathered happily over carefully chopped chicken pieces. She hummed softly under her breath as she worked; a bright, happy tune that perfectly matched her mood.

"Hey, beautiful," Olivia murmured, sliding up behind her and slipping her arms round her waist.

"Mmm," Natalia moaned in satisfaction, leaning back against her girlfriend and turning her head ninety degrees so she could present her lips for a kiss. "You're back early," she said, delighted.

"Just couldn't stay away," Olivia mumbled, trailing her lips down so she was pressing gentle kisses along the length of her neck. "Doris came by earlier and, when she left I had the strangest desire to drop everything and be with my girlfriend." A tiny thrill of pleasure and desire flickered down Natalia's spine and she shivered. "Cold?" Olivia asked playfully. Natalia grinned.

“Not even a little bit,” she whispered, pressing herself back against Olivia’s body and leaning her neck to the side to provide better access. Olivia took advantage of the skin newly spread out before her and moaned softly as she bent to kiss it.

“Oh,” Natalia gasped, her breathing beginning to quicken. She reached behind her and tangled her fingers in Olivia’s hair, holding her in place.

Not that Olivia was planning to go anywhere. “I take it you like that,” she murmured into Natalia’s ear, tightening her arms round her waist.

“You have to ask?” Natalia ground out, and shuddered when she felt Olivia’s low laugh reverberating against her skin.

“Not really,” Olivia admitted. Natalia whined in protest when she pulled back, but was quickly silenced when Olivia guided her round to face her. “In fact...if my legendary powers of deduction have not deserted me...I’d say you might be after a little something more.”

The last word was no more than a breath against Natalia’s slightly parted lips. “You might have something there,” she admitted in a hoarse whisper, and pressed forward, erasing those final millimetres.

Olivia dug her fingers into Natalia’s hair as they kissed, with the same languid intensity in this, their sixteenth kiss (Olivia was counting) as there had been in their first real one, two days before. Olivia wondered if she would ever get used to it – the shock of emotion and deep, visceral desire, coupled with a familiarity and ease that she had never experienced with any other person.

Natalia sighed when they eventually parted, a small, enigmatic smile brightening her face. “Do you think it’ll always be like this?” she murmured.

“Like what?”

“Breathtaking.”

Olivia found herself blinking back sudden tears. “*You’re* breathtaking,” she said, and followed it up with another kiss (number seventeen) to prove it. They rested with their foreheads bumping gently together for a few moments, until Natalia suddenly grabbed Olivia’s hand and pressed it to her belly.

“She’s kicking!” she exclaimed in delight, ignoring the tension that had suddenly crept into Olivia’s muscles.

“Mmm,” Olivia murmured in reply, with none of the excitement that was lacing Natalia’s voice. She pulled her hand away as quickly as she could, covering the haste of her withdrawal with a bright smile. “What’s for dinner?”

Natalia bit her lip, sensing the doubt in Olivia’s voice again but at a loss as to how to deal with it. “Sweet and sour chicken with fried rice,” she said at last.

Olivia glanced around at the ingredients laid out on the countertop. “You’re making the sauce from scratch,” she deduced. “What’s the occasion?”

Natalia grinned, the joy of her news drowning out any lingering uneasiness. “Rafe’s coming over.”

Olivia smiled back, allowing Natalia’s happiness to infect her. “Oh sweetie, that’s great,” she said, with genuine enthusiasm. “What can I do to help?”

Natalia threw her an apron. “I need you to chop the onions and peppers for me,” she instructed. “The peppers need to be in strips, and the onions need to be diced.”

Olivia narrowed her eyes. “You timed this, didn’t you?” Natalia *knew* how much she hated chopping onions.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Natalia said sweetly. Olivia didn’t believe her for a second.

“You’re lucky I love you so much,” Olivia muttered, tying the apron round her waist in resignation.

Natalia beamed. “Yes, I am,” she agreed.

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Dinner was an unqualified success. The food was delicious, Natalia was happy, and Rafe was not only civil, but positively charming. He ate everything that was put before him, he laughed at all of Emma’s jokes and stories, he even offered to help his mother wash the dishes afterwards. Natalia shooed him away, insisting that Olivia was perfectly capable of drying and stacking. Rafe allowed Emma to drag him off with a smile, and the next thing the two women heard was the tell-tale sound of Wii Bowling.

“I’m so happy,” Natalia murmured against Olivia’s lips between ecstatic kisses.

"I'm happy you're so happy," Olivia replied with a grin, wrapping her arms round her neck and pulling her close. Natalia's answering laugh was by far the most beautiful sound Olivia could possibly have heard at that moment, and she found herself utterly incapable of *not* kissing her again. And again.

Luckily, neither woman was about to complain.

"Mo-oom!" Emma called. "Natalia! Come and play with us!"

Natalia glanced at the pile of dishes waiting in the sink and hesitated. Olivia shook her head, reaching down to take her girlfriend's hand. "Leave them," she insisted, tugging on her hand. "How many more nights like this are you going to have?"

For a moment Natalia looked unutterably sad, obviously thinking of the day, looming ever closer, when her baby boy would leave her for parts unknown. But then her face cleared, and she squeezed Olivia's hand. "All right," she called back. "We're coming."

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"I still don't see why my Mii has to look like a witch," Olivia grouched an hour or so later. Natalia stuck out her tongue.

"You're only complaining because you lost," she said teasingly. Olivia raised her eyebrows in a fairly convincing *who, me?* expression.

"No, I'm complaining because a certain someone," she glared at Rafe, "or someones," she turned her eyes on Emma, "seem to think it's funny to make me look silly."

Rafe held up his hands. "I can only work with what I'm given," he said with a laugh.

"Are you saying my nose actually looks like *that*?" she demanded, gesturing towards the hideously ugly Mii that Rafe had made for her.

"It's a pretty fair resemblance actua..." Natalia trailed off under Olivia's thunderous look. "I mean...uh...you're gorgeous, sweetie. Utterly gorgeous. And so is your...uh...Mii thing."

Rafe glanced from one woman to the other, sensing the currents running deeply under the silliness of their conversation, watching how his mother subconsciously leaned towards Olivia and how Olivia, in turn, looked at his mother like she was the most precious thing on Earth. They had always behaved like this, he realized with a sudden shock. Or, if not always, at least for a very long time. Certainly since January, when they'd rushed from

Emma's presentation to be at his bedside in the prison hospital, and then rushed back to the school to be with Emma.

"I gotta go," he mumbled under his breath, pushing himself onto his feet. Natalia looked up at him, her face falling.

"Oh," she said sadly. "But...it's early."

Rafe shrugged. "I'm meeting Ashlee," he said. "We're catching a movie."

"Oh," Natalia said again. Rafe squirmed in the face of her palpable disappointment.

"Come on, ma," he said, with a hint of a whine. Natalia shook her head and managed a smile.

"All right, all right," she conceded. "But I'll see you again soon, right?"

Rafe leaned down and wrapped his arms round her shoulders. "Before you know it," he promised softly.

Olivia ran her hand gently over Natalia's head as she stood, smoothing her hair back. "I'll walk you to your car," she said to Rafe. "I still have a bone to pick with you about that nose."

As soon as they stepped outside, they both felt the loss of the warmth of the living room. Olivia, who hadn't thought to put on a jacket, shivered, but pressed on behind Rafe who was striding ahead towards his car. The friendliness that had marked the earlier part of the evening was gone, replaced by a hint of tension.

"Thanks for coming tonight," Olivia said, as Rafe hesitated by his car, shuffling from one foot to the other. "I can't tell you what it means to your mom...and to me."

Rafe looked away. "I didn't do it for you," he mumbled.

Olivia looked away, smiling ruefully. "I figured that much," she said. Rafe leaned back against his car, folding his arms over his chest.

"So why are you out here?" he said.

Olivia hesitated. "I just wanted to say thank you," she said at last. "For making this easy on her."

Rafe shrugged. "She loves you," he said grudgingly. "And...you love her, I guess. This," he gestured towards the house, the brief swing of his arm seeming to encompass everything that the building represented, "is what she wants. She's been pretty clear about that, so..." He ground the ball of one foot into the dirt, avoiding Olivia's steady gaze. "Maybe I don't like it much," he said. "Maybe I wish things were different. But...I love her, and I want her to be happy. So...I can just pretend that all of this is cool. Sometimes you just have to do that. Just...suck it up and deal with situations you didn't plan."

Olivia stared at him as he spoke, wondering if this sudden maturity was Ashlee's influence. She would have to thank her, if that was the case. She could cope with Rafe's continued disapproval, just as long as he let Natalia be.

"I know exactly what you mean," she said seriously, thinking of the baby and Frank and the future she'd signed up for by moving back to the farmhouse. Rafe's head snapped up.

"What?"

Olivia shrugged. "You think I planned this?" she asked. "Me and your mom bringing up Frank's baby? But those are the cards I got dealt, so...I'm getting on with it."

Rafe narrowed his eyes. "You don't have to," he began slowly. "If you don't want it..."

"I want Natalia," Olivia interrupted, ignoring the wince that flickered across Rafe's face. "I want her to be happy. I want to be the one to *make* her happy. So...if I have to accept a few extra things to do that, I will." She smiled, joylessly. "I was willing to walk away from her once, for the sake of her happiness. And now I'm willing to stay with her, for the same reason. How can I do anything else?"

They lapsed into a long, protracted silence. A muscle clenched rhythmically in Rafe's jaw as he hunched against a sudden, chill breeze. Olivia shoved her hands in her pockets, waiting for him to formulate his response.

At last, he leaned heavily back against the car, meeting her eyes with a new, grudging, respect. "Are you going to tell her?" he asked. Olivia snorted.

"Are you?"

Rafe looked away, shaking his head. "I'll be gone soon," he said. "I want her to be looked after. I know you'll do that, so..." He shrugged. "That's all that really matters. I won't ruin that for her."

Olivia nodded. She sensed that, for the first time, she and the young man across from her understood each other. “Neither will I,” she said firmly.

She turned to walk back to the house, wrapping her arms round her middle as another frigid breeze began to blow in from the north. Rafe’s voice stopped her in her tracks. “I’ll be gone soon,” he said, for a second time. “But you’ll still be here. How are you gonna deal with the baby, and Frank?”

Olivia ground her teeth. “One step at a time,” she called over her shoulder, and continued to trudge back to the house.

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Olivia returned to the house to find Emma alone in the living room rifling through their recently unpacked DVD collection. She caught a glimpse of the dreaded *Little Mermaid*, and sighed in relief when Emma discarded it. She had seen that movie more times than she could count – one of the perils of being the mother of a pre-teen girl.

“Hey,” she said, ruffling the girl’s hair. “Where’s Natalia? And why are we looking for a movie on a school night?”

Emma looked up briefly before turning back to the DVDs. “Natalia wanted to watch a movie because that’s what Rafe’s doing,” she said.

Olivia’s heart clenched just a little, and she looked towards the kitchen. “Is she in there?” she asked. Emma nodded.

“She said she needed to do the dishes,” she explained.

With a final stroke through Emma’s hair, Olivia headed towards the kitchen. Natalia was, as she’d expected, elbow deep in soapy water. There were several dishes on the draining board already, so she grabbed a dish towel and began to dry them in silence. She stood close to the other woman, but didn’t touch her until she saw the first two tears drop into the water.

Wordlessly, Olivia stepped closer to her girlfriend and pressed their sides together. Natalia accepted the unspoken invitation gratefully, leaning against her as she continued washing the last of their dinner dishes.

“I can’t believe he’s really leaving,” she said after long minutes of silence.

Olivia hesitated before replying. "All children leave," she offered eventually, thinking of the sharpness of the pain and loss when Ava had decided to move to San Francisco after the death of her baby, Max. Still, at least she could pick up a phone or jump on a plane whenever she missed her eldest child. Once Rafe left for boot camp, he would be out of Natalia's reach completely.

"I know," Natalia said softly. "I just...I already lost so much time with him. When he was in juvie, and then jail...and now the army's going to take him places where I can't get to him." She bit her lip before finally voicing her greatest fear, in a whisper. "He might never come back."

Olivia dried her hands on the dish towel, turned, and pulled Natalia into her arms. Natalia buried her face in the crook of her neck, breathing deeply as she fought back tears. Olivia took a deep breath of her own.

"I'm not going to tell you that won't happen," she said firmly, but gently. "You and I both know it's a possibility. So does he. There's no point pretending otherwise." Natalia stiffened in her arms, but Olivia just strengthened her hold. "All I can promise you is that I love you, and I will be right there with you...whatever happens. Good or bad. I won't ever leave you."

Natalia released a tremulous sigh. It was a promise she would have liked to have made herself, but she held her tongue. She wasn't sure Olivia would believe her, and she couldn't take that. Not tonight. "I don't deserve you," she said instead. Olivia dropped a soft kiss onto her temple.

"You deserve everything," she murmured, then pulled back to wipe her girlfriend's watery eyes. "Now – are you ready for whatever delights our daughter has in mind for the evening?"

Natalia managed a brief laugh as she nodded. "As long as it's not *The Little Mermaid*," she said as she turned to leave the kitchen. "If I have to hear *Kiss the Girl* one more time I'll–"

"Kiss her?" Olivia offered. Natalia threw a grin over her shoulder.

"Hey, maybe that's why we had to watch it over and over for months," she said. "D'you think Jellybean was giving us a little hint?"

"I wouldn't put it past her," Olivia murmured, allowing herself to be pulled into the living room. Emma had already chosen the movie and was wriggling impatiently on the couch, watching the animated menu repeat over and over.

“Finally!” she exclaimed. Olivia stuck out her tongue as she flopped down onto the couch next to Natalia.

“Brat,” she mumbled, wrapping her arm round Natalia’s shoulders. “Ooh, *Matilda!*” she said when she spotted what movie her daughter had chosen. “I love this.”

“Hey, this movie reminds me of someone we know,” Natalia whispered in her ear. “Precocious kid, always wandering off by herself...” Olivia laughed.

“If she starts levitating things I’m outta here,” she whispered back, and impulsively leaned forward to peck Natalia’s lips.

“Mommy!” Emma whined. “No more kissing. I want to watch the movie!”

Olivia glared down at her totally unphased daughter. “By all means, start the movie,” she growled, but with good humor.

Natalia leaned against her side, resting her head on her shoulder. Olivia found herself pre-occupied with the unfamiliar sensation of being so close to Natalia in this situation; so free to touch and to feel. They had never watched a movie together as a family like this. Emma had always been between them – literally, in fact; her place had been in the middle of the couch. For some reason the girl had decided to sit on the far left side tonight, leaving Olivia and Natalia with nothing to separate them.

Except the baby.

One step at a time, she’d said to Rafe. Well...now was as good a time as any for the first one.

Slowly, hesitantly, she reached out and rested her hand gently on Natalia’s belly. The baby wasn’t moving, for which she was grateful. If she had been moving, Olivia wasn’t sure she could have forced herself to stay still. But this was fine. This was just touching Natalia. She could do that.

With a small smile, Natalia reached out and covered Olivia’s hand with her own. “I love you,” she whispered. Olivia swallowed hard.

“I love you, too.” Natalia’s hand was warm against hers, and she could sense the life growing beneath her palm. She closed her eyes, forgetting about the movie, and just allowed herself to absorb the moment.

This is my life from now on, she thought. Natalia's hand gently squeezed hers. She thought, perhaps, that she could now feel the baby kicking.

It could be worse, she conceded silently. *It could be a lot worse.*

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Olivia woke abruptly with a jerk, and for a moment wasn't sure where she was. The flicker of the TV was the only light in the room. Natalia was by her side, sleeping still, her mouth slightly open. Emma looked at them both curiously.

"Why do you always fall asleep during movies?" she asked.

Olivia stretched as best she could with Natalia still wrapped around her, and yawned. "It's because I'm old," she muttered, feeling her bones creak. Emma giggled.

"Natalia isn't old," she said.

"No, but she's pregnant," Olivia explained. "That makes you tired."

Emma's eyes flickered down to her mothers' hands, resting together on Natalia's belly. "Mommy," she said slowly. "Is Natalia's baby really my sister?"

Olivia's eyes widened and she quickly glanced at Natalia. Her eyes were closed and she looked happy and peaceful. No help would be forthcoming from her. She turned back to Emma and fixed her with a serious look.

"Of course she is," she said. "Why are you asking? I thought you wanted a sister."

"I do," Emma said quickly.

"But?"

Emma squirmed. "It's nothing."

Olivia's eyes narrowed. "If I have to tickle it out of you I will," she warned. Emma bit her lip.

"There's this new kid at school," she muttered. "He said the baby can't be my sister because she's Natalia's, not yours. He said we wouldn't be related bio...biolo..."

“Biologically,” Olivia said, closing her eyes. Oh, this was just perfect. Some kid that knew more about biology than was really seemly for an eight year old was going around telling *her* daughter what a real family was? She tightened her hold on Natalia’s shoulders instinctively, and it must have been a little too hard because Natalia began to stir.

“Mmmph,” she mumbled. “Olivia?”

“I’m here sweetie,” she said softly. Natalia sighed and began rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Did I miss the movie?”

“We both did,” Olivia said, watching Emma carefully. She knew her daughter too well to believe for one moment that she had forgotten her earlier question. “Emma was just asking me about biology.”

She felt Natalia stiffen in her arms. “Oh?” she said, with a casualness that Olivia knew to be false.

“Uh huh,” she replied. “Apparently one of her little friends at school was explaining the concept of biological relations.”

Natalia released a heavy, tremulous breath. “Oh,” she said.

“Yeah. Oh.”

Emma glanced from one woman to the other, her eyes sharp. “So what does it mean?”

Olivia could feel the tension in Natalia’s muscles. She knew her girlfriend wasn’t good at facing issues head on, as they came up. She tended to need time to ponder, consider, and pray before she could make a really good job of tackling problems. But they didn’t have time for that. Emma was asking the question now, and she needed the answer now.

“It means being blood related,” Olivia said calmly. “Having the same mommy, or the same daddy.”

“Oh.” Emma’s face fell. “So the baby *won’t* be my sister?”

Natalia sucked in a single, sharp breath, but Olivia didn’t stop to reassure her. “Yes she will,” she said firmly. “Because blood isn’t the most important thing.” She cast about in her mind, searching for an example to make her daughter understand. “Your cousin Jonathan,” she said at last, with sudden inspiration. “You know that Reva’s his mother, right?” Emma

nodded solemnly. "Well, my sister was also his mother, because she adopted him when he was a baby. So we're not blood related, but I'm still his auntie, and you're still his cousin, because we love him. Love is the most important thing." She grabbed Emma's hand and placed it above Natalia's. "Love is what makes Natalia your mommy. And that's what'll make the baby your sister. Love is all that matters."

Emma stared at their three hands resting together on Natalia's belly. Natalia's dark eyes flicked from Emma to Olivia nervously, but Olivia was watching her daughter steadily.

"I think I understand," Emma said softly. "Kurt was talking about blood relations. But we're love relations, right?"

Natalia couldn't stifle the sob that rose up in her throat. Emma looked up in alarm, but Olivia smiled. "Happy tears," she assured her. "Right, Natalia?"

"Of course," she managed through her tears. "Come here, honey."

Emma nestled into her arms, pressing her ear against her stomach to try to hear her sister moving. The two women's eyes met over the top of her head. "Thank you," Natalia mouthed silently. Olivia just smiled.

"Time for bed, Emma," she murmured after a few quiet moments. "You've got school tomorrow."

The girl went upstairs without complaint. As soon as she was out of earshot, Natalia turned to her girlfriend with wide eyes. "Oh my God."

Olivia shrugged. "We always knew there'd be people who'd say things to her," she said, quirking her lips in an expression of resignation.

"I know. But...I thought we might manage a week before it started." Natalia covered her eyes with her hands, rubbing them until she saw little points of multi-colored light appear, like fireworks exploding in a dark night sky.

Olivia snorted. "Since when did we get a whole seven days in a row without some kind of crisis?" she asked. "This is pretty tame compared to some of the other stuff we've dealt with."

Natalia sighed. "I suppose you're right," she said, opening her eyes and smiling. "You were amazing. You just knew exactly what to say to her."

Olivia brought Natalia's fingers to her lips, kissed them softly, then placed them, tangled up with her own, above her heart. "It was just the truth," she whispered, hesitating slightly before she continued. "Do you remember what you said to me once? That we'd never like each other, but we'd always be connected?"

Natalia laughed softly. "I guess I was only half right about that, huh?" she murmured. Olivia smiled.

"Yeah," she agreed. "But...that's what a family is, right? People who love you, even if they don't like you?"

A frown creased Natalia's forehead. "I don't understand." Olivia shook her head.

"I'm not making a lot of sense here, am I?" she murmured. "I just mean..." She trailed off, searching for the words. "All my life I've felt like I needed to be someone else in order to be loved," she said at last. "And I've always known that love is a temporary gift. It can be taken away, so easily. If you let your guard down for a minute, if you fail to live up to everyone's expectations..."

Reaching out a trembling finger, Natalia placed it gently over Olivia's lips. "No..." she breathed. "Sweetheart, no. That's not what love is."

Olivia shrugged. "Everyone I've ever loved has left me, one way or another," she said, trying hard to sound matter-of-fact, but betrayed by the tremor in her voice. "My parents, Richard, Josh, Bill-

She snapped her mouth closed, but Natalia knew what she'd been about to say. "And me," she finished for her. Her eyes swam with tears, but she refused to look away.

She knew she had hurt Olivia by leaving so suddenly, without a word. But perhaps she had not realized, until this moment, just how damaging her actions had been. She'd seen glimpses of the pain shining through the dispassionate mask, but tonight it was raw, unguarded, and utterly, utterly heartbreaking.

"Olivia," she said, pulling the other woman close and whispering urgently in her ear. "I don't know if you can believe this yet. But I will never, *ever*, leave you again. I promise you. You, and Emma, and Rafe, and the baby...you are my life. You are *everything*."

Olivia shuddered in her arms, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. "I want to believe that," she admitted. "And I'm trying. I'm trying...really hard..."

Her hands reached out and curled round the swell of Natalia's belly. Natalia blinked back tears, allowing Olivia to take the lead. Slowly, Olivia sank down to her knees and pressed her ear against Natalia's middle, imitating Emma's earlier position. "Oh," she gasped. "I can hear her..."

Natalia curled her hands round the back of Olivia's head, cradling her and holding her in place simultaneously as she watched a look of sheer wonder spread across her beautiful face. Her heart contracted almost painfully, and she knew that she would never be able to give this up. This remarkable woman who had given her so much – confidence, self respect, a sense of ambition, love...above all, love.

"I'll never leave you," she promised. Olivia's eyes fluttered closed, but she made no reply. Natalia didn't allow herself to feel disappointed. After all...she had a lot to make up for.

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ACT 3

When Saturday dawned, Olivia made sure she got up bright and early. For once, she made it downstairs ahead of Natalia. It was the day of the baby shower at last, and she wanted it to be perfect for Natalia right from the start. With that in mind, she began to cook breakfast.

The smell of bacon and sausage floated up the stairs and tickled Natalia's nostrils. Her eyes flickered open, and she blinked blearily at the clock. Eight am. Much too early for Olivia to be up.

Groaning a little, she swung her legs out of bed and braced herself to stand. Standing up wasn't as easy a proposition these days as it used to be. Her back was aching and her feet hurt. She hadn't slept well either – too much tossing and turning, and too much dwelling on the fact that Olivia was still kissing her goodnight at her door like a very polite prom date instead of coming to bed and ravishing her like she so desperately wanted.

Carefully, she pushed the images that thought inspired out of her mind. To dwell on them would surely be an exercise in masochism.

Alas, it seemed the universe - or possibly Olivia herself - was conspiring against her efforts. How else could she explain the fact that, when she finally managed to pad downstairs, she found Olivia in the kitchen cooking breakfast, her hair still slightly mussed from sleep, and wearing nothing but a pair of plaid boxer shorts and a tank top? She stopped in the doorway, unable to move for a whole minute. Her eyes were both wide and slightly glazed

as she raked them over Olivia's body from head to foot. She had a horrible feeling she was drooling.

Olivia still hadn't noticed her when she turned her attention from the stove and began to root through the spice drawer. "Looking for something?" Natalia managed to croak. Olivia looked up in surprise.

"Dill," she said, after a moment. "For the eggs."

Natalia pushed herself off the wall where she'd been leaning and made her way to Olivia's side. "I don't keep dill in the house anymore," she said. "It's a troublemaking herb."

Olivia laughed. "Yeah, yeah, blame the herb," she replied, turning and draping her arms round Natalia's neck. "You're not supposed to be up yet."

Natalia's hands curled round Olivia's sides. "It's not every day someone cooks breakfast for me," she said. "I had to see for myself that I wasn't having a very vivid dream." She allowed her eyes to drift down from Olivia's face, while her hands slid under the tank top to caress warm, bare skin. She felt the muscles of Olivia's stomach contract. "I'm not entirely convinced I'm not..."

"Oh..." Olivia breathed. "Then...allow me to prove to you that this is real..."

Their lips met and melted against each other as if by some pre-arranged signal. Instantly Natalia felt the air knocked out of her lungs. She opened her mouth automatically, and Olivia took it as an invitation.

"Oh, God," Natalia managed to gasp before her mouth was claimed again. Her hands slid along the curve of Olivia's spine, fingers splayed against the expanse of skin under her girlfriend's top.

"You're beautiful," Olivia whispered, breaking away. Immediately she dropped her head to Natalia's throat and nuzzled against it, breathing hard. "So beautiful. You make it hard for me to control myself sometimes..."

"So don't," Natalia replied instantly.

The air suddenly thickened. Olivia raised her head and fixed Natalia with a serious, slightly sad, look. "Natalia..." she began, but was quieted by the sudden appearance of fingers on her lips.

"It's okay; I understand," Natalia murmured. "You don't have to say anything."

Olivia bent her head again, relief flooding through her. She wasn't sure she had the words to explain why she had been holding back. She knew Natalia wanted her. She could see it in every glance, feel it in every kiss. And her own passion was undimmed, there was no question about that.

But what she had said to Natalia all those months ago was still true. She wanted it to be okay – for them both. And while it was clear that it *would* now be okay for Natalia, she wasn't sure if she could say the same for herself. Not yet.

But, perhaps...soon.

"Sweetie," Natalia murmured softly.

"Hmm?" Olivia pulled her girlfriend a little closer and rested her head on her shoulder.

"Is that pan supposed to be smoking?"

Jerking her head up, Olivia spun round to face the stove. "Shit!" she exclaimed and rushed to rescue breakfast while Natalia laughed.

"Language," she admonished playfully. Olivia responded by shooting her a foul look and an obscene hand gesture that made Natalia blush. A few minutes later, she tactfully pretended not to notice that the bacon was ever so slightly charred. The perfect sausage, scrambled eggs, and toast more than made up for it, after all.

"Since when could you cook?" she asked around a mouthful of toast. Olivia grinned.

"Since always," she admitted. "But you said you loved working in the kitchen, so I thought you'd prefer to believe I was hopeless."

Natalia's lips curled up in a delighted smile. "Oh," she said. "That's actually kinda...sweet. But...I think I'd like you to cook for me now and again. If you want to."

"I'd love to," Olivia replied. "Maybe I'll make you something from San Cristobel sometime."

"Yes please," Natalia said, delighted. She opened her mouth to say something else, but the chirp of a cell phone threw it from her mind.

"Yes?" Olivia said after accepting the call. The smile that had been gracing her face slipped, replaced by a frown of annoyance. "Then handle it, Greg. That's what I pay you for." She rolled her eyes at Natalia's puzzled expression and shook her head. "Greg!" she said,

“handle it. It’s my day off.” She lapsed into silence, apparently listening to something that displeased her greatly. “Fine!” she exclaimed at last. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She threw the phone from her with a disgusted sigh. Natalia reached out and touched her hand. “Problems?”

“Just the usual incompetence,” Olivia muttered. “I have to go and handle it. Can you get Emma up and take her to Jodie’s for me?”

“Of course. Jodie’s mom’s taking them to the zoo, right?”

“Right.” Olivia ran her fingers through her hair, wincing. “I was really looking forward to spending some time alone together today,” she admitted sadly. Natalia squeezed her hand.

“Me, too,” she said. Olivia suddenly brightened.

“Hey, why don’t you come by the Beacon at lunchtime? We can hide in my old suite, maybe get some room service...”

Natalia laughed. “I’d love to,” she said. “One o’clock?”

“Sounds perfect.” Leaning forward, Olivia kissed her quickly, but thoroughly. “See you later sweetie.”

She headed back upstairs to dress with a spring in her step. Stage one – lure Natalia to the Beacon – was complete. Now for stage two – the epic baby shower to end all epic baby showers.

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Olivia arrived at the Beacon just in time to supervise the delivery of a huge cake in the shape of a crib, complete with pink frosting for the blankets. Ashlee was already there, bossing the caterers around like a pro.

“She’s coming at one,” Olivia said, watching as Ashlee scrawled a huge tick next to one of the last items on their long to-do list. “Everyone knows to be here at twelve thirty, right?”

“Yep. But some of us haven’t got the hang of this timekeeping thing at all,” said a familiar voice from behind her. Olivia turned to see Doris sauntering into the banquet hall, dressed casually for once in jeans and a V-neck cashmere sweater. She was carrying a variety of brightly wrapped packages in her arms which looked in imminent danger of toppling over.

"Jeez, mom, did you buy out every store in town?" Ashlee grumbled, relieving her mother of the gifts and taking them over to a waiting table.

"Not quite," Doris replied. "But I hear this is going to be the baby shower to end all baby showers, so I thought I'd make an effort." She winked at Olivia, who grimaced.

"Please don't talk about it that way when Natalia gets here," she said. Doris rolled her eyes.

"Don't worry, I'll let her figure out the gargantuan overcompensation for herself," she assured her friend. Ashlee looked at Olivia quizzically before the hotelier dragged her mother away.

"Would you quit it?" Olivia hissed. "This is Natalia's day, okay? And if you do anything to ruin it I swear to God I'll-"

"All right, all right," Doris interjected, holding up her hands. "For God's sake, I'm not going to say anything to Natalia. Jesus, what kind of a jerk do you think I am?"

Olivia raised one eyebrow, but didn't mention all the times in the past that the Mayor had proven herself capable of *exactly* that sort of meddling. "All right, I'm sorry," she said instead, which seemed to pacify the other woman. "I'm just on edge, okay? I need this to be perfect."

"I'm sure it will be," Doris replied gently. "But once it's over...you're to going run out of excuses not to face this problem. You know that, right?"

"I'm sure I can find a few more excuses," Olivia quipped. "I'm exceptionally clever you know."

"And an exceptionally good bullshitter," Doris said with a sigh.

Olivia leaned forward with a gleam in her eye. "And don't you ever forget it."

~~*~*

Natalia arrived at the Beacon fifteen minutes early, hoping to surprise Olivia in her office. She smiled at everyone she met in the familiar lobby, saving her widest, kindest smile for Greg who – she expected – had been experiencing the sharp edge of her girlfriend's tongue all morning.

"Hey Greg!" she said happily. "How are you?"

Greg jumped a little, seemingly surprised to see her. “Ms. Rivera!” he exclaimed. “You’re earl-” He cut himself off with a tiny blush. “I mean, it’s so good to see you!” he said instead, picking at a loose thread in the sleeve of his uniform.

“You too,” Natalia replied, patting her strangely nervous erstwhile colleague on the arm. “Do you know where Olivia is?”

“Uhm...the banquet hall, I think,” he said, still picking at the loose thread. Natalia flashed him another dazzling smile.

“Thanks!” she said, turning to go. She didn’t hear Greg’s urgent whispers into his walkie talkie. Her mind was already on Olivia.

When she pushed open the doors of the banquet hall, it took her a few moments to take everything in. There was a table full of expensive looking food and wine at the far end, beyond a ring of comfortable looking chairs that had clearly been harvested from empty suites. There was another table over to the right stacked high with presents of all shapes and sizes. But what really drew her attention was the banner stretching across half the back wall saying ‘**CONGRATULATIONS NATALIA!**’

“Oh,” she gasped, her hand flying to her mouth as tears sprang to her eyes. She took a few steps into the room.

“Surprise!”

A cacophony of voices erupted from behind her. She spun around and saw almost every woman she knew peeling themselves off the wall on either side of the door. Blake was sporting a huge grin as she walked over to Natalia, her arms open for a hug.

“Congratulations, mama,” she said, quickly releasing her so she could greet the rest of her guests. Ashlee, Daisy, Doris, Mel, and Lillian all greeted her with hugs. Marina was a little less enthusiastic, but managed a smile and a quick tummy rub and baby-talk greeting for her little sister. But Natalia only had eyes for one person.

Olivia was last to greet her, smiling shyly as she wrapped her girlfriend in a warm embrace. “Surprise,” she whispered in her ear. Natalia held her tight.

“I love you so much,” she murmured, for Olivia’s ears only. Olivia briefly tightened her hold, then released her with another, brighter smile.

“Come on,” she urged. “We have presents, we have food, we have some games that sound awful, but which I’m assured are traditional...”

Natalia giggled, wrapping her arm round Olivia's waist as she allowed herself to be led to the circle of chairs. "Wow. There's so much...I hardly know where to start."

"With presents, of course," Blake said, sounding almost as excited as Natalia looked. "Come on, help me bring these gifts over," she added, grabbing Doris's arm and dragging her over to the table. Doris looked vaguely outraged.

"I'm the Mayor, not a delivery girl," she protested. Blake just rolled her eyes and shoved an armload of presents against Doris's chest.

Natalia was, of course, delighted with everything. It took nearly forty minutes to unwrap all the presents, coo over them, and thank the right people. All in all, there was quite a haul – the usual things, like clothes, rattles, baby books and diapers, as well as a couple of unusual things - like nearly all of Doris's gifts.

"*Mommy Kissed A Girl And She Liked It*," Olivia read from the tiny t-shirt Natalia had just unwrapped, then turned a look of pure annoyance on Doris. "Tasteful," she muttered darkly, but Natalia laughed.

"Thank you, Doris," she said graciously, laying her hand on the Mayor's arm. "I definitely prefer it to the edible panties and peephole bra." Doris rolled her eyes.

"Once a prude always a prude," she said, resigned, thrusting another gift into Natalia's arms. "This one's from..." she trailed off, reading the tag, "Olivia."

Natalia flashed Olivia a brilliant smile. "You didn't need to get me anything," she murmured. "You've already given me so much..."

Ashlee and Daisy glanced at each other with twin indulgent smiles. Olivia was sure she saw the words '*so romantic!*' mouthed between the two of them. "Hey, I'm not bringing up any kid that's not in all the latest designer bling, so..." Natalia swatted her playfully on the arm, and bent to unwrap what turned out to be a top of the line baby monitor. Further gifts labelled with Olivia's elegant, flowing signature were equally extravagant – a crib, a stroller, and a tiny blender for making homemade baby food; plus a few more ordinary presents like a set of bottles, pacifiers, and clothes in every size from newborn to three year old.

"Oh, that dress is utterly darling!" Blake cooed as Natalia unwrapped the last gift. Doris, however, cast a critical eye over the huge pile of clothes that had been amassed.

"All pink," she grumbled. "Can anyone say gender stereotypes?"

“Oh, shut up mom,” Ashlee called over her shoulder as she and Daisy rose and began to wander over to the food table. “Come on and get some food. I spent an hour on the phone with those caterers and I will be so pissed if no-one eats anything.”

The guests laughed and all began to drift over to the table, eyeing the food and making exclamations over the crib cake. Just as Olivia was helping Natalia to her feet, a quiet voice floated over from the doorway.

“Am I late?” it said. Natalia’s head whipped round to see Rafe slipping inside, a small gift in his hand and a sheepish smile on his face. Natalia immediately forgot about the food and detoured to her son instead, opening her arms and smiling with joy.

“Rafe!” she exclaimed. “I didn’t expect you to be here. I’m so glad!”

Rafe shrugged as he pulled back, blushing ever so slightly. “Well...you girls need a chaperone. I’ve heard about what goes on at these parties.” He glanced over her shoulder, spotting the food. “Ooh, are those pasteles?” he said, thrusting his gift into his mother’s hands. “I’ll be right back.”

Natalia laughed, following her son to the table and surveying the platter of pasteles. “Any good?” she asked Rafe, who already had a whole one in his mouth.

“Not as good as yours,” he replied, although it came out more like: “not ash mood ash oors.” He swallowed hard, and gestured to the gift still held in his mother’s hands. “Open it,” he said. Natalia smiled and turned her attention to the present, tearing off the paper.

It was a photo frame made of pink enamel, with one large aperture in the center and twelve smaller ones surrounding it, like the numbers on the face of a clock. Along the top were the words *Baby’s First Year* in neat, flowing script.

“It’s so you can track how she’s growing,” he explained. “You put her first picture here,” he pointed at the space where the twelve would be, which was slightly larger than the others, “and then you put one a month into the others until she’s a year old. You put her birthday picture in the middle.” He smiled hopefully, obviously desperate for her to approve of the gift. Natalia fought back tears.

“Oh, Rafe,” she murmured, hugging him close. “It’s wonderful.”

Rafe’s smile became relieved. “I wasn’t sure what to get,” he admitted. “But I thought this would be good, you know? I can sort of see her growing up, even if I’m not always around...”

This time there was no stopping the tears. “I wish you weren’t going,” Natalia sniffled. Rafe pulled back, wiping away her tears.

“I know, ma,” he said softly. “But I’m coming back, okay? I promise.”

Natalia nodded, with all the confidence she didn’t feel. “I know,” she said. Her eyes left her son’s face momentarily, searching the room for Olivia. She needed her girlfriend by her side – needed the solid reassurance of her presence and the loving certainty of her touch. But she was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Doris met her gaze and smiled at her.

“I think I saw Greg come and drag her away,” she said. “I’ll go and find her.”

Natalia waved her thanks, and turned back to her son who was once again stuffing food in his face like he hadn’t eaten in a week. “Okay, let’s see what else we have here,” she murmured, grabbing a plate and beginning to fill it up.

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It took Doris longer than expected to find her wayward friend. She tried all the usual places, starting with the hotel bar and proceeding to her office, her suite, and even the kitchens. It wasn’t until she cornered a terrified looking maid who finally admitted to seeing Olivia on the stairs leading to the roof that she got herself on the right track.

“I hope you’re not going to jump,” she called, finally spotting Olivia standing near the edge, hugging herself and staring out over the lake.

“Not planning on it, but I might push someone,” she shot back. She smiled at Doris, despite the harshness of her tone.

“Ha ha,” Doris replied, drawing level with her friend at last and wrapping her own arms round her waist, mimicking the other woman’s posture. “What the hell are you doing up here, Olivia?”

“Enjoying the scenery,” Olivia said immediately. Doris shook her head, but waited patiently. After a few long minutes of staring at the lake, Olivia blinked and bowed her head. “I don’t know,” she admitted at last. Doris drew in a breath.

“Running away,” she pronounced. Olivia flinched.

“You’re thinking of Natalia,” she said coldly. “She’s the one who ran away, remember? I’ve been right here, all the time.”

“So what do you call it?” Doris demanded, injecting a little heat into her voice. “Your girlfriend – your *pregnant* girlfriend – is downstairs right now wondering where you are. Meanwhile you’re up here brooding and I, for some reason, am covering for you by saying Greg took you away. So what’s this all about?”

Olivia clenched her jaw, trying to be angry, but unable to keep it up. Eventually she gave it up completely, slumping her shoulders and sighing. “What am I going to do?” she asked plaintively. She didn’t see the gentle expression that spread across the Mayor’s face.

“You’re going to love her,” she said firmly. Olivia shrugged.

“Loving her isn’t the problem,” she began, but Doris cut her off.

“I’m not talking about Natalia,” she explained, as if Olivia were a very small, very dim child. “I’m talking about the baby.” Olivia’s head shot up in surprise, but Doris carried on. “I’m serious. You’re going to take one look at that kid, and she’s gonna have Natalia’s eyes, and Natalia’s dimples, and you are going to *love* her. You won’t be able to stop yourself. So will you just stop over-thinking all this and get back downstairs?”

For a long time, Olivia didn’t speak. Instead, she just stared at Doris as if she’d never seen her before, blinking hard against the wind. “Do you really think so?” she asked at last, and the shy hope in her voice almost broke Doris’s heart.

“I know it,” she said firmly, reaching out to take her friend’s hand. “Now come on. There’s that huge cake still to cut, and I know you don’t want to miss baby shower bingo...”

Olivia groaned, but allowed herself to be dragged along.

Maybe Doris was right. She tried to picture what the baby would look like. Olive skinned, dark eyed, with a mop of black hair and a dazzling smile... Her heart gave a small, experimental leap. “You really think the baby will have dimples?” she asked quietly.

Doris’s knowing laugh was her only reply.

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The natural order had quickly been restored at the farmhouse, meaning that Natalia was once again rising first. On the morning of Billy and Vanessa’s wedding she got herself out of bed at seven and immediately went to her closet to choose an outfit. She’d been putting the task off for several days, because – since she and Olivia never had found the time to go shopping – her stock of maternity clothes was both paltry and unflattering. Eventually

deciding on a sleeveless powder blue dress that ended just above the knee, she headed downstairs to make the coffee she'd need as a peace offering when she woke Olivia.

They had ended up storing all the baby shower gifts in Olivia's bedroom. It had been decided – without discussing it, it seemed – that Olivia's room would become the nursery. They even had an appointment with a designer the following day. The question of where Olivia would go when it was time to start preparing the room for the baby was at the forefront of Natalia's mind. Of course, there was only one place she *could* go. But, so far, Olivia had shown no signs of even wanting to visit that room, let alone sleep in it.

Natalia picked her way through boxes and packages, holding Olivia's coffee carefully so as not to spill it. When she reached the slumbering woman's bed, she placed the cup on top of a coaster on the bedside table and reached out to shake Olivia's shoulder.

"Olivia," she whispered. "Sweetie, it's time to wake up." The only response was a long, deep groan. She tried again. "Honey, we have to get ready for the wedding."

"Mmmph," Olivia moaned. "Five more minutes." Natalia smiled indulgently.

"I know what your five minutes are like," she murmured. For a moment she thought she'd won the battle when Olivia pulled back the covers. But then her girlfriend merely patted the bed and screwed her eyes more tightly shut.

"Five more minutes," she repeated.

For a long moment Natalia simply stared – first at Olivia and then at the empty expanse of bed she had just patted. Was that an invitation?

It certainly was. After half a minute, Olivia's eyes creaked open. She glanced at Natalia and then at the bed with raised eyebrows. Natalia flushed, but sprang into action. She climbed into Olivia's bed, her heart thundering like mad. Olivia opened her arms and sighed as Natalia settled against her.

"Maybe ten more minutes," she murmured against her hair before dropping a kiss onto it.

Natalia didn't have the heart to argue.

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After that rather blissful start to the morning, the rest of the day seemed to pass in something of a blur. They visited Philip, Rafe and Alan with Emma, who was dressed like an angel and desperately excited. The wedding itself – or rather weddings, since Buzz and

Lillian decided to attach themselves to the event at the last minute – was beautiful, although Natalia did feel the need to grumble a little about Father Ray happily marrying four divorcees while still trying to periodically talk her out of being with Olivia.

Soon after the reception began, however, Frank appeared and asked Natalia to dance, explaining that it was his privilege as one of the best men to dance with the most beautiful woman at the wedding. Olivia simply rolled her eyes behind his back as he dragged her girlfriend to the dance floor, and headed for the bar.

“Surely not drowning your sorrows,” Doris said, sliding into the bar stool beside her. “Everyone’s been saying how *happy* you are. It’s really quite disgusting.”

Olivia nodded to the bartender to bring her friend a drink. “Now that’s a bit hypocritical, Madam Mayor,” she said. “You’re looking pretty disgustingly happy yourself.”

A gooey look that didn’t really suit Doris at all spread across her face as she glanced over her shoulder to stare at Jamanda. “I guess I am,” she murmured.

“She’s a fetus, Doris,” Olivia deadpanned. Doris turned back to her in annoyance.

“She’s twenty-seven.”

“She’s a bartender,” Olivia carried on.

Doris bristled. “So?”

“Soooo,” Olivia drawled, “you’re the *Mayor*.”

A flash of color appeared on Doris’s cheeks. “Since when were you a snob, Olivia?” she asked coldly. Too late Olivia realized that her friend wasn’t playing at being offended this time. “You don’t know anything about her. She was at Harvard you know. She looked set for Valedictorian. And then she came out and her parents pulled all their support. Where the hell do you get off criticizing her for doing whatever she can to make enough money to get her life back on track?”

Olivia held up her hands in a gesture of surrender. “I’m not,” she said contritely. “Sorry.” Doris glowered. “Really, I’m sorry,” Olivia insisted. “I’m just a little wound up because someone,” she nodded meaningfully at Frank, “stole my girlfriend.”

Doris shifted slightly in her seat. “I’m sure that’s what he says about you,” she replied, appearing to mellow slightly. Olivia managed a laugh.

"I'm sure you're right," she said magnanimously. "So...you and Jamanda."

Doris flicked her eyes back to her date and smiled. "Uh huh."

"I take it this is what you were talking about the other day," Olivia said. "The thing that Ashlee deserved to know first?"

"Uh huh," Doris said again. Olivia had the distinct impression that she didn't have Doris's full attention.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, clicking her fingers in front of the Mayor's face. "Wake up, Madam Mayor."

"What? Jeez..." Doris smoothed her hands down the front of her dress, tearing her eyes from Jamanda with an effort. Olivia laughed.

"So are you going to dance with her?" she asked, taking a sip of her martini. Doris bit her lip, her face clouding over.

"I'd like to," she murmured. "But..."

Olivia waited, then finally prodded her friend when it didn't look like she was going to continue: "But what?"

Doris shook her head. "Look, it's one thing being out to you and Natalia, or my daughter. But if I dance with Jamanda here, now...it means something else."

Olivia frowned, confused. "But you brought her as your date. Aren't you pretty much outing yourself right now?" To her surprise, Doris just laughed.

"God, no," she said. "People don't see what they don't expect to see. Hell, half these people haven't figured out that you and Natalia are an item. They're not going to notice anything about little old me."

She sounded almost disappointed. Olivia shrugged. "Well, you could always go and make an announcement after the speeches."

"Oh ha ha." She took a sip of her drink. "I do need to figure out how to do this, though..." she murmured sadly. "I don't want to alienate people. How much do I say? How much PDA is too much? Should I lay some groundwork first? Or just...come out with it?" She shook her head, downing the last of her drink and motioning to the bartender to bring her another.

Olivia threw her a speculative glance. "I know a guy," she began slowly. "Real hot shot image consultant. Maybe he can help you work on the face you want to present. I'll dig out his card for you when I get home." The look Doris gave her in return was grateful, and Olivia thought she'd probably been forgiven for her earlier Jamanda related faux pas.

"So what kind of name is Jamanda anyway?" she asked, deciding to risk another. Doris rolled her eyes.

"I know, right?" she said. "She's got two aunts who can't stand each other – Jessica and Amanda. Her mom wanted to name her after them both, but she knew if she just called her Amanda Jessica or Jessica Amanda the one who came second would complain. So there you have it...Jamanda." She sipped at her martini. "Of course, Jessica still complained because there's more of Amanda's name than hers in there."

Olivia snorted. "Yeah, those are the perils of naming your kids after other people," she said. She glanced over at Natalia, who looked like she was more than ready to escape from Frank, and let her eyes flick down to her belly. Doris noticed the direction of her glance.

"Speaking of naming," she said smoothly. "Have you and Natalia decided on anything yet?" Olivia shook her head.

"Not yet," she said, her eyes flicking up to Natalia's face, then sliding over to Frank's. "I have an idea," she admitted. "I think Natalia would really go for it, but I'm not sure..."

"Not sure about what?" Doris asked. Olivia turned away from the dancing couple.

"Not sure I can stomach it," she admitted, making short work of the last of her drink. Doris scoffed.

"My God, you are *such* a drama queen. It can't possibly be that bad," she said firmly. "And if I can stomach what I'm about to do, you can stomach anything."

With that she rose from her stool and headed smoothly for the dance floor. Olivia turned around just in time to see her cutting in to Natalia and Frank's dance, allowing her extremely relieved looking girlfriend to escape.

"I never thought I'd say this, but thank God for Doris," she muttered when she arrived at Olivia's side. Olivia laughed, reaching out and pulling her into a loose embrace.

"Thank God for Doris indeed," she replied, catching her friend's eyes as Frank twirled her clumsily on the dance floor and mouthing a silent '*thank-you*.' She dropped a quick kiss onto Natalia's cheek. "So, have you had enough dancing?"

Natalia snorted. “With Frank? Absolutely.” Olivia smiled, almost shyly.

“Actually...” She shook her head and stood, holding out her hand. “May I have this dance?”

A slow smile spread across Natalia’s face, lighting up her whole expression. “Why, I would be delighted,” she replied, slotting her hand into Olivia’s and allowing herself to be led to the dance floor.

“So, I’m told there are a few people who haven’t figured out we’re together yet,” Olivia murmured as they moved together. Natalia smiled.

“Are they blind?” she said, making Olivia laugh.

“Apparently,” she replied, sliding her hands up her girlfriend’s back and curling them round her neck. “Shall we open their eyes?”

Natalia leaned forward. “By all means,” she whispered against her lips, and kissed her.

Olivia smiled into the kiss. She could feel a few eyes on her, but she didn’t care. She was more than ready for everyone to know she loved Natalia and, if the hands roaming across her back and the lips insistently claiming hers again and again were any indication, Natalia was more than ready too.

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ACT 4

It was a strangely silent bedtime. Normally, Emma’s bedtime ritual was a noisy, joyful affair, full of laughter and stories. But tonight the girl was quiet and solemn. So were her mothers, if they were honest – Alan’s death and Rafe’s departure hung like a dark cloud above them all.

“Do you want to sleep with me tonight, baby?” Olivia asked, kneeling by her daughter’s bed. Emma shook her head.

“You want some hot chocolate?” Natalia added from her position perched at the foot of her bed. Emma shook her head again. Olivia smoothed her hair back from her face, smiling gently.

“What do you want then, sweetie?” she murmured gently. Inspiration struck. “Cornelius?” Emma nodded quickly, and Olivia smiled as she moved to rummage through the toy chest, looking for her daughter’s old fudge-colored teddy bear. He had been her constant

companion until very recently. Olivia still remembered the day Emma had declared herself to be too old for teddy bears and thrust him into the toy chest. She'd cried for hours. She'd even rescued Cornelius from the toy chest that night and slept with him herself, clinging to him like he was her daughter's innocent childhood made manifest, as if she could somehow halt the passage of time if she could just hug him hard enough.

She found the bear at last and brought him back to the bed. "Hello Emma," she said, deepening her voice. "Why are you so sad?"

Emma held out her arms for the bear. "My grandpa died," she said. "And my brother went away."

Natalia turned to Olivia with tears in her eyes. Olivia reached out and took her hand, still holding the bear with the other.

"I'm sowwy," she said, in Cornelius's voice. "I'm sad now, too. Can I have a hug?"

Emma nodded, and Olivia placed the bear in her arms. Emma held him tightly.

"I think Cornelius needed that hug," Olivia said in her normal voice. "You'd better hold him tight all night, honey. Just in case he gets sad again. Can you do that?"

Emma's eyes were wide and serious. "Yes mommy," she murmured. Olivia leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"That's my girl," she whispered.

The room was nearly dark, illuminated only by a nightlight and the crack of brightness leaking in under the door from the hall. Emma settled into her bed, holding her bear tight as her eyes slid closed. Olivia and Natalia waited with her for some time, stroking her hair and murmuring quiet words of love, until their daughter's breathing slowed and deepened, signaling her descent into sleep.

Quietly, they retreated into the hallway. "She'll be okay," Natalia whispered. Olivia nodded.

"I know," she said, taking Natalia's hand. They traveled the few paces to Natalia's bedroom door, and stopped there. "And will her mommy be okay?"

Natalia looked down briefly, then forced her head up. "I think so," she said. "I mean...I'm sad that he had to go away. But..." she trailed off, searching for the right words. "But I have you," she said at last. "And he told you to look after me, so..." Olivia smiled.

“So he did,” she said. “Can’t disappoint my new step-son, can I?”

Natalia’s eyes filled with tears which she quickly blinked away. “I love you so much,” she murmured.

Olivia reached out and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “I love you too,” she said.

She kissed her then, just like she had almost every night since she’d moved back in. Natalia’s lips parted, inviting her inside, just like always. And again, like always, Olivia accepted the invitation and they kissed, long, slow, and deep, outside the closed door of Natalia’s bedroom.

Olivia’s hands wandered lower as their lips joined and fused, curving around the rapidly growing bump of her belly. The baby kicked, as if she knew she was being sought. Natalia broke the kiss and smiled. “If she were a boy, I’d name her John,” she whispered. Her eyes were dancing with mirth, as if expecting Olivia to get the joke.

“John?” Olivia repeated doubtfully. Natalia cocked her head to one side.

“The Baptist,” she explained, and then, when Olivia’s frown only deepened, added: “He leapt for joy in his mother’s womb, in the presence of the savior.”

Olivia blushed. Natalia wasn’t sure why - lingering discomfort with the more overt demonstrations of her religious faith, she supposed. “I don’t see any saviors around here,” she said, looking down at her hands where they rested on Natalia’s rounded stomach. Natalia smiled as she covered those hands with her own.

“I do,” she murmured. If anything Olivia’s blush intensified. She opened her mouth to speak, but then the baby kicked again, distracting them both. Natalia smiled again. “Looks like she’ll be up for a while,” she said softly. She reached up and nudged Olivia’s chin, forcing her to meet her eyes. “Why don’t you come in for a few minutes and talk to her?”

Olivia looked away. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “It’s late.” Natalia nodded slowly.

“I know,” she replied. A part of her was telling her to leave this alone, to let Olivia retreat to the safety of her own bedroom. But another, larger, stronger part was screaming out that it couldn’t stand it anymore - the doors and the walls and the air, thick as a solid object, between them. She wanted Olivia to stay. She wanted it with every fiber of her being. “Just for a while, then,” she said, trailing her hand down to link with Olivia’s. The other woman’s grip was strong - a little too strong, but the tiny pain was worth it if it led to her crossing that threshold with her.

"A little while," Olivia said at last.

Natalia let go of Olivia's hand as they stepped inside the room. She could feel Olivia's eyes taking everything in. It occurred to her suddenly that Olivia had only rarely been in this room. And never like this. Smiling, she climbed up onto the bed and patted the spot beside her. "Sit with me," she said.

Olivia stood in the doorway, silhouetted in the light from the hall. Natalia hadn't turned on any lamps in the bedroom - it was a clear night, the moon was full, and she didn't believe in wasting energy when what God had provided was more than sufficient. Olivia didn't move. She seemed hesitant, almost frightened.

"Do you-" Natalia began, then quickly swallowed the words. She'd been about to say *Do you trust me?* But she couldn't finish the sentence, suddenly terrified of what the answer might be. "Do you love me?" she said instead. She remembered a time when the answer to that question would have scared her more than anything. She'd gone to such lengths to stop Olivia from saying it out loud - always changing the subject, turning away, pretending she didn't understand the currents just below the surface of Olivia's eyes. Now the answer held no fear, no doubt, no uncertainty. She knew exactly what Olivia would say.

"I love you," Olivia said, exactly as Natalia had known she would, and took the final few steps over to the bed. The door swung shut behind her, plunging them into semi-darkness. Pale moonlight streamed in through the open windows, but Olivia's eyes hadn't adjusted to it yet. "Where are you?" she called into the dark. Natalia reached out and found her hand.

"I'm here," she murmured. She heard Olivia release a long, tremulous breath.

"Of course you are," she muttered to herself, and Natalia was glad of the relative darkness because it hid the two perfect tears that escaped from her eyes at the uncertainty in Olivia's voice. She had done that. She had left Olivia, abandoned her, forsaken her, and she had created that mustard seed of doubt that laced every intimate conversation. She had behaved abominably, picking Olivia up and then throwing her away, like a child quickly losing interest in a shiny new toy. She knew enough about Olivia's past lovers to understand that - in some ways - she had behaved just like them. Keeping Olivia around while it was convenient; tossing her aside when it got hard. She'd thought her reasons were good ones at the time. But now, as Olivia settled in against her side and rested her head just above the little life trying to kick its way out of her belly, she found herself choked into silence by the weight of regret and shame at what she had done, and what she might have lost.

"Well, well little one, are you planning to let your mommy get any sleep at all tonight?" Olivia whispered, running one hand along Natalia's belly. The baby was still kicking

strongly. “Hmm, I don't know if I should keep talking to you if you're gonna kick me for it,” she continued. Natalia could hear the grin in her voice. She blinked away another couple of tears. After all she had done, all she had put her through, Olivia was still with her. Lying beside her in the moonlight, talking to their baby, feeling her kick.

“She's definitely a soccer player,” Natalia murmured, combing her fingers through Olivia's hair.

“Is that right?” Olivia replied. “Hmm, little one? You want me to buy you a ball for when you make your debut?” She stroked Natalia's stomach as she spoke, her voice gentle and smooth. “Your sister never kicked this much, you know,” she admonished.

Natalia laughed. “I'm sure she was a perfect angel, just like now,” she said. Olivia nodded.

“She was.” She was still talking to the baby. “One time, when I was about eight weeks along, I was lying talking to her just like this. She didn't move much then, you understand – not like you, sweetheart. You know what size she was then? A bean. A lima bean, the doctor said. But she was too sweet to be a lima bean. I told him she was more of a jellybean.”

Natalia laughed softly. “So that's where that name comes from,” she murmured.

“Mmm hmm,” Olivia hummed, then carried on humming, turning it into a quiet lullaby. Natalia didn't recognize the tune, but it was pleasant and soothing, and she almost found herself being lulled to sleep by it.

Not just by the lullaby. Olivia's presence was warm and comforting – it called out to her, speaking of safety, home, a place to rest. She was very close to surrendering to it, when she heard Olivia speak again.

“I thought about this, you know,” she whispered, and somehow Natalia knew she was no longer talking to the baby.

“About what?” she whispered back into the stillness of the air. It was very quiet and peaceful. Even the baby seemed to have quieted down. She'd stopped kicking like a wild thing at least.

“About us having a baby,” Olivia murmured. Natalia's breath caught in her throat. “I thought about a lot of things, before,” Olivia continued in a faraway voice. “I used to lie in that bed across the hall aching for you. I used to dream about coming in here and kissing you until you loved me back.”

Natalia smiled. "You are a *very* good kisser," she said. She could feel the muscles in Olivia's cheek moving, betraying her smile.

"I thought of other things too," she whispered. "I sometimes used to let myself imagine what it'd be like if we were together." Her fingers were still absently trailing over Natalia's stomach. Goose flesh began to erupt under the thin material of her dress. "A real family; you and me and Emma and Rafe. I thought Rafe would go to college. And then...I thought maybe you and I would think about adding someone to the household." She paused, and it was on the tip of Natalia's tongue to say that all of that had come true.

But it would be a lie. They were a family, but Rafe wasn't with them. He'd never lived there with them, and now he was gone – not to college, but to boot camp in North Carolina, and from there maybe to Iraq or Afghanistan to fight a war he didn't understand, or care to understand, for reasons Natalia still couldn't comprehend. And yes, there was a baby, but not one they had planned together, created together, got excited about together. This child had very nearly torn them apart. More than that, she meant that it would never be just them, their little family alone and protected, because Frank was now inextricably linked to them in the most intimate of ways.

What Olivia had wanted was so simple. It seemed almost cruel that all that had come true were shadows and imitations of her dreams.

Tears nipped at Natalia's eyes. "Show me," she whispered. Olivia raised her head at last and looked up at her with bleary, confused eyes.

"Show you what?" she asked. Natalia took a breath.

"Show me how you thought of kissing me, when you were alone in your bed," she replied.

Olivia swallowed hard. "Those were just dreams, Natalia," she murmured. Natalia shook her head.

"Dreams come true," she insisted.

Olivia shook her head sadly. They had come together with a foundation of friendship, family and love. On those foundations Olivia had built a fantasy, a beautiful dream. She'd thought she'd built it with precious metals and stones that could weather any storm. But then the fires of doubt, pain and abandonment had come roaring in and burnt everything away like so much straw. She thought of the long weeks of silence and loneliness in which she'd tried to come to terms with the loss.

But Natalia had returned and she'd discovered the foundations were still there. They had survived that purgatory, alive if not wholly intact. It was for the sake of that survival that she finally leaned up, hovering over the other woman with her hands on either side of her face before she angled her head down and kissed her.

Immediately they both felt the shift. They had kissed in the living room. They had kissed on the porch. They had kissed in the hallway outside Natalia's bedroom. They had kissed in the kitchen, letting the breakfast burn. But this was new, this supine position, Olivia holding herself up and Natalia wrapping her arms round her shoulders to pull her down.

Olivia let her win, eventually, like always. Natalia sighed into the kiss as she felt the length of Olivia's torso press up against her. Gently, Olivia moved to the side so she was lying half on and half off Natalia, mindful of the baby. But she hooked one leg over and between Natalia's to maintain the intensity of the embrace, and then she kissed her again. It was long and slow and deep, and Natalia felt sure in that moment that she would have succumbed to it even if she'd never even considered loving Olivia.

But she had. She'd spent long, sleepless nights alone in this very bed, aching for Olivia just as Olivia had ached for her. She opened her mouth to say as much when the kiss finally broke. "I've been waiting for you all my life," was what tumbled from her lips. Olivia froze and Natalia blushed. "I mean...uh...that is..." she scrambled until Olivia placed a gentle finger over her lips.

"I've been waiting for you, too," she whispered, and Natalia fell a little bit deeper in love with her.

"Really?" Her eyes were wide, awe-struck. Olivia nodded.

"You are the love of my life," she murmured. "There's never been anyone...anyone quite like you."

Natalia hesitated, stuck for a moment between two possible responses. Finally she arched her eyebrows and grinned. "I'm one of a kind, sweetheart," she said, and it was exactly the right thing to do because Olivia laughed, and that laugh seemed to blow all the tension out of the room like a breeze blowing away a layer of cobwebs. Olivia settled down against her, leaning her head on her shoulder. She seemed relaxed at last.

"You think you're pretty funny, huh?" she said. Her arm snaked round her waist and her hand rested lightly against her side.

"Yep," Natalia replied, sounding about as pleased as she felt to get a laugh out of Olivia. She decided she couldn't let a minute go by without hearing that sound again. "So, this kid goes up to his grandfather one day and says 'Grandpa, can you do animal noises?'"

Olivia glanced up at her in disbelief. "You're not..." she began, but was interrupted by the rest of the joke.

"So the grandfather says 'Some, why, what do want me to do?'"

"Natalia-"

"And the little boy says: 'A frog,' and the grandpa says: 'Why a frog?'"

Olivia sighed indulgently. "All right, if you must," she conceded, laying her head back down on Natalia's shoulder. Natalia brought her hand up to stroke through her hair. It was soft and silky beneath her fingertips, and for a moment she forgot the punch line. She simply got lost in the sensation of touching, and the joy of being permitted to touch.

"So the kid answers: 'Because my papa said when you croak we're going to Disneyland.'"

Natalia looked down in surprise. "Hey," she said, sounding slightly aggrieved. "That was *my* line."

Olivia chuckled, low and deep in her throat. Natalia felt it viscerally, like a caress. "Sorry sweetie," Olivia replied, sounding completely unapologetic. "There isn't a bad joke in the world I don't know."

Natalia seemed to consider that. "True," she murmured at last. "Your jokes *are* terrible." She earned a swat on the arm for her trouble, but also another of those deep, throaty laughs, and that made it all worth it. There was a beat of comfortable silence, and then Olivia made to pull away. "Stay," Natalia said instinctively. Olivia froze.

"What do you mean?" she asked at last. Natalia swallowed hard.

What do you think I mean? was what she wanted to say, but she didn't. She couldn't pass the responsibility for naming this to Olivia. She'd done enough of that already.

"I mean," she said finally. "I want you to stay here with me tonight. I want you to get undressed and get into bed. I want to make love with you. I want to fall asleep in your arms and wake up beside you."

Olivia wouldn't meet her eyes. "You know if we do that we can't go back," she said softly.

"I don't want to go back," Natalia replied instantly. She leaned forward, grasping the other woman's slender wrist. "I want to go forward. I want to be with you."

Her tone was serious and earnest. Olivia blinked once, then twice. "You're sure? Last chance to change your mind..."

Natalia smiled, remembering that Olivia had said the exact same thing just before she and Emma had moved back to the farmhouse. She replied now the same way she had then. "Never." She swallowed against a sudden lump in her throat. "I need you, Olivia."

"You've got me," Olivia replied at once, wrapping Natalia up in her arms. "For as long as you want me."

"Is forever good for you?" Natalia asked. She felt Olivia smile against her cheek.

"I'll have Keira check my calendar," she quipped. Natalia didn't want to reward such a terrible line with a laugh, but she couldn't help it. It had been a very long time since she'd been able to resist laughing at Olivia's jokes, even – maybe especially – the bad ones.

"What are you doing for the next eight hours or so?" she said, dropping a kiss onto the exposed skin of her neck. Olivia shuddered in her arms.

"Loving you."

Her voice was so tender, so sincere, that it immediately drew tears to Natalia's eyes. She squeezed them shut quickly, unwilling to let Olivia see them. She had nearly lost all this. Because of fear and confusion and doubt, she had hurt this remarkable creature in her arms. And she'd come so close to failing to win her back. She'd never really let herself believe it before. She'd buoyed herself with a veneer of bravado and confidence. But now the connection between them seemed as fragile as gossamer and she longed to strengthen it, with her body as well as her heart.

Her lips found Olivia's neck again of their own accord. Olivia sighed and trembled in her arms, her head thrown back to allow Natalia to kiss wherever she wanted to kiss. Natalia accepted the implicit invitation, trailing her lips everywhere, from the pulse dancing in Olivia's throat, to her soft, delicate earlobes, to the curved line of her collarbone, and finally back up to her mouth where she was met by the other woman's eager kiss.

It was a different kiss again from every one that had come before. It contained the full spectrum of love and desire and promise with nothing held back. Every element blended together in perfect proportion to produce a pure, white light. "Oh God, I love you," Natalia

gasped between kisses, the need to draw breath subsumed by the more immediate urge to speak to her soon-to-be lover, to tell her exactly what she meant to her.

“Are you talking to me or the man upstairs?” Olivia murmured against her lips. Natalia could feel the faint hints of a smile there, though she couldn’t tell if it was indulgent or vaguely mocking. She decided to answer the question seriously, however Olivia had meant it.

“Both,” she said. She stroked Olivia’s hair back from her face, watching the subtle changes in her eyes. “Loving God is loving you. Loving you is loving God.” Her lips curled upwards. “All love comes from the same source. Any time we experience love for another person, we experience it through God. Without him, there’s nothing.”

For a long moment Olivia didn’t speak. Natalia could practically see the gears turning in her head as she tried to formulate an appropriate response. “There’s always a man involved with us,” she said at last. “What’s that all about?”

Natalia smiled. Well...an appropriate response was maybe going too far. A completely inappropriate response was much more Olivia. “Don’t ever change,” she whispered, pulling the other woman down for a kiss.

One kiss became two, and two became three, and three soon became too many to count. When Olivia finally pulled away, gasping, Natalia’s dress had ridden up to her thighs and her own shirt was half unbuttoned. “How did that happen?” she wondered aloud as she looked down at her shirt. Natalia grinned.

“Magic fingers,” she said, wiggling them briefly in the air. Olivia barked out a laugh.

“Promise?” One eyebrow jumped into her hairline as Natalia blushed. She bit her lip, battling her instinctive urge to back away from the direction her thoughts had taken. There was no need to hide from anything now, after all. She was allowed to think about loving Olivia – no embarrassment, no shame.

“I’ll do my best,” she said seriously.

Olivia’s face softened instantly. “This is okay, right?” She pulled her hand away from its position idly stoking Natalia’s now exposed thigh and pushed a lock of inky hair behind her ear. “You’re not scared, are you?”

Natalia swallowed. Honesty. Honesty was what was required. “I’m really scared,” she admitted, then wrapped her arms round Olivia’s shoulders to stop her from moving away. “But it’s not the kind of scared that makes me want to stop. It’s the kind of scared that

makes me want to keep going.” She paused briefly, biting her lip as she tried to put what she was feeling into words. “This is important to me,” she said at last. “This means *everything* to me. So...I think there’d be something wrong with me if I wasn’t afraid. But I don’t want to stop.” She looked into the depths of Olivia’s eyes, watching the emotions her words had evoked swirling beneath the surface, like the ocean below a glass-bottomed boat. “I never want to run away again.”

Olivia’s breath caught. “No more running,” she murmured. She leaned forward, but stopped just before their lips met. “Not for either of us,” she added, with a kind of quiet intensity that Natalia didn’t quite understand. And then they were kissing again. But this time there was no stopping to talk, and no interruptions.

It was nothing like being with a man. Everything was sleek and soft and gentle. And they fit together. Every curve seemed to mould happily into its twin as they melted into one another. Natalia didn’t think anything could compare to the sensation of running her hands across the smooth planes of Olivia’s back. She could feel the roll of muscles playing beneath her fingers as Olivia moved against her.

“You’re really strong,” Natalia murmured between kisses, pushing Olivia’s shirt from her shoulders to reveal the subtly defined muscles of her arms and stomach. Olivia trailed her lips along the line of Natalia’s jaw.

“I’ve been working out a lot in the last few months,” she replied absently. Natalia buried her fingers in her hair, drawing her up so she could kiss her again.

“Since when?” she asked when the kiss broke. A slow, wicked smile spread across Olivia’s face.

“Oh...January, I guess.” Natalia grinned.

“Around the time I started baking cookies like Martha Stewart on crack, right?”

Laughter bubbled up in Olivia’s chest and spilled out like the tinkle of bells. “I’m so glad our neuroses are complementary,” she said. And then she forgot how to say anything else because Natalia had reached out and curled her hands around her sides and was now stroking her thumbs in small circles against her stomach.

“You’re so beautiful,” Natalia murmured. “I can’t believe I didn’t feel like this the moment I met you...”

Olivia thought back to all of the days and months and years that had led them to this moment: Gus, the heart transplant, Natalia’s stubbornness, her own gratitude, the

farmhouse, the family, the love. "Even when we didn't like each other, we were always connected," she murmured. Natalia nodded.

"That's how I know," she whispered. Her eyes flickered up to meet the steady green gaze of the woman above her. "That you're the love of my life."

Olivia blinked once, then twice. A couple of wayward tears spilled onto her cheeks. Natalia reached up to brush them away, then her fingers curved behind her head and pulled her down for a kiss.

"Make love to me," she whispered against her lips. "Please. I want to be yours."

Olivia's head reared back as she let out a hiss of pure, unadulterated arousal. "Oh, yes," she moaned, sliding her hands under Natalia's dress to rest on her sides. She tugged at it, trying to pull it further up Natalia's body. "Help me," she murmured. "I need to see you, please..."

Natalia hushed her with a kiss and then arched her back a little, allowing Olivia to finally pull the dress up the length of her body. At last it was discarded, thrown on the floor to join Olivia's shirt. Olivia raked her eyes over the banquet of skin that was now revealed to her. Natalia shuddered, feeling the intensity of Olivia's gaze like a physical caress.

"You are...so beautiful," Olivia whispered reverently. Her fingers began to slide across the path her eyes had just traveled, raising little trails of goose flesh and making Natalia gasp.

"Off," she murmured, tugging at the waistband of Olivia's jeans. Olivia grinned.

"Demanding little thing, aren't you?" Natalia rolled her eyes.

"Just take them off." Olivia nodded, still grinning. She kissed a burning trail from Natalia's lips, along her jaw and down her neck, and then slid off the bed. Natalia whimpered at the loss, but Olivia silenced her with a look.

The sound of her fly unzipping sounded preternaturally loud in the stillness of the room. Natalia's eyes locked onto Olivia's hands, watching as they slowly pushed her jeans down the length of her toned, tanned legs. Finally Olivia stepped out of them and hesitated. Then, after seeming to come to a decision, she hooked her thumbs round the waistband of her panties and slowly drew them from her body as well.

Natalia gasped and flicked her eyes up, just in time to see Olivia's bra joining the rest of her clothes on the floor. Olivia stood there for a moment, hesitant but not embarrassed. It

was Natalia whose cheeks were burning, although most of that was caused by raw, naked *need*.

“Come here,” she begged, reaching out to Olivia. Their hands linked together, the bed dipped slightly, and then Olivia was molded to her side again. But this time it was different. Their kisses were somehow deeper, and everything was softer and warmer. Natalia wrapped her arms round Olivia’s shoulders as she rolled her onto her back.

She was struck by the sudden thought that she had been waiting her whole life for this.

Sex had never been unpleasant for her – not really. The first time had been awkward and slightly painful, but that was only to be expected. And Nicky had been gentle with her. After they were married he had been just as gentle and it had been...nice. Frank might have been nice too, if she hadn’t been so wracked with the guilt of using him and betraying Olivia throughout the whole experience.

This was different. She’d never be able to describe this as *nice*. That was too colorless a word to encompass the full spectrum of this moment; Olivia lying beneath her, cheeks pink, eyes glistening. She was so beautiful she took Natalia’s breath away.

“I love you so much,” she whispered. Olivia’s hands stroked up and down her back before hesitating on the clasp of her bra. Natalia nodded breathlessly. Olivia seemed to settle back more deeply against the pillows, and then made short work of the last remaining barriers between them. Natalia’s underwear joined the rest of their clothes on the floor. Natalia sucked in a short, sharp breath when they finally lay together, skin to skin with no obstacles at last. Olivia’s answering gasp was swallowed up by a new kiss. Natalia’s hands were everywhere. They’d never been closer than they were at this moment.

And it wasn’t enough.

Natalia was on fire now, hungry for the banquet of skin and lips and hair spread out before her like a beautiful dream. She wanted to consume her. She wanted to crawl inside her and never leave. She wanted to love her.

Olivia arched her back and Natalia suddenly became aware of the subtle rocking motion of her hips. “Please,” Olivia moaned. “Please...Natalia...”

And suddenly it didn’t matter that they’d never done this before, and that they didn’t really know what they were doing. It didn’t matter that they’d been dancing around this for months, afraid to step over that final line. All of that was buried beneath layers and layers of love, desire, and overwhelming need.

Natalia released a long, tremulous breath as she finally slid inside her lover. “Oh,” she moaned aloud, awe-struck. “I’ve wanted you...for so long...” She pressed more firmly against Olivia, whose hips continued to rock in a rhythm that was unmistakable. Natalia kissed her deeply, then trailed her lips to her ear. “You’re it, you know,” she whispered fervently. “I’m never going to do this with anyone else.” She pressed a delicate kiss to her lover’s earlobe and sighed. “You are *everything* to me.”

Olivia had lost the power of speech. Her body was taut, like an overstretched rubber band getting ready to snap. One fist clenched and unclenched at her side, messing up the blankets. Her other buried itself in Natalia’s hair, pulling her head back so she could kiss her.

Their bodies moved in concert, joined at the hips and the lips. Their legs tangled together. Olivia’s hands moved randomly from Natalia’s face to her hair, to her back, to her arms. One of Natalia’s arms was curled round Olivia’s shoulders, pulling her closer as they kissed, for what felt like hours. Sometimes gentle, sometimes heated, sometimes deep, each kiss blending into the next. They kissed as if to make up for every time they’d failed to kiss before; for all the times they’d held back, waiting for a moment that was perfect, that was right.

Waiting for *this* moment.

Olivia gasped against Natalia’s lips as her muscles clenched. She reared up, clinging desperately to her lover’s body, holding her tight as a wave of heat radiated from the inside out. For a moment she danced on the edge, and then, with a deep, throaty moan, she pitched over, trusting Natalia to catch her.

And catch her she did. “It’s okay,” she murmured, pulling Olivia tightly against her. “You’re okay, sweetie. I’m here.” She kissed her forehead, tasting the salt of sweat and the sweetness of skin. Olivia’s breath was coming in ragged gasps, and Natalia could feel her still rippling and shuddering beneath her hands.

“Of course I’m okay,” Olivia replied breathlessly, and it was only then that she realized she was crying. Grimacing, she wiped furiously at her eyes. Natalia just held her close, stroking her hair and kissing everywhere she could reach – her eyelids, her forehead, the bridge of her nose. Eventually, the tears slowed and stopped. Olivia wrapped her arms round Natalia’s shoulders and shivered ever so slightly at the sensation of the length of their bodies pressing against each other. “I don’t know why I did that,” she muttered, attempting a self-deprecating smirk and failing miserably.

Natalia smiled. “Because you’re happy?” she ventured.

Olivia's face softened. "I am," she whispered. She leaned up and caught Natalia's lips between hers again. It was a kiss designed to express love, devotion, joy. It wasn't designed to ignite. Not until Olivia, without breaking the kiss, gently pushed on Natalia's shoulders and rolled her onto her back.

"I want to make you happy too," she whispered. A rush of heat raced down Natalia's spine, followed by a chill that made her shudder in Olivia's arms.

"You do," she gasped as Olivia's hands trailed over her skin, stroking over her belly, tickling up her sides, caressing her breasts, before cupping her face and pulling her close for yet another kiss. This one was heated, possessive.

"You belong to me," Olivia whispered between kisses. Natalia nodded desperately, arching up against her, moaning at the delicious friction of skin on skin. Olivia pulled away, ignoring the whimper of loss that escaped Natalia's throat. "Say it."

For a moment Natalia wasn't sure what she meant. A flush of desperate desire flooded through her when she finally understood what Olivia wanted from her. "I belong to you," she said breathlessly. Olivia rewarded her with a deep kiss, full of love and want and passion.

"Please," Natalia begged when the kiss finally broke. "I need...Olivia, please..."

"Yes," Olivia hissed as she finally gave her what she wanted. Natalia's eyes flickered closed as her back arched. Her bottom lip was held between her teeth so hard it practically turned white.

"You're mine," Olivia whispered in her ear. Their bodies moved together like they were built to.

"I'm yours," Natalia moaned in reply. Pressure that had been building for months suddenly seemed unbearable. She whimpered, pressing herself against Olivia, arching up, straining, searching for more. Olivia buried her face in her throat and nipped there, behind her ear. Natalia wondered if the mark would be visible, and then just as quickly decided that she didn't care. So what if it was? She belonged to Olivia. And she didn't care anymore who knew it.

"Natalia."

The word penetrated the fog of pleasure and rising need. Natalia opened her eyes. Olivia was hovering above her, staring at her with a look of pure love shining from her face. "I belong to you too," she whispered.

It was too much. With a gasp, Natalia pulled Olivia against her, finding her mouth again as she began to shudder in her arms. Olivia held her firmly through every wave, stroking her hair, kissing her, pulling her close. "Oh God," Natalia gasped when she finally had breath to speak. "Oh Olivia..."

"I'm here," came the breathless reply, and Natalia suddenly realized that Olivia was crying again.

"Hey," she said gently, still breathing hard, heart hammering. Gently, she brushed the tears away with slightly trembling fingertips. Olivia shook her head.

"I just love you so much," she said, answering the unspoken question. Her lips found Natalia's again for long, languorous minutes.

Of all the kisses they'd shared in the week since they'd finally been together, Natalia thought she liked this one the best. It was warm and comforting, with a hint of remembered heat and the promise of more to come. Sometime. No rush.

When their hearts had stopped racing, Olivia slid down her body to press a series of butterfly kisses against her belly. "I love you," she whispered again.

Natalia smiled. "Are you talking to me or the baby?" she asked teasingly. But the smile slid from her face when she caught Olivia's eyes. Her gaze was serious, and there was something there she hadn't seen before.

"Both," Olivia said softly. She pressed another kiss to Natalia's belly, just as the baby began to kick again. They both laughed, and Olivia wrapped her arms round the small of Natalia's back, leaning her head against the swell of her abdomen.

"Both," she whispered again. Natalia combed her fingers through her hair, fighting a wave of giddiness.

Something was different. Natalia wasn't sure what it was, but she could sense the change in the air.

"Everything's going to be okay," she murmured, and for the first time she actually believed it. No doubts, no worries, no fears.

Pressing one last kiss to Natalia's belly, Olivia crawled back up and wrapped herself around her lover. "You're okay?" she whispered, dropping a kiss onto the top of her head. Natalia nodded.

"I'm more than okay." She trailed patterns absently on Olivia's back and then, when Olivia began to wriggle at the slight tickling sensation, changed to a gentle scratching motion.

"Oh yeah, that's good," Olivia moaned, arching her back. Natalia smirked.

"Mmm, I definitely like hearing that."

"Well don't worry; you'll be hearing it a lot."

A tiny bit of color spread from Natalia's chest to her cheeks. Without interrupting her impromptu back scratch, she smiled hesitantly. "So...I was...okay?" Her blush deepened when Olivia tilted her head back to look at her incredulously.

"All that gasping and moaning wasn't a good enough clue?" Natalia looked away. It was hard not to be worried about her 'performance', for lack of a better word. It was hardly a secret that Olivia was more experienced than her in bed. Or in the shower. Or over the desk in Olivia's office.

Whoa, and here come the hormones, Natalia thought as she nestled against Olivia's chest.

Olivia stroked her hair. "I love you," she said softly. "And you were perfect. Please, don't ever worry about that." Natalia glanced up and immediately got lost in Olivia's eyes. A slow smile spread across her face.

"Really?"

Olivia reached for Natalia's hand and placed it gently on her chest, above the flutter of her heart. "I've had my fair share of sex," she began awkwardly. The faintest hint of a blush rose on her cheeks as her eyes slid closed. "But that was...something else." Her breath came out in a rush. "I had no idea...no idea..."

Natalia let out a gentle sigh. "Neither did I," she murmured, and tilted her head up for a kiss.

Long minutes later, a breeze from the open window danced down Natalia's spine, making her shiver. A light sheen of sweat had cooled on her skin. The temperature outside had dropped hard – the days were still warm but the nights left no doubt that fall was coming.



“Come on,” Olivia murmured, slipping under the covers and pulling Natalia close to her again, wrapping one hand round her upper arm. Natalia settled down against her lover’s side, resting her head on one strong shoulder. Their hands tangled together on Olivia’s chest. After a moment, Natalia brought their joined fingers to her mouth and kissed them lovingly.

“I guess we should go to sleep,” she said reluctantly. “We have to see the nursery designer with Frank tomorrow.” Olivia grunted sleepily in acknowledgement.

“Yeah,” she muttered. “And I have to go see Doris before that.” She yawned. “She asked me to meet her for a coffee after breakfast. Said it was important.”

“All right, well, I guess I can meet you at Company afterwards,” Natalia replied. Olivia nodded.

“Goodnight.”

Natalia smiled. “Goodnight, querida.”

After one final kiss, Natalia lay there, listening to Olivia's heartbeat and breath for long, seemingly endless minutes. She could feel the exact moment that Olivia slid into sleep. Her muscles relaxed and a gentle sigh escaped her lips. Natalia pressed a kiss against her chest; just above the pale, milky scar that had, in effect, brought them together.

"Thank you for her, God," she whispered. Her arm slipped round Olivia's waist as she settled more comfortably against her side. Her eyes flickered closed as she let out a long, slow breath. "Thank you..."

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ACT 5

It had been a very long time since Olivia had woken up beside someone; years, in fact, since her bed had been home to anything but sleep and dreams.

But of course, this was not her bed. It was Natalia's bed, and it was Natalia who was slumbering beside her, warm and beautiful. And she *was* a dream, but a dream brought to magnificent life last night with every whispered word, every shallow breath, every gentle touch. Olivia pulled her closer, glorying in the sensation of being with her at last.

"I caught up," she whispered to her still sleeping girlfriend, then curved her hand round her abdomen and said it again, this time to the baby.

Something fundamental had changed, and she wasn't quite sure how it had happened. Being with Natalia fully for the first time had been the culmination of everything; the last, best puzzle piece that slotted into place and turned a confused jumble of color into a perfect picture. And, for the first time, she could see how the baby fitted in to that picture.

"You *will* be mine," she whispered to the baby, bending her head to rest on Natalia's belly. She lapsed into silence, imagining all the ways, big and small, that she would affect this baby's life and character. "You're going to have her eyes and her dimples. But you'll have my sense of humor." She smiled. "I don't think your mom's gonna like that. But I'll make sure of it."

"That's child abuse," Natalia murmured sleepily, running her fingers gently through her lover's hair. Olivia just smiled.

"Your mommy's being silly," she whispered, dropping a kiss onto her stomach before raising up to smile and claim Natalia's lips. "Good morning," she murmured into the kiss, rolling her over so she was on her back. Natalia gazed up at her with happy, shining eyes.

“You’re really mine,” she whispered in awe, trailing her fingers in an irregular pattern all over her forehead and cheeks, before grazing her lips. Olivia flicked out her tongue and drew one of the wandering fingertips into her mouth.

“And you’re really mine,” she murmured, before leaning forward to kiss her again. She drew a whimper from Natalia’s throat and was so enchanted by the sound that she immediately resolved to cause it again, and again. “I love you so much,” she moaned between kisses.

“I love you too,” Natalia managed to reply, before her breath was stolen by the sensation of Olivia’s mouth, warm and wet, on her throat. “Oh!” she moaned, tangling her fingers in her lover’s hair. She hissed when she felt the sharp edge of teeth against her skin. “Oh, Olivia..”

Olivia threw her head back, teeth slightly bared, with fire in her eyes. “I’m meeting Doris in two hours,” she whispered hotly. It took a few moments for her meaning to become clear to Natalia, who was breathing hard and aching for Olivia’s touch.

“Oh...right,” she managed at last, trying hard to keep the disappointment out of her voice, but failing utterly. “I...uh, I guess we need to get up...”

Olivia placed a finger over her lips to hush her, before leaning up to grace her with a blazing kiss. “I didn’t mean that,” she murmured in her lover’s ear, before taking the earlobe between her teeth and flicking her tongue over it. Natalia shuddered. “But we’ll have to be quick.”

Natalia opened her mouth to ask what she meant, but closed it again when Olivia grinned wickedly and began to kiss a burning trail down her body.

After all...she wasn’t *that* naïve.

~~*~*

Olivia attracted more than a few second glances as she bounced through the park, heading for the bench by the lake where she’d agreed to meet Doris. She wondered if she had *I just had sex with a beautiful woman* written on her forehead. Perhaps she just looked as happy as she felt.

Doris was waiting for her when she arrived at the bench, holding a bouquet of red roses and playing distractedly with her Blackberry. “Why good morning, Madam Mayor,” she said brightly, flopping down on the bench next to her. Doris jumped.

"Oh sure, give me a heart attack," she grumbled. Olivia just smiled. Not even Doris's snark could bring her down today.

"I know CPR," she said breezily, waving away her friend's concern like a heart attack would be a mere minor inconvenience. Doris regarded her with narrowed eyes.

"Somebody got laid last night," she said, suddenly sporting a grin. She nudged Olivia, who blushed.

"That obvious, huh?"

"It may as well be written on your forehead."

Olivia slapped her palm against her head, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like: "I knew it." Doris laughed, and laid the flowers she was holding down on the bench beside her.

"Well, good for you," she said. "It took you long enough."

Olivia cast her eyes out over the lake, stretching her limbs, feeling the pull of under-used muscles crying out in satisfaction. "Everything's going to be all right," she murmured. She knew it with a certainty she wasn't sure she could explain. The bond between her and Natalia was unbreakable now. It was beyond physical. It was deeper than that, almost...she hesitated over the word, but eventually was forced to concede that there was no better...spiritual.

And that bond included the baby too.

Doris regarded her curiously. "The baby?" she asked, seeming to read her mind. Olivia smiled.

"I'm going to love her," she said simply. "Just like you said." And she would. She had no doubts about that anymore. Everything that belonged to Natalia was hers now too, because they belonged to each other; fully, without barriers, without fear. At long last.

"I'm happy for you," Doris said quietly. Olivia flashed her a bright, wide smile.

"Thank you," she replied, and impulsively leaned forward to kiss her friend on the cheek. She moved a little closer, resting their sides together. She felt Doris relax against her, like some kind of tension had drained out of her. "And I've decided to tell Natalia my idea. For the baby's name."

Doris reached down to the ground, pulling up two previously unseen take-out coffees. “So what is this amazing name?” she asked, handing one over. Olivia smiled ruefully, taking a sip.

“Francesca,” she said.

Doris avoided spitting her coffee all over the place by sheer force of will. Instead she swallowed hard, so hard that tears sprang to her eyes. “Francesca?” she repeated incredulously. Olivia nodded.

“Francesca,” she confirmed.

Doris stared at her like she’d suddenly grown two heads. “Are you serious?” she spluttered. “You’re going to name the baby after Frank?”

Olivia winced. “No,” she said quickly, then shrugged. “I mean...that’s what I’ll tell *them*,” she clarified. “But that’s not what this is about.”

“Then what *is* it about?”

Olivia sighed, hoping she could articulate her thoughts in a way that made sense. It had only come together in her mind that morning, and she hadn’t said it out loud yet.

“When Natalia came back, she had everything all planned out,” she said quietly, staring out over the lake. “She wanted us to be this big happy family – me, and her, and Frank, raising the baby together. And you know how much I fought against that idea.”

Doris snorted. “Understatement of the century,” she murmured, earning a jab in the ribs from Olivia’s sharp elbow. “Ow!”

“You can take it,” Olivia quipped, but smiled to smooth the moment over. “Anyway,” she said, looking back out at the lake, “I’m done fighting. Fighting against it, anyway. Natalia and Emma and the baby...I want them all. I want what she wants. And the name...well, that’s just my way of saying that I’m okay with everything. That I’ve accepted it. Does that make sense?”

For a long moment, Doris was silent. But then she sighed, and an affectionate look spread over her face. “Yes,” she said at last. “I suppose it does. And for what it’s worth...” She swallowed, suddenly tense again. “I...I admire you. I really do.”

For a second or two it was awkward. Olivia wasn't quite sure where to look, unused to that much concentrated sincerity from her friend, the consummate politician. "Thank you," Olivia said at last, and the tension seemed to disappear from Doris's body again.

"I got Ashlee into Berkeley," she blurted suddenly. Olivia blinked.

"How did you manage that?" she asked. Doris shrugged.

"With a very large donation," she admitted, shaking her head. "You know there was a time not so long ago when I'd barely have let her out of my sight? And now here I am...letting her go."

There was a wistfulness in her voice; not quite sadness, but close. Olivia felt a sudden rush of affection for her friend, and impulsively linked their arms together. "But you won't be alone. You know that, right?"

Doris smiled tremulously. "Thank you," she said softly. "For everything. You...I..." She trailed off, blinking back tears. Olivia reached out, brushing them away.

"You don't have to say anything," she said gently, but Doris shook her head.

"I do," she insisted. "You and I never say what we mean. And maybe I'll never do this again, but I have to say it at least once." She swallowed hard. "I'm done hiding from the people I care about."

Slowly, Olivia nodded. "I understand," she murmured, and took Doris's hand. The Mayor drew in a deep breath.

"When I went on TV back in January to talk about Emma's presentation," she began softly, "I gave you every reason to hate me. What I did was just...well, it was sickening. It made *me* sick. With every word I hated myself a little bit more, but all I cared about was being *electable*." She spat the last word like it was poison. Olivia squeezed her hand.

"I get it," she said gently. "I understand. I forgave you for that a long time ago."

"I know," Doris said, managing a smile. "That's the thing about you, Olivia. You're incredibly forgiving. It's another of the things I admire about you, actually."

"You're making me blush," Olivia quipped. Doris swatted her on the arm.

"Could you let me get through my schmaltzy moment please?" she admonished. Olivia held up her hands.

"Sorry, sorry. Please, carry on. You were talking about how wonderful I am?" Doris rolled her eyes.

"I may have changed my mind," she grumbled, but then her face softened. "Okay, no I haven't," she admitted, then let the rest come out in a rush. "You are the best friend I've ever had. Because of you, I've started to show people who I really am. I'm getting a second chance with my daughter. I'm happy, for the first time in years. So...thank you. Thank you, Olivia."

They were still holding hands. Olivia blinked once, then twice, feeling tears welling up in her eyes. She let them come. "That's one of the nicest things anyone's ever said to me," she breathed, then reached out and threw her arms round Doris's neck. "Thank you," she murmured against her friend's ear. "Thank you."

Doris wrapped her own arms round Olivia, feeling her spirits soar. "It's just the truth," she said. "But don't expect compliments like that every day, okay?"

"Heaven forbid." Olivia pulled back, smiling. "You know...now that Natalia and I are together I seem to have an opening for the position of best friend..." She grinned. "Care to submit a résumé?"

For a moment, Doris couldn't speak. Her lip trembled slightly when she finally managed to reply. "Hmm. I don't have a lot of experience you know..." she said. Olivia grinned.

"But you have bags of potential."

Doris released a tremulous breath and laughed. "I'll have my people contact your people," she said. "Maybe we can set up a face to face sometime next week, and hash out the particulars of the position." Olivia pretended to consider that.

"Hmm. Okay. Tell you what – come over for dinner. You can talk to your predecessor, get a few tips on how to approach the job."

Doris laughed again. "All right," she said. "I'd love to."

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, sipping their rapidly chilling coffee. Eventually, Olivia glanced at her watch. "I've gotta go," she said, with some regret. "Natalia and Frank and I have an appointment with the nursery designer."

Doris swallowed the last of her coffee. "And I'm meeting Ashlee," she said. She coughed a little to clear her throat, then abruptly thrust the bouquet of roses into Olivia's arms. "These are for you," she said, blushing nearly the same color as the flowers.

Olivia smiled softly, touched. “Oh, Doris,” she murmured. If anything, Doris blushed harder. Olivia leaned forward and hugged her again, and then stood, holding out her hand. “Walk me to my car?” she offered. Doris nodded.

“All right,” she said. Olivia curled her arm round Doris’s waist, and smiled when she felt Doris reciprocating by hugging her shoulders.

“Let’s go, friend,” Olivia murmured. And with that they began to walk together towards the park gates, both of them harboring the same wonderful feeling that – despite the odds – things had actually worked out just fine.

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Night had fallen on the farmhouse. The sun was long gone, replaced by the moon and a canopy of twinkling stars that were always clearer out here in the country than in town. Natalia had finally given in and allowed Olivia to turn on the heating in the evenings, so the house was warm and bright. Light streamed from nearly every window. Under normal circumstances Natalia would have been tramping round the house turning off unnecessary lights, but she was far too busy. After all, there was one final piece of unfinished business.

“Olivia!” Natalia called over her shoulder. “Do you think Francesca would like this...thing...in her room?”

Olivia appeared in the doorway, carrying an armful of clothes on hangers and depositing them in the closet. She grunted when she saw what Natalia was looking at. It was the piece of modern art that Natalia had complained about so much when she’d first moved in, and which she’d agreed to keep in her bedroom after much negotiation.

“Sure,” she said. “I’d like her to pick up my taste in art, actually.”

Natalia’s eyes widened. “You know, I think it’s growing on me,” she replied quickly. Olivia laughed warmly.

“I thought you might say that,” she murmured, sidling up behind her girlfriend and wrapping her arms round her waist. She splayed her fingers over her belly, and immediately the baby kicked. “Oh hey there, Sweetpea,” she said, leaning down and kissing Natalia’s neck.

“Sweetpea?” she asked, shivering slightly. Olivia kissed a trail up to her ear.

“Don’t you like it?” she murmured. “She needs a sweet nickname, don’t you think? To go with our Jellybean.”

Natalia laughed. "True," she agreed, leaning back against Olivia with a happy sigh. "Have you moved all your stuff yet?"

Olivia nodded. "That was the last of it," she said. "I'm all moved in."

Natalia turned silently in the circle of her arms. "Finally," she murmured, pushing up on her tiptoes to capture Olivia's lips in a kiss. "You are one hell of a stubborn woman."

"That's why you love me," Olivia whispered and kissed her again for long, happy minutes, her hands framing her face and curling into her hair.

"Mommy! Natalia!"

They broke apart in an instant, both rushing to the doorway. "Emma?" Olivia called, a tiny bit of panic leaking into her voice before Natalia put a hand on the small of her back to steady her.

Emma emerged from her room with tears streaming down her cheeks. "I lost it," she gasped, rushing up to her mommies and throwing herself against Natalia, wrapping herself round her legs.

Olivia knelt down and stroked her hair. "Lost what, baby?" she asked. Emma sniffled.

"The magic quarter," she mumbled miserably. Natalia let out a little gasp.

"Oh..." she breathed, reaching down and covering Olivia's hand with her own where it rested on Emma's head. "Then we'll just have to help you look for it, won't we?"

Emma looked up at her with eyes full of hope. "Really?"

"Of course we will," Olivia assured her, while Natalia nodded. "Why don't you go and check the living room, and Natalia and I can look in your bedroom?"

Emma thundered down the stairs, desperate to begin the search. Natalia took a few steps towards Emma's room.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Olivia asked. Natalia frowned, confused.

"Uh...going to look for Emma's quarter?" she offered. Olivia smiled and shook her head as she rummaged in her pocket.

"This can be her 'magic quarter,'" she said, producing a shiny coin. To her surprise, Natalia pursed her lips in disapproval.

"She wants the coin Rafe gave her," she said firmly, moving towards Emma's room again. Olivia followed her, perplexed.

"It's not like she'd know," she argued, but Natalia just shook her head.

"If a woman had ten silver coins and lost one, would she not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she found it?" she said. Olivia's brow creased in a frown.

"You've lost me," she admitted.

Natalia sighed. "It's the parable of the lost coin," she explained, becoming more and more animated as she went on. "If you lose something precious, you don't just forget about it. You don't give up on it. You search for it and you fight for it. Even if you don't really deserve it..." She trailed off, biting her lip. Olivia stepped forward and placed her hands gently on her girlfriend's shoulders.

"All right, I understand," she said carefully. She hesitated for a brief moment, then flashed a small smile. "And for what it's worth...I'm glad you're more persistent than I am. I'm glad this is where we ended up."

Natalia smiled, dimples appearing in her blushing cheeks. "Oh, Olivia," she breathed. "This isn't the end." She leaned forward to peck her girlfriend's lips; sweetly, though briefly. When she spoke again her voice was quiet, but as sure as Olivia had ever heard it. "This is the beginning, querida. Just the beginning."

Olivia let out a long, slow breath, and suddenly found herself blinking back tears. "I love you," she murmured, sliding her hands down Natalia's arms and pulling her close for a fierce hug.

"I love you too," Natalia replied, holding Olivia just as tightly. They stood together for a long time, just drinking in the intoxicating sensation of being together.

And then, through the last of her tears, Olivia spotted the glint of light on metal under the desk in the far corner of the room. "Oh," she said. "I think I found it."

Natalia released her, and together they went to investigate what Olivia had seen. Natalia picked it up, smiling. "This is it," she said. "Emma will be so happy!"

Olivia took the coin from her. "I think I'll have a hole drilled in it," she murmured. "And buy her a chain, so she can keep it round her neck."

Natalia leaned forward, presenting her lips for a kiss. "That's just about the sweetest thing I've ever heard," she whispered. "Come on. Let's go and tell her."

Olivia watched her go. "Coming," she called, but she didn't move. She looked around her daughter's bedroom for a moment, imagining what the baby's room would look like, and thinking of all the days and nights stretching out ahead of them all, in this house, with this family. Natalia was right.

This was just the beginning.

"Olivia!" Natalia shouted from downstairs. "Hurry up! We're going to watch a movie and Emma says you can choose."

Olivia laughed, and looked down at the coin that she was still clasping carefully in her hand. "All right," she yelled back. "I'm coming."

And with that, she turned off the light in Emma's room and went to join her family.

The End

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A Helping Hand

By ladyvictory

ACT 1

Doris Wolfe was late. She knew it even before she glanced down at her watch as she slipped silently, and hopefully stealthily, into her office and ran smack-dab into her one o'clock appointment. Her very impatient, very irritated one o'clock appointment. Her very impatient, very irritated, very *gay*, one o'clock appointment. Wincing, she chastised herself; she had no way of knowing if the tall, thin man sitting in her office tapping his obviously

pricey leather ankle-boots was gay. There were plenty of men who liked tan suede heeled footwear... and Burberry cardigan sweater vests with matching bags... and pink button-down shirts tucked half-in, half-out of their designer jeans... Nope, this man could definitely be straight. More than anyone, she should've known better than to judge a book by its cover; sometimes the inside was not at all what was pictured on the front.

"Mayor Wolfe?" The man - Andre Graham, if she remembered correctly - spoke as his head whipped around, a shrewd look in his powder-blue eyes, which peeked over pink-frosted Chanel glasses. "Oh honey, I see we have a lot of work to do!"

And sometimes the cover was an isomorphic display of the contents of the pages. Looking down at herself, Doris frowned. She liked this outfit, especially the blazer; it was her favorite. "No need to be upset, darling. My job is to turn frowns upside down. Yours and, more importantly, your public's."

"Mr. Graham..." she began, shaking off the initial shock of his bluntness and stepping forward. He had come highly recommended, after all. She was quickly cut off.

"Andre, please, no need to be formal. We are going to get *real* close over the next few weeks."

"You don't say?" she deadpanned, feeling a headache worming its way between her eyes. It was definitely going to be a *long* day.

"Oh yes, I certainly do. As of right now, I am your frontal lobe; any decisions that affect your public image have to come through me first."

Blue eyes met blue in a battle of wills and, after a full minute, Doris quirked an eyebrow.

"They tell me you're good at what you do, Mr. Graham," she said, doubtfully.

"Andre, and I'm the best. I'm the Johnnie Cochran of PR," he replied, smirking arrogantly. Still seated, he offered her his hand.

"You'd better be," she muttered, accepting it and shaking firmly. "Well then, let's get to work."

~~*~*

"Hmmm... what about this one?" Natalia asked, holding a dark frock up against her body. Olivia winced but said nothing. She wanted desperately to scream that the sorry excuse for a dress wouldn't do her lover's body justice, but knew that in the end, it really didn't

matter. She would find Natalia beautiful no matter what she wore for Halloween, even if it was a piece of cloth that made a potato sack look like designer fashion.

“No, huh?”

“You’ll be beautiful no matter what you wear,” Olivia responded honestly, reaching an arm out as she moved forward, gently taking the sad excuse for a costume away from her lover and tossing it aside before moving in close. Looking around with exaggerated care to make sure they were alone, she leaned down and was rewarded with a kiss.

“Olivia!” Natalia giggled, snuggling into the embrace and gazing up at her lover through dark lashes. “I don’t want to be beautiful *despite* my outfit! I... I want to look nice...” she said, suddenly turning shy and hiding her face against her lover’s neck. “Well, as nice as possible considering I’m the size of a house.”

“Ha! You are *not* the size of a house, sweetheart. A small studio apartment, maybe, but a whole house? Nah-oof!”

“Hey, watch it lady!” Natalia growled playfully, poking the taller woman in the ribs. Pulling back, she shook her head, a grin ruining her façade of fake anger. “Keep that up and you sleep on the porch tonight.”

“Of course, what I meant to say was that you’ve never looked thinner.” Olivia teased, arms coming around to hold her partner close. “You always look good.” Taking a deep, noisy of the smaller woman’s hair, Olivia let out an exaggerated moan. “Smell good too. Lavender and vanilla, my favorite.”

“Uh huh; nice recovery,” the Latina muttered, smiling against the older woman’s shoulder.

“Maybe we should see how Emma and Frank are doing?” Natalia suggested reluctantly after a few moments. She didn’t want to move, loathe to give up the feeling of warmth and completeness she found in Olivia’s arms, but knew that if they didn’t they would end up without costumes.

“Sure,” Olivia agreed easily, eager to get her lover away from the hideous outfits she had been contemplating. If worst came to worst, she would fashion the younger woman a toga out of the bed sheets... The thought stopped Olivia short, and she had to force herself to breath normally as her girlfriend led her out of the shop. Natalia... in a toga... and nothing else... Shaking her head, the older woman brought herself back to reality.

“Right, let’s go find them before Em cons him into buying her a puppy...”

They found Frank and Emma three shops over in the toy store, the back of which had been converted into a children's costume emporium. Frank sat rather awkwardly in a tiny chair outside the dressing stalls, a small pile of colorful clothes on his lap. He looked vaguely frazzled, hair unkempt as if he had been running his hands through it in frustration. Despite, or maybe *because*, of any frustration at having him around constantly, Olivia couldn't help but chuckle at the sight. At the sound the man jerked around in his seat, face immediately filling with gratitude. "Oh thank God," he all but whimpered, standing and clutching the clothes in a white knuckled grip that spoke of exhausted desperation. "She is definitely a Spencer," he said by way of explanation to the question reflected in two sets of amused eyes.

Before either woman could comment, a curtain pulled back revealing the interior of one of the dressing stalls, and out stepped their daughter, smiling widely. "Whadda you think?"

"Oh, honey! You are too precious for words," Natalia breathed, moving forward and kneeling in front of the girl as best she could. Emma beamed, supremely proud of herself for picking out her own costume. She was dressed, rather appropriately both her mothers thought, as an angel in a white dress with gold trim, with a pair of white-feathered wings on her back, and a halo attached to a gold-glitter head band. "My little Angel!"

"You like it?" the girl asked, obviously fishing for compliments. Olivia snorted, moving forward and softly tugging on her daughter's ponytail.

"Yeah, Jellybean, we like it. Good choice," she indulged, reaching down and offering her lover a hand up.

Smiling up at her and accepting her hand, Natalia rose slowly to her feet, groaning as her back twinged. Frowning with concern, Olivia squeezed the shorter woman's hand. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just sore. I can't wait for her to come, so I can see my feet again!"

"Is there anything I can do?" Frank asked, moving forward, stopping himself from reaching out for his ex-fiancée after a pointed look from Olivia.

"I'm fine," Natalia assured, oblivious to the exchange. "She'll be here soon enough, and this pain'll be a distant memory..."

"Can we get ice cream?" Emma interrupted, batting her eyes winningly at her parents.

Frank chuckled, discarding the remaining costumes on the chair.

“That’s my cue to get out of here. You ladies have a good day, and, Happy Halloween,” he said, backing away slowly, acting almost as if he were afraid a sudden move might incite the women into asking him to stay. It seemed to Olivia, however, that he was moving slow enough so that he could return at a moment’s notice should anyone suggest he join them for the afternoon.

“Happy Halloween!” Natalia and Emma said together, giggling.

“Bye-bye Frankie,” Olivia called, waving, before turning back to her family. She thought she heard the man sigh, but ignored it; she wouldn’t raise a fuss about him being around, but she wouldn’t invite him either. “And no, we can’t get ice cream.”

“But, it was just my birthday...” Emma tried again, using her best pout.

“And that’s why you had the biggest birthday party that any nine year old has ever had,” Olivia countered, rolling her eyes. “Besides, you’ll have so many sweets tonight you won’t know what to do with them. That should be enough.”

“Ooooookay...” the girl sighed, dragging her feet as they made their way to the counter.

“Jeez; where does she get this from?” her mother grumbled, shaking her head.

“I believe that would be you,” Natalia replied playfully, linking their arms together. Emma turned back and looked at her non-existent watch impatiently. “Yup, definitely you.”

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Doris Wolfe felt the other woman’s stare like an accusation, burning into her skin through the flimsy protection of her clothing. “Look, Jamanda... it’s nothing *personal*, all right?” the older woman tried, raising her hands in a placating manner and approaching her agitated lover as if she were a cornered animal. Jamanda only glared, and for a moment Doris feared for the objects on her coffee table; she was beginning to reevaluate the wisdom of having this particular discussion in her home, near her fragile, mostly beloved collection of possessions.

“I just don’t think—”

“*You* don’t think, Doris, or... or that *man*?” the younger woman interrupted pointedly, even as she hugged her middle defensively. “Because it seems like not that long ago you were introducing me to your daughter, and-and taking me to weddings as your date. So, please, explain to me how this is *your* idea?”

“Look,” the Mayor tried again, blowing out a frustrated breath. “I’m not breaking up with you - Jesus that sounds so juvenile.”

“Juvenile? Now I’m being immature?”

“No, damn it, that’s not what I meant! Look, I’m not *ending* things between us, okay? I just, I think we need to... slow down a bit.”

“How much more *slow* can we get? Christ, it took us this long to move forward from secret meetings in hotel rooms and quickies in my car.” The older woman had the good grace to blush at that, coughing to cover her embarrassment. “We finally get past all your fear, and... what, we have to go back to sneaking around? Because some man thinks I’m bad for your image?” Jamanda spat, flames practically shooting from her eyes as she paced jerkily along the length of the room.

“Not sneaking around, sweetie, just...” The blue-eyed woman tried again, her voice a little hoarse with the desperation of wanting her lover to understand. “Andre says I need to focus on making myself more approachable, presenting myself as ‘Doris Wolfe, woman of the people.’ He thinks pushing my sexuality into the public sphere will alienate large portions of the more conservative voting demographic, at least, for now.”

Jamanda made a disgusted sound at the back of her throat and rolled her eyes, but said nothing. Doris took this as a good sign and moved forward to gently grasp her lover’s upper arms, pulling their bodies together so she could embrace her loosely. After a few moments of resisting, the bartender relaxed into her, sighing.

“It won’t be forever, all right?” Doris began again softly. “He says that after a few months, maybe six, I can start introducing-” She was quickly interrupted.

“Six months!” the younger woman exclaimed, breaking free and stepping back. “You can’t be serious!” Dark eyes flashed, and the Mayor felt her own temper flaring.

“I don’t think a little patience is too much to ask for here.”

“There’s a difference between patience and denial, Doris.”

“I’m not denying anything, *Jamanda*,” the politician ground out through clenched teeth.

“He tells me this is the right move for me to make professionally, and I don’t see the harm. He’s the best at what he does.”

They stared at each other silently, for long moments, before Jamanda finally spoke. When she did, her voice was soft and low, pleading. "Doris, I... I can't go back to being a dirty little secret..."

"You're not! It's not about you, I promise. I just-I need to start thinking about the election *now*, start assuring the vote."

"Doris," Jamanda tried again. She moved forward, taking the other woman's hands in her own, bringing them to her face and kissing the knuckles. "What we have, it could be something... something real, meaningful..."

"I think so too! That's why, after a few months, we can start slow, attend events together, be seen in public..."

The younger woman sighed, eyes filling with tears. "I can't take hiding who I am, who we are together anymore. We won't survive the six months, baby. I'll get restless, stifled, and you'll get resentful, and it'll end... so badly," she murmured, whispering the last words. It sounded almost as if she had done this all before.

"But, I have to think about my career," Doris insisted, seeing their relationship curling and blackening, but not wanting to believe this was it.

Jamanda let go of her hands and moved back, shaking her head sadly. "I won't pretend not to know you when I see you in public, if we're together. Not when I want you to hold me, not when I want to kiss you."

"Are you forcing me to choose, you or my job?" The Mayor asked, voice suddenly bland and steady, almost pleasant; it was like the calm before the storm. Jamanda laughed, though the sound was hollow.

"No, you've already made the choice. I'm just making you see that." She walked forward, into Doris's personal space. Sliding a hand up, she cupped Doris' cheek, urging her closer, until they were breathing the same air. "Remember, this was *your* choice," she whispered, leaning forward and kissing her lover slowly, sweetly. Pulling back, she swallowed hard, fighting against the tears. "Goodbye."

And before Doris could respond, she was gone.

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In the end, after another half hour of shopping without luck, they had unanimously decided to call it quits and go home, still having a few important chores to get done before

the evening came. Knowing her lover would be disappointed about not dressing up, Olivia had promised her that next year they would go shopping early. Natalia had just smiled enigmatically and said she would work with what she had. When they had returned home, the smaller woman had disappeared into the bedroom stealthily, chasing her lover away and down the stairs when she tried to come in. "Time to make pumpkin cookies!" she had announced, distracting both her girls successfully.

"How long is this gonna take?" Emma asked impatiently, bouncing in place at the end of the counter. She had insisted on wearing her Halloween costume all day, and thus had been banished to the opposite side of the room when the orange food coloring had been introduced to the project. To make up for that, she had been promised a cookie from the first batch.

"Not too much longer, sweetie," Natalia replied for what must have been the hundredth time in the last five minutes, her patience seemingly infinite. Olivia observed the scene, hidden from view in the doorway, amused by her daughter's eagerness and enjoying the normalcy of the moment the rest of her family was sharing. Her family; even the thought of it made her feel warm and relaxed.

"This is taking forever!" Emma groaned, shuffling from foot to foot, the movements causing the ivory-white feathers on her back to rustle.

The sound of Duran Duran's "Hungry Like the Wolf" pulled Olivia back to reality, and she smirked like she did every time the ring-tone played. Doris would probably roll her eyes and grumble if she knew, and the thought of her friend's reaction always made her chuckle. Moving into the living room, she retrieved her phone from the coffee table and pressed the green button. "What can I do for you, Madam Mayor?"

"Olivia..." came the soft, hesitant voice, and immediately the hotelier was serious, a frown creasing her forehead.

"Doris? Are you all right?"

"I... I'm fine," was the response, but the thickness of the other woman's voice made it obvious she had been crying, and Olivia felt her heart clench.

"What's wrong?"

"I... she... Jamanda... she left me, Olivia..."

Olivia's breath caught in her throat. "Crap..."

“Yeah... Do you...can I talk to you?”

“Uh... yeah, sure; just gimme a sec.”

Walking back into the kitchen, Olivia covered the phone with one hand and motioned to Natalia with her head. The smaller woman wiped her hands on a dish towel and made her way over. “Doris just got dumped,” she whispered without preamble.

“Oh no!” the dark-haired woman gasped, hand flying up to cover her mouth.

“Yeah, I’m going to take this upstairs. Send Em if you need me; I don’t want you climbing if you don’t have to, okay?” Natalia just rolled her eyes but nodded, used to her lover’s over-protectiveness by now.

“Ask her if she wants to come trick-or-treating.”

Olivia snorted. “I doubt getting kicked to the curb is going to make her eager to parade around town and beg for candy.” “Olivia.” Natalia’s voice was stern. “Just ask.”

Sighing, the taller woman nodded, leaning forward for a kiss, which she was easily given. She wouldn’t consciously admit it to herself, but deep down she needed the reassurance of her lover’s touch. The sound of her friend’s heart-broken voice brought her back to where she had been not too long ago, lost and alone. She needed a reminder that Natalia was there, wasn’t an illusion.

“Yes dear,” she drawled as they broke apart, spinning away and power-walking to avoid the dish towel snapped at her. She took the stairs two at a time, mind racing, trying to think of what to say.

“Okay, I’m here. Tell me what happened.” Olivia spoke into the phone, walking into the master bedroom, but stopping short as she spied something very out of place. A large white bag sat on her side of the bed with a card on top of it, her name written out in Natalia’s unmistakable script. Approaching the bed, she opened the bag, unable to help the smirk when she peeked inside and saw the contents. Pushing the bag aside, she cradled the phone between her shoulder and ear and grabbed the card, tearing the envelope open. It read simply, ‘Couldn’t resist, hope you like it. Love, N.’

“This is partially your fault, you know,” Doris began, dragging Olivia back to reality, her tone not a bit accusatory, instead just resigned. “Damn Evil Image Consultant from hell...”

By the time the Mayor finished her story, Olivia was wincing with guilt, biting her lip to keep from apologizing for the millionth time. If she had thought for a second her friend

couldn't handle the opinionated PR specialist, she wouldn't have suggested him to her. It was a new friendship, and she sometimes forgot that, despite her sarcasm, bluster and larger-than-life persona, Doris Wolfe was sensitive and easily wounded. She personally would have just told the man to find a way to integrate her sexuality into her new image, insisting that the people would appreciate honesty over sugar-coating.

But she was never one to hide who she was while, conversely, Doris's public persona was based entirely on what she thought others wanted her to be. They would have to work on that; she would have to help the other woman be unapologetic of her true self. If anyone had told her six months ago that she would be helping Doris Wolfe come out of the closet, she would have laughed in their face. Still, the other woman had been there for her when she'd needed her, supporting her and telling her it would be all right. Olivia owed it to her to be there in return.

"Doris, I..."

"Please don't apologize again, Olivia, it's getting tiresome." The Mayor sighed, sounding defeated.

"No, I wasn't going to. I mean, I *am* sorry, but... Listen, I'll talk to Andre, okay? You just have to know how to talk to him. He obviously misunderstood what his place is, so we'll just have to make sure to remind him who's paying who." The businesswoman practically growled, and the other woman chuckled thickly.

"We'll get him straightened out... so to speak."

"You... do you think I was wrong? Would you have done it differently?" Doris asked suddenly, her voice small and unsure.

Olivia froze for a moment, before forcing herself to relax and answer honestly. "Look, Doris, what I would've done doesn't really matter. What *does* matter is that you worked so damn hard to get where you are; you put everything you had into it. If she can't understand how much a part of you being Mayor is, how important it is, then she didn't really know you. And you deserve to be with someone who can support you even if they don't necessarily agree with you."

"Yeah, I... I suppose...you're right..."

"Pfft, that's right I'm right! I'm Olivia Freakin' Spencer; I'm *always* right!"

"Except when you're not."

“Which isn’t the case, at least not here.”

Doris was silent for long moments, but the other woman could hear her breathing over the phone. Finally the politician sighed again, a slow, even release of air.

“Okay,” she said, and Olivia could almost see her nodding, pulling herself together. “Olivia... thank you. I didn’t mean to unload on you like that.”

“No problem, that’s what friends are for. Or, so I’m told,” the green-eyed woman replied, joking to try and chase away the lump of emotion in her throat.

“Ha, right! I think I read that in a book somewhere.” Doris acknowledged the shift in mood, a smile evident in her voice. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

In the ensuing silence Olivia’s mind wandered back to the bag in front of her, which she grabbed after a few moments and upended onto the bed so that she could thoroughly inspect the contents.

“Well then, I think it time for me to shut up...” Doris said reluctantly, snapping the businesswoman’s attention back to their conversation again. “So, I’ll... talk to you later, I guess.”

“Oh, wait! Natalia wanted me to ask if you want to come trick-or-treating with us tonight.”

“Oh, Olivia, I don’t know...”

“Free candy and a chance to be someone you’re not for a night... come on, who *doesn’t* love Halloween? Plus, Natalia and Emma are baking up a few batches of her famous pumpkin cookies...” she enticed, fingers toying with her loot absently.

“Oh. all right.”

“Well that was easier than I thought it would be.”

“It was the promise of your lady friend’s cookies that did it,” Doris quipped, and Olivia snorted.

“So, what are you gonna be?” the hotelier asked after a moment, truly curious. Perhaps, if the outfit was sexy enough and a certain someone just happened to be out and about, that someone would be reminded of what she was missing...

"Wouldn't you like to know? You'll see when I get there," the Mayor replied, chuckling.

"Awww, come oooooon! Gimme a hint?"

"Don't whine, Olivia, it's unbecoming."

"Sigh, fine, don't tell me. You, here, at six. Don't be late."

"Okay, Tarzan, see you then."

"That would make you the chimp," Olivia teased, smiling, relieved her friend would be all right.

"And you a man," Doris retorted. "See you in a bit, Spencer."

"See you soon, Wolfe."

When Olivia reentered the kitchen, she found an extra person sitting patiently at the table. Taking one look at the newest arrival, Olivia burst into loud, uncontrollable laughter, so overcome that she had to hold on to the edge of the counter to keep upright.

"What?" Clarissa Marler asked, frowning in confusion. Chuckling, Natalia rolled her eyes.

"Nothing, honey, Olivia's just rude," she chided, swatting her lover as she walked by with cellophane wrap for the cookies.

"What... oh man, *who* are you supposed to be?" Olivia giggled, trying to restrain herself.

Clarissa sniffed, clearly annoyed. Standing, the girl picked up her briefcase and did a little spin, showing off her black pencil skirt and blaringly loud black, red, and white blazer. "You can't tell?" she asked, a little disappointed.

Olivia took a deep breath and wiped her eyes. "Oh, no, I think I got it. But you can tell me if you like."

"I'm Mayor Wolfe!" the girl exclaimed, proud of herself. "My mommy said I could be Mayor some day if I wanted, but I didn't want to wait."

"That is both the most adorable and most shrewd thing I have ever heard," Olivia commented, eyes narrowing in thought for a moment. "Jellybean, I think mini-Wolfe here is going to give you a run for your money when you rule the world."

"We're gonna to do it together," the girl replied easily, smiling cheekily at her mother, by now used to the odd comments about her conquering the globe.

"Of course, why didn't I think of that?" Olivia asked, rolling her eyes.

Inching her way to the cooling rack, the businesswoman reached forward, mouth watering at the scents teasing her nose. Surely, her lover wouldn't notice if *one* cookie went missing.

"Don't even think about it," Natalia said evenly, her back turned to the still-hot confections and her guilty-looking partner. "Those are for the hosts!"

"Only you would take gifts to give to people when *you're* the one trick or treating!" Olivia muttered, annoyed but backing off. "All right then, who wants to help decorate candy buckets?"

"Oh, oh, me!" the two girls exclaimed, jumping up and down excitedly.

"Excellent. To the living room!" Olivia shouted, turning and jogging back through the door.

"To the living room!" they repeated, dashing after her.

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Anna Li was bored. She knew she should be listening more attentively to the gruff voice detailing instructions and information to her over the phone, but she found herself sitting behind the wheel of her car, holding back a yawn and idly wondering what she would have for lunch instead. Part of her apathy towards the man on the other end was the fact that they had been over this before, many times, in preparation for her placement in Springfield.

"Are you listening to me, Li?" the voice barked, and she sighed quietly, rolling her eyes and adjusting her sunglasses on her face.

"Of course. I could repeat back the last five minutes if you'd like," she replied, frowning as she looked around the parking lot. She had been not-so-patiently waiting for her contact to stop talking so that she could commence with the next part of the operation, but it looked as if she would have to, once again, reassure him that she was up to the task before her.

"Make light of my concerns if you want, *Anna*, but you'll find out soon enough that small towns don't necessarily mean small problems. You're going to have to play this one real smart if you're going to succeed," was the reply, and she nodded, mouthing the words along with him, having heard this, too, many times.

"If you didn't think I was qualified, I wouldn't be here," she reminded him flatly, wanting to get on with it.

"Credentials and training don't make the man," he countered readily, tone fierce.

"Fortunately for you, in this case, not only do I have experience, I'm no *man*." Spotting a figure approaching in the distance, she closed her eyes briefly in relief.

"Make sure to keep in close contact with my partner."

"My new boss is here; I have to go. I'll be in touch. Happy Halloween." She smirked, hanging up on him before he could reply. She would hear about it later, but the little power-play was well worth it. "Trick or Treat, Chief Cooper," she murmured to herself.

Getting out of her car, Anna stretched mightily, relaxing her posture to one of hesitant friendliness as the man reached her, a perfect combination that would undoubtedly lead him to let down his guard. Frank Achilles Cooper Jr., new Chief of Police in Springfield. Father: Frank "Buzz" Cooper Sr., sister: Harley Cooper-Aitoro, daughter: Marina Cooper, formerly Camalleti, and, more importantly, adopted grandson: Henry Cooper Camalleti.

"You Anna Li?" the man asked, grabbing her hand and shaking it before she could answer.

"Uh, yeah. Chief Cooper, right?" she asked, frowning and feigning an air of ignorance.

"That'd be me. Sorry I'm late; I had some business with my ex-fiancée and her family," he replied, shrugging as if to say, *Women*.

Reviewing her mental file, Anna frowned ever so slightly. Ex-fiancée: Natalia Rivera, left him at the altar. But who was her family? And more importantly, why was she still involved in Chief Cooper's daily life? As far as the operative knew, the son was now out of the picture and there were no concrete ties to the Coopers. She would have to tell her contact that his intel was incomplete.

Shaking her head, she focused on the task at hand, namely, gaining the trust of her new employer. Schooling her expression to appear sympathetic and relieved, she laughed a little. "Oh, I understand, believe me," she assured, squeezing the hand still in hers and nodding in what she hoped looked like sympathy. "No harm done." Letting go of Frank's hand, she inclined her head. "If you don't find it to be too much trouble, though, I'd absolutely love a tour."

"Of course! Let me just grab some papers from the office, and then I'll take you to the best coffee in town. I always work better over at Company anyway," he said amicably, clapping

her on the shoulder and moving forward to lead the way into the police station. Rolling her eyes behind his back, Anna held back a sigh. It was going to be a *long* day...

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Checking herself over one last time and using the glass of the china cabinet as a mirror to put the finishing touches on her crimson lipstick, Olivia blew an air-kiss to her reflection, grinning in satisfaction. Skin tight, almost indecently short red dress? Check. Red cape and pitchfork? Check. Horns and matching tail? Check. Four inch black pumps that drove her lover crazy? Double check.

Clicking her heels together almost giddily, she made her way to the living room, chuckling at the sight of Emma and Clarissa sitting on the edge of the couch, watching SpongeBob as if he held the secrets to the universe. "Em, sweetie, why don't you go get Natalia? Doris and your cousins should be here soon." Nodding, the girl got up and scurried to the bottom of the stairs.

"Natalia! Mommy says hurry up cuz Doris and Jonathan and Sarah are gonna be here soon!" Emma shouted, tapping her little foot impatiently and casting furtive glances back at the television screen.

"Ya know Jellybean, when I said go get Natalia I meant in person... quietly..." Olivia commented flatly, wiggling a finger in her ear to try and dispel the high pitched ringing. Clarissa giggled from her seat on the couch before turning her attention back to the Halloween themed cartoons.

After a few moments of nothing, Olivia realized that she was going to have to take things into her own hands. Rolling her eyes, she moved forward and past her daughter, flicking the girl's braid as she walked up the stairs. "Entertain your guest, pretty girl," she reminded, pausing for a moment as an idea struck her. "And, if two cookies were to come up missing, I'm sure no one would notice..." The two girls froze for all of two seconds, before bolting for the kitchen door. "One each!" she called after them, chuckling.

Climbing the stairs quietly and moving down the hall, Olivia paused in front of her old room. The door stood shut, a fresh layer of soft yellow paint making it stand out amongst the rest of the colors in the corridor. The inside was almost complete, all that was missing now was the rocking chair she had secretly special ordered for Natalia – an early Christmas present – and the baby herself. "Soon," she murmured, the thought filling her with warmth. Soon, her family would be complete. Nodding to herself, she smiled and began walking again, to her new room, to *their* room.

“Natalia, sweetheart, are you close to ready? The natives are getting restless...” Olivia called from outside the door, trying to resist the urge to look inside. The other woman had informed her that she had actually gotten her costume the day before, when she had been at work, and wanted to surprise her. She lost the battle, peeking into the room and frowning when she didn’t see the younger woman.

“In here,” Natalia called back, arm appearing through the entrance of the adjoining bathroom and waving for a moment before disappearing again. “Just putting on the finishing touches. You can come in.”

Olivia wandered into the room and sat on their bed, sighing happily. Their bed: she would never get tired of that thought. “Better hurry, before Angel Emma and Doris 2.0 eat all the cookies and use the energy to mutiny.”

“Don’t even joke about that!” Natalia cried, popping out of the bathroom and darting out of the bedroom. “Emma Spencer, you can each have one cookie, *one!*” Olivia bit her lip to keep from laughing.

“You move fast for a pregnant lady,” she commented off handedly as her lover stepped back into the room.

“You calling me fat?” the smaller woman growled playfully, hands on her hips.

Opening her mouth to back peddle, Olivia was struck dumb by the vision before her. Natalia, who had apparently decided to be a witch again this year, had managed to find a long, flowing dress that somehow was both perfectly form fitting *and* tastefully accommodating of her rounded belly. It hugged her stomach but flared at her hips, so that the black material seemed to shimmer and flow like liquid whenever the woman moved. What really caught Olivia’s attention, however, was the way the dark cloth plunged dangerously low at the smaller woman’s chest, accentuating her larger bust and giving her amazing cleavage...

“Gii-uh huh, what?” the older woman mumbled, blinking slowly and shaking her head, trying to come back to reality.

“Hey there, my eyes are up here.” Natalia giggled, smiling indulgently, eyes crinkling at the corners. The expression drew attention to the subtle indigo eye shadow she had applied, which made her dark gaze smoky, almost indecent.

“Uh... yeah, can we just skip the trick or treating and go straight to unwrapping the candy?” Olivia suggested, wiggling her eyebrows to indicate she was joking... mostly.

"It was either this or Catwoman, and I don't think anyone wants to see me in a leather cat suit right now..." Olivia's eyes glazed over and her jaw slowly slid open. The Latina wasn't sure, but there might have been drool. "Olivia? Hey!" Natalia snapped her fingers in her lover's face. "Dirty mind," she muttered.

"Hey, don't say things like that and not expect my mind to buy a ticket for the gutter bus!" the taller woman defended, trying to hide her embarrassment.

The dark haired woman smiled, natural shyness causing her face to color slightly as she moved to stand in between her lover's legs. "Flattery will get you no where," she chided gently, leaning down to kiss the other woman.

"You do know that you are beyond drop dead gorgeous in that dress, right?" Olivia asked, incredulous when Natalia shook her head, unconsciously denying the sentiment. "I mean you're always beautiful, but, you set phasers to 'knock-out'."

"Stop it," Natalia blushed harder, obviously pleased even as she hid behind her hair.

"Sweetie, you are absolutely stunning."

"You really think so?" The seated woman let out a bark of a laugh.

"Uh, no honey, I don't think so, I *know* so! Seriously witchy-woman, you cast a spell on me!"

Sliding into the hotelier's lap, Natalia hummed in contentment. "*Somebody's* getting an extra treat tonight, I think," she murmured, leaning forward for another kiss.

"Ooo, pick me, pick me," Olivia whispered against her lips, hands wrapping around the smaller woman to hold her securely in place. The baby chose that moment to make her presence known, kicking hard enough to poke Olivia firmly in the stomach. Resting their foreheads together, the two women grinned, a peace settling over them. "Yeah, yeah, love you too Sweetpea." They were rewarded with another strong kick.

"MOM, NATALIA! JONATHAN AND SARAH ARE HERE!" Emma shouted from the base of the stairs, shattering the stillness and startling them.

"All work and no play make Olivia a grumpy girl," the taller woman muttered, before sighing and smiling sheepishly. "Why yes, she *was* raised in a barn."

"Aw, my poor baby. I'll make it up to you," Natalia promised, pecking the other woman on the lips one more time before standing. "Come on, lazy bones! We have candy to scam."

“And they say *I’m* wicked...”

“Hey Auntie O, Natalia.” Jonathan greeted with a smile as the women descended the stairs. “Ladies, you look stunning.” Natalia blushed but smiled back, ignoring her lover’s ‘*I told* you so’ as she pulled the man into a hug.

“You’re not too bad yourself there, kiddo,” Olivia replied, nodding at him. He cut quite the dashing figure in an obviously tailor made tux and bow tie.

“But, Auntie O, where’s your costume?” he teased.

“Oh, very cute, cheeky boy. Looks like someone is gonna get more tricks than treats tonight!” she replied, poking at him with her pitchfork.

“I was just curious...” he said innocently.

“She’s in it Jonathan!” Emma exclaimed from her position on the couch, jumping up and rushing to her mother’s side and defense. “See, we match! I’m an Angel, and Mommy’s a devil. See the horns?”

“Of course, how could I have missed it?” he said, bending down to her level and tweaking her nose.

“I picked the outfit,” Natalia admitted, her blush and unrepentant smile at odds with each other.

“Did you now? I’m impressed,” Jonathan said, smirking.

A tug at his sleeve brought the man’s attention to his daughter, who was hiding behind his leg. “What is it, baby girl?” he asked, reaching back and hoisting the child up with one arm, settling her onto his hip. She was growing so fast; soon he wouldn’t be able to pull off that little maneuver. She reached forward and pulled herself to his neck, whispering into his ear. “Uh huh, why don’t you ask them?” he suggested, smiling when she shook her head and hid her face against him.

Turning back to the others, he gave them a mock serious look. “I have been informed that I am to ask you if you like Sarah’s costume,” he reported, chuckling.

“Oh, of course we do honey!” Natalia cooed, moving closer and brushing dark curls from the girl’s face. “You are the cutest Fairy Princess I’ve ever seen!” And, indeed, the girl looked absolutely darling in her layered green and pink dress and gossamer wings. Sarah smiled shyly, clearly pleased. She reached forward a tiny hand and tangled it in Natalia’s hair,

playing with the waves. The woman smiled back, nose crinkling in delight. The girl was so timid that even this was a big step.

“Yeah, and I love your crown Sarah!” Emma added, moving next to her second mother and grinning.

“What do we say, sweetie?” Jonathan prompted.

“Thank you. Like your ring,” the younger girl replied, taking her hand away from Natalia and pointing to Emma’s head.

“Oh, my halo? You wanna trade for the night?”

“Okay. Daddy, down please,” Sarah requested, kicking her legs impatiently. With a chuckle, the tall man placed his daughter on the ground, poking her in the ribs.

“No, Daddy!” Sarah scolded, glaring for a moment before turning to her cousin.

Carefully, the dark-haired girl removed her tiara and walked forward, presenting the piece of plastic to Emma as if it were the most important treasure in the world. With equal reverence, the older girl removed her own headpiece and handed it over, first affixing her new one in place before helping the smaller girl do the same.

“Come on, let’s finish watching SpongeBob.”

“Kay.” The younger girl agreed, leading the way to the couch. Within seconds, all three girls were engrossed in the bright colors and odd sounds.

“And just what are *you* supposed to be, young man?” Olivia asked her nephew, bringing the attention back to the adults.

“You mean besides painfully handsome?” he countered, winking at her. “Bond, James Bond,” he clarified, turning to Natalia and taking her hand, placing a kiss on the back. The smaller woman giggled.

“Definitely your nephew,” she commented, utterly taken.

“Easy there, tiger, turn the charm levels down from eleven. She’s with me,” Olivia muttered, trying hard to appear annoyed, but failing as her fondness for the man shone through in her eyes. It was evident that she adored him and their easy banter.

“Okay, Jane of the Jungle,” Natalia chastised as she pulled away from Jonathan and walked towards the kitchen. “I’m going to grab my hat and the cookies; you call Doris and tell her we’ll have to meet her in town.”



“In a second,” Olivia replied, catching the younger woman’s arm and gently pulling her back. With a wicked glint in her eye, she cupped her lover’s cheek in her palm and slid closer, leaning forward until they were barely an inch apart. “Jane, mine,” she grunted playfully, and pulled Natalia the last few millimeters forward. The kiss was slow and deep, and for long moments, both women forgot there were other people around them. The shorter woman reached up, fingers gripping the silky material of Olivia’s cape, crushing their bodies together as much as possible, considering her pregnant state.

“Ladies, are you going to come up for air, or should I get out the hose?”

Pulling back reluctantly to wolf whistles, Olivia glared at her nephew, who gave her his best wide-eyed look. She opened her mouth to say something off color, but before the words could pass her lips, the doorbell rang, startling them all.

“I’ll get it!” Emma shouted.

“Inside voice,” Olivia said, pulling away from her lover and following their daughter.

The girl reached the door first, yanking it open with the enthusiasm and excitement that only a child has at the thought of someone at the door. “Who is it, Bean?”

“It’s... uh...” Emma trailed off, head tilted to the side. She knew she recognized the woman standing on the other side of the threshold from *somewhere*...

“Trick or treat?” the woman at the door purred, leaning casually against the frame.

“Holy crap!” Olivia exclaimed, stepping up behind the girl and gawking at the waiting figure.

“Olivia!”

“Mom!”

The green-eyed woman winced. “Sorry!”

“Well, are you going to invite me in, or do I have to egg your house?” Doris asked, amused by the reactions to her arrival. Gaping, Olivia moved aside to allow the other woman to strut into the house. And *strut* was the only word to properly encapsulate the movement and the attitude - and the *outfit*.

“Oh my!” Natalia exclaimed, eyes wide in surprise.

Skin-tight leather pants, which partially covered black Converse high tops, held up by a black leather belt with a ridiculously large silver belt buckle in the shape of the female symbol, were only the beginning of the ensemble. A form-fitting black tank top with Debbie Harry’s face embossed in white – ripped strategically so that there was a hint of cleavage and midriff – added to the air of what could only be termed ‘Bad Ass-ery’. Dark aviator glasses and a motorcycle jacket thrown carelessly over one shoulder rocketed the effect into the realm of “Epic with the intent to Awesome,” a phrase Olivia had overheard from a very excited Ashlee months earlier. Mussed, just-rolled-out-of-bed, *black* hair completed the look.

“Sweet Je—” A stern look from Natalia silenced the stunned businesswoman for a moment. “Let’s try this again. Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?” Olivia heckled, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I believe she's at home, buried in a pint of mint choc-chip ice cream. Her part tonight will be played by Joan Jett of Blackheart fame," was the easy retort, delivered with a nonchalant shrug.

"Your hair..." Natalia breathed, still in shock.

Doris snorted, gazing at her friend over the top of her glasses. "Washes out. Trust me, come Monday morning, there will be no evidence of this."

"That's what *you* think!" Natalia chuckled, pointing to Emma, who had managed to get a camera and snap a few photos unnoticed.

"Darn paparazzi," the "rock star" deadpanned, rolling her eyes but otherwise seeming unconcerned.

"Tell me about it," Olivia laughed. "She's like a ninja with that thing!"

Catching sight of the eldest of the children hovering at the edge of the group, Doris did a double-take. "I stand corrected; apparently the role of Mayor Wolfe will be played by Clarissa Marler!" she amended, clearly taken by surprise. The girl blinked, blushing hotly. Motioning her forward, Doris bent down to her level.

"Are you...did you dress up as me for Halloween?" Clarissa only nodded, eyes firmly glued to the floor. The Mayor smiled, obviously delighted. "And why is that?"

"Scariest thing she could think of," Olivia quipped, grimacing at the twin glares she received for her trouble. "Sheesh! Some people have no sense of humor!"

"Cause my mom says you're important and powerful. And you're real good at softball," Clarissa replied, shrugging, trying to seem unaffected.

"Well, I'm very flattered," Doris said, tugging the girl's blazer straight and winking. "You have excellent taste."

"All right, ladies and gentleman, lets get this show on the road!" Natalia announced, emerging from the kitchen with stacks of Tupperware.

"Ooo, cookies!" Doris all but moaned, reaching towards the bounty.

"Ah, ah, ah! These are for the hosts!" Natalia admonished, slapping the blue-eyed woman's hand away.

“Ouch! Hey, what gives! That’s no way to treat your guests!” the Mayor grumbled, rubbing her wrist.

“You’re not a guest, Doris,” Olivia said casually, wrapping an arm around her friend’s neck and half-hugging, half-choking her.

“Oh yeah? What, then?” the Mayor grumbled, prying the arm from her body and scurrying away towards the door.

Natalia rolled her eyes at their antics, but smiled as she moved past them to the door. “That’s easy,” she said motioning for the others to follow with her head. “You’re family.”

~~*~*

By the end of the evening, the merry group of seven had collected enough sugar to power a small nation...

“I don’t think that there have ever been this many peanut chews and Hershey’s Kisses in one place... ever!” Doris said, impressed, as she surveyed the chaos that had once been the Spencer-Rivera kitchen table.

Once the candy was sorted, and after a small misunderstanding...

“Well now, all we have to do is check it all and...” Natalia trailed off, staring incredulously at her lover.

“Muroh?” Olivia asked around two cheeks full of candy. Swallowing hard, she tried again. “Check it?”

The loot was divvied up equally so that each party member had just enough to induce a sugar coma, ensuring that no one was left wanting. And because it was a Saturday, each party member promptly ate half of their booty. While the children passed out soon after, the crash hitting them as if the Sandman had swung the entire bag at them, adult heads did not hit pillows until well after midnight.

In fact, after an hour of sitting around making idle conversation, they decided to hold an impromptu Wii Bowling tournament...

“You’re cheating!” Jonathan cried, mouth agape as he watched Doris get yet another strike, the screen proclaiming it a ‘Six Pack.’

“Having a system doesn’t mean cheating. Stop being a sore loser,” she replied, stepping with unrepentant swagger over to the couch and clapping the man on his shoulder.

The winner of which was rewarded with Olivia’s secret stash of Andes Candy...

“Hey, no fair! I actually bought those!” the hotelier complained as Natalia smirked and devoured the last of her prize. “And just how did you get so freakishly good at bowling anyway?”

“Worked at a bowling alley one summer when I was a teenager,” was all Natalia would say.

“Isn’t that much sugar bad for the baby?” Doris asked, eyeing the last mint longingly.

“Two days a year I get to eat as much candy as I want; Halloween and Valentine’s Day. Stop being sore losers!” the Latina gloated, popping the chocolate into her mouth and slowly licking her fingers clean.

Olivia whimpered, torn between enjoying the view and mourning the loss of her sweets. “So not fair...”

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ACT 2

Monday morning saw Olivia Spencer, businesswoman extraordinaire, back at the office. She stared balefully at what used to be her desk, but was now an avalanche of papers. It was amazing how much work accumulated while one was dealing with a relationship crisis. Her inbox had spilled out across the surface of what had been an organized plane, giving the impression that a filing cabinet had exploded. “Well, Spencer, you should have seen this one coming. This is what you get for letting things slide,” she sighed to herself, tossing her jacket onto one of the guest chairs and rolling up her sleeves. “Time to be a business mongrel...”

Three hours, countless mutterings, and a few nasty paper cuts later, Olivia could once again see the beautiful wood finish of her desk. Sitting back in her chair, she blew out a breath of relief, hand coming to cover her tired eyes, fingers rubbing her temples. “Sweet Jesus, I thought I’d never hit the bottom,” she murmured. The sound of the office phone ringing pierced the air, and she groaned in frustration, resisting the urge to fling the hunk of plastic and circuitry across the room. With a sigh, she picked up the receiver. “Olivia Spencer,” she said evenly, impressed with herself for not growling. It was only noon and already it had been a long day.

“Hello, Ms. Spencer; my name is Karen Miller and I am calling on behalf of Jacob Anderson.”

Olivia sat up straight, eyes widening. Jacob Anderson, one of the prospective investors she had been communicating with months ago when she had been trying to franchise. But that plan had fallen to the wayside in the last few months, all the parties pulling their money out one by one as she became distracted by *other* things. It was one thing she had regretted not paying closer attention to, especially because it took so long to gather so many interested backers. The slow crumbling of that project should have meant that no one would touch any of her propositions with a ten-foot pole until she proved herself again...

“Ms. Spencer, are you there?” the voice asked, interrupting her internal monologue.

“Yes, yes I’m here!”

“Excellent. As I was saying, Mr. Anderson was reluctant to renew talks with you at this time, but when he was informed about the circumstances surrounding the dissolution of the project-”

“Circumstances?” the hotel owner interrupted, suspicious.

“Your ex-husband’s terminal illness, the experimental procedure and his subsequent recovery, the death of Alan Spaulding...”

Frowning, Olivia’s mind worked quickly, trying to narrow down who had made contact with her former investor. “Of course,” she said slowly, rolling with it in the meantime. “The circumstances; go on.”

“Mr. Anderson is an understanding man, Ms. Spencer, and the Beacon franchising is a prospect that gives all appearances of being very lucrative. If it is all right with you, he would like to reenter the venture. Would that be agreeable?”

“Of-of course!” Olivia exclaimed, blinking slowly and shaking her head in disbelief.

“Excellent. I’ll relay your interest back to him.”

“Please do. My assistant has my schedule, she’ll handle the details of setting up a meeting. Tell Jacob I’ll see him sometime next week for a face-to-face,” the business owner said, regaining a bit of her composure.

“Of course. Thank you for your time, Ms. Spencer. Have a good day.”

"Thanks; you too."

Olivia hung up the phone and sat quietly for several moments, stunned. Franchising the Beacon was something she had wanted, so badly, since that mess with Decker. Partially because it would be an interesting, new, and likely profitable experience - but if she was honest with herself, mostly she wanted to succeed just to rub it in his face. She had thought that the distractions of the last few months had closed the door on that possibility but, if Anderson was still interested, others would follow... Which raised the question of *who* had been talking to Anderson. The only person she could think of who would know about her business and personal life, and care enough to do anything about it, was Phillip.

"Note to self, send Phillip a gift basket, possibly full of chocolate and booze..."

"I see I'm just in time," an amused voice commented, startling her despite it being immediately recognizable. Jerking forward, the hotelier slammed her knee into the desk

"Jesus! Natalia, you scared me!" she hissed, bending over to cradle her throbbing joint. "Christ, that smarts!"

"That's a lot of blasphemy for one breath," Natalia said mildly, walking in and setting a covered dish on the desk, trying to bite back a smile. Her dimples gave her away. "Good day?"

"Oh, you know, cleaned my desk, checked my email, got an offer to help franchise the Beacon..." was the casual reply, betrayed by the huge smile on Olivia's face.

"Olivia, that's great!"

"Nothing finalized yet, just some feelers... we'll see."

"Still, this is good."

"Definitely of the good," she agreed, green eyes fairly glowing with pleasure.

The smell of garlic and paprika reached Olivia's nose, cutting off any other smart remarks. "Please tell me that's what I think it is..." she begged, sitting up and reaching for the plastic container. Popping it open, she moaned in appreciation. "Oh God, it is! Chicken and rice!"

"What do we say?"

"Thank you!"

“Uh uh, en español,” Natalia said, playfully wagging her finger at her lover.

“Nataaaaaaliaaaaa,” the hotelier whined, gazing longingly at the open container of food.

“Hey, it was *your* idea to start integrating Spanish into our everyday life so that the baby grows up bilingual,” her lover reminded her, rolling her eyes.

“Ugh, why did I do that again?” Olivia asked, slumping across the wooden surface dramatically.

“Something about respect for my culture; I forget,” was the sarcastic response, softened by a smile. The smaller woman walked around the desk.

“Riiight...” Olivia made a face. “Promise not to make fun of my pronunciation?”

“Scout’s honor,” Natalia swore, holding up three fingers. The businesswoman laughed, reaching out and pulling the dark-haired woman closer, so that she had to look straight up to see her face.

“You were never a scout.”

“Hmmm, you’re right. How about on my love?”

“Grassias...”

Natalia giggled, cupping the seated woman’s face gently, fingers stroking the edges of her mouth. “When you articulate the ‘a’, it’s an ‘ah’ sound. Grr-AH-see-Ahs.”

Olivia snorted, choosing to nip at her instead of trying again. Language could wait; there were more pressing matters at hand. Natalia just raised an eyebrow as her fingertip was gently captured, first by straight white teeth, then soft, pink lips. Those lips closed around the digit, trapping it in wet heat, and she bit back a moan when the suction started, watching as the other woman’s cheeks hollowed slightly.

“Olivia... you’re gonna get yourself into a lot of trouble.”

Olivia released her with a quiet ‘pop’ and smirked. “My middle name,” she teased, running her hands up the other woman’s sides, around to the small of her back, softly massaging what were sure to be sore muscles there. Natalia groaned, resisting the urge to collapse into a boneless heap at the sensation.

“Painful or good?” Olivia asked, laying a kiss on the round belly before her.

“Ow, and, yes,” was the whimpered reply.

“Should I stop?”

“Only if you want me to hit you,” Natalia growled, brown eyes fluttering closed as Olivia found a particularly tense spot.

“And here I thought you loved me for my personality and winning good looks,” the taller woman quipped, working at the knot.

“And now you know the truth,” Natalia hissed, losing the battle and leaning forward, bracing herself with her arms against the back of the chair, resting her cheek on top of Olivia’s head.

They stayed like that for long minutes, the pregnant woman gripping the chair to keep from melting into a puddle on the floor, while her lover worked the tension from her abused back. Finally though, the sensitivity of the position occurred to Natalia, and she pulled away with a sigh. “Thanks,” she murmured, moving back around the desk and sitting in the guest chair.

“Uh uh, en español,” Olivia chided, grinning.

Rolling her eyes, Natalia chuckled. “Gracias mi amor, me dio mucho gusto.”

“Yeah, uh, about that... De nada?” The taller woman tried, wincing a bit. Laughing loudly, the smaller woman leaned forward and pushed the food towards the other woman.

“Very good, now, eat it before it gets cold,” she commanded.

“Don’t have to tell me twice!”

They sat in silence for a while, the businesswoman enjoying her lunch, and Natalia watching, lost in thought. Nodding to herself, she took a deep breath, before focusing her attention on the other woman. “So, I’ve been thinking about middle names,” she said casually as Olivia swallowed the last of her lunch.

“Oh?” the older woman asked, smirking to cover her sudden nervousness. Despite what she felt were giant leaps in personal growth she had made as of late, this was still an uncertain area of discussion. “And what’s caught your fancy?”

“Weeeeelll... I was thinking, maybe, possibly... Olivia?” Natalia said hesitantly, cringing a bit.

“Are you asking or telling?”

“I’m serious! I, I want her to be *ours* in every way. I know Francesca was your way of trying to show you were okay with this, with her... But I want you be connected to her too...” she added, voice fading uncertainly, eyes fixed on the desk. She hated to push the other woman, who had been so patient and remarkably accepting considering the circumstances.

“And I am. You don’t have to saddle the kid with my name for me to love her. Crisis of identity over, I promise. I, I’m looking forward to her too, y’know? Seeing her, holding her, telling her stories. I don’t need her to have my name for me to think of her as my daughter,” Olivia insisted.

Natalia smiled a watery smile, reaching across the desk for her lover’s hand, squeezing it when their fingers intertwined. “I know that, I do. But this is important to me. I want her to write out her name one day, and to *see* that she’s as much yours as mine, just from her signature.”

“Hyphenated last names are also a good compromise...” the businesswoman said, smiling winningly.

“Olivia...” Natalia groaned, rolling her eyes. “You know this is important to me. Middle names are a critical part of my cultural identity.”

“Well that’s a mouth full,” Olivia teased, cringing at the glare she got. “But, I mean, Francesca Olivia? What are we, Vikings?” she quipped, succeeding in breaking what was fast becoming a serious the mood.

Natalia sighed and rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped her. “Well, I was considering Emily but, I think it’s a little too close to Emma,” she said.

“Yeeeah, I don’t think that would work anyway,” Olivia agreed, shrugging. With a small sigh, she tried again, mindful of keeping her tone light, so as not to put off her partner. “Look, I think it’s sweet that you want our daughter to be named after me, but, I have a feeling you’ll just end up calling her Olivia and confusing us both when you yell.”

“I don’t *yell*!” the dark haired woman denied, sticking out her tongue.

“Yea-huh, riiight,”

“And, if I yell your name, I’m sure you deserve it!” Natalia winced, shaking her head ruefully. “Darn, that came out dirtier than I wanted.”

“Been spending too much time with me, kiddo,” Olivia teased, winking saucily.

“You’re such a bad influence.” The younger woman groaned, rolling her eyes.

“I do what I can,” was the easy reply, and the hotelier buffed her nails on her vest for effect.

Tilting her head, Natalia sighed in defeat. “Well, I guess we’ll have to go traditional and pick someone in the extended family to honor with the name.”

“Tradition, huh?” Olivia asked, raising an eyebrow; the pregnant woman just shrugged. “Well, I’m out, so moving on... How about *your* side of the family?” she suggested.

Natalia frowned, her expression becoming tense for a moment, before she relaxed again. Flashing her dimples, she shook her head. “Nice try, but this is about connecting her to *you*,” she insisted. “How about a favorite aunt?”

“Nope, none of those. And before you ask, no, we are not naming her after my mother, grandmother, or any of my dogs.”

“Did anyone ever tell you, you are a pain in the butt?” Natalia asked, cheeks puffing up in frustration, mouth twisting in displeasure. Olivia grinned, shrugging.

“It may have been mentioned to me once or twice.”

Both women were quiet for long moments, and Olivia found herself zoning, happy to drop the subject and engage, instead, in one of her favorite activities: Natalia watching. Just as she lost herself in the examination of her lover’s hands, and memories of exactly what they could do to her, Natalia spoke again. “There has to be someone... not your mom or grandma... what about your sister or a cousin.”

Olivia froze, tensing but trying very hard to appear calm, to regulate her breathing; she forced her expression to stay passive, hoping to hide her discomfort. The younger woman noticed anyway, and winced. She didn’t know why her words had caused such a reaction, but it didn’t matter; she had inadvertently upset Olivia with her insistence. “Never mind. This, uh, this was a silly idea. Let’s, um, just forget I brought it up,” she said quickly, moving as if to stand. Olivia’s words stopped her short.

“My sister... she, uh, she died... a long time ago.” Natalia grimaced, sitting back down.

“I... I didn’t know... I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking,” she apologized, clearly distressed.

"No, no, it's okay," Olivia reassured her, standing and moving around the desk, taking a seat in the chair next to her partner. "It's hard to talk about, but... I mean, if you want to ask..."

Natalia reached out, grabbing Olivia's hand and bringing it to rest on her chest, over her heart. "I love you," she said simply, other hand moving to the taller woman's face.

"I... she... Goddamn it, this is hard..." Olivia smiled wanly, sniffing discretely.

"What was her name?" Natalia asked softly, choosing to ignore the curse in favor of progress.

"Marissa. Her name was Marissa. She was... she was murdered," the older woman said, voice soft, almost faint, but surprisingly calm. Green eyes stared, unseeing, at the surface of the desk in front of them.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry!" the younger woman gasped, free hand flying to her mouth in horror. "You don't have to talk about it right now if you don't want to."

Olivia opened her mouth to say it was fine, to go on with the story, but no words came out. Frowning, she tried again, and again, nothing. "I... I don't think I can... right now, anyway..." she admitted, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. Natalia nodded, moving forward and kissing her gently.

"Whenever you're ready to talk, I'll listen. But don't force it, okay?" she whispered, resting their foreheads together. "We have the rest of our lives to learn everything about each other. Okay?"

"Yeah... okay."

Again there was silence, but the businesswoman found it comforting. She took strength from the contact with her lover and, after long moments, drew in a shuddering breath and sighed. "I... I'd like it if, maybe, you would consider Marissa for a middle name," she allowed, rubbing the other woman's rounded stomach absently with her free hand.

"It's a beautiful name," Natalia replied, covering Olivia's hand with her own. "Hmmm, Francesca Marissa Rivera... Spencer-Rivera?"

"Quite the name you've got there, kiddo," the green-eyed woman spoke to the baby, smiling instead, when her hand was kicked. "You're going to be a ball-buster, I can feel it." She choose not to comment on Natalia's addition, preferring instead to once again use humor change the subject, not ready to have *that* conversation.

“Olivia!” Natalia admonished, swatting the taller woman on the shoulder.

“What? It’s true! With a name like that, and parents like us, she’s either going to be a nun or the CEO of her own company. No offense, but I would like to be put into a decent retirement home, so I am voting for the latter...” Olivia trailed off, shrugging and wearing a *sorry, it’s out of my hands* expression.

“You are impossible!”

Olivia’s reply was cut off by the sound of her phone ringing. Grumbling in frustration, she stood up and reached over the desk, perching on the edge as she answered the call. “Olivia Spencer.”

“Ms. Spencer? This is Janet Smith, the principal of your daughter’s school,” said the calm, even voice on the other end of the line. Immediately, Olivia felt her heart leap into her throat.

“Principal Smith... how can I help you?” she asked, swallowing hard, trying to keep a neutral tone so she wouldn’t upset her pregnant lover.

“What’s going on?” Natalia whispered, standing. Olivia held up a finger and mouthed ‘gimme a sec’.

“I need you to come down to the school right away, if you can. There’s been an incident.”

“Is Emma okay?” Olivia demanded, rising to her feet. Natalia reached out and took the older woman’s hand, frowning deeply in worry.

“Emma is fine. Actually, she’s the one that is responsible for the altercation...”

The women exchanged a concerned look. “We’ll be right there.”

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ACT 3

By the time lunchtime came around on Monday, Doris Wolfe had seriously debated just calling it quits and starting a new life. The frustration of her job, coupled with the nosy, tactlessness of the ‘Evil Image Consultant from Hell,’ – Andre’s new, secret name - as well as the fact that she missed her daughter was almost too much for the Mayor. Andre had decided that the best way to serve his client efficiently was to follow her around everywhere she went, save the bathroom. And *that* was only because she’d threatened to

do him permanent damage. When he wasn't critiquing her choice in clothing, he was picking apart her mannerisms; the snide comments about her interpersonal skills and the tssking noises he made as she spoke on the phone were still ringing in her ears.

She had managed to secure the afternoon to herself, however. As soon as he had turned his back she had darted out the door, leaving behind her purse and jacket in favor of freedom. It was only noon, but Doris was sure that forces at work in the universe were conspiring to make her hang herself by the end of the day. Honestly, she hadn't felt this self-conscious and judged since high school.

Walking out of her office, escaping hours early because she had damn well earned it, she stopped short just outside the building when she heard a sound she instantly recognized. There, down the street, head thrown back in seemingly carefree laughter, was Jamanda. Jamanda and another woman; Jamanda and another woman, standing very, *very* close to each other, much closer than would seem socially appropriate for anyone but lovers. The sight made Doris's stomach drop and her chest tighten. "Well, that certainly didn't take her long," she whispered to herself, swallowing hard. If she had wanted to quit and run away at 12:00, she wanted to curl up and die at 12:08.

Fighting the urge to give in to the burning behind her eyes, she straightened up to her full height and marched by the younger woman and her... *friend*. She didn't know where she was going, but she wanted to arrive with what was left of her dignity intact. She thought she heard her name being called, but refused to turn, quickening her pace instead. If Jamanda wanted to talk, they could meet on Doris's terms, when *she* was ready. Certainly not in front of the other woman's new lover, where the possibility of humiliation was that much greater.

Her feet took her to perhaps the last place she would have thought she'd find herself after a day from hell: Company. Instead of questioning it though, she merely shrugged and opened the door. Inside, the usual lunch crowd sat at their normal tables, and they all stopped and stared at her as she stepped inside. With a sigh, the Mayor moved into the restaurant, shuffling over to where Buzz stood wiping down the bar. "Have anything strong enough to erase the last few days?" she asked by way of greeting.

The man smiled kindly. "Not really. But I *do* have something chocolaty enough to take the edge off," he offered, tossing his rag aside and moving towards the kitchen.

"That sounds heavenly," Doris admitted, closing her eyes and laying her head on the cool surface in front of her.

"Be right back," Buzz said, chuckling sympathetically.

“Yup, you do that,” she replied, not bothering to move, only raising a hand and waving. “I’ll just be here, dying...”

Doris didn’t know how long she stayed like that, forehead to counter, wallowing in self-pity. But, after a time, she was jarred from her thoughts by the sharp clack of ceramic hitting wood, and the smell of warm chocolate and cool cream wafting into her nostrils. Moaning in appreciation, she turned her face towards the tempting scents and reached out a hand, drawing the plate closer.

“Ha, yeah, I think that’s everyone’s reaction to the chocolate pie,” a voice, decidedly female and therefore *not* Buzz’s, commented.

“Blake?” Doris asked, sitting up straight, trying in vain to control a blush.

“The one and only. You look like you’ve had a rough day.”

“What a polite way to say that I look like shit,” the Mayor said dryly, snagging a fork and sinking it into the gooey confection.

Blake barked out a laugh, then covered her mouth quickly, as if she hadn’t expected it to come out. Doris smirked around a mouthful of pie, raising her eyebrow.

“I notice you aren’t jumping to correct me,” she quipped through the chocolate, swallowing and licking the silverware clean.

“Sorry, but you do kinda look like you went a few rounds with a kangaroo.”

“What?” Doris frowned in confusion, shaking her head.

“A kangaroo... you know, hoppy legs, big old ears, a pouch...”

“Yes, thank you Blake, I *know* what a kangaroo is! The reference is obviously beyond my current mental state, however.”

Laughing at the irritable expression on the other woman’s face, Blake mimed punching with her hands. “Oh! You know, they, ah... box... you know what, never mind. It’s been a long day for me too.” The smaller woman trailed off, snatching the fork away from the Mayor and taking a bite of her dessert.

“Hey!”

“Oh, hush. I need this just as much as you do,” the strawberry-blonde replied, rolling her eyes and taking another small bite.

“Get your own pie!”

“This is the last piece...”

“This is definitely par for course for me today,” the blue-eyed woman sighed, nodding to herself. “Fine, but I’m not paying for it.” Blake just smiled winningly, scooping up another bite and offering it to the grumpy woman.

“To you, Mayor Wolfe.”

Soon the pie was gone, and the publisher brought over two cups of coffee as a peace offering. Walking around the bar, she took a seat next to the still brooding woman, half-turning to face her while leaning against the edge of the counter. “So, tell me about your day. What’s so bad that you’re hiding out at Company, drowning your sorrows in sugar?”

“Who says I’m hiding?” Doris countered. She was partially distracted by Blake’s position – not used to interacting with the other woman, let alone being the center of her attention – and her words ended up sounding unconvincing even to her own ears. Was she that obvious?

“You don’t have your purse on you, which means you weren’t on your way out to eat. And you’re missing your, uh, *trademark* blazer – actually, any blazer – which means that you took off from wherever you left it in a hurry...” the strawberry-blonde explained, shrugging as if to say it was obvious. “So, what’s got you on the run?” Doris’ eyebrows shot up her forehead.

“Those are... impressive observations... Since when did you become Nancy Drew?” the taller woman asked with a glare, her voice just this side of condescending.

“Hey! I’m a writer, I have to observe!” Blake exclaimed, choosing to ignore the other woman’s tone. At that Doris glared suspiciously, but the other woman only rolled her eyes, waving her hand in annoyance. “Jeez, off the record, okay?”

Regarding Blake with stern eyes for long moments, Doris finally sighed, gaze dropping to her still steaming mug. She had hoped she could intimidate the publisher into backing down, but now she saw she would either have to tell her directly to mind her own business, or at least partially answer. She didn’t have the energy to be tough anymore, to pretend to be made of stone; the sympathy in Blake’s eyes made the option of talking seem that much more tempting. Still, best not give too much away.

"I spent the morning having my habits and mannerisms torn apart by the man partially responsible for the end of my relationship, all for the sake of improving my public image. And then as I was making my escape I ran into my ex, who apparently took another lover in the three days we've been apart..." she said in a rush, panting a little at the end.

Or, she could just blurt everything out and hope for the best.

Doris was horrified at her honesty, and suddenly wished that the ground would open up and swallow her whole. Or, at the very least, that her words were somehow not actually audible.

"Oh honey, I'm so sorry!" Blake cried, moving forward and pulling the brunette into a hug. No such luck. "Here, let's get a booth so you can tell me all about it!" And before she could say anything to the contrary, Doris found herself hauled to her feet and led over to an occupied table, where the smaller woman used her charm to convince the patrons to move to the counter.

"You are very pushy, you know," the Mayor grumbled, unable to help the small smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth. Blake just shrugged. "And I suppose now, you want me to tell you all my deep, dark secrets?" she snarked, but it was obvious the smaller woman wasn't fooled.

Reaching out across the table, Blake took Doris' hand, her thumb running over the knuckles soothingly. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," she said, shrugging again. "We can just sit here quietly if you want. I just figured you could use a friend."

"And are we friends?" Doris barked harshly, though it came out more desperate than angry. Blake regarded her for a moment before nodding.

"It was recently brought to my attention that life is too short to waste time beating around the bush. If you'd like, I'd be honored to call you a friend."

Doris snorted, eyes filling with water that she pretended wasn't there. "I suppose," she allowed. "It's not like I have many of those anyway."

They lapsed into silence again, broken finally by the Mayor removing her hand from the other woman's and discreetly wiping at her eyes. Her emotions were close to the surface, just waiting for a chance to escape, to embarrass her. "So..." she began, trailing off uncertainly.

“So... friends?” the publisher asked, smiling tentatively. Doris suddenly realized that she wasn’t the only one who was putting herself out there, who could potentially be burned. Returning the smile, she took the initiative and reconnected their hands.

“I... I’d like that, very much.”

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Principal Janet Smith was a tall woman in her early fifties, with gray hair that had once been black, and sharp brown eyes that still managed to be kind. She sat straight in her high backed chair, patiently gazing at the women and child assembled in her office. “Emma, do you understand why I brought you here and called your mothers?” she asked. Right away Olivia felt a grudging respect for her. Acknowledging Natalia was not as casual as the older woman made it seem. Emma nodded but didn’t speak, eyes trained on a spot on the floor in front of her.

“Well, I sure don’t. What happened, exactly?” the businesswoman cut in, pacing back and forth near the door of the office.

“Olivia!” Natalia said sharply, glaring at her lover until she sank into the chair provided for her. “Please continue, Principal Smith,” she added when Olivia was settled, smiling apologetically. The school administrator smiled briefly at their behavior, before clearing her throat and nodding.

“I think it would be best if Emma told us her side of the story before I say anything else. Emma, could you tell us what happened?”

All eyes turned expectantly towards the silent girl, who trembled ever so slightly. She knew what she had done was wrong, but even now she couldn’t help but think that she would do it again. Truth be told, she had stopped herself from *really* letting the boy have it. She could still hear his mocking voice, still see his superior – that was a word she’d learned from her mother recently – smile. It made her eyes burn and her throat tight just to remember. “Don’t want to,” she whispered finally, sniffing. She didn’t want to cry, but couldn’t help the shuddering breaths that escaped her throat. She looked over at Olivia, who crooked her finger in a ‘come here, Jellybean’ motion. Immediately, she moved from her chair into her mother’s lap, cuddling against her.

“Emma, honey, please. We just want to know what happened,” Natalia soothed, getting up and moving to kneel in front of them.

“I-I don’t know...”

“Did he say something mean?” the pregnant woman tried again, reaching out to her daughter’s hair, hesitating briefly when the girl flinched. Emma only shrugged, looking away towards the floor again. “It’s okay, sweetie.”

Sighing, Principal Smith rifled through some papers on her desk. Finding what she was looking for after a few moments, she slipped on a pair of dark-framed glasses and began to skim over the page. “According to Emma’s teacher, Kurt Baker asked Emma about her family, after which she shoved him to the ground.” Replacing the paper on her desk, she gazed over the rims of her glasses at the other occupants of the room.

“Is that true, Em?” Olivia asked, gently moving her daughter so she could look her in the face.

“He-he kept saying that Rafe wa-wasn’t really my brother, and that the baby wasn’t really my sister, ‘cause Natalia isn’t really my mom!” Emma cried, tears slipping from her eyes and down overheated cheeks.

“Oh, honey...”

“But, that’s not true, right?” Turning to look at the kneeling woman, Emma reached out a hand, fingers clutching at her shirt. “You *are* my other mommy, and, and Rafe *is* my brother, right?” Sniffing, Natalia pulled the sobbing girl into her arms, rubbing her back soothingly. Small watery eyes regarded Natalia pleadingly.

“I’m yours, right?”

“Of course, baby, of course you’re mine. And Rafe’s your big brother, and the baby is going to be your little sister,” the dark haired woman assured her. Olivia’s arms wrapped around both of them, so that Emma was cradled safely between their bodies.

They stayed like that for long minutes, letting the physical closeness repair any damage done by the boy’s ignorant words, until the position became too much for Natalia to handle and she pulled back. Slowly, and with a groan, she rose to her feet, moving back to her chair and dropping into it. Emma followed her, managing to crawl into her lap and mold herself against the woman.

“What’s going to happen?” Olivia asked, discreetly wiping away a tear. The Principal sighed again, tiredly scrubbing her face with her hand.

“The boy’s parents are very upset. They are pushing for suspension. Because it’s a first offense, however, despite it being an assault-”

“Assault!? She pushed a kid down in a playground, she didn’t mug him in a dark alley!” the businesswoman exclaimed indignantly. Wincing at the anger in her mother’s voice, Emma hid her face against Natalia.

“Ms. Spencer...”

“Oh, come on!”

“The boy is suffering from a lacerated palm and a posterior hematoma” the principal began, looking back at what had to be an incident report.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake! So the kid has a cut hand and a bruised ass! That happens; he’s a kid!” Olivia interrupted, beside herself with impatient exasperation.

“Olivia!” Natalia gasped, horrified.

“Mom!” Emma parroted, shock stopping her tears.

“Ms. Spencer, please control yourself!”

“I’m sorry, but I think it’s ridiculous to suspend Emma because she got into a schoolyard scuffle. It’s not like they were cage fighting,” Olivia muttered, rolling her eyes.

“As I started to say, *because* this is a first offense, and because *Emma* has always been an exemplary student, despite the nature of the situation, I am inclined to let it go with a warning. Unless you have a problem with that?” the older woman asked, raising an eyebrow in a way that made Olivia slump down in her chair and have the distinct impression that she had just been schooled. Emma just looked between the women, wide-eyed. “Now, if we could all comport ourselves like adults for a moment?” Natalia kicked Olivia’s chair when the woman muttered something under her breath.

Principal Smith paused, massaging her forehead tiredly for a moment before continuing. “Look, I called you here because I think there is something more going on here than Mr. Baker being annoying and your daughter responding. I have never known Emma to be violent in any way, shape or form. As her parents, I thought it would be best if you looked into it, because she isn’t going to tell anyone here about what is behind this... outburst.” Olivia nodded, looking over at her daughter and her partner, swallowing hard. Principal Smith took a deep breath, her expression becoming grave. “I also called you here to warn you that if this type of behavior continues, I will be forced to call in outside forces to investigate. When a child like Emma begins to act out, it’s usually indicative of a larger problem, and caring for our students is something we take very seriously.”

Silence blanketed the room for long moments as everyone absorbed the implications of her words. Detangling a hand from Natalia's shirt and wiping her face, Emma looked at around the room at each woman, eyes finally coming to rest on the one behind the desk. She wasn't sure what the last exchange had meant, but knew that it couldn't be good. "I didn't mean to hurt him... I just got really mad," she whispered.

"I believe you Emma." The school administrator assured her, smiling encouragingly. "I know that *you* know better than to use violence to solve your disagreements; mistakes happen. But when you make a mistake, you have to take responsibility. Do you understand?" The girl nodded solemnly, swallowing hard. "Now, as I was explaining to your mothers, I think that, this time, I can let you off with a warning. I want you to go home today and think about what you did. Write Kurt and his parents an apology note, and bring it to school tomorrow."

Emma nodded again, eyes flicking to Olivia's before going back to the Principal's, her face crumpling a bit. "I'm sorry he got hurt, but... I'm kinda not sorry..." she confessed, hanging her head in shame.

"Emma!" Olivia exclaimed, shocked at her daughter's words. Here was Emma, who cried when she had accidentally stepped on a *spider* in the bathroom, admitting she wasn't remorseful at the pain of another person.

"He said we weren't a family, that Natalia isn't my mom!" the child replied, as if that explained everything. Olivia frowned, suddenly feeling very uneasy; this was out of character for her little girl.

Principal Smith stood, walking around her desk and kneeling in front of her charge. "I understand what you mean."

"You... you do?" Emma asked, clearly shocked. The woman nodded gravely.

"When I was about your age, I found out that I was adopted. I was the only one in my whole class who was, and I was teased a lot. I was angry, but then I realized that my classmates were afraid of being different, and that they didn't know any better."

"There's nothing wrong with being different," Emma consoled, reaching out and taking the kneeling woman's hand.

"Of course not." Principal Smith smiled, squeezing the hand in hers gently. "I'd say we're special, even. We were *chosen* by our families; that means they loved us that much more." Emma nodded. "But some people don't understand that yet. Do you know how you can help them understand?"

“How?”

“By coming and telling me who they are, so I can have a chat with them about it. ‘Words connect, fists disconnect.’ my mother always said.”

The girl looked thoughtful for a moment, before nodding sincerely. “Okay.”

“Okay, good. Now, why don’t you take off the rest of the day to work on that letter. I’m sure your mothers will help you if you ask,” the woman suggested, standing with a small grunt.

“Note to self: don’t bend down, you’re too old,” she grumbled, moving back around her desk.

Giggling, Emma stood, walking over to her own empty chair and retrieving her bag.

“Thanks Principal Smith.”

“Anytime, my dear,” the woman replied with a smile. “Us special people have to stick together.”

Taking that as their cue, the other two women stood, Natalia moving forward to take the school administrator’s hand, shaking it gratefully.

“Thank you so much for being so understanding.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. Your daughter is one of my best students, Ms. Rivera, a true joy.”

“Still, thanks,” Olivia seconded, running her hand through Emma’s hair as the girl hugged her waist.

“You’re quite welcome. Now kindly clear my office so I can entertain some actual troublemakers. Good day.”

~~*~*

The ride home was quiet, and as soon as the car stopped, Emma was out the like a shot. She hurried into the house and disappeared up the stairs, going straight to her room.

“Looks like she’s not ready to talk,” Olivia said, frowning thoughtfully at the sound of the girl’s door shutting.

Smiling gently, Natalia pulled the other woman into a hug. “She’ll come out when she’s ready,” she murmured against the taller woman’s shoulder.

“I just... she’s never done anything like this before... I don’t know if I should punish her, or if the trauma of getting sent to the principal’s office is lesson enough,” Olivia admitted, pulling back to look into her lover’s eyes, utterly lost.

Natalia kissed her lover’s chin before resting their foreheads together. “I think she understands what she did was wrong,” she reassured. “Let her process a bit, and she’ll talk to us when she’s a little more ready. I think she’s a little overwhelmed with all the craziness lately.”

“Yeah... I guess...” Olivia said, still obviously troubled.

“She’s a wonderful girl.” At that, the green-eyed woman had to smile, obviously pleased.

“Don’t know how that happened. Me, I would’ve kicked the kid when he was down,” she quipped, shrugging.

“Oh stop it.” Natalia scolded, swatting her lover’s shoulder but moving in closer, so she could snuggle into her arms. “You did a good job with her, Mama.”

They stood like that for long moments, basking in the warmth of the embrace. Finally though, Natalia pulled back. “Do you want to go back to work? I can hold down the fort alone if you need to.”

“No, I think I kinda want to stick around, make sure we’re both here in case she wants to talk,” Olivia replied, reaching up and tucking a lock of hair behind the shorter woman’s ear.

“Okay, good, then you can help me do laundry.”

“Nataliiiiaaaaa.”

“Sorry, Charlie, you walked right into that one. If you’re gonna take up space, you might as well make yourself useful,” she chuckled, kissing Olivia quickly before moving away, towards the living room. “Come on; if you’re actually helpful, I’ll consider making dessert from scratch tonight.”

“Where’s that laundry? Lemme at it!”

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ACT 4

Friday found Doris Wolfe standing, determined, outside of the bar hosting Springfield's Ladies' Night. After a week of Andre's criticisms, especially pertaining to her wardrobe, she was ready to unwind. Despite the talking to Olivia had given the man, which had been quite spectacular to witness – she didn't think she had ever heard a grown man hit soprano before – she was quite sure he would heartily disapprove of her associating with her lady-loving peers in such a setting. Snickering, she congratulated herself on her secret rebellion. Come Monday, she'd have a slew of new memories that would help her bear even the snidest of the insufferable man's remarks.

As she stepped inside, the first thing she noticed was that there was almost double the amount of women. The room was comfortably populated, the ambient noise at the level of a moderate hum. She hadn't really been out since she and Jamanda had started seeing each other regularly, and she would be lying if she said she hadn't missed it. The little thrill of entering a room and knowing that, by the end of the night, she would be leaving with someone on her arm. Smirking and nodding to herself – tonight would definitely prove worth the trip – the Mayor made her way to the bar.

Motioning to the bartender for service as she slid into her seat, the blue-eyed woman turned around, surveying her prospects. There were a lot of new faces, which meant plenty of fresh blood, unaccustomed her to M.O. Things were looking good, and she predicted she would have a bite within the hour.

"What can I get you?" a voice asked from behind her. Opening her mouth to answer, she was struck dumb by the sight of her ex-lover playing pool at the far end of the room.

"I'll... I'll have a..." she trailed off, dread slowly creeping into her suddenly heavy limbs.

"I can come back if you're not thirsty..."

"Shit!" Doris hissed as Jamanda looked up, and she spun around to face the bar, hoping she hadn't been spotted.

"Don't tend to serve that at here," the bartender joked, shrugging at the venomous look shot her way.

"She'll have an Original Sin, Sam," someone murmured directly beside her. The Mayor's breath caught in her throat in fear, even though she didn't recognize the voice, and she froze, unwilling to turn. A pale hand crept into her line of vision, pushing a folded twenty towards the bartender, who snorted in amusement and nodded.

"One Original Sin, comin' right up," Sam acknowledged, winking at the petrified elected official.

Holding her breath in trepidation, the politician slowly turned on her barstool, and the woman beside her smiled lazily, raising a mostly empty bottle of beer. The first thing Doris noticed – as disgustingly cliché as it was – were the eyes. Dark, almost black, and perfectly almond shaped; they twinkled in amusement at her reaction. The rest of the woman was just as intriguing. At first glance, she was taller than Doris, but a quick flick of her gaze to the woman's feet revealed four-inch-heeled black leather boots. Pale, smooth skin, straight jet-black hair, loose, and perfectly arranged about her shoulders, as if she had individually placed each hair in position to enhance the 'bad girl' image she was obviously going for. A tight slate colored t-shirt, proudly proclaiming 'Chuck Norris counted to infinity... twice,' tucked into dark blue jeans only added to the effect. The bartender set down Doris' drink, interrupting her appraisal.

"So, what, or rather who, are you hiding from?" the standing woman asked, motioning for Sam to bring her a fresh beer. Sighing, Doris resigned herself to the very likely possibility of being caught by her ex, and the ensuing nasty scene. Maybe her new *friend* wouldn't hold it against her.

"You're the second person to ask me that this week, and, amusingly enough, the situation was very similar."

The Asian woman smirked, cocking her head to the side thoughtfully. "Lemme guess; that brunette in the corner, she's your ex, and you didn't know she was here until you sat down at the bar? And now you're too far from the door to make a clean getaway?"

"How remarkably perceptive of you," the politician said dryly, turning to fully face her companion and raising an eyebrow. "You know, you're awfully familiar. You remind me of-"

"If you say Ming Na, I'm leaving right now," the other woman threatened playfully.

"I was going to say someone who should have reported to my office a week ago, but that works too," Doris countered, snorting. The smaller woman had the good grace to blush.

"Sorry I, uh, get that a lot," she said sheepishly.

"Do you routinely not show up to meetings with city officials?" the blue-eyed woman asked, taking a sip of her drink. "Hmm, this is pretty good."

"Do I know you?" the Asian woman asked, and the Mayor chuckled again.

"Don't be coy with me, Detective Li."

They stared at each other for almost a minute, neither willing to budge, until, finally, Li smirked, nodding. "Am I famous or something?"

Doris chuckled again, rolling her eyes. "Hardly, Detective; no offense. Despite the fact that we have never been formally introduced, I make it a point to know the people who answer to my Chief of Police. I also find it hard to believe that you don't recognize the Mayor of the sleepy little town you've sworn to protect and serve." The policewoman shrugged apologetically.

"I thought I'd pretend to give you some semblance of anonymity," she offered, a rueful grin showing off a set of perfectly straight white teeth.

"Ha, well, thank you, but I've accepted the fact that anywhere I step in this town, someone is going to recognize me."

"Fair enough. What's up with the hat, then?" Doris glared, and the shorter woman laughed, gesturing apologetically. "Not that it's not absolutely fabulous! How about we start again?"

Moving forward, so that there were mere inches between them, the dark-eyed woman slid her arm up between them, offering her hand. With a cocky smirk, she waggled her eyebrows. "Howdy there," she said, voice taking on a comical spaghetti Western lilt. Doris chuckled, and Li winked before continuing, voice going back to a normal, if lower register. "My name's Anna Li; I'm a detective for the Springfield PD, an Aries, and an avid college basketball fan. I've also been told I'm a pretty good dancer, and a decent pool player."

Accepting the hand, shivering ever so slightly as her fingers were caressed, Doris gulped down the rest of her cocktail. "Hello, Detective," she husked, inclining her head flirtatiously. "Quite the resume. I'm the Mayor of this fine city. Fancy meeting you here, and not in my office a week ago." Anna laughed, not releasing the hand in her grasp, instead using it to angle in closer.

"Sorry about that, but my new boss has been riding my ass hard since I got into town."

"That sounds uncomfortable."

"Could be worse, and I could definitely think of a few things that'll make up for it."

"Oh, very subtle; nice," Doris chided, rolling her eyes, but still not pulling away.

"I was gonna say like having such a beautiful Mayor as my employer, but sure, go there," Anna retorted, tongue-in-cheek.

"Can I get either of you anything else?" Sam interrupted, amused by their banter. "How about you, Casanova? Another beer?"

"No thank you. But if you beat it, there's a very attractive tip in it for you."

"Nuff said." And she was gone, leaving them in the relative privacy of the corner of the bar.

"You know, you are ridiculously bold, and a little presumptuous," Doris commented, smiling.

"I'm told those are two of my finer qualities," Anna answered, nodding and grinning winningly, not apologetic in the least.

"Oh yeah? And the others?" the Mayor challenged, free hand coming up to toy with the empty beer bottle.

"Guess you'll have to wait and find out. I think I will have another..."

Twenty minutes and two drinks later, Doris had almost forgotten about Jamanda. The woman in front of her was the perfect mix of daring and charming, her sharp wit and the alcohol mixing to create a misleading warm blanket of security around the Mayor's consciousness. It helped that Anna was beautiful, but more so that she was obviously intelligent - an attribute sorely needed among Springfield's finest - and almost painfully funny.

"Ways to know you did something wrong? You have to sugar-coat it for your police academy classmates. Lesson learned though, so I can only hope that the negatives were disposed of, as per the agreement," Anna finished another amusing story, knocking back the rest of her PLCKS beer with a shrug.

"Oh my!" Doris giggled, her hand coming to her mouth as if to take the sound back.

"Ah, misspent youth... Whoops! Don't look now, but your ex is on her way over." Immediately, Doris froze, body tensing until it was hard to breathe. "How do you wanna play this?" Anna asked.

"Huh?"

"Either I don't know you, and the two of you have an ugly fight in public by the look on her face," Anna said, expression sympathetic and knowing. "Or I know you very well, and we make a semi-dignified escape... your call."

"Uh, the latter option?"

“Good, I hoped you’d say that. Follow my lead.” Anna moved forward, into Doris’s space, until their faces were inches apart. “This will only hurt for a second,” she quipped, warm breath caressing the other woman’s cheek. Crossing the last bit of distance, she brought their lips together, free hand moving to tangle in the taller woman’s hair.

“Doris? Is that you?” Pulling back and inhaling sharply, the Mayor gasped. “It is!”

“Ja-Jamanda...” she stuttered, eyes wide with panic. She caught sight of her ex standing just behind the detective, hands on her hips, face twisted in confusion and betrayal.

“How... How could you?” the younger woman whispered, eyes shiny with tears.

“Jamanda, I...”

“Ah, you must be her ex. Name’s Anna Li,” Anna interrupted, turning away from Doris and offering her hand to the shell-shocked third party.

“No one is talking to you,” Jamanda hissed, confusion turning to anger as she refocused on the policewoman. She stepped forward, until she was standing directly in front of the mildly amused woman, whose hand was still out. “This is none of your business! Why don’t you go wreck another relationship?”

“That’s not very nice, especially considering, as I hear it, you two are not currently involved,” the dark-haired woman replied, standing slowly, hand going casually to her belt. Something glinted, and Jamanda’s eyes widened for a moment. “Now the two of us were just getting to know each other before you so rudely interrupted.”

“I just bet you were,” the taller woman growled, but stepped back.

“Oh, we definitely were. If you’re here to be friendly, that’s fine. But unless you have something of value to say, we were just leaving.” Anna reached back and took hold of Doris’s hand, pulling the other woman to her feet. “Nice to meet you.”

Doris opened her mouth, but all that came out was a squeak, and she quickly shut it again. She found herself being pulled towards the door, and followed without resistance. Glancing back, she saw Jamanda shaking her head as she was pulled into a hug by the same woman she had seen her with on Monday.

Glaring, the Mayor turned her gaze forward again and lengthened her stride, so that she was leading. With a firm and determined tug, she directed Anna to her car, hitting the unlock button and waiting. “Um... we going we for a ride?” the other woman asked, clearly amused as she got into the car.

“Of your life,” Doris replied, getting into the driver’s seat. Without another look to the bar, she jammed the key into the ignition and started the car, peeling out of the parking lot.

The drive to the mayoral mansion was short and silent, though surprisingly comfortable. “Nice place,” Anna commented as Doris pulled into the driveway, unbuckling her seat belt. The car shut off with an air of finality, and the blue-eyed woman turned in her seat. She reached forward, jerking the other woman across the divide of their seats and crushing their mouths together.

“Less talking, more kissing,” she grunted, pulling back for a moment before recapturing the other’s woman’s lips.

Somehow they made it into the house and up the stairs without losing contact with each other, hands reaching out blindly to open doors and navigate the potentially hazardous interior. “Which room?” Anna whispered against Doris’ lips, simultaneously unbuttoning the taller woman’s slacks and kicking off her own boots. Instead of answering, Doris reached behind her soon-to-be lover and shoved open a door, hands yanking the t-shirt from Anna’s body and tossing it ahead of them. Backing her in, the taller woman nonchalantly kicked the door closed, ripping off her own top and discarding it.

“I’m not paying you to talk, Detective,” the Mayor growled, swiftly removing her shoes.

“Careful - that sounded positively incriminating.” Anna found herself shoved on the bed for her trouble.

“Shut up and kiss me,” Doris commanded, straddling the shorter woman.

Smiling insolently, the policewoman nodded. “Yes ma’am.”

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ACT 5

Olivia paced back and forth in the confined space of the master bathroom, a frown firmly affixed to her face, fidgeting nervously with a wrapped box she clutched in her right hand. It was nine in the morning, way too early for her to be this wound up on a Saturday, but she couldn’t help it. She was fully dressed for the day, which was an odd occurrence in itself, considering it had become her practice to spend weekend mornings in her robe when she could get away with it. But today was special. Well, the day itself wasn’t anything noteworthy, but the night before she had promised herself that today was the day she would stop being such a scaredy-cat.

The box, which was rectangular and thin – she had been very clear that it couldn't be square – had been wrapped for more than a week now, and securely hidden in the drawer of the nightstand on her side of the bed since she had brought it home. It was a simple gift, really, a silver necklace with a butterfly pendant, which had diamond chips along its body. While on the shiny, perhaps even flashy, side, it was not nearly as expensive or extravagant as, oh say, a huge baby shower, or eighty-thousand dollars, or even the amount she had spent tracking down and getting that piece of molding for her, then not-yet lover, for Christmas. And yet, she had been holding onto it, afraid of what Natalia would say.

Taking a deep breath, she gathered her courage and strode purposefully out of the room, almost running smack into the woman she had been about to go find. She let out a little shriek, empty hand flying to her chest and clutching at the space above her heart. “Whoa there, where's the fire?” Natalia teased, giggling at the startled expression on her lover's face.

“Holy crap, I am getting a bell for you!” the startled woman said, wincing at the disapproving look her curse earned her. “Sorry, I, uh, was just coming to find you.”

“Oooo-kay...”

“Here!” Olivia exclaimed, shoving the present into her lover's hand before she had time to chicken out.

“What... what's this?” the shorter woman asked, brow creasing a little. She held the box away from herself, regarding it anxiously, almost as if she thought it would bite her.

Olivia took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. Taking Natalia by the arm, she led her to the bed and motioned for her to sit down. “I... I had this big speech planned out for when I gave you this,” she began, smiling nervously.

“Olivia...”

“No, no, lemme get it out, before I lose my nerve. First off, I want to reassure you that this isn't a marriage proposal.” Seeing the other woman sigh in relief, Olivia felt her own body relax a little. “We haven't talked about that, and while I know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you, I think it's kind of a crazy time, and things need to settle.”

“Okay... so?” Natalia prompted after a moment, motioning to the parcel in her hand.

“Right, well... open it...”

Nodding, the dark-haired woman did as she was told, gasping when the gift inside was revealed. "Oh, Olivia... it's beautiful..."

"Not as beautiful as you... wow, that was corny."

"And unbelievably sweet," Natalia added, reverently touching the diamond-studded pendant. "But much too expensive."

"Ah, ah, ah! Don't, please," Olivia pleaded, kneeling in front of the other woman and taking the necklace from her.

Before she could protest, Natalia found the silver chain being clasped into place around her neck, the metal surprisingly warm against her skin. She couldn't help the delighted smile that shaped her mouth and deepened her dimples. "Look, like I was saying, I had a speech prepared, but... I'll keep it simple. You're more than my lover or my best friend; you are my soul mate. I hate that term, it's so overused, but it's true. I was incomplete without you. You... you gave me wings, kiddo, and I've always wanted to fly." Chuckling ruefully, she rolled her eyes at herself. "There was some other stuff about hatching from my cocoon and metamorphosis and such, but I'll skip it."

"Oh, Olivia!" Natalia whimpered, tears streaming down her face.

"Sssh, hey, this wasn't supposed to make you cry!" Olivia said frantically, hand cupping the other woman's face.

"Happy tears, I promise."

"Oh... good."

Reaching out, Natalia pulled her lover into her arms, burying her face in the taller woman's shoulder. "I love you so much," she whispered, pressing kisses onto the soft skin left exposed by her tank top.

"Love you, too." The older woman replied, sighing happily and with a bit of relief. "So, you like it?"

"Of course I like it, silly! It's gorgeous." Natalia laughed and pulled away, wiping self-consciously at her face.

"Good. In payment, I expect you to put up with my crap for the foreseeable future."

"Language!" Natalia scolded, swatting Olivia's shoulder. "And, I guess I'll keep you around..."

“Gee, thanks.”

“Anytime.”

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The sound of someone moving around in her bedroom was what initially pulled Doris from her sleep, but the smell of fresh coffee close by was what kept her from falling back into it. Breathing deeply, she cracked open an eye and spotted two mugs steaming lazily on the nightstand. The thought of caffeine made her groan quietly in pleasure and she stretched fully for long moments, ending with an undignified squeak. Muscles she had forgotten existed twinged in protest, and she couldn't help the smile that spread across her face. Sex with Jamanda had always been energetic and satisfying, but sex with Anna had been... positively *indecent*.

The dark-eyed woman had spent no less than an hour keeping her on the verge of orgasm, without letting her fall over the edge. Phantom sensations of lips on her skin, teeth nipping at her hip bones, a talented tongue dragging its way down her body, and fingers, first gentle then rough, washed over her, causing her to blush. She wasn't entirely sure, and hoped that her memory was failing her, but she vaguely remembered *begging* at some point. She would deny it should it ever be brought up, but at the time she had been beyond herself with need. Her only comfort was that she gave as good as she got, and that the other woman would have a few bruises to remember her by.

Hearing the shower turned off, Doris suddenly became cognizant of the fact that, if she was in bed, she couldn't be in the bathroom, or have made coffee. Quickly shutting her eyes again, she rolled over, back to the opening door. The bed dipped down behind her, and she felt warm droplets of water splash on to her back as her newest detective leaned over and kissed her bare shoulder.

“Don't have a heart attack, I'm not expecting a set of keys or anything.” Anna murmured, tone amused, her damp hand encircling the prone woman's waist as she slid back under the covers. “A ‘good morning’ wouldn't go against your religion, would it?” she added, shivering a little at the cool air. Releasing the breath she had been holding, Doris slowly turned in the smaller woman's arms. “Well hello there.”

“Uh, hi...” the blue-eyed woman whispered, voice rough with sleep.

“I considered pretending that I was one of those crazy, clingy women, but you looked so tense I was afraid you'd burst a blood vessel.” Doris groaned, closing her eyes again. Anna chuckled, bumping their foreheads together lightly. “Hey, relax, Boss. This doesn't have to go beyond today, if you don't want it to.” Smirking, she nipped at the mortified woman's

chin. "I didn't think you'd mind me spending the night, considering I could barely walk after last night, wild woman. Also figured using your shower was kosher, considering we're already past the naked stage."

"Just tell me one thing..." Doris began, after long moments of silence.

"Shoot."

"Did you really flash your badge at Jamanda last night?" the taller woman asked, opening her eyes.

"Ah, noticed that, did you?" Anna chuckled, flipping the sheets up and tangling their legs together. "I had a feeling things could get a little messy. I didn't want to have to arrest the poor girl for assaulting an officer of the law when she didn't know..."

"That was very kind of you."

The dark-eyed woman shrugged, moving forward to kiss her lover's jaw. "What can I say, I'm a stand-up kinda gal."

"You know, for someone who doesn't want to be labeled clingy, you're awfully... close right now," Doris said dryly, raising an eyebrow as Anna wrapped her arms around her waist, lips slowly moving downward.

"Difference between... clingy... and *friendly*..." the police detective corrected between kisses.

"Fair enough," the Mayor agreed, biting her lip to keep from moaning.

The sound of "Secret Agent Man" filled the air, startling both women. "Oh, you are fucking *kidding* me!" Anna grumbled, releasing her hold with a sigh and rolling over, towards the sound. Blindly, she rooted around on the floor, hand snagging her pants and plucking her cell phone from her pocket. "Li," she growled. After listening for a moment, she sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, pinning the phone between her shoulder and ear as she pulled on her jeans and searched for her socks. "Yeah, okay. No problem. Give me half an hour. Yeah, be there, right." Locating her shirt, she yanked that on, not bothering with her bra, which she scooped up and shoved in her back pocket.

With a final grunt, which could have been goodbye, the policewoman snapped the device shut, turning and smiling apologetically. "Sorry Boss, duty calls." Leaning across the expanse of the bed, Anna kissed the stunned woman again briefly. "You know where to find me if you want to do this again. Ciao." And without another word, or a glance back, she was gone.

“Bye...”

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“I can’t thank you enough for doing this,” Jonathan said again, and Olivia rolled her eyes, moving to accept the tiny, shy child into her arms. “This meeting came out of nowhere, and Lizzie is caught up in a family thing...”

“It’s a Saturday, and we didn’t have anything planned. Enough already; go to your meeting!”

“I owe you Aunt Liv, really,” he insisted.

“It’s no problem, really. I get to spend time with my favorite grand-niece... ugh, now I feel old.” The adults both chuckled. Shifting the girl higher on her hip with one arm, she reached out and stroked her nephew’s stubbly cheek. If Natalia were watching she would probably catch hell for holding the child, even though she barely weighed a thing. “You know I’d do anything for you, kiddo. This is hardly a burden, all right?” He nodded, relief palpable.

“Hey there, Princess, how are you today? Ready to have a great time with your cousin?” Olivia asked softly, brushing curls away from the girl’s face so she could see her eyes. Her heart clenched for a moment; would this be what Francesca looked like, all big, inquisitive eyes and waves of ink-black hair? Sarah nodded hesitantly, glancing back at her father for reassurance.

He smiled and ruffled her hair before backing away slowly. “Have fun, baby girl; don’t cause trouble.”

The child sighed, but some of the tension slid from her body. “Kay Daddy... come back soon.”

“Won’t even notice I’m gone,” he replied, winking before turning and jogging to his car.

Olivia and Sarah were still for long moments, sizing each other up. Finally, the woman smiled and bounced the girl a little. “How ‘bout we go inside and see if Aunt Natalia is done with lunch, huh, pretty girl?” She got a tentative nod in return.

“Can I have candy?”

“Ha, sure, why not? I think we may have a bit left over from Halloween. I’m sure I can convince your cousin to let you have some of hers...”

“Kay.”

An hour later, Olivia smiled at her partner as she reached out for another dish to dry. “Two bambinos, fed, cleaned, and quietly amusing themselves. See, I told ya, simple as pie. Having two girls around is going to be a cinch...” Natalia rolled her eyes but nodded indulgently.

“I have to admit, it’s a lot quieter than I thought it would be...” she admitted, shrugging and rinsing the soap off the last of the plates. “There, all done. What next?”

“Well,” Olivia drawled, taking the dish and placing it still wet on the counter. “I was thinking, if the girls are busy entertaining themselves, we could...” she trailed off, pulling the bemused woman into her arms and trailing light kisses across her jaw.

“Oh yeah, ya think?” Natalia whispered breathlessly, eyes fluttering closed. “Awful presumptuous of you.”

“Hmmm, but you love me anyway,” Olivia murmured against olive skin.

Suddenly there was a loud crash in the living room, and both women closed their eyes, one wincing in sympathy, the other counting to ten in her head to keep from screaming. They both knew the only thing in the house that could make that particular crunching noise was Olivia’s laptop, which had been left out on the end table next to the couch.

After long moments of dead silence, Olivia opened her eyes. “Okay, that’s it! We’re going outside!” she announced, clenching her jaw in an effort to quell any yelling.

“Sweetie, we should really sit them down and talk to them about-” Green eyes flashed dangerously for a moment, before calming.

“I am way, way too pissed to *talk* right now. I’m just thanking my past self for randomly backing up all the important files on my external drive.”

Taking a deep breath to further encourage herself to keep control, Olivia raised her hand to stall any more arguments. “Better to get everyone outside and away from anything else breakable. Accidents happen, shouldn’t have left that there with a nine-year-old and a four-year-old running around. My mistake, lesson learned.” She spotted the two culprits hovering around the connecting door, looking appropriately apologetic and nervous.

“But-”

"Nope, outside, *everyone*, before I say something I regret," she insisted, glaring at her daughter and niece and pointing to the door. "Out. *Now*."

Obediently, the girls shuffled towards the door. "Ah, ah, ah, whoa there!" Natalia called, glaring at Olivia for a moment before moving towards the children.

"Coats first; no getting sick on my watch!" Grabbing the appropriate outerwear, the Latina gave her partner a pointed look. "That means you help. Two little people, two adults," she added, chucking the smaller of the jackets towards the other woman.

"Right away, commandant!" Olivia mocked, nevertheless moving to do what she was told.

By the time they had the girls suited up, out the door, and happily running around the yard, Olivia had almost forgotten about the pile of metal and plastic that had been her laptop. Watching her daughter giggle in delight as she pretended to be a monster and chase her cousin, who shrieked happily and zipped about the grass, filled her with warmth and peace. "I always wished Emma had a sister closer in age," she confessed, sitting down on the porch bench and reclining, resting her arm along the back.

"Yeah?" Natalia sat down beside her, looking over at her for a moment and smiling, before turning back and watching the children roll around on the multi-colored leaves which had begun to cover everything.

"Yeah. Someone to play with, y'know? To be a kid with, instead of spending all her time around adults."

"Hmmm, she does seem to really enjoy being around Sarah. I hope she feels the same way about the baby," Natalia replied, hand resting lightly on her stomach.

"I've been a little worried..."



Moving closer, so that the line of their bodies were in full contact, Olivia rested her chin on Natalia's shoulder, wrapping an arm around the pregnant woman's back and pulling her against her chest. "Hey, it's all going to work out, okay? I know it's been a really stressful few weeks, but she seems absolutely thrilled at the idea of being a big sister."

"Yeah... I guess. I just, I worry..."

Closing her eyes, Olivia nuzzled her cheek against the other woman's, inhaling her scent. "We love each other, and we're a family. Everything else is going to follow from that."

"Promise?" Natalia asked, the tight control she kept over her doubts to slipping for a moment.

"Cross my second heart." Natalia smiled, and Olivia felt it against her cheek.

Reaching up, the Latina covered the hand that was resting lightly against her chest. "You are entirely too good to me, you know that don't you?"

"Yeah, I know," Olivia replied breezily. "Have to show all the boys how it's done." Chuckling, Natalia pulled away, turning so she was able to see her partner.

Cupping the other woman's face, she looked deeply into the eyes she loved so much.

"Thank you."

"For what, being your sugar mama?"

"Nooo, she who thinks she's so clever," Natalia groaned, tapping Olivia's chin with her finger. "Thank you for... for loving me, and giving me, us, another chance even though I-I didn't..." she trailed off, emotion causing a lump to rise in her throat. Instantly, arms pulled her close, cradling her face against a strong shoulder.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," Olivia murmured, hand combing through dark hair, massaging her lover's scalp soothingly. "It's me who should be thanking you. You gave me a second chance at life, at *really* living. How about we call it even and go from there?"

Natalia sniffled against the thin fabric of the taller woman's tank top. "Sounds good," was the muffled reply.

Pulling back, the brown-eyed woman frowned. "How did you manage to get out of the house with no jacket on?"

"My laziness, plus your distractedness?" the businesswoman offered, grinning charmingly.

"Aren't you cold?"

"Well, now that you mention it..." Olivia replied, shivering a little. "How about I go for hot chocolate and overcoat reinforcements, and meet you back here in ten?" Gently, she wiped away the few tears that had managed to escape her partner's eyes.

"Okay. But don't take too long."

"Won't even notice I'm gone."

"Lies," Natalia disagreed, smiling weakly. "Also, use the semi-sweet chocolate, not the Swiss Miss junk. That packaged stuff is bad for you."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..."

Olivia entered the farmhouse, exhaling noisily in relief at the rush of warm air that greeted her. She hadn't noticed how chilly she was until her lover had pointed it out; perhaps jeans and a tank top hadn't been the wisest of choices to brave the autumn afternoon. "First things first," she said to herself. "Hot cocoa, jacket, then... the world!" Walking to the

pantry for the Swiss Miss, she grinned. Natalia wouldn't be able to tell the difference... would she? Sighing in resignation, she pulled out the less sweet, 'healthier' option. "If this didn't take five times as long, it would taste better," she grumbled under her breath, moving to the refrigerator for milk.

Humming to herself and gazing out the window as the milk simmered on the stove, Olivia couldn't help but smile. Sarah and Emma were taking turns leap-frogging over each other, laughing loudly enough for her to hear whenever one of them fell over into a pile of leaves. It was one of the cutest things she had ever seen, and made her heart feel lighter. Her thoughts turned to the future, to autumn weekends with her and Natalia, Emma and Francesca, and maybe even Rafe, and suddenly she found herself excited by the idea.

The sound of her phone ringing brought her out of her musings, and she pulled it from her pocket, answering absently without bothering to look at the caller. "Olivia Spencer."

"Olivia Spencer," the voice on the other end mocked, and instantly she smiled. Shifting the phone onto her shoulder and pinning it with her ear, she turned off the burner, giving the hot cocoa a final stir.

"Sammy? Is that you?" she asked, unable to keep the giddiness from her tone.

"The one and only. How's my favorite Springfield resident?"

"Fabulous, fantastic, and phenomenal, as always. How's my favorite baby brother?" she countered, grabbing two large mugs and carefully pouring in the steaming liquid.

"Not to mention your favorite eldest daughter," another voice added, startling her so that she splashed some of her drink onto her hand.

Wincing, she hastily replaced the saucepan onto the cooling burner. "Ouch!"

"You okay?"

"Ava, sweetie, is that you?" the woman asked around the fingers jammed into her mouth.

"Indeed. Are you okay, Mom?"

"Yup, just clumsy," she said, snorting at herself. Walking over to the sink, she turned on the tap and stuck her hand under the lukewarm water. "Note to self, when chocolate is boiling lava hot, you can't dip your hands in and hope to come out unscathed." Twin laughs echoed over the line.

“So, how did it come to pass that my daughter and brother are in the same place at the same time?” Olivia prompted.

“Guy walks into a bar...” Ava replied, trailing off with a chuckle.

“I got an assignment that posted me in the Bay area for a bit, and decided to look up Miss Thing,” Sam said, and Olivia could almost see him shrug.

“He showed up at the bar I manage and charmed a few drinks from my bartenders,” the younger woman added, snorting.

“That’s my boy,” her mother snickered, rolling her eyes.

“So, tell me, to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?” Olivia asked after a moment. Grabbing her mug and bringing it to her lips, she blew over the rim before taking a sip. The chocolate was still too hot, and she winced as it scalded her tongue.

“We had a question for you, actually,” Sam announced, drawing her attention from her wounded mouth.

“No, you can’t use my bra as a slingshot for your action figures,” she said immediately, smiling when he laughed.

“That was *once*, jeez! Let it go already, woman; you sure do hold a grudge,” he grouched.

“Don’t wanna know,” Ava chimed in.

“Ah, misspent youth,” the man said nostalgically. “I would do it all again...”

“Sam, focus!” Ava chided, sounding like she had spent quite some time corralling his wandering thoughts and was reaching her limit. Olivia chuckled in sympathy.

“Right!” he continued, and again, Olivia could almost see the expression on his face; innocently wide eyed, with a dash of mischief. “So, we were wondering if you had enough room for two more at your Thanksgiving table?”

“Oh, Sammy... are you serious?” she asked, chest tightening with emotion at the thought of being able to see her brother and eldest daughter again.

“As the IRS,” he joked, but she could hear the same emotion reflected in his voice.

"Yes, of course..." she whispered, tears pricking at the backs of her eyes. "I always have room for you; you know that." She wanted to say more, but didn't trust herself not to cry.

"So, what's new with you, sister o' mine?" Sam asked after long moments of silence, and Olivia could hear him swallowing hard.

"Long story short?" she asked, glancing out the window and wiping her eyes before turning her attention to the second, half-filled mug, and finishing the task of pouring out the rest of the hot chocolate.

"Sure."

"Moved into Cassie's old farmhouse with my girlfriend, and we're expecting a baby in less than a month," she rattled off, enjoying the stunned silence that followed.

"Natalia's pregnant?" Ava squealed, sounding completely ecstatic.

"You're dating *Natalia*?" Sam asked, sounding completely lost. "Doesn't she hate you?"

"I did say long story *short*."

"Well, you'll have to tell us when we get there, because I am getting death glares from your daughter," Sam whined.

"Sorry, Mom, but I have work in a bit, and I have to get ready..." Ava apologized.

"No problem, sweetheart. I'm glad that you guys called, and I can't wait to see you again!" Olivia replied, setting the empty pot into the sink and wiping up the rest of her mess with a damp dish rag.

"Love ya, Big Sis," Sam sang, and the woman couldn't help but laugh.

"Love you, too, Little Bro."

"Love you, Mom! See you soon!"

"Love you, honey. Bye-bye."

Stepping outside, jacket snugly zipped and carefully balancing two mugs of hot cocoa as she pulled the door closed behind her, Olivia Spencer took a deep breath of the crisp November air.

“Took you long enough,” Natalia teased, reaching out gratefully to accept her drink. “Who was on the phone?”

“How did you know I was on the phone?” the taller woman asked, sitting beside her lover and sipping at her treat.

“Well, I heard you having a conversation. So, either you were having a psychotic episode, or you got a call,” was the amused, but reasonable reply. Nodding, Olivia had to agree with the logic.

“Sam and Ava called.”

“Oh! How nice! What did they say?” Natalia asked, smiling.

“They want to come to Thanksgiving; I told them it was okay.” Olivia paused mid-drink, looking over at her partner. “Is... is it okay that I invited them? I mean, I... I just miss them so much...”

Smiling gently, Natalia set her mug on the ground, taking Olivia’s free hand in her own. “Of course it’s okay,” she assured, free hand coming up to stroke her beloved’s cheek. “This is your home too.”

“I know, I just... I realize it’s going to be crazy, and with the baby coming, you have to rest...” Olivia replied, frowning.

“They’re your family, querida, which means they’re *my* family,” Natalia assured her, leaning forward and kissing the other woman softly, before pulling back and resting their foreheads together. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

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After more than an hour of running around outside, the girls were convinced to come inside, with the promise of a snack, which they consumed like ravenous beasts.

“Auntie O, Natalia? Sarah?” a deep voice called from the living room, startling the women and children as they were contemplating getting up to clean up after themselves.

“In here, Jonathan,” Olivia shouted, wincing at the glare she received from her lover. Heavy footsteps moved toward them, and the man appeared in the doorway.

“Daddy!” Sarah cried, jumping up from her chair and running to him, wrapping her small arms around his leg. Smiling, he knelt and pulled her into his arms.

“Hey there, baby girl. Ready to get going?” he asked, standing and swinging her around.

“Daddy, can Emma sleep over today?” Sarah asked, batting her eyelashes and smiling winningly.

“Oh, I don’t know, baby girl... It’s up to her mommies,” he replied hesitantly, loathe to deny his daughter anything.

Three sets of eyes turned to the women in question, who both just shrugged. “If you don’t mind...” Natalia began, cut off by Emma’s happy squeal. Jumping out of her chair as well, the nine-year-old hugged them both quickly, before dashing off to her room.

“Be right back!” she shouted over her shoulder.

“Jellybean, don’t run in the house,” Olivia called after her, rolling her eyes when the sound of the girl’s footsteps seemed increased in speed.

“So, what time do you want speed racer back tomorrow?” Jonathan asked, sliding into an empty chair and settling his daughter into his lap.

“Um, anytime between ten and two?” Olivia asked, looking over at her lover for confirmation. Natalia nodded, smiling at Sarah, who grinned and stuck her hand out across the table.

The woman reached forward to take it, surprised when the girl pulled it back at the last second, giggling.

“Oh, you got me!” the dark-haired woman lamented, pouting and clutching her chest in mock sadness. “You’re just too quick for me.”

“Be faster!” Sarah commanded, sticking out her tongue playfully.

“Sarah!” Jonathan scolded, shocked.

“Ha, yup, she’s definitely yours,” Olivia teased, winking at the girl, who smiled back smugly.

“Kay, I’m ready!” Emma exclaimed, rushing back into the room, knapsack – stuffed to the brim – on her back.

"Did you pack your entire room?" Olivia asked, eyeing the bulging bag dubiously. She gave it ten minutes before it exploded, taking the surrounding area with it.

"No, Mommy! Just clothes and dolls and my book," Emma replied, rolling her eyes. "Can we go now?"

"Over-packs and impatient, yup, she's definitely yours," Jonathan said, setting Sarah on the floor before standing and moving around the table, kissing the seated women in turn. "I'll bring her back as intact as possible," he promised, winking at his aunt.

"I'd worry more about your house than anything else," the older woman quipped, deciding not to tell him about her computer, which she had tossed sadly into the trash before they had sat down to their snack.

"Bye Mommy, bye Natalia!" Emma said, hugging both women again before moving to the door and grabbing her coat. Slipping it on, she grabbed Sarah's and held it out for her, helping the younger girl into it.

"Bye Auntie 'Talia, Auntie 'Livia," Sarah said, following Emma's example and embracing them.

"Bye Bean, bye Princess," Olivia called after them, throwing up her hands and shaking her head when they zipped out the door without looking back.

"Auntie O, Natalia." Jonathan chuckled, waving and stepping outside, pulling the door shut behind him. After a moment they heard the car start up and drive away.

Standing up unison and looking at the closed door, the two women turned to each other. They stared into each other's eyes for long moments, slow smiles spreading across their faces. "You know..." Natalia began, moving forward and insinuating herself into her lover's arms.

"This is probably the last time... in a *long* time..." Olivia continued, dropping kisses across the shorter woman's face, starting at her hairline and working her way to lips.

"We'll be completely alone together..." the Latina finished, grinning.

"You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

"First one to the couch gets to pick the movie!" Natalia exclaimed, making a break for the living room with a squeal. "We're watching something with subtitles!"

“Aw, crap...” Olivia muttered, following at a more sedate, defeated pace.

“Language!” the other woman called from the other room.

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Anna loved few things more than she loved the smell of hot, fresh tea. Despite coming from an island where the hot drink of choice was coffee, it was only since coming to the United States that she had learned to appreciate the taste and effects of the bitter brew. Her household had been one without the influence of the roasted bean, and because of it, the beverage first in her heart would always be tea. The scent conjured memories of quiet nights on the beach and long talks with her father...

Sighing in contentment, she poured the boiling water into her traditional teapot slowly, letting the liquid strain through the leaves and through the mesh, savoring the smell. Almost more than the taste, she enjoyed the act of preparing the drink; it was calming in its precise method, something that reminded her of home, and gave her a sense of control. Through her movements, she directed the course of the tea, allowing her mind to unwind and drift; it was a form of meditation, though she would never admit that out loud, having little patience for that sort of thing otherwise. Placing the kettle on a cool burner, she turned and retrieved the lid to her pot, sliding it on before picking the fragile ceramic up and filling her mug.

Sitting quickly at her table, she raised the cup to her lips, jerking and spilling her drink at the sound of her phone ringing. With a growl, she rolled her eyes and stood, setting down the cup, grabbing the offending object in one hand and a dish cloth in the other. “What can I do for you?” she asked, tone bland, as she wiped at the table.

“How did your meeting with my partner go?” the voice on the other end asked, not bothering with pleasantries either.

“Uneventfully. I didn’t have much to report, and he was distracted.”

“Distracted?”

“Had other obligations he had to return to,” she replied, tossing the soiled cloth into the sink and grabbing the half-full mug, moving to her living room and sitting on the couch. “Don’t fret, *Sir*, we made another appointment to exchange information.”

“Not in public, I hope?” he asked.

She scowled, voice taking on an edge. "I understand that you wish you could be here, taking care of this personally, but that's no reason to question my ability. I am good at what I do, and I am giving this mission my full attention."

"Funny, I heard otherwise. How's the Mayor involved in this?"

Anna froze, dark eyes widening for a moment, before narrowing. How had he been spying on her? Who else did her employer have working this mission?

"She's close to the family of one of the two targets," she replied slowly, mind racing.

"Sleeping with a high-ranking political official is *not* keeping a low profile, *Anna*," he growled. She felt her hackles rising, and had to swallow her first retort.

"You gave me full authority to proceed however I saw fit during this mission. Involving myself with her will allow me to gain social access to the targets, to be trusted more quickly," she ground out, jaw clenched tight. "You said it yourself more than once, we are running out of time."

"Make sure that you aren't getting sloppy in the interest of *time*," he replied.

"No, *Sir*."

"I expect a report by Friday of your progress."

"Yes S-" The line went dead. "ir..."

Fuming for long moments, Anna gazed down into her tea, her reflection distorted as the liquid rippled slowly. Standing with an outwardly calm appearance, she tilted her head, before hurling the mug against the wall. Smiling with a dark satisfaction as the ceramic shattered and the fluid sprayed out, staining the white of the wall paper, she looked to the painting well above the mess. It depicted one of the shorelines of San Cristobel during a hurricane, done in grays, blues, blacks, with some yellows. It was the only thing she had brought with her from home. "Soon," she whispered, sighing and scrubbing her face tiredly with her hand. "Soon."

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Glancing around the living room as she walked in from the kitchen carrying two mugs of decaf tea, Olivia tilted her head in confusion. Popcorn: check; warm snuggling blanket: check; movie that she wouldn't be caught dead watching for anyone but her lover: check. So, where the hell was her lover? "Natalia, honey?" Olivia called up the stairs, plopping

down onto the couch, frowning. Really, how long did it take that woman to pee? Olivia had managed to make a huge bowl of popcorn, two cups of tea, and check her email on her blackberry since the younger woman had gone upstairs.

“Could you come up here for a second?” Natalia’s voice floated down. Alarmed, Olivia stood and hurried up the stairs.

The first thing she noticed was that the hallway was dark, a soft, flickering glow emanating from the open door to the master bedroom. “This is either going to be really good, or really, *really* badly,” she muttered to herself, cautiously making her way towards where she assumed her lover was. The quiet made her edgy, and she attempted humor to steady herself. “Fee, fie, fo, fum, I... oh my...” she trailed off as she entered the room, breath catching. “Definitely good...”

The curtains had been drawn and the main lights had been turned off, replaced by countless strings of Christmas lights. They were everywhere: wrapped around the windowsills, on the bed posts, snaking up the walls like magically illuminated ivy. They softened the sharp edges of reality, making it seem to the hotelier as if she had walked into an enchanted version of her life. And there on the bed, naked as the day she was born, Natalia lay propped against the headboard like a Shakespearean dream, completing the surreal-ness of the moment. Dark eyes twinkling in the muted light, the woman-cum-goddess raised an arm, beckoning the dumbfounded Olivia forward.

Reaching the side of the bed, she stopped, uncharacteristically unsure of the next step. Giggling, Natalia grasped her hand and tugged until she got the message and climbed onto the bed. Gingerly Olivia straddled the reclining woman’s thighs, mindful of her belly. “Hi,” Natalia whispered, pushing herself up with her free arm, bringing them face to face, as close as possible.

“Uh, hi...” Olivia mumbled blinking slowly, not entirely convinced she hadn’t fallen asleep on the couch and that this was all a dream. “Just to, uh, be clear... I’m not unconscious, right? This isn’t some sort of exhaustion induced, hormone driven coma?”

“Would it matter if it was?” Natalia asked, frowning, truly curious.

“Nope!” Olivia replied, shaking her head and gently running her lips along the naked woman’s throat. “I just want to know if I should expect any furniture or appliances to randomly burst into song.”

“You’re very strange,” the younger woman said, lying back again and rolling her eyes.

“Part of my charm,” was the easy reply, muffled as the green-eyed woman braced her arms on either side of her lover and moved in for a kiss.

Pulling back a few inches and grinning, Olivia looked around and chuckled. “How badly would it ruin the mood if I said it was like a Danielle Steele novel in here?” she teased, scrunching her nose a little.

Natalia laughed, hands tangling in her lover’s hair. “I was going for ‘enchanting’ and ‘dreamy,’ but, yeah... kinda pulp romance novel-y, huh?” She paused, frowning a little, suddenly embarrassed. “Too much?”

Olivia shook her head, trailing kisses down Natalia’s throat. “Ignore my cynicism,” she instructed, distracted by the curve of the woman’s collarbone. “Defense mechanism. This is perfect... you’re perfect.”

“Oh... good...” Natalia moaned encouragingly, drawing the other woman closer, breath catching in her throat. “Glad you... approve...”

Instead of answering verbally, Olivia moved down, capturing a hardening nipple gently between her teeth and flicking it with her tongue. Smiling smugly at her lover’s gasp, she shifted her weight to her right arm and brought the left up to cup the other breast. “Have I mentioned lately how painfully beautiful you are?” she whispered, kissing and then swirling her tongue against pebbled flesh.

“Might, oh my, have mentioned it...” Natalia gasped, urging her lover up for another kiss with a gentle tug at her hair.

“You are wearing entirely too many clothes,” she admonished when they came up for air.

“What are you going to do about it?” Olivia challenged, attaching her lips to the column of the dark-haired woman’s throat.

“Either you, yes! Either you take ‘em off... Or I rip ‘em off...” Pulling back a bit, the green-eyed woman chuckled.

“Fair enough.”

~~*~*

“Well, that was...” Olivia whispered, using the last of her strength to roll away from her lover before collapsing.

"Yeah, it really was..." Natalia agreed, smiling proudly and turning, propping her head up on her right hand. "Not bad for a pregnant lady."

"Let it *never* be said that I ever doubted your abilities!" the older woman said hoarsely, voice cracking. Natalia giggled at that, reaching out with her free hand and trailing it down her lover's still quivering abdomen. "No, please, mercy!" the older woman cried feebly.

"Getting too weak to keep up with your pregnant girlfriend, huh? I need to start feeding you more; you need to build up stamina, and you're getting kinda thin," the dark-haired woman teased, pinching Olivia's hip.

"Hey!" the boneless woman protested weakly, turning her head fractionally to glare. "Take that back."

"Aw, I'm sorry, sweetie," Natalia cooed, completely unapologetic.

"I'll have you know, I have the stamina of ten women, and the curves of a Greek statue..." Olivia grumbled. She inhaled sharply through her nose as the other woman's hand wandered to oversensitive, overheated areas.

"Aphrodite in the flesh," the younger woman hummed in agreement, her expression oh-so-innocent.

Whimpering, Olivia rolled away and got to her feet, backing away from the bed, towards the adjoining bathroom. "I love you, and lust after you like no other, but if you keep touching me I am going to implode," she groaned, eyes pleading. Natalia pouted, dimples deepening. "Ugh, don't do that, that's cheating!"

"Fiiiine, ya big baby."

"At least lemme take a shower; I'm all sweaty..."

"Go, be clean," Natalia conceded, waved her arm dismissively. "But hurry back." With a sigh of relief, the green-eyed woman blew her lover a kiss and escaped to the bathroom.

Starting the shower and stepping in, Olivia moaned quietly in appreciation. Leaning forward, she allowed the steaming, hot water to pour over her head and down her neck and shoulders, easing some of the tension in her muscles. She thanked every god she could think of for the pain in her joints; she had completely earned it, and had enjoyed every second thoroughly. Having a younger, pregnant lover certainly had its perks, but she needed to start stretching more often if tonight was any indication of how things were going to be between them in bed...

“Olivia?” Natalia called softly from the other room, and Olivia realized she had dozed off under the spray. With a wry chuckle, she shut off the water and grabbed a towel, wrapping herself in the soft material and wandering back into the bedroom. Stopping short, she frowned at the sight of her partner fully dressed. Noting the small carry-on bag at her side, the businesswoman stopped breathing.

“You might, uh, want to get dressed...” Natalia whimpered, her free arm wrapped around her stomach. “I think we’re gonna need to go for a drive...”

The End

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All the Trimmings

by Calliopes_Muse

ACT 1

This was so unlike her. Olivia went through about three alarm clocks a year because she pulverized them on chilly mornings like this. Usually, all she wanted to do was huddle back under the warm covers. And more recently, snuggle closer to the warm body next to her. But here she was, less than two weeks away from having her life change yet again with the birth of her third daughter, and she found herself in a new position...awake...early. She fought the groan rolling low in her chest so she wouldn’t wake the sleeping woman next to her. Instead, she quietly sat up to turn off her alarm before it had a chance to chirp annoyingly and then leaned over to watch Natalia sleep.

The last few days had been chaotic, to say the least. They had not just one, but two, false alarm rushes to the hospital. The doctor had explained it as Braxton Hicks contractions. They weren’t uncommon late in a pregnancy, but they had scared Olivia. The second time it happened Natalia had some spotty bleeding, but the doctor again reassured them both that it wasn’t a bad sign and to continue on with life as normal. Olivia brought Natalia home each time, and each time she made her sit on the couch while Olivia made her some tea and wrapped her in a warm blanket. She even built a small fire so they could huddle under the blanket and listen to the soft winds outside bring in the change of the seasons.

Everything was changing - the seasons, their lives, and the depth of Olivia's love for Natalia. She thought she loved her before, and she thought the love could never get stronger; however, when Natalia cried out in pain at the false contractions, and Olivia saw the small hint of blood on Natalia's thigh, the fear of loss, a gut-wrenching rending of her soul, was so intense it took her breath away. Even now, looking down on Natalia's serene features, Olivia's hands shook at the remembered rush of fear.

As she watched Natalia sleeping peacefully in their bed, she pushed away the fear and allowed herself a moment to relish in the warmth that spread through her every time she looked at her lover. She couldn't imagine ever being without this profound feeling of love for Natalia that left her awestruck. Yet it still seemed so surreal at times, and she found herself seeking reassurance in the most tactile of ways by doing what she was doing now, reaching over to brush her quivering fingers lightly over the other woman's swollen belly. The solidity of her and the child inside calmed Olivia like nothing else. Natalia really was here. She really was back. And she really was hers. Natalia was okay, and Olivia would do everything in her power to ensure it stayed that way.

She was roused from her musings by slender fingers slipping between her own and a drowsy mumble. "Stay."

"If I stay, I'm going to do far more than cuddle, and it'll definitely wake you up." Olivia whispered.

"S'alright. Don't mind." Natalia said.

Olivia smirked at Natalia's semi-nocturnal confession, but the smile quickly faded. "I know you don't mind, but you and the baby need to sleep and rest. Doctor's orders. I'll be back to check on you at lunch. Sleep."

"M'kay."

Olivia brushed dark hair away from Natalia's face, enjoying the heavy feel of the strands teasing the skin between her fingers, until the other woman's breathing deepened. Natalia visibly sank further down into her pillow and the warmth of the bed. Olivia wanted nothing more than to slowly wake her lover up with heated kisses and touches. Instead, she sighed and got out from under the toasty covers, making a quiet but hasty run for the bathroom where she jumped into a steamy shower.

Thirty minutes later, she emerged from the bathroom and dressed in a tailor-fitted tan suit and high-heeled brown boots. Slipping on her long brown jacket from the closet to guard against the chilly fall weather, she looked in the mirror and drew up short. Except for the highlights in her pulled-back hair being slightly darker, she looked almost like she did on the surprisingly cold spring day when, over Gus' grave, she confessed her love for Natalia.

Stepping aside, she saw the reflection of the woman in question sleeping soundly in bed... their bed.



It was hard for her to believe that barely six months had passed. So much had happened. So much had changed. Yet things felt exactly right, the way they should be.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Natalia was here now. She had come back to her and that's all that mattered.

Putting on the last of her jewelry, she moved to the side of the bed and gazed down at Natalia. Even with her mouth slightly open and a hint of drool on the corner of her mouth, Olivia thought she was the most gorgeous woman in the world. She slipped her hand along a warm cheek, gently caressing the soft skin, her fingers tracing the full lips. With an internal groan, she fought the desire to strip down and climb back into bed, and instead let her "worried partner" side come out and argue that Natalia needed rest more than sex. She contented herself with running her fingers softly along Natalia's cheek and kissing her tenderly on the lips. "I love you."

"Love you too."

~~*~*

Olivia glanced at the clock on her desk for the third time in ten minutes, finally tossing down the file in her hand in frustration and sighing.

"Fire 'em." Olivia jumped at Doris' voice coming from the doorway.

"What?"

"Anyone who makes you sound like that and fling innocent files at only," Doris glanced down at her watch, "10:45 in the morning must be fired."

Olivia smiled at her friend and leaned back in her chair. "It's not that. Well, not quite."

The mayor smoothed down the non-existent wrinkles in her tight gray skirt before sitting across the desk from Olivia. "So...spill. What is it?"

Waving a hand in the air at Doris, Olivia feigned nonchalance. "Just want to get home."

Doris smirked, one eyebrow quirking up naughtily. "Those cookies Natalia bakes must be really good to have you so anxious to get home so soon."

"You're horrible, and that's not it at all." Olivia shook her head and sipped her coffee, "Poor Natalia can hardly move, much less do...that."

"Thank goodness I don't have that kind of lady trouble!"

Olivia let her inner eight-year-old out to play and shot a rubber band at the other woman. "You wouldn't complain. Trust me, I haven't."

Doris' latent softball skills came in handy as she deftly caught the flying object in one hand. "Please...do tell me all about it, because I just can't picture your personal Virgin Mary doing anything more intimate than bathing you in holy water. In fact," Doris stood and grabbed her coat and purse, "you can tell me over an early lunch and a drink."

"I'd love to kiss and tell with my disturbingly nosy friend, but I really do have to go home to check on Natalia."

"Augh, that's just disgusting."

"What?"

"You are so whipped!"

Olivia shot another rubber band at Doris' head. "I'm not whipped. I'm worried."

“Why? She’s not due for a couple more weeks.” Doris shrugged, completely unconcerned for Natalia’s health.

A worried frown creased Olivia’s face and she avoided Doris’ eyes. “She started having some false labor pains last week.”

“Oh. Well, she’s obviously okay, right, or she wouldn’t be at home?”

Olivia nodded, tapping a pen nervously on her desk. “Right.”

“And the baby’s far enough along that it would be fine if she delivered early. It’s going to be fine, Olivia. Don’t worry so much.”

Olivia rubbed the bridge of her nose. Her emotions were too close to the surface, and she really didn’t want to break down in front of Doris...again. “I can’t help but worry. I know the odds are low that anything really bad could happen at this point, and the doctor has given both her and Francesca a perfect bill of health.”

“See?”

Olivia leaned forward, resting her arms on the desk. “But I just got her back, Doris.” The tears popped into her eyes before she realized what was happening, and she quickly brushed them away. “I just got her back and the thought of anything going wrong is...terrifying.” Olivia nodded her head in resolve and continued on, “Only a little while longer. I just have to keep her from overdoing it.”

Doris waited silently somehow knowing that Olivia’s rant wasn’t quite done. Doris smiled to herself when Olivia kept talking. “And it’s not helping that Keira is sending me all these health and medical articles about women having babies after 35 with all these medical problems. I know she means well but...”

“Fire the bitch!”

Olivia stared at her friend for a moment, stunned by the absurdity of the outburst, before bursting into laughter. Seconds later, Doris started to chuckle as well.

Finally, Olivia wiped at the tears of laughter in her eyes. “Thank you; I needed that!”

“You’re welcome.” Doris picked up her purse and walked around the desk to kiss the top of Olivia’s head. Olivia smiled up at her friend not letting her shock show at the uncharacteristic affectionate gesture. “Now, go home to your girl. You won’t get many more moments alone.”

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The drive back out to the farmhouse was idyllic. The fall sky was a startling shade of blue and a light wind dusted fallen leaves across the road and into Olivia's path as she steered her car along the road. She took Doris' advice and left a little early to spend quality time with Natalia and their unborn baby.

When Olivia opened the door, everything was silent until an overhead crash alerted her to the fact that someone was upstairs. She climbed the steps quietly and shuffled down the hall until she was in front of the nursery door, the room that had once belonged to her. She cracked the door open and caught sight of Natalia feverishly reorganizing and mumbling to herself. "No...no there. Maybe here. No, then the diaper caddy will be on the other side of the room."

Olivia swung the door open fully and Natalia immediately stiffened, knowing who was there, without turning around.

"Hi, honey. You're home early."

Olivia crossed her arms. "And what exactly do you think you're doing? The doctor said to rest."

She turned eager brown eyes on Olivia. "I am, by getting ready for our little girl to make her debut. It's kind of exciting, huh?"

"Yeah, it is, but we agreed that we'd work on her room this weekend. There's hardly anything left to do anyway." Olivia came up to her and ran the back of her fingers along Natalia's chin.

"I know, but something...I can't put my finger on it, just isn't right yet. Something doesn't feel right." Natalia spun around to face the room, taping a finger against her lips in contemplation.

Olivia smiled at the realization she was having. "You're nesting."

"No...no, I'm not." Natalia shook her head and adjusted the bedside lamp by a mere fraction of an inch.

"Yes, you are."

"And you're not?"

At that, Olivia sighed, knowing she had probably walked right into a trap.

Natalia's next words confirmed it. "What's with that mile high pile of diaper coupons on the kitchen table then?"

Olivia shrugged. "It's practical though. You can never have too many diapers."

Natalia quirked her mouth and regarded her partner as she took Olivia's hand and came closer. The protrusion of her belly, which seemed to be growing exponentially on a daily basis, kept Natalia from getting as close as she wanted so she tugged at Olivia's coat to bring her face down until their lips met in a kiss.

"I know, honey, but if you keep buying at this rate, we'll have enough for all of our grandkids until they go off to kindergarten."

Olivia smiled at her and leaned down into another gentle kiss, relishing the idea of them old and gray and spoiling a house full of grandkids. When she pulled back, she noted that Natalia wavered a little on her feet. "Whoa, have you eaten lunch yet?"

"Nope, waiting for you."

"Well, come on; let's get you downstairs and off your feet for a little while. I'll make sandwiches for us."

Natalia readily complied and followed Olivia downstairs. Olivia slipped off her jacket when they reached the kitchen and pulled out a chair for Natalia. Natalia didn't sit down right away. Instead she went to the refrigerator and started pulling out condiments, including the new jar of pickles that Olivia had bought the day before then sat down at the table.

"Mmmmm, pickles."

Olivia giggled at her, sliding into the chair across from her. "I got some ice cream too...you know, just to complete the pregnant woman stereotype."

Natalia speared a pickle from the jar and leaned back in her chair, her hand resting conveniently on her belly. "Hmmm, the other stereotypes don't seem to bother you."

Olivia glanced down at Natalia's ample cleavage, reminding her of one stereotype that she was thankful for. "They don't bother me, believe me. Except for that whole 'standing on your feet all day, slaving around the house, nesting' thing when you should be resting. That...bothers me a little."

Natalia watched for a moment as Olivia worked on their sandwiches. "I'm sorry. I guess I am nesting, huh?"

Olivia put the finishing touches on Natalia's sandwich, passed it over, and then held up her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. "Just a little."

With the overstuffed ham sandwich finally finished and in front of her, Natalia lifted it and took a hearty bite, humming her approval. When she set it down, she looked at her partner nibbling on a turkey wrap.

"Something's just not right here. There's something missing."

Somehow Olivia knew the comment didn't have to do with her sandwich, and she wasn't sure how to really feel about it. She thought this – this home, family, her – was all Natalia needed. Apparently, she was wrong and she wasn't sure she wanted to know what the other woman meant. She got lost in her thoughts and picked at the tomato on her wrap, so she didn't notice Natalia get up from the table.

"I got it!"

Olivia jumped at the exclamation and followed her absent partner's voice into the family room. Natalia was standing in the space by the windows next to the front door.

"Got what?"

"Remember that Christmas tree you got from the Beacon last year?" Natalia's face was glowing with excitement.

Olivia shuffled her feet. "Yeah, you hated it."

"I didn't hate it. It just wasn't homey or..." she smirked at Olivia, "real. What was real was the warm feeling it gave me to have you and Emma here, in this house with our tree and decorations and food. We - the people in this house - make it a home. I want that again this year."

Olivia got it but she was still somewhat confused at where Natalia was going with this. She shrugged her shoulders. "You've got that. We're here. Just like we were last year."

Natalia went up to her and took her hands. "But it's not just us anymore, is it? And the situation is very different than it was last year. We have this little one here to consider and we have to think about the world and life we're bringing her into."

Olivia started to feel a little uneasy, wondering if Natalia was hinting that their family wasn't a good life for Francesca. A moment of panic, borne of years of waiting for flying bricks to hit her in the head, started to set in and tears sprang to her eyes.

Natalia felt a surge of sympathy at Olivia's reaction and moved as close as the baby would allow.

"I told Frank at the ultrasound, before you got there, that I want this baby surrounded from day one by all the people who love her. What better time to start than Thanksgiving?"

Olivia scrunched her eyebrows together. "What?"

"I know what this place needs. I know what I want. A big ol' family dinner on Thanksgiving, right here," Natalia turned, looking at the space currently occupied by two chairs and a small table, "with all of our family and friends to share it. What do you say?"

"Um, no."

"What? No...why no?"

"Because you'll become completely consumed with getting ready for this, and you shouldn't push yourself that much. Besides, Sam and Ava are coming, and that'll be enough to get ready for. We don't need to add more work to it."

Natalia considered the comment and quirked her face in a half-smile before adopting a full-blown pout. "Please? I never got to do this with Rafe. It was always just the two of us, and sometimes I even worked on Thanksgiving so I ended up bringing home leftovers from the restaurants I worked at. I really want to do this for Francesca...for us and our family."

When Olivia still seemed hesitant, Natalia turned the pout into a bright, winning smile. "That's not fair."

"What?" She smiled all the more, knowing full well what Olivia was talking about.

"The dimples. Those things should come with a warning label. You flashed those dimples and batted those pretty brown eyes and half of Springfield fell for you, including me."

"Does this mean that we're having Thanksgiving dinner here?" Natalia bit her lip expectantly.

Olivia threw her hands up in surrender. "As if I have a choice? The dimples have spoken."

Natalia bounced with excitement and kissed her partner thoroughly. "I love you so much, Olivia Spencer."

"Wow, we can have a big ol' family dinner every week if you keep kissing me like that!" Olivia smiled happily, loving it when Natalia was happy too. But she raised a finger in warning at Natalia. "You have to promise me though; you'll let me and Emma help you. That you won't go crazy getting ready for this. Promise."

"I promise."

When Natalia added a sexy smile to the already prominent dimples, Olivia held up a finger of warning again.

"Don't!" Olivia joked then got serious. "Okay, I'll talk to Keira about bringing in some catering and I can have the logistics guys bring over enough tables and chairs for everyone. Oh, and maybe Greg can get one of his flower-arranging buddies to do a huge centerpiece for the table!"

The more Olivia talked, the more Natalia's smile faltered. "No...No, Olivia."

"But...you said?"

"No, we're having a traditional family dinner here. That means I'm cooking dinner, with your help, of course; you'll personally invite everyone; and you'll carve the turkey."

Olivia spluttered, "Carve the turkey? Why do I have to carve the turkey?"

Natalia smiled lovingly at her partner and kissed her on the cheek. "I cook it. You carve it."

Olivia's mouth hung open as she watched Natalia waddle back into the kitchen and sit down to finish her sandwich. She followed her back into the kitchen, slumping back into her own chair, and looked at her smug girlfriend. "There's a problem with this little plan of yours."

One dark eyebrow curved up. "Oh really?"

"Uh huh. You're using this as a roundabout way to do your," Olivia flailed her hands around her, "nesting thing. When I leave for work, you'll probably bake fifty thousand batches of cookies or something. You have to promise me that you'll take it easy and let me and Emma help you."

"Okayyyyyy." Natalia dragged the word out in exasperation then looked at Olivia through slitted but amused eyes, "And what if I don't promise?"

Olivia pushed her plate aside and leaned across the table, propping her breasts up on the table to enhance her cleavage. When she saw Natalia look down and swallow hard, she knew she had her attention. She stroked one long finger along the other woman's exposed wrist, watching goose bumps pop up along the tan flesh and smiled seductively at Natalia. "Let's just say that with what little time is left between now and when the baby's born, you really don't want to be so exhausted from cleaning and cooking that you can't manage any other activities. Now do you?"

"You drive a hard bargain." Natalia licked her lips and swallowed hard.

Olivia's smile became feral. "Oh, honey, you have no idea how hard I can drive that bargain."

Natalia's breath catching was audible and Olivia couldn't resist her. The sound Natalia was making was a reminder of the sounds of pleasure Natalia made, low in her throat, deep and breathy, as Olivia would make love to her. For Olivia, pleasing Natalia was a drug that had hooked her on the first kiss and right now, she needed to feed her addiction. She stood and moved around to the front of the other woman's chair, kneeling in front of her and sliding her hands along still-shapely thighs as her fingers disappeared under the hem of Natalia's skirt. "Perhaps a demonstration is in order?"

Her lover's breathing quickened and her dark eyes were nearly black with desire. "When do you have to be back in the office?"

Olivia smirked and glanced at the watch on her wrist before sliding her hand under the skirt again. "About 30 minutes."

Natalia closed her eyes, imagining all of the wonderful things they could do in thirty minutes, and her body instantly responded. "Plenty of time."

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Olivia bit her lip and closed her eyes as her fingers traced along the edge of the other woman's panties. She dipped a finger underneath the silky material, brushing the back of her finger along the dampness. She looked up to dark eyes, searching hers, as she slipped the digit into her mouth and moaned at the taste.

Natalia watched as Olivia's finger disappeared into her mouth, and she felt the instinctive clenching of her muscles in response. She never knew what it meant to feel passion for another person. She had loved Gus with an adolescent heart, infatuated and carried away by his attention, and she had cared for Frank and the pain he had felt at Coop's loss,

wanting to ease his pain and to drown her unspoken desires for Olivia. But this, the feelings she had for Olivia, she couldn't even find words for. She didn't even care to explain it or understand it. All she knew was her body and her heart were in unison for the first time in her life, and they spoke a wordless conversation to Olivia, telling her what she desired, what she needed. And the beauty and wonder of it was that the other woman understood this language and read it with ease.

Olivia's knowing touches and sure kisses left Natalia in breathless wonder and absolutely convinced with every movement, every word, every brush of skin that this love between them was their destiny and fate. For Natalia, God had willed this love into existence as sure as He willed the sun to shine. There was no doubt. And in this knowledge, it gave Natalia the assurance to be active in their lovemaking, to cherish it and honor it.

She took Olivia's hand and scooted her chair back, causing Olivia to look at her curiously. "Let's get more comfortable."

Olivia followed her hand-in-hand to the living room until they were in standing next to the couch.

Natalia turned and pulled her into a deep, searching kiss, letting her tongue slowly caress Olivia's mouth. She pulled back and dipped her head to the side, kissing along the older woman's neck and gently sucking on her pulse point.

Olivia's head fell back in response, freely giving the other woman access, as her hands slipped into thick, dark hair to encourage Natalia to explore. And she did. She let her tongue trace the dip in Olivia's throat and nip along her collarbone, before moving up to the other side of Olivia's neck. Her hands moved along her waist, restlessly grasping at Olivia's blouse, as she lost herself in the sensation of the other woman moving against her.

There were many things Natalia loved about Olivia – the fresh, clean scent of her shampoo; the salty taste of her skin; and the low, throaty moans as she became more excited.

Everything worked together in a perfect choreography to cause Natalia to sense the moment inside herself where she could almost hear an internal switch click on telling her that there was no stopping, no going back, and she absolutely had to have Olivia right then and there.

The breaking point for Natalia came the moment that Olivia's breasts brushed against her own, and the sensation sent a jolt of desire down Natalia's spine.

"God, Olivia." She moved back up from the spot on Olivia's neck, just below her ear, and kissed her solidly. She held the older woman in place with her hands on either side of her face as she kissed her thoroughly. "I need you. I want to feel you."

She pushed Olivia towards the arm of the couch until they bumped against it. She pulled back to look into the green eyes dazed by a rush of desire and need.

“Take these off.” Natalia tugged at the waistband of Olivia’s pants, and with help from the other woman, they ended up in a heap next to the couch along with her panties.

Natalia nudged her back until she sat on the arm of the couch. She never broke eye contact with Olivia as she teased her hand along a naked thigh. It wasn’t until her fingers caressed damp curls that Olivia closed her eyes and let her head fall back.

“Natalia.” Olivia’s breathy sigh undid her.

Effortlessly, she slipped two fingers inside, curving up slightly the way she knew Olivia loved. She was rewarded by Olivia’s arms and legs wrapping around her. She pulled Olivia in close to hold her up as her hand moved against her. They had only been lovers two months, but it already felt like a lifetime for Natalia. Yet, a lifetime would never be enough to love the woman in her arms. She swore every time they made love she knew everything about Olivia – every movement, every sound – but she was amazed each time that she learned something new.

Like now, the tilt and erratic movement of her hips told her that Olivia was close, so close, but when the older woman looked at her and worked to focus on her, she read something else in the raw, needy depths of her eyes.

“What you do need, Olivia?”

The older woman, rarely at a loss for words, and certainly not shy about her sexual needs, looked at her with a vulnerability that she could only show to Natalia. She bit her quivering lip as Natalia leaned in and gently kissed her.

“Tell me, baby.”

“More. I need more of you.” Olivia breathlessly whispered.

The moment hung suspended in the air as Natalia registered the request. Olivia’s body shook in her arms, waiting, until Natalia tested a third, and then a fourth, finger.

“Oh God...baby.” Olivia moaned, her head resting now on Natalia’s shoulder and her legs held onto the other woman tightly, pulling her in close. “Faster.”

Olivia reached back to grip the arm of couch and get better leverage as Natalia moved frantically against her.

The pain and burn in her arm was worth it to hear Olivia panting out “fucks” and “oh Gods”. Natalia swore there was nothing more entrancing and erotic than Olivia Spencer on the verge of orgasm, and the knowledge that she had that power to make it happen, to bring this incredible creature such pleasure, made Natalia feel like she could fly. She felt powerful and strong, holding Olivia up as the other woman’s body surrendered to her climax, her head back and her body reaching for the last shiver of release.

Natalia leaned forward, tasting the exposed column of Olivia’s neck and tracing a line to her ear. “My God, Olivia. You are *so* beautiful!” Her voice was soft and reverent as she worshipped the damp skin beneath her mouth.

Olivia was slowly coming back down from her high, and she felt a new rush of wetness as the fingers still inside of her began to move again and the hot mouth on her skin became more forceful.

“Baby.” Olivia started to protest.

Natalia nibbled at her ear then whispered. “Just one more. Please.”

She couldn’t refuse her, and her body gave into the demands of Natalia’s thrusts. Quickly and without warning, the orgasm ripped through her, stealing her breath, leaving her gasping out, “Oh my God.” Over and over again.

Olivia pulled back and looked at the desperate desire in brown eyes. “Get on the couch.”

She watched as Natalia stepped back and then turned to follow the brunette with her eyes to the couch. She slid off the arm of the couch and stripped her blouse and bra off, simply watching Natalia as she laid down and hiked up her skirt.

For Natalia, the sight of a bold and naked Olivia standing over her was almost too much to take. Olivia’s utter confidence in her sexuality stirred a similar reaction in Natalia, and she found herself brazenly raising her skirt in invitation. When Olivia told her to take off her panties, she started to shake with need.

Then the other woman was there, between her legs, hovering over her and slowly kissing her. Olivia leaned back and lifted Natalia’s hips until they made contact. Her eyes rolled back in her head as Olivia rocked against her, building up a delicious friction. She took Natalia right to the edge then broke the contact. Natalia opened her eyes at the feel of fingers tracing down her cheek. The smoky green eyes looked back at her with a fierceness Natalia had only seen in the bedroom and the boardroom. This was the woman Natalia had fallen in love with – a unrepentant and unapologetic force of nature – wrapped in the luscious skin and heady scent of femininity.

“What do you want, baby?” The adoration in Olivia’s voice told Natalia that anything was fair game. There were no limits or impossibilities. Anything Natalia wanted, Olivia would give to her.

All she could think of though was being as close to Olivia as possible. All she wanted was her. “You. All I want is you. Your mouth, your hands. I want to feel you everywhere.”

Olivia kissed her again, and it stirred more than Natalia’s body. It reached into her soul, lighting up the dark places she had closed off for so long, so much pain she had known, was healed by Olivia’s touch. She whimpered as the kiss ended and Olivia’s weight shifted as she moved lower. She needed to be in this moment and feel connected to something bigger than herself, so she watched her. She watched as the dark head moved lower, lifting her blouse and kissing a trail down her stomach. She could feel Olivia’s breath against her skin, and she could hear whispered words that weren’t intended for her but for the little life inside her, making her smile.

The kisses moved lower still, brushing along the inside of her thighs, as hands lifted her hips slightly. And then all thought stopped as Olivia’s tongue nestled between her legs, slowly worshipping and caressing her. Every time they made love, Natalia was reassured all over again that they were meant to be together, that this was perfect and right, because every time they made love, it was like two pieces of a puzzle coming together. Everything made sense in that perfect moment of union.

It was that awareness and knowledge that allowed Natalia to let go in Olivia’s arms, to show her need and desire openly. She reached down and pulled Olivia closer, rolling her hips against her, driving her deeper. It was like she couldn’t get Olivia close enough, but before she could get the words out around her gasps, Olivia slipped her fingers inside.

Natalia let out a long, deep groan and for a second her body stilled then began to rock against Olivia again as the knowing fingers moved deeper and faster. In a matter of seconds, her body tightened as she teetered on the edge with the rush of blood from her extremities racing into the small point of contact where Olivia’s mouth was.

She knew she must have screamed because she looked down to see a smiling Olivia raise up. “Thank goodness we live in the country. That would have required a call to 911.”

Natalia laughed and flopped her head back on the couch, her body relaxed and sated, small aftershocks rumbling through her as Olivia moved up along her body. “You’re one to talk.”

Olivia slid up beside her and propped up on one elbow, smirking. “It’s expected of me though.”

She rolled her head to the side, smiling at the green eyes dancing mischievously. “Well, you know what they say; better watch out for the quiet ones.”

Olivia sighed and curled up against Natalia’s side. “Indeed.”

“Don’t you need to get back to work?” Natalia nudged the head on her shoulder.

Olivia huffed a little and yawned. “I’m the boss. I think I can take a few minutes for a little post-sex cuddle.”

“I won’t argue.”

Quietly, Natalia lay there, listening to Olivia’s breathing even out as she drifted off to sleep. Outside, she could hear the brisk winds buffet the house and the rustle of leaves stirring. Then she smiled contentedly and closed her eyes, kissing the head on her shoulder before letting sleep claim her too.

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ACT 2

The lunch rush at Company was oddly non-existent for a Friday. Certainly, it had something to do with the pelting, icy rain outside. Blake propped her elbow on the bar, sipped her third cup of coffee so it wouldn’t go to waste, and contented herself with the trashiest romance novel she could find. When she first started dating Frank, she thought her interest in those books would fade, since she’d found the real thing again. But she kept going back to read about seduction on the high seas and dalliances at the dude ranch. Sighing, she turned the page to find out that the book’s hero was critically injured in a car wreck.

“Figures,” she muttered. The sudden ding of the bell over the door startled her out of her romance-induced coma. She turned to see Olivia shaking off the rain and offering her a beaming smile.

“Hey, Blake!”

“Well, hey to you too. You sure are chipper for a horribly nasty Friday.”

Olivia shrugged and chuckled a little. “Why, yes, I am. I can’t seem to help it these days.”

Blake finally put her book down and turned to face Olivia, who’d come over to sit on the stool next to her. “Well, that’s just disgusting!”

She turned a confused look on Blake. "What?"

Blake slid off her stool and went around to fill a coffee mug as was customary, even if not always asked for. Everyone just knew that Olivia took a cup of coffee when she came into Company. "You and Natalia...you're just so...disgustingly happy."

Olivia waited a beat, smirking, until Blake had set down her mug and taken her own back up to take a sip and said, "Good sex will do that for you." She effectively dodged the spray of coffee coming from Blake and smiled teasingly. "Oh, wait, you wouldn't know anything about good sex, now would ya, Blakie."

Olivia could see the smile fighting to stay hidden as Blake huffed out. "Hey! I'll have you know that..."

"Have her know what?" Buzz scurried in with an apron on and a clueless look on his face.

Blake smiled sincerely. "That Frank is a great guy, so that makes you the best father ever."

Olivia fought the urge to throw the book next to her at Blake's head and instead turned her best fake smile on Buzz.

"Obviously!" He said before he turned his attention to Olivia and gave her a solid hug. "So, what brings you here, Olivia? How's Natalia? Frank said you all rushed to the hospital the other day."

She toyed with the rim of her coffee cup before looking up at her friends. "Oh, Natalia's great! And she's fine; it was just false labor pains. However, she got this crazy idea, and I've been sent out on a mission to make sure it happens." Blake and Buzz eyed her curiously but silently, encouraging her to continue. "She wants to have this huge Thanksgiving dinner out at the farmhouse, and she...we would love it if you would come. And, of course, Frank, Lillian, and Clarissa are invited too."

Buzz managed to speak first. "Wow, well...thank you, both of you. But we were thinking of just having a quiet holiday dinner at home. Marina, Shayne, and Henry were planning on coming over early in the day. So..."

Olivia held up a hand to forestall the need for an explanation. "No, it's okay. No need to explain. I understand. I really do."

He patted her hand. "I know you do, Liv."

The dark wood interior and soft, sultry jazz music welcomed Olivia as she entered Towers. She walked up to the bar and nodded at the bartender, surprised that it wasn't Jamanda. "Fancy meeting you here."

Olivia turned towards the familiar voice and smiled at Doris, who already looked pretty drunk.

The Mayor moved over to the bar where Olivia was sitting and struggled to sit on the stool next to her. Olivia eventually took pity on her and steadied her at the elbow so she could finally sit down.

Doris motioned for the bartender. "One for her, too."

Olivia shook her head at the bartender to decline the offer. "No, that's okay. I have to go pick up Emma from school soon, and I just stopped by to get some dinner for tonight."

Doris smirked at the open door Olivia had given her, and she couldn't resist going through it.

"Awww, poor Livvie. Betty Crocker's not going to greet you with a kiss, a foot rub, and a five-course meal?"

Olivia glared at Doris, but she decided to cut her some slack because she knew the other woman was probably still getting over Jamanda. And being in Towers probably wasn't doing anything except reminding her of that situation.

"I hate to ask, but why are you at Tower's when you could run into your ex?"

"Oh, I won't be running into Jamanda here anymore." Doris stared down into her martini, then looked up at Olivia, her blue eyes sad but amused. "She ran off with the cook."

"I didn't know you had a cook."

The politician almost choked on the big sip she had taken. "Not mine. The one here!"

"Oh...sorry."

Doris waved a hand casually. "Eh. I met someone else anyway."

That kind of response only made Olivia more curious, and against her better judgment she asked, "Obviously, you're not that broken-hearted over the fetus, so what gives? Something has you here drinking away your troubles."

Sighing, Doris said, "I miss Ashlee."

"That's understandable. You've always had each other and now she's away at school."

The Mayor toyed with the toothpick in her glass. "She's not coming home for Thanksgiving. She decided to stay there with Daisy. Apparently, James is taking a trip out there too, so they'll have a grand old time!"

Olivia looked at her with understanding. "I know it's hard, but they have to live their lives, just like we do. She's a college student. It's what they do...ignore us. Besides, there's always Christmas." She chuckled her melancholy friend on the shoulder, but noticed Doris' cheeks were red, and she looked like she was fighting tears.

Olivia sighed. "I'm going to hate myself for this, I bet, but I can't stand it. You can't be alone for Thanksgiving. That's just not right. You're our friend, so come have dinner with us. You can even bring your new...friend?"

Doris laughed out loud at the comment. "Um no, I made that mistake with Jamanda by actually giving a damn. Anna, that's her name, completely understands about me trying to improve my image. She's not putting any pressure on me. It's nice." She caught Olivia giving her an imploring look. "Okay, okay, maybe I'll see if she's free."

"So, you'll come to dinner then?"

"Yes! I'll come to dinner. You're as bad as your girlfriend."

Olivia picked up the dinner order that had been placed in front of her, smiling. "I learned from the best. See ya Thursday."

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Olivia tapped her foot impatiently on the floorboard as she waited for Emma to emerge from her school building. She kept herself amused by checking email on her Blackberry every few minutes. And then, just as she became engrossed in a headline news story, a tap on her windshield made her jump. She rolled down her window.

"Ms. Smith," she greeted the principal. "It's good to see you again, I think."

She looked at Olivia with both understanding and concern. "Would you be able to come in for a minute? Emma's teacher just came off bus duty or she would have come out herself. She would like to have a word with you before you leave."

“Okay...sure.” Olivia exited the car and followed the woman across the well-manicured lawn and through heavy metal and glass double doors. Olivia had checked out several different schools in the area before settling on this one. But these schools all looked the same after a while – heavy, metal doors, long, well-waxed hallways, and classroom doors inset at regular intervals. They all smelled the same too – the sharp acidity of bleach that couldn’t hide the smell of musty gym socks and the lingering burnt scent of greasy cafeteria food.

She followed Ms. Smith down the hall to the right, and halfway down the now-darkened corridor, the principal turned to open a door. Seated at a small table, with mini-chairs all around in different colors of the rainbow, was Emma. Her daughter didn’t turn to smile or look up to greet her, but continued to stare at her hands on the tabletop in front of her.

Across from Emma sat her teacher, Ms. Warner, a new teacher hired fresh from the local college. She was an eager teacher. Olivia remembered that from the open house she went to before school started. The woman already had a year’s worth of lesson plans prepared to show all the parents and a very detailed list of supplies each student would need. Who knew that there was an actual paint color called Flamingo Pink - not Baby Doll Pink or Dusky Rose Pink but Flamingo Pink - and that her nine-year-old would need it in order to successfully navigate the third grade?

She carefully sat down in the tiny chair next to Emma, and even managed it with some propriety in her short pencil skirt. She hadn’t expected to get called in to talk to Emma’s teacher today or she would have worn pants.

Ms. Warner nodded at the principal as she left and then smiled warmly at Olivia, her tousled brown hair bouncing around her face, and shook her hand. “Ms. Spencer, thank you so much for coming in today. I really wanted to talk to you because Emma, even though I’ve only known her a short time, has been uncharacteristically quiet lately. Today, impossibly so.”

“Today? What happened today?”

“She hasn’t spoken a word to anyone. She refuses to talk.”

Olivia looked at her daughter. “Emma, honey, what’s wrong? Why wouldn’t you say anything at all?”

Emma didn’t respond, she just fought back the tears in her eyes and looked down at her folded hands. She didn’t want to make her mom mad, but she didn’t know what to say. It seemed like she was getting in trouble these days for first saying something to that kid Kurt and now for saying nothing at all.

When Olivia realized that Emma wasn't going to say anything, she turned back to the teacher. "She's had a tough time lately. We all have, but her grandfather recently passed away. It may just really be hitting her now with the holidays coming up. It has to be hard for her."

"Perhaps that is all it is. I sure hope so." Ms. Warner looked at Emma and tried to make eye contact. "But time does make it better. It can help to talk about it."

Olivia saw the brief, but unmistakable quirk, of Emma's mouth, not in agreement, but in skepticism. Whatever was going on with Emma, it wasn't like her to react so cynically and hopelessly.

"I appreciate you wanting to talk to me, Ms. Warner. I'll see if she'll be a little more talkative at home."

Ms. Warner nodded her head in agreement and thanked Olivia before the mother and daughter left. On the way out, Olivia looked for the principal but didn't see her. She wanted to find out if she had talked to Kurt's parents yet.

After about fifteen minutes of driving, they were on the well-worn road running in front of the farmhouse, and Olivia decided to approach the issue from school with Emma.

"So, tell me, what's up, Bean? It seems your principal and I are getting close to being on a first name basis."

"Do I hafta?"

So, something was up, just like she thought. "I really wish you would, baby."

"Can I do it after I get back from Daddy's?"

Olivia had promised Emma that she could spend time with Phillip over the weekend, and she didn't want to break her promise.

"Okay, but don't think this is the end of it. You pushed that kid down and now this. I know he said mean things to you, and that wasn't right, but I need to understand because I know this isn't like you." Olivia looked at her daughter in the rearview mirror. The girl's eyes were averted, and she was looking out the window.

"Okay, mom."

The Spencer entrance to the house was more subdued than usual, and Olivia noted the oddity of how quiet the house was. Usually, Natalia was bustling around in the kitchen with some kind of wonderful-smelling food permeating every crevice of the house. Olivia hoped to go upstairs to find Natalia resting or napping for a change.

“Go wash up, baby, and get your bag together for your Dad’s.” She hustled Emma up the stairs.

“Okay.” Olivia watched her daughter go down the hallway to her own room.

Olivia opened the door to their bedroom and noticed it was empty, with all the lights off. She narrowed her eyes at the door to Francesca’s room and turned the knob ready to catch Natalia overdoing it again. When she peeked in though, she saw Natalia, seated in the rocking chair she had bought for her, pulled up close to the small white dresser. The brunette turned and smiled, holding up an adorable sleep outfit with footies and duck designs on it. Even the feet were in the shape of ducks. Olivia couldn’t help but smile and imagined Francesca in it.

“Isn’t this the most adorable thing ever?” Natalia hugged it as if the child was already wearing it. “I always wanted a girl of my own.”

Olivia looked up, not because of the woman’s words, but because she thought she heard a soft scuffing sound. But the doorway was empty and she didn’t hear the echo of footsteps, so she chalked it up to imagination and refocused on Natalia. “You have one now.”

Olivia brushed a soft, dark curl of hair from Natalia’s face and leaned over to kiss her gently. Natalia grinned at her. “Yes, I do. I have all my favorite girls with me now.”

“Speaking of which, one of your girls had a tough day at school.”

Natalia pulled a beautiful pink dress from a box and put it on a hanger next to her. “Really? Again?”

“Yep. Seems she was mute today and wouldn’t talk to a soul.”

“Huh, well, that’s definitely not normal for Emma. Then again, neither is pushing another kid down.” Natalia added another outfit to a hanger and handed an armful to Olivia. “Can you put these up for me?”

“Sure.” Olivia took the clothes and ran a hand over a fancy dress, before moving to the closet. “I know, she’s not herself. First, that altercation with that Kurt kid, and now this. I still can’t believe he said that stuff to her. Something should have been done.”

Natalia watched Olivia walk to the closet, before turning back to the pile of clothes in front of her. "I'm sure it'll all work out the way it's supposed to. But you know, she did just lose Alan. It has to be tough. And she's getting to a difficult age."

Walking back over, Olivia leaned against the dresser and looked at Natalia. "Maybe you're right. Maybe she's just overly sensitive now with losing Alan and all of the changes going on in her life."

Olivia held out her hand for Natalia to take so she could pull herself out of the chair. "I'm sure that's all it is. You got dinner, right?"

Olivia nodded.

"Good, 'cause we're starved!" Natalia patted her belly for emphasis and laughed.

A few minutes later, all three sat around the table munching on their dinner and all the while Natalia practically hummed in delight. Emma was still subdued but she ate well.

Olivia was picking up the dirty plates and placing them in the sink for cleaning later when Natalia asked, "Oh, did you get a chance to invite Buzz and everyone for Thanksgiving?"

Olivia grimaced a little. "I did."

"But? I know I hear a 'but' in there."

"They're planning something quiet with just their family."

"Oh." Natalia was a little surprised; she thought Frank would want to do the family thing with his soon-to-be youngest child. "I guess it'll just be us and Sam and Ava then."

Olivia cringed again. "Not quite." Natalia raised an eyebrow at her, urging her to continue. "Um, I ran into Doris at Towers when I got our dinner and..."

"Olivia!"

"Ashlee's staying at school for the holidays!"

"Olivia!" Natalia's tone had taken on an I-can't-believe-you-did-this quality.

"She was drunk and pathetic and...I felt sorry for her." Olivia pursed her lips and looked down. "No one should be alone for the holidays. I've been alone. It's not fun."

Suddenly, she had her arms full of a very pregnant and very emotional Natalia.

“That was so sweet of you.”

“Um, okay.”

Natalia pulled back and looked at her with tears in her eyes. “In fact, I think we should just invite everyone we know. Even people we wouldn’t normally invite. What do you think?”

She turned the rhetorical question on Emma, who was poking a French fry into her ketchup. “Emma, how would you like to invite your Dad over here for Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Really?” Emma squealed.

“What?” Olivia squeaked out simultaneously with her daughter’s excited response.

Natalia added excitedly. “Yeah, Beth, James, all of them can come over.”

“But James can’t be there. He’s going to see Daisy and Ashlee.” Olivia hoped to throw a monkey wrench in with that twist.

Natalia waved the comment away. “Eh, we’ll make up for it with someone else. Oh, I know.” She turned to Olivia. “Jonathan and Sarah.”

Emma squealed in delight, “Cool!”

Olivia looked at Emma with regret before turning to Natalia. “No, not cool. Honey, we talked about this. This is going to be too much for you to deal with.”

Natalia calmly turned to Emma. “Sweetie, go get your bag so we can get you to your Dad’s, okay?” She watched Emma scamper away before turning back to her flustered girlfriend.

“Did you see how excited she was by the idea of her Dad coming for Thanksgiving and then having Sarah to play with? They had so much fun together on Halloween. She hasn’t smiled all night, but this did the trick. If you don’t want to do it for me, do it for her.”

Olivia took Natalia’s face between both of her hands, groaning in frustration yet still lovingly caressing a cheek with her thumb. “I do want to do this for you...and her. For us. I just don’t want you to work yourself like crazy. I know how you get.”

Natalia leaned into the caress, her eyes dropping heavily under the soft, seductive gaze Olivia unknowingly turned on her. “That’s why I have you. You’re my helpmate and my partner and my best friend. We’ll do it together, okay?”

Olivia sighed, knowing she'd just lost this round of battles. All she could do was nod and kiss the woman she loved. "Okay."

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Hilda opened the large doors to the Spaulding mansion and ushered the women inside, even though it was unnecessary. Emma didn't heed propriety and took off through the foyer and into the den where she knew her father would be. Sure enough, it was only a matter of seconds before Emma was dragging the tall blonde man out into the hallway.

"Daddy, can we stay up tonight and watch movies? I brought *Cars* because you said you hadn't seen it yet."

He smiled down at Emma, who was practically bouncing with excitement. "Sure, honey, whatever you want to do. Why don't you go take your stuff to your room and I'll make some popcorn?"

"Okay!" In a flash she was gone up the stairs, leaving the grown-ups looking at each other awkwardly.

Natalia was the first to move, and nudged Olivia in the ribs, forcing Olivia to speak.

"Umph! Ummmm, Phillip. We...I mean, Emma and us, we'd like to have you come for Thanksgiving dinner at our house. And Beth, of course." After another nudge to the ribs. "Oh, and Bill and Lizzie too."

He chuckled at his formidable ex-wife being unceremoniously man-handled by the petite woman next to her. "I'd love to, but um, I made special plans for Beth and I. We kind of got back together, so I wanted to do something romantic."

When Natalia finally spoke, her hands were up over her heart. "That's so sweet! I'm so glad you two patched things up."

Phillip looked down, a little embarrassed. "Yeah, me too. I'll tell you what though, I'd love to see my little girl on Thanksgiving, so why don't I come that morning and get her, then bring her back before you guys carve the turkey."

Olivia hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely!"

"Good, because she was so excited about seeing you for Thanksgiving." Natalia smiled.

“Would nine o’clock be okay?”

Olivia looked to Natalia to confirm it before she spoke. “Yeah, sounds good.”

They said their goodbyes and Emma came down for one last hug and kiss before they headed back to the car. Walking down the steps of the Spaulding mansion, Olivia looked over to see Natalia dabbing at her eyes.

“Can I blame this recent emotional rollercoaster on hormones or is it something else?”

“Oh no, trust me, it’s hormones. The other day, I went into Francesca’s room and looked at the little booties we got for her trip home from the hospital, and I sat in the chair and bawled for an hour. And then hearing Phillip planning something so sweet and romantic for Beth. I’m just a sucker for romance.”

“Lucky me.” Olivia smiled at her partner and helped her get in the car.

A few minutes down the road, Olivia took Natalia’s hand. “Are you scared of what we’re getting into?”

Natalia shrugged, seeming to fight for the right words, when the tears came again in earnest. Olivia pulled the car over into a parking lot, unbuckled their seatbelts, and pulled the other woman close. She held and rocked her like that for a few minutes until Natalia got her breath back. She leaned back so she could look into the warm, brown eyes of her partner.

Before she could speak though, Natalia answered her question. “I am a little scared, but I feel really excited too. I’m so excited that I feel almost out-of-control, like I could just float off into space if you weren’t here to ground me.” She looked at Olivia as she said the last part, and an undeniable electricity crackled between them. “Sometimes, I can’t believe that you’re here and that we’re here. That we have this life together. It still amazes me.”

Olivia shifted a little closer, feeling the invisible cord that had always seemed to pull them together tighten. She was drawn to Natalia without even realizing what she was doing. There was a simple basic need inside that compelled her forward. She traced a full lip with her finger, letting the tips of her fingers drift lower, past the buttons and under skirts. She never kissed her, but she watched her and let herself be made breathless by the wonder of her, of them, in this moment.

~~*~*

It was the Monday before Thanksgiving, and Doris was being mocked.

She looked at her phone, sitting beside her so innocent and benign. She tapped the side of her wine glass impatiently before standing and pacing the length of her study. One wall held all of her law books, neatly organized and lovingly cared for. The opposite wall showcased her favorite works from Shakespeare to Hemingway, Brontë to Plath, and a spattering of political memoirs and biographies.

She felt like she had conquered many problems in her time – college, coming out even if it was only to a few people, law school, the political “good ol’ boy” network, and even raising a child – but she was still stumped when it came to women, particularly women she found interesting and attractive.

Anna was certainly one of those women. She was bold and challenging, mysterious and captivating, and damned good-looking. Doris chastised herself for not being able to think of anything or anyone else. At other moments like this, she would have given the whole situation a big old middle finger and just gone down to Ladies Night. She couldn’t do it this time. What the hell made things so different now she wasn’t sure. All she knew was that she hated feeling this way, ineffectual and powerless, so drawn in and unable to fight the pull of this magnetic woman.

With a growl, intended solely for that insecure part of her that still resided far below the surface, the one recently dredged up by the Evil Image Consultant from Hell, she picked up the phone and dialed before she could change her mind again.

Two rings...three rings...shit, she thought, it’s going to voice mail. “Anna Li.”

For three whole seconds Doris forgot to breathe as the crisp, and now agitated, voice filtered over the line again. “Hello!”

“Ummm, hi. It’s me...Doris.”

“Oh, hi. How are you?”

“I’m good. I just...” Doris couldn’t stop her hands from shaking and wanted to slap herself. She’d never acted like this with a woman before. She wondered what the hell was wrong with her? “I called because...oh, this is gonna sound really weird and crazy and...I’m really not weird or crazy, I just...”

A soft laugh came over the line. “Doris, it’s okay. Just say it.”

“Would you come with me to Thanksgiving dinner at a friend’s house? Um, as my date?” A long pause. Doris fidgeted through the long pause and finally broke the uncomfortable silence. “You know what? Forget about it. Just...”

“Wait! Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I can’t,” Anna quickly explained, knowing how it sounded. “I have some work to do.”

“On Thanksgiving. You’re working on Thanksgiving.” Doris closed her eyes and leaned against the large mahogany desk behind her.

“Yes, I am. Not because I want to but because I have to. It’s some reports from my old job. My replacement starts Monday, and I have cases that I need to write reports for. The chief made everyone write these reports for the day when we’d have more staff and someone would take some of our caseload. No one ever took any of mine until now. We were overworked and underpaid, and anyway...let’s just say, I got really far behind.”

Doris looked down at her immaculate heels. “I guess that’s plausible. Still not sure if I buy it though.”

“You don’t have to buy it, but you can let me make it up to you. Have dinner with me?”

Doris snorted. “You can’t have Thanksgiving with me, but you can take me out?”

“After the holidays,” Anna cut her off before she got going.

“Oh.”

Anna’s smile could be heard over the phone. “You know, you’re kind of cute when you’re flustered. How about Monday at eight o’clock?”

“I...”

“Just give me a chance. You won’t be sorry.” Anna’s voice had shifted to low and sultry, and the effect of it reminded Doris of their first meeting. She couldn’t shake the way the woman made her feel. It was exhilarating and frightening, and she wanted it to last forever. And damn if she hadn’t wanted to call Anna the moment she walked out of her house that morning.

“Okay. Eight o’clock it is then.”

“I’ll pick you up.”

“Okay.”

After they said their goodnights, Doris hung up the phone and went to the bar to pour another glass of wine. She saw her reflection in the mirror above the bar and shook her head. "You're in deep trouble, Wolfe."

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The mini-mart was unusually busy, even for the day before Thanksgiving, and it was nearly impossible to find a decent parking spot. Olivia had asked Natalia to make a list of the ingredients she needed, but the other woman insisted on going along with her. She glanced at the brunette out of the corner of her eye. Every day the waddle got more pronounced, and her ankles were the size of grapefruits, but Olivia grinned to herself, thinking that Natalia was still the most beautiful woman on Earth.

"You're adorable when you're miserable."

At the words, Natalia glared at her and huffed.

Olivia chuckled. "Hey, you could have stayed home. You're here now, so buck up, buckaroo."

Natalia smirked at her as they got out of the car. "Hmmm, sounds vaguely similar to something that happened after we dropped off Emma."

Olivia strutted a little cockier than usual through the doors of the mini-mart. "Yes, it does. Will you do me one favor though?"

"Maybe."

"I can get around faster without you, so would you just sit over there and let me get everything?"

Natalia looked at the uncomfortable, red wooden booth seats, "I don't know if I'll ever be able to get back up from there."

"That's why you have me." Olivia cocked an eyebrow at her and motioned her to the table.

Natalia sighed. "Fine." She watched Olivia start at the farthest aisle as she flopped gracelessly onto the seat.

Olivia filled up her shopping cart, loading up on all the necessities – sugar, flour, bag of potatoes, box of macaroni, and lots and lots of liquor. She turned the corner and suddenly got a sickening feeling upon seeing Reva in the middle of the aisle contemplating between a box of Ho Hos and Little Debbie Swiss Rolls. She turned to go back the way she came, in order to avoid her nemesis and occasional frenemy.

“Which would you get, Olivia?”

She stopped in her tracks and grimaced, muttering under her breath. “Fuck!” Apparently, it was still barely audible to Reva.

“Ho Hos it is then.” Reva waltzed over and peered into Olivia’s cart. “Awwww, you’re being domesticated. How cute!”

“I guess you could say I’m done with my Ho Ho-lovin’ days.” Olivia fought to find the path to the high road. She looked over her shoulder to see Natalia amiably talking to Jonathan with Sarah and Colin in tow, and she magically found it as she watched Natalia laugh. “So, how are you doing, Reva?”

The other woman seemed to be caught off-guard and for a brief moment, she let the walls drop. “I was doing good. Had just come to terms with the fact that Jeffrey wasn’t coming back, only to have that sense of pain and loss transfer to another person. There are just some people you never get over.”

“He’ll be back. Josh is always true to his word. We both know that.”

Reva nodded. “It’s going to be a long year.”

“At least you know it’ll be over in a year.” Olivia glanced again at Natalia. She tried not to think about the “what ifs” anymore, but it would have been nice to know when, not if, Natalia had planned on coming back. Day in and day out of not knowing had been excruciating. She sighed and looked at a morose Reva. Knowing that Reva was dealing with even a small portion of what she had dealt with a few months ago made her heart ache, and she kicked herself mentally for letting herself get soft.

Reva looked around and saw Jonathan coming up, his infectious smile making both women grin. He gave Olivia a full-bodied bear hug. “Hey there, Auntie O.”

She ruffled his hair. “Hey, handsome!”

He peered into her cart. “Looks like you two are doing Thanksgiving dinner.”

Olivia blushed and smirked at her nephew. “Yes, we are and it just so happens we have several open places still available. Would you two like to bring Sarah and Colin over and join us? Unless you all have plans already.”

Reva shrugged. "Not much really. Jonathan, Sarah, and Colin will be with me, but Shayne's going to play happy family with Marina and the Coopers. We'll probably just do something quiet and non-traditional."

"Well, if you really want to push the non-traditional part of that, why don't you all come to our house? Emma would love to have Sarah around."

Reva looked at Jonathan, who looked back at her with that ridiculously cute smile of his. "Okay?"

He nodded his head, and she turned back to Olivia. "Okay."

"Okay." Olivia nodded, immensely pleased with herself and surprisingly happy with their acceptance. "Good. We'll see you Thursday then. Dinner probably won't be until that evening, but come over anytime."

Natalia had been watching her interactions with Reva and Jonathan, and now felt her heart speed up as Olivia approached her. A contented sigh escaped her lips. She didn't think she'd ever tire of looking at Olivia, with her air of confidence and her raw sexuality that permeated even the simplest of gestures. Case in point was how her heart fluttered as her lover slid into the booth across from her and smiled at her. Just when Natalia thought she couldn't feel anything stronger, a new surge that took her breath away passed through her.

She struggled, but managed to finally speak. "Well?"

"I invited them. They're coming." Olivia smiled in self-satisfaction.

"Good."

Olivia chuckled. "This is going to be one motley crew though. Our family, Doris and her new girlfriend, Reva...are you sure we shouldn't go for broke and ask Father Ray too?"

Natalia giggled. "Now that would be very interesting!"

"I could arrange it, you know."

"I'm sure you could, but that's quite alright." Natalia grinned at her and then looked in the cart next to them. "You didn't get the candied cherries?"

"You are not making fruitcake!"

"Why not?"

Olivia looked at her like three heads had popped out of her shoulders, and gestured between the two of them. “Um, hello...fruitcake? That’s just begging for Doris, and now Reva, to make some horrible gay stereotype joke. I can hear it now ‘the fruitcakes are making a fruitcake’!”

Natalia struggled to slide out of the booth and get to her feet. But when she did, she went to the baking section and grabbed the candied cherries then came back to drop them in the cart. “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”

She watched Natalia turn with the cart and head to check out. “Great, not only are we a stereotype, but we’re now a cliché too.”

~~*~*

ACT 3

Olivia stretched in bed, reaching out and hoping to find Natalia’s warm curves to snuggle decadently into. They had stayed up late watching for the tell-tale sign that Christmas was right around the corner...a 24 hour marathon of “A Christmas Story.” Olivia smiled in her half asleep state remembering Natalia’s giggle when that kid triple-dog dared Schwartz to put his tongue to the frozen metal pole. Olivia was sure that Natalia would sleep in late, but when she only found a vacant cold space, she sat bolt upright and then sniffed.

“She’d better not be doing what I think she’s doing,” Olivia grumbled and rolled out of bed, pulling her robe on as she went out of their room and down the steps. Sure enough, that strange smell, an odd mix of bacon and citrusy cleaning solution, was spread out guiltily around Natalia as she struggled to maneuver herself around the kitchen, belly bumping into everything everywhere she turned.

Olivia shook her head. “Please tell me I’m having a nightmare and my pregnant girlfriend isn’t on her feet at seven in the morning on Thanksgiving.”

Natalia turned, her face set in refusal-to-accept-guilt mode. “If I do it now though, I can rest later.”

Olivia rolled that around for a moment, her barely awake brain searching for a witty comeback, but failing. “That is logical. However, my dear, you agreed to let Emma and I help you. That does not mean letting us sleep through it.”

The brunette offered a half-smile to her girlfriend, one dimple showing. “But you’re so cute when you sleep.”

“Don’t butter me up with your sweet talk and dimples. It’s too early for that. At least let me have a cup of coffee before you turn on the charm, keep us on even ground here.”

Natalia giggled. “Coffee’s ready.”

“I figured. You’re the best partner a girl could hope for, you know.” Olivia leaned down and kissed Natalia softly on the lips. “But do me a favor?”

Natalia sighed, but before she could say anything, Olivia continued, “Just sit down here at the table, take these potatoes, and peel them. Just sit and work, okay?”

“I think I can do that, but the baby’s been quiet today. When she’s still, it’s hard for me to sit still.” Natalia rubbed her belly and pouted.

Olivia smirked at her as she sat and took the bowl of potatoes. “I don’t doubt that you can sit still. What I do doubt is that you’ll continue to do it while I go get our daughter up so she’s ready when Phillip gets here. Once she’s out the door, I’ll help you, okay? You can boss me around like you’re used to doing. I’ll do all the lifting, moving, standing.”

Natalia huffed, resigned to her fate. “Boss you around, huh? I guess that’s an offer I can’t refuse.”

“That’s my girl! Now don’t move. I’ll be right back.” With that, Olivia grabbed a cup of coffee and headed back upstairs to entice Emma to wake up. On the way, she picked up her cell phone from the coffee table in the living room, quickly finding the number in her list of contacts.

“Get your butt over here, Wolfe.”

“Good morning to you too, Olivia.”

Olivia paused outside Emma’s room, whispering sharply into the phone. “Natalia’s channeling Rachael Ray on crack. I’ve seen this before. Get over here before she breaks out the bleach.”

“She’s your girlfriend; you deal with her.”

“Do not make me call Graham back.”

Olivia smirked evilly when she heard the phone drop, then get picked back up in a rush of expletives.

"I'll be there in twenty."

Olivia clicked her phone closed and sighed, her hand on the doorknob. "It's good to be queen."

~~*~*

Thirty minutes later a bleary-eyed Emma slunk into the kitchen, but perked up when she saw they had company.

"Aunt Doris!" Since Halloween, Doris had been known as the "cool" aunt and suddenly all the kids loved her. Emma raced over and hugged her around the waist.

"Hey, kiddo. You're up awfully early." Doris gazed over the top of Emma's head to see Olivia smiling at her daughter.

"My daddy's coming to get me so we can spend some time together for Thanksgiving." The little girl bounced over to the refrigerator and got out some juice.

"Honey, you need some breakfast before you go. Here, let me get you some..." Natalia started to stand and was immediately guided back down to her chair by Olivia's hand on her shoulder.

Olivia looked at Emma, who was watching them curiously. "What do you want for breakfast, Bean? I'll get it for you."

"You can cook?" Emma's question drew chuckles from the other two women.

"I have been known to boil water and not burn it. That should count for something."

Emma quirked an eyebrow, looking just like her mother. "I guess."

"So, pick your poison." Olivia picked up a spatula and waved it in the air.

Emma thought for a moment and then got a knowing smile on her face. "French toast."

Natalia looked up from seasoning the pot of chopped potatoes in front of her. "Ohhhhh, good choice, Jellybean! Hmmm, I don't know, Olivia. That's a tough one."

Olivia waved her hand. "Pffttt, piece of cake."

"That would've been the safer bet." Emma and Natalia snickered at Doris' muttered comment.

Olivia raised an eyebrow and pointed the spatula menacingly. "Two words for you Wolfe: Graham and makeover."

Doris looked at Emma and Natalia. "You're on your own. Stakes are too high in this game for me."

Olivia rolled her eyes at Doris and turned to the stove to get to work when a knock interrupted her. Olivia motioned for Natalia to stay seated. She opened the door to her ex-husband, who was already looking over her shoulder for Emma.

"Daddy!" Emma jumped up and ran and leapt into his arms.

"Hey, pumpkin!"

"Daddy, that was so Halloween!"

"Oh, forgive me. Hey, turkey! Gobble, gobble, gobble." He tickled her belly, making her giggle and squirm out of his arms.

"And you're early!" She poked at him.

"Well, I couldn't sleep. I was too excited about seeing you."

She smiled and grabbed his hand. "Come on, let's go!"

"Hold up, Bean!" Olivia called. "You still need to have some breakfast before you leave. Why don't you two go hang out for a bit? This won't take long."

Emma suddenly bounced excitedly. "Oh, I know. Come see my room. I rearr...rear...I changed things around a little."

In a flash they were gone out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Natalia watched them go, then turned back to a very focused-looking Olivia, who was cracking eggs into a bowl. Then she noticed how the other woman managed to crack and open an egg one-handed - like a pro. The image was complete with a whisk held comfortably in her free hand and a dishtowel tossed effortlessly over her shoulder. Natalia eyed the complete package before her, and with a shuddering breath understood why Olivia found her to be so sexy when she was in the kitchen.

He followed Emma - actually it was more like he was dragged - up the stairs. He paused at an open door and Emma slowed down with him.

"That's the baby's new room. They had to leave the door open because Natalia made Mommy put up a new wallpaper thingy up top last weekend." Phillip looked and saw the old-fashioned Winnie the Pooh border around the room.

"It's a really cute room. Looks like they've been working hard on it." He stepped in further to get a better look and Emma stood in the doorway.

"Yeah, they never stop working on it. If Mom's not working in here at night, she's on her computer trying to find some new gift for Fran...Frances." Phillip smiled at his daughter's attempt to say the difficult name. "I have a hard time saying it. It's a hard name."

"That's okay. Maybe you could just call her Fran or Frannie or give her a nickname especially from you." Phillip didn't miss the sad look on Emma's face and his parental instincts told him something was going on with his daughter. Maybe with a little time, he could figure out how to help her.

When Emma didn't say anything, he pulled her down the hall to her own room. On her bed, he saw something familiar and went over to sit down. When he turned back to her, he held up Cornelius, her teddy bear from when she was younger.

"You know, Em, when you were just a baby, your mom went searching everywhere for this teddy bear. She went to every single store in Springfield, determined to find you the perfect bear. And a lot of stores had teddy bears, but it wasn't the perfect bear. I didn't think she was ever going to find the right one, but she finally did and now you have Cornelius forever."

"She went through all of that to get me Cornelius," she said, her small voice disbelieving.

"Yep! It sounds to me like she's doing the same thing for Francesca by trying to make everything perfect for her."

Emma looked down and nodded her head. Phillip saw an opening in the small gesture. "I have an idea. How about you and I go on a special shopping trip this weekend? We can look for a super special gift for your little sister, something that only you can give her. What do you say?"

"Can we get ice cream?"

"Of course!"

“Okay.”

By the time they got back downstairs, breakfast was done. Olivia had made enough for everyone, so they all sat down around the table and dug in. Natalia took a bite and looked up at Olivia, shocked.

Olivia asked around a mouthful of toast, “What?”

“Oh my God, you faker! You can cook!”

Olivia shrugged. “A little. Told you I could help you with fixing dinner today.”

Natalia just shook her head at Olivia. “You never cease to amaze me.”

Doris broke the moment. “Okay, this love fest is getting a little thick in here. Break it up you two or go get a room.”

Natalia blushed while Olivia smirked.

Phillip cleared his throat and looked at Emma. “I think that’s our cue, kiddo. You ready?”

Emma barely took a moment to hug her moms and Doris before slipping on her coat and racing to the car. Phillip hung back for a moment. “Hey, Olivia, do you mind if I take Emma shopping this weekend?”

“Shopping?” She looked at her ex like he needed a trip back to Ravenwood.

He laughed. “Yeah, she’d like to get the baby a gift. I thought I’d help her out. If it’s okay with you two.”

Olivia looked at Natalia, who simply shrugged. “Okay, sure.”

“Great!”

Olivia stopped him on his way out the door. “Oh, and since I have to pick up Sam and Ava at the airport, I can stop by to get Emma on my way instead of you coming all the way back out here.”

“That’s perfect, Liv. See you then. Bye ladies!”

~~*~*

The farmhouse was starting to come alive with the smells of Thanksgiving. The smooth richness of garlic mashed potatoes and the sinful sweetness of a sweet potato casserole, with almost as much brown sugar and nuts on top as sweet potatoes below, permeated every inch of the house. Then, the first batch of chocolate chip cookies was baking in the oven settling a warm-scented blanket over everyone. Natalia sat drinking some decaf tea while the other two women sipped coffee.

“Sam and Ava said they’d take care of the turkey when they get here, and we have to save some kind of dessert for Emma to help with. She loves to do that.” Olivia ran off the list of what had been accomplished and what still needed to be done.

“Cheesecake.” Natalia spoke from her chair.

“What?” Olivia looked at her.

“That’s what we’re making and what we can save for Emma to help with...cheesecake. Gooney, warm, homemade cheesecake with a crumbly graham cracker crust and fruit toppings. Mmmmm.”

Olivia lost her train of thought watching her girlfriend get more and more thrilled by the idea of cheesecake, so much so that she was totally derailed when Natalia closed her eyes and hummed.

Doris snapped her fingers in front of Olivia. “Earth to Olivia.”

“Huh? Oh.” They looked at each other knowingly while Natalia remained oblivious.

“Oh no!” A sudden gasp and Natalia grabbing her belly had Olivia at her side in a split second.

“Honey, are you okay? Is it the baby?”

Natalia looked up at her like she was crazy. “What? No! We need butter for the cheesecake. I only bought one package.”

Olivia flopped her head onto Natalia’s shoulder. “Please don’t do that to me again, okay? Rented ticker here.” She straightened back up and looked down at Natalia. “Do we absolutely have to have a cheesecake?”

“Yes.” Natalia’s tone brooked no argument, so Olivia threw up her hands.

“Alrighty then! Allow me to go get more butter.” She slipped on her coat and gloves, but before she could get out the door, Natalia beckoned her back.

“Don’t you dare walk out that door without giving me a kiss.”

Olivia walked back over and braced her hands on the back of Natalia’s chair, on either side of her shoulders, leaning in close. “Wouldn’t dream of it, dear.” The kiss lingered, slow and deep, until a throat being cleared behind them broke the mood.

They turned to see Doris looking slightly flustered. “Um, hello...you’re not alone here. The single lesbian would really like to be forewarned if she’s getting a free show so she can appreciate it more.”

Olivia drew back from Natalia. “In your dreams, Wolfe, and technically, you’re not single.”

“Getting laid does not constitute a relationship, as you well know.”

“Touché. And just where is your new flame?”

Doris flopped down in the chair next to Natalia. “She couldn’t make it. Work or something. We do have a date though, for Monday.”

“Work on Thanksgiving?” Natalia honed right in on the heart of the issue.

“On that note, I think I’ll leave the mushy girl talk to my better half.” Olivia leaned over and kissed Natalia quickly. “Love you. Be back in a bit.”

No sooner had the words fallen from Olivia’s mouth and she opened the door, when Reva stumbled through the open door and into her arms. Barely catching her in time, Olivia managed to get her back on her feet.

“Whoa, watch the hands there, Olivia. Your girl might get jealous. Hey there, Natalia.” Reva waved a gloved hand at the brunette.

“Hey Reva, come on in.”

Reva slipped off her coat and gloves, handing them blindly to Olivia muttering behind her.

“Can I take your coat, Reva? Sure...no problem. Glad I could help.”

Reva walked over to Doris, reaching out her hand. “Mayor Wolfe, fancy seeing you here.”

Doris took the offered hand, giving it a firm shake. “Friend of the family, and here it’s just Doris.”

“Doris it is.” Reva said. “I think drinks are in order.”

Reva was the same everywhere she went, sizing up every female within a twenty-mile radius for potential threat, but now Olivia had learned how to take the other woman. Of course, no longer fishing in the same pond had helped her get Reva off her trail.

Olivia saw Jonathan coming up the walk with Sarah and Colin in tow. She slipped off her coat, sighed, and offered a smile to her nephew.

Olivia held her arms open to Jonathan. “Do I get a hug?”

He slipped easily into the hug. “Of course, Auntie O.”

A tug on Olivia’s arm drew both of their attention down to Sarah. “Is Emma home?”

“Not at the moment, honey. She went to spend a little time with her dad. She’ll be back later.” The shy little girl looked disappointed, but then turned up her big eyes again. “Can I play the Wii?”

Olivia tousled her curly locks before she ran off. “Of course.”

Jonathan moved to go with her, but Olivia stopped him. “Nuh uh.”

“What? I was going to go help her get set up.”

She smiled at him sweetly, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I don’t think so. I’ll go help her get started. You, my dear nephew, will sit right here at this table and chop onions and peppers for the stuffing.”

Natalia leaned across the table as best she could. “I’d just do what she says for now, but when she’s gone...party!”

Olivia leveled her death glare on the snickering room. “Don’t even get any ideas. If my darling, and very pregnant, girlfriend gets up on her feet while I’m gone, I’m taking each of you down. Doris, Graham...nuff said. Reva, I already have a place to hide your body and it’s been a long time coming. Jon, honey, snip, snip to that hair, and baby,” she leaned over to kiss Natalia on the head, “you have to live the rest of your days with me. Think about it. That’s all I’m sayin’.”

After a few moments in the living room with Sarah, Olivia re-entered the kitchen and slipped on her coat and gloves again.

Seeing that Doris had poured her and Reva a glass of wine, Olivia reached over and took one along with a hearty swallow. On an air of stunned silence, Olivia grabbed her coat and bolted from the house.

Reva looked at Natalia who was smirking at the closed door, and asked, "How do you live with that?"

Natalia sighed, "Happily."

Doris made a gagging sound.

"Tell me about it!" Reva smirked at the mayor as they clinked glasses.

~~*~*

The Springfield mini-mart was a bustling place for mid-morning on Thanksgiving. Olivia had to nudge her way past several people to get to the butter. She made sure to grab two packages, just in case, and then made a sprint for the liquor aisle, picking up two more bottles of wine for emergencies. After all, it was a holiday, and she had thought it wise to feed Natalia's need for family and togetherness by inviting two of the biggest alpha females in Springfield - next to her anyway - to her house.

"Smart move, Spencer." On that thought, she decided to backtrack to get a bottle of tequila too. "Much better."

With all of the items in the car, she began to make the long drive back out to the farmhouse. Her house...no, their house. She still had to get used to that. At one time, she had so readily accepted the farmhouse as her home, but then she spent weeks telling herself that she'd never go back. It was taking some effort to stop thinking negatively and accept the reality that she and Emma really were home...finally.

Turning off the main road from town, Olivia started down the road that ran past the farmhouse and into the next town. When she was about a mile from home, she slowed, seeing a dark sedan on the side of the road. She drove past slowly and tried to peer into the vehicle, but it appeared to be empty. She pushed the strange feeling away, assuming the driver was probably lost or had run out of gas.

When she got home and came inside, Doris greeted her with a hearty, "Thank God!"

"Um, okay."

The mayor shrugged on her coat, double-checking the pockets for something, before heading out the front door.

Olivia turned to the group in the kitchen. "Is she okay?"

"I think she needed a nicotine break, and I need a potty break or we're going to be swimming in it in here." Natalia said and attempted to stand. Olivia reached out a hand to help her up.

It's okay, honey, I got it. Just thank God for guest bathrooms!"

Olivia laughed and looked back at Reva and Jonathan. "Did she...?"

Reva held up a hand. "She was perfectly behaved."

"You're just saying that because you value your life." Olivia smiled.

"Pretty much."

"Thought so." Olivia held up the bottle of tequila. "Whatcha say?"

"Now this is my kind of party!"

They quickly pulled down shot glasses from the top shelf, filled them, and downed one each before Natalia came back. Olivia hid the bottle back in the corner and snickered at Reva.

Natalia rounded the corner to see the two women giggling like schoolgirls. "What are you two up to?"

"Nothing," they answered simultaneously.

"Uh huh."

~~*~*

The bitter wind of fall had picked up outside, and for the billionth time Doris wondered why she kept up this habit if she was always freezing her ass off trying to appease it. A long pull on the cigarette reminded her of why, and she let out a deep sigh of pleasure. She leaned her head back against the porch post and continued to periodically take a draw from her cigarette. The crunch of gravel made her open her eyes. Slowly, a black car made its way along the road. It seemed to slow more as it came even with the house, and she blinked her eyes hard to focus on who was inside, but the windows were darker than normal. She could only tell that the driver seemed to have fine features like a woman and long straight hair.

“What the...?”

The door behind her opened, and Olivia stepped out with two glasses of wine. She handed one to Doris. “Thought you might want one.”

Doris thanked her absently and took the glass. Olivia tracked to where she was looking and recognized the car. “I think that’s the same car I saw a little while ago on the side of the road. I didn’t see the driver though. Guess they’re just lost.”

The car sped up suddenly. Olivia turned to go back inside, and Doris watched the dust fly up on the road as the car disappeared in the distance.

Doris shook her head. “No, you’re just imagining things and being suspicious, Wolfe. Just let it go.”

~~*~*

When Doris came back in, Olivia had settled down on the couch next to Natalia while everyone watched Jonathan and Sarah playing Mario Kart.

Doris slipped into an overstuffed chair, took a sip of her wine and leaned back. “Now this is perfect.”

Natalia curled around Olivia, cradling her tea and humming in contentment. “Yes it is.”

Olivia kissed the top of her head. “It’ll be even better when Sam, Ava and Emma are here.”

Natalia nodded silently against her shoulder.

The momentary break in the holiday labors didn’t last though. A knock at the door had Olivia sitting up and looking at Natalia. “I wonder who that could be. I told Phillip I’d pick up Emma. Hope everything’s okay.” She unfurled herself from her partner’s grasp and walked to the door.

She opened it to find a sheepish Buzz grinning at her, while a happy Lillian held tight to his hand, and beyond her Frank shuffled his feet and looked to Blake at his side with Clarissa hanging back a little behind her mother.

“Buzz?”

“Is the invitation to dinner still open?”

Natalia poked her head out from behind Olivia, answering for her. "Of course! Why don't you all come in?"

Buzz handed over a bag. "Our new stove decided to go on the fritz, but I made a couple of different types of salad to try and contribute."

Natalia took the bag and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, but you didn't have to do that."

He shrugged. "I wanted to."

They shared a friendly smile and Lillian leaned forward to hug her, reaching down to touch Natalia's belly. "How is she, dear?"

"Unusually quiet."

Lillian leveled her best mom look on Natalia. "I hope you're staying off your feet and taking care of yourself."

Natalia smirked at Olivia, who was putting away the new guests' coats. Olivia smiled back at her, obviously having heard Lillian's comment. "As if I have a choice."

Lillian patted her hand lovingly. "Good. That's good."

The new arrivals moved into the living room, and Buzz looked confused at seeing Reva sitting on the far end of the couch with Colin in her lap. "What are you doing here?"

"Um, I was invited."

He brushed off the comment. "That's not what I meant. I thought you were at your house for Thanksgiving."

"Last minute plans. Um, where's Shayne, Marina, and Henry?"

"Probably at Cross Creek looking for you."

Reva's shoulders sagged and she sighed. "No."

"Fraid so." Buzz took the spot on the couch next to her. "Maybe you should call them to let them know you're here."

Reva made eye contact with Olivia who was leaning against the wall. With a small nod of her head, Olivia answered her. "Call 'em, Reva. I'll go get the folding chairs out of the barn."

Olivia headed to the back door and pulled on her coat as Natalia followed.

Jonathan turned to the retreating pair, putting down the steering wheel of the game and followed them into the kitchen. "Let me do that, Auntie O. You need to go get Sam, Ava, and Emma."

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. "Thank you."

"No problem." He flashed a brilliant white smile at her and jogged to the barn for the chairs.

Olivia started to take off her coat, thinking she didn't have to leave after all, but Natalia tugged the open edges back together and slipped a button through a buttonhole. She looked at Natalia curiously. "What's up, honey?"

"You still have somewhere to go."

"Yeah, but I still have about thirty minutes before I have to leave for the airport."

Natalia hung her head and ran her hands over the lapels of Olivia's jacket, skirting dangerously close to her breasts. "That's not what I meant."

Olivia got a panicked look in her eye and glanced down at Natalia's belly.

"No, not that, Olivia. We need food. Lots and lots of food. We're going to have far more people here than we have food for."

Olivia stood up a little more confidently, running a finger along Natalia's jaw, letting it slip into a dimple as the woman smiled up at her. Olivia kissed her gently. "I'll take care of it. I have to go get Emma anyway and pick up Sam and Ava. I'll just get some more stuff from the mini-mart while I'm out. Will you be okay?"

Natalia nodded.

~~*~*

The foyer of the Spaulding mansion was strangely quiet. Olivia had let herself in, assuming that Hilda would be busy with Phillip and Beth's special dinner. She walked further into the spacious and well-appointed home and back to the library where Phillip spent most of his free time when at home. Before she could turn the corner and announce her presence, she overheard Phillip and Beth talking.

"I can do it. It's not like I've never cooked before, you know."

"That's not the point. You weren't supposed to cook today. It was supposed to be a special day for us." Olivia could hear the exasperation in Phillip's voice. "That's it, Hilda's fired."

Olivia peeked her head around the door. "You're sounding like the old me, Phillip. I was hoping I didn't transfer my bad characteristics to someone else. Guess you're just a lost cause!"

Phillip laughed at Olivia. "Actually, she got called away for a 'family emergency.'" He lifted his hands and put the comment in quotes, then turned back to Beth. "And she wants to do the cooking now."

"And the problem is?" Olivia didn't get it.

Beth tilted her head at Phillip's ex-wife and her occasional personal nemesis. She raised her hand and gestured at the other woman. "Exactly. Thank you, Olivia."

"You're welcome."

"Yeah, well, I'd prefer not to let Beth loose in the kitchen because I like the house standing." He fought a smile as he looked sideways at the blonde woman next to him.

Beth glared up at the smiling man and elbowed him in the ribs. "Keep it up."

Olivia rubbed at the bridge of her nose, muttering under her breath. "I must be a glutton for punishment."

"What?" Beth looked at her again.

"The invitation for dinner is still open."

As if it had been timed perfectly, Emma came bounding down the stairs. "Yeah, Daddy, come on! Please?"

He looked at Beth, questioningly, and she nodded her approval. "Well, I can't say no to that."

"Funny, that's exactly what Natalia says." Emma bounded over to her mother. Olivia smiled and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "We have to make a pit stop at the mini-mart though. We're gonna need a lot more food."

Phillip looked at his watch. "You better hurry. They're closing early today."

Olivia glanced at her watch, anxiously. "And I still have to get Sam and Ava from the airport. Ah ha! I have an idea!"

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The farmhouse was becoming noisier by the moment. With every fumble, pass, or interception, cheers, boos, or hisses were heard in quick succession. The kitchen had become too congested for Doris' comfort so she grabbed another glass of red wine and decided to brave the testosterone-laden living room. She found Blake sitting in a rocking chair looking blankly at the television. On the couch sat Frank, Buzz, Shayne, and Jonathan, clinking beer bottles and crudely harassing each other over who had the better football team. Sarah was smart enough to scurry off to Emma's room to play with her dolls, while Lillian, Reva, and Natalia swapped mommy stories in the kitchen. Marina had conveniently, but not surprisingly, decided to take Henry for a walk down to the pond. That left Doris to fend for herself. She looked at her watch and grumbled when she realized that it would be at least another thirty minutes before Olivia got back.

Blake glanced at the woman propped on the edge of the couch, then eyed the mayor's countenance thoughtfully. "I thought you liked sports, Doris."

"I like to play, not watch, unless it's live, especially not oversized men in tight pants tackling and sweating all over each other." She visibly shuddered at the thought. "So gay!"

Blake laughed. "Do you watch any sports?"

"Oh sure. Women's college softball and sometimes basketball."

"And that's not gay?"

Doris opened her mouth, a witty retort at the ready, when her phone rang. She slipped it out of her jeans pocket and flipped it open. "Um, hi?"

"Doris, I need your help," Olivia said.

"Hello to you too, Olivia." Doris answered Blake's questioning look with her comment, making Blake smile.

"Tell Natalia that Phillip and Beth are on their way with Emma. They had a small crisis too, so they're joining us for dinner."

Doris looked around at the shrinking space in the house. "Olivia, someone may have to sit on the porch to make this work."

"I know, but we'll have to make do. Natalia wanted a big Thanksgiving dinner and she's sure getting it!"

"Okay, I'll tell her."

"Um, that's not all."

Doris hung her head. "Lay it on me, Spencer."

"I need you to go get the groceries for Natalia. I have to be at the airport to get Sam and Ava in ten minutes and time's getting short here. It's already after noon and that turkey has to get in the oven soon. The quicker I can get them to the house, the faster that bird will get done."

Doris rolled her eyes. "That's the big help you needed? Olivia, I think I'd pay you to let me get out of this house right about now. I'll gladly go."

"Thank you! I owe you."

Doris smiled into the phone. "I'll have a list of appropriate gifts when I get back."

Olivia laughed. "I'm sure you will."

"So, what should I get?"

Olivia rattled off the supplies Natalia needed, and Doris made a mental list. When the other woman finished, she ended the call and stood to slide the phone back in her pocket. She reached behind the chair Blake was in and picked up the woman's purse, handing it to her. "Come on."

Blake jumped at her purse suddenly landing in her lap. "What? Where?"

"Time to raid the mini-mart." Blake scrambled from the chair at the chance to get out of the house, telling a distracted Frank that she'd be back in a little while. He never tore his eyes away from the television set as he reached up to give her a quick kiss.

Doris noticed the exchange and shook her head as Blake joined her in the hallway to the kitchen.

"What?"

"Frank? Really, Blake?"

The redhead squinted her eyes at Doris. "He's a good guy."

Doris snorted a little and wanted to say something sarcastic, but instead she decided to let it go. After all, what did she care if Blake liked Frank? To each their own, she thought. Besides, looking at her own track record, who was she to judge when it came to dating?

Doris led the way into the kitchen letting Natalia know that Phillip and Beth were on their way with Emma and that they would be joining them for dinner too. At Natalia's panicked expression, Doris laughed. "Don't worry. Blake and I are going to get what you need to take care of dinner. Olivia's probably on her way right now with Sam and Ava."

Natalia glared at Doris for worrying her then breathed a sigh of relief as she waved at them leaving. The raucous noises from the other room actually put a smile on her face. This was what she had always wanted - all the trimmings for a great family holiday and a house full of family and friends, sharing the holiday together. She regretted that Rafe wasn't there to be a part of it, but she rubbed her belly knowing that the life she always wanted for her son would be a reality for her daughter. They were going to have it all. The joy that suffused her made her giddy, and she smiled.

"Now that's the look of a happy woman there." Lillian smiled at her observation of the young woman.

Natalia looked at Lillian sincerely with a huge smile. "I am. I'm the happiest I've ever been, Lillian."

Lillian looked over at Reva, who was leaning against the counter nursing a martini. "I think we can both say that we've never seen Olivia so happy either, right Reva?"

Reva nodded and added, "I can say I never expected this for her. The being happy, that is. Falling for a woman doesn't really surprise me, but the being happy...now that's a shocker."

Lillian nodded in agreement. "You're good for her, Natalia."

Natalia smiled. "We're good for each other. We always have been." She looked at the picture on the side table from New Year's Eve last year and her thoughts drifted as she searched for the words. "She believed in me. She saw more in me than I thought I was capable of, and she pushed me, drove me crazy, and frustrated me. When I didn't think I was capable of being more, she challenged me. I am who I am because of her."

Lillian reached across the table and squeezed Natalia's hand. "I'm sure she'd say the same thing of you."

The intense moment was broken by a loud cheer from the living room and the kitchen door swinging open. Emma rushed in with Phillip and Beth close behind.

“Hey, Emma! Did you have fun?”

“Yep, but I’m really, really hungry because Hilda wasn’t there and Daddy wouldn’t let Beth go in the kitchen to cook. When will dinner be ready?” She looked at the table as if searching for a bite to eat.

“Well, honey, your mom has to get back with Sam and Ava so they can put the turkey in the oven and then Aunt Doris and Aunt Blake have to get back with the stuff we need to make our cheesecake, so it’s going to be a while. I’ll tell you what, Sarah’s playing in your room. Why don’t you go up and wash your hands, and I’ll bring up a sandwich for the two of you?”

“Okay!” Emma ran out of the kitchen and waved hi to everyone watching the game as she raced up the stairs.

Phillip and Natalia shared a smile as they watched Emma leave. He turned to Beth and gave her a pitiful look when he heard another cheer from the living room. “Oh fine. Go...go watch the game.” He smiled like a kid at Christmas and went into the other room.

Beth gestured to the refrigerator. “Natalia, you want me to get some sandwich stuff out.”

Natalia sighed. “Yes, please.”

“Hey, Natalia, can you bring me a beer?” Natalia started to stand up and was promptly pushed back down by Reva.

“Oh no, he didn’t,” the blonde growled. “Frank, get your lazy butt up and get your own beer!”

When he slunk his way into the kitchen, four sets of female eyes pinned him down. Reva was itching to say something cruel about Natalia being someone else’s wife, but dropped it when she felt the woman in question reach out to squeeze her forearm. She suddenly had a sense of why Olivia had fallen for the brunette. In the short time she had been around Natalia recently, she noticed her own rough edges softening in the younger woman’s presence. She couldn’t put her finger on what magic or power this woman held, but she could now understand how Olivia had changed so much over the past year.

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Blake raced up to the door of the mini-mart just as the red and white sign was being flipped from “open” to “closed.” She banged on the door, pleading for admittance, but the

clerk pointed to her watch and the temporary sign with their holiday hours on it. The clerk mouthed “sorry” and turned to walk away.

Doris sauntered up and tapped on the window with a musical rat-a-tat-tat. The clerk turned back around and was visibly angry, but once she saw Doris, she smiled sweetly and unlocked the doors.

Blake looked at Doris suspiciously. “Do I even want to know how you know her?”

“Oh, get your mind out of the gutter, Marler. Her dad was a huge donor to my last campaign, and he had several fundraisers at his house for me.”

Blake’s cheeks reddened at being caught thinking bad thoughts of Doris. “Oh.”

When the doors opened, Doris spoke to the young woman. “Hey, Shelby. How are your parents?”

Shelby’s cheeks flamed at being addressed directly. “They’re good, Mayor Wolfe. And you?”

“Very good. We just need to get a few things we forgot for dinner. We won’t be but a moment.”

Shelby looked over Doris’ shoulder at the redhead behind her, a flash of jealousy passing over her youthful features. Doris saw the look and instantly knew what Shelby thought. “It’s dinner at a friend’s house...with lots of other people there.”

The young woman looked down and excused herself. Doris turned to see Blake looking at her, smiling. “Seems you have an admirer, Mayor Wolfe.”

Doris brushed past Blake to get a bag of sugar. “A jealous admirer too. Seems she thought you and I were together.” The look of surprise on Blake’s face quickly made her explain, “It was the dinner comment, I’m sure. It sounded like we were having dinner together and not with a big group. Nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worried.” Blake smiled at Doris and kept walking down the aisle.

~~*~*

When Doris and Blake returned with ingredients for the cheesecake, the house was warm from wall-to-wall people and an oven full of baking turkey and stuffing. They handed the bags off to Olivia and Natalia and headed into the living room with everyone else. Olivia called up to Emma, Sarah, and Clarissa to come help with the cheesecake.

Olivia got the freshly washed mixing bowl out and set it in front of Natalia and the young helpers on either side of her. All of the ingredients and measuring scoops were placed on the table. Olivia watched as Natalia worked her magic with the girls, who were giggling and making a horrible mess with the sugar.

She turned to the counter and poured a small bit of red wine, kissed Natalia on the top of the head, and walked out to see what was going on in the living room. The football game had been forsaken in lieu of a competitive game of Wii pool. Frank had a horrible aim and missed every pocket, while Doris routed him three games in a row.

Lillian and Blake were seated closest to Olivia, and Lillian had to speak up over the noise of the game for Blake to hear her. The proximity allowed Olivia to hear as well though.

“Maybe one day you and Frank will have your own children. He’s so good with them. Francesca’s going to be such a lucky little girl to have him as a parent.” Blake didn’t really respond to the comment except for a brief nod, and Olivia didn’t hang around to hear any more.

She went back into the kitchen for more wine and poured a heaping glass of the red liquid. She turned with a sigh to watch the graham cracker crust being pressed into the pan.

Natalia heard Olivia’s sigh and looked up. She glanced at the glass in her hand but didn’t comment. Instead, she showed the young girls how to press the edges of the crust up on the side of the pan without it falling. They were amazed by what in their minds was an impossible trick.

Ten minutes later, Natalia had all of the ingredients together for the cheesecake filling and Olivia had a fresh glass of wine. Once the batter was whipped, Natalia looked at it thoughtfully.

She glanced at Olivia, who was looking a little glassy-eyed. “I think I need more cream cheese. There may be more in the fridge. Could you check?”

Olivia spun a little too fast and grabbed the open refrigerator door for support. “Nope, don’t see any.” She closed the door and turned back to Natalia, finishing off the glass of wine in her hand. “I’ll go get you some more.”

Buzz and Doris came into the kitchen at that exact moment and Doris inquired, “Get more what? Did we not get enough of something?”

Natalia stood to stretch her legs and walked over to the trio. “Cream cheese. I think one more pack would make it the perfect consistency.”

"I'll go to the mini-mart for it," Olivia said.

Natalia reached for her arm. "It's not that important, honey." She took the wine glass from Olivia's hand. "Besides, I don't think you need to be driving right now."

"I'm fine." Olivia spoke a little tersely.

Doris sensed the impending argument. "You know, the mini-mart is closed anyway. We had to beg for it to stay open when we got there."

Natalia looked up into sad green eyes. "Let's not have a repeat of the engagement party, okay? Not today."

Natalia saw the pain flicker across Olivia's face at the reminder of a difficult time for both of them and instantly regretted her words, but wasn't sure how to fix it.

Buzz had witnessed the exchange and stepped in then, trying to lighten the mood. "The mini-mart may be closed, but fortunately for you two, Company can be open at your beck and call. I'm pretty sure there's some cream cheese in a refrigerator at the back of the kitchen. Olivia, why don't you come with me? I could use the company. Get it? Company!"

Olivia leaned her forehead against Natalia's, and they had a wordless conversation just by looking into each other's eyes.

"I'm sorry." Olivia said quietly.

Natalia gave her a soft and simple kiss on the lips and then brushed the freshly kissed lips with her thumb. "It's okay."

"I love you, Natalia."

"Love you, too."

"I'm going to go with Buzz. Be back in a bit."

"I'll be here waiting." Natalia caught Buzz's eye as he followed Olivia out the door and mouthed a "thank you" to him.

The drive to Company was quiet. Neither Buzz nor Olivia spoke, and she was grateful for the momentary silence. She loved the man, but she really didn't feel like talking at the moment. Buzz opened the door and motioned for Olivia to sit on the stool at the bar.

She watched for a few moments as Buzz moved around behind the bar. Thanks to her delayed reactions, it took her a little longer to realize he was making coffee.

"Buzz, can we just get what we came for and get back?"

"No." Buzz put a hearty amount of coffee grounds into the machine and filled it with water.

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"You're going to sit for a few minutes and have a cup of coffee with me. And you're going to talk to me."

Olivia pressed the bridge of her nose. "We need to get back. I need to help her finish the dinner prep."

"It's a cheesecake, Olivia." He threw his hands up in the air. "I'm sure it can wait a few more minutes. What's going on with you? You were fine one minute, then sullen and drinking the next."

Olivia wanted to be mad at Buzz for calling her on her attitude, but she couldn't seem to stay mad at him for long. She didn't plan to let it slip, but her exasperation and lowered inhibitions from the wine suddenly made her mouth spout off before her mind could stop her. "Why is Frank always the 'good man' or the 'good father'? I swear if I hear it one more time..."

He raised one hand and looked at her dumbfounded. "Whoa, wait a minute. That's what has you upset? Who got the girl, Olivia? You did. Who got the house? You did. Who got the family and tons of people around who love, admire, and respect both you and Natalia? You did. What do you have to complain about?"

Olivia was speechless and she just sat for a moment thinking on what he had said.

"I knew." She looked up confused at his words, and he made a hand gesture. "You know, about you and Natalia. I knew probably before the proposal."

He smiled at her ruefully. "I thought it was all you though."

"Everyone thought that, Buzz."

“Can’t blame ‘em.”

“No, I can’t.”

He smirked at her. “I really didn’t think that Natalia would feel that way about you. Not until she took off at the wedding. I knew why she ran off.”

Olivia looked at him, confused. “She told me that you weren’t exactly kind to her when I went to San Francisco.”

He smiled at her. “Frank is my son. It’s a natural instinct to defend your kid even if he’s wrong. But you two have had a long, hard road to get to this point. It hasn’t been easy. I’ve watched it all from the outside, and I know you. I know you just can’t accept that this is as close to perfection as you’ll ever find.” He looked down sadly thinking of his own lost loves. “Some of us aren’t so lucky.”

She sighed, and squeezed the bridge of her nose. “I just...it’s...overwhelming. We haven’t really had time to be alone or get away from...things. It just feels so...out of control.”

Buzz laughed. “That’s the holidays for you! And you’re so used to controlling everything. It’s hard to let go and just let the moment be.”

“It’s hard to explain, but I have this incredible need to whisk Natalia away, and be alone with her for once, just her and I.” She was quiet for a moment. “The last time the world got too much in the way, she ran off.”

He tilted his head. “Is that what this is all about? You’re afraid she could run off again?”

She looked down into her now cold coffee as Buzz continued talking. “Olivia, if you think she’d run off now, right at the moment when she not only gets the girl, but also has a home and a family that loves her, you’re crazy. Yep, I can see why any sane person would want out of that situation!”

She slapped his arm. “Smart ass!”

They were silent for a moment, smiling at each other, until Buzz broke the gaze. “Exactly why are we sitting here again?”

“You forced me to.”

“Cream cheese!” He snapped his fingers and ran to the back to get it out of the refrigerator then came back in. “Right! Well, let’s get you back to your beautiful girlfriend and all the other things you should be thankful for.”

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When Buzz and Olivia got back, Natalia quickly finished up the cheesecake and put it in the oven. As they waited for the turkey to finish cooking, everyone sat around laughing at the kids playing *Dance Dance Revolution*. Emma began to challenge every grown up in the room starting with Ava to a dance off. In quick succession, the little girl took down not only Ava, but also Sam and Jonathan.

Olivia announced proudly. "That's my girl!"

The best part though was laughing at Frank trying to keep up with Emma. Olivia was laughing so hard she almost started hyperventilating.

Natalia pulled a giggling Olivia to the kitchen where they checked the turkey between kisses before coming back to announce that dinner was ready.

The food was carefully placed and arranged on the dining room table. And since there wasn't enough room for everyone to sit at the actual table, chairs were placed in strategic places around the living room. There was mild chaos as everyone shifted and moved to make room.

Olivia and Natalia stood next to each other beside the table, laughing as Phillip and Buzz bumped into each other and shook off the close encounter with a manly "excuse me." And they became increasingly amused at Jonathan trying to balance both Sarah and Emma, each on a knee, until Emma gave up and climbed on Uncle Sam's lap.

Natalia wrapped an arm around Olivia's waist, making her warm inside and out at the contact at her side. She looked down and saw the huge dimples residing alongside shimmering tears.

"Hey, you okay?"

Natalia looked up at her. "Never been better." A tear finally did fall, and Olivia brushed it away. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For doing all of this, bringing all of these people together, and giving me my dream Thanksgiving dinner. This is exactly the way I always wanted it to be." Natalia got lost in the smoky green eyes. "I love you...so much."

"I love you, too. I'd do anything for you, anything to make you happy." Olivia leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her lips.

"Ewwwww," Emma called from the back of the room.

"Hey, get a room! Some of us are still single, you know." Sam joked with his sister.

Olivia glared back at her brother. "Jealous?"

He saucily winked at Natalia, making her blush. "Maybe just a little."

Olivia pointed at him. "Don't even think about turning on that Spencer charm, little brother. You may be family, but I know where to hide the bodies."

Natalia stepped forward a little, angling herself between the siblings. "Alright you two, enough of that. I think it's time we feed the hungry natives. But first, a toast."

Olivia watched as Natalia stepped back a little more, so as to include her in the group she was toasting to. The moment was surreal. Only a few months ago, she had stood in almost the same place and raised a glass to Natalia and Frank's happiness. Now here she and Natalia were, a couple and a family in every sense of the word. They were still surrounded by family and friends in celebration, but this time there were no secrets. Everyone knew they were together, and it was okay. Frank was still there, but he had a friendly smile on his face, his hand gently cradling Blake's. So much had changed in a few short months, but the look of adoration and love on Natalia's face hadn't. The realization took Olivia's breath away. All of those months ago, Natalia had looked at her this same way in this same spot, and at this moment on Thanksgiving, Olivia knew exactly what she was the most thankful for. She was looking right at her.

"So," Natalia started, "I'm not used to giving toasts. But, I think it's appropriate to stick with the theme of the season and give thanks."

She turned to look fully at Olivia before continuing, "The one thing I have been most thankful for in all of my life is Olivia. She has given me her love, her trust, her faith, and her future. She believed in me and tried to sacrifice everything for me, even herself. I wasn't a very good steward of her trust, and I made some big mistakes. But I'm thankful that she saw fit to forgive me and give me another chance. You are my hope, Olivia. You are my light and my strength. I hold to what is good and your love is so good."

Natalia fought back the tears in her eyes and turned to the room. "And I'm thankful to have all of you. The rest of our family, my little Emma, and our dear Francesca, and all of our friends who are an extension of that family. I...we love all of you and we're blessed to share this day with you."

There was a long pause as Olivia and Natalia simply stared at each other until Sam piped up in the back. “Awwww!”

Olivia laughed and brushed away a tear from her face. “Jeez, can we eat now? I think my stomach’s about to revolt!”

“Of course, honey, do your thing.”

With that, Olivia turned and picked up the knife and fork for the obligatory first slice of turkey. She poised the knife over the browned breast before slicing smoothly into the meat.

“Ohhhhhhh!”

The knife slipped from her grip and landed with a clang on the table. She turned to see a red-faced Natalia in obvious pain and holding her stomach.

She reached for her partner’s arm before she could sink to the floor. “Natalia?”

Frank was the first to notice the wet spot on the floor. “Um...I think Francesca has the Spencer grand entrance down pat already.”

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ACT 4

The living room was unnaturally quiet. For what seemed like an eternity, but was really only moments, the only sound was Natalia’s strained breathing as she struggled against the blinding pain of her contractions. Then it was as if everything shifted into motion and noise at once. Olivia reached for her partner’s hand and wrapped a protective arm around her waist. Frank jumped from his chair and went to Natalia’s other side. Emma ran up to them, looking scared and worried.

Ava was by Emma’s side in an instant, reassuring her that Natalia was fine but that their little sister was ready to be born. Lillian stepped away from Buzz at the back of the room and calmly walked forward. She kneeled down and peered up into Natalia’s pained eyes as she doubled-over with another contraction.

“Follow my lead, Natalia.” The older woman took a long breath in through her nose and blew it out through her mouth. She did it a couple more times until Natalia’s breathing had fallen in sync.

Olivia ran a soothing hand over Natalia's lower back and winced at the pain in her other hand, where Natalia held on tight. She watched the exchange for a moment before letting her worry kick back in.

"Is she okay?"

Lillian smiled and spoke, never taking her eyes off of Natalia. "Of course she is. She's having a baby."

Olivia swallowed hard. "Right now?"

Lillian then looked over at Olivia, her smile growing. "Hope you're ready to be a mom again."

Olivia straightened up then but never let Natalia go. "Oh boy."

Looking around the living room, Olivia finally saw the chaos that had ensued while she and Lillian were caught up in Natalia going into labor. Ava, Sam, and Jonathan were hurriedly working trying to bundle up Emma and Sarah for the inevitable ride to the hospital, and Ava was struggling the worse because Emma was so excited she wouldn't hold still. Olivia caught her oldest child's eye across the room and she could tell that Ava was telling her something, but she was too dazed to focus on it. Buzz pulled Frank away from Natalia's side, urging him to get hot water and towels, and Frank argued back telling his dad that they needed to get her to the hospital. Phillip strolled up behind Frank and clapped him on the back in congratulations, looking around, clearly amused by the madness in the Spencer-Rivera household. Shayne, Marina, and Henry were nowhere to be seen, and Reva was focused on ushering Colin, Doris, Blake, and Clarissa out the door. Beth efficiently moved back and forth from the living room to the kitchen to put away food that could spoil and turning off the cheesecake in the oven, before moving around the living room blowing out candles, preparing for a fast exit.

Olivia closed her eyes and tried to shut out the cacophony of noise, so she could focus on what they needed to do next. She chanced a glance at the clock on the mantle amazed that only about ten minutes had passed. It seemed odd when the last few minutes seemed to pass so slow.

When the noise got to be too much, she broke down and yelled into the room, "Enough!"

All motion ceased as everyone stopped to look at Olivia. She promptly dismissed them and looked down at Lillian. "Should we call an ambulance?"

Lillian looked up from the watch she had been keeping time on. "You could, but I think you'd end up needing the towels and hot water like Buzz suggested. No, her contractions are too close. We need to get her to the hospital immediately. This baby's coming fast!"

Olivia nodded at Lillian, but before she could speak, Frank stepped forward. "I could take her."

"Thank you, Frankie, but no. I think I can take her." Olivia would be damned if Good Man Frank would take her pregnant girlfriend off in his carriage like some knight in armor.

"Don't even start!" Natalia grumbled at them. "Frank, we're taking your car..."

"But..." Olivia interrupted.

"You have leather seats, sweetie, and honestly, I don't want to mess up your nice car. Frank shares responsibility in this too; I think he can deal with it."

Olivia smiled at her feisty girlfriend and looked at Frank. "You heard the lady."

Frank looked at Buzz. "I think we need those towels after all."

"And Buzz, you're driving," Natalia huffed out through the end of a contraction. "You haven't been drinking like these two have and the last thing I need or want is to be stranded on the side of the road, having a baby in the back seat of Frank's car."

Lillian stood up, looking at her husband, then at Frank. "You heard her. Let's get crackin'."

The house became a flurry of motion again as Frank came back with an armload of towels, Ava and Jonathan got the kids shuffled out of the house, and the rest piled into cars for the ride to the hospital. Lillian and Olivia squeezed into the back seat of Frank's small sedan on either side of Natalia. As Buzz took off down the driveway, Frank remembered the portable siren in the glove compartment. He reached in and placed it on the roof of the car and started it up. Buzz looked at him sideways in disgust.

"What?!" Frank yelled.

"Is that really necessary?"

"We won't have to stop at red lights now."

Buzz shook his head and turned back to the road. Frank turned to the back seat. Olivia was huddled close to Natalia, holding the other woman's hand and whispering in her ear.

Lillian held the woman's other wrist as she tracked her pulse along with the timing of her contractions.

Frank reached back to place a gentle hand on Natalia's knee. "Hey, how are you doing?"

Her eyes flew open. "I'm in pain, Frank. How do you think I'm doing? Now, turn around and buckle up. Wouldn't look good for the Police Chief to get a ticket for not wearing his seat belt."

He slumped back in his seat and buckled his seat belt for the rest of the ride. When they arrived at Cedars, Frank raced to the emergency room doors and got help. In seconds, a nurse with a wheelchair was at the side of the car where Olivia already had Natalia out of the backseat and waiting. Lillian gave the on-duty nurses all of her vital statistics and other information as they raced Natalia down the hallway to the labor and delivery wing, with Frank and Buzz trailing behind. Once they had the information they needed, Lillian came back to the entrance to let everyone else in their group know where the waiting room was located. Once the group was on their way, she headed back to help Natalia get settled in. But by the time she returned, the woman was already in a bed. Frank and Buzz stood outside the room pacing.

"Has the doctor come in yet?" Lillian asked the two men.

"He's on his way," Buzz answered.

She looked at Frank standing off to the side, appearing a little lost. She motioned to the room before asking Buzz quietly, "Isn't he going in there?"

Buzz looked down, answering quietly, "She only wanted Olivia in there with her."

"Oh." She felt for Frank, but she also knew it was Natalia's right to have whoever she wanted there. To ease Frank's pain at being kicked out, she told them, "Instead of going all the way back to the waiting room with everyone else, why don't you two have a seat over there?" She motioned to some chairs against a far wall. "That way you'll be close by when Francesca comes."

Buzz took her hand and gave her a quick kiss. "You're a good woman, Lillian."

"That's why you married me."

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Olivia stood by the bed holding onto Natalia's hand, and her other hand held a wet cloth to cool her partner's flushed face. The monitors bleeped a steady rhythm and one machine

whirled out little slips of paper charting Natalia's heart rate and contractions. Even before the hardest of the contractions hit Natalia, the little machine temporarily came to life as it spat out new data. From Olivia's vantage point, it merely looked like a fancy EKG machine with the same spiked lines indicating activity. When the contractions passed, it would slow, and the lines would roll and bounce along the paper rather than spike violently.

She looked down at the tensed features of her partner. Natalia always looked calm and serene, almost angelic, to Olivia. The only exception being when they made love and then the look on Natalia's face was indescribable. It was somewhere between fierce possession and awestruck wonder depending on her mood, and sometimes she saw both in the same night. But the look on her face now was unlike anything she'd ever seen. Even when her beautiful, warm brown eyes opened, resting from a contraction, she seemed caught in her own world. To say Natalia looked intensely focused didn't do it justice. Olivia simply had no words.

All she could do was continue to hold her hand and brush away strands of sweaty, matted hair. Natalia had said little since snapping at Frank in the car and Olivia wasn't used to the other woman being so non-vocal.

As they waited for what seemed like an eternity for the doctor, Olivia swept her free hand down Natalia's cheek, willing her to open her eyes. When the brown orbs turned to her, she smiled. "Hey."

"Hey." Natalia's voice was rough and tired.

Olivia knew the next wave of contractions was coming, so she talked to her partner while she had a chance. "What do you need? Can I do anything?"

Surprisingly, Natalia smirked at her a little before speaking. "If you happen to have any drugs for pain, slip some in my IV, okay?"

Olivia smiled at her. "Let me check my purse. I'm sure I have something in there for just such a time as this."

Natalia chuckled, "You would!"

"I thought you wanted to do this naturally."

"That was before I was painfully reminded that my body is twenty years older than it was the last time I did this. If I've passed out from the pain when the doctor comes in, tell 'em I want the drugs, like yesterday."

"You got it!"

A harder contraction slammed into Natalia then, her body going rigid and bowing. Instinctively, Natalia inhaled sharply, holding the breath, her mind laser-focused on telling her body not to push, until the wave passed. Eventually, she was able to use her breathing techniques to relax.

Olivia grimaced as the delicate hand in hers squeezed with brutal force. Olivia hissed at the pain and ended up using the same breathing techniques as Natalia to get through the pain.

Natalia looked at her apologetically once the pain had passed. "Sorry."

"S'alright, I think I have one bone left intact in there."

"Where is that damn doctor?"

Olivia was shocked at Natalia's exclamation. "Want me to go check?"

"No, don't you dare leave me."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Moments later, the door to Natalia's room opened and a middle aged man entered the room. The two women looked at each other, confused.

Olivia was the first to speak. "Who are you? You're not her doctor, unless you're the best crossdresser I've ever met."

The doctor informed them in a slightly foreign accent that since it was a holiday and he didn't celebrate Thanksgiving, he was the only doctor on-call. His exasperated tone was clarified when he stated that he had five other women who'd gone into labor at exactly the same time. Olivia could have sworn she heard him mumble something about a full moon, but it was hard to tell for sure. She just looked at a stricken Natalia and shrugged.

"Doesn't look like we have a lot of choice."

The doctor wasted no time examining Natalia and determining that she was almost fully dilated.

"What about drugs?" Olivia hadn't forgotten Natalia's comment from earlier.

"She's too far along now for an epidural. With any luck, this baby will be here in the next hour."

Natalia's head flopped back on the pillow and a tear rolled down her cheek. "Oh God. Olivia, I can't do this. I can't. Make it stop."

Olivia looked down at her partner and started to comfort her when the doctor interrupted.

"I'll be back in ten minutes to check on her. The call button for the nurse's station is next to her head if the baby starts moving faster." The doctor then excused himself to go check on his other patients.

Olivia came back to her side and pushed the damp hair out of her face. "You can do this. You've done it before. And you know something?"

"What?" Natalia whimpered.

"You're stronger than you realize."

Natalia looked at Olivia, disbelieving her confidence in her. "Seriously, honey, think about what's happened in the last year. You took a job with me. You kicked my sorry butt in line. Fell in love. Had an almost wedding. Ran away from that before it went too far, consequences be damned. Stood up to your priest, your son, and your ex-fiancé. Fought for me. Chased me and won me back even when I pushed you away."

Olivia brushed away the tears that were now falling from her own eyes, thinking about the wonderful woman she was going to be lucky enough to spend the rest of her life with.

"You're not a quitter, Natalia. You're a fighter, and I love you so much for that. God knows, we never would have gotten to this point if it wasn't for you."

Natalia chuckled, "If you mean a surprise pregnancy, then yeah, you're right."

"You know what I mean."

"I know."

Olivia leaned over and brushed a soft kiss against Natalia's lips. It was only a momentary distraction before a new wave of contractions hit. The usual grimaces and grunts were replaced by a blood-curdling scream.

Olivia jumped back, looking at Natalia in fear. "That didn't sound good."

"Oh God...oh God," Natalia panted out before screaming again.

"Baby?"

"I think your Sweet Pea is ready to make her debut."

"Now?" Olivia gasped.

"Well, check and see."

"What?" Olivia was positively panicked.

"Olivia, just look." Natalia was losing her patience with her girlfriend.

Olivia lifted the cover up from Natalia's raised legs. "Oh God."

"What is it? Is the baby okay?"

"Head...I saw a head." Olivia voice was quiet, her eyes staring at a spot on the wall behind the bed, but Natalia heard it.

She snapped her fingers to get Olivia's attention. "Olivia, snap out of it. Go get the doctor."
"Oh yeah, right."

Out in the hallway, she searched for the nurse. Seeing no one nearby, she looked for Lillian.

Frank noticed her come out and jumped to his feet. "Is she okay?"

"Where's Lillian? We need the doctor."

Frank got his distracted ex's attention by tugging at her arm. "She went to get us some coffee. Is Natalia okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. She's just having the baby right now. We really, really need the doctor. Can you go find him, Frankie?"

"Sure, no problem." She watched him run off down the hallway, stopping every person in scrubs that he saw, before turning to head back into the room. She didn't want to leave Natalia alone for too long.

Buzz came up behind her. "Is she really okay?"

"Yeah, she really is, all things considered." She then turned and looked Buzz in the eye. "I saw her head, Buzz. Her little head. It was," she choked up on the feeling, "it was... amazing."

They shared a moment of understanding, just looking at each other, before he squeezed her arm and urged her wordlessly to go back in the room. When she went back in, Natalia's eyes were closed, resting from the recent contractions. Olivia slid her fingers into Natalia's hand and without opening her eyes, the woman smiled.

Natalia lifted the cord next to her head. "We completely forgot about the call button."

Both of them laughed at the absurdity then looked at each other.

"You saw her head, huh?"

Olivia couldn't stop the giddy smile that crossed her face. "Yep. She has a head full of dark hair. Bet it's going to be beautiful, just like her mom's."

Their mutual smiles were erased when Natalia's body seized up again with a contraction. With perfect timing, the doctor came in with a nurse in tow and settled in to check Natalia.

"Well, Ms. Rivera, are you ready to be a mom?"

Natalia squeezed Olivia's hand, gritting the words out around the pain. "Are you?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Okay, let's do this."

The doctor gave some instructions to the nurse, who prepped the portable crib beside the bed with cloths, a syringe, and a swaddling blanket. He then turned back to Natalia, telling her to take a deep breath on the next contraction and push as hard as she could. In a series of ten second waves, she screamed and pushed her way through several sets of contractions. By the time Natalia finished the last one, she was sure she was going to pass out. She had pushed so hard she was seeing stars.

There was no rest though, because Francesca was ready to make her great escape. Olivia moved slightly behind Natalia and wrapped an arm around her as she rose to push, bracing her body against the woman's back to ease the strain on tired muscles, allowing Natalia to focus on pushing. She squeezed her lover's delicate and thin hand in her own, whispering words of love and perseverance in her ear.

"Come on, baby. You can do this, just a little bit more. Push!"

“OH MY GOD!!!! OLIVIA!!!” Natalia cried out then took a deep breath and pushed harder than she ever remembered pushing before, and suddenly her upper body lurched forward, followed by a tiny, whimpering scream.

Natalia raised her hands to her mouth and looked at Olivia with tears running down her face. “Is that her?”

Olivia was smiling and crying too, and she didn’t care one bit. “That’s our girl.” She hugged Natalia tight and kissed her on the head. “I knew you could do it. I love you so much.”

Natalia was crying so hard her hands were shaking. Finally, Natalia raised quivering hands to Olivia’s face and kissed her tenderly, reverently on the lips. She pulled back and looked at Olivia with such a complete aura of blissfulness that it took Olivia’s breath away. For one moment, Olivia lost herself in the power of their love, not just for each other but for the baby as well.

“I love you, too,” Natalia’s hushed words were as reverent as her touch. “Is she okay? Healthy?”

They both looked at the doctor and he smiled a blinding, white smile at them. “She’s absolutely beautiful and perfectly healthy. Ten fingers. Ten toes.” The doctor looked at Olivia then, before offering her a pair of scissors. “Would you like to do the honors?”

Olivia bit her lip, but with a nudge from Natalia and a quick smile, she took the scissors in her hand and looked past the drape to get her first look at their baby. She didn’t want to stop looking at Francesca and it took the doctor clearing his throat to get her attention. After she cut the cord, the nurse briefly took the baby to wipe off and weigh and measure before coming back to the bedside where she motioned for Olivia to come closer as well. Olivia took her place on the bed next to Natalia again. Carefully, the nurse placed the baby in Natalia’s arms.

“Congratulations, Ms. Rivera and Ms. Spencer. You’re the proud parents of a beautiful baby girl.”

Natalia leaned her head back against Olivia’s shoulder and smiled up at the nurse. “How much does she weigh?”

“7 pounds 3 ounces, and she’s 20 inches long.” The nurse watched the happy couple cuddle their new baby and make silly goo-goo sounds. “Do you have a name for her?”



Olivia wiped at a tear on her cheek and nodded before answering, “Francesca Marissa Rivera.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

The nurse went back to work with the doctor, blanketing the room in near silence as they continued to clean up. Eventually, the doctor stood and nodded his head slightly. “We’ll leave you to be with your daughter. It’s our policy not to send in visitors for at least ten minutes. Is that okay?”

“It’s perfect.” Olivia was torn between who she wanted to look at: the baby or Natalia. She settled for taking turns looking at each, and with each pass she felt her heart expand a little more. She imagined that was what the saying meant about having a heart overflowing with love. She certainly felt that way as she looked at two of the people she loved beyond her own life.

It was inevitable that the world would crash in on them and their days would no longer be their own for quite a while. So for now, they huddled together on the bed admiring the beauty and perfection of this new life.

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A few minutes later, Frank quietly entered the room. Olivia looked up from where she was softly stroking Francesca's tiny head as she held her in her arms. She mouthed a hello and tilted her head, indicating he could come closer. He moved to the side of the bed opposite of Olivia, so he could see Francesca's face.

Olivia could see him fight back tears as he bit his lower lip. After a moment, he was able to speak. "She's beautiful."

"Funny, that's the same word I'm stuck on too. Where's Buzz?"

"He went to get everyone else from the waiting room. Enjoy the quiet while you can."

Natalia looked to Olivia, then to Frank. "Would you like to hold her?"

He broke out into a huge grin. "Of course."

Olivia walked around the bed and carefully passed the baby to Frank, who cradled her gently in his arms. A tear finally fell from his eye, and Olivia turned away before he could see her brush away her own.

He rocked her in his arms and talked to her, joking about how strong she was when she grabbed his finger and squeezed.

"You are a very lucky girl, Francesca. You have so many people who love you so much, and two mommies and a daddy who will do anything for you. Anything at all." He lifted her higher and gently placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Alright, Frank, stop it or you're going to make me like you." Olivia smiled at him from her spot on the bed next to Natalia. She wrapped an arm around her partner's shoulders, holding her close.

A soft knock at the door interrupted Olivia's teasing, and Buzz poked his head in. "I don't think I can hold Emma back much longer. Can we come in now?"

Natalia laughed. "You better let my Jellybean in!"

As if beckoned, Emma came barreling past Buzz and excitedly ran to the side of the bed next to her mom. Olivia ruffled her hair. "You want to see your baby sister?"

"You bet!"

Olivia laughed, then reminded her, "Honey, you're going to have to be quiet around her, okay? We can't be too loud or we'll upset her."

“Okay, Mommy.” She whispered

Frank came around the bed and knelt down with Francesca. “Say hi.”

“Hi, Fra...Fra...” She looked to her mom for help.

“Francesca.”

“Right.” She nodded and turned back to the sleeping baby. Her little voice was full of awe as she looked at her sister. “She’s tiny.”

“So were you once. One day she’ll be as big as you.” Olivia played with her daughter’s ponytail.

“Can I hold her?”

Olivia looked to Natalia, who happily nodded her head and answered for both of them, “Sure, Emma. Why don’t you sit in that chair over there and Uncle Frank will help you?”

Everyone stood around watching, amused, as Frank tried to instruct Emma on how to hold the baby and keep her head still. Emma sat proudly in the chair with her sister, as everyone took turns greeting the newest member of their family. Ava came over and kissed her mom and Natalia on the cheek and offered her congratulations. Sam playfully punched Olivia on the shoulder and joked about her cleaning her shotgun when the boys came around for dates.

“Or girls,” Olivia quipped back. “Hey, I’m living proof that anything is possible!”

A cell phone chimed in the room with an incoming message and everyone turned to Frank, who guiltily pulled it from his pocket. He looked at the text message and scrunched his eyebrows upon seeing a name he’d never expected to see again. He felt his heart start to race, and he took a deep breath to calm himself. Later he’d deal with it. Now definitely wasn’t the time.

Blake came over to loop her arm through his. “What was that?”

“Nothing.” He tried to blow it off, but when Blake looked at him like she expected more of an explanation, he elaborated, “I forgot to cancel the dating service. Someone posted a comment on my profile, and it just surprised me. But I don’t need that anymore, now do I?”

“Nope.”

When Natalia yawned, several people got the hint and began to excuse themselves. They all came over and gave Olivia and Natalia hugs and well-wishes. Eventually, the only ones left in the room were the three parents, the baby, Emma, and Phillip.

Phillip picked up Emma. "So, Em, do you want to come spend the weekend with your old man?"

Emma was excited at first and then pouted. "But I want to be with my mommies and the baby."

"Oh, you will. But they won't be able to go home for at least a couple of days. The doctor's going to want to keep them here for a little while, but we can come visit. What do you say?"

She shrugged. "Okay. As long as we can visit."

"Okay. Well, let's go then. Kiss everyone goodbye." Emma leaned over in his arms and gave her mommies and Francesca kisses before waving bye.

Frank's phone rang again, but this time when he looked at it, he smiled and handed it over to Natalia.

"I think it's for you."

She looked at the display and a huge smile crossed her face as she flipped the phone open. "Baby, is that you?"

"Hi, Ma. I hear I have a baby sister."

Olivia knew immediately who was on the other end of the line just from Natalia's reaction. She looked up at Frank in genuine gratefulness.

"Thank you," she quietly mouthed to him.

He simply nodded and gestured with his head that he was going to step out in the hallway. Olivia snuggled up closer to Natalia on the bed. She could hear Rafe's voice through the phone asking about the baby, like how big she was and what she looked like. Natalia sleepily answered his questions and then there was a long pause.

There was no mistaking the sadness in his voice when he said, *"I miss you, Ma."*

Natalia swallowed hard before she could answer him. "I miss you too, baby."

“Love you.”

“Love you, too. With all my heart.”

“I know, Ma.”

Olivia could hear the smile in Natalia’s voice as she said her goodbyes to Rafe, hope springing up in both of them that their troubled son would find his way home. Natalia handed the phone to Olivia, who placed it on the side table next to her, and snuggled deeper back into the other woman’s warm embrace as she cradled their child.

They didn’t have to say a word. Both understood this was a new beginning for them. While it wouldn’t be easy and they’d certainly have troubles like every couple and every family, they had each other.

And they had an abundance of family and friends surrounding and supporting them. It was a day of thanksgiving and neither could be more thankful than they were at that moment in each other’s arms.

The End

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Circle of Life

by Geekgrrllurking

ACT 1

A late November wind sent a wave of fallen maple leaves tumbling across the yard of the farmhouse as Emma Spencer pressed her nose against the screen door and sighed. Still no telltale plume of dust from her mother’s white Nissan coming down the driveway. Disappointed, she closed the inside door and wandered into the kitchen, plopping down onto one of the wooden chairs at the table, bored.

Picking out a colored pencil from the slim box, Emma continued to color her “flags of the world” project for school. Her daddy had dropped her off in the morning with plenty of

time to say good bye to Ava and Uncle Sam before her mommy took them to the airport. She had already watched *High School Musical* and played Wii bowling with Uncle Jonathan, beating him easily. She'd finally had no choice but to break out her homework to pass the time.

Emma's mind wandered as she worked. Maybe now Natalia would be home more and want to do stuff together like before. Mommy had said Natalia would be sore for awhile but she knew there would still be lots she could do to help out with her new baby sister. It seemed like forever since she had seen Francesca in the hospital with Natalia, with her little scrunchy face and tiny fingers. She couldn't wait for the little squirmy baby to come home.

"Hey munchkin, still no sign of them?" Jonathan leaned against the doorframe and watched the girl coloring away on the flag for Italy. *'She must be bored if she's doing her homework.'*

"Nope." Another big sigh, before she reached for a green pencil.

"Wanna check out the ducks again?" Jonathan stepped closer to the kitchen table as Emma began to fill in a space on the page.

"Not really."

"Maybe we could watch another movie. I've only seen the Hannah Montana movie twice and you know how I love her music, so if you wanted to we could put it on." Jonathan smiled while cringing inside at the thought of actually having to sit through it yet again.

Movement from outside suddenly caught his eye and Jonathan froze, going on high alert. Jeffrey's most recent message had said to stay vigilant. He relaxed, however, as he quickly recognized who it was.

"I don't feel like it right now." Emma sighed, not noticing the door being quietly opened behind her.

"Then how about giving your baby sister a big welcome home, Jellybean?" Olivia smiled from the door as she ushered in a slow-moving Natalia and her tiny bundle.

"Mom! Natalia!" Emma leapt up from her chair and threw herself at Olivia and then pounced on her other mother and the baby. "I'm so glad you're all home!"

"Sshh, she's sleeping, sweetie." Natalia hushed her and quickly checked to see if the little girl in her arms had woken. Francesca shifted slightly but didn't wake. She looked back into Emma's beaming face and grinned. It was good to finally be home again.

“Can I hold her? Can I, please?” Emma practically shook with excitement, but spoke softly. Olivia glanced at Natalia to make sure she was holding up okay and then nodded at her daughter.

“On the couch though, Emma.” Olivia chuckled as the girl took off like a shot into the living room and then gasped as she suddenly found herself wrapped in a big bear hug.

“Congrats, Auntie O, you’re a mommy! Again.” Jonathan’s eyes twinkled with mirth as he squeezed the older woman and lifted her off the ground. Finally letting the laughing woman go, he wisely didn’t comment on the happy tears glittering in her eyes. Turning to the small, sleeping child in Natalia’s arms, he grabbed a tiny hand and gave it a little wiggle.

“What a lucky little lady you are, with all this love around you,” he whispered, trying not to wake the girl. Natalia smiled shyly up at him before slowly making her way into the living room with Francesca, to find Emma.

“Thanks again for looking after Emma for us at the last minute this afternoon. Poor Jane sounded like she was coughing up a lung. I hope it’s not H1N1 or something.” Olivia quickly tugged off her jacket and hung it up on a hook before heading towards the living room to help get Natalia settled.

“No problem. Lizzie had Sarah for most of the long weekend, so I was at loose ends today anyway.” Jonathan stuck his hands deeply into his pockets and followed Olivia into the adjacent room. They paused, watching as Natalia stiffly bent over and slid the baby onto Emma’s waiting lap.

“Now just put one arm around her here, like that so that you keep her close, and put your other hand under here to help support Sweet Pea’s head.” Natalia moved a pillow a little closer to help keep the baby wedged against Emma’s body. Olivia appeared beside her partner and helped her out of her jacket before Natalia gingerly sat down beside Emma. She let out a big sigh of relief and just let herself relax, glad to be home.

“Hi, Sweet Pea.” Emma was thrilled as the baby’s eyes blinked open and stared back at her. “You’re going to love it here. We’ve got ducks and lots of places to explore. And your room is so pretty.”

Francesca stared up, and kicked her feet a little in response. Emma giggled and looked up at her mommy. Natalia reached over and tugged back the pink blanket so the baby could move a bit more easily. A little hand started to push against Emma’s tummy, which made her look back down and giggle again.

Olivia's heart melted a little at the sight of Emma, Natalia and the newest member of their family snuggled together on the couch. A wave of pure joy washed over her, stealing her breath away.

Was this really her life? Sometimes it still felt like it was all too good to be true, like she didn't deserve to be this happy. A part of her was waiting for the other shoe to drop and for everything to be taken away from her. Natalia looked up at that moment, as if sensing her doubts, and as their eyes locked, something deep inside Olivia seemed to slide into place. Her family was home.

"Hey, y'know from this angle she kinda looks like Frank..." Jonathan teased, chuckling harder as Olivia smacked his stomach with the back of her hand. It was almost too easy to yank her chain sometimes.

"No she doesn't. She looks like Natalia." Emma looked up and pointed at a little dimple on Francesca's pudgy cheek. "See!"

"She's beautiful, Bean, just like her mother." Olivia smiled softly, still staring intensely at the woman sitting beside her daughter. Jonathan coughed discreetly from behind her, breaking the moment, and she turned back to her nephew. "Did you want to stay for supper? Once we get the baby and Natalia settled, there are plenty of Thanksgiving dinner leftovers." Olivia mentally ran through what they had in the fridge, thinking about how much was still left over from the huge, interrupted feast.

"No, but thanks though. I've got a few errands to run before I head home." Jonathan could clearly see this little family needed some alone time. He waved to Emma and Natalia and headed into the kitchen to grab his jacket from where he had hung it, Olivia following behind him.

"Wait. At least let me send some food home with you, kiddo." Olivia pulled open the refrigerator and started pulling out the tightly packed disposable Tupperware containers. "Just hang on a second while I put something together for you."

Jonathan checked his watch. It was getting late. He leaned over and poked his aunt to get her attention.

"Listen, Auntie O, I'm going to head out." Jonathan went over and grabbed his jacket from the coat hooks by the back door before tugging it on. "If you two need anything, I'm only a phone call away."

Olivia turned and started haphazardly tossing various containers into a large plastic bag.

"I'm working from home this week at least, maybe even the next if Natalia seems too wiped out, so I think we'll be okay. But we may take you up on that offer if things get a bit overwhelming around here." Olivia knew the next few weeks were going to be a big adjustment for the whole family, but knew in her bones that they would get through it together just fine.

Sliding a third of the leftover cheesecake into a large Ziploc baggie, Olivia added it to the bag of leftovers and shoved it into his arms, not taking no for an answer. They would be eating Thanksgiving leftovers for a good month if she didn't do something.

"Er ... thanks, Auntie O." Jonathan flashed his most charming smile, and dropped a quick kiss on her cheek. A squeaky wail started up from the living room as he disappeared out the door. Olivia waved him off, making sure the door was closed, before quickly heading back to rescue Emma.

Tugging his jacket collar up against the cold wind, Jonathan headed past the stork sign stuck in the lawn and dashed to his car, slamming the door behind him. Slipping his cell phone out of his pocket, he dialed a number he knew by heart and waited for the person on the other end to pick up.

"Jeffrey, it's me." Jonathan glanced back at the porch of the farmhouse, the warm glow from inside spilling out into the dimming afternoon light, and thought about the little family snuggled together inside.

"We need to talk. There are rumblings of things stirring in Springfield. If they're true and Edmund's making a move, none of us are safe."

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It had been a long day. Olivia made sure the back door was locked and shuffled over to the kitchen counter to unplug the whistling electric kettle. Yawning, she pulled out two mugs from the cupboard overhead. She was definitely ready for an early night; she could only imagine how tired Natalia was. And while she was happy to have her girls home from the hospital, it still shocked her a little at how quickly Cedars released them.

Olivia tossed a teabag into each mug and poured the boiling water from the kettle over them, shaking her head at herself. She would never admit out loud that she had had a hard time falling asleep without her lover by her side. It was funny how quickly she had gotten used to sleeping in the same bed with Natalia. Hell, it had taken months to get used to Bill's snoring and Phillip's constant movement in bed. No, she didn't envy Lizzie or Beth at all.

Tossing out the used teabags, Olivia slowly stirred a bit of honey into Natalia's mug. Sometimes it amazed her at how easily their lives had meshed together, in so many ways. It was almost scary. If she believed in such things, she'd almost say someone up there had a plan.

"Don't you even start ..." Olivia mumbled to the small picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall, giving it a stern look as she passed. Switching off the kitchen light, she made her way through the dark living room with her mugs of steaming tea.

Quietly tiptoeing up the stairs, she easily stepped over the squeaky step, the third one from the top of the staircase, and padded down the hallway towards their bedroom. Ducking her head into Emma's room, she paused to make sure her little girl was okay. Her heart clenched at the sight of her girl snuggled up in the blankets, peaceful. She was growing up so fast; it made Olivia's heart ache. It seemed like just yesterday she had been rocking her to sleep too.

Olivia turned to go, glancing over at Cornelius, Emma's battered old fudge teddy sitting in his new place of honor on the bookshelf, watching over the girl at night. Emma said that it was in case he got sad again, she would be in easy hugging distance. Olivia nodded at the bear, knowing Emma was in good hands. Juggling the two mugs of chamomile tea, she slowly pulled the door almost closed, leaving a few inches for the hall light to fall through into the dark room. Emma still hated it if it was pitch black in her room.

Making her way back to her own room, Olivia nudged the door with her elbow, slowly opening to reveal Natalia and the baby sitting together in the new rocking chair. The bedside lamp bathed them in a warm glow as they gently rocked back and forth.

She silently watched Natalia with her sleeping child. Long, dark hair tucked behind a delicate ear, revealing the long column of her neck, a sweet smile on her full lips and warm, brown eyes staring at the tiny life in her arms. Olivia had never quite seen that look of perfect adoration on the younger woman's face before. A creaking floor board gave away her position and Natalia glanced up as if waking from a trance, smiling sleepily back at her, her beauty never failing to take Olivia's breath away.

"Hey, it's only me," Olivia whispered, finally stepping deeper into the room. Placing the mugs on the nightstand, she turned to Natalia, reaching out to gently trail her fingers across the baby's slightly flushed cheeks.

Olivia felt her heart swell and shook her head in wonder. How could she have ever thought this little darling would never really be *hers* too, *theirs* together? Francesca squeaked and sighed in her sleep, and turned towards the gentle touch.

“Everything is locked up and Emma’s sound asleep.” Olivia bent to scoop the sleeping infant into her arms and moved away so Natalia could stand.

“You have her lunch ready for school tomorrow?” Natalia gripped the armrests and slowly pushed herself up. God, she was so stiff; she didn’t remember being this sore and exhausted after Rafe was born. Then again, she wasn’t that same young woman either. Luckily Francesca had been an uncomplicated birth.

Olivia gently placed their daughter down into the crib they had temporarily moved into their room. They would move her into her own room soon, but Natalia couldn’t bear the thought of not being near Francesca, at least at first. And if Olivia was honest, neither could she.

“Sleep, *mija*.” Natalia breathed, ever so gently stroking the dark downy hair before reluctantly pulling away from the crib and picking up her mug of tea to take a sip. Sighing, she put it back down and slowly moved to the end of the bed.

“Need any help?” Olivia asked softly, worried about Natalia’s slow shuffling pace as she continued on past the bed.

“No, I’m okay. Other than having a bladder the size of a peanut...” Natalia grumbled as she made her way to the bathroom. Olivia snickered and slid into bed, turning the blankets down for Natalia. She felt drowsy by the time she heard shuffling feet returning and then the mattress dipped as her lover came to bed.

Natalia slowly sank into the soft sheets, letting her body stop and relax. It was so good to be in her own bed, with Olivia by her side. She closed her eyes and couldn’t stop the low groan that slipped from her lips.

“So was it a half-ton or a Mack?”

“What?” Natalia popped an eye open to look over at her lover.

“The size of truck that you feel like you were hit by?” Olivia rolled to her side, her lip twitched into a half-smirk.

Natalia groaned again, this time at the joke, but smiled.

“Definitely a Mack.”

“My poor, sweet girl.” Olivia softly pushed dark strands of hair from Natalia’s forehead, before slowly stroking back through the long locks. “How’s the bleeding; still pretty heavy?”

Natalia sighed and nodded, shifting slightly, trying to relieve the ache in her lower back and legs. "Kind of what I expected. It still burns when I go to the bathroom, but it's better than it was in the hospital."

Olivia dropped a tender kiss to Natalia's forehead.

"We'll get that sitz bath set up for you tomorrow, okay? That should help," Olivia whispered softly, nuzzling into the thick, dark hair just breathing in the scent of her lover.

Natalia nodded sleepily, her eyes drooping. Olivia began to make soothing circles as she massaged her scalp. Soon she heard deeper breathing from the younger woman, sleep finally claiming her weary body. She trailed the back of her fingers across her lover's slightly flushed cheeks, smiling when she sighed in her sleep and turned towards the gentle touch.

"Sleep *mija*."

~~*~*

ACT 2

Olivia yawned as she pulled the Nissan up to the front of the school first thing Monday morning and parked. She glanced up at the rearview mirror to find Emma in the back seat, yawning too. She felt bad for her little girl. It had been a long night for everybody, with Francesca crying every three hours or so. And of course it was inevitable that they had all slept in too long, ignoring the snooze buzzer one too many times, causing Emma to miss her bus.

"You got everything, Emma?" Olivia turned in her seat and smiled at the still somewhat grumpy girl. Unbuckling her seatbelt, Emma grabbed her backpack and opened the door to get out, before pausing and turning back to look hard at her mother.

"Mom?"

"Yes, Bean?" Olivia tried hard not to smile at the young girl's serious face.

"Is the baby gonna cry like that every night?" Emma's dramatic sigh said it all.

"I'm afraid so, sweetie, at least for a little while." Olivia nodded sympathetically at the girl. The crying at all hours was a big change for all of them. "But it won't last forever, I promise."

Emma raised an eyebrow and stared fiercely at her mother a moment longer, before getting out of the car.

“So that’s what the Spencer Glare of Doom looks like...” Olivia murmured, oddly entertained by her daughter’s spunk, as she signaled and pulled back out into morning traffic. Her BlackBerry buzzed on the passenger seat beside her, and she grabbed it, navigating to the incoming text message.

Tell me you did not just feed Emma Poptarts this morning – NRivera 9:05am

Olivia stopped at the red light and quickly typed out her response.

Of course not! She had some orange juice with them – OSpencer 9:07am

Hitting send, she could almost see Natalia’s disapproving scowl. Chuckling to herself, she turned left into the parking lot behind the mini-mart.

Grabbing a much-needed cup of coffee from the counter, Olivia soon found her way to the feminine hygiene products aisle, only to discover Reva Shayne pushing her son Colin’s stroller, puttering away in the baby food section. Hoping she hadn’t been spotted yet, Olivia started to turn down the cookie aisle, but to no avail, as Reva looked up and waved.

“Damn.” Olivia muttered under her breath, as she plastered her best fake smile on her face. She really needed to find another, less popular, convenience store in town.

“Olivia!” Reva dropped a few jars of baby food into her basket and waited for the other woman to approach. “How’s the little one? Is Natalia settling back in at home okay?”

Olivia took a big slurp of coffee and nodded her head.

“Francesca and Natalia are home safe and sound, thanks for asking.” Olivia couldn’t stop the huge grin that spread across her face, as she remembered leaving a sleepy Natalia propped up in their bed that morning breastfeeding little Sweet Pea. She hadn’t wanted to leave them and even now she couldn’t wait to get back home to them.

Reva took a moment to straighten Colin’s hat, the movement hiding her knowing smile. Olivia Spencer in love was truly a sight to behold. She was suddenly reminded of Jeffrey, how happy he had been after Colin was born. The sudden pain of the memory overwhelmed her for a moment. Swallowing hard, Reva pushed the thought away, straightened her shoulders and headed the stroller towards the checkout.

“Listen, when Natalia is up for it, I’ll give her a call and see if she wants to join me and Marina for our regular park strolls. Us new moms hafta stick together. Besides, it’ll be good for the kids to spent time together.” Reva paused a moment longer. “Just think, we’re watching the next generation of Springfield getting started.” She sighed happily and waved before disappearing around the corner.

“Oh, Sweet Pea, you’re gonna have those two little boys eating out of your hand in true Spencer style if I have any say in it.” Olivia watched the older woman go and just shook her head, already plotting on how to rescue poor Natalia from the other new moms wandering in the park.

‘Then again, Natalia might like that.’

The random thought pulled Olivia up short. They hadn’t talked much about what Natalia would do when the baby was a little older. Natalia hadn’t really been that attached to working at Spaulding and Blake was pretty hit-and-miss with having steady work.

Actually, with Alan gone, Olivia wondered how Phillip was dealing with everything as interim CEO of Spaulding Enterprises. The cutthroat executive in Olivia realized that Spaulding was in a very vulnerable place, at least until Alan’s will was executed. She made a mental note to check on how their stock was doing, and went back to searching for the overnight pads the doctor had recommended for postpartum bleeding. Finally finding them, she grabbed the bag and was moving on to get some milk, when her phone buzzed again.

Can you pick up some milk and don’t forget the mail – NRivera 9:30am

“Already on it, sweetheart...” Swinging the glass fridge door open, Olivia tucked the package of pads under her arm and grabbed a gallon of two-percent milk. Stepping back she bumped into a warm, familiar body.

“Whoa there!” Buzz grabbed the bag of pads that slipped out from under Olivia’s arm and steadied her before she spilled what was left of her coffee.

“Jesus, Buzz, you scared me.” Olivia held a hand to her chest, and elbowed the glass door shut behind her.

“Let me give you a hand with that.” Buzz started to turn a lovely shade of red as he realized what was in his hands. Olivia smirked and took pity on him, handing over the jug of milk and snagging the pads back.

They made their way to the checkout, Olivia digging into her bag for a coupon she was sure she had grabbed from the pile on the kitchen table. Finding it, she stifled a yawn as Buzz chuckled at her.

“So, just how much sleep did you get last night?” Buzz put his own items down on the counter as the young woman started ringing up Olivia’s things.

“Not much. Poor Emma woke up a few times too. I think she wants to send Francesca back and get a puppy instead.” They shared a laugh as Olivia handed over the money to the cashier and moved to pick up her bagged items.

“You know Lillian and I are around if you two need anything, right?” Buzz placed his hand over hers and squeezed.

Olivia nodded and smiled, thankful for their friendship and support. It could have turned into such a bad situation between the Cooper clan and her little family. Instead, they had all pulled together. Natalia had pulled them all together.

“Thanks, Buzz,” Olivia said sincerely. Grabbing her plastic bag, she gave the man a lopsided grin and started for the door.

“Anytime.” Buzz watched her go and turned back to the cashier packing his items into a bag. “After all, a Grandpa loves to spoil his little girl. Right?”

~~*~*

Detective Anna Li shuffled the papers on her desk and tried to look interested in the vandalism report Officer Remy Boudreau had left her. There was so much incompetence in the Springfield Police Department that she didn’t know where to start to fix things. Luckily, the young man seemed to have a good head on his shoulders, and if she could just keep him out of the Chief’s bumbling clutches, he might make a decent cop.

“Anna, can I see you for a minute?” Frank Cooper ducked his head into the squad room and indicated that she should follow him, before he disappeared down the hallway again.

Rolling her eyes, Anna stood and grabbed her grey blazer from the back of her chair, slipping it on before heading to Frank’s office.

Frank sat in his large leather chair, his desk piled with paperwork and several picture frames containing family photos. His computer desktop background wasn’t the usual Springfield PD logo; instead it was a picture taken just days ago in Cedars Hospital, of him

holding his baby daughter and his other daughter Marina smiling and hugging him. His girls.

Frank smiled, staring at the screen for a long moment. Despite his heartache and the complicated relationship he had with Natalia, he would never regret Francesca coming into this great big world. He chewed his thumbnail a little, wishing with all his heart that he could see her all the time, even though he knew it was impossible. It was a new kind of torment that Natalia was putting him through and only time would tell if this was the right arrangement for his innocent daughter. He prayed his ex-fiancée knew what the hell she was doing.

Anna tapped on the open door and came into the cluttered office, breaking into his wandering thoughts. Frank looked up and smiled, waiting as she closed the door behind her and sat in one of the chairs in front of his desk before he got back down to business.

“Anna, you’ve read Remy’s report on the vandalism going on at Springfield High School. I wanted you to head up our new Youth Crimes Task Force. I think your experience with the Chicago PD Gang Unit will really be an asset in this situation.” Frank still couldn’t believe the arrests in Li’s file, the number of gang members behind bars because of her tireless work. She was dedicated and tough, and they were extremely lucky to have her in their fair city.

“Sure thing, Chief.” Anna sat straighter in her chair, glad to finally have something of interest to sink her teeth into. This could work to her favor, getting her ear to the underground in Springfield, which could help her with her primary mission. She smiled, barely listening as Frank droned on.

‘Yes, he will be very pleased with this development indeed.’

~~*~*

Olivia quickly unpacked the few items she had picked up in town. She had stopped off briefly at the health food store that Phillip, of all people, had recommended to her at Thanksgiving. She never figured him for a granola-head, but she knew he had gotten into all kinds of alternative stuff during his illness.

Luckily, the list of herbs for the healing sitz bath recipe Lillian had given them was relatively short. Stuffing the plastic bag into the bag saver under the sink, Olivia grabbed the mail off the counter where she had dropped it and started shuffling through the various envelopes.

"Bills, bills ... oh! A shoe sale at the mall." Olivia flipped the flyer over to read the details. She glanced up as Natalia came into the kitchen. "Hey you, where's Sweet Pea?"

"Conked out in the living room." Natalia leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on Olivia's still-cool lips. Running her hands along the soft cashmere sweater covering Olivia's arms, she hummed contentedly and moved to put the jug of milk away in the fridge. "Want some orange juice?"

"Please." Tearing into an envelope, Olivia dragged her eyes away from the sight of Natalia's tempting curves, as she bent over and tried to make room for the milk in their stuffed refrigerator, and started reading the official-looking letter.

Natalia grabbed the orange juice and poured out two glasses, smiling to herself at the conundrum that was her girlfriend. On the one hand, Olivia would keep coupons for diapers and then on the other, turn around and drop two hundred bucks for a pair of boots without a second thought. Natalia wasn't sure she'd ever get used to having that much disposable income or be able to justify spending her money that way. Thriftiness was too ingrained in her, from her time struggling with Rafe on her own, and even before that, when she still lived at home with her parents.

Natalia's mind skittered away from revisiting those memories. The anger and hurt were too close to the surface, even after all this time. Taking a calming breath, she returned the carton of orange juice to the fridge and focused instead on her new family, on the here and now. And this family still had plenty to try to figure out together about how to juggle everything.

"A will reading? Seriously?" Olivia mumbled behind her.

"What's that?" Natalia turned to stare at her lover.

"I've been invited to attend the reading of Alan Spaulding's will. Looks like you got one too." Olivia raised an eyebrow and tossed over a similar-looking envelope addressed to the younger woman. Tearing it open, Natalia began reading her letter from Alan's personal lawyers, Wittcombe and Nesbitt.

"A viewing of his videotaped reading of his last will and testament?" Natalia dropped her letter onto the table and stared at Olivia.

"God, Alan always was such a drama queen." Olivia rolled her eyes and didn't expect it when Natalia whacked her hard on the arm.

"Ow! What was that for?" Olivia rubbed her elbow.

“Don’t speak ill of the dead.” Natalia frowned at her lover. They both turned as a hiccupping wail started up in the living room. Somebody was awake again. Olivia, still massaging her arm, followed as Natalia moved to go see what was wrong with Francesca.

“Well, I am his ex-wife. It’s a hard habit to break y’know...”

~~*~*

“So are we still on for tonight, boss lady?” Anna repeatedly clicked her pen open and closed and nervously tapped it on a folder on her desk as she spoke softly into her cell phone. No need for half the squad room to hear her private business.

“Definitely.” Doris Wolfe’s smooth seductive voice seemed to drop an octave hitting Anna low and hard. She shifted in her seat, remembering the last time she’d heard that tone, hot and needy, tickling her ear. Anna savored the image for a moment more and then cleared her throat.

“I was wondering if you’d mind bumping the time up to seven?”

“Sure, that’s fine by me.” Doris smiled into the phone. It seemed she wasn’t the only one looking forward to this evening. “Where are we going anyway?”

Anna just laughed. “Ah, ah, ah, no ruining the surprise. I’ll pick you up at seven then, and dress casual.” Anna looked up and noticed a smirking Remy standing in front of her desk. “Uh-oh, looks like there’s trouble in paradise. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Sounds like someone’s got a hot date,” Remy teased good-naturedly as Anna snapped her cell phone shut and grinned up at him. He handed over their latest assignment.

“What does an old married man like you know?” Anna stood ignoring the grinning man, slipping her cell phone into her blazer’s inner pocket adjusting her shoulder holster so her gun lay comfortably flat.

“What’s his name?” Remy couldn’t help himself, he was curious about the new cop. He really liked the new detective, even if she was a little intimidating and standoffish.

“He’s a she, and I don’t want to talk about it.” Anna nearly broke out laughing at the stunned look on his face. “Pick your jaw up off the floor, Boudreau, there’s a crime scene waiting for us.” Anna headed out of the squad room.

Remy stared after the formidable woman.

“Wow, Cyrus was right. They *are* everywhere ...”

~~*~*

The warm afternoon sunlight was tracking across the living room floor, when Natalia’s eyes popped open. She had fallen asleep on the couch. Something moved against her foot and she realized that she had stretched out across the length of the couch in her sleep, her feet ending up in Olivia’s lap.

At the other end of the couch Olivia sat reading a document, her recently needed reading glasses low on her nose, with Francesca lying comfortably in the crook of her arm.

“...and the party of the first part...” Olivia looked down at the baby staring up at her. “That’s us, Sweet Pea.” She kept softly reading the document. “...shall be paid on or before the thirtieth day of the month by the party of the second part or said contract will be deemed null and void. And then the party of the second part went ‘wee, wee, wee’ all the way home. Didn’t they? Didn’t they?” Olivia walked her fingers up the baby’s belly to her chin, then tapped her nose with her finger.

Francesca gurgled in agreement and kicked Natalia’s foot again.

Natalia smiled and let her eyes blink back closed, feeling herself drift off to sleep once more. After all, everything was obviously under control at the Beacon home office.

~~*~*

Emma bounced through the back door, dropped her backpack and jacket on the floor, and dashed past her mother.

“How was school today, Em?” Olivia watched the back of the girl disappear into the other room. “Emma?” Shaking her head, she went back to assembling her turkey, ham and Swiss cheese casserole, turning the oven on to preheat.

Emma looked around the empty living room and then heard the squawking cry of her baby sister coming from upstairs. Dashing up the stairs two at a time, she skidded around the corner and found Natalia and the crying baby in the nursery.

“Is she okay?” Emma walked slowly towards the changing table where Natalia was standing.

“Hey, Jellybean. Is it four o’clock already?” Natalia lifted Francesca’s little legs up and pulled the soiled diaper away, dropping it into the garbage can. “Sweet Pea’s just fine. She just needed a new diaper.” She swiped her bottom clean and dropped the baby wipe into the garbage too before making sure the lid was shut tight.

“Hand me a diaper from out of there, sweetie.”

Emma brought one over to her from the diaper caddy and Natalia started to unfold it.

“Natalia?” Emma turned a hopeful face up to her other mommy.

“Hmm?” Natalia shook on a little baby powder and slid the diaper underneath the little, wiggling body.

“Can I try?”

“Oh, sweetie, you’re not old enough yet.” Natalia quickly secured the diaper in place, making sure it was snug but not too tight.

Emma scrunched up her face sadly, but Natalia didn’t even notice. And she was so busy looking after the baby that she didn’t even realize her other daughter had started to wander out of the room.

“Oh, okay.” Emma leaned against the door frame and watched as Natalia snapped the baby into a clean, white bodysuit and wrapped her in a blanket.

“Do you want to know what Derek did to Sarah today?” Emma asked hopefully as Natalia scooped up Francesca and headed into the master bedroom to sit in the rocking chair for a while.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, not right now. I just want to get Francesca settled down and then you can tell me all about it.” Natalia sank slowly down onto the cushion and started rocking the still-fussing baby.

Emma nodded and headed back downstairs, finding her mother in the kitchen.

“Emma, would you hang your jacket up, please?” Olivia pulled a head of lettuce out of the crisper and shoved the fridge door shut with her hip.

“Ok Mom.” She trudged to the door and grabbed her jacket, hanging it up where it belonged with a big sigh.

Quickly rinsing the head of lettuce, Olivia started to tear the leaves into smaller pieces and drop it into the salad spinner, keeping a concerned eye on her daughter. Emma wandered over and stood beside her, watching her work.

Olivia glanced down at the quiet girl and could tell something wasn't quite right. This obviously called for the big guns. Reaching up into the cupboard, Olivia pulled out her secret stash of Andes candy, giving a chocolate square to the suddenly smiling girl and keeping one for herself.

"Did something happen at school today, Bean?" Olivia asked, half afraid of a return visit to the principal's office. Even with both Emma and young Kurt's written apologies to each other and Janet Smith's reassurance that there was no tolerance of bullying at the school, Olivia still worried about her daughter.

This was part of their new reality, a consequence of her decisions, their decisions together, that Emma was going to have to deal with. And it pissed Olivia off that there was very little she could do to help her girl, except maybe be there to listen or rip someone a new one after the fact. She ran a soothing hand through the girl's long hair, giving her time to respond.

"Nope." Emma seemed like she was going to say something more, but then changed her mind and didn't. Instead she just looked sad and sighed. "I'm gonna go watch TV for a while, okay?"

Olivia stared at her serious little face a bit longer, unsure whether to push it. Finally, she smiled softly at the girl and nodded, letting the moment pass.

"Okay, baby," Olivia kissed the top of her head and swatted her bottom as she turned to go. "Just keep the sound low so you don't wake up Francesca."

Emma nodded and headed into the other room.

~~*~*

Doris nervously opened her door promptly at seven o'clock and stared at the woman standing on her doorstep. Black bomber jacket, white shirt and faded blue jeans, long black hair pulled back into a ponytail and threaded through the back of a Chicago White Sox baseball cap. She couldn't pull her eyes away from the exotic beauty.

"Hi." Doris took a deep calming breath and finally met the other woman's dark eyes.

“Hi, beautiful.” Anna had taken a moment herself to rake down the curves of the mayor, much to Doris’ secret delight. “Ready to rock and roll?”

“Absolutely. Let me just grab my jacket.” Doris opened the door wider for Anna to come into the small foyer of her home.

“Before we go, I have a present for you.” Anna had something hidden behind her back.

“Really?” Doris was touched by the romantic gesture and then surprised when she saw the petite woman pull out a black and red ball cap. “The Springfield Senators?”

“Well, I know you like hats.” Anna smirked. She couldn’t help tweaking the mayor a little for her Ladies Night disguise. She rolled the stiff brim of the hat between her two hands until she got a nice curve to it and then slid it onto Doris’ head. “Nothing like showing a little team spirit for the local high school girls’ basketball team we’re seeing tonight. It’s an exhibition game with their arch enemies, the Oakdale Tigers. Thank God I found some sort of competitive sporting life in this sleepy burg other than football. What is it with small-town America and football anyway?”

Doris simply stared at the adorably babbling cop and bit her lower lip.

“You did say you liked basketball, didn’t you?” Anna was starting to think she’d made a mistake. She ran back through their various conversations; she was sure Doris had mentioned liking basketball and baseball. The other woman’s soft laughter drew her back into the here and now.

“Yes, I do.” Doris tugged on her own butter-soft brown leather jacket and matching gloves. “Actually, my daughter Ashlee tried out for the Senators team once, but she didn’t make the cut. But how did you find out about them?” Flicking off the hall light she ushered Anna out of her home.

“I’m a detective, Doris. I detect.” Anna smirked, holding the screen door open as Doris locked up. “We better hustle if we want to grab a Buzz burger before tip off.”

Doris followed Anna down the walkway to the black car parked in her driveway, enjoying the sway of the other woman’s hips and the way she filled her well cut jeans. Turning, Anna caught her looking and just waggled her eyebrows at her.

Doris shook her head and laughed. It looked like tonight was going to be even more fun than she’d expected. And with any luck, the Senators wouldn’t be the only ones scoring tonight...

~~*~*

Tuesday morning found Olivia sitting on the couch with her new, top of the line laptop and mountains of paper work spread out across the coffee table, BlackBerry clutched in her hand.

“Keira, did you get that confirmation from the Dunfield Club?” Olivia leaned back and nodded thoughtfully, as her assistant ran through their response. Natalia wandered past and handed her a steaming mug of fresh coffee. Smiling her gratitude, Olivia blew on it and took a quick sip, relaxing a little.

“Ok, then what about the contract they need me to sign?” Olivia scanned her email, growling when she didn’t see it there. “I have a hard copy?” Olivia glanced anxiously down at the scattered papers on the table and the pile on the floor.

Natalia sat on the couch beside her, Francesca nuzzling against her chest. Leaning forward, she pulled out a document with the Dunfield Club logo on the letterhead and handed it over to a relieved Olivia.

“No, it’s ok. I’ve got my hands on it now.” Olivia mouthed a silent ‘thank you’ and smiled at her lover. Damn, she had missed their easy working relationship.

Natalia leaned back into the corner of the couch, unbuttoning her shirt and adjusting herself so Francesca’s tiny mouth could find her breast. Olivia watched mother and daughter settling down together, as her partner grabbed the handy comforter on the back of the couch and pulled it down to tuck in around them.

“Thanks, Keira.” Olivia hung up on her still-chattering assistant. Natalia looked up at that moment and smiled at her. Olivia swallowed hard and put her BlackBerry down onto the coffee table. Her partner had no idea how beautiful she was like this, as a loving new mother.

“Break time?” Natalia asked, shifting the suckling child.

Olivia nodded and leaned back with her mug, sipping her coffee for a moment just letting her mind wander. She had forgotten how much she had come to depend on Natalia’s input at work. How much she valued her opinion, how the other woman tempered and balanced Olivia’s own mercurial command style. And it wasn’t that Keira wasn’t competent as her assistant; she just wasn’t Natalia.

Olivia refused to be selfish though. Natalia had the potential for so much more, and was plenty able to do anything if she put her mind to it. And Olivia wanted the sky to be the

limit for her, and if her lover wanted to reach for the stars, she would do anything she could to make it happen. She would help her be and do anything, but first she needed to know what Natalia wanted.

“Have you given any thought to what you want to do, you know, when Francesca is a little older? Stay at home with her or return to work at Spaulding Enterprises again? Or even go back to school?” Olivia began a little awkwardly.

“Well, I – I don’t really know.” Natalia blinked, taken a little by surprise. To be honest, she had been so focused on getting her relationship with Olivia back on track and then having the baby that she hadn’t really thought that far down the road. She glanced down at the child in her arms, a part of her dreading the thought of leaving Francesca. However, she knew herself well enough to know she would eventually want to return to the workforce again. She glanced up at Olivia and wondered where this had suddenly come from.

“It’s just that, working at home with you has reminded me how much I valued your contribution at the Beacon.” Olivia stared down and swirled the cooling coffee in her mug for a moment before looking up and locking eyes with her lover. “I miss your smiling face in the office, I guess, but more than that I miss you calling me out on my questionable decisions, challenging me and making me think. There are not many people out there willing to do that. Or who I trust enough to listen to, for that matter.”

Olivia looked over at her laptop, her email inbox growing before her eyes. She wanted to share all this with someone who understood her world and loved the Beacon as much as she did. She wanted Natalia by her side. Olivia sighed and locked eyes with the younger woman once again.

“What I’m trying to say is that I’d love to have you come back to work with me, but this time as a partner in the Beacon.” Olivia watched the dark eyes go wide with surprise. “I want you with me in all aspects of my life. But I understand if you want to do something else, or go back to school, or stay at home and raise our daughters.”

“Oh, *querida*, thank you!” Natalia was so touched by the gesture, wiping absently at the sudden tears stinging her eyes. “I don’t know what to say though. I – I guess I’m just not sure yet. I haven’t even thought about what we should have for dinner tonight.”

“Turkey.” Olivia smirked, smiling wider when Natalia just shook her head.

“Hey, you know there’s no rush, sweetheart. I just thought we should start talking about it. Okay?” Olivia gave her a lopsided grin and started as her BlackBerry practically vibrated off the coffee table. “No rest for the wicked.” She snatched it up, winking at Natalia.

“Spencer.” Olivia all but growled into the phone. After all, she still had a reputation to uphold.

~~*~*

Wednesday night found the farmhouse dark and quiet at last. Olivia still couldn’t believe the stream of visitors they’d had all day. Who knew so many women from Natalia’s church cookie baking committee could fit into their kitchen, all of them “oohing” and “aahing” over their small daughter.

Olivia had steadfastly ignored the dark looks sent her way by some of the older women. Instead she’d retreated with cookies in hand into the living room to work, letting Natalia and Francesca enjoy the attention. It had made for a long day, however, and they were all ready to settle down early for bed.

Tapping lightly on the bathroom door, Olivia slowly opened it and peered inside. She found Natalia wrapped in her warm terrycloth robe, slowly drying off her legs. The plastic basin was still on the toilet seat waiting for the older woman to dump out the liquid and store for use the next day.

“Feeling a little better?” Olivia came into the small room and wrapped her arms around the tired woman, feeling her relax against her.

“Yeah, the sitz baths seem to be helping.” Natalia sighed. What she really wanted was a good, hot soak in her clawfoot tub to help ease the aches and pains of childbirth, but she would have to wait and mend a little bit more before that. In the meantime, several fifteen minute soaks in the small sitz bath throughout the day were definitely soothing and healing.

With one last squeeze and a soft kiss to Natalia’s neck for good measure, Olivia moved away to start cleaning out the small basin.

“I can do that,” Natalia started to protest.

“Hey, that’s what I’m here for. Just lean on me for a little while and then you can get back to ruling the world, alright?” Olivia was pleased when the obviously tired woman reluctantly agreed, and watched carefully as she gingerly tugged on her pajama bottoms.

“Are the girls asleep?” Natalia asked, hanging up her damp towels.

“Yeah, Emma went out like a light. And Francesca...” Olivia sighed as a hesitant, squeaky cry started up. Natalia just smiled and ran a hand along her lover’s shoulders before disappearing out the bathroom door.

Olivia dumped out and rinsed the small tub, propping it beside the toilet ready for action the next day. Quickly running through her own nightly bedtime routine, she soon dried her hands and flicked off the light before heading to their bedroom.

Natalia was just settling into bed, since Francesca was fed and sound asleep again relatively quickly. She groaned as her body was able to stretch out and her day could finally just stop.

“Roll over.”

“What?” Natalia raised her head and looked at the other woman like she was crazy, until she noticed the small jar in her partner’s hand.

“I picked this up at that health food place. It’s a natural massage cream, good for gently warming and soothing achy muscles.” Olivia opened the jar and tentatively sniffed. “It smells good too. Come on, roll over and let me rub some of this in.”

Natalia slowly rolled over. It seemed like forever since she had been able to lie on her stomach. She folded her arms under her head, tucking a pillow underneath for support and waited while her lover crawled onto the mattress and straddled her legs.

Olivia scooped up a little of the cool cream with her fingers and rubbed it between her hands, trying to warm it up a bit before touching Natalia. Sliding her slick fingers under the hem of the woman’s shirt, she smeared the warmed cream across the lower back muscles, her fingers pressing and spreading out across the soft skin in small circles. She smiled when Natalia moaned in pure pleasure.

Pushing the soft material of the nightshirt up higher, Olivia exposed most of Natalia’s bare back. Scooping up a little more cream, she smeared a trail along the long curving spine, before leaning forward and applying pressure, running her palms along the greasy skin. She began to knead and manipulate the twitching muscles, feeling them relax under her sure touch.

“Oh God...” Natalia sighed, her mumbled voice drifting up, making the older woman smile wider. She continued to stroke and caress the soft skin below her, long fingers following the ribcage around to find the swell of her breasts and more achy muscles along her sides.

Olivia was enjoying the solid warmth of her lover's body underneath her, pressed snug between her legs, causing a delicious friction. She couldn't stop the slow roll of her own hips, as she pushed down with the heel of her palms and massaged the supple flesh of Natalia's back.

Olivia slipped her fingers just under the waistband of her partner's pajama bottoms, her thumbs circling and rubbing. She stared down at the gentle slope of Natalia's back, the steady rise and fall of the woman's breathing doing things to her.

A random desire to yank off her own nightshirt and press her body tight to her lover's seductive form sparked through Olivia's brain. A longing to touch Natalia more intimately pulsed through her, settling low in her belly, the need for more contact almost overwhelming. Unable to resist, she leaned over to sweep dark hair to one side and brush a tender kiss to her lover's shoulder.

A soft snore could clearly be heard.

Dropping her forehead gently against Natalia's shoulder in frustration, Olivia sighed and waited for the rapid beat of her heart to slow.

Olivia sat up slowly and straightened the pajama shirt back down, covering the tempting curves below. Running a gentle hand along the soft material, she smiled ruefully. It wasn't as if they could have done anything much anyway. The last thing she wanted was to go against what the doctor had recommended and end up accidentally hurting her lover. She'd waited for Natalia before; so what in the grand scheme of things was another six weeks?

A stuttering cry from Francesca in the crib finally pulled Olivia's mind away from the sexy brunette beneath her in bed. Natalia started to stir, her head turning towards their daughter's voice.

"Shhh...it's okay, I'll look after her. Go back to sleep." Olivia whispered softly, running a soothing hand along her lover's back, pleased when the dark head slowly sank back down onto her pillow. She carefully moved off of the sleepy woman, pulling the comforter up higher and tucking it in to keep her partner warm, before padding over to check on their fussing daughter.

"Your timing is impeccable as always, missy." Olivia easily felt the dampness of the girl's diaper as she lifted the baby out of the crib. Cuddling the unhappy child closer, she headed to the nursery. "We'll have to work on that as you get older. Oh, I know you can't help it, after all, you're Frank's child too, aren't you..."

Francesca just stared up at her other mommy and cried a little harder.

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The sleet and freezing rain Thursday morning did nothing to slow the steady flow of customers at Company. Blake Marler placed a muffin and coffee on the polished wood counter in front of a patiently waiting Matt Reardon, barely noticing Doris Wolfe as she settled herself on one of the stools along the bar.

Finally glancing up at the slightly dripping mayor of Springfield, Blake smiled and grabbed a mug, pouring a cup of Company's strongest brew and stirring in two spoonfuls of sugar.

"Here you go. Strong and sweet, just like you." Blake blushed slightly as she realized what she had just said. "I - I mean, just like you like it."

"Uh, thanks." Doris' eyebrows rose at the odd comment, but chalked it up to just Blake being Blake. She chuckled to herself as the other woman quickly busied herself with another customer looking for a refill. Wrapping her fingers around her coffee mug, she enjoyed the warmth that seeped into her cold hands. She looked up as the door to Company opened and Olivia came in, shaking her umbrella closed.

Blake poured out another cup of coffee and slid it over to a grateful Olivia, who was quickly grabbing a seat beside Doris.

"Thanks, Blake." Olivia smiled and took a tentative sip of the hot liquid.

"What brings you out of the land of diapers and into the real world?" Doris teased.

"Emma forgot her lunch and I needed to drop off some paperwork at the office. I think Keira's about to have a meltdown, and as entertaining as that might be, I need to talk her down from the ledge and get some contracts squared away with my lawyer." Olivia smirked and swirled her coffee in the mug a little. "That reminds me, did you get a letter from Alan's solicitors?"

"Old 'hang 'em high' Wittcombe and his little toady Walter Nesbitt?" Doris snorted. She'd run into the weasely lawyers often enough as the District Attorney. "Yeah, well, Ashlee did, but she can't make it. I called to let them know I'm going in her place as her power of attorney."

"Why does he have Ashlee, of all people, in his will?" Blake asked as she slid fresh coffee grounds into the maker and flicked the switch to start a new pot to drip.

"God, I don't even want to think about what Alan is up to." Doris shook her head, concerned for her daughter. "Still, the man is dead; what can he do from the grave?"

All three women shared a worried look.

“Hey, Matt, check it out, I just had these printed.” Frank wandered out from the kitchen, a set of photos in his hand. He handed over the latest pictures of Francesca to his friend and went to find his own cooling mug of coffee over by Blake’s.

“Aw, I remember when Maureen was this little, like it was yesterday. Y’know, she looks like you, Frank.” Matt flipped through the shots and smiled up at his friend.

“You really think so?” Frank seemed to stand a little taller and prouder. Blake slid her arms around his waist and looked up into his happy face.

“Definitely, honey. You can see it around the eyes, I think.” Blake smiled up at him. “She’s beautiful, Frank.”

Olivia’s eyes narrowed and she nearly bit off her tongue, but couldn’t help from murmuring under her breath, “I only see Natalia in her personally.”

Doris snorted into her coffee and glanced over at her irritated friend, “Down, tiger.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. She knew she shouldn’t let it get to her, but sometimes it was hard. She took another drink of her coffee and tried to tune out the conversation swirling around her. Her BlackBerry vibrated in her pocket and she smiled, pretty sure she knew who it was. It also reminded her of the mission she had been sent on.

“Um, Frank?” Olivia leaned forward slightly to catch the man’s attention for a moment. “I’m actually glad I ran into you here. Natalia and the baby have settled in nicely at home and we wondered if you wanted to come over for dinner tomorrow night and spend some time with Francesca.” Olivia was pleased she’d run into Frank here; it was much less awkward than calling him up or dropping by the precinct.

“Friday?” Frank fidgeted and glanced over at Blake. “Well, actually we were...”

“That’s okay, Frank. Go spend some time with your daughter.” Blake smiled shyly and wiped at the counter as Frank gave her his best adoring puppy dog eyes. Olivia thought she was going to gag at the cuteness.

“Oh, Blake. I’m sorry, I didn’t think. Of course we’d love for you and Clarissa to come too. The more, the merrier.” Olivia genuinely meant it. Despite everything that had happened with Natalia over the summer, Blake was one of their staunchest supporters and had proven to be a good friend, frustrating as her keeping Natalia’s secret had been.

“Okay.” Blake’s huge smile said it all. Frank slipped his arm around her shoulders and dropped a kiss to the top of her head.

Olivia nodded knowing that Natalia would be pleased. She drained the last of her coffee and glanced back over at Doris, noticing something just peeking out from the mayor’s collar.

“Doris, is that a hickey?”

Doris froze as all eyes turned to her, and then glared at a suddenly smirking Olivia.

“Say, look at the time. Well, Springfield doesn’t run by itself.” Doris stood quickly and headed for the door, umbrella at the ready. “I’ll call you later, Spencer. We’ll do lunch.” The door closed behind the rapidly disappearing politician.

Olivia chuckled to herself and pulled out her BlackBerry to update Natalia.

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Friday night came quickly, with Frank, Blake and her rambunctious daughter Clarissa joining the small family at the farmhouse. Francesca rarely left Frank’s arms, the man obviously smitten with his baby girl. Leaving the other couple with the kids in the living room, Olivia popped her head into the warm kitchen to find Natalia with her arms elbow deep in soapy water.

“Hey, you don’t need to be doing that now. Come on, leave it.” Olivia slipped her arms around the younger woman, nuzzling along her hairline, dropping tiny kisses on her soft skin along the way. She smiled as Natalia leaned into the embrace, enjoying the closeness of her lover.

“Your turkey tetrazzini was perfect. Leave the plates to soak and I’ll finish them up later, before bed.” Olivia grabbed the tea towel draped over Natalia’s shoulder and snapped it at her lover’s butt playfully.

Natalia gasped and grabbed it back, dried her hands and then tangled their fingers together. Tugging Olivia close, she stole a quick kiss and then led the way from the kitchen into the living room. Emma and Clarissa could be heard thumping around upstairs, no doubt playing with their Barbies in Emma’s bedroom. Frank and Blake were chatting quietly, Frank lifting his daughter up and then cuddling her against his chest.

“Who’s daddy’s little girl?” Frank leaned close, smelling the clean baby powder freshness of the gurgling child. Natalia sank down onto the couch, happy for him, watching father and

daughter bonding. Blake made her way over to the fireplace, where Olivia stood to one side.

“Thank you for this, Olivia. I know it’s hard, but look at him. He loves that little girl so much.” Blake glanced over at Frank cooing as he wiggled his daughter’s little feet, making the child stare up at him like he was crazy.

Olivia just sighed and nodded. Buzz had been right really, and when she actually sat and thought about it, her heart went out to Frank. She had been the one standing in the cold not that long ago, on the outside looking in, watching everything she desired slipping away. She’d ended up with everything he thought he was going to have. How could she possibly begrudge him the joy of spending time with his baby girl?

“Uh-oh. Who has a wet diaper?” Frank patted his daughter’s damp bottom and glanced over towards Natalia. Blake stepped forward before he could say or do anything stupid.

“Come on, Daddy. Let’s go take care of that. Diapers are where in the nursery?” Blake ran her hands along Frank’s back as he stood and gently shoved him towards the stairs.

“In the diaper caddy beside the change table,” Natalia helpfully filled in from her perch on the couch. She watched the other couple make their way upstairs with the now loudly crying baby, before dropping her gaze to find Olivia staring intently at her.



The other woman's dark eyes seemed to call to Olivia, as if silently speaking to her very soul. Making her way to the couch, she leaned over and placed a tender kiss on Natalia's head, then trailed butterfly kisses along her eyebrow and cheek, to finally find sweet, smiling lips.

"I love you so much," Natalia whispered against soft lips, fingers grazing her lover's cheek. Smiling Olivia sank down onto the couch beside her, pulling her into a tight hug.

"I love you, too." Olivia sighed, content to have Natalia in her arms again. Upstairs, they could still hear Francesca in full voice, but knew that they didn't have to rush to her. It was comforting to know she was already in the good hands of her father.

"Y'know, it's not so bad having Frankie around for diaper duty. Especially when it gives us extra snuggle time." Olivia could feel Natalia's soft laugh and just held her tighter.

Despite the awkwardness with Frank and the other Coopers, Olivia knew that Natalia had been right all along. They weren't a conventional family but somehow, together, they would make it work.

Everything was going to be just fine.

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ACT 3

Olivia slammed her car door shut and stood for a moment in the crisp Sunday sunshine, gathering her thoughts. She had known this day would come. In fact, it was inevitable, really, despite how well everyone had reacted to them, how happy and genuinely pleased their friends all seemed to be for them, for her. She had expected there to be a backlash, somewhere along the line. At the end of the day, Springfield wasn't perfect. It was just like every place else in the world. Human.

And there it was, scrawled in blood-red spray paint that dripped down across the brick wall of the Beacon, the physical embodiment of her power base. Marked like the scar across her chest, the wound just as deep.

GO HOME DYKE BITCH!

Somewhere in the distance Olivia heard a church bell ringing.

What she didn't expect though was the sudden flood of tears, welling up and flowing down in hot, wet tracks over her cheeks. Rubbing them away with the back of her hand, Olivia pulled her dark aviator sunglasses from her hair and repositioned them over her eyes. She let herself slide into alpha bitch mode, an icy calm settling over her, refusing to let this get to her.

Someone was going to answer for this.

"Where's Detective Li?" Olivia growled at the young officer guarding the perimeter of the scene. He pointed at a petite Chinese woman, who was scribbling notes and talking to Pete Billinghurst, the Beacon's nighttime duty manager.

Olivia stopped short as a shiver of recognition ran down her spine, and she yanked off her sunglasses to squint at the detective. Slim build, long inky black hair, piercing eyes, and an air of command a person could see a mile away. Where the hell had she seen her before?

Olivia lifted the yellow police tape and marched past the junior officer. She noticed a crime scene investigator, hunched over a small puddle of blood, the whine and flash of his digital camera jarring her nerves as she passed the crime scene where her security guard had been assaulted. Looking up Olivia saw Remy Boudreau nudge Detective Li and then nod her way. Their eyes met for a moment and then he looked away.

Anna Li, on the other hand, carefully watched the angry woman approach, long confident strides across the crime scene, hair flowing around her shoulders, green eyes flashing as if ready to kill someone. It had been a long time since she had seen the infamous Olivia Spencer, self-made millionaire and hotelier, and she sure as hell hadn't looked like that. Anna had both longed for and dreaded this moment. She was about to find out if her boss had been right. She prayed he was.

"Who's in charge here?" Olivia stopped and glowered at the smaller woman. Something familiar still niggled at the back of her mind.

"Detective Anna Li." Anna nervously extended her hand and waited. She watched as Olivia seemed to hesitate and then took the offered hand, shaking it firmly.

"How's Miguel doing?" Olivia's focus shifted to her employee.

"Concussion, they took him to Cedars to be checked out. He caught the little hellions who did that red-handed, but they hit him with something and took off." Pete ran a hand through his short, blonde hair. "He's damn lucky he didn't get killed."

Olivia swore.

"We think it was a brick. Our CSI found one over by the garbage dumpster," Remy supplied helpfully, ignoring Anna's glare.

"Local high school thugs, I suspect, Ms. Spencer. Miguel de Santos mentioned that one of them looked like a former busboy that was fired recently."

"Andy Gervais," Pete offered promptly.

Anna added that to her notes and then turned her attention back to Olivia.

"The graffiti says 'go home', Ms. Spencer. 'Go home' where?" Anna already knew the answer to this question very well.

"I'm from San Cristobel originally and only came to Springfield about ten years ago. When I lecture the staff about gold service standards, I constantly compare the Beacon to the

resort hotels I grew up working in back home. If it was a former employee, he'd know I'm not from around here."

Olivia chewed her bottom lip. Had she pushed the staff too hard? When Natalia had left her, she had been surly, to say the least, with her employees. With her buffer gone, there had been no softening of the blows to the staff. Had she caused this to happen?

"And the rest of it, Ms. Spencer?" Anna treaded lightly, curious as to what Olivia would say, while Pete and Remy looked like they wanted to sink into the ground.

"I'm in a relationship with a woman. Natalia is a former employee as well." Olivia locked eyes with the diminutive detective and hoped she wasn't turning too dark a shade of red. But if Anna Li judged her, she didn't see it in the depths of the sharp eyes.

"So this could be a hate crime," Anna flipped her notepad closed and glanced up at Remy. "Or just a case of a disgruntled ex-employee and his friends lashing out at you."

"A man is in the hospital, detective. I don't think it's something to take lightly. It's a crime and I want this followed up with." Olivia all but growled.

"I assure you we will do what we can. But our hands are tied, Ms. Spencer. Aside from giving the punks some community service time for the graffiti there's not much we can do. Springfield doesn't have a hate crimes ordinance. If your night watchman can positively identify who attacked him, well, we can add assault charges have a better chance to fully punish the offender."

Olivia raised an eyebrow. Why the hell was there no ordinance in place? Doris would be getting an earful in the near future. She still had a lot to make up for after the two mommies debacle.

"If we're done here, I have things to attend to." With the detective's tight lipped nod, Olivia headed inside to call her maintenance department. That filth would be off her wall the minute the cops cleared the scene. Her next call would be to Miguel de Santos' family, to see what she could do to help.

It was getting dark by the time Olivia finally got home. She barely remembered the drive, the hateful words scrawled across the wall swirling around in her mind. She wasn't going to be weak in front of Natalia, but she had to tell her the details, even though all she wanted to do was protect her. All she knew was that she needed to get home. She needed her family around her.

She needed Natalia.

Walking into the kitchen, Olivia saw her partner standing at the stove stirring a pot of her homemade chili, the familiar scent filling the house. The next thing Olivia knew, she was crying, sobbing out the whole terrible thing, crumbling in her lover's strong arms.

And Natalia just held her, tears streaming down her own cheeks as she softly whispered a prayer. Together, their love would be stronger than whatever the world could throw at them.

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Monday morning arrived quietly and calmly as the Spencer-Rivera household adjusted to its new morning routine. Emma was fed, dressed, and out the door in time to catch her bus. Natalia was up with the baby, starting their day, as Olivia dressed for work, and gulped down what was left of her own breakfast. A quick kiss and Olivia was outside, sweeping a light dusting of snow off the car windshield and heading down the long driveway. And when she squinted she could just make out Natalia and Francesca waving goodbye from the window.

Olivia didn't want to go to work. She wanted to stay home with her two girls, but the Beacon couldn't run itself. Pulling into her parking spot, she walked down the alley to go in the back service door. The wall of the Beacon had been freshly painted, with no sign of the trouble from the weekend, just business as usual. Nodding her approval, she headed inside to start her work day.

It had taken time to wade through her emails and to sit through her regular senior management meeting that morning, but Olivia was soon back into her work groove. She looked up from the Beacon's November month end financial statement as her BlackBerry vibrated on the top of her desk. She knew it was Natalia before she even read the message.

I think she just smiled! Or maybe it was just gas <3 – NRivera 2:13pm

Olivia smirked and glanced at the latest addition to her desk, a framed picture of Natalia and Francesca taken when they were still in Cedars Hospital. Grabbing the frame, she ran a thumb lovingly along the cool glass, wishing yet again that she could be home with them, too. Checking the time to see how long she had until her next meeting, Olivia put the frame back onto her desk and picked up her BlackBerry.

Watch out for her dimple, it's a killer. Like mother, like daughter after all xoxo – OSpencer 2:17pm

Hitting send, Olivia reluctantly went back to work. She loved the Beacon, but right now her heart was in a certain farmhouse on the outskirts of town, and the rest of her really wanted to join it there.

Shaking her head, Olivia picked up the reports from the hotel Controller and the statistics from her Food and Beverage department. Despite her crazy personal life this summer, and the ongoing effects of the bad economy, the Beacon had been doing exceptionally well.

“Keira, I need the financial statements from the last six months. Could you grab those for me please?” Olivia yelled, knowing that her assistant would hear her with no problem. If she was right about these figures and even close on her conservative financial forecasts, it looked like her dreams for the Beacon might actually be able to take flight.

The meeting with potential investor Jacob Anderson several weeks ago had been heartening to say the least. If one of Decker’s investors was interested, then maybe she could woo a few more. And Anderson was definitely interested.

Olivia spun in her chair, putting her hands behind her neck, and stared happily at the reports on her desk. She’d been periodically watching Larry Decker’s hotel empire flounder in the economic recession for months, gleefully enjoying it as the Barbie doll he hired as her replacement tap-danced around the last three quarters’ diving stock prices. It had been one of the few bright spots for her during those dark summer months when Natalia was gone.

Olivia sat up as the heart-wrenching pain and doubt of it all came crashing down on her, like a bucket of ice water again. Damn it, she wasn’t going to go down that pity path again. Standing, Olivia wandered over to her well-stocked office mini-bar and poured a finger of scotch over a few ice cubes. Leaning against the edge of her desk, she picked up the framed photo again, her thumb rubbing along the glass.

That was then, and this was now. Their relationship had come so far in a short amount of time, really, and this, their family, was her reality now. Olivia took a drink, enjoying the slow burn of the alcohol sliding down into her stomach. She just needed to keep trusting that she wouldn’t screw it up somehow.

The BlackBerry vibrated on her desk top and Olivia smiled, already knowing who it was.

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“You’re getting some. I can tell,” Olivia grumped the next day over lunch.

"A lady doesn't kiss and tell." Doris couldn't help the satisfied grin that spread across her face. And Anna was definitely keeping her very satisfied.

Olivia merely raised an eyebrow and stared at her friend, waiting.

"Oh, all right, if you're going to drag it out of me." Doris smiled gleefully and swirled her glass of pinot grigio. She actually couldn't wait to tell somebody about her new lover.

"Well, do I know her? She doesn't work for me or go to school with Emma or anything, because I don't know if I can do another May-December midlife crisis situation, 'kay?" Olivia glanced over at the new bartender and sighed. She hadn't had a decent martini here since Jamanda had left.

"Are you done?" Doris rolled her eyes and straightened out her napkin across her lap as Olivia just laughed. "She's a new cop in town."

"Tell me it's not Detective Li? That hotshot know-it-all cop from Sunday?" Olivia's eyes widened and she shook her head. It couldn't be. She stared at her friend and Doris just smiled wider. Damn, it was her too.

"Hey! Compared to the rest of those Keystone Cops under Frank's command, Anna's a much needed breath of fresh air around there." Doris sipped at her wine and smiled when Olivia snorted into her martini, and nodded in agreement.

"Touché." Olivia looked across the table at her obviously happy friend. A shadow of doubt crossed her mind. She was sure she had seen the sharp detective before, if she could just figure out where and when. Nothing came to mind and she shook her head to clear her thoughts. It would come to her eventually.

"That reminds me, about the hate crimes ordinance." Olivia leaned forward, ready to argue her point again with the stubborn politician. Just because she was in the closet didn't mean Doris could ignore the issue.

"Already working on it, okay!" Doris shifted in her seat. This was going to cost her votes in the long run, but it was the right thing to do and she knew it. She peered over the rim of her wine glass at the other woman, the issue hitting close to home when her own friend was the victim of a hate crime. Someday it could even be her.

If Doris was honest she was getting tired of the power plays in politics, all of the games, the nasty backroom deals and payoffs. It was time to start doing the right thing, and this would be a first step.

“Okay, so spill it, Wolfe. Tell me how you met.” Olivia watched, amused, as Doris’ eyes lit up as she quietly started talking about Ladies Night. Oh, she had it bad all right.

Olivia sipped her martini and decided it might be wise to keep an eye on Detective Anna Li.

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Natalia wasn’t sure what had woken her that night, but she blinked her eyes open slowly and blearily glanced towards the crib. There was no baby crying, but she did hear something. Stretching her hand out, she discovered Olivia’s side of the bed was warm, but empty.

“Hey, my little Sweet Pea, can’t sleep hmmm?” Olivia paced with the small, grumpy baby before wandering over to the window to look out. “We’ll just let Momma get some rest for a bit, okay? Just us Spencer girls hanging out...”

Rolling slightly, Natalia followed the sound of her lover’s voice, softly murmuring in the dark. Silhouetted against the night sky, she watched Olivia nuzzle into the baby’s hair and sway slightly. And then she heard her start to sing softly, a sweet, haunting melody she didn’t recognize at all.

Francesca settled down in her arms almost instantly, tiny eyes blinking closed with a little sigh and gurgle. Olivia finished the old San Cristobel lullaby and gently put her daughter down into the crib before rubbing small, soothing circles on her tummy.

Natalia felt the bed dip as Olivia slipped back under the covers. Moving closer, she stretched her arms around the surprised woman, spooning her, savoring the warmth of their bodies snuggled together.

“I thought you were sleeping.” Olivia rolled onto her back, barely able to make out her lover’s face in the darkness while enjoying the feel of Natalia’s fingers stroking through her thick hair.

“I was,” Natalia whispered, her eyes growing dark with desire. “But I’m wide awake now, *querida*.”

Natalia heard Olivia gasp as she dipped her head, pressing a gentle kiss to soft lips before pulling away and then moving to claim them again. A swipe of her tongue and she was sinking deeper into the heat of Olivia’s mouth, their tongues dancing and teasing together.

Finally they pulled apart, both breathless. Natalia rolled on top of Olivia, blazing a trail across her strong jaw to find an earlobe, sucking on it gently. She shivered, feeling Olivia moan below her as her roving hands started exploring the tempting skin beneath her nightshirt.

“Natalia...wait...” Olivia finally panted, her body screaming for more, but she knew what she wanted to do.

“God, I want you so badly,” Natalia whispered, but did as she was asked and slowed her movements, fingers trailing along the delicate skin of Olivia’s breast, her thumb stroking lightly over a stiffening nipple. “Let me love you, touch you, be with you.”

Olivia nodded, completely understanding the desire, the need to connect, feeling the familiar pulse throbbing between them like a physical presence. And yet she knew that she wanted to share in Natalia’s experience, to be a part of it all with her.

“I know, sweetheart, and I want to.” Olivia pulled her confused lover down for another sweet kiss. “Believe me, I really, *really*, want to. But I’ve been thinking and...well, I want to wait with you, until you can be with me, too. I know the doctor said it would only be six weeks or so before the danger of hurting you and the bleeding would be over...” She paused as she noticed Natalia’s eyes shimmering with tears.

“Hey, don’t cry.” Olivia wiped a thumb along a flushed cheek before catching a slowly falling tear, afraid she had hurt Natalia’s feelings. That was the last thing she had wanted to do. “I didn’t mean to upset – “

“No, it’s okay, they’re happy tears.” Natalia laughed softly and shook her head. “Every time I think I can’t possibly love you any more, you do something so sweet, so perfect...”

Olivia looked away, suddenly shy. She pulled her lover into her arms once more, tucking the dark head under her chin. She heard Natalia sigh contentedly and they just lay together snuggling, listening to each other’s heartbeat.

It was going to be a very long six weeks.

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A simple brass plate was all that announced the Springfield offices of Wittcombe and Nesbitt, Alan Spaulding’s private attorneys at law. While Spaulding Enterprises had a team of corporate lawyers, Alan had always preferred to keep his own counsel separate from his business ventures. A black limousine pulled up in front of the historical building and parked.

Alexandra Spaulding waited as her driver came around and opened the back door of her limo, offering her his hand to step from the vehicle. Fletcher Reade appeared at her side, as if he had always been there, and she smiled warmly at the man who had come to mean so much to her in the last few months. He was just what she had needed since Alan's death, someone to travel the world with and share new adventures.

Fletcher opened the large oak door, waiting as Alexandra went ahead into the building. About to follow her in, he stopped as Natalia and Olivia dashed up the stairs behind them and continued to hold the door open for them as well.

"Thank you." Natalia smiled warmly and Olivia nodded to the older man, before noticing Alexandra's eyes narrow as she took in the two of them holding hands with an air of distaste. Alan may have mellowed before his death, but Alex obviously still had that old Spaulding fire inside.

"I heard you'd had your baby, Natalia, congratulations." Alex plastered her most smarmy smile on her face. "The Coopers must be so thrilled."

Natalia blinked, a little surprised at the older woman's tone and squeezed Olivia's hand to keep her from saying something that would only make this all the more awkward.

"We're all thrilled that our little family is settling in." Natalia looked over at a brooding but silent Olivia.

"Indeed," Alex sniffed, taking Fletcher's arm and heading down the small hallway to the office reception area. "How is dear sweet Emma taking it all?" She glanced over at her companion and smiled. "I do worry about her so, you know, Fletcher dear."

Olivia opened her mouth, ready to defend herself against the implied criticism but quickly snapped it shut as Natalia beat her to it again.

"Emma just loves her little sister. She and Phillip went shopping the other day and picked up an adorable stuffed teddy bear for her. It's as big as she is." Natalia grinned up at Olivia, who still looked like she wanted to smack Alex upside the head.

"Did I hear my name?" Phillip appeared beside the receptionist's desk and smiled at the new arrivals.

"I'm sorry I'm late, darling. The plane just landed and we came straight here." Alexandra hugged him and kissed his cheek. Phillip shook Fletcher's hand and then leaned over to kiss Olivia and give a quick hug to Natalia.

"You're not late at all, Aunt Alex. We're just meeting over here in Walter's office." Phillip led the way as the small group headed down a small hallway toward the spacious office of one of the senior partners.

Inside the tastefully decorated office sat a small group of familiar faces. Bill Lewis and his new wife Lizzie sat whispering quietly together. Next to them Beth Raines grumbled quietly to her son James, clearly not pleased with his non-stop cell phone texting. Behind them were Buzz and Lillian, some of the board members from Spaulding Enterprises and Hilda, Alan's long-time housekeeper. Doris Wolfe sat in a row by herself, impatiently tapping her foot, but perked up as she noticed them enter the office.

Olivia took the opportunity to escape from Alexandra and made a beeline to the empty chairs near Doris, Natalia following behind. On top of the solemn reason for gathering, it was always a bit concerning when so many of her ex's were in a room together. It was comforting to have reinforcements close by just in case. Olivia smiled at Doris before glancing over at a worried-looking Natalia, who was busy checking that her cell phone was indeed on and working.

"Jane is fine with babies, sweetheart. Relax," Olivia leaned over, whispering to her lover. Natalia nodded but still triple-checked her phone before slipping it back into her purse.

"Where's Francesca?" Lillian asked softly as she turned in her chair to smile at the couple.

"We just left her with Jane at the Beacon." Olivia ran a soothing hand along Natalia's arm and then finally ended up tangling her fingers with her partner's, needing the reassuring physical connection herself. "Someone was having a hard time saying goodbye."

"Well, Natalia pulled you away somehow, thankfully," Buzz teased from beside Lillian. Natalia smirked, looking up as Olivia merely chuckled and squeezed her hand.

"If everyone could take their seats please, I'd like to start." Walter Nesbitt Sr. rose from behind his desk as the people still standing made their way to their chairs. He paused as the office door opened and two more guests arrived. Phillip smiled and quickly went to speak with the older woman and shake the other man's hand before guiding them to some empty chairs. The lawyer pointed his remote control at a bookshelf. A panel slid to one side and revealed a large-screen television.

"Thank you all for coming today," Walter began as he leaned against the edge of his desk, waiting for the room to fall silent. "Normally I would just send out copies of the will to the beneficiaries to read for themselves, but Alan Spaulding was never one for the ordinary. This summer, he dropped by my office to tape a message to be played in the event of his death. That tape is what we will be seeing in just a moment. I have copies of the will for

everyone here today, which will outline the specific details of Alan's wishes." He hit the play button on the remote control and waited.

A few seconds of blue screen and then Alan Spaulding blinked into view, suntanned and healthy looking. A quiet sob could be heard, as Alexandra reacted to seeing her brother again. Fletcher pulled out his handkerchief and gave it to her, before taking her hand.

"Good afternoon." Alan smiled and leaned back in his chair. The video had obviously been filmed in the very office that the small group sat in, as the bookcase and large ornate desk were unmistakable. "I've asked you all here today to personally discuss certain aspects of my last will and testament. Walter here will see to the details, but I wanted a last chance to speak to you all.

"If you are watching this, then I've obviously left this earth. I imagine my ticker finally gave out or someone finally got lucky stabbing me in the back." Alan smiled slightly at that and then continued, "I just hope it was quick and painless, and that my funeral was as wonderful a send off as I had left instructions for. I always did enjoy a good party, didn't I, Alexandra?"

Alexandra nodded, smiling sadly as she dabbed at her eyes, Fletcher squeezing her hand in silent support. By the end of his life, Alan had changed so much, redeeming himself in so many people's eyes. His request to her for a simple funeral, while in the hospital for the experimental procedure to save Phillip only emphasized that.

"But let's not dwell on that, shall we? Let's get down to business. You may not have known it, but I've recently updated my will. Surprise!" Alan chuckled and leaned back in his chair, clearly enjoying himself.

Olivia exchanged worried glances, first with Natalia and then with Phillip. Alan's surprises were seldom good.

"Family means everything to me, as most of you probably already know. I have been blessed with a loving, caring, and good family." Alan paused, looking down thoughtfully, and then back up at the camera again with a wry smile on his face. "I should probably add conniving and cutthroat but then, who am I to point fingers. So let's get down to the nitty-gritty shall we."

"You'll all get a copy of this as well but I wanted to personally go over it." Alan picked up a document from the desktop and started to flip through the pages.

"To Phillip, my adopted son ..." Alan glanced up at this point and smiled. "Hell, I knew the first time I saw you that you were the son I was meant to have. We've had our ups and

downs and I'm pleased you've recently returned to my life. Our recent family trip to Florida has inspired me to redo my will and I can only hope that we've had a chance to grow closer again since then.

"To you, I leave one quarter of my Spaulding Enterprise shares, my estate in Springfield and several overseas properties that Walter will give you the details for. I only hope that you consider taking over as CEO of Spaulding in my place."

Phillip looked down at his hands a moment, watching as Beth slid her hand over his and intertwined their fingers. The Spaulding board members murmured amongst each other before the room settled down as Alan continued.

"More importantly, Phillip, I ask you to watch over my daughter Peyton in my place, to be there for her when I can't be. I've watched you with your own children, my grandchildren, and I know that Peyton couldn't find a better father. As we both know, family is what we make it." Alan smiled slightly before flipping to the next page of his will. When he looked back up he had a much more serious demeanor.

"To my other son, Alan Michael, who, at the making of this recording, is still estranged from me ..." Alan grimaced and looked away from the camera before looking back up again. "Well, I was tempted to leave you a mere penny, but even I am not that heartless. So I leave you a quarter of my shares in Spaulding, to be managed by Phillip until you return to claim them yourself." Alan stared off into the distance for a minute before continuing.

"I regret that we've ended up the way we have, Alan Michael. I love you, son. No matter what has come between us, just know that my love has never, ever changed." Alan cleared his throat and swallowed hard before continuing.

"To Peyton, my darling daughter." A huge smile crossed Alan's face. "I am terribly sad that I will not see you grow up to be the lovely woman I am sure you will become. I've left several tapes and letters for you to have as you grow older so I can be a part of your life, in at least some fashion. You are my heart and I will love you forever. To you I leave one quarter of my Spaulding shares, under your mother Beth's control until you are twenty-one."

Beth felt her hand gently squeezed by Phillip, and she took comfort in his silent strength. Their eyes locked for a moment, a soft smile passing between them before turning back to the television screen.

"To my grandchildren, Lizzie, James, Zach, Raphael, and Emma and to my great-grandchild Sarah, where ever you may be, I leave substantial trust funds that you will have access to immediately, or when you reach your twenty-first birthday."

“Lizzie my dear, I have no doubt you will one day surpass even me in business, if that’s what you put your mind to. While I may question your taste in men,” Alan shifted in his seat and cleared his throat a little, “I have no doubt in your ability to take care of yourself. I can’t wait to see what you do with your life. Remember I’m always right here.” Alan pressed a hand his heart and smiled softly.

Bill hugged Lizzie closer, as tears streamed down her flushed cheeks. Beth handed her a tissue and she dabbed self-consciously at her eyes.

“And James, you remind me of myself at your age, son. My last words of advice to you are simply trust in yourself. You’ll find your own way, I know it. Just try not to give Phillip an aneurism while you’re doing it, okay? I’ll be keeping an eye on you from wherever I’ve ended up boy.” Alan smirked and pointed at the screen to make his point.

James nodded, smiling down at the image on his phone. It was the last one he had of the man, taken in the hospital when he had been trying to show his grandfather how to text from his phone. He would miss the old man. Wiping at a sudden tear, he looked up to find his father watching him. They shared a sad smile.

“No promises about the aneurism, Dad.” James whispered, pleased when his father just chuckled and shook his head.

“To my sisters Alexandra, Amanda and Victoria, I also leave trust funds. Alexandra you have been my most steadfast friend all my life. And while we’ve had our battles, in the end family would always unite us. Our lives together have been nothing if not exciting. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

“To all my friends on the Spaulding Board. It has been an honor and a privilege to work with such a fine team. I have instructed Walter to arrange for a final dinner at the country club, with the best Cuban cigars and the oldest scotch available. I ask only one thing before I go, don’t screw things up now that I’m gone. I’d hate to have to come back and haunt you all.” Alan chuckled to himself.

“He’d do it too...” Buzz murmured to Lillian.

“To my good friend, Buzz Cooper.” Alan smiled fondly. “And I do consider you my friend. You work too hard, buddy, and that damn stove in your kitchen is way too important in your life. So I’ve left you my condo in New York, in the hopes that Lillian can drag you off to the big city every once in awhile for some fun. I hope life in Springfield won’t be too boring for you without me stirring things up. Keep him in line, Lillian.” Alan smirked and flipped to the next page of his will.

“Ah, Hilda, my steadfast housekeeper for all these years. Only you and I know of the secrets that have been kept over the years and where the skeletons have been hidden. For unwavering service and devotion, I leave you a home of your own, with maid service for as long as you live. You made my house a home, and for that I will always be grateful.”

Hilda pulled a tissue out of her pocket and wiped at the tears freely falling down her cheeks.

“To young Ashlee Wolfe, I leave a lifetime membership to the Springfield Shooting Range and Gun Club. Walter also has a token of my affection for you, Ashlee, a little something for you to remember me by.” Alan fingered a velvet ring box and placed it onto the desktop with a mischievous smile.

“That would bring me to my ex-wives; I’ve not forgotten you, any of you. Love me or hate me, you know you’re gonna miss me. I would have been remiss not to say goodbye to you all. There is a bottle of Cristal champagne for each of you. All I ask is that you light some candles and find some quiet time alone to toast to the memory of our good times together.”

Olivia looked away, unexpected tears stinging her eyes, the image of Alan on one knee proposing to her immediately coming to mind. She noticed Beth wiping a tear away as well. Natalia’s warm hand slipped into hers and squeezed, returning her to the here and now. She’d try to remember the good things about Alan.

“I never knew my son Gus as he grew to be a man, in the same way that he never knew his own son Raphael. And yet, here we are, a family. I am responsible for him and his family and I will take care of them in his stead. Therefore, I leave a little something for his widow, Natalia Rivera, so that she will no longer need to work so hard for everything.” Alan smiled mysteriously. “You wouldn’t accept my help in life, Natalia, you can’t refuse me now in death.”

Natalia looked over at Olivia, puzzled by that last comment. Olivia just raised an eyebrow and shook her head. They’d find out more soon enough.

On screen, Alan flipped the will closed and tapped the desktop with a finger, seemingly unsure how to start what he wanted to say. Shifting in his seat a little, he finally looked up again.

“Finally, we come to Mrs. Joanne Pierce and her son, Charlie. It is my greatest regret that I was not strong enough or brave enough to honor my tour of duty in Vietnam. It is my greatest shame that Gerald Pierce went in my place and died.”

Surprised at this news, Olivia and Natalia exchanged looks. Phillip turned to look at the duo who had arrived late to the reading. Mrs. Pierce wiped at the tears freely falling while her son sat pensive and unmoving. On screen, Alan continued.

"I accept responsibility for Gerry's death, so the least I can do is to take care of his family to the best of my ability. I don't know if I'll ever have the guts to speak with you face to face, and explain. The least I can do is to leave you one quarter of my shares in Spaulding Enterprises and a lump sum of money to help take care of you both, now that I'm gone.

"So, my friends and family, this is it. I never said it enough in my life, but I love you all. The ride has been interesting, to say the least. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting to get to. No rest for the wicked after all." Alan smiled and then nodded.

"Goodbye."

The television screen turned blue and then Walter turned it off completely.

"You know he's already heading up some committee wherever he's gone to," Buzz said quietly as Lillian just shook her head, chuckling and squeezing his hand. "What?"

"If you wouldn't mind seeing either myself or one of my assistants, we will get you all your copies of the will and have you complete whatever paperwork needs to be done. Thank you all for coming today."

The small group stood and started milling around. Phillip immediately went to speak to Mrs. Pierce and her son. Olivia watched the quiet discussion with interest, not sure how these new shareholders would affect Phillip and Spaulding Enterprises. Glancing over at the group of board members huddled together by Walter Nesbitt, she didn't think she was the only one wondering how this would all turn out.

"Well, that was interesting," Doris noted as she, Olivia and Natalia headed slowly over to one of Nesbitt's assistants. The man had Doris sign for Ashlee's items and then handed over the same velvet box from the video. Popping it open, she pulled out a silver bullet.

"It's engraved." Doris squinted, trying to make out the wording. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

Olivia burst out laughing as Doris just shook her head and smiled.

"Tell Ashlee I'll show her the ropes at the gun club." Olivia smirked at her friend. "It's actually a great place to network with the 'good old boys'."

"I bet." Doris checked her watch. "I've gotta go. I have to prepare for my press conference this afternoon." She met her friend's eyes, both women knowing it was a big step and made up for a lot of old, unresolved issues between them. Olivia placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. Smiling, Doris just nodded and left them to deal with Nesbitt's waiting assistant.

Signing for her copy of the will first, Olivia waited as Natalia started filling out her paperwork. She flipped through the thick document searching for Natalia's inheritance clause, while her lover busily signed off on the transfer of funds to her account and gave the man her banking information. Olivia stopped abruptly when she finally found the amount listed in the will and smiled, glancing up just in time to see her partner register exactly how much was being deposited into her account.

"Oh, my God!" Natalia stared at the amount in disbelief. "Alan left me one and a half million dollars."

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Later that afternoon at city hall, Doris stood to one side of her desk and adjusted her black pencil skirt. The evil image consultant Andre Graham was hovering somewhere nearby, having stolen her favorite red, black and white blazer right off her back and threatening to burn it.

The idiot might be irritating, but he did have a point. She needed to be very smart about all of this if she wanted to eventually come out of the closet and maintain some sort of political career. And Doris definitely was tired of hiding. Just a little while longer and then she would set herself free. No more secrets.

"Hi sexy," Anna smirked, leaning against Doris' office doorway. She wandered closer to the fidgeting woman. "You look nervous."

"Just a little. It's a bit of a departure from my normal press conference. I look more 'warm and fuzzy' than I'm used to and I'm about to do something my conservative voters will not be that thrilled with." Doris straightened out her pale blue sweater and adjusted the simple strand of pearls around her neck.

"You'll do fine." Anna pressed a soft kiss against a surprised mouth. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks." Doris leaned in for another quick kiss. A sharp tap at her door made her reluctantly pull back, as her image consultant popped his head in.

“Ready for your close up, Ms. Wolfe?” Andre smiled knowingly at the quickly separating duo. Doris grabbed her speech, squeezed Anna’s hand once for good measure and headed for the door.

“Let’s do it, people.”

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ACT 4

Olivia brought in their cups of herbal tea, setting them down onto the coffee table before sinking down onto the couch and pulling Natalia and the baby into her warm arms, snuggling together until the heat in the house kicked in. There was no doubt that winter was on the way.

On the television set was Doris’ live press conference, taking a stand against hate crimes and outlining her plan to fight for Springfield’s diverse future. It was a campaign speech if ever they had heard one.

Olivia smiled at how far Doris had come, pleased for her friend. The woman had stepped up to the plate for them all this time, despite how it could affect her politically. She pressed the off button on the remote and turned her full attention to her quiet partner.

“So, it’s been an eventful day.” Olivia started running her fingers through Natalia’s long hair, soothing her lover. “You doing okay?”

“I will be. I still can’t actually believe he did that. One and a half million dollars. And Rafe getting a trust fund on top that. It’s still just so much to take in.” Natalia’s soft, sad sigh was almost lost in the baby’s gurgles.

“Well, you know I just want you for your money, right?” Olivia smirked and giggled as Natalia poked her stomach.

“That’s a relief, because I totally want you to be my sultry trophy wife,” Natalia teased back, feeling a little better. Olivia always knew how to make her feel better.

“Oh, really?” Olivia arched an eyebrow and dipped her head to place a tender kiss against the soft, dark hair. “I’ll have to buy more shoes then.”

“I just never would have thought that Alan cared so much about my welfare. I did nothing but try to stay at arm’s length from the man and keep him out of Rafe’s life as much as possible. And yet he left us both so much.” Natalia burrowed closer to Olivia’s chest.



“Family is...was really important to him. And with Gus gone, he wanted to take care of his son’s family. Even though Alan didn’t always know the appropriate way to express that, I totally understand how he felt. I’d want that for you and this little one here.” Olivia’s hand slid over to caress the baby’s fine, dark hair as Francesca squeaked and happily gummed her blue pacifier.

They just sat together for a while, listening to the hum of the furnace and happy baby sounds. Finally, Olivia reluctantly broke the silence, knowing it was time to broach the subject.

“Hey, what do you think about moving the crib into the nursery this weekend? Sweet Pea seems to be settling in okay and those baby monitors I got for you at the shower are top of the line.”

Natalia froze for a moment and Olivia cringed, waiting for her to disagree, but she simply nodded. It was a baby step, but a necessary first one, not only for Francesca, but for them as well.

"It's time, you're right." Natalia snuggled a little closer and ran a hand over the baby's soft hair. "We need alone time and Sweet Pea will be just fine in her own room." Natalia shifted her hand from Francesca to Olivia's stomach, feeling her muscles twitch under her fingers. They lapsed into a peaceful silence for a few more minutes.

"I've been thinking," Natalia finally murmured.

"Uh-oh..." Olivia couldn't help but tease her. She chuckled as Natalia swatted her arm and ignored her.

"Remember when we were talking about what I wanted to do when I grow up." Natalia shifted a sleeping Francesca a little closer. "This inheritance from Alan has just given me so much more that I can contribute to our family now, and that's important to me."

Olivia stayed quiet, listening to the proud woman in her arms.

"I want us to be partners in all aspects of life as well, but I never felt like I would be able to weigh in financially like you have in our relationship." Olivia started to protest and Natalia simply placed a finger across her lips, effectively silencing her. "I realize that's not important to you, but it was how I felt. I've worked so hard all my life for everything, struggled and fought, and I know you have too, so I couldn't just take half of the Beacon from you."

Olivia sighed, but could see her point.

"But now, thanks to Alan, of all people, I feel like I can stand beside you. What I'm trying to say here is that I'd like to come back to the Beacon and work with you again, Olivia. But I don't want it just given to me. I want to invest, to be a true partner with you there. Franchising the Beacon is a dream that I want to be a part of too."

"Oh, sweetheart." Olivia stared into the serious eyes before her.

"So I want to set aside some money for the kids' education, pay off the house, and I know there will be some inheritance tax, too. I'd like to call your accountant again and have him help me with all this. He did a great job working out the income tax on that \$80,000 I got for the house in the spring. And whatever is left over I want to give to you to become a partner in the Beacon, use the money to help launch our franchise."

"You drive a hard bargain, lady," Olivia smiled at the determined woman in her arms. "But I gladly agree to your terms."

"I'd show you just how hard a bargain I can drive, but you're being adorably stubborn about that." Natalia smirked and waggled her eyebrows at her lover, laughing outright as Olivia rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically.

"It's you and me against the world." Olivia kissed impossibly soft lips, sealing the deal. "For richer or poorer."

"For always, Olivia," Natalia murmured against Olivia's lips, closing the scant distance between them again.

"For always."

Outside the cozy farmhouse, snow lightly fell in the fading sunlight, the fat flakes blanketing the fields and nearby woods. At the end of their long driveway, a black sedan slowed and carefully pulled off to the side of the quiet country road. With a push of a button, the driver's side window opened about halfway, leaving the perfect amount of space for a camera lens to rest comfortably on the edge.

Black-gloved hands hit the zoom button, then quickly squeezed off several shots of the peaceful farmhouse, before moving to the open haymow of the barn, the small stand of trees to the right of the house, even the footbridge by the duck pond. When the camera was pulled back in, the window silently closed and the car pulled back onto the road, to disappear once more into the cold night.

The End

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Our Christmas Present

by Karjens40

ACT 1

Natalia Rivera paced the living room frantically, praying both that Olivia would return soon and that Francesca would remain asleep for a little while longer. Emma had wandered off again and Natalia was beside herself with worry. It was snowing and very cold outside, and she wasn't even sure the little girl she considered her own was wearing a coat.

It had been nearly twenty minutes since she'd greeted Olivia's return from the store with a panicked announcement of Emma's disappearance. She'd been unable to go look for Emma herself because of the baby, and to her shame, she had no idea how long the little girl had already been gone. Olivia had reassured her as best she could and then went out to find her daughter yet again. With every second that passed, Natalia grew more and more afraid as various scenarios played out in her mind.

Suddenly, the front door opened. She was relieved, nearly to tears, to see the wet, but none the worse for wear, nine-year-old, followed by her mother. All at once, the late nights, the worry and the stress she'd been under, caught up with Natalia.

"Emma Spencer, where have you been?" she snapped, instantly regretting her harsh tone when she saw the startled look on the little face.

"I was out feeding the cows," Emma replied uncertainly.

Natalia sighed tiredly. "You had me worried sick. I've been looking all over for you."

"I told you where I was going earlier, when you were feeding Francesca," Emma protested, looking between her two mommies.

"You did?"

Olivia watched Natalia with growing concern. She was aware that the new mother was exhausted, but she was beginning to wonder if there was something else going on.

"It's okay, Natalia. Emma's back and everything's fine," she said, trying to soothe the agitated woman.

Despite Olivia's words, Natalia struggled to remember talking to Emma. She remembered feeding Francesca and the little girl coming over to say something but the baby had been a little fussy and she had been distracted.

"I don't remember," Natalia muttered in disbelief. She reached out to stroke Emma's cheek and was startled when the usually demonstrative little girl pulled away. "I'm sorry, Em, I've just been really tired..."

"I know. That's what Mommy says when she yells at me," Emma replied, feeling funny. Everything had changed lately and she didn't like it. Rafe was gone, her daddy had gotten sick and her grandfather had died. Now there was Francesca. Ever since Natalia had come back, she had been different, and never seemed to have time to spend with her. She loved

her baby sister completely, but wasn't sure where she fit in. Now that her two mommies were getting along, it seemed like they didn't need her anymore.

Natalia saw the sadness filling the expressive brown eyes and felt a lump in her throat. She looked at Olivia, who seemed as confused by Emma's behavior as she was. She knelt down and put her fingers under Emma's chin, gently coaxing the girl to look at her. "I'm really sorry," she said again. "I guess I didn't hear you, but you know you do have a tendency to disappear without telling anyone," she teased, trying to get the girl to smile. There was very little that could break her heart more than Emma's eyes when they were sad.

"So do you," Emma blurted. "You ran away and you never even missed me." She slapped a hand over her mouth. She hadn't meant to say that. She had never wanted to tell anyone how badly Natalia's leaving had hurt her. She was afraid of making her leave again.

Natalia's breath caught in her throat. "Emma? What...?" The little girl was out of her arms and up the stairs before she could say anything else.

Natalia looked up to meet Olivia's startled green eyes. It was obvious that Emma's mother was as shocked by the outburst as she was.

"Is that what she's been thinking all this time?" Natalia asked in a whisper as she got to her feet.

"I don't know," Olivia answered weakly. "She never said anything and I...I didn't pick up on it." She felt sick. She remembered the month Natalia had been gone. She had been so caught up in her own pain that she'd fallen into the bottle and had had trouble seeing out of it.

Natalia swallowed the lump that had risen in her throat. "After it was too late, I knew how much I must have hurt you... but I didn't think about Emma," she finished, horrified at the realization. So many people had come and gone out of the little girl's short life. How had she not even considered how her actions would hurt the child?

"I didn't either," Olivia admitted.

"I never meant to hurt anyone," Natalia said brokenly, looking desperately at Olivia, wondering if she would be paying for that one mistake forever.

"I know that now," Olivia replied sincerely, pulling Natalia into an embrace that was meant to comfort both of them.

“Poor Emma.” Natalia sighed against Olivia’s shoulder. “It’s no wonder she’s having problems in school. She’s been through so much lately and I know I haven’t had much time for her since Francesca was born. Now I find out she thinks I didn’t even miss her while I was gone? I can only imagine what’s been going through her mind all this time and I never noticed.” She sniffed, fighting back the tears that threatened to fall.

“You weren’t the only one, Natalia. We’ve both spent so much time trying to get used to being together as a couple that I guess we pushed her out and didn’t even know it. I need to go talk to her.” Olivia gently pulled away, guilt nearly consuming her.

“Let me go first,” Natalia said, placing a hand on Olivia’s arm to stop her. “Please?”

Olivia nodded and watched Natalia head up the stairs to Emma’s room. Sighing, she picked up the baby monitor, somewhat calmed by the little noises being made by the sleeping infant she adored.

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“Emma?” Natalia knocked on the door, unsure if she should just walk in. After a long minute, she heard a little voice call out for her to come in and she cautiously entered the room unsure of what to expect.

Emma was sitting at her desk working on what Natalia assumed was homework. She looked up with worried eyes. “Am I in trouble?” she asked immediately.

Natalia smiled gently and sat on the bed. “No, baby, you’re not in trouble. I’m the one who’s in trouble, I think.”

“You are? What did you do?” Emma asked, wondering when she would ever understand anything grownups talked about.

Natalia sighed and then patted the bed next to her. She waited patiently as Emma looked at her and then cautiously got up from the desk to go sit beside her. That one, tiny hesitation nearly broke Natalia’s heart. From almost the first, she and Emma had developed a bond as close as any mother and daughter could share. This was the first time that the affectionate little girl didn’t rush over to give her a hug or a kiss.

“Emma, about what you said, I...”

“I’m sorry,” Emma blurted, staring at her feet. “I didn’t mean it,” she insisted.

Natalia ran her hand over Emma's bent head and played with her ponytail as she so often did. "Yes, you did, and I'm glad you said it," she said, studying Emma's reaction.

"You are?" Emma turned to look at Natalia in surprise.

"Yes, honey, I am. You should have told me how you felt a long time ago. Your mother certainly didn't hold back when she confronted me," she teased.

"I couldn't," Emma said quietly, turning back to look at her feet.

Natalia gently took Emma's chin and turned her face back up to hers. "Why not?" she prodded.

"I didn't want you to get mad and leave again." Emma looked away nervously.

Natalia couldn't do anything for a moment as the impact of what the girl had just said sank in. "Emma, do you think I left because of you?" she choked out.

Emma shrugged but didn't say anything and Natalia shut her eyes as pain filled her. Of everything that she had considered when she left; the thought that the little girl that she loved would think that she was responsible had never once crossed her mind.

"Sweetie, look at me," she ordered softly. When Emma didn't reply, Natalia took the little chin in her fingers once more and waited until the girl looked at her. "My leaving..." she paused, struggling to find the words to explain her disastrous decision. "My leaving had nothing to do with you or your mother. I promise. It's just that I was afraid, and it was the only way I knew at the time to handle it."

"You never called me," Emma muttered.

Sighing, Natalia took her into her arms and kissed the top of her head.

"I know, and I'm sorry for that. I wanted to. I really did, but I was afraid that if I did I would rush back here before I was ready. I know you don't understand and I know your mother doesn't understand either, no matter what she says, but it was something I had to do. There wasn't a *second* that went by that I didn't miss you," she said firmly.

"Really?" Emma said with a wary hope in her voice.

Natalia couldn't believe how bad she'd let things get. She squeezed Emma and kissed her again. "Really. Don't you know how much I love you?" she asked brokenly. She pulled back

and brushed the light brown hair away from the sweet face. "You, my love, are the reason we're a family, you know."

"I am?"

Natalia smiled. "Yes, you are. You're the one who helped me make the decision to give your mommy her new heart. You're the reason I fought so hard to get that stubborn woman to take care of herself. In fact," she nudged the little girl fondly, "it was because of all that, because of you, that I was finally able to see just how special your mommy really is and that I couldn't live without her or you in my life."

"So you won't leave again?" Sadness had given way to hope in the big eyes.

"No, honey. I won't ever leave again," she hugged the girl tighter and rubbed her cheek against the top of Emma's head.

"Everyone leaves," the girl said simply, and Natalia sighed as the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. She looked up when she sensed the distinctive figure watching them from the doorway.

She gestured for Olivia to join them and then turned her attention back to the little girl in her arms. "Not everyone, Emma."

"Daddy left, Ava, you, Rafe, Grandpa, they all left."

"Emma, honey," Olivia said, sitting on the other side of her. "They left, but they all came back, right?"

"Grandpa didn't," she said soberly.

Natalia and Olivia exchanged pained glances. "He couldn't, sweetie," Natalia said, pausing a moment to consider her words. "Death is... different. He would have never left you if he had a choice."

"He's still with you though, Em," Olivia added.

"He'll always be right here." Natalia covered Emma's chest with her hand. "As long as you remember and love him, your grandfather will always be with you."

"You have a lot of people who love you, Emma, especially Natalia and me. Always remember that, okay?" Olivia dropped a kiss on her daughter's head.

Emma nodded and then looked between the two people she loved most in the world. “As much as you do Francesca?”

“Oh, Jellybean, of course we do,” Olivia said, shocked that Emma would feel the need to ask.

Natalia caressed a round cheek. “Of course we love you as much as we love your sister,” she echoed Olivia’s words but knew what else Emma needed to hear. “I know I haven’t spent as much time with you as I used to, but it’s not because I love you any less or don’t want to spend time with you. You will always, *always* have a special place in my heart, Emma, and no one will ever change that.” She chuckled the girl under her chin. “Believe me?”

Emma studied Natalia intently before nodding.

Olivia reached out and stroked her daughter’s face. “Please don’t keep these things from us, Emma. Come talk to me...to us when you’re sad, or angry, or when you’re feeling alone. Okay?”

“Kay.”

Natalia pulled the girl into another tight hug and kissed her head. “I love you, Emma. Never, ever doubt that, even if your mommy and I do get wrapped up in other things.”

Emma moved away and Olivia took her turn hugging her daughter. “I’m so sorry that I got so caught up in my own pain that I didn’t see yours. I’ll never let that happen again, I promise.” She kissed Emma and simply held her for a long moment.

“Okay,” Emma said after a while. She didn’t understand it, but the weird feelings that had been inside of her for so long seemed to be going away.

“How about you and I spend the day together tomorrow,” Natalia suggested with a smile. “Provided I can persuade your mother to babysit.”

Olivia met Natalia’s suddenly heated gaze over her daughter’s head, and shivered. She had a pretty good idea what sort of persuasion Natalia would be using and she very much looked forward to being persuaded.

“Yay!” Emma said, breaking the moment. Natalia laughed as her arms wrapped around a much happier little girl.

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Natalia shifted in her sleep and lazily stretched out her arm, instinctively seeking out the comforting warmth normally provided by the woman she loved. Her eyes flew open when she only felt rumpled sheets. She sat up, instantly awake. She grew worried when she noticed that the light was off in the master bath and Olivia was nowhere to be found. Once they had begun sharing a bed, she had quickly discovered that her lover's sleep was occasionally troubled and restless.

She rarely knew which particular demons caused Olivia to toss and turn and murmur under her breath, but most of the time it only took Natalia kissing her cheek and snuggling close to calm her back into sleep. There were nights, however, when she had been awakened by the sounds of near-whimpers in her ear and arms holding her so tightly from behind, that she nearly couldn't breathe. It was at those moments that Natalia knew Olivia was dreaming about her leaving. It never ceased to make her ache for the pain she'd caused her lover.

Never before had Olivia left their bed during the night, unless it was to check on Francesca; but she'd not heard their baby crying. Sighing, Natalia slipped from the bed and walked toward the baby's room. Francesca was sound asleep and there was no Olivia. She then headed to Emma's room, and still no Olivia.

Natalia smiled as Emma giggled in her sleep. She quietly approached the little girl and simply watched her sleep for a few moments. She bent down and brushed her lips over the child's wrinkled little brow. Her heart broke a little as she remembered the talk she'd had with Emma earlier and how much worry the little girl had been shouldering all alone. She was so very much like her mother.

"I love you, Em," she whispered before leaving the room to go look for Olivia.

The light from the television allowed Natalia to make her way down the steps without turning on a light. She let her eyes adjust and quickly found Olivia sound asleep on the sofa, but what made her chest ache was the sight of the wine bottle and the empty glass sitting on the coffee table. She was well aware of the other woman's penchant for drinking when her emotions threatened to overwhelm her. She still cringed when she remembered how much champagne Olivia had drunk the night of her engagement party, but now, seeing her like this, Natalia suddenly had an idea of just how her lover had spent the time while she'd been gone.

She silently approached the sleeping woman and softly kissed her forehead. "Olivia?" she whispered, wanting to wake her but not scare her. When Olivia stirred but didn't waken, Natalia kissed the slightly parted lips, gently at first, but then more firmly, unable to resist. It had taken them an eternity to get around to sharing their first true kiss, and since then she grabbed every opportunity that presented itself to kiss her again. It had been a very

pleasant discovery that Olivia's natural intensity carried over into the more intimate parts of her life.

A moan from the woman she was kissing caused Natalia to pull away, somewhat embarrassed that she had taken advantage of her lover's vulnerable state. She blushed furiously when she opened her eyes to see a grinning Olivia staring at her.

"You're awake," she said lamely.

"I am now," Olivia teased sleepily, running a finger down Natalia's warm cheek. "Why do you always seem to wait until I'm unconscious before making a move?"

Natalia opened her mouth to defend herself, but stopped when she saw the mischievous sparkle in the green eyes. She loved Olivia's playful side, and knew that her refusal to play into it amused the other woman.

"Why are you sleeping down here when there's a nice, warm, big bed upstairs?" She flushed at the sexy little chuckle that came from Olivia.

Olivia's smile faded as she remembered what had brought her downstairs. "I couldn't sleep," she said, sitting up. Before the other woman could move away, Olivia took her hand and waited for Natalia to sit beside her. She sighed as the brunette placed a comforting hand on her thigh.

"Want to tell me about it?" Natalia asked gently.

Olivia debated whether or not to talk about this with Natalia. She didn't want to dredge up something that they had been trying to put behind them, but the worry in the beautiful brown eyes compelled her to be honest.

"I couldn't stop thinking about everything Emma said," Olivia said bluntly, watching as the woman beside her stiffened. She knew that Natalia was as tortured by what she'd done as anyone else.

"Olivia, I..."

"After you left, I fell apart," Olivia admitted. "At first, I couldn't think about anything except finding you and bringing you home. Then I switched to almost hating you and trying to forget you with more and more alcohol, but no matter how much I drank, you were always there."

“Oh, God.” Natalia’s eyes shut tightly as she tried to block out the ache that shot through her at the images that sprang to mind. The thought of what she’d put Olivia through was almost unbearable.

“The day I finally pulled myself together and decided to move on,” Olivia looked at the glass but didn’t pick it up, “I had gone to pick up Emma from camp. Christina told me she wanted to keep her for a while because... because it was apparently obvious that I was drunk. I had gone to pick up my own child with every intention of driving drunk.”

Natalia felt as if she’d been slapped. “Oh, Olivia,” she said sadly. She knew how much the woman adored her daughter, and to think that she had been so lost that she’d inadvertently taken such a risk brought tears of guilt once more to Natalia’s eyes.

Olivia wiped at her damp cheeks. “I just keep thinking about Emma and everything she must have been going through, but my mind was closed to everything but myself. How selfish is that? What does that say about me as a mother?” She looked down at the floor in shame.

“You’re a wonderful mother, Olivia. Never doubt that. Emma is a very sweet little girl and she always puts other people’s happiness before her own. She knew you were sad and didn’t want to make it worse,” she explained resolutely, reaching up to run a hand down Olivia’s damp cheek.

She looked away and sighed, running a shaky hand through her hair. “I really screwed things up, didn’t I?” she asked, almost to herself. She turned back to Olivia, but the green eyes remained focused on the carpet. Finally, she gently lifted Olivia’s face around to where she could see the sincerity in her eyes. “I’ll never leave you or Emma again, I swear it on my life. And I’ll continue to promise you every day until you finally stop crying in your sleep or feel the need to turn to that” -- she gestured at the bottle on the table -- “for reassurance.”

She took Olivia into her arms and cried with her, as she stroked the dark hair and whispered quiet apologies in her ear. Natalia finally pulled away, but only because her arm had fallen asleep. She wiped the tears from Olivia’s cheek before kissing it.

“Are you okay?”

Olivia nodded. “I’m sorry,” she said as she straightened. Instinctively, she reached for the wine bottle, but found her hand covered by Natalia’s.

“You never have to apologize for crying, Olivia, but it worries me when you do this to yourself. Not so much the drinking in general, but when you start drinking to forget. You

know that too much alcohol isn't good for your heart and, in case you've forgotten," Natalia placed her free hand over Olivia's heart. "I have a particular interest in its continued wellbeing," she said quietly, her fingers involuntarily beginning to move seductively.

Olivia inhaled sharply and trembled at the feeling of Natalia's touch. "That you do," she murmured softly, losing herself in the earnest dark eyes.

"Plus," Natalia continued, trying not to become distracted by the inherent sexuality that her lover didn't even seem to be aware she emanated, "it hurts me to see you taking your emotions and your pain to a bottle, when you should bring them to me." She moved her fingers up to Olivia's lips to stop her from what she was about to say. "Yes, I know, I left and wasn't here for you to come to. I'm back now and I'm not ever going anywhere without you and our kids again."

Olivia sighed. "I know, Natalia, but ..."

Natalia lifted the woman's hand and kissed her fingers, effectively silencing the protest. "I made a huge mistake, Olivia. I know that and I will never forgive myself for hurting you and Emma the way I did, but you have me now and you always will. Come to me when you're hurting and let me help you in a way that glass can't. Okay?"

Olivia studied the other woman for a long moment. "Okay," she finally replied, fascinated, surprised and nearly overwhelmed by the love shining back at her from the exotic, dark eyes. It always amazed her to have someone look at her like that.

Natalia smiled and Olivia's eyes instantly zoomed in on the dimples that appeared. Natalia Rivera had the most beautiful smile she had ever seen.

"So, how exactly would you help me?" she asked quietly as she slid closer to Natalia, wondering why it had taken her so long to realize that they were meant to be together.

"Hm," Natalia said thoughtfully, running a finger down Olivia's jaw. "I would start by telling you that I love you, and would keep saying it as long as you want to hear it. Then, I would... well, as I once told Emma, sometimes the best way to tell someone something is to show them."

Before Olivia knew what hit her, Natalia's lips were on hers and the remnants of her guilt over Emma were erased by the desire that had hit the second she'd seen those dimples. She groaned as long fingers slowly stroked the back of her neck and a warm tongue flicked over her lips. She slid her arms around her lover, pulling her closer. It didn't take long before passion drove out every bit of angst they'd felt that day. Natalia glued her lips to Olivia's neck, savoring every moan and near-growl the other woman produced.

As she let Natalia have her way, Olivia ran her hands through silky dark hair and wondered at how this woman, who she'd once thought lived under a rock, hid such an amazingly passionate nature. Part of her knew they would have to stop soon, as Natalia was still recovering from childbirth and she had assured the new mother that she was content to wait until she was ready, but that rational part was quickly being overridden by the part that had been unable to fully be with her lover for so long.

Finally, Natalia pulled away, needing to catch her breath. The feelings that just kissing Olivia stirred inside of her were almost overwhelming. "Better?" she breathed.

Olivia swallowed. "A little, but I think I still need some comforting."

Natalia grinned. "You do, do you?" She grabbed Olivia's hand and pulled her off the sofa. "Well, let's go back to our room and I'll see what I can do about that."

Just then, a sleepy wail came from upstairs, causing both women to groan and then laugh in resignation. "Someone's hungry," Natalia said, disappointed at having to put their passion on hold, but suddenly anxious to check on their little baby.

"I know the feeling," Olivia muttered, even as she followed a giggling Natalia up the stairs.

~~*~*

ACT 2

"So what do you want to do first today?" Natalia asked as she helped Emma with her seat belt.

The excited smile on the girl's face prompted a matching one from Natalia.

"We need decorations for the house," Emma suggested as Natalia backed out of the driveway.

"Great idea. It is looking rather un-Christmasy, isn't it?" Natalia said with a grin. "Em, how would you like to help me out with something? A surprise for your mommy."

Emma loved to be part of surprises, especially when they involved her mother. "Really? Like what?"

Natalia laughed, filled with relief at seeing the girl happy again. "Well, here's what I was thinking..." She told Emma her plans as they made their way to the mall.

~~*~*

Olivia sighed in contentment as the baby in her arms drifted off to sleep. As she looked down at Francesca, she smiled tenderly, taking in the features so like those of her beautiful mother.

Despite being happier than she could ever remember, there were times such as this when Olivia couldn't help but wonder what she had done to deserve it and whether it was destined to last.

She often found herself thinking of "what ifs," but then all she had to do was think about her new family and she realized she didn't care. She would simply enjoy the gift. The sound of the doorbell interrupted her musings and; relieved that though Francesca's eyes opened, she didn't seem particularly upset, she quickly walked to the door before it could ring again.

"Phillip. Hi," she said in surprise.

The ex-husband she had spent so much time fearing stood on the doorstep with his hands in his pockets, looking a bit sheepish.

"Hi. Sorry to drop in without calling, but I was hoping I could borrow Emma for the day."

Olivia stepped aside. "Come in," she said warmly. She had never thought that she and Phillip Spaulding would ever become friends, but they had. Their friendship had grown stronger after Olivia realized how sick he had been, and how close they had come to losing him.

Phillip stepped into the house and then grinned as he looked at the drowsy Francesca, who was currently sucking on two of her fingers.

"She's beautiful," Phillip said sincerely, reaching out to run a finger over the soft head.

"Just like her mother," Olivia acknowledged without embarrassment.

Phillip studied his ex-wife for a moment. Olivia Spencer was a woman who exuded sex appeal and she had spent years using that quality on any man she wanted. He never would have thought she'd wind up falling in love with another woman, but he had to admit, Natalia Rivera had done wonders for the woman he'd thought had no heart. "Have I told you how happy I am for you?" he asked.

Olivia's eyes widened. Despite his recent support, she had always sort of expected him to revert to his old ways and use her relationship with Natalia to try and take Emma. "Thank you," was all she said.

"Can I hold her?"

Olivia looked down at Francesca who was now looking up at the tall blonde man. "Of course," she said and carefully handed the baby to her ex. She grinned as she watched the man, who had been the scourge of Springfield for so long, speak gibberish to the baby, who seemed equally fascinated with him.

Phillip sat down with Francesca and Olivia joined him. "How are you Phillip?" she asked, knowing how devastated he had been after his father had died.

"I'm better. Seeing him in the video was a shock I have to admit. I still can't believe he's gone you know?"

"I know. Alan was one of those people you always think is too much of a force to be taken," Olivia said with a sad smile.

"I just keep thinking that if he hadn't gone through with the procedure to save me, he'd still be here," Phillip muttered, shifting Francesca in his arms.

"Maybe," Olivia conceded, "or maybe not. It was a heart attack, Phillip," she insisted. "There is no way of knowing if the procedure caused it. Besides, if he hadn't gone through with it, you'd be dead and Emma would have lost her father."

"I know, but that doesn't ease the guilt much," Phillip said with a small smile.

"Believe me, I know all about guilt," Olivia answered.

"It all seems to be working out though. James and I are on our way to forming a relationship, Beth and I are getting married, you have Natalia and Francesca, and we both have the sweetest little girl. We must have done something right at some point." He chuckled.

Olivia laughed. "We must have. Though I can't think what that could possibly be."

Phillip laughed with her. "Don't question it, Olivia. You may jinx it."

"True enough," she agreed pleasantly. "Oh, can I get you some coffee or something?"

“Nah, I’m good. So, is Emma around?” he asked, getting back to the purpose of his visit.

“No, sorry. She and Natalia are spending the day together. They had some things they needed to work out.”

“Oh?” Phillip asked with concern.

“Yeah, but it will be fine. Natalia loves Emma every bit as much as we do.” She reminded him.

“That she does,” Phillip agreed, remembering the day that Natalia had come to him after his return to Springfield and told him what was what. He’d known then that she was more than a match for Olivia.

Phillip got to his feet. “Well, I guess I’ll go then. I just thought Emma might want to help pick out a Christmas tree for the mansion. I can come by tomorrow, if that’s okay.”

“I’m sure she’d love that,” Olivia assured him. Suddenly she looked at the glaringly empty space by the front door. “Christmas tree? Crap.”

Phillip snorted. “I see you’ve got the Christmas spirit already.”

“Funny,” Olivia said, not particularly amused. “I just realized we haven’t even begun to decorate for Christmas yet. I was hoping to surprise Natalia this year and I forgot to buy a tree.”

Phillip thought for a moment. “Well, if you want, I’d be happy to watch Francesca for a little bit while you go buy one.”

She wasn’t proud of it and she couldn’t explain it, but she felt an instinctive moment of doubt. Phillip must have seen it.

“That’s okay, Olivia. I understand,” he said sadly as he stood up, prepared to hand the now-sleeping baby over to her second mother.

Olivia stopped him. “I’m sorry, Phillip. Old habits. I do trust you and if you don’t mind, I’ll take you up on your offer. Francesca will be out for a while so you can put her in her crib, and I won’t be gone more than an hour.”

“Great. Now get going.”

Olivia paused and then leaned forward to kiss her ex-husband on the cheek. “Thanks.”

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“So, do you think your mommy will like everything we bought?” Natalia asked as she gathered up the trash from their lunch.

“Oh yeah,” Emma said enthusiastically. “When are you going to give her presents to her?”

Natalia grinned at the little girl and the blob of ketchup that dotted her cheek. She took her napkin and gently cleaned the spot. “I thought I’d give her one every day until Christmas.”

“Kind of like that Christmas song?” Emma asked with excitement.

“Kind of,” Natalia said warmly.

“Neat.”

Natalia looked around the mall’s food court, which had become more crowded by the minute, reminding her why she rarely went to the mall if she could avoid it. “I imagine the ornament is ready by now,” she said, glancing at her watch. “Ready to go, Em?”

“Yep.”

Natalia grinned and then leaned over to kiss her cheek. “Thanks for all your help today, sweetie. I honestly don’t know what I’d do without you, you know.”

She stood up and held out her hand and instantly the girl took it. Natalia sighed, thinking how close she’d come to ruining their special relationship. Emma simply smiled up at her and then pulled her through the mob, causing her to grunt slightly and then laugh in response.

“Hello, Natalia.”

She turned, startled that anyone would recognize her in the sea of humanity filling the mall, and saw Reva Shayne walking toward her and pushing a stroller. She didn’t know the older woman very well, so it surprised her that one of the most well known women in Springfield would approach her.

“Hi,” Natalia greeted when Reva came to a stop. She instantly bent down to play with Colin.

"And where's your little one?" Reva watched with a smile as the naturally maternal woman got her son to giggle.

"Olivia is entertaining Francesca today," Natalia said, almost with pride, as she stood upright, still not a hundred percent certain what this normally outspoken woman thought about their relationship.

"Oh, to be a fly on the wall," Reva teased. She had seen Olivia with Emma enough to know that, despite anything else people thought about her, Olivia Spencer truly loved children.

Natalia laughed at Reva's reaction. "I'm almost sure she's behaving herself," she said. "She offered to take care of Francesca while I spent the day with my other favorite girl."

Reva smiled at the daughter of her one-time nemesis. "Well, hello, Emma. You've got your hands full, I see," she said, gesturing at the several packages the girl looked proud to be carrying.

"They're secret presents for Mommy from Natalia," Emma announced, unaware of the blush that rushed up into Natalia's cheeks as she stood upright.

"Really?" Reva drawled in amusement as she turned her eyes to the younger woman. She'd only met Natalia a few times but she knew that she was very sweet and very religious; and it had come as a total shock when Josh Lewis had informed her that the younger woman was Olivia Spencer's lover. The more she thought about it though, and the few times she'd seen them together, she knew they were truly meant to be together. *Just like me and J...* she cut that thought off at the pass.

"It was just an idea I had," Natalia said with embarrassment. "I thought I'd surprise her with a little something every day before Christmas."

Reva's eyes widened, as did her smile. "That's quite romantic," she said, no sign of mockery in her voice. "Honestly, I think that would be wonderful for Olivia. I don't think she's ever been truly romanced before."

"She's missed out on a lot of things," Natalia said seriously, "and I plan on changing that."

"I never thought I'd consider Olivia a friend, but I do now. She's changed a lot over the last year and I have no doubt it's because of you. You've given her something that no one, including Olivia herself, knew she needed, and I think that's wonderful," Reva said sincerely. "You two really have something rare and special and I'm happy for you both."

Natalia watched a cloud pass over the older woman's face and realized what this holiday was going to be like for her. "I'm sorry, Reva. I know this is going to be a hard Christmas for you."

Reva shrugged off the words and ignored the pain that filled her at the reminder that Jeffery would miss their son's first Christmas. "Having Colin to focus on has helped me," she assured the concerned woman. "And I love the fact that I can bring him Christmas shopping with me because I can buy all his presents and he'll forget them by Christmas day," she laughed.

Natalia laughed with her. "That's true."

"Speaking of sons, tell me, how's Rafe doing?" Reva asked, wanting to shake off the sadness that still followed her.

"Really well, I think," Natalia said. "I still worry about him every second of every day, but he really seems happy. He's going into the military police, which has him very excited. He says it's almost like he got his dream of honoring Gus back." She added, not entirely thrilled with the idea.

"That's wonderful," Reva said sincerely. "Is he going to get to come home for Christmas?"

Natalia's face fell. "Unfortunately no. He's still waiting for his orders to come through."

"I'm so sorry."

"It will be hard. I mean, even when he was in prison last year I at least got to see him, but I have this one" -- she tugged playfully at Emma's hair -- "Francesca, and of course, Olivia to help me through," she smiled contentedly.

"You really love her, don't you?" Reva said curiously.

"Oh yeah," Natalia said enthusiastically, causing the other woman to laugh.

Just then, Colin let out a small whimper.

"Okay then, I guess that's my cue to get moving. I guess my son isn't as impressed with matters of the heart as we are," Reva chuckled.

"Well, just know you're more than welcome to spend Christmas with us if you'd like," Natalia invited. "We'd love to have you and Colin."

“That’s very sweet. Thank you,” Reva assured her. “I may give you a call.”

After a few more moments, Colin began to fuss again and with a smile and an apologetic shrug, Reva kissed Natalia and Emma both on the cheek and then walked away.

“Come on, Em.” She placed a loving arm around the small shoulders and squeezed. “We’ve got one more stop to make before we head back to the farmhouse.”

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“So, what do you think?” Olivia asked the uninterested baby watching from her little bouncer. “You know what? I agree. It *is* perfect,” she said, pleased with herself, as she turned back to look at the large, beautiful evergreen. She’d found it almost immediately and had known it was the right one for the farmhouse.

Phillip had brought it in for her and set it up before he left, but she decided to hold off on decorating until Emma and Natalia came home. They had only been gone for a few hours, but she found she missed them terribly.

The sound of the kitchen door opening made Olivia smile. She had only taken a few steps when she found her arms full of a very happy child.

“Hey there, Jellybean,” she said, kissing her daughter’s head. “Have fun?”

“Yep.”

Olivia saw the impish look in her daughter’s eyes and knew she was hiding something. Her eyebrow lifted. She was about to question Emma when she heard Natalia’s voice from the kitchen. Her heart fluttered as it always did when she heard the lilting voice but the man’s voice confused her.

“What...” She was bewildered when the white branches of an obviously artificial Christmas tree appeared through the doorway.

“Uh-oh,” Emma said, giggling before moving off to say hello to her little sister.

“What’s so...” Natalia stopped short as she followed the deliveryman into the living room. “Oh no,” she said, laughing when she saw the evergreen.

“What did you do?” Olivia asked Natalia as the young man set the garish, white tree that was eerily reminiscent of the one Olivia had picked out last Christmas, into a stand next to the evergreen.

"I wanted to surprise you," Natalia explained. "You didn't get the Christmas you wanted last year, so I wanted to give it to you this year."

Olivia was speechless. She could only watch mutely as Natalia followed the deliveryman back into the kitchen, wished him a Merry Christmas and then shut the door behind him, quickly returning to the living room.

"Olivia? Are you okay?" Natalia slipped off her coat and tossed it on the couch.

"I'm fine, but you didn't have to do this. I *did* get the Christmas I wanted last year, don't you know that?" she said earnestly as she took one of Natalia's hands and softly kissing the knuckles. "I spent it with you and Emma. That's all I've ever wanted. Now, it's even better because of Francesca. If I never get anything else for Christmas, I couldn't be happier."

Natalia sighed at the heartfelt words and the feeling of her lips on her hand. The romantic side of Olivia Spencer never failed to make her melt. She quickly kissed her lover as a reward, and then went to check on her daughter.

"Well, that's too bad," Natalia said casually as she nuzzled the infant. "I sort of wish you had told me that earlier."

Olivia looked from the beautiful woman, who was kissing their baby, then to her daughter, who was giggling. "What have you two been up to? Aside from buying that hideous Christmas tree?"

"Nothing," Emma said innocently, but was unable to contain a mischievous grin.

Olivia didn't want to ruin whatever surprise they had by pushing, so she played along. "Fine. I don't want to know anyway," she huffed before flopping on the couch in mock disgust. She pulled Emma to her and kissed her head to show her daughter she was only teasing. Natalia and Francesca joined them.

"So which tree are we keeping this year?" Natalia finally asked, leaning her head on Olivia's shoulder.

Olivia looked at Natalia and then examined the two trees. "I say we keep both."

Natalia sat up and looked at Olivia in surprise. "You're kidding. Why?"

"Because we can," Olivia said simply in the arrogant tone that Natalia found herself missing occasionally.

Laughing, Natalia kissed Olivia's cheek. "I love you," she said.

"Love you too." In response, Francesca let out a whimper, which turned into a pitiful cry.

"What's the matter, sweetie? Hungry?"

Francesca buried her face in her mother's chest, causing Natalia to chuckle. "I'll take that as a yes." She got to her feet. "I'll be back," she said, not unaware of where Olivia's eyes had fallen.

"Come on, Em," Olivia said with a resigned sigh as she watched Natalia walk up the stairs. "Let's go find the decorations."

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ACT 3

Olivia looked at the gold pendant shining up at her from the satin lining of a jewelry box. She had entered the office that morning to find the elegant black box sitting on her desk and draped in a red bow with an accompanying card.

Have I told you today that I love you? P.S. the symbol is meant to represent unending love.

Olivia stared at the gift in bemusement. Every day for nearly two weeks, she had discovered little presents left around either her office or the house. They had started fairly general; a plate of Christmas cookies, a bouquet of specially arranged flowers. Then they had progressed to more personal gifts. One of her favorites had been a specially designed crystal ornament that contained a picture of Natalia and Olivia sharing a special moment and the words "I will love you forever" inscribed in elegant lettering.

This new token of affection surpassed them all. God, how she loved Natalia Rivera; her heart almost hurt at the thought of it. She had just finished putting on the beautiful necklace when the phone rang. She absentmindedly answered the phone and then swallowed when she heard the familiar voice.

"The necklace was beautiful, Natalia, but you didn't..."

"Are you free for lunch?" Natalia interrupted.

Mayor Doris Wolfe entered the office of her best friend and stopped short when she saw Olivia was on the phone. The love-struck look on the beautiful face told Doris she was about to be stood up, but she was far more amused than offended.

“Okay... I’ll see you there in fifteen minutes...I love you, too.” Olivia sighed and hung up the phone. She looked up and saw Doris smirking at her from the other side of her desk.

“What?” Olivia asked, waiting for the obnoxious remark that she knew was coming.

Doris just shrugged and raised her eyebrows. “Nothing,” she responded innocently. “So, I’m assuming lunch is off?”

“I’m afraid so. Natalia just called and said she needed to see me.” Olivia said somewhat bewildered.

“Is everything okay? It’s not the baby is it?” Doris asked with concern.

“Oh no. She said it wasn’t anything bad but there was something she wanted to talk to me about and it couldn’t wait.” Olivia felt her face heat and hoped Doris would either not notice or be kind enough to ignore it.

Relieved that there was nothing wrong with little Francesca, Doris released the chuckle she had been holding back. “Well, this is new.”

Olivia rolled her eyes at her irritating friend. “Alright, Doris, I’ll play. What’s new?”

“I never thought I’d see the day when Olivia Spencer was at someone else’s beck and call.”

Although she shot the other woman a dirty look, silently Olivia couldn’t help but agree with Doris. Never in her life had she been inclined to drop what she was doing for anyone other than Emma or Ava. Natalia Rivera had changed that. She had changed her completely, but there was no way Olivia would ever share that information with the aggravating woman standing across from her.

Olivia narrowed her eyes. “I wonder if your pretty new girlfriend has any idea what she’s getting herself into,” she commented, fighting a smirk at Doris’s discomfited look. The Mayor had only just recently come out to a handful of people after spending her entire life hiding who she was, and she was still trying to battle her fears.

“Alrighty then,” Doris said quickly, “we’ll do lunch another time.”

Olivia always enjoyed winning these little skirmishes with her friend but her amusement faded as she thought about Doris’s new girlfriend.

“Doris, about Anna...” She paused, not sure whether she should continue.

Doris's eyebrow lifted and she smirked. "Forget it, Olivia. You already have the love of your life. Leave my girl alone." Her smile faded when Olivia didn't smile back. "What?"

Olivia sighed. "I just want you to be careful. There's something about that woman...I swear, I've met her somewhere before."

Doris snorted. "Are you still going to Ladies Night?"

"Very funny. Seriously, I can't put my finger on it right now, but I know I've seen her before, at the very least, and it was before I came to Springfield. If I knew her then, chances are she may be bad news for you." She cautiously watched the other woman's reaction. She may be a kinder, gentler Mayor Wolfe, but Olivia had no doubt the fire was still there.

"You're wrong, Olivia." Doris stiffened. "You know, I was supportive of your relationship with Natalia. I would think you could give me the same courtesy."

"I am supportive, Doris. I just..."

"Forget it," Doris said before storming out of the office. Olivia sighed again, hoping she hadn't just ruined one of the few true friendships she'd ever had. She resolved to patch things up with the Mayor later, as she grabbed her own coat and purse.

On her way out of the Beacon's main office, she told her assistant, Keira, that she was leaving and it was doubtful she'd be back. She also instructed the young woman not to call her unless it was an emergency. Natalia had told her that Francesca was spending the morning with Frank and, as Emma was still in school, Olivia secretly hoped that the woman had called her simply because she missed her and wanted to spend some time alone together. However, the fact that they were meeting in the park made her doubt that was going to happen.

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Natalia shivered and wondered what on earth she'd been thinking when she planned this surprise for Olivia. The snow-covered park was beautiful, but it was beyond freezing. She was about to call Olivia back and tell her to meet her at the farmhouse, when she saw the woman in question walking her way. Instantly, every bit of cold she'd been feeling vanished and she found herself helpless to do anything but stare.

There was no doubt that Olivia Spencer was incredibly beautiful, but so were a lot of women. Her looks weren't what had attracted Natalia. No, there was something different about Olivia that went beyond the physical, an almost palpable force that caused the world

to stop and that knocked Natalia for a loop whenever she looked at her. She didn't really understand it, but she had stopped fighting it a long time ago.

"Earth to Natalia."

The amused voice instantly pulled Natalia out of her admiring trance.

"Hi," she said, embarrassed to have been caught ogling her so blatantly.

"Welcome back," Olivia teased before reaching out to take Natalia's face in her hands and kissing her the way she'd been thinking about the entire walk over from the Beacon.

Eventually they broke apart and for a long moment they simply held each other, enjoying the fact that they were no longer afraid to show their love for each other in public.

After placing a gentle kiss on a frozen cheek, Natalia stepped back and noticed a frown on Olivia's face.

"Are you okay?" she asked, with worry.

Olivia cleared her thoughts to focus on her much more pleasant companion. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just stuck my foot in it with Doris."

"Want to talk about it?" Natalia took Olivia's hand, leading her to a familiar picnic table. She knew how much the Mayor's friendship meant to the other woman. It was an odd relationship, to say the least, but it made Olivia happy and therefore it made her happy.

"Not right now," Olivia said softly. Her worry vanished instantly when she finally saw the display she had been too distracted to notice. The picnic table was covered with a white tablecloth and there were three covered plates from Company along with a large thermos laid out carefully. Two unusual looking things that Olivia assumed were small heaters sat nearby. "What's this?" she asked in confusion.

"It looks to me like a picnic," Natalia said, nervously. She wasn't really sure what the other woman's reaction would be. "Our last one was a little pitiful."

Olivia remembered that day vividly. It was one of the first times they had truly let themselves be together in public, and they had been so happy. "I loved that little picnic," she said warmly.

Natalia smiled, touched, as always, by the soft side of the woman she'd once considered cold and unfeeling. "I did too, but as this is sort of a special occasion and as fond as I am of chocolate and mints, I was hoping we could eat actual food this time."

"But it's so cold," Olivia protested with a laugh, even as she sat down at the table and waited for Natalia to slide in next to her.

"That would be what the heaters are for."

Olivia sighed blissfully as the heat finally reached her, and then she frowned. "Special occasion?" she asked, struggling to think of what day it was and what they could possibly be celebrating. "I'm sorry, honey. I don't..."

Natalia covered Olivia's hand. "It's okay, Olivia. It's not something you would remember, but I do."

"You know, you confuse me sometimes," Olivia said softly, reaching up to lovingly push a lock of dark hair behind Natalia's ear.

"Good. Now you know how I feel most of the time," Natalia said, offering a wide smile. She shivered as Olivia's fingers went immediately to her cheek. It often amused her that it seemed almost a reflexive response for her lover and Natalia had never been happier that she had been born with dimples.

"Not that I don't love you for the effort and for everything you've done, but why are we having a picnic in the snow again?" Olivia asked as she reluctantly moved her fingers away from the soft skin to warm them in front of the heater.

"Let's eat first and then I'll tell you."

Olivia groaned but nodded in agreement, and Natalia poured them both what turned out to be hot chocolate from the thermos. The lunch was only hamburgers and fries, but it was warm and filling.

"Thank you for the necklace," Olivia said as she swiped a French fry from Natalia's plate. "It's beautiful."

"Eat your own," Natalia swatted at Olivia's hand. "I'm glad you like it and just so you know; what it represents...that's exactly what I feel for you," she said seriously. "Emma helped me pick it out when we went shopping. She was a very big help with everything."

"She loves to shop, that child of mine. I don't know where she gets it."

Natalia snickered, but then grew serious for a moment. "I'm so glad that she seems to have gotten over her worries. I can't believe I..."

Olivia kissed Natalia's temple. "Shh. Don't keep beating yourself up about it, Natalia. Emma is a resilient little girl with a giant heart and she loves you."

Natalia nodded. "I know and I couldn't love her any more if she was my own. You know that, right?"

Olivia covered Natalia's hand. "Of course I do. That's one of the things that first attracted me to you, even when we were enemies. No matter how much you hated me, you adored my daughter, and watching you with her just... I don't know." Olivia chuckled self-consciously. "I never let on, but it touched me, here," she tapped her chest over her heart.

Natalia lifted Olivia's hand and kissed her knuckles. "I never hated you, Olivia," she said. "I couldn't stand you, but I never hated you," she teased.

"Nice," Olivia laughed in response. Natalia just shrugged innocently, smiled and went back to her hamburger.

They finished quickly as, even with the heaters, it was growing colder. When they were done, Olivia helped Natalia put everything back in the bags, While Natalia was throwing the trash in a nearby garbage can, Olivia poured them both another cup of cocoa and leaned against the table and waited.

As Natalia walked back toward her, it was Olivia's turn to stare as she was suddenly transported back to the day they were last alone together in the snow.

"Olivia? What's the matter?" Natalia asked, stopping in front of the bemused woman, concerned by the strange look on the beautiful face.

"Hm? Oh, nothing." Unable to help herself, she took Natalia by the hips and pulled her close. "I was just wondering what it is with you and snow."

Natalia frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I don't... It's just that, well you're always beautiful, but there's just something about you surrounded by snow that takes my breath away."

Natalia didn't know whether to blush, giggle nervously, or cry at the compliment. No one had ever said such beautiful things to her before. Not even Gus. Sighing, she reached out to caress Olivia's face, her fingers drifting over the lips she had quickly discovered she loved

to kiss. "I adore you," she said quietly, before leaning forward to taste those same lips. She honestly believed she could kiss Olivia Spencer forever.



"Yum. Chocolaty," Olivia said breathlessly when they pulled apart. "So, are you ever going to tell me what the special occasion is?" She asked, removing her hands from Natalia before she did something embarrassing and wildly inappropriate in such a public environment.

Natalia's excitement quickly turned to nervousness. "Well, it may not be as special to you as it is to me. You may not even like it and..."

Olivia placed her hand over Natalia's lips. She never quite knew what to expect when her lover began to ramble. "Just tell me," she prodded gently.

Natalia took a step back and tried to find the right words. When she arranged this picnic, she had known exactly what she was going to say, but as usual, once she was in Olivia's orbit she could barely form a coherent thought.

"Do you remember the day you told me you loved me?" she started.

Olivia's heart began to race as she was instantly reminded of the best and worst day of her life.

"How could I forget?"

"I thought my heart would jump out of my chest when you finally admitted what I had been waiting to hear, but then you started telling me all the reasons I should ignore it." Natalia laughed softly. "Like I could ever hear those words from you and forget them."

"I was afraid," Olivia said quietly.

"I know you were, so instead of letting me tell you how I felt, you told me then that I should marry Frank because he could give me a home and that you couldn't give me one as safe as he could." Natalia shook her head, still amazed at the fight the other woman had put up that day.

Olivia remembered that conversation clearly. She still wondered what their lives would have been like if she had let Natalia tell her then that she loved her.

"Are you saying you've changed your mind?" Olivia asked, only half-kidding.

"Never," Natalia replied seriously as she pulled something from her pocket and stepped close to her lover again. "I just meant that when you said that, you had forgotten that you'd already given me a home. One that was safe, warm and full of more love than I'd ever hoped for."

Olivia shook her head, trying to figure out where Natalia was going. "I don't..."

"Larry Decker, remember? It was a year ago this week that you made it possible for me to buy the farmhouse. Then you shared it with me. You and Emma gave me the home I had always dreamed of."

"I didn't really do anything," Olivia muttered shyly. "I told you..."

Natalia covered Olivia's lips with her fingers. "Don't. You always downplay the gifts you've given me and I'm not going to let you do it anymore. I know exactly how much you gave up

to do that for me, no matter how much you protest. I think that was the moment when I first truly understood that what I was feeling for you was something stronger than friendship, even if I didn't know what it was." She slid her hand over Olivia's cheek in a soft caress.

"Natalia, I..."

"Shh. Let me finish. You gave me a home, Olivia. Now I want to return the favor." She handed Olivia the folded piece of paper.

Olivia opened it and quickly read over it. Her eyes shot up to meet anxious brown ones. "You put my name on the deed to the farmhouse?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. I had Blake help me with the details, and I haven't filed it yet as I didn't know what you would say, and then I..."

"You're babbling," Olivia pointed out numbly.

"Oh." Natalia smiled weakly and then scratched her temple as she tried to organize her thoughts. "This is something I've been thinking about for a while," she said, no longer able to look into the eyes that were studying her. "After I found you downstairs the other night, I..."

Olivia straightened. "You don't have to feel sorry for me, Natalia, I don't want that."

"I don't," she assured the proud woman, once more meeting the emotional green eyes. "It's just that between what happened with Emma and your nightmares – yes, I know about those, by the way -- I can't escape knowing just how badly I messed things up when I left. How I made you doubt yourself and me, and how grateful I am that you didn't write me out of your life forever."

"I really don't understand."

Natalia placed her hand on Olivia's cheek. "The bottom line is, I love you, Olivia, and now it's my turn to offer you and Emma a home. A permanent home with me and our baby girl."

Olivia's eyes filled with tears. A home. Not a hotel room, not living somewhere as a renter, but a true home with a family who loved her. . Not knowing what to say, she wrapped her arms around Natalia, who simply held her while she cried.

"Can I take that as a yes?" Natalia whispered into Olivia's ear.

“Oh yes,” Olivia breathed out as she pulled back. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just tell me you love me,” Natalia prodded, wiping the tears from Olivia’s cheeks.

“I do love you, so much that it scares me sometimes.”

“Well,” Natalia said thoughtfully, “Emma is still in school and I still have an hour or so before I need to pick up Francesca. How would you feel about coming back to our home and showing me just how much?”

Olivia’s eyebrow lifted at the seductive tone of Natalia’s voice. The still-innocent woman was getting quite adept at using her voice to seduce her and she was so beyond ready for the doctor to clear the new mother for more... intimate activities. “I’d feel just fine about it,” she answered casually, not showing how interested she truly was.

Natalia looked at the lips she wanted to kiss, then back up into eyes that had gone from light green to almost black. Olivia Spencer could never fool her for a second... especially when she looked at her like that. She grabbed the bag containing the picnic supplies with one hand and Olivia’s hand with the other, and nearly yanked the taller woman’s arm from the socket as she all but ran to her car. Both women had reluctantly accepted that Natalia was not ready to make love so soon, but they thoroughly enjoyed the activities that she was able to handle.

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ACT 4

It was mid-morning on Christmas Eve and Olivia had finally found a moment alone to finish wrapping the presents she had bought. She looked at the box for Doris and grinned, imagining the other woman’s reaction to the new fedora. She was grateful that she had been able to talk to her friend and apologize. She still had concerns about the new police detective, but she wouldn’t ruin Doris’s happiness with her suspicions. Not until she had proof, anyway.

Sighing, Olivia unconsciously fiddled with the necklace Natalia had given her, as her thoughts once more drifted back to the picnic in the park.

The fact that Natalia had put her name on the deed to the farmhouse would probably not have seemed like much more than a nice gesture to other people, but it had totally befuddled her. This was Natalia’s dream home for herself and for Rafe and she had given it, well half of it, to Olivia. No one had ever given her a true home before, at least one that

didn't come with strings. How could she even begin to show the amazingly caring woman what that meant to her?

The doorbell rang, pulling Olivia from her muddled thoughts.

"Ava," Olivia greeted her oldest daughter in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, hello to you, too," Ava answered, even as she was pulled into a tight hug by her mother.

"Get in here," Olivia said happily, standing back so Ava could come in.

Ava looked around the house, her eyes stopping on the two Christmas trees. She turned to Olivia and grinned. "Really?"

"Don't ask," Olivia said dryly. She took Ava's coat and hung it by the door.

"So where are my sisters and my new step-mom?" Ava grinned as she said the last word, eliciting an eye roll from Olivia.

"Very cute. Natalia took Francesca and Emma to see Frank for a little while."

"So things are working out okay then, with Frank?"

"Yeah, I think so," Olivia answered optimistically. "We both really want him to be as big a part of Francesca's life as he wants to be. I know he wants to see her more, but until she's bigger...he seems content for now."

"Good. I was afraid he was going to try and make trouble for you," Ava admitted.

Olivia nodded. Frank had been so hurt and angry when he found out about their relationship, but ultimately he had seen that what she and Natalia shared was more real than anything he had thought he felt for the younger woman. "I was too. He and I still have our issues, but for now he seems to have come around. He knows now that it wasn't circumstances or Gus or anything else that brought us together, and now that he's dating Blake, he finally seems to be happy."

"I'm glad," Ava said as she sat on the couch.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee?" Ava declined and Olivia sat down next to her. "Okay, Ava. Not that I'm not thrilled, but I hadn't expected to see you again so soon after Thanksgiving."

Ava gave Olivia a smug little smile. "You actually have Natalia to thank for that. She called me last week and told me that she wants to make sure that from now on, you spend every Christmas with your entire family. Or as much of it as possible and I think that's a wonderful idea. You and Emma have spent way too many of them alone."

That was the final straw and Olivia promptly burst into tears, startling her daughter.

"Mom?" Ava embraced Olivia, growing concerned. Her mother was not normally a woman who cried easily. "What's wrong? Are you and Natalia having problems?"

Olivia sniffed and pulled away. "Oh no, not at all, but I just don't understand her." She told Ava about all the little gifts she'd discovered each day and about everything that Natalia had done since she'd come back ending with her adding her to the deed to the farmhouse.

"Wow," Ava said, impressed.

"Wow?" Olivia said, wiping her eyes.

"She really is an amazing woman. I wish I had someone who loved me half as much as she loves you," the young woman said wistfully "My guess is that she is trying very hard to ensure you understand how committed she is to this relationship."

"But I..."

Ava took her mother's hand. "Don't analyze it, Mom. Just enjoy it."

Olivia looked at her daughter, and reached out to touch her cheek. They had gone through so much but were now so close and she was so relieved that Ava seemed to finally be mending from the loss of her son Max.

"I have no idea what to do for her though to show her the same thing," Olivia said. She looked at the collection of gifts under the tree. "These little things," she gestured at the gifts, "are just things. Money and material possessions don't matter to her. Now that she has her son, a baby and a home..."

"You'll come up with something. You always do," Ava interrupted with a smirk, earning another hug from her mother.

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"Olivia?"

Natalia entered the kitchen, wondering where Olivia was, and then heard the voices coming from the living room.

“Ava!” Emma said excitedly and dashed ahead, drawing a smile from Natalia. She gently shifted the sleeping baby in her sling and followed.

“You made it,” Natalia said, as the tall, young woman quickly enveloped her in a hug, careful not to smash the baby.

“I did, and thank you so much for having me. Now give me my little sister.”

Natalia laughed and Ava helped remove Francesca from her sling to cuddle her close.

Natalia felt Olivia’s eyes on her and turned, not sure what reaction to expect. Olivia had mentioned a quiet Christmas at home with just them, like the previous year, but she’d had a different idea. The look in the green eyes told her in no uncertain terms how much the other woman liked the idea and that she wanted to thank Natalia privately.

Apparently the look didn’t go unnoticed as Ava coughed. “Um, Emma, I left my suitcase in the car. Want to come help me?” she asked her little sister.

“Okay,” Emma replied with no small amount of enthusiasm.

“Great.” She gently placed Francesca in the nearby bassinet and she and Emma left their two moms temporarily alone.

“I can’t believe you,” Olivia said instantly, closing the distance between them.

Natalia blushed, more from her body’s automatic reaction anytime Olivia was near her than from any sense of shyness about her gift. “It wasn’t really....”

Olivia was kissing her before she could finish the sentence and she’d never enjoyed being interrupted so much. She had just run her fingers through Olivia’s hair when she heard the door open.

Groaning in disappointment, they broke apart, smiling as they watched Emma try to carry Ava’s luggage. Ava was carrying a box full of presents.

“Presents, Ava? I wish you hadn’t,” Olivia protested, also wishing her daughters hadn’t chosen that moment to walk in. She sighed wistfully as she watched Natalia remove her coat and then help Emma with hers.

"I didn't know you were coming, so I put yours in the mail," she added, dragging her thoughts back from inappropriate places.

Ava smirked, not missing the look on her mother's face. "I know. I got the package right before I left. I brought it with me," the young woman said, placing the gifts under the already crowded tree, not the least bit bothered by having caught her mother making out with another woman.

"So, does anyone want hot chocolate?" Natalia asked after finally regaining her equilibrium.

"I do," Emma blurted.

Ava wrapped her arm around her little sister. "Only if you have cookies to go with it," she added.

"We've got lots," Emma assured her big sister.

"I'm sure you do," Ava teased, thinking again how much she missed seeing her sister. Springfield held too many bad memories to make her anxious to come back, but she really did miss being able to watch Emma grow up, seeing her mother happy at last, as well as the newest members of her family.

"Okay then, I'll be right back," Natalia said warmly. Watching the interaction between Emma and Ava, and seeing her sweet baby nearby, filled her with a contentment that she'd never felt before and the look Olivia was giving her filled her with other feelings she wasn't sure were proper for Christmas Eve. The slow grin that appeared on her lover's face told her she must have been blushing, so she quickly left the living room before she totally embarrassed herself.

After Ava was settled in the guest bedroom and Francesca was checked in on, Emma decided they needed to have a snowball fight. Natalia brought the baby monitor, but declined to participate just in case her daughter stirred. She watched and laughed as Olivia was thoroughly pounded by Ava and Emma. At one point, Olivia had her back to her as she sought out her prey, and unable to help herself, Natalia snuck off the porch and grabbed a handful of snow.

Olivia heard a noise behind her and turned around, instantly getting a face full of snow.

"I'm so sorry," Natalia burst out laughing. "I meant to get the back of your head."

Olivia carefully wiped the snow from her face. "Is that so?" she asked coolly. She bent down to grab a handful of snow and slowly approached her would-be assassin.

“Um, Olivia?” Natalia backed away. “Turn the other cheek, remember?” she said nervously as the taller woman stalked closer.

Olivia quickly caught up to her lover “Hm. I prefer ‘an eye for an eye’, she said simply, grabbing the lapels of Natalia’s coat.

Natalia watched Olivia lift the snowball and knew she was about to have a shirt full of snow. Knowing the other woman well, she flashed a big, innocent smile and predictably Olivia’s eyes dropped to her mouth. The snowball fell harmlessly to the ground as Olivia warmed her lips up in a very pleasant manner, until a squeal of laughter from Emma broke them apart.

Olivia reluctantly went back to the game and Natalia headed back to the house, wondering when she’d ever stop being discombobulated by Olivia Spencer’s kisses... and hoping the answer was never.

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After a large dinner, which consisted of turkey and all the trimmings, Ava and Emma offered to do the dishes. Neither Olivia nor Natalia were inclined to refuse the offer, so they retired to the living room. Natalia watched, thoroughly captivated, as Olivia picked up a bottle and sat on the sofa to feed Francesca. Her heart melted into a giant puddle and she smiled, thinking that if any of Olivia’s competitors could see her like this, so gentle and making silly faces at the curious little baby, they’d never fear her again.

She watched contentedly for a while, nearly overwhelmed by the feelings racing through her at the sight. Eventually she decided she needed a distraction, so she went to the kitchen to help finish the dishes.

Once everything was put away, the unique little family gathered in the living room. Natalia fixed more hot chocolate and brewed another pot of coffee, while Olivia announced that they would open a few presents, which had Emma bouncing with excitement.

Olivia and Natalia played Santa Claus, simply happy to see the joy on Emma and Ava’s faces.

After an hour, Olivia finally put a stop to the present opening despite Emma’s pleading for just one more.

“You want to have something for tomorrow don’t you?” Olivia teased. “You know, just in case Santa forgets us?”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Emma said worried.

Natalia chuckled Emma under the chin and laughed. “Of course not. Your mother is just being naughty. As usual. I’ll talk to her about that later.” She snorted as she saw the almost expectant look on Olivia’s face. “Now how about we clean up all this mess?”

“Okay.”

Soon the living room was free of torn Christmas paper and empty boxes. Olivia was in the kitchen and the girls were setting up the Trouble game Emma had received. Natalia was holding Francesca and crooning to her softly while the infant yawned and gurgled. She suddenly felt unsettled and slightly overwhelmed, although she didn’t know why.

“Want me to take her for a while?” Ava asked, seeing the peculiar look cross her face.

“Would you mind?” Natalia was grateful that Olivia’s oldest daughter was so willing to help with the baby, but she was concerned about opening up old wounds for the still-fragile woman.

Ava seemed to understand Natalia’s reluctance. “I’m fine with being with Francesca, Natalia. Really,” she answered with a smile of reassurance. After a brief pause, Natalia kissed Francesca’s forehead and handed her over to her oldest sister.

“Thank you.” She looked once at the lovely picture of Ava on the couch holding Francesca and Emma scooting close to them, and then grabbed her coat and stepped out onto the porch.

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Olivia shivered as she stood in the doorway, gazing silently at the most beautiful image she’d ever seen.

The land surrounding the farmhouse was covered in a snowy blanket that glittered like diamonds as the moonlight hit it. It was truly a spectacular scene, but what stole her breath and nearly stopped her heart was the woman leaning casually against one of the posts, looking thoughtfully out at the night.

Partly because she wanted the body warmth, but mainly because she couldn’t help herself, she stepped closer and slid her arms around Natalia from behind.

“Are you okay?” Olivia asked through chattering teeth, nuzzling through Natalia’s hair to kiss her neck, smiling at the responding shiver.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just needed... I don't know. I guess maybe I was hoping you would follow me out here."

"You know me too well," Olivia murmured.

"Hardly," Natalia snorted. "But that's okay. I love trying to figure you out." She abruptly turned around and wrapped her arms around Olivia's neck. "Thank you," she said seriously.

"For what?"

"For this," Natalia said, nodding toward the lights coming from the living room window. "For giving me a home and a family. I never thought I'd have this. Ever."

"You've given me all that and more," Olivia whispered. "You gave me a reason to keep living; you've given me hope and you've given me love. Even when I didn't deserve it."

Natalia placed her hand on Olivia's cheek. "I do love you, Olivia, and you've always deserved to be loved. Even when you acted like an ass."

Olivia's eyebrows shot up and she laughed outright at the mischievous sparkle in the brown eyes. "Thank you so much," she said.

"You're welcome," Natalia answered, and suddenly noticed the thin denim jacket Olivia was wearing. "God, Olivia, you must be freezing. We need to go in and get you warmed up." Olivia leered and Natalia slapped her shoulder. "Not that way," she giggled and then narrowed her eyes. "At least not until later tonight, when we're all alone upstairs in our bedroom and the kids are asleep." The other woman swallowed audibly and Natalia laughed, pleased with herself.

"You're very funny," Olivia said dryly before pulling out the present she'd tucked inside her jacket pocket.

"Where did that come from?" Natalia asked, staring at the present as if she'd never seen one before.

"Not terribly observant, are you?" Olivia teased before taking Natalia's hand and placing the package in it. "Are you going to open it?"

Natalia ripped off the paper and paused when she saw the jewelry box. She cautiously opened the blue velvet box and gasped when she saw the silver charm bracelet resting inside.

“Olivia, it’s beautiful,” she breathed. She lifted the bracelet to see one lone charm, a heart, already attached. She raised her eyes and stared in wonder at the woman watching her expectantly. “You shouldn’t have.”

“Shouldn’t have what?” Olivia asked as she took the bracelet and placed it on Natalia’s wrist. “Bought something special for the woman I love?”

“But I...”

“I only included one charm because I plan on giving you a new one every year that we’re together,” Olivia interrupted as she lifted Natalia’s hand to her lips and then placed it on her chest. “The charm itself is simply a reminder that my heart belongs to you.”

Natalia fought back tears as she slid her arms around Olivia’s neck. “I don’t need a reminder of that,” she said seriously. “And I promise I will always take care of it.” She couldn’t speak anymore so she pulled Olivia’s head down and kissed her fervently.

Natalia grew lightheaded as Olivia’s hands wandered down to the small of her back and pulled her closer. The kiss grew more heated and she was very close to forgetting where she was. Groaning, she pulled away, knowing that Emma and Ava were waiting for them and that Olivia was decidedly underdressed for being outside.

“Come on,” she said, her throat gone bone dry. “We can continue this later.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Olivia choked out, but followed her inside.



When they were back inside, Olivia took a moment to welcome the blast of warmth coming from the fireplace and then hung their jackets back in the closet. Almost immediately after she finished, she snuggled up behind Natalia, trying to absorb more of her body heat.

"You're icy," Natalia laughed as Olivia nuzzled her ear with a cold nose.

"Not for long," Olivia muttered. Then she placed her chin on Natalia's shoulder as they took in the sight. Francesca was obviously back in her bassinet and Emma was laughing with Ava over the game.

"I'm glad you're here," Emma said, looking up at her big sister. "I miss you."

Ava looked down into Emma's smiling face. She lifted a hand to gently brush a piece of hair behind a little ear. "I miss you, too."

"Why don't you move home?" Emma asked, her enthusiasm suddenly shining in her eyes. "Then we can see you all the time."

Ava's eyes shot up to meet her mother's. Olivia had a sad, but understanding look on her face. She knew her mom realized how hard living in Springfield was for her, but poor Emma was too young to understand.

"Emma..."

"So who's winning?" Natalia suddenly asked, sensing that they could use a distraction. She took Olivia's hand and pulled the still-thawing woman toward the fireplace.

"Who do you think?" Ava said in mock frustration, grinning at the image of Natalia fussing over her mother adoringly. One day she hoped to find the love and contentment that they had. Having seen firsthand what true love could be, she'd never settle for anything less again.

"Want to play?" Emma asked, totally unmoved by the tender moment.

Olivia and Natalia shrugged and joined their daughters, Natalia taking the time to place a kiss on Emma's head.

"Best Christmas ever," Olivia whispered before giving Natalia a quick kiss and turning her attention to the colorful game board.

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EPILOGUE

Natalia swallowed the nerves that threatened her ability to walk. The hand that touched her back soothed her instantly.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just...” Natalia looked at the doors of the church and hesitated. She unconsciously wrapped the blanket tighter around Francesca to protect her from the cold.

Olivia saw the doubt in Natalia’s face and swallowed her disappointment. “I can go home if you’d like.”

Natalia looked up at Olivia. “What? No, of course not. I want you to be here. It makes me so proud and happy to have you, Ava, and Emma with us.”

It had only been a couple of hours since Natalia had been awakened by a gentle kiss on the lips, which had become her favorite way to start the day. When she’d opened her eyes, it had been to see the beautiful sight of Olivia kneeling by the bed, wearing a surprisingly sedate dark blue dress.

She’d sleepily asked Olivia what was going on and was told that she needed to get up if she wanted to make the early morning Christmas service. When it finally clicked that Olivia wanted to go to church with her, she’d almost cried. Her lover was not a religious woman and had very little patience with the intolerance of the Catholic Church, especially given Father Ray’s reaction to their relationship. That she would ignore all that and join Natalia in something so important to her meant more than anyone else would ever understand.

“You’d do that for me?” Natalia had asked, sitting up.

Olivia had run a finger down her cheek. “Don’t you know I’d do anything for you?” she’d whispered, before she lightly kissed Natalia’s lips.

Natalia had taken advantage of the closeness, which resulted in Olivia, happily having to redo her hair and reapply her lipstick.

“So why the frown?” Olivia’s voice brought Natalia back to her present predicament and she sighed.

“It’s just that it’s really the first time we’ve gone to church as a family. I’m afraid that if anyone says anything ... I’ll walk out, Olivia. I swear it, if anyone dares to judge you or us,” Natalia said passionately.

Olivia kissed her temple in comfort, knowing that she only spoke out of fear. “Shh. Let’s just go in and see what happens, hmm?”

Sighing heavily, Natalia nodded and the family made their way up the steps and into the church that was already filled. A few people glanced at them curiously... well, mainly they looked at Olivia, as no one in Springfield would have ever imagined her stepping foot in a church if a wedding wasn’t involved. All Natalia saw, however, were the smiles as they looked at the sleeping baby in her arms. She saw no looks of judgment on people’s faces and she felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders.

Natalia knew very well that this was not going to be a regular occurrence, and she had no desire to force Olivia into something she didn’t really want to do. Just the fact that she was with her now, at Christmas, her arm protectively around her and their kids nearby was enough.

Olivia pointed out an empty pew and Natalia proudly led her family into the church, knowing her life would never get any better than this.

The End

~~*~*

My Pretty Pony

by DAX

ACT 1

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

Natalia smiled at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, the hand holding Olivia’s favorite shade of lipstick hanging motionless in front of her mouth. “For the hundredth time... yes.”

She heard the older woman sigh from the other room. "I still think we should have thrown a party here."

"Olivia," The brunette rolled her eyes and went back to applying her make-up. "We can't claim every holiday! We celebrated Thanksgiving *and* Christmas here..."

"*Ahhh*, technically we never had Thanksgiving, since someone had to go and give birth in the middle of dinner."

"It wasn't the middle! It was the beginning!" Natalia leaned against the sink, turning her head towards the door as her voice dropped dangerously low. "Are you complaining?"

"No." Olivia's voice was soft, almost shy as she ran her hand down the outside of the door. "In fact, I think it's rather fitting that on that particular day... you gave me something I'll be thankful for the rest of my life..."

The younger woman felt her heart flip lazily in her chest and closed her eyes, amazed yet again at the sweet and gentle soul hidden beneath her lover's sarcastic exterior.

"It also makes it a lot easier to remember her birthday."

Natalia snorted. "Nice."

"Practical."

"Yeah, because practical is your middle name!"

"It is!" Olivia tapped the door one last time with her nails before sitting down on the end of the bed to pull on her boots. They were new; black ankle boots with three inch heels that turned her calves and backside into a spectacle that Natalia had labeled a near-religious experience.

Considering the source, Olivia thought it was quite a compliment.

Standing she turned from side to side, checking out the rest of her outfit in the mirror. The skirt was charcoal gray. Tight to the point of almost being obscene, it clung to her hips and thighs all the way down to her knees. Tucked into it was a white tuxedo shirt, complete with silver button covers and cufflinks. She pulled a matching charcoal vest over the top of that, smiling as it molded to her body like a second skin when she fastened it across her chest.

With a chuckle, she reached for the last part of the outfit, a crimson bow tie. Picking it up, she stared at it for several long seconds; running her fingertips over the silky material. It was soft and smooth and she could imagine a dozen or so better ways to put it to use than wrapping it around her neck. Unbidden, the image of her girlfriend with her hands bound to the bedposts popped into her head.

Swallowing, she sat down heavily. "Jesus... get a grip, Olivia." She whispered. "You went without sex for...what? More than a year before Natalia? God, it hasn't even been that long..." She closed her eyes, whimpering softly. "Thirty-six days, fifteen hours and..." She glanced at the clock next to the bed. "...twelve minutes..." With a tiny, anguished cry she toppled over, burying her face in Natalia's pillow and inhaling deeply.

"Who are you talking to?" The brunette called from the bathroom.

"No one." Olivia sighed, pulling herself to her feet and walking back to the mirror. She slid the tie around her neck, knotting it quickly into a bow. Leaning her head to the side she studied her reflection, pursing her lips as she did so. Finally, with a small leer, she reached up and pulled the tie loose, letting it dangle from beneath her collar like a playboy just stumbling home after a night on the town. She backed up a few feet and checked the overall effect of her outfit, smoothing her hand over layers of chestnut hair that were slicked back away from her face but left to hang long in the back. Her makeup was done sparingly, except for her eyes. There, the combination of charcoal eye shadow, black liner and long, thick lashes made her green eyes stand out even more clearly, glowing like a cat's in the moonlight.

"Perfect." She purred, a wicked smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

"Mmmm, I agree."

Before she could react, her eyes were covered by Natalia's soft, sweet smelling fingers. "What are you doing?"

"I don't want you to peek."

"Are we going to stay like this all night?" Olivia smirked, moving her hips to rub her backside seductively against the younger woman's groin. "Because if we are, I want to request something slow and dirty when we dance..."

"Just... be quiet and do what you're told."

“Ooo.” One eyebrow shot up. “I am yours to command.” Her heart caught when she felt Natalia’s lips against her ear, the warmth of her breath sending chills up and down the older woman’s spine.

“I already knew that.” She whispered.

Olivia laughed softly; more at herself than anything else. If any of her former lovers had dared to say such a thing, it would have earned them the door. But with Natalia...

With Natalia it was just the truth.

“Okay...” She leaned back slightly, licking her lips when she felt the soft swells of her lover’s chest against her back. “What now?”

“Now...” Natalia nuzzled her ear. “Now you’re going to close your eyes and keep them closed until I tell you to open them. Understand?” Olivia nodded and the younger woman removed her hands. “Turn around.”

She did as she was told, her hands instinctively reaching out only to be playfully slapped away. “Hey!”

“I didn’t say you could touch!” Natalia laughed.

“I can’t touch... I can’t see.” She frowned. “What can I do?” For a moment, there was no response, then her heart rate kicked into double time when Natalia moved in so close she could feel her breath against her lips.

“What can you do?” Long, delicate fingers curled around the back of her neck. “You can taste...”

A small whimper broke free from Olivia as her head was gently pulled down. Her lips parted automatically and that was all the invitation Natalia needed to slide her tongue inside before running it along the older woman’s lower lip, pulling it between her teeth for a moment before letting go.

It was too much for her to resist. In one graceful movement, Olivia caught the smaller woman up in her arms; crushing their bodies together as she spun her around and pressed her up against the mirror. When Natalia’s hands came up, she grabbed them both, tucking them behind her back as she devoured her lips hungrily, leaving them swollen and bruised as she licked and bit her way down the younger woman’s throat.

“Olivia...” Natalia’s voice was rough, breathless. “You weren’t supposed to touch...”

“Mmm...” She slid her lips down further, surprised that she had yet to encounter any kind of clothing. “At least I kept my eyes closed.”

The brunette laughed, pulling her hands free and using them to push a groaning Olivia away from her. “You can open them now.”

The older woman opened her eyes, her jaw dropping as all of the air rushed from her lungs at the sight of the woman in front of her.

Natalia was a vision in crimson and black; the blood red cocktail dress tight in all the right places, not that there were any wrong ones. It was strapless and sleeveless, cut low across her still much enhanced chest and left to flow freely along her hips. The color enhanced her natural skin tone, making her look as though she were positively glowing. Olivia followed the line of her hip down her thigh to the black leather boots that stretched from her knees to the tips of her toes. She couldn't stop the eyebrow that arched wickedly up her forehead.

“Don't even say it!” Natalia pointed a finger at her.

Olivia raised her hands innocently. “Say what?”

“I know what you like to call these boots!”

“Oh honey, I think that would actually apply to the whole outfit at this point.”

Natalia's face fell slightly. “Do you... think it's too much?”

“Are you kidding??” She slid in close, pursing her lips when their bodies once again fit together perfectly. Over the last five weeks, Natalia had quickly shed her baby weight, so quickly in fact that Olivia had dragged Rick into his office just that morning to give her a check up. She had been relieved to hear that it was just the younger woman's naturally high metabolism kicking back in. She still wasn't as slender as she had been before the baby, but Olivia wasn't exactly unhappy about that. There was a lot to be said for a woman of substance. Grinning, she laid her hands on Natalia's hips, leaning down to nuzzle the sensitive skin beneath the younger woman's ear. “I think you're perfect.”

“Hmmm...” Natalia hummed happily. “You keep that up and we're never going to leave this room.”

“Would that be so bad?” Olivia mumbled, her tongue tracing the hollow at the base of her lover's throat.

Natalia sighed and gently pushed her away. "We promised we'd be there."

Olivia hung her head in frustration. "And why did we do that again?"

"Because," She picked up the charm bracelet Olivia had given her for Christmas, holding her arm out so that the older woman could fasten it around her wrist. "This New Year's Eve party means a lot to Phillip." She rubbed Olivia's lips gently with her thumb, trying to get her to stop pouting. "It's the first year without Alan. Love... hate... whatever their relationship was... he has to be feeling that loss."

Olivia sighed. "You're right. *You're right.*" She wrapped her arms around the smaller woman, resting their foreheads together. "I'm just kind of surprised you're so gung-ho about this. I would have thought I'd need a crow bar to pry you away from the baby."

Natalia picked up the ends of Olivia's bow tie, fidgeting with them before laying them back against her shirt, her lips quirking adorably to one side. "It's hard." She finally admitted. "I would love to stay here and curl up under a blanket with our girls. But I think... I think we really need some adult time... away from the kids; to keep it in perspective."

Olivia looked at her closely. "Dr. Phil?"

"Oprah."

"Ahh..." She laughed and kissed her tenderly. "We really *do* need to get you out of the house. If you start watching Judge Judy, I'm staging an intervention."

"Ha!" Natalia picked up the black wrap that completed her outfit, smiling when Olivia grabbed the other end. Pulling gently, she backed out of the room. "Don't even try to pretend you're innocent of trashy television tendencies!"

"Trashy television tendencies? Can you say that five times fast?"

"No, but I can say for a fact that I've seen you watching Court TV!"

Olivia blushed. "Just 'Forensic Files'! It's... educational!"

"Mmhmm...but do you need to explain it to Francesca? You're going to end up giving her nightmares!" Natalia kept pulling until she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I would think you'd be happy!" Olivia stopped three steps up, pulling back firmly. "It *is* a cop show!"

“When I asked you to help me bring her up with positive examples of her father’s profession, that wasn’t exactly what I had in mind!”

“I could show her Reno 911!” Olivia smirked. “Probably be more accurate...”

Natalia’s eyes narrowed. With a mock frown, she tugged. Hard.

Olivia stumbled down the last few steps and into her girlfriend’s arms. “Hey!”

The brunette grinned, wrapping her arms around the other woman tightly. “Lose your balance?” She glanced down. “Must be the boots.”

“You love these boots.”

Natalia leaned forward until her lips grazed Olivia’s with every word she spoke. “No... I love your *ass* in those boots.” She slid her hands dangerously low on Olivia’s back. “The fact that they’re cute is just a bonus.”

The older woman shook her head, her eyes darkening. “You’re getting quite a mouth on you.”

“The important thing...” Natalia kissed her neck, breathing deeply as she nuzzled her way up to a perfect ear. “Is what my mouth can do on *you*...”

Olivia shivered. She took Natalia’s face in her hands and kissed her, tenderly at first and then with growing enthusiasm.

“Oh my god! Are they always like that?”

The two women broke apart quickly to find Jane and a wildly giggling Emma watching them from the couch.

“Yeeees!” The little girl sang happily. “Mommy and Natalia sittin’ in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

“Okay, bean.” Olivia ran a finger around the edge of her lips, smirking when she saw the burst of color in Natalia’s cheeks. “I was just... checking her lipstick.”

Emma rolled her eyes.

“She definitely gets that from you.” Natalia whispered.

The older woman smiled proudly. "Okay, here are the ground rules! No soda past ten o'clock, no candy past eleven. No scary movies, no long distance phone calls and no wild tea parties with your dollies. You can stay up to see the ball drop but I want you in bed by twelve-thirty. Agreed?"

"Agreed..." The little girl said sullenly. "But I still don't know why I can't go with you!" Her lower lip extended in a spectacular pout.

"And she gets *that* from you!" Olivia whispered in Natalia's ear on the way to the couch; making the brunette laugh. "It's not that we don't want you with us, Jellybean." She sat down next to her daughter, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "But there won't be any other kids there. It's all grown-ups and you know how boring we can be. Plus, Jane needs you to help take care of your little sister, don't you Jane?"

"I do." The babysitter nodded.

Emma sighed. "Okay..." She stretched the word out over several seconds.

"Be good?" She waited until the little girl nodded, then kissed her on the forehead. She watched with a small smile as Natalia did the same.

Waving goodbye, they stepped out onto the porch. The air was crisp and clean, the world white with a dusting of new snow that had recently fallen over the old. Olivia pulled the black cashmere wrap tight around the younger woman's shoulders before tilting her head back to finish their interrupted kiss.

A few moments later they heard the crunching of tires in the driveway and looked up to see Phillip's personal driver Jacob pulling up to the house in a long black limousine.

Olivia glanced at her watch. "Eight O'clock. Right on time."

"It was really sweet of Phillip to send a car."

"Yeah, it was." She took Natalia's hand and led her to the limo, smiling at Jacob when he jumped out into the cold to open the door. "Hiya, Jake. He got you out all night?"

"Six runs." The young man nodded; an amiable smile on his face. "Mr. Spaulding said he didn't want anyone to even think about having to drive home. You're my first stop, though." He winked. "You're special."

Olivia inclined her head towards her date. "She's special. I'm just a lucky fool."

Jake smirked. "Yeah, he said that too."

Natalia laughed at Olivia's look of mock outrage, dragging her into the back seat and sighing happily when the heat from the vents hit her full force.

"Cheeky bastard." The older woman grumbled good-naturedly.

"Mmm..." Natalia snuggled into her side. "You know, you never did tell me how you got Jane to babysit tonight. Whatever it was must have been major, for her to give up New Year's Eve."

Olivia played idly with the hair falling across her lover's forehead. She wondered if the errant lock was a desired effect or just an escapee from the perfect chignon Natalia had pulled her gorgeous mane into. She brushed her fingers through it happily before trailing them down one smooth cheek, her heart flipping over when a perfect dimple appeared beneath her touch. "Let's just say that she doesn't have to worry about next month's rent..."

Natalia's eyes widened. "Olivia!"

"Hey, to have you all to myself, looking like that?" She kissed her gently. "I'd have paid her college tuition next year."

"Oh..." The younger woman's face melted into a lovesick grin. "That is so sweet! But you know... it *is* a party... we won't exactly be alone."

"You forget... it's a big house..." Olivia winked. "A *really, really* big house."

~~*~*

Mayor Doris Wolfe was nervous.

It was not a feeling she liked, nor was it one she was used to experiencing; especially not while sitting in her car, dressed to the nines, outside her kinda-sorta girlfriend's house.

To be honest, this was not where she was supposed to be. Nor was it where she expected to end up.

But here she was, and here she had been for the last quarter of an hour, trying to decide whether or not to do something about it.

With a long sigh, she looked at her watch. It was five minutes to eight. In five minutes she was supposed to be making her grand entrance at the social event of the year, the

Spaulding New Year's Eve Bash. She had been amazed to even be invited. Mayor or not, the Spauldings were a family more accustomed to owning politicians than courting them and, truth be told, her invite probably had a lot more to do with who she knew than who she was.

But either way, it was an opportunity to rub elbows with Springfield's elite and drum up support for her next Mayoral campaign.

So why, knowing all of that, was she sitting outside of Anna Li's house contemplating social suicide?

"Because you're insane!" She growled at herself, reaching for the keys and starting the car. She let it idle for a minute, gunning the accelerator like it was somehow connected to her common sense, before sighing and killing the engine yet again.

Wrapping her scarf tightly around her neck, she pushed open the door of the car, her teeth beginning to chatter at the first lungful of freezing winter air. Slamming the door shut behind her, she hurried up the path towards the front door, heels slipping on the new ice as she muttered quietly to herself. "I *must* be insane. That's all there is to it. I'm insane. I have lost my freakin' mind. Do they even allow crazy people to run for office?" She stopped on the front step, tucking her hands under her arms and staring at the bell. "What the hell am I doing?"

"That's a damn good question."

She spun around quickly, losing her balance on the icy step. A moment later she was caught up in warm arms, her chest and face pressed against the soft leather of a brown bomber jacket.

"Are you okay?" Anna Li looked down at her, eyebrows knitted together in concern.

"I'm fine!" Doris stood up straight, trying to adjust her black overcoat, which had fallen open in the scuffle. "I'm... just perfect!"

"Wow!" Anna whistled in appreciation, reaching out to part the coat wider, taking in the Mayor's appearance with appreciative eyes. "You can say that again!"

Doris was dressed in a black Dolce and Gabbana cocktail dress. It was gathered tight around her waist and cut low across the chest in a diamond-shaped pattern. The neckline was a fitted choker that left her shoulders bare until it met up with the half sleeves that circled around the older woman's upper arms. Anna felt her eyes widen as they slid down the decadent dress to a hem that was far from modest, landing a full two inches above her

knees. The outfit was finished off in style by a pair of two inch heels that made the Mayor's calves look like they were carved from stone and a messy, upswept bun that softened the whole image with stray locks of hair framing her face.

"Wow."

Doris blushed, pleased. "You said that already."

"Yeah, well..." She raised her eyebrows. "It bears repeating. Where the hell are you going looking like that?"

"New Year's Eve at the Spaulding mansion."

"Ahhh..." The detective held up the white plastic bag she was carrying. "Kung Pao chicken and hot and sour soup." She shrugged, a self-deprecating smile on her face. "I'm a girl who knows how to party."

"Well... I..." Doris fiddled with one of her diamond earrings. "I was sort of hoping that you were..."

Anna blinked. "Were what?"

"A girl who likes a good party."

The detective stared at her. "You better come inside." She unlocked the door and shuffled the freezing woman into the foyer. "I think the cold has gone to your head."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you can't possibly be asking me what I think you're asking me."

"What do you think I'm asking you?"

Anna sighed, rubbing her temples with her fingers. "It kind of sounds like your asking me to go to this party with you."

"Oh, good!" Doris nodded. "Because that's what I'm asking you."

Anna stared at her speculatively for several long moments until Doris finally frowned.

"What?!?"

"I'm waiting for the punch line."

"This isn't a joke!" She sighed. "I... I've wanted to ask you for a while now but... I kept talking myself out of it."

"And for good reason!"

"Really?" Doris sat down heavily on the bench in the entryway. "You think there's a good reason? Because all of the ones I keep coming up with make me feel like a coward."

"Doris," Anna sat down beside her and took her hand. "It isn't cowardice to protect the things you've worked for, the things that matter to you. It's rational... and understandable."

"Rational." The Mayor repeated. "Anna, I've been hiding my whole life; first from myself and then from the rest of the world. For the longest time I hid from my own daughter! To such an extent that she doesn't even know who I really am. All that time... all those opportunities... gone. Wasted. And now she's on the other side of the country. I can't get those years with my daughter back and I can't undo all of the lies I've told. But I can start living my life differently *now*. I can stand up and be proud of who I am instead of hiding all the time!" She laced their fingers together. "What's the point of being Mayor if I only got here by pretending to be something I'm not? What's so rational about that?"

"Doris... sweetheart..." Anna ran a hand through her jet black hair. "If you do this... if we do this... Then that's it, it's done. You can't un-ring that bell."

"I know."

"Do you?" Anna looked at her closely, surprised and more than a little turned on by the determination plainly evident in the woman before her. She blinked as she breathed in deeply. "Wow... you're really serious? You're willing to risk everything... to come out... with me?"

"Yes I am." Doris cupped her chin, pulling her forward to kiss her firmly. "Now, the real question is..." She looked her lover over from head to toe. The woman looked damn good in jeans and leather, but she wouldn't exactly blend. With a smirk, she reached out and pulled the ball cap off her head. "Do you have a couple of mice and a magic pumpkin somewhere? Because I'm no fairy godmother and you're a tad underdressed."

Anna's lips curved into a crooked grin. "Oh baby, you'd be surprised how well I can clean up. Give me twenty minutes."

Doris stopped her when she started towards the bedroom, pulling her back and down onto her lap. Never breaking eye contact, she began to unbutton Anna's shirt. "I could always come help..."

The detective laughed. It was full and deep and sent a wave of tingles down the older woman's spine. She slapped Doris' hands away and climbed off. "Not if you want to get to the party sometime tonight. You just sit there and be a good girl."

Doris grinned; her gaze following Anna until she disappeared into the bedroom. Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes, breathing in evenly as she let her mind wander.

"Doris?"

The Mayor blinked rapidly as she sat up. "Oh my god... did I actually fall asleep?" She rubbed at her eyes carefully, trying not to smudge her makeup.

"Well, you were pretty stressed out. So what do you think? Will I pass for the social elite?"

Doris looked up, her breath stopping as her eyes widened in unabashed appreciation.

Anna was wearing a short, pale green shift. Iridescent, the fabric shimmered as it slid smoothly across her body. It twisted with her as she spun in a slow circle, providing the older woman with a complete 360 degree view. The dress was held up by two thin strips of fabric that hugged her slender shoulders before widening to create an almost drape like affect down her back. While modestly cut in the front, the back plunged so low that Doris swore she could almost see the dimple at the base of her spine.

And as for her hair...

"Dear god!" Doris reached up tentatively, her fingers gently nudging the thick mass of wild black spikes that jutted out in all different directions. She was amazed to find them incredibly soft and made a mental note to figure out how the Asian woman had managed to pull that off. "You're... magnificent!" She whispered finally.

Anna smiled, the faintest hint of a blush tinting her cheeks. "Thanks." She sat down next to her and pulled on a pair of brown, fuzzy UGGs.

"Uhm..." Doris bit her bottom lip. "Really?"

The detective rolled her eyes, holding up a pair of black, strappy sandals in her other hand. "Frostbite beats fashion every time. I'll change when we get there."

"Ahh..." Doris smiled when Anna stood and held out a hand. Taking it, she allowed herself to be pulled up, kissing her lover tenderly before turning to study their image in the hallway mirror.

“So...” The Asian woman brushed the hair away from her eyes. “What would your new image consultant say about this?”

“Honestly?” Doris tucked her arm into Anna’s. “I don’t think he’d say much of anything. His head would just implode.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“No.” She admitted. “But I think it time I stopped doing what’s right for everyone else... and started doing what’s right for me.”

Anna nodded. “Okay then... let’s go destroy your political career.”

“Sweet talker!” Doris smiled, hugging their hips together as they headed for the door.

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ACT 2

Natalia sighed happily, burrowing deep into Olivia’s arms as she watched the snow fall outside of the limousine. The flakes were small and fluffy looking, but they were falling so quickly that it was hard to make out any of the landmarks they were passing. She smiled in amazement when she realized that she still knew exactly where they were, even without seeing the signs or recognizing the buildings, she knew.

After all the years of trying to create a life, of trying to make her world work the way she thought it was supposed to; after all the years of trying to find a place where she and Rafe *truly* belonged...

She had finally found everything she needed... and all she’d had to do was lose everything she ever thought she wanted.

This was her home.

This place... *this* town.

This woman.

That realization filled her with a tenderness so overwhelming she could not contain it. Closing her eyes, she cried softly.

“Hey...” She felt Olivia’s fingers run over her hair before trailing down her back. “Hey, hey, hey...” The words were whispered, soothing. “What’s wrong sweetheart?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Natalia’s voice was small and she sniffled as the look of concerned adoration on her lover’s face almost sent her into a fresh round of tears. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Then what’s with the water works?”

“I just...” She bit down on her bottom lip, breathing in deeply as she tried to control her emotions. “It’s just that every time I think I’ve reached the limit...” She shook her head, a tiny smile offsetting the tears. “...that I couldn’t possibly feel anything more for you that I already do...” She closed her eyes as she traced her lover’s mouth gently with her fingertips. “You’ll say something, or you’ll do something and it just hits me again... sometimes so hard that it’s like a physical blow and I have to wonder if it’s a sin because I shouldn’t love you more than I love... God...” Her voice trailed off to a whisper. “But I do.”

Olivia kissed her softly on the forehead, not trusting herself to speak.

“And Rafe...” The younger woman’s voice caught. “I never thought that there would ever be *anything* I would refuse to do for my son.” She looked up, amazed to see the shine of tears in the other woman’s eyes as well. “But Olivia... if he had... if he had forced me to choose...” She swallowed. “I’d still be here...”

Olivia pressed her lips together tightly, angling her head back to keep the tears from falling. The questions were there... the same ones that had haunted her since she had lost Natalia all those months ago; the same questions, the same doubts. But this was a brand new year. A new chance and she could either hang on to the past; let it damage her, let it damage *them*... or...

“I believe you.”

Natalia look up at her, hope shining in her eyes. “You do?”

A shiver ran down Olivia’s spine. “I do.”

They both went completely still, caught in the moment as those two words hung in the air between them. Everything they had been through, everything they had together, and all of the love they shared seemed to come together in a moment of perfect clarity.

But it was a clarity that neither of them was quite ready to deal with.

Olivia's gentle laughter finally broke the moment. "You're going to have me looking like a raccoon." She carefully wiped at the tears clinging to her lower lashes.

Natalia quirked one eyebrow, "With that eye shadow you picked I thought that was the look you were going for."

The older woman blinked. "Wha...?" She saw the edge of Natalia's lips quiver and pulled away, leaning back against the seat and crossing her arms as she pouted. "You said you liked it."

"Oh, I do.... I do." The brunette said seriously. "I'm just afraid of the affect you might have on the rest of Springfield's female population." She sighed. "I certainly wasn't expecting what you did to me..."

Olivia half-snorted, "Oh, you're saying that this..." She waved her hand back and forth between them. "This is all *my* fault? That I'm the one...?"

"Yup!" Natalia crossed her legs, looking prim and proper as she rested her hands together in her lap. "You made me gay."

"*What?*" She tried for outraged and ended up sounding strangled as she choked on her laughter. "You did nothing? You had no part in this?"

"Nope, I'm innocent."

"Soooo, this is all me...? You never had any naughty thoughts? No lust in your heart for me? Not ever?"

Natalia blinked innocently. "Of course not! I'm a good Catholic girl!"

Olivia pursed her lips. Turning slightly, she slid back until she was tucked into the corner of the limo's bench seat, far enough away that she lost all contact with the other woman. With a small smile, she brought her hand up to her chest, slowly popping the buttons on her vest until it hung open.

"Uhm..." Natalia swallowed. "What are you doing?"

"Is it hot in here?" She began to do the same with the buttons on her shirt, closing her eyes as she slid her hand inside to rub lightly across the tops of her breasts. Her fingers dipped dangerously low, disappearing to the first knuckle beneath the black lace of her bra. "Or is it just me?"

When there was no answer, Olivia licked her lips... slowly. She felt the seat dip and smiled as warm breath ghosted across her cheeks. Opening her eyes, she stared up into Natalia's beautiful face, shifting slightly to accommodate the smaller woman as she lowered her body down on top of her. "Mmmm." She sighed happily as Natalia's full weight pressed into her. "God, you feel good." She laughed lightly, pulling her head back as the younger woman tried to capture her lips in a kiss. "Oh no... no naughty thoughts at all..."

"Shut up." Natalia took her face between both hands, holding it still as she pressed down with her hips. Her eyes closed at Olivia's groan of pleasure. "Just shut up and kiss me."

"Gladly." She slid one hand up Natalia's back, slipping her fingers into the tight knots of hair at the nape of her neck. Not for the first time, she wished that Natalia had worn her hair down. The idea of tangling her fingers in it, using it to pull the younger woman more firmly against her, was more than appealing. In fact, the images it evoked were downright toe-curling. She settled for sliding her other hand down and across Natalia's backside, cupping one firm cheek as she met her lips halfway.

The kiss was tender at first; lips touching gently, grazing against each other in the same teasing dance that always led to trouble. And trouble quickly followed as Olivia parted her lips, welcoming Natalia's tongue inside and playing against it with her own. The textures were like velvet, the taste of her lover intoxicating, and she couldn't stop the small whimpers that were coming from the back of her throat.

She had expected passion; she had seen that much in the dark, wide pupils of Natalia's eyes. But she hadn't expected the fire that came along with it; or the hands that wandered possessively down her body, fingers lingering atop her nipples before running across her ribs and down her hips. She felt the other woman shift, rolling her body slightly to the side, and then her head fell back into the soft leather seat as firm fingers wandered up the inside of her thigh, dragging her skirt up with them.

There was a whirring sound and Olivia opened her eyes briefly, fighting the urge to laugh as she saw the privacy shield going up between them and Jake.

Good old Jake. She thought to herself. *I need to send him a bottle of...* "Fuck!" Natalia's fingers had reached their destination and began playing over the silk between her legs. The touch was gentle, light, almost to the point of being maddening. But the intent was there and when the pressure began to increase, Olivia rolled her head to the side, breathing heavily as teeth bit firmly into the skin of her neck. The bite was followed by Natalia's lips and she whimpered as they formed a seal over the tender spot. The pain was exquisite... and so completely worth the scarves she'd have to wear for the next few days. "Oh yeah... Just a... a good... Catholic girl..."

Natalia's laughter was low and deep. "Forgive me, Father," She whispered. "For I have sinned..."

Then her mouth was on Olivia's again and it all felt so incredibly good that she wanted to cry... she wanted to laugh... she wanted to write bad poetry and sing sappy love songs. It was astounding. Sex had always been good, but with Natalia...

With Natalia it was an epiphany.

She knew they should stop... she wanted to say 'not like this'. After waiting so long she didn't want this to happen in the backseat of a limo, but it felt so right to have Natalia's hands on her, to be kissing her... to be loved by her.

For them to love *each other*.

"Wait... wait..." With a sigh she wrapped her fingers around Natalia's, holding them still. "Sweetheart..."

Natalia growled, pressing down harder as she tried to pull her hand free and continue what she was doing.

"Honey..." Olivia whispered, delighted by the desire burning in her lover's eyes. "We have to stop."

"Why?" The younger woman pulled back slightly, frowning, and Olivia had to bite down on her lip to keep from laughing.

The same lines creased Francesca's forehead when the little girl was angry or frustrated. In fact, it was the same exact pout.

Dear God... I'm in trouble!! She knew she'd never win an argument again.

"Because..." She traced one pouty lip with a fingertip. "Because we agreed to wait until we could be together..."

"We are together." Natalia lowered her head again, kissing her softly before trailing her lips down her chin.

Olivia groaned. "God, you're making this hard."

She tugged at her hand again. "Then just let me."

The older woman laughed, pulling the captured hand up to kiss her fingertips. "Not here and not like this. Not until I can touch you too."

Natalia looked down at her, a strange expression on her face. "Olivia... I need to tell you something."

There was something in the tone of her voice that caught the older woman's attention immediately. "What?"

Before she could answer, Olivia's cell phone began to ring. With a sigh, Natalia pulled herself up, letting her lover grab the phone from her purse on the floor.

"Olivia Spencer." She growled. "And this better be important."

Phillip's laughter could be heard on the other end. "I was just wondering if you were actually going to come inside or if you were planning to circle the driveway a few more times and call it a night."

"What?" Olivia squeaked in surprise. She tried to look out the window, sighing when she realized they were all steamed up. She brushed at the film with her hand, hanging her head in embarrassment as the front of the Spaulding mansion came into view. Phillip was on the porch waving at them, a huge grin splitting his face as they drove past. "Jake!" She knocked on the privacy divider, trying not to blush even harder when the driver's smirk came into view. "How long have we been here?"

"About ten minutes."

"Why didn't you tell us?" She demanded.

"I didn't think you guys would want to be disturbed." He glanced down at her unbuttoned shirt before winking at her. "I know I wouldn't."

Olivia laughed grudgingly. "Just... stop on the next pass!" She waved for him to raise the privacy shield again before smiling sheepishly at Natalia. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

Natalia started to speak, then shook her head when the car pulled to a stop. "It can wait."

"Are you sure?"

The brunette watched Olivia button her shirt and vest, a wistful expression on her face. "At this point, I think it's going to have to."

"Alright," She smoothed her hair into place before wrapping her hand around the back of Natalia's neck and pulling her into a brief but passionate kiss. "Until then..."

The door opened and Phillip ducked down, sticking his head inside. "Hey there! Glad you could make it." He held out his hand and helped each of them from the car before waving them up the steps. "I like that shade of lipstick." He bumped Olivia playfully with his shoulder as they walked. "But I think it goes better with Natalia's outfit..."

~~*~*

Doris stopped the car ten feet from the front of the Spaulding mansion, holding up a hand to stall the valet that glanced their way. She laughed when she saw Olivia smack Phillip on the back of the head as he led them into the house.

Anna looked over at her curiously. "Second thoughts?"

"Not exactly." Doris smiled self-deprecatingly. "I just realized I never even bothered to ask how you felt about this." She took her hand, squeezing it gently. "If I'm going to try to be a better person, then it means caring about your feelings at least as much as my own." She turned in her seat to study the younger woman carefully. "This means coming out for you too. That could make it harder for you to do your job."

Anna shrugged. "I'm a cop but... I'm also a lesbian. I've never tried to keep those things separate. I've just never advertised it either. I mind my own business and if someone ever asks a question I give them a healthy dose of the truth. They usually run for cover, and that's fine by me." She looked down at their joined hands, tracing one of Doris' nails with a fingertip. "I guess I just never considered my sexuality a political issue. But then, I'm not elected so I can see how it would be different for you. It just isn't a concern I share." She smiled warmly. "I am happy that you thought to ask me, though."

"The old me wouldn't have." She turned and stared out the window.

Anna could feel the other woman closing herself off and reached out, cupping her chin in her hand and using it to bring her head back around. "Part of starting over is forgiving yourself for the past, Doris. We've all made mistakes, done things we're not proud of, hidden parts of ourselves..."

A shadow passed over her face but it was there and gone so quickly that Doris barely had time to register it, let alone ask about it.

Anna shook her head slightly, refocusing. "The point is that you want to change. So let all that go..." She slid her fingers up the Mayor's arm, laughing when Doris' eyebrows went skyward. "...and come dance with me."

"Dance?" The other woman squeaked. "Who said anything about dancing?"

Anna trailed her fingers down Doris' jaw line before dropping them to her chest. She tucked them into the opening in her dress and used it to pull the older woman forward until they were nose to nose. "You promised me a party. A party means dancing. Ergo, you promised me a dance."

Doris laughed. "With that kind of logic maybe you *should* try for a political career."

"Ya think?" She moved in closer. "Isn't that like inviting competition?"

"A little competition can be... invigorating..." She stopped breathing when Anna kissed her softly. "And voters love cops."

"Do they?" She kissed her way up to Doris' ear, nuzzling it with her nose. "What about you?"

She felt the older woman go stiff in her arms and pulled back slowly, blinking at the look of wide-eyed panic on the Mayor's face. "Doris?" She patted her lightly on the cheek when she didn't respond. "Doris... it's ok." She smiled. "I'm not expecting any kind of declaration here. I was just playing with you." She sighed in relief when the color returned to the other woman's face. "Thank god! I thought I gave you a heart attack!"

"Pretty close." Doris took a deep breath.

"Listen," Anna caressed her face with her fingertips. "Whatever this is... whatever we have... I'm not in any hurry to slap a label on it." She kissed her, lightly at first, then more deeply, finishing with a nibble on her bottom lip as she pulled away. "I am enjoying you, Doris Wolfe. And that's more than I can say for my last few relationships. So how about we just relax and see where we end up... deal?" She held out her hand.

Doris laughed, relieved. She took the other woman's hand, shaking it before turning it over and placing an open-mouthed kiss in the center of her palm.

"Oh..." Anna shivered, feeling the older woman's kiss from the top of her head to the tips of her toes; with a few lingering stops at specific points in between. "You keep doing that and I know exactly where we're going to end up." She pulled her hand away. "And I really

wanna see what kind of dancer you are, Madame Mayor. So behave; and let the anxious little man park your car.”

Doris smirked, pulling up the last ten feet and jumping out before the disgruntled car jockey could even touch the door. She walked around to the passenger side and opened Anna’s door, holding her hand out gallantly.

“My... what a gentleman you are.”

“Who would have thought it?” Doris smirked as she watched Anna change her shoes, then pulled the younger woman gently from the car and looped their arms together.

“Ready?” She felt the older woman tremble slightly and leaned into her, sharing her body heat.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Then lead the way.”

Doris knew what she was doing; knew she was giving her one last out. If she turned and got back in the car, Anna would do the same. They would go home and make love and nothing would ever be said about her failed attempt at joining the human race.

She thought about Olivia and Natalia. She thought about what they had, the family they shared and the future that was stretched out before them and she knew.

To do that would lead her right back to her old life.

And that just wasn’t good enough anymore.

God help her.

She dropped her arm, smiling at the shock on Anna’s face when she took her hand instead, leading her up the steps and into the party.

~~*~*

“Wow...”

Olivia glanced over at Natalia as they entered the house, smiling at the look of delight on her lover’s face. “You lived here once dear.” She smirked. “It can’t be that much of a surprise.”

Natalia made a face at her and bumped her with an elbow. "I'm not talking about the house. That's as decadent as it always was. I'm talking about the decorations."

Olivia glanced around, thinking that Natalia definitely had a point. The entire house had been decked out in silver and gold, all of it shimmering in the bright light of the overhead chandeliers. Down one hallway she could see the dining room, where the table had been removed, replaced by parquet; with a live band set up at one end. There were already several couples twirling around the make-shift dance floor to big band music and Olivia smiled when she saw Jonathan spin Reva until it looked like the woman might lose her balance.

Down another hall, what was once Alan's conference room had been turned into a large buffet, with several attendants running back and forth from the kitchen, exchanging empty pans for full ones and replacing them in their matching chaffing dishes. She wasn't sure what they were serving, but whatever it was, it smelled incredible.

And knowing Phillip... it would be.

All around the buffet, tables had been set up. From large, ten-seaters to small, intimate two-place settings, there was a size available to fit anyone's needs. Many of them were already occupied with people laughing and eating or just talking quietly while they sipped their drinks. One thing about them all was the same though. Large or small, each table sported an incredible centerpiece made up of perfect silver and white roses arranged with large sprigs of acacia and baby's breath around a glistening ice sculpture.

Natalia smiled as her eyes jumped from table to table and she clapped her hands in delight at all the different designs. From fairies to butterflies to doves taking flight, each sculpture was intricately designed and incredibly rendered.

"Impressive." Olivia shot Phillip a playful smile. "Until they end up as puddles in a couple of hours."

Phillip glanced at his watch. "Three hours and twenty-one minutes to be exact."

She blinked. "You have it timed?"

"Let's just say..." He stroked the head of a nearby fawn. "You might want to be close by around midnight."

"You want us to watch *ice melt*... on New Year's Eve?" She laughed. "Somehow I was expecting something a little more exciting."

“Oh, there will be several events to choose from.” Phillip smiled mysteriously.

“Silver?” Natalia suddenly spoke, interrupting their conversation. “Where did you find silver roses?”

Olivia snorted. “Look closer.”

Natalia did as she was told, her eyes widening. “They’re painted!”

“Airbrushed.” Phillip grinned. “Each one done individually... by hand.”

She glanced around the room. “There must be... five hundred of them!”

“Six hundred, actually. Two dozen for each table.”

“You really went all out didn’t you?” Olivia gave him a smile of grudging respect.

“What, with this?” Phillip winked. “You ain’t seen nuthin’ yet.” He crooked a finger at them, beckoning them to follow.

Exchanging smiles, the two women joined hands and trailed behind him. The hallway banners glittered, reflecting the light from thousands of chasing lights strung up to direct people towards the many different rooms, each with a different theme. From 70’s disco to 90’s rave, there was a DJ and décor scheme to match anyone’s mood.

But the main living room... now *that* was truly inspired.

The floor was littered with thousands of tiny pieces of silver confetti, creating the effect of walking on water. The walls were covered with ribbons and drapes and showers of gold and silver streamers hung down from the ceiling, suspended from iridescent balloons that swayed gently with the moving air, making the whole room seem alive with light and energy.

The center of the room was taken up by a huge champagne fountain. Made up six sterling silver plates, all with tiny silver spigots, the sweetened red punch ran in rivulets from plate to plate before raining down into chilled serving bowls.

Olivia inclined her head towards the punch. “And what about those of us that prefer something... a little less fruity?”

Phillip bit his lip, holding back his laughter when her green eyes narrowed in warning. “Uhm...” He cleared his throat. “Then there’s always the *other* champagne tower.”

He looked behind her pointedly and Olivia turned; her jaw dropping as she took in the tall, brushed silver structure pushed up against the wall. To most people it would have looked like an over-sized game of Jenga. But she knew exactly what it was.

“You have got to be kidding me.” She walked over to it quickly, tugging on one of the twelve doors to reveal the small, bottle shaped inner chamber. Lying there, perfectly chilled, was a magnum of 2000 Louis Roederer “Cristal” Brut Rosé. “Oh...” She closed her eyes, a small smile of appreciation playing on her lips as she shivered in anticipation. “Where on earth did you get a Vertical Limit? There were only fifteen of them made! And if I remember correctly, they didn’t make them for Roederer.”

“I had this one modified slightly... to hold *your* favorite champagne.” At her confused look he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and hugged her. “Merry Christmas, Olivia! It’ll be dropped off next week.”

“I’m...” She shook her head, looking between Phillip and Natalia. “I’m speechless.”

“Well... then it was money well spent.” He laughed when she elbowed him in the ribs. “But wait, there’s more.”

“More?” Natalia looked a little embarrassed by the display of wealth. “Isn’t all of this enough?”

Phillip held up a hand. “This one...” He gestured towards the main balcony. “This one, I think you’ll like, Natalia.”

The balcony was dark when they stepped outside, but several carefully spaced heaters kept the air warm while the heating mats built into the structure itself kept the floor free of snow and ice. The view from the balcony was spectacular and Olivia could see the Spaulding grounds sprawling out in all directions. She watched Natalia’s face light up as she pointed out the six large firework launchers lined up along the back wall.

“Only six?” She joked.

“Oh, that’s just part of it.” He pulled a small remote out of his pocket and tapped a button, causing a bright red glow to appear above them.

Natalia looked up and laughed in delight. Suspended on what she had thought was a flag pole, a multifaceted crystal ball winked at them as it slowly revolved, changing colors with each revolution. It looked strangely familiar. “Is that...” Her eyes widened.

“Yes.” Phillip’s smile was huge. “A one-sixth scale version of the Time’s Square New Year’s Eve Ball, complete with four hundred and forty five Waterford Crystals and fifty-four hundred Philips Luxeon LEDS. It’s an exact replica.” He shrugged. “Except... in size.” He pointed a warning finger at Olivia, who was chuckling under her breath. “At 11:59 tonight the ball will begin its descent and when it hits the bottom...There will be a display that this town will remember for years to come.” His smile was gentle. “I know it’s more New York than Chicago but... I figured it might give you a little taste of the big city.”

“You...” Natalia stuttered in surprise. “You... you did this... for me?”

He took her shoulders in his hands, leaning down slightly to look into her eyes. “I did this for my family. You are Emma’s mother. That makes you my family.”

Tears welled up in the brunette’s eyes as she wrapped her arms around the tall man, hugging him tightly.

“Uh...” He patted her back carefully, looking over her shoulder at Olivia. “Does this mean she likes it?”

“Oh, she likes it.” She looked at him gratefully, letting the playful battle of wills between them fade for just a moment. Then she smirked. “Hey, what does this red switch do?” She hovered her foot over the wide, flat button at the lying at the bottom of the ball’s path.

“No!” He laughed nervously, stretching a hand out towards her. “C’mon! You wouldn’t...”

“To see the look on you face?” One eyebrow arched wickedly. “I just might.”

“Olivia.”

Natalia’s voice was soft, but the meaning was clear. Slowly, she lowered her foot, coming back to stand beside her lover. She hung her head slightly as she chewed her bottom lip.

“I’m a little thirsty.” Natalia kissed her on the cheek. “Could you get me a drink, sweetheart? Please?”

Olivia nodded, throwing a rueful grin in Phillip’s direction before heading towards the bar.

“I don’t believe it.” He stared after his ex-wife, astonished laughter bubbling up inside of him. “I *never* thought I would see the day that Olivia Spencer ended up on a leash!”

“Trust me, Phillip.” Natalia watched her partner all the way to the bar, enjoying the gentle sway of her hips and the way her outfit accentuated some of her best assets. “If Olivia *is* on a leash... it’s only because she chooses to be there.”

“That says a lot about you.”

“Considering I’m just as bad about her... I think it says a lot about both of us.”

Phillip nodded, watching in silence when Olivia returned and handed Natalia a glass of champagne. Their fingers touched as the glass passed between them, causing them both to breathe in quickly as their eyes met. The connection was visceral, almost physical and Olivia could not stop herself from leaning forward to capture Natalia’s lips with her own.

“Okay!” Phillip clapped his hands together, shaking them slightly for emphasis. “On that note, I think it’s time I saw to my other guests.” He shook his head when they paid no attention to him. “Uhm... the coat room... it’s in the den... when you... you know... get too warm...” He laughed. “Yeah... okay.” Without waiting for a response, he headed back inside.

“Finally,” Olivia mumbled against her lover’s lips as she wrapped her arms around her. “I thought he’d never leave.”

“Be nice.”

“You like it when I’m naughty.”

Natalia felt a bolt of desire run through her, leaving her quivering in its wake. “Considering where we are...” She whispered. “I think it’s safer if I deny that.”

The older woman smiled, kissing her on the forehead before releasing her. “Nice enough?”

“For now.” Natalia took a long drink of her champagne. “How about we get rid of your coat and go find something slow to dance to?”

Olivia’s tongue played across her upper lip. “Oh... I think I like that idea.”

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“Hello?” Olivia tapped the bell on Phillip’s desk, which had been set up as a makeshift coat check table. “Anyone here?” She poked her head around the screen that was blocking the rest of the den from view, whistling softly at the rows of fur and leather already hanging from rolling garment racks. “It looks like anyone who’s anyone in the next four counties is

here tonight.” She picked up the sleeve of a chinchilla coat, holding it with two fingers before dropping it in distaste. “Fur is murder.” She mumbled.

“Technically so is leather.” Natalia stood on tip toe to peek at her over the top of the rack.

“Yeah, but...” The older woman shrugged. “That crime doesn’t seem quite so horrible when it comes with snow peas and a nice merlot.”

Natalia rolled her eyes.

“Where is the attendant?”

“Relax.” The brunette came up behind her, wrapping her arms around her midsection and placing a soft kiss on the back of her neck. “They’re probably on a break. Besides...” She slid her hands up and under the taller woman’s lapels, brushing lightly across her breasts as she peeled away the long, black overcoat. “I’m used to hanging up your clothes.”

Olivia groaned. She quickly turned in Natalia’s arms, pulling their bodies firmly together. She dropped her head, breathing into her ear as she whispered, “What about taking them off...?”

“That too...” Natalia swallowed, her eyes closing automatically as Olivia’s hips pressed into her. She turned her head up to meet the older woman’s lips, losing herself in the kiss until all she could hear was the sound of her own heart beating wildly in her chest. The want... the *need* to be loved by this woman hit her hard; an overwhelming wave of desire that left her senses reeling and her self control in tatters. Suddenly, it didn’t matter where they were, or why they were there...

All that mattered was that Olivia never stopped touching her.

Which meant...

“I need...” She whimpered when the older woman’s teeth bit into her neck. “I need to tell you something.”

“Mmm...” Olivia kissed her way to the tops of Natalia’s breasts, nuzzling them lovingly with her nose while her hands slid dangerously low on her hips. “Tell me what?”

“Wow!” Anna laughed before she could stop herself, quickly bringing her hand up to cover her mouth when Olivia and Natalia looked their way.

"I concur." Doris raised one eyebrow wickedly. "I'd say that making out in the coat room was a bit cliché, but I doubt it ever looked this good. Please, by all means... continue."

Olivia growled deep in her throat as the two women untangled themselves. "Your timing... sucks, as usual Wolfe."

"Oh, I'd say it was just about perfect." She looked back and forth between them. "No? Well... then could you at least hang our coats?"

The older woman pushed passed the still smiling Mayor, grabbing one of the paper tags from the desk. She slapped it into her hand. "Hang it yourself. You're a woman of the people, right?"

They stared at each other for several moments... and then burst into laughter.

"Bad timing or not, I'm glad you could make it." Olivia squeezed Doris' hand warmly.

"Like I could pass up the social event of the year." She shook her head slightly, turning to Anna with an apologetic look. "You know Detective Li."

"Yes." Olivia forced a smile. "It's... nice to see you again. And you know my..." She blinked, biting back the first word that came to mind. "My... partner... Natalia."

"Of course." Anna smiled as they all fell silent.

"Well!" Natalia broke up the uncomfortable moment. "Shall we?"

"You're still wearing your wrap." Doris pointed out.

"Oh..." Natalia adjusted the black cashmere carefully, covering the small red mark she could feel throbbing on the left side of her neck. "I'm a little... cold."

"Funny," The Mayor smirked. "You look kind of flushed to me."

"Ha... yeah, well..." She shrugged. "I think I could use another drink."

"Oh, me, too." Olivia took her by the hand, more than a little surprised when Doris did the same with Anna.

"Lead the way." The detective smiled charmingly at her date.

The entry way was packed with newly arrived guests and Olivia realized they had been lucky that it was Doris and Anna that had stumbled across them in the coat room.

Then again, she laughed softly to herself, it's not like we really have anything else to hide.

The fact that they were a couple had been hot gossip for about a week; the same length of time it took people to realize that they weren't ashamed of it.

It was funny how uninteresting the truth really was.

Now Doris and her new squeeze...

She followed them quietly through the main room, watching the way heads turned in their direction. She could feel each stare as though it was trained on her and shook her head sadly.

"What's wrong?" Natalia asked softly.

"I just think she picked an interesting time to come out."

"What do you mean?"

"Look around." Olivia cast her glance around the room. "Half the people here donated money to fund her last Mayoral campaign. I don't think this is what they were expecting to buy."

Natalia frowned. "You sound like you don't approve."

"It isn't that..." She pulled the brunette to the side. "I just..." She watched as Anna whispered something in Doris' ear, making the older woman laugh. "I just hope she isn't doing this for *her*."

"Anna?" Natalia looked over her shoulder at the two women. "Why? I think they look lovely together."

"There's just..." Olivia cursed softly, unable to put her finger on what she was trying to convey. She settled for the obvious. "There's just something about her I don't trust."

"Ahh..." Natalia smiled knowingly.

"What?" She pulled the other woman closer. "What?"

“Mama Bear is protective.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Doris Wolfe is not my cub.” She raised her voice slightly to be heard over the music.

“Maybe not; but she *is* your friend.”

“I don’t have very many of those.” Olivia nodded slowly, cupping the side of Natalia’s face with one hand. “And you finally made me realize just how much they’re worth.” She plucked a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter, turning to hide the emotion in her eyes. “I don’t want to see her get hurt.” She took a quick drink. “Unless I can film it...”

It was so classically Olivia; hiding her soft side behind sarcasm and cynicism; that Natalia felt her heart swell to almost painful levels. For the hundredth time that day she sent up a little prayer, thanking God for leading her to this incredible woman... and for giving her the strength to come back to the one place she knew she truly belonged. She was connected to Olivia in every way imaginable.

One of which she was missing very, *very* much.

“I’m ready.” She blurted out.

The older woman smiled at her. “Ready for what, sweetheart?” She upended her glass, draining the contents just as the band finished its set.

“Ready for sex!”

Those three words rang out over the lull in party conversation, sending Olivia into a coughing fit as she choked on her champagne and turning Natalia’s cheeks a deep shade of red.

At the bar, Doris just shook her head in amusement.

“Wait...” Anna blinked in confusion. “They’ve never had sex?”

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ACT 3

Olivia covered her mouth with her hand, coughing quietly as she tried not to die from embarrassment. She was used to finding the humor in most things, even when the

laughter was turned in her direction. But Natalia... she didn't like it when people laughed at Natalia.

Taking the brunette gently by the elbow, she led her over to the bar, accepting the napkin Doris handed her with a grateful nod.

"Okaaaay." She dabbed at her lips, drying them off while trying not to smear her lipstick. "Let's try that again. What?"

Natalia looked nervously at the trio of women.

"Doris," Anna took her lover's hand. "I think I heard the first few notes of 'I Will Survive' in the 70's room. I love Gloria Gaynor. Wanna come be my dancing queen?"

"That's ABBA." Doris answered absently, watching her two friends with keen interest.

Anna rolled her eyes. "Come on, Mayor Wolfe. I think Olivia and Natalia need some alone time."

"What? Why?" Doris looked truly baffled. "I want to watch!"

"Oh my god!" She laughed. "You're about as subtle as an anvil." She dragged the protesting women away.

Olivia shook her head before focusing on Natalia, surprised to find her lover's forehead creased with a frown. She reached out and gently smoothed the lines away with her thumb before trailing her fingers down the smaller woman's cheek.

Natalia leaned into her hand, closing her eyes and exhaling slowly as the familiar touch both calmed and unsettled her. "I'm sorry." She whispered.

"For what?"

"I... I didn't mean to... blurt it out like that."

Olivia smiled, glancing up as she drew Natalia into her arms, holding her gently. "I've gotten used to it." The other woman's soft laughter was her reward. She felt her relax in her arms and began to sway to the slow song the band was playing. "Listen..." She took a deep breath when Natalia laid her head against her shoulder, closing her eyes as her hands wandered aimlessly up and down the smaller woman's back. "I know you want to make me happy. But you can't rush this, sweetheart. I miss us...being together..." She swallowed as a

hundred different images of their lovemaking flashed through her mind. “*God...* I miss it... But it isn’t worth the risk. The last thing I would ever want to do is hurt you.”

Natalia pulled back, looking up at her shyly through thick black lashes. “I know.” She whispered. “But that’s what I’m trying to tell you.” She leaned her forehead against Olivia’s chin, sighing happily when she felt the older woman’s lips brush tenderly across her skin. “Do you remember this morning, at my appointment? Dr. Rick was in the middle of going over my test results when Francesca decided she had to have her wubby?”

Olivia laughed. “How could I forget?”

Their little girl’s ‘wubby’ was an incredibly soft pink baby blanket that had been a gift from her sister Ava. She had slept with it every night since she had been born and demanded, quite loudly, that it be brought with them anywhere they went. That morning it had been left in the car and as soon as Francesca had woken up, she had been very vocal in her displeasure of that fact. Olivia had taken her to retrieve it and missed the last fifteen minutes of Natalia’s appointment.

“Well...” Natalia chewed on her bottom lip. “While you were gone... Rick told me that it was okay for me to have sex again.”

Olivia blinked. “Can we do that again in slow motion?”

“Rick... he told me that I’ve healed a lot more quickly than anyone expected and... as long as we don’t get *too* crazy...” She blushed a lovely shade of red. “That it would be okay if we...” She waved her hand in between their bodies. “You know...”

The older woman couldn’t help snickering. “I think the whole room knows, sweetheart.” She grew serious again. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I knew if I said anything we’d never leave the house.” She sighed. “And tonight was important to me.”

Olivia looked around the room. It was beautiful, but it was also filled with people she barely knew. Aside from a few close friends, they were mostly business contacts and strangers. “Why?”

“Because... we’re always being defined by something...” She closed her eyes and leaned into Olivia, falling into the rhythm of the music. “Your past, my religion, our children...” She swallowed heavily. “Just once... I wanted everyone to see *us*... for what we really are.”

The older woman felt tears stinging her eyes and looked up at the ceiling, tucking Natalia's head under her chin as she tried to use gravity to keep them from falling. "What are we?" She whispered.

"Don't you know?"

"Yes." She laughed gently. "But I really need to hear you say it."

"We're a couple. Partners, lovers... Girlfriends..." A silly smile blossomed on Natalia's lips as she raised her hand, playing idly with one of Olivia's buttons. "Just two people who fell in love despite everything that got in our way. Everyone keeps looking for a reason..." She glanced around the room, her smile fading slightly. "But the only *reason* is that you and I... we were meant to be together."

"And you thought coming here tonight would show people that?" The older woman leaned her head down, rubbing their cheeks together softly. "Is it working?"

"You tell me."

Olivia looked around, unsurprised to find most of the attention in the room focused on them. What did surprise her though, was how many smiles were directed their way. There were still a few cold stares, and the odd look of confusion here and there, but by and large the attention was warm... and approving.

"Damn!" She looked down into Natalia's smiling face. "You're pretty smart."

"That's why you love me."

"Is that why?"

"Yup." The younger woman smirked. "Someone has to do the thinking."

"Ohhhh!" Olivia twirled her carefully as the music switched to a light Latin beat, stepping back until their fingertips were barely touching and then pulling her back firmly into her arms. "I think I may be rubbing off on you a little too much."

"Actually," Natalia tucked her thigh between Olivia's legs as the older woman dipped her, pressing into her firmly when she pulled her back up. "I don't think you've been doing that *enough*."

Olivia closed her eyes, her heart beating double time when Natalia stayed close, their hips grinding together in a way that was just north of obscene. "You're asking for trouble..." She sang softly.

The brunette slid her hand up Olivia's side, skirting the edge of one breast with her fingertips as she leaned in to whisper, "Oh, I'd say I'm *begging* for it..."

Olivia pulled back as though she had been burned, taking long, ragged breaths as she studied her lover intently. After a moment, she smirked. "Be careful what you wish for."

Grabbing Natalia by the hand, she pulled her across the room towards the stairs.

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"Where are they going?" Anna looked up from the table in time to see Olivia and Natalia heading up the stairs. They had gotten as far as the buffet before Doris gently suggested they wait on the dancing.

"Who knows," The other woman shrugged. She was staring into the rabbit-shaped ice sculpture on their table, trying to make out what was frozen inside of it. "They're probably sneaking off somewhere romantic."

Anna raised her eyebrows at the older woman's tone. "Does that bother you?"

"No." Doris sighed. She picked up her knife and began to poke at the side of the bunny. "It's just that... it used to bother *them*, you know? Olivia was scared of what it all meant... Natalia was terrified of what people might think. Now... it's like they don't even care."

Anna reached out and took the knife away from her, brushing the ice chips off the table as she tossed the older woman a sardonic look. "Should they?"

"They just...they make it look so easy!"

"I know I haven't been in town very long but, from everything I've heard, their relationship was anything but easy." She picked up a shrimp and popped it into her mouth, humming in pleasure at the flavor. "In fact, unless half of the rumors I've heard are pure hyperbole, I'd say it's a miracle they're together at all."

"What have you heard?"

“Well...” Anna pursed her lips “That Olivia tried to steal Natalia’s husband?”

“That one’s true.” Doris snatched one of the sushi rolls off the younger woman’s plate.
“What else?”

“Did Natalia really almost kill her by locking her in a bathroom?”

“Yes,” Doris munched on the food happily. Good sushi was so hard to find! “But, in Natalia’s defense, there were extenuating circumstances.”

“Death by bathroom...” Anna scratched her head. “I don’t even know how I would write that up.” She shook her head, looking at the other woman skeptically. “Did Natalia *really* give Olivia her husband?”

“Mmmhmm.” Doris nodded.

“And then when he died, she gave Olivia his *heart?!?*”

“Yup, all true.” Doris took a sip of her wine. “But, it does even out. Eventually Olivia gave up her dream job so that Natalia could have her dream house.”

“Even though they hated each other?”

She nodded as she crunched into a breadstick.

“Oh yeah...” Anna rolled her eyes. “Easy!”

Doris sighed. “Love... hate.... They’re both sides of the same coin. I guess it just depends what side that coin happens to land on.”

There was something so wistful in the older woman’s voice that Anna reached out and took her hand. She thought for a minute that Doris might shake it off, pull away, but after a moment, she wrapped their fingers together, holding on tightly.

“Did you lose the toss?” Anna asked softly.

Doris stared at her for a moment. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You and Olivia... seem close-“

“Olivia...” Doris cut her off. Stopping short, she lowered her voice before continuing. “Olivia was a pain in my ass that... somehow... became dear to my heart. I’m glad she’s happy.”

Anna nodded slowly, feeling a retreat from this particular topic was in order. “Then why are you upset?”

“Because I...” She pulled her hand away, clasping them together in her lap as she looked around. “Because I want the same things and I can’t seem to figure out how to get them.”

“Isn’t that what tonight’s all about?”

“It is.” She laughed bitterly. “I’m just... not doing it very well.”

“Actually,” Anna slid her chair closer. Picking up the Mayor’s arm, she draped it around her shoulders, snuggling in close to her side. “I think you’re doing just fine.”

Doris stared down at the younger woman, mesmerized by the black pools of her eyes. She glanced at her mouth and that was her undoing. Slowly, without even realizing she was doing it, she lowered her head until she could almost taste the champagne on Anna’s full, red lips.

“Doris?”

The Mayor sat up quickly, pulling her arm back to her side as she looked around to see who had called her name. She paled when she saw Blake standing next to their table. “Oh... Hi!”

“Hi.” Blake looked from Doris to the pretty young Asian woman sitting by her side. She knew who Anna Li was; she had seen her at the station when she brought lunch to Frank, but she had never met her.

And for the life of her she couldn’t imagine why she would be at the Spaulding’s New Year’s Eve party... with Doris Wolfe no less.

When the Mayor made no move to introduce them the redhead smiled and held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Blake Marler.”

“Anna Li.” The young woman shook her hand firmly. “I’ve seen you around the station. Aren’t you dating...” Her eyes widened slightly. “Chief Cooper.”

The man in question walked up behind Blake, placing a hand possessively in the small of her back. "Detective Li, I wasn't aware you had been invited to the party."

"She's here as my guest." Doris finally spoke up, her back stiffening slightly.

"I see." Frank looked back and forth between the two women. "That's... interesting."

"Not really," Doris stood, holding out her hand to help Anna from her chair. "I'd think you'd be used to it by now." Frank's cheeks reddened slightly, but the Mayor held up a hand before he could speak. "Truce?" She smiled good-naturedly. "At least for the party?"

Blake took him by the arm, squeezing gently. Frank looked at her for a moment and then smiled, but it never reached his eyes. "Agreed."

She eyed him slowly, starting at the ground up. When she reached his head, Doris pursed her lips. "You look very... dashing in your dress blues, Frank. But isn't it customary to remove your hat in the presence of a lady?"

He opened his mouth to say something but stopped abruptly when Doris looked pointedly at Blake. Flushing, he pulled the cap from his head and tucked it under his arm. He bowed slightly to his date. "My apologies."

Blake nodded. "It's okay Frank."

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" His smile faded quickly. "I'd like a word with Detective Li."

"Of course."

Doris glanced at Anna, raising her eyebrows, but the Asian woman just shook her head. She squeezed her hand quickly before letting it go. "I'll be right back."

When Frank had pulled her out of earshot, Doris turned her attention back to Blake, taking in the other woman's outfit slowly.

It was a calf-length emerald green cocktail dress that wrapped tightly around her midsection, accentuating her ample chest without being obvious. The neckline was square cut, with tight, off-the-shoulder sleeves that hugged her arms the way the skirt hugged her thighs, making her look svelte and sleek, all while bringing out the fiery red highlights in her hair. Black three-inch stiletto's finished the outfit off with style and Doris couldn't help whistling under her breath.

“Stop.” Blake laid a hand on her arm, flushing a deep red as her smile gave away her gratitude.

“I’m sorry.” Doris pulled the hand from her arm, holding it out to the side to get a better view. “But I have to say... you look incredible tonight.”

The redhead tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, asking shyly, “Do you really think so?”

“Hasn’t Frank told you that?”

“Oh, well...” Blake frowned slightly. “He’s been... busy. There are a lot of people here who have monopolized his time.” She shook her head when Doris looked at her sadly. “No, it’s fine. Really. Besides... they say compliments from women are more sincere.”

“They are.” The Mayor smiled, slowly dropping her arm but not letting go. “They really are. And since your date has failed on so many levels this evening,” She laughed when Blake rolled her eyes. “Allow me to also say, that you are very much a lady.” Without thinking, she brought the hand she was holding up to her lips, kissing Blake’s knuckles gently.

The other woman’s soft intake of breath was all it took to bring her back to reality and Doris let go quickly, bringing a hand up to cover her mouth. “I’m... I’m so sorry.” She stammered. “I don’t know why I did that...”

Blake just stared at her with wide eyes as she rubbed her hands together slowly. “It’s okay.” She finally whispered, a watery smile making its way onto her lips. “It’s... uhm...” The smile brightened. “It was... nice.”

Doris could only stare, her mouth slightly open as she realized that, for one of the few times in her life, she had absolutely no idea what to say.

Across the room, Frank had pulled Anna into the corner, standing between her and the two women they had just left at the table.

The detective sighed, wondering if the man had any innate cop abilities whatsoever. A first-year rookie knew not to turn his back on a room, no matter what the situation. “What did you need, Chief?”

Frank leaned in close, lowering his voice. “Look, I know about your...” He waffled his hand in the air between them. “...persuasion, and that’s fine. It’s none of my business what you do in your private life. But what I don’t understand is what you are doing *here*, with *her*.” He held up his hand when she tried to respond. “I get that you have aspirations, Li, I really do, but that... piranha... is going to end up doing you more harm than good. I have known

Doris Wolfe a long time and I can say from experience that the woman is poison. So do yourself a favor and drop her, before the damage is irreparable.”

Anna stared at him, completely astounded that the man had the nerve to even have this conversation with her. Taking a deep breath, she tried to hold on to her temper. “First of all, you’re right; my private life is none of your business. And since tonight definitely qualifies as *my private life* I am going to respectfully tell you to butt the hell out. Secondly...uh...” She glanced over his shoulder, stumbling slightly on her words when she saw Doris kiss Blake’s hand. “You...” She shook her head, refocusing. “You might want to worry a little less about my date and a little more about yours. Who the hell wears their hat inside anyway?”

Anna walked away without waiting for a response. When she reached the table, she smiled sweetly at Blake before taking Doris by the hand. “I want to dance.” She said firmly.

“Oh...uh... okay.” Doris nodded, allowing herself to be led away. “Bye.”

Blake raised her hand, staring at it strangely as she waved. “Bye.”

“Everything all right?” Frank slid his arm around her waist and kissed her on the cheek.

“What?” She asked absently.

“Is everything okay?” He looked at her closely, his forehead furrowing in confusion.

“Oh! Yeah,” She frowned slightly, watching the two women until they disappeared into the sea of bodies dancing in the next room. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

~~*~*

“So...” Anna pulled Doris all the way through the ‘disco’ room, not stopping until they were in the farthest corner from the door. “You want to tell me what that was all about, Casanova?”

Doris blinked innocently. “What?”

She rolled her eyes, trying not to smile. “I saw you! What, did you trip and your lips just happened to land on her hand? C’mon, Wolfe! You can’t need the votes *that* badly!”

“Honestly?”

Anna nodded.

"I have no idea *what* the hell that was." Doris sighed. "I'm all over the place tonight. I feel like I'm splitting in two and the wrong half keeps grabbing the reins." She stroked the younger woman's cheek gently. "I'm sorry."

"No..." Anna leaned into her touch. "Don't be sorry. It's not like you made out with her or anything. You're under a lot of pressure. I can see how that might make you a little crazy..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes narrowed. "Or maybe... maybe you were just trying to get a rise out of Cooper!"

Doris raised one eyebrow, making Anna laugh.

"Okay, but here's the deal." The Asian woman pointed a finger at her. "For the rest of the night, those lips are mine. Beyond that, we can always renegotiate."

The Mayor smiled. "Deal." She took both of Anna's hands in hers, moving closer as "How Deep Is Your Love" played softly in the background.

They began to dance and a part of her was relieved that the conversation had ended so quickly; that Anna had been so willing to accept such a simple explanation.

But another part of her still wondered...

What the hell just happened?

~~*~*

"Ow!"

"What's the matter?" Natalia asked anxiously.

"I ran into something with my knee." Olivia grumbled. "Why the hell does Phillip have all the lights off up here?"

"Maybe because he wants his guests to stay on the first floor?" The brunette snickered.

"Shush you." She found a door and pushed it open, her lips quirking into a silly smile as she glanced around blindly, "Oh my god..." She slid her hand along the wall, trying to find the light switch. "How is it possible that I can still get lost in this place?"

"Well... it *is* obscenely huge." Natalia said quietly.

"Why are you whispering?"

“Because I know where we are.”

Olivia’s fingers finally located the small pad on the wall and she ran her thumb across it, blinking as the lights flashed on from recessed fixtures overhead. She grinned when she recognized the tall stacks lining the walls from floor to ceiling; her eyes lingering on the long, deeply burnished oak ladder that clung to a thin brass rail above the shelves.

“The Library.” She breathed in deeply, closing her eyes as the scent of dry paper and old ink filled her nostrils. “Mmmm. Gotta love that smell!”

“I do.”

Olivia turned to look at her lover, one eyebrow raised. “Why are you still whispering?”

“Because...” She waved a hand around the room. “We’re in the library.”

The older woman blinked. “We’re in *a* library. Not *the* library.”

Natalia shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not the room.” She leaned in closer, lowering her voice even more. “It’s the books.”

Olivia pressed her lips together firmly. She looked around. “I don’t think they’re going to complain.”

The brunette rolled her eyes. “Stop it!” She slapped her lightly on the arm. “Books are sacred.”

“All of them? I kind of thought you just felt that way about one particular book.”

“You’re just... you...” She sighed. “You’re going to make me crazy about this aren’t you?”

“It’s not quite midnight,” The older woman smirked. “No reason to break with tradition just yet.”

Natalia walked around the room, gently trailing her fingers across the books as she passed by. “I always loved to read.” She pulled one of her favorites off the shelf, a huge smile on her face. “Little Women.”

“How did I know that you’d love that one?”

She stuck her tongue out at the older woman, making her laugh. “When I was young, my Daddy always brought me home a new book every payday.” She touched the spine of the

novel lovingly. "Little Women was the last one he ever gave me." She slid it back into its spot on the shelf. "Anyway, after I got pregnant I couldn't afford them anymore, so I used to reward myself with a library book once a week instead. No matter how tired I was, I would read a little bit of it each night, at first just to myself, and then out loud to Rafe after he was born."

Olivia watched the dimples appear in Natalia cheeks when she smiled and couldn't stay away. Coming up behind her, she wrapped her hands around the smaller woman's biceps, pulling her back tightly against her chest. Natalia hummed happily, rolling her head to the side as Olivia's lips traveled from her ear down to her neck.

"We had... traditions..." She swallowed when Olivia's teeth grazed across her pulse point. "I'd read... The Gift of the Magi every... every Christmas... *oh...*" She bit down on her lip, her breathing ragged as Olivia's nails scratched lightly up her arms, running under the black wrap to trail down into the deep V of her cleavage. "And... uhm... Where the... Where the Red Fern Grows... every summer." Her back arched when the older woman's hands briefly cupped her breasts before splaying out across her stomach, palms gliding firmly over crimson silk as they headed downward. "In the fall, it was... it..." Olivia's hands slid onto her thighs, her fingers curling slowly, dragging Natalia's dress up her legs as she pressed herself against the brunette's backside. "*Oh my god...*"

"I don't know that one." Olivia snickered.

"Don't... don't make fun." Natalia began to move her hips in small circles, caught up in the exquisite torture of her lover grinding into her. "Some of my best memories... are of books."

Olivia closed her eyes, nuzzling into Natalia's ear as she whispered, "Some of my best fantasies are too."

Natalia turned her head to stare up at her. "Fantasies?"

"Oh yeah..."

"What..." She swallowed heavily when Olivia's fingers finally touched bare skin. "What kind of fantasies?"

Olivia froze and Natalia could feel her heart pounding hard against her back. "Are you serious?"

"Tell me." She reached up, running her index finger across Olivia's mouth. Her eyes fluttered shut when she felt the other woman's tongue brush across it.

“I’d rather show you...”

The whisper was accompanied by a full body press, making Natalia groan loudly. Unable to speak, she merely nodded, leaning forward to rest her head against one of the shelves when the presence at her back suddenly disappeared. She heard the heavy ‘click’ of a dead bolt being turned, followed by several desk drawers opening and closing and then a quiet ‘Yes!’ that sounded strangely triumphant.

“What are you doing?” She asked nervously.

“Turn around.”

She turned slowly, her bottom lip held firmly between her teeth, to find Olivia with her hands behind her back and a strange little smile on her face.

“Oh, that’s perfect.” The older woman breathed. Leaning forward, she kissed her, biting down on her lip hard enough to make it sting before pulling away. “You have to promise to do what I say... otherwise this won’t work.”

“What are we doing?” Natalia asked breathlessly, a dark flush already working its way up her cheeks.

“No.” Olivia shook her head. “Promise me.”

The brunette hesitated.

“Do you trust me?”

Natalia’s eyes held the only answer she needed. “I promise.”

“Okay,” She pulled one hand out from behind her back. “Put these on.”

The younger woman’s jaw dropped slightly when she was handed a small pair of glasses. “What?”

“Put them on.”

“But... they’re not... mine...”

“They’re just reading glasses.” Olivia assured her. “They won’t hurt your eyes.”

“Oh...okay.” Laughing softly, she slid them on. “How’s this?”

“Hmmm...wait.” She took hold of the frames, gently pulling them forward until they rested further down her nose. “Perfect.” She kicked off her boots and then pulled her other hand out from behind her back, handing Natalia a book.

The brunette took it slowly, biting down on the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. “Moby Dick?”

“The title doesn’t matter!”

“Okay, okay I’m sorry.” She tried to look serious. “What do you want me to do?”

One eyebrow arched wickedly. “Tell me it’s overdue.”

Natalia’s eyes widened. “I beg your pardon?”

Instantly, Olivia went from smiling seductress to naïve young girl. “I’m returning my library book... ma’am.” She hung her head slightly, the corner of her mouth twitching as she looked up at her with big green eyes.

“I... I don’t know what to do...” She shrugged helplessly.

Olivia moved closer. She kept her hands down at her sides, pressing in with her body until Natalia was forced backwards. “All those years... all those books...” She smiled when the younger woman backed up into the ladder, reaching out to grab the rails on either side of her, holding her in place. “There has to be one librarian out there somewhere... just one... that made you think naughty thoughts...”

“All the...” Natalia’s breath caught when the older woman’s hands moved from the ladder to her hips, her fingers squeezing firmly. “They were all... women.”

“So?” Olivia laughed softly at her lover’s surprised expression. “You can’t tell me you never had a girl crush.” She leaned in, rubbing their cheeks together before breathing into her ear, “Come on, Natalia. One sweet, pretty little thing... the kind you’d stay late for, shelve books for...do anything for.” Her thumbs began to move in small circles, inching their way towards the nipples that were hardening beneath her dress. “The kind that might make you keep a book out a day or two longer than you were supposed to... just to get her attention?”



Natalia gasped when Olivia's hands finally reached their destination. Moving with slow intent, the older woman ran her fingers back and forth across the pebbled flesh.

"Your book..." Natalia closed her eyes, swallowing hard.

"What about it?"

"It's... overdue."

Olivia smiled. She pressed in closer, dragging the brunette's skirt up as she used one foot to slide her legs apart. Natalia groaned and tried to kiss her but she pulled her head away. "And?"

"And... there's... *oh*..." She dropped her head back against the ladder when Olivia placed her foot on the first rung, using the leverage to press her thigh firmly into the ache between her legs. "There's... a fine..."

The other woman blinked innocently. "But I don't have any money..."

Her eyes flew open when Natalia's fingers tangled fiercely in her hair, pulling her head back so that the younger woman could stare down at her. "Then I guess you're just going to have to work it off." She growled.

She brought her lips down hard, stealing Olivia's breath with the force of her kiss as her free hand worked at the buttons on her vest. When it was loose, she slipped her hand

inside, her fingers closing over a swollen nipple hard enough to make the older woman gasp.

That sharp burst of pleasure mixed in with the slight, stinging pain was enough to jolt Olivia out of her shock. She pulled Natalia forward roughly, her heart skipping a beat at the younger woman's delighted laughter. With a small moan she slid her fingers into soft, dark hair, tugging it free from the carefully designed chignon to let it flow over her hands and down across the smaller woman's back.

"I love you." She whispered, not giving the other woman a chance to respond before claiming her lips in a soul-searing kiss. Closing her eyes, she lost herself in the feel of Natalia's mouth, of the tongue brushing firmly against her own. In the back of her mind, her memory ran through a thousand different images, each of them depicting a moment in time when the two of them could have kissed, when they *should* have kissed... and didn't. That desire resurfaced now, maddening in its intensity and so overwhelming that she didn't pull away to breathe until small spots danced before her eyes.

Panting for breath, Natalia pulled at the front of Olivia's tuxedo shirt, unable to get it open because of the silver button covers holding it in place. She whimpered in frustration and Olivia crossed her arms over her chest, pulling the whole thing up and over her head.

"Oh..." The brunette looked at her lover through heavily lidded eyes, taking in the soft swells of her breasts, her hardened nipples protruding clearly from beneath black silk and lace. She cupped them both in her hands, squeezing them firmly, reveling in the feel of the sharp points jabbing into her palms.

Olivia closed her eyes tightly, licking her lips as a sharp spike of desire traveled from her breasts down to the juncture between her legs, causing the ache that had been there for weeks to escalate to an almost unbearable level. "Natalia..." The word came out strangled, her throat closed by desire, but it was all that her lover needed to hear.

She felt nimble fingers work the clasp at the back of her skirt, felt the zipper being released before the fabric was pushed down and off her hips. And then Natalia's palm was on her stomach, her fingers sliding down beneath the black silk of her panties to coat themselves in the liquid heat between her thighs.

"Oh god..." Olivia cried out sharply, her hips rocking wildly when Natalia's fingers sought out and found the hard ridge of flesh at the top of her cleft; playing across it in long, languid strokes that made her back arch and her toes curl.

“God, you are so beautiful...” She heard Natalia whisper, but before she could answer, the younger woman’s mouth was on her breast, her lips and teeth suckling against her nipple and she could no longer speak... it was all she could do to breathe.

Olivia held on tightly, her nails scrambling under the black cashmere wrap to scratch across smooth skin and soft flesh. She tried to think, tried to speak, but the feel of Natalia’s hands on her was overwhelming, the pleasure so intense that she could already feel her orgasm growing quickly.

Then Natalia’s hand slid around her back; she felt it brace against her spine and had just enough time to take a single breath before her lover buried three fingers deep inside of her.

“*Oh fuck!*” She curled her hand around the back of Natalia’s head pulling her closer while her other hand clawed at her back. She felt the fingers inside of her begin to thrust, slowly at first, then faster; felt the tips of them curve in and she began to shudder, her head falling back as wave after wave of ecstasy crashed through her. When the final wave hit, it took all the strength from her knees, sending her tumbling forward into Natalia’s arms, her body trembling and weak from the strength of her release.

“I’ve got you.” The younger woman stroked her hair gently, her lips placing small kisses along Olivia’s cheek and forehead as she held her tightly. “I’ve got you.”

“Yes, you do.” She laughed softly; burying her face in Natalia’s neck as she pulled the cashmere wrap from around her shoulders. She waited until her heart beat normally and then tested her legs by walking over to Phillip’s desk, laying the wrap across it before turning around to stare into Natalia’s eyes.

The desire in that gaze was so intense that Natalia felt her nipples tighten from across the room. She had a hard time breathing as Olivia walked towards her; a goddess with green eyes and wild hair, full of wicked intent.

Olivia recognized the wide-eyed look and smiled. It was the same as the first time she had kissed her and she knew now just as she had known then, that this woman; this infuriating, frustrating... wonderful woman... was the light and love of her life.

She stopped an inch away from Natalia, the sweet smile on her face at odds with the wicked gleam in her eyes. “Turn around.” She said softly.

Natalia didn’t hesitate and she was rewarded by Olivia pressing herself tightly against her back as she slowly took each of her arms and raised it over her head, using her own hands to wrap Natalia’s fingers around one of the upper rungs of the rolling ladder.

“We don’t want to damage this lovely dress.”

Natalia eyes half-closed when Olivia freed the clasp on the back of her gown; slowly inching the zipper down until the dress was a puddle on the floor around her ankles. The older woman lifted her leather-clad feet one at a time, pulling the dress free to toss it over Phillip’s high-backed chair.

The dress had a built in bustier, which meant she hadn’t been wearing a bra and Natalia began to drop her arms, wanting to cross them over her chest.

“No.”

She froze at that one word.

“Put them back where they were.”

She did as she was told; breathing in sharply when she felt Olivia’s hardened nipples press into the sensitive skin beneath her shoulder blades. The older woman gripped her hips firmly, pulling them back until they were tucked snugly against her groin, leaving her bent forward slightly as she gripped the ladder.

“Now keep them there.”

Olivia’s voice was low, gravelly, almost like it was when she woke up in the morning and Natalia felt her thigh muscles clench in response. Making love with Olivia first thing in the morning was one of her very favorite things to do; that voice being one of the major reasons.

“Do you know how beautiful you are?” Olivia asked softly, her hands gliding up to cup Natalia’s breasts. “How perfect you are...” She groaned as the brunette’s nipples hardened even more. “How fucking good you feel?” She pressed into her backside, unable to stop her hand from sliding down the younger woman’s stomach and onto her thigh.

Natalia’s entire body trembled. It had been so long... She felt Olivia’s teeth close on her shoulder and cried out softly, “Please... Olivia... please don’t make me wait...*touch me...*” She whimpered when strong fingers slid between her thighs, stroking through the wet heat to find the small nub of flesh that seemed to be connected to every nerve-ending in her body. “Yes....”

Olivia’s jaws clamped shut, biting off a groan that felt like it had been pulled from the very depths of her soul. All the weeks, all the days, all the hours and minutes of waiting for this moment culminated in a need so huge that it was indefinable, indescribable...

uncontrollable. It felt as though some part of her had been hollow, empty; like a vessel waiting for Natalia to fill her and make her whole again. With something akin to shock she realized that it wasn't just the sex she had missed.

It was the connection. The raw, visceral link they created whenever they made love. All consuming, it went beyond the physical, creating an orgy of emotions and sensations that never failed to set her on fire from the inside out.

And she was burning *now*, the heat threatening to make her lose all control.

Olivia took a deep breath and slowed the movement of her fingers, keeping a gentle rhythm that nearly drove Natalia to distraction. It felt incredibly good, but more than anything, she needed Olivia to make her scream; to take her hard and fast, muttering vulgar words in her ear while she did it.

And there was only one way she knew of to get her lover to do that.

"I want you to fuck me, Olivia..." She whispered. "*Please...*"

She felt the woman behind her tremble, felt her fight to control herself and knew the exact moment when that fight was over.

Olivia slammed into her from behind, her hand squeezing one breast firmly as she increased the tempo of her fingers. "What did you say?"

"I said..." Natalia gasped softly, pushing back hard with her hips, grinding her backside into the other woman. "*Fuck me.*"

It was all she needed to say.

Olivia never went inside, which was what Natalia really wanted, but she increased the speed of her fingers until it no longer mattered.

Natalia half-laughed, half-cried as her head slammed back onto Olivia's shoulder, her back arching so severely that she had to let go of the ladder. She was vaguely aware of teeth biting into her neck, of lips that suckled against her so hard that she knew they would leave *another* mark.

But none of that mattered either.

All that mattered were the colors that blossomed behind her closed eyes, the liquid joy that sang through her veins and the woman that was responsible for all of it. Crying out

loudly, she let herself go, feeling the edges of her vision darken as her orgasm ripped through her.

When she came to her senses she was sitting on something incredibly soft; something warm that felt like silk against her skin. She looked over her shoulder, a happy smile curling her lips when loving green eyes blinked back at her.

Somehow, Olivia had managed to get them both into Phillip's chair, with her sitting in it and Natalia curled up on her lap.

She sighed happily, snuggling into her lover as best she could with bones that felt like jelly. She noted absently that her legs felt strange and glanced down, choking on her laughter. "I'm still wearing my boots."

Olivia shrugged; the movement sending little shock-waves sensation down her body. "Seems fitting... considering..."

"Don't!" Natalia stopped her with a kiss, laughing sympathetically when Olivia whimpered in pain.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" The older woman asked.

"That we can never go this long without making love again?"

"That, too," Olivia nodded. "But actually... I was thinking it's a good thing this chair is made of leather."

~~*~*

ACT 4

Doris frowned.

She had lost the plot. She didn't know when it had happened or how it happened, but she had definitely lost the plot.

She stared into the bathroom mirror, the cold water she had just splashed on her face falling back into the basin in small rivulets. She had hoped that it would cool her skin, lessen the flush that had traveled up her neck to pink her cheeks and ears, but all she had really succeeded in doing was wasting the hour she had spent putting on her make-up before the party.

There was a small pyramid of rolled hand towels next to the sink and she picked one up with a sigh, wondering what the hell was wrong with her. The night had been going so beautifully... right up until...

She closed her eyes, leaning heavily on the counter as she accepted the fact that there was only one way to describe what had happened.

Doris Wolfe, Mayor of Springfield, long time lesbian and political badass... had freaked.

Plain and simple

Hanging her head, Doris closed her eyes, fighting the urge to yell obscenities at the jerk in the mirror. She knew that it wouldn't help; it might make her feel better, but it certainly wouldn't help. She had broken the cardinal rule of politics.

Don't run... *ever*.

Even if you're doing the most idiotic thing on the planet, you smile and wave like you're at a baseball game eating hot dogs and crapping apple pie.

Act guilty and the public *will* convict you. Maybe only in the court of public opinion but in her world, it was the only court that mattered.

Doris leaned up against the wall; softly banging her head on it like she thought it might knock some sense into her.

She had spent the last two hours dancing with Anna, jumping from room to room as they chased the slow grinds from the '60's up through the '80's. The younger woman had tried to drag her into the Rave room but Doris had declined, laughing at the pouty little faces her date was making to try and change her mind.

It struck her then, at that moment... that she was happy. That she was doing exactly what she wanted to be doing and the world wasn't crashing down around her ears.

Enchanted, she had looped her hand around the back of Anna's neck and pulled her close, cupping one cheek as she ran her thumb across those full, gorgeous lips.

Anna had closed her eyes, tilting her face up and it was an invitation that Doris could not refuse. She leaned forward, not stopping until she could almost taste the other woman's breath on her tongue. And that was when it happened.

All of the music stopped.

Doris had looked up to see every head in the Rave room turned in their direction. For a moment, she was completely frozen.

Then she let go of Anna so fast that the younger woman had actually stumbled backwards, losing her balance and ending up on her ass.

That was when Doris had bolted; mumbling some lame-ass apology under her breath as she took off.

The bathroom was the first private place she had come across and she had ducked inside quickly, locking the door behind her.

Now, twenty minutes later, she felt like a fool.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” She asked her reflection

She had hurt Anna.

And worse... when she had dropped the Asian woman like she had the plague, just for a moment there had been a look of utter disappointment on her face. It was there and gone so quickly that most people would have missed it.

But Doris had spent her whole life watching for that look and to her it was as plain as the egg on her face.

“Fuck.” She whispered

There was a soft knock on the door and Doris felt her heart jump into her throat. Part of her hoped like hell that it was Anna, coming to tell her that everything was alright.

But another part of her knew... she just wasn't that lucky.

“Doris?” A soft voice called through the door. “I know you're in there.”

The Mayor blinked, confusion slowing her recognition. “Blake?”

“Yeah. C'mon, let me in.”

She hesitated for a moment. There was no other way out of the bathroom and if she knew Blake, the woman would not give up. With a loud sigh, she walked over to the door, unlocking it and opening it just wide enough to allow the other woman to slip through before slamming it shut again.

Once it was closed, she leaned her head against it for so long that Blake finally came up behind her, ducking her head down to smile at her gently. "Hi."

Doris banged her head softly against the door. "Hi."

"Stop it." The redhead slid her hand between her forehead and the door, frowning when Doris didn't listen. "Hey, come on, stop it." She took her by the shoulders and turned her around, looking suddenly at a loss for words when the Mayor's attention was focused directly at her. "Uhm... that was quite a sprint you did." Blake smiled, pulling her hands away and crossing her arms over her chest. "You're in pretty good shape for a politician."

"Oh god...", Doris groaned, covering her face with her hands. "I'm such an ass."

"I think the jury's still out on that, sweetie." She patted her awkwardly on the back. "But... you should know... that no one was looking at you and Anna."

Doris snorted. "Thanks, Blake but... I saw it with my own eyes."

"No... What you saw was everyone's attention turned towards the door." She smiled sympathetically. "They were looking at the monitors, Doris. There's one sitting right inside each room. The music stopped because Phillip was on them, doing his forty-five minute's till midnight speech. He's pretty excited about his fireworks display..." Her voice trailed off when she saw the look of absolute shock on Doris' face. "Didn't you see them when you were dancing?" Her lips quirked oddly. "No... I guess you wouldn't have. Your attention was... definitely elsewhere."

The Mayor closed her eyes tightly, her hands balling into fists. "I made a complete ass of myself... for nothing?"

Blake patted her on the arm. "I wouldn't worry about it. A politician making an ass of themselves is like bees making honey... it's expected."

"Gee, thanks."

"Sorry. I'm just trying to make you laugh."

"I know." Doris sighed. "And I appreciate it, I really do, but..." She shook her head sadly. "I really screwed up."

"You mean with Anna?" She waited for Doris to nod. Pursing her lips, Blake went to the sink, wetting a hand towel with warm water and bringing it back. "I'm not so sure about

that..." She began to dab at the Mayor's face, gently removing the traces of eye liner and mascara from her cheeks.

Doris' eyes widened in surprised but she let her continue. "You didn't see her face when... when I..."

"Dropped her?" The redhead pulled back to look at her for a moment. "Actually I did see her face. And more importantly, I saw her face *after* you left." She traded the wet towel for a dry one, gently patting the moisture from the other woman's skin. "I think more than anything she was surprised... and confused."

"Confused?"

"Well, yeah!" She tossed the towel into the basket under the sink and pulled a compact out of her clutch. Opening it, she began to apply fresh powder to Doris' cheeks. "I can't say as I blame the poor girl. You spend two hours dancing with her like she's your own personal stripper pole and then you freak over something as simple as a..." She swallowed. "...as a kiss."

Doris leaned her head to one side, her voice soft. "I thought you said no one was watching."

Blake snapped the compact shut, reaching into her bag for a tube of mascara. Focusing on the other woman's eyes, she cleared her throat. "I'm pretty sure if you just explain to her what happened, she'll understand. You panicked." She screwed the mascara shut and picked up a tube of lipstick. "It happens to the best of us."

Doris grabbed her hand, gently pulling the make-up from her fingers. "I'll... I'll do that..." She walked over to the mirror, applying the lipstick carefully while watching Blake's reflection. The redhead was looking at the floor, her fingers playing idly with the small diamond dangling from her necklace. She started to say something to her and then shook her head. "I don't even know where she is."

"She's out by the pool." Blake stepped closer, looking directly into Doris' eyes. For a moment, she just stared. She had always thought they were blue... but up close... there were definitely specks of green in them...

"Blake?"

"Hmm?"

"I asked how you knew that."

“Oh...” She shook her head, brushing at the hair that fell into her eyes. “I saw her grab a glass of champagne and head outside. The heaters only extend as far as the patio around the pool.” Blake shrugged. “She looks too smart to get herself frozen.”

Doris bit down on her bottom lip as she stared at the door.

“Go on...” Blake said quietly. “What do you have to lose?”

“You’re right.” She smiled. “Thank you.” Without thinking, she pulled the redhead into her arms, hugging her tightly.

After a moment, Blake wrapped her arms around Doris too, silently returning the embrace.

It was just a friendly hug, a gesture of thanks and comfort, but it went on far longer than either of them really intended.

It was Doris that finally pulled away, clearing her throat as she rubbed the back of her neck with one hand, her cheeks flushing a lovely shade of red. “Well...” She smiled shyly. “Thanks.”

Blake nodded slowly, a grin finally settling on her lips. “Go get her, slugger.”

The Mayor laughed as she pulled open the door. “Next time?” She stopped and pointed at Blake playfully. “Next time you’re on *my* team.”

The redhead laughed and waved her off, the grin on her face turning wistful as she watched Doris disappear out the door.

~~*~*

“Okay... now *that* is a lie!”

Natalia’s laughter echoed off the bookshelves, the delightful sound bringing a happy smile to Olivia’s lips. She tightened her arms, pulling the younger woman more tightly against her as she shook her head in mock outrage. “I never lie...”

The brunette turned her head, looking at the woman behind her as she rolled her eyes sarcastically.

“...anymore.” Olivia finished with a small kiss to her lover’s cheek.

They were still in the exact same place they had been for the last two hours; sitting snuggled tightly together in Phillip's high backed office chair. Even though the chair was more than wide enough for them to lounge side by side, Natalia had chosen to sit in the V of Olivia's legs, her back pressed warmly against the older woman's chest and her head resting on her shoulder as she talked quietly about the events that had led them to where they were. Desire and need still hung thickly in the air between them but they had agreed to wait until they got home to deal with it... now that the hard edge had finally been buffed away.

Natalia shivered and Olivia pulled the black cashmere wrap more tightly around their bodies, spreading it out, turning it into a makeshift blanket. "I'm glad you hung on to this thing. It's *freezing* in here!"

"Mmmhmm." Natalia poked her playfully in the thigh. "Don't change the subject. That has to be a lie."

"No, it's true." The older woman smiled. "I felt... connected to you somehow... from the first time we met."

"But...you were *so* horrible to me!" She accused.

"I didn't say I liked feeling that way!" She ducked when Natalia swatted her playfully on the arm. "And besides, it was *you* that hated *me*."

Natalia became serious. "I didn't hate you. I could never hate you." She rubbed her forehead. "I wanted to... oh, I *really* wanted to!" She shrugged. "But I couldn't." She picked up one of Olivia's hands, tracing her knuckles with a fingertip. "You made me *so* crazy... I tried to stay away.... I really did. But every time I turned around I was outside your door. I told myself it was for Emma, or for Gus, but the truth is... you fascinated me."

"I fascinated you?"

"Yes." The younger woman blushed. "You were beautiful... strong... powerful..." She swallowed. "And so very, very broken." She pursed her lips, looking down. "You could be so cruel... in one breath... and then I would see you with Emma and the love you had for her... it would just... *shine* through your eyes." She shrugged. "I knew that deep down... you were a good person. You just needed a reason to see it."

Olivia breathed in deeply, bringing her hand up to gently stroke Natalia's cheek. "You are the best reason I could have ever hoped for." She whispered; her voice breaking. "You are my heart... and I would die without you."

“Don’t say that.” Natalia snuggled deeper into her arms. “Don’t ever say that.”

“That’s how I feel.”

“Yeah, well... you’re gonna live forever, if I have anything to say about it.”

“I’d settle for sixty years with you.”

Natalia closed her eyes, smiling at the sweetness of the comment.

“Of course, either one is a big improvement over you trying to kill me.”

The brunette made a sound of shocked outrage, grabbing Olivia’s knee and squeezing the ticklish spot. “I did not try to kill you!”

“You could have fooled me!” Olivia laughed, trying to pry the younger woman’s fingers loose.

“I was just trying to keep you from ruining my wedding!” She giggled when Olivia’s fingers skittered down her ribcage, letting go to slap the attacking hands away. When the older woman didn’t stop, she leaned up and kissed her.

It was the only incentive Olivia needed to behave. The kiss was long and slow, sweet with just a hint of the desire they were holding in check. Natalia moaned as she nibbled on her bottom lip, causing the older woman to sigh when she pulled away. “What is it with us and weddings?”

“I dunno...” Natalia shrugged, one finger tracing around Olivia’s mouth. “Maybe... maybe everything kept going wrong... because we kept trying to marry the wrong people.”

Olivia took her hand gently, holding it still so that she could place a kiss in the center of her palm. “Maybe...” She whispered.

Natalia closed her eyes as slight tremors ran through her body. When they stopped, she turned around, supporting her weight on her knee’s as she straddled Olivia’s lap. Wrapping her arms around the older woman’s head, she pulled her in close, burying her face between her breasts as she hugged her, hard.

Olivia licked her lips when she caught Natalia’s scent. It was clean and heady; rich like grass after a rainstorm. She felt her mouth begin to water and slid to the edge of the chair, dragging Natalia forward until the heat between her thighs was pressed up against

her belly and her legs were wrapped tightly around her back. She tangled her fingers in dark silk, using it to draw Natalia's head down so that she could capture her lips in a kiss.

It was long, slow and deep. The kind of kiss that involves the whole body as much as the lips and tongue and when they finally parted, there was a warm slickness low on Olivia's stomach that made her growl and lean in for more.

But Natalia turned her head, offering her neck instead and whimpering when her lover bit down on it, hard. "I thought..." She groaned quietly when Olivia's hands slid down to cup her ass. "I thought you wanted to wait... until we got home."

"Okay," Olivia snickered softly. "Maybe *that* was a lie...just a little white one." She began to kiss her way down Natalia's body, pressing the younger woman backwards as her lips trailed down between her breasts to nuzzle happily against her stomach.

They both froze when there was a firm knock on the library door, followed by someone trying the knob.

"Olivia? Natalia?"

The older woman held a finger up to her lips, wincing slightly as she mouthed the word, "Phillip."

"I know someone is in there." The humor in her ex-husbands voice was unmistakable. "I know this because it takes opposable thumbs to lock a door and I don't think any of my first editions qualify..." There was a pause. "Okay..." She could almost hear him rolling his eyes. "Well, if anyone in there should happen to see my ex-wife and her baby mama, could you tell them that the ball drops in twenty-seven minutes and... 13 seconds and that I would very much like them to be in attendance for that event. Oh and, you might also let them know that the bedroom two doors down has a full bathroom suite."

They could hear his laughter fade away down the stairs and Olivia shook her head. "I'm not sure if the new, improved Phillip is worth his sense of humor."

Natalia slid away reluctantly, immediately missing the warmth of Olivia's arms. "I guess... we really should behave..."

"Whose idea was it to come here tonight?" The older woman grumbled under her breath.

Natalia smiled innocently. "Yours."

"Mine?" Olivia's eyes widened. "That's a lie!"

The younger woman climbed to her feet, picking up Olivia's still-buttoned shirt and tossing it at her.

"Just a little white one." She smiled.

~~*~*

Doris stopped at the patio door, her heart jumping slightly in her chest when she saw Anna standing at the edge of the pool. The snow had finally stopped falling and the sky had cleared, leaving nothing but a black expanse heavy with a blanket of stars and a perfectly full moon that bathed the younger woman in pale blue light.

Doris looked up in surprise. For a moment she could only stare in wonder. It was so clear that she could see the outline of every mountain, every crater; the orb hanging so low that she felt like she could reach out and grab it, pluck it from the sky and offer it to Anna like a ripe piece of fruit.

"Blue moon..." She whispered in awe. "Once... in a blue moon..."

Taking a deep breath she headed across the patio, goose bumps breaking out along her arms as she moved from the glow of one heater to the next. When she was halfway there she saw Anna's head turn slightly to the side, saw her back stiffen and slowed to a stop a few feet away.

"Hi." She said softly.

There was no response.

"Anna?" Doris tried again. "Please let me explain."

"What is there to explain?" The younger woman didn't sound upset. She sounded tired, and in so many ways, that was worse.

"I..." She sighed, bringing her hand up to rub her forehead. "I just..."

"You left me there." Anna turned around slowly. She looked at Doris with sad, red-rimmed eyes. "You dropped me on the floor... and you left me there!"

"I am so sorry-"

The detective held up a hand, cutting her off. "There are a lot of things I can forgive, Doris. The fact that you're scared, that you've spent your whole life in the closet, that you're a

politician..." She made a face. "That you're a republican. But shame..." She tunneled her fingers through her hair. "I can't *be* with someone that's ashamed to be with *me*. I can't be your dirty little secret... your occasional play date. I can't... and I won't."

"I don't want you to be."

Anna shook her head. "I don't think you know *what* you want." She shrugged. "And I don't know that I can wait around for you to figure it out."

Doris closed the distance between them, bringing both of her hands up to cup the other woman's face. "Anna..." She stroked her cheeks gently with her thumbs. "What happened in there... it didn't have anything to do with you." She saw the disbelief on the other woman's face and rushed to continue. "The way we danced together..." She laughed softly. "I've never even danced in public like that with a *man*." She blushed. "I don't think there was any doubt in anyone's mind just who and what we are to each other."

The Asian woman looked thoughtful for a moment. "Then... why?"

"Because I'm a dancing daisy."

Anna blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Do you remember... a couple of years ago? There was this craze for those little potted daisy plants? The ones that danced whenever you played music around them?"

She tried not to laugh. "A couple of years ago? Doris, I was in my twenties when those things came out."

"Okay, so... maybe I'm a little off on my timeline..."

"A little?" Anna snorted.

"Can we... stay on point here?"

The other woman held up her hand. "Sorry! Please... continue. Tell me how you're a ..." She bit her lip. "...a dancing daisy."

"Well... now the analogy seems silly."

"*Now* it seems silly?"

Doris threw her hands up. “Look, the point is that those things danced whenever they heard music. They didn’t have a choice; it’s what they were programmed to do.” She stopped to breathe. “I... have spent my whole life that way. You shine a spotlight at me and I start dancing. I perform. I play a part. And up until now, that part has always been about who I *appear* to be.” She looked down at the ground. “No one has ever cared who I *really* am.”

Anna couldn’t stop herself. She stepped closer and wrapped her arms around the shivering woman. “I care.” She whispered.

“I know, and that means the world to me.” She sniffled quietly. “Anna, when I looked up and saw everyone watching us... I heard that music start to play in my head, only I didn’t want to dance anymore. I was standing there, caught between who I used to be and who I want to become and...” She shook her head. “I just... went into overload.” She leaned back, staring directly into Anna’s eyes. “But I swear... It didn’t have anything to do with you.”

Anna heard voices and looked up, nervously releasing Doris as she saw people begin to file out onto the upper balconies. “I think...” She frowned when the New Year’s Eve Ball suddenly winked on, rotating slowly on its axis as it shimmered in every color of the rainbow. “I think maybe we should finish this somewhere else.”

Doris looked over her shoulder. She felt panic fill her chest and throat at the number of people looking down at them. Trying to calm herself, she turned away to stare at the moon.

Blue light rained down on her face, filling her with a strange sort of peace and suddenly she knew one thing with absolute certainty.

Some moments you only get one shot at... because they only come around once in a lifetime.

“No. No, here is just fine.” She glanced down at her watch. “Three minutes till midnight. Got any last minute resolutions?”

Anna smiled when the older woman slid her hands down to her waist, pulling her in close. “No...” She leaned her head to the side, studying the Mayor closely. “How about you?”

“Just one.” Doris slid an arm around the smaller woman’s back. “But for that, you’re going to have to wait two minutes and fifty-one seconds.”

~~*~*

Olivia led Natalia towards the main balcony, smiling when the waiters on either side of the door moved into the crowd, creating a path for them that led right up to the base of the countdown display.

Phillip was waiting for them, a huge smile on his face. "So glad you could make it."

"Yeah, well," Olivia smirked. "We heard somewhere that you were looking for us."

"You heard that, did you?"

"Or maybe I read it..." She shrugged. "I can't remember."

Her ex-husband leaned in close. "I hope you at least remembered to wipe down my chair."

Olivia's eyes were huge. "How did...?"

"It's the only possible piece of furniture in the room." He smiled.

"That's not true." Natalia blurted, turning bright red as she slapped a hand over her mouth.

"She's right." Olivia hugged her lover close, amusement shining in her eyes. "There's also that rolling ladder."

"Stop!" Phillip held up his hands. "I have to use that thing every day!"

"Oh and the desk," She continued.

"Gah!" He covered his hands with his ears just as the large digital clock at the bottom of the ball's path lit up and the crystal sphere began its descent.

"We never used the desk!" Natalia whispered.

Olivia smiled. "Only because we were interrupted." She gripped her lover's hips possessively. "I had big plans for you and that desk."

The younger woman pressed her lips together, her dimples flashing as she blushed shyly. "You have an office too you know."

Olivia's jaw dropped, but before she could respond, Natalia was pointing down towards the patio.

"Hey... isn't that Doris and Anna?"

She looked over the railing, her eyebrows crawling up her forehead when she saw the Mayor below with Anna Li wrapped up in her arms. "I'll be damned... She's really serious."

The people around them began to chant, pulling her attention back to the woman at her side.

10....9....8....

She wrapped her arms around Natalia, pulling her so close that the people watching were hard pressed to tell where one of them left off and the other began.

7....6....5....

Together they watched the multi-colored crystal ball slowly slide downwards.

4....3....2....

Turning her head, Olivia briefly captured Natalia's lips with her own. "I'm going to love you forever."

1....

The ball reached the bottom, its weight pressing down on the flat red, plate built into the base of the platform.

There was a moment of absolute silence and in that stillness, Natalia pulled her head down to whisper, "You promise?"

The night shattered into a sea of colors as all six firework launchers went off; lighting up the sky with blossoms of every shape and size. Along the sides of the Spaulding property, lasers and projectors played across screens that had hung hidden between the trees. They created a kaleidoscope of landscapes that seemed to grow out of thin air only to burst into vibrant colors before crumbling to dust; only to be reborn a moment later by yet another phoenix rising in its place. Beneath it all, the vibrant strands of *Around the Bend* pulsed, supplying a steady beat and an energetic musical score that had everyone on the balcony dancing happily in place as the world exploded around them.

Everyone... except Olivia and Natalia. The two women stood perfectly still by, caught up in their own private moment as a brand new decade stretched out before them.

Olivia raised her hands, gently cupping the younger woman's face. "I do."

~~*~*

Down below, Anna raised her head as the first fireworks went off, following their trails across the night sky to watch them explode against the inky blackness.

Doris watched Anna's face change, watched the lines around her mouth and eyes soften with delight and felt herself melt right along with them. Not stopping to give herself time to think, she twisted her fingers into the other woman's dress, using it to tug her forward until their hips were locked together. Lowering her head, she kissed the startled woman fiercely.

"Oomph!" Anna squeaked in surprise, freezing for a moment as her brain tried to catch up with what was happening.

Then she kissed Doris back, her whole body straining towards the older woman as she wrapped her arms tightly around her neck. It wasn't sweet and it wasn't soft. It was lips and tongues and teeth and want, wrapped up with hands wandering into dangerous areas and small whimpers that slid into bone shaking moans.

All around them, the night was loud with celebration, but none of it mattered. Not the fireworks overhead or the people who glanced their way briefly before continuing on with their own merrymaking.

All that existed for them was each other... and that kiss.

The sky had gone dark by the time they broke apart; the lighter trails of grey ash and smoke that crossed over the blackness the only proof that it had ever been on fire at all.

But the music played on and when someone in the group above began to clap, the rest of the party followed suit. Whether it was for their display or the one overhead, Doris would never know, but she did see Olivia smiling down at her before she disappeared into the crowd.

"That was..." Anna shook her head, laughing softly. "That was one hell of a kiss."

Doris placed a cold hand against her own cheek, trying to cool the heat of her skin. "Uhm... yeah."

The younger woman slid into her arms, resting her chin on Doris' shoulder. "Do you court all of your voters this way?"

"Only the special ones."

“Are there... any other perks?”

“Come home with me.” Doris whispered, her hands sliding low on Anna’s back. “And I’ll lay out my entire strategy for you.”

Anna felt a spark of heat follow the older woman’s hands down her spine, making her purr deep in her throat. “Deal.”

The older woman kissed her, sweetly this time, then took her by the hand and led her around the pool.

“Oh but...” Anna’s lips quirked into a smile as she trailed behind her. “You should really incorporate that whole ‘dancing daisy’ thing into your next campaign speech. “Cuz yeah... that was classic... really.”

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Natalia opened the front door of the farmhouse, trying to quiet her laughter as she wiggled away from Olivia’s curious fingers. “Shhh.” She admonished. “It’s late!”

“Why are you telling me to shush?” Olivia snarked. “You’re the one making all the noise.”

“Only because someone can’t keep their hands to themselves.”

“Oh, now you *want* me to keep my hands to myself? In the limo you said I couldn’t touch you enough.” She moved in close, breathing heavily into Natalia’s ear. “You said you needed it more than air.”

The younger woman shivered. “I do... I need it more than anything...” She swallowed and stepped away, balling her hands into fists as she tried to even out her breathing. “And there will be time for that... even if it takes all night and damn...” She flushed. “I really ho... hope it does. But right now... we need check on the girls and send Jane home.”

Olivia wasn’t sure if Natalia’s flush was caused by her swearing... or by the desire she was obviously fighting to keep from giving in to, but she knew which one she was hoping for.

She also knew that if she pushed just a little bit harder... she could have had Natalia on the kitchen table with her dress hiked up to her waist and her legs wrapped around her shoulders.

She froze for a moment; the visual that came along with that thought making her stomach clench and her palms ache. Then she closed her eyes, forcing it out of her head. As

appealing as the image was... she'd rather try that particular scenario when the interruption factor was a little lower.

"Where did *you* go?" Natalia smirked.

"Oh, somewhere really, *really* nice..." She glanced at the kitchen table and then took the younger woman by the arms, turning her until she faced the entryway. With a soft push on her backside, she started her moving again. "You want to get out of this room. Trust me."

Natalia laughed, but did as she was told, stopping short when she stepped into the living room, the laughter dying in her throat. "Oh my..."

Olivia pulled up short behind her, covering her mouth with her hand to hide her amusement.

The living room looked like a war zone... if that war was being fought with licorice whips and bazooka bubble gum.

There were candy wrappers in various colors and sizes littering the floor and empty soda cans covering nearly every flat surface. An overturned bowl of popcorn blanketed one end of the couch like snow from a freak indoor storm, while a dozen little M&M cairns made the table look like a scene out of Pet Semetary.

And the other end of the couch... well... it was laid out with the casualties of war.

"So much for needing to be quiet." Olivia snorted, walking over to check on Emma, who was dressed in her ballerina outfit and fast asleep, her head and shoulders hanging halfway off the cushion. A sticky, half-eaten Sour Punch Straw was still clutched in her little fist and she had to pry her fingers open to pull it free.

Next to her, Jane snored loudly, her head hung back over the arm of the sofa with Francesca curled up in a ball on her chest. She glanced at Natalia. "At least she has her tucked towards the back so if she rolls, there's no place to go."

The younger woman just frowned at her.

Olivia winced. Turning around, she gently picked up their baby girl, cuddling her in her arms before leaning down to shake the babysitter's shoulder. "Jane?" When there was no response she shook her a little harder. "Jane!"

"Wha?" The young woman sat up quickly, looking around in a panic until she saw the baby in Olivia's arms. "Oh... you've got her... okay." She rubbed at her eyes. "What time is it?"

"It's a little after one." Natalia looked pointedly around the room. "What happened here?"

Jane snorted. "Like mother, like daughter."

Olivia's eyes narrowed.

"I mean..." She jumped to her feet. "Emma missed you... a lot and... I tried to keep her entertained but... she kind of... just did what she wanted." She gestured wildly with her hands. "I figured as long as it wasn't dangerous what's the harm right?"

Natalia sighed. She picked up an empty Reese's wrapper. "How much sugar did she eat?"

"Uh... a lot... especially if you consider the cookies... and the... uhm... six pack of soda..." She looked down at her feet. "And the ice cream."

"No wonder she's passed out! She's in a sugar coma!" Olivia laughed, biting her lip when Natalia glared at her. "Look, Jane... why don't you go ahead and get out of here? We'll settle up at work on Monday ok?"

The young woman took one look at Natalia's face and nodded eagerly. Scooping up her coat, she headed for the door. "Happy new year."

"This is going to take forever to clean up." Natalia grumbled after she was gone.

"Yeah well, we'll worry about it in the morning." Olivia nodded at Emma. "You want to grab the sugar plum fairy and we'll take them both upstairs?"

The brunette finally smiled. She picked Emma up, holding her tenderly as they climbed the stairs. When they reached the little girl's room, she laid her down on the bed, taking off her tutu and ballet slippers before pulling the covers up to her chin. She watched Emma sleep for a few moments then leaned down, brushing the hair off her forehead before kissing her goodnight. She felt her heart swell with happiness, just as it did every night when she tucked her little girl into bed, knowing she would get to do it the next night and the one after that. She would do it for as long as Emma let her.

And she hoped that would be a good long while.

"Sweetheart?" Olivia looked at her knowingly. "She'll still be here in the morning. And probably grumpy as hell from the sugar crash." She leaned down and kissed Emma on the forehead too. "Let's see if you're still as starry-eyed then."

Natalia smiled. "I will be."

The older woman laughed. She led the way to the baby's room, stopping long enough for Natalia to nuzzle her daughter's head before lowering Francesca into her crib. "She's wet."

"Oh, okay..." Natalia started to move but Olivia grabbed her by the hand, pulling her back to kiss her gently.

"I'll take care of it." She smiled at the younger woman's shocked look. "I've changed her diaper before!"

"Maybe, but... I don't think you've ever actually volunteered for it."

"Yeah well..." Olivia went to the changing table, pulling out a fresh diaper, a bottle of powder and some wipes. "It's a new year, right? That means I get to be a whole new me."

Natalia came up behind her, circling her arms around her waist. "I was pretty fond of the old you."

She closed her eyes, leaning back into the body behind her. "Does that mean I never have to deal with diapers again?"

"Let's not get crazy." Natalia patted her on the butt. "A *little* change is good."

Olivia snickered. "Why don't you go get ready for bed?" She kissed Natalia on the nose. "I'll be right in."

She watched as the older woman picked up their daughter, humming a lullaby under her breath. "I think I'll start with a shower."

Olivia made faces at the little girl, who was smiling up at her.

Natalia pursed her lips as she walked backwards to the door. "Which means I'll be in the bathroom..."

"MMhmmm." She laid the baby on the table, bending down to blow a soft raspberry on her tummy.

"...and I'll be naked...and wet."

She laughed. "Don't you dare start without me!"

The younger woman blew her a kiss and headed for their bedroom.

Olivia smiled down at her daughter. “Hey you...” She whispered when she was done changing her. “I wanted to talk to you alone for a minute.”

Francesca looked up at her expectantly.

“We both love you so, so much, little girl.” She picked the baby up, rocking her slowly. “But sometimes your mommies need... to have a play date of their own; just a little time for us to be alone together and show each other how we feel.” She made a silly face. “That’s something that we really need tonight.” She laid Francesca back down in her crib. “Now, I know how much you love to interrupt whatever we’re doing, but I need you to just... take the night off, okay?”

The baby gurgled at her happily.

“I’m not above begging.”

Francesca laughed.

“Okay... well then, how about a bribe?” She pulled the little girl’s blanket up, tucking it in, making her look like a burrito. “You give me one night with your mommy and I will...buy you a pony. When you’re old enough to ride it of course. Deal?”

Slowly, the little girl’s eyes closed; her tiny chest rising and falling evenly as she drifted off to sleep.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

~~*~*

Natalia groaned happily as she turned her face up into the warm spray of the shower. The water felt incredibly good, almost decadent, against her over-sensitive skin and for a couple of minutes she just stood there, letting it rain down on her.

Her entire body had felt like the exposed end of a live wire ever since the library and all night long she had been fighting like hell to keep from acting on it. Now, safe at home, she let her self-restraint go; closing her eyes and purring softly as her nipples hardened under the heavy pulse of the showerhead.

“I thought I told you not to start without me.” Olivia said softly, molding herself to Natalia’s back as she stepped in behind her.

The younger woman laughed breathlessly. “You were taking too long...”

Olivia picked up the soap, lathering her hands generously before sliding them onto the other woman's belly. She rubbed upwards in small, slow circles, loving the feel of smooth skin and soft flesh under her hands. Touching Natalia was always a revelation. One she knew she would never tire of.

"You looked beautiful tonight." She breathed, her hands slipping up to cup the younger woman's breasts. "It was all I could do to keep myself from taking you right there... on the dance floor..." She caught the younger woman's nipples between her fingers, rolling them firmly with soap slickened fingers. "Or the balcony..." She pressed into her with her hips.

Natalia leaned forward, bracing herself against the wall as Olivia ground into her from behind. "What about..." She swallowed hard when the other woman gently nudged her legs apart. "What about the shower?"

"The shower? The shower I think we can do."

~~*~*

Olivia sucked on her earlobe as she brought one hand down, slipping it into the heat between her thighs with a groan that Natalia felt all the way to her bones. "Jesus...you are so incredible." She moved her fingers slowly, reverently; reveling in the small sounds Natalia was making in the back of her throat. She loved to touch her this way, to explore every inch of her; but right now... right now she really needed something else.

Pulling her arm back, Olivia slid her hand around the outside of her hip, caressing her backside firmly as she whispered, "Natalia?"

"Yes." The brunette nodded quickly. "Oh god, Olivia... please... yes..."

The older woman used one knee to push Natalia's legs further apart then leaned down, biting her firmly at the base of her neck as she slid two fingers into her from behind.

"Oh!" Natalia cried out, reaching behind her to tangle her fingers into Olivia's hair. "Yes... oh, god, baby, yes..."

Olivia tried to move carefully at first, but the younger woman growled at her, tugging sharply on her hair as she pushed back, hard. From that point on she couldn't speak, couldn't think... all she could do was focus on the warm velvet wrapped around her fingers and the soft flesh cupped in her other hand. She thrust into Natalia wildly, curving her fingers to reach the spot that would make her lover come apart in her arms.

She wasn't disappointed.

Natalia's back arched, her entire body beginning to shake as the fingers of her free hand scrabbled madly at the tile wall, trying to find anything to hold onto. She settled for grabbing onto Olivia's hand, squeezing it tightly around her own breast as her hips pumped frantically against the woman behind her.

"Come for me..." Olivia begged softly. "I need to hear it, feel it... God, sweetheart please... come for me."

And Natalia did, her entire body going rigid as a huge wave of pleasure rode through her, making her toes curl and her lips tremble. She cried out once, twice... and then she fell back into Olivia's arms, crying softly as the older woman gently lowered her to the floor.

"Did I hurt you?" Olivia asked anxiously.

"No..." Natalia laughed, closing her eyes and she rested her head weakly against the wall. "No, you most definitely did not hurt me."

Sighing in relief, Olivia sat down beside her, pulling her into her arms. "I love you."

The younger woman kissed her tenderly. "I love you, too."

They sat quietly for a few minutes, listening to each other breathe.

"I'm getting a little cold." Olivia finally acknowledged. "Are you up to moving this into the bedroom?"

"*Oh yeah.*" Natalia stood up, holding out a hand to help the other woman up. "I think there's enough warm water left to finish our showers."

"No." Olivia jumped out quickly, pulling Natalia after her. "I don't want you to wash anything away."

"Why not?" The brunette looked at her curiously.

"Because I'm hungry..."

Natalia laughed as Olivia led her out of the bathroom. "Wait! We haven't even dried off!"

"What does it matter?" She tossed Natalia facedown onto the bed, climbing in on top of her. "The sheets are just going to end up soaked anyway..."



~~*~*

“Jesus...” Natalia fell back against the pillows, trying to catch her breath as the remnants of her last two orgasms slowly dissipated.

“Blasphemer.” Olivia tucked her hands behind her head, smiling happily.

“No, not really.” The younger woman covered her eyes with one hand, licking her lips to try and moisten them. “That was actually a prayer.” She glanced at Olivia when the older woman chuckled. “You don’t have to look so smug about it.”

“I don’t?”

Natalia considered the question for a moment. “You’re right. Go ahead and look smug.” She shook her head. “But you are so *not* buying her a pony.”

Olivia’s eyes flew open wide. She opened her mouth to ask how the hell she knew about her promise and then closed it with a grin when she spied the baby monitor sitting on the bedside table.

“Are you saying that wasn’t worth a pony?”

Natalia laughed weakly. “Are you kidding?” She swallowed; her mouth dry. “But who would take care of it? You barely go near the cows!”

"I didn't earn the cows..." She trailed her fingers down Natalia's ribs, splaying her hand out flat across the smooth expanse of her belly.

The brunette lifted her head slightly, watching as Olivia's hand slid lower. "You trying for a whole herd?"

"Well, we'd need one for Emma, too..." She leaned down, pulling Natalia's earlobe into her mouth with her tongue. "Can't have the bean getting jealous..." She bit down lightly. "And Ava should have one... for when she comes to visit..."

"Oh..." Natalia's eyes slammed shut as long, deft fingers gently stroked through the wetness between her legs. "What about..." She licked her lips. "What about me? I always wanted to learn how to ride."

"Really?" Olivia chuckled low in her throat, raising the hair along the back of Natalia's neck. In one smooth move, she rolled them both over, fitting the younger woman's sex against the firm muscles of her right thigh. "That's what you have me for..."

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Epilogue

Olivia blinked slowly as she woke up, letting her eyes gradually adjust to the bright rays of sunshine streaming in through the bedroom window. She turned her head from side to side, sighing happily when the bones popped with a satisfying snap.

Looking over at the other side of the bed, her eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

She was alone.

"Natalia?" Climbing out of bed, she grabbed her robe and wrapped it around her body, marveling at how good the silk felt against her skin. "Natalia?"

She wandered down the hall, looking in on Emma to find the little girl sleeping peacefully before heading to Francesca's room where she found Natalia, sliding the changing table to one side to stare at the wall thoughtfully.

Olivia walked up behind her, sliding her hands possessively down her hips and onto her thighs. The fact that she was allowed to do that now still made her a little bit crazy. "What are you doing?"

“Mmmm...” Natalia wiggled slightly, pushing back further into her arms, rubbing against her until Olivia half-moaned. “Making a space.”

“For what?” Eyes closed, the older woman was barely following the conversation as she rocked gently against Natalia’s backside.

“That...” The brunette swallowed, the feel of her lover moving against her making her more than a little breathless. “That Vertical... thingamabob.”

Olivia froze, blinking quickly to clear away the lust-induced fog. “My Vertical Limit?”

“*Our* Vertical Limit.” Natalia smiled, turning her head to kiss the tip of Olivia’s chin. “I think it’ll fit perfectly right here.”

“But...” She glanced over at the crib, her heart melting slightly at the sight of their daughter sleeping peacefully. “Why would we put it in the baby’s room?”

“Are you kidding?” The brunette turned in her arms, resting her chin in the center of Olivia’s cleavage as she looked up at her with big, doe eyes. “All those little refrigerated sections? They’re perfect for baby bottles.”

Olivia’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“Oh yeah! And we can put the bottle warmer right on top!”

“But... but...”

“No buts.” Natalia traced her lips with a fingertip. “It was very generous of Phillip and we’re not going to turn him down, but there is no reason you need to keep that much champagne in the house. You can have the last two compartments. And...” She kissed her, taking the sting out of her words. “If it’s up here and Francesca is sleeping... you’ll really think twice about how much you need it before trying to sneak past the human intruder alert.”

Olivia’s lower lip swelled into a pout.

“Hey...” Natalia bit that lip, tugging on it gently. “You may feel as strong as an ox and act as stubborn as one...” Her smile was a little forced. “But it’s barely been a year since the last episode with your heart. You have a family now, Olivia.... Four kids and a...” She swallowed. “Me... who need you around.”

Tears rolled down Olivia’s cheeks as she pulled Natalia close. “I’m fine.”

"I know." Natalia's voice was very small. "And I am going to do whatever I have to do to make sure you stay that way."

The older woman nodded, coughing slightly to hide her sniffles. "How about some breakfast then?" She kissed the top of Natalia's head. "And considering it's a new year, I think my bacon ration should reset..."

Natalia laughed. "Jeez, you and your bacon." She wiped at her eyes. "Two pieces, that's my best offer."

"I'll take it!"

"Bring your daughter." Natalia headed for the door. "It's time for her bottle. But I think we should let Emma sleep in. Let all that sugar wear off as much as possible."

Olivia watched her until she was out of sight then went to the crib. She scooped the little girl up carefully, the dopey grin on her face only getting bigger when the baby gurgled at her happily.

"Hey there, Franciegirl. You ready for some food? You sure earned it, yes you did!" She tickled the child's belly, laughing along with her. "You were really good for your mommies last night... and you know what?" Olivia craned her neck to make sure the hallway was empty and then reached out, flipping off the baby monitor with her thumb before whispering, "You are so getting that pony!"

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An hour later, Emma Spencer stumbled down the stairs, following the sounds of voices to find her two mommies in the kitchen, her baby sister playing quietly in a playpen nearby. For a moment, she felt lost; like she didn't belong there.

After all, they hadn't even woken her up for breakfast. She was about to sneak back upstairs when she heard her mother talking to Natalia.

"Do you think she's slept enough? I miss my Jellybean... I really want her to watch the Parade with us."

"I do, too." She could tell that Natalia was smiling. Her other mommy had the most expressive voice in the whole wide world, which is why she never understood how anyone had ever thought she was in love with Uncle Frank. All anyone had to do was hear her talk to mommy and they would know who she really loved.

Duh...

Smiling, feeling better, she bounced into the kitchen.

“Jellybean!” Olivia grabbed her little girl, wrapping her up in her arms. “There you are! I was about to come up and get you! I missed you!”

“I missed you, too, Mommy.” She looked at Natalia. “I missed both of you.” She picked up a piece of toast. “Did you bring me anything?”

“As a matter of fact...” Natalia pulled a small black package out of her pocket, handing it to the little girl. “We did.”

“What is it?”

“We don’t know!” Olivia raised her eyebrows. “It was inside of a bunny rabbit!”

Emma’s eyes got huge.

“Olivia!” The brunette smacked her lightly with a spatula. “The bunny was made of ice, sweetheart. Your Daddy had them on all the dinner tables.”

“Cool!” Emma ripped into the plastic wrapping, holding up her prize when she was done.

“Is that...” Natalia stepped closer, looking at it curiously.

“It’s a fortune cookie.” The little girl smiled. Cracking it open, she pulled out a bracelet and a rolled up piece of paper.”

Olivia took the bracelet, whistling softly at the heft of it in her hand. It was made up of two delicate chains attached on either side of a long slender, band.

Engraved across the band were three words:

‘Peace, Love, & Happiness’.

“Platinum.” She shook her head. “You can’t do anything small, can you, Phillip? What does the fortune say, Bean?”

The little girl unrolled it eagerly. “It says ‘May your future shine as brightly as the love in your heart.’”

Olivia handed the bracelet back to her daughter, grabbing her hand and pulling her out of her chair for a hug and a kiss. "So, did you see the ball drop?"

Emma frowned. "I fell asleep too early."

"Oh, baby I'm sorry." Natalia came over and hugged the little girl too. "I know you wanted to stay up and look into the New Year."

The little girl shrugged. "I don't have to do that anymore."

"What? Why not?" She glanced at Olivia, wondering if there were still some issues left unresolved with their daughter.

"Because!" Emma smiled brightly. "I'm back home... with both my mommies *and* my little sister." She touched the quarter hanging from a thin chain around her neck. "And my big brother... he loves me, no matter where he is." She sat back down, picking up a fork to spear several of the heart-shaped pancakes that Natalia had set on the table. "I already know this year is going to be great!"

Olivia smiled. "You're right, baby." She reached out and grabbed Natalia's hand, pulling the younger woman into her lap. "We have everything we need to make it great...sitting right here with us."

The End

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Eros

by ladyvictory

ACT 1

The woman watched the scene unfold before her, standing silent and still at the window. She was exhausted, having travelled countless miles and hours along lonely stretches of road, in darkness and through storms, to reach this place – this moment. She had been so sure of her purpose since she had made the decision to return, but now, she found herself

hesitating before taking the final step. She knew, without a doubt, that she would not be welcome, at least not at first. This hadn't bothered her on her journey; if there was one thing she could say for herself, it was that she had a knack for turning hostile situations to her favor. She wasn't always known to be the most patient person, but in this she could wait out any bad feelings. And yet, here she was, faltering as she reached the first meaningful checkpoint...

Inside the warm house, Marina Cooper was hefting her son into his high chair, trying to hold back an undignified grunt at the strain. The boy was growing larger and more handsome every day, and she knew that soon she would be hard pressed to carry him around like she enjoyed to do. "All right buddy, time to start dinner," she cooed, clipping the safety-belt and snapping the tray down into place. Henry, who Shayne had taken to occasionally calling Hank, nodded excitedly and laughed. No one would ever charge him with being a bad eater, that was for sure.

Turning, Marina started as she caught sight of someone looking into the window. A knife was in her hand almost before she considered picking one up, and she moved forward, placing herself between the intruder's line of sight and her son. Henry whimpered, startled by his mother's sudden movement. "It's all right buddy, it's okay," she assured him, looking back briefly before cautiously advancing.

Reaching the curtains and throwing them back with her free hand, she got her second surprise of the evening. "Mom?" she asked, squinting in confusion. The older woman sighed, breath fogging up the glass, and nodded, pointing towards the front door. Frowning now, Marina inclined her head in agreement and moved towards the front of the house. "This had better be good."

Opening the door, Marina resisted the urge to shiver at the cold air that immediately blew into the house. The two women stared at each other silently for long moments, sizing each other up, until, finally, Eleni looked away. "Aren't you going to invite your mother in?" The younger woman snorted, raising an eyebrow.

"And just why in the world would I do that?" she asked, all but sneering. Taken aback, her mother blinked slowly.

"I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, but, the last time I was here we... weren't exactly on the worst of terms..." she said, hesitating.

"Not exactly on the best either," Marina shot back, crossing her arms over her chest, mindful of the sharp edge of the knife.

Now it was Eleni's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Are you going to stab your own mother, Marina?" she chuckled, shaking her head. The younger woman glared, just barely holding back a pout.

"When it comes to Henry, there aren't many people I can trust."

Eleni cocked her head, smiling genuinely. "Is that my grandson's name?" she asked, pleased. "It's a good, strong name."

"He's a good, strong boy," Marina allowed, unable to stop the pride from filling her voice and expression. "No thanks to his grandmother," she added with another glare.

"Can't I see him?" the older woman asked, her gaze shifting from her daughter to the inside of the cozy house longingly. "I don't want to impose, b-"

"And yet, here you are," the younger woman sniffed. Eleni scowled, jaw clenching in annoyance.

"He's my grandson, Marina, I have a right-"

"You have no rights here. If, and that is a big if, you get to see him, it's because I decide to let you."

Nodding, the wind gone from her sails, the former Mrs. Frank Cooper Jr. swallowed hard. Shouldering a previously hidden duffle bag, she reached out with her free hand and cupped her daughter's cheek. "I had hoped," she murmured, slightly encouraged when Marina didn't pull away. "That you would understand, now that you are a mother. I love you, sweetheart, no matter what happened before. And I love my grandson, even though we have never met."

"I find that hard to believe," Marina grumbled, trembling from the cold.

"So stubborn; you definitely get that from me. I'll be in town for a while... if you decide you want to talk..."

Jerking her head back, out of her mother's hold, Marina shrugged, posture sagging a bit now that she was sure there was no danger of a confrontation. "Don't hold your breath." Nodding again, Eleni turned on her heel and walked away.

Sagging against the door in relief, Marina stared into the distance long after her mother had gotten into her car and driven away; she shook slightly with both the cold and the loss of adrenaline. Henry's crying broke her stupor, and she blinked rapidly, shutting the door

and entering the kitchen once again. She would find out what her mother was after later; right now, it was time to take care of the most important person in her life.

“Hey buddy, are you okay? Oh, you’re freezing! Mommy’s sorry, little man!” Removing the boy from his high chair and lifting him in her arms, she moved into the living room. Sitting on the couch, she grabbed the throw and wrapped it around them both, reaching for the phone once they were cocooned. She dialed quickly, fingers accustomed to the familiar pattern of numbers. She got an answer on the third ring. “Yeah, hi Shayne. Do you want to come over for some pizza take out...have a movie night with me and the little guy?” she asked, trying not to sound too hopeful. Pausing a moment, she smiled, holding Henry closer. “Excellent, I’ll see you in half an hour.” Hanging up the phone, she kissed her son on the forehead. “Hear that buddy, your daddy’s coming over for a family night. Let’s not let mean old grandma ruin a perfectly good evening.” Tomorrow...tomorrow she would find out what the woman wanted. Tonight, she would lose herself in two of her favorite men, and try to pretend that they really were a small happy family.

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Act 2

Olivia Spencer yawned widely, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she stumbled over the hem of her favorite robe on the way into the kitchen. It was Sunday, which meant that there would be coffee, but no Natalia waiting for her there; a sad second best, but one that she appreciated all the same. The smell of frying turkey bacon didn’t register until she was fully in the room. “What in the who now?” she sputtered, shock burning away the last of the cobwebs in her brain. Natalia smiled over her shoulder from her position at the stove, still in her pajamas – plus a protective apron, of course – and Emma just raised an eyebrow as she sipped her orange juice. “Did I sleep through Sunday?”

“Nope,” Natalia chuckled, turning back to her sizzling skillet.

“Am I... in the Twilight Zone?” Olivia glared in suspicion, checking to make sure that Rod Sterling wasn’t hiding in a corner. Now Emma giggled, rolling her eyes.

“Mo-om! It’s a special Sunday.”

Pursing her lips in the universal ‘fair enough’ expression, Olivia nodded and all but skipped up behind her lover, wrapping her arms around the smaller woman’s waist and burying her face in soft hair. “Did you bribe the priest to write you name in the attendance book?” she asked cheekily, burrowing until she found smooth skin and laying a kiss there.

The shorter woman snorted, sighing in equal parts contentment and exasperation. “The tree that does not bend, breaks; it’s a special day, even I can bend.”

“Oh-kay, Confucius,” Olivia teased pulling back.

Kissing the back of Natalia’s head, she wandered over to the table, sitting beside her daughter. “Next, she’ll want to know the answer to the riddle of the sphinx...” she stage whispered, wagging her eyebrows. Emma nodded solemnly, not understanding the reference, but wanting to go along with the joke. Natalia turned and glared playfully.

“Tell ya what, smart aleck, you don’t get coffee until you answer.”

Olivia affected an innocent, wide eyed expression for all of four seconds, before smiling a bit smugly. “The answer is 42... oh wait, wrong question. The answer is Man.”

Rolling her eyes, Natalia all but threw her hands up in surrender. “How can you be such a pain in the butt first thing in the morning?” she grumbled, lowering the heat on the stove before moving to get her lover coffee.

“Just happy to see you,” Olivia replied honestly, reaching for the mug and craning her neck for a kiss, which was gladly bestowed.

“Uh huh, sweet talker,” Natalia accused, utterly charmed. “Why don’t you enjoy that before the baby wakes up; you’re on feeding duty.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Olivia smarted, raising the drink to her lips.

Just as the hot liquid touched her tongue, an indignant cry sounded from the second floor, making her freeze. “Sigh,” she said, putting down the mug sadly. Emma nodded her agreement, patting her mother’s hand in sympathy.

“Oh, honey,” Natalia cooed, sympathetically. “I’ll get her if you want to finish breakfast and drink your coffee.”

“No, no, I got it. My turn and all that,” the older woman insisted, nodding in resignation. With another longing look at her caffeine, she turned and walked from the room.

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The shrill ringing of the phone startled Doris Wolfe out of a pleasant dream. Disorientated and grumpy, she reached for the offending machine, hitting the ‘Talk’ button and laying the

receiver on her face in an effort to expend as little energy as possible. “Mayor Wolfe,” she muttered, voice gravelly from sleep.

“Hey you,” a cheery voice greeted, and Doris couldn’t help the smile that immediately sprang to her lips.

“Hey you yourself,” she replied, sitting up slowly and stretching. Looking over at the bedside clock, she nodded to herself, mentally planning out her day. She had plenty of time before she had to get up and begin preparations for her romantic surprise, but it never hurt to start early. “When am I seeing you today?”

“That’s, uh... kinda what I called about...” On the other end of the phone, the other woman was suddenly hesitant, and the Mayor’s heart skipped a beat.

“Anna...”

“I’m sorry Dor, but I have to cancel. I got orders to report to some sort of training seminar in Chicago...”

“I *am* the Mayor, you know... I could pull some strings...”

Anna chuckled ruefully. “And how would *that* look? Mayor Wolfe using her clout to give a certain detective special privileges...”

With a sigh, Doris slumped against the headboard. “But it’s not fair... it’s Valentine’s Day, and Chinese New Year to boot...” she almost whined as she picked invisible lint from her comforter, the pout clear in her voice.

“I know, babe, and I’m sorry. Listen, I have to go; if I don’t leave soon I won’t make sign in time. I’ll make it up to you when I get back in town, okay?”

“All right,” Doris allowed, sighing.

“Okay; talk to you later. Ciao bella, mwah.”

“Bye. Happy-” the phone went dead. “Valentine’s...”

~~*~*

“Hey Sweet Pea,” Olivia soothed as she stepped into the nursery, smiling when sharp cries turned to sniffles and whimpers. Peering over the rail of her daughter’s crib, she was struck again by how beautiful the infant was, all dark hair and large eyes. “What’s a matter, cutie

pie? Is it time for food already?” Francesca frowned impatiently. Chuckling, Olivia reached down and gently picked the tiny child up, lifting her so they looked eye to eye for a moment, before laying a kiss on her smooth forehead. “All righty then baby girl, let’s go get you fed so I can drink my coffee.”

As she walked into the kitchen, a bottle was immediately thrust in her direction. It seemed to be halfway gone within seconds of reaching the squirming baby’s mouth. “Slow down there, vacuum!” Emma giggled into her plate of food.

“She makes piggy noises when she eats,” the older girl noted, delighted at the snuffling sounds her sister was making.

“She eats like she never tasted food before,” Olivia added, shrugging and sliding into her chair. Smiling at her family, Natalia brought over plates for the adults and took her seat.

“I like to think she is just passionate about food; maybe she’ll grow up to be a chef,” the dark haired woman suggested, picking up her fork and stabbing some of her lover’s eggs.

“Hey!”

“Oh ye of little faith,” the Latina admonished, raising the loaded utensil to the hotelier’s mouth.

“I shall never doubt again,” Olivia said. Moaning as she chewed, the green eyed woman nodded. “Oh my God, that’s real sharp cheddar cheese, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s real cheddar cheese. Special treat for my favorite lady on a special day.”

“I love you with all of both of my hearts.”

“Me, or the cheese?”

Olivia paused thoughtfully for a moment. “Can I have time to decide?” Emma giggled as Natalia glared.

“Thin ice,” she threatened playfully, poking her lover’s shoulder.

The sound of air being sucked through a bottle brought their attention to Francesca, who whined. “Please sir, can I have some more,” Olivia teased, taking away the bottle and placing it on the table. Lifting the girl to her shoulder, she added and she began to burp her, “If you think *that’s* good kiddo, wait until you try cheese.”

~~*~*

Blake Marler stared incredulously at her boyfriend from her seat on the bed, blinking slowly, as if closing her eyes would somehow erase the last two minutes. “You’re kidding me, right?” Frank Cooper winced and rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably, almost displacing the tie that lay half undone at his collar.

“Blakey, honey, I have no choice,” he all but pleaded, throwing up his hands in the universal ‘out of my control’ gesture.

“You’re the Chief of Police, Frank, of course you have a choice,” she countered, snorting in disgust. “They couldn’t pick another day? Had to be Valentine’s Day?”

“I know, I know, terrible planning. But there’s nothing I can do about it now.”

“When will you be back?”

“Tomorrow, in the early afternoon,” he replied, smiling sheepishly. “See, I won’t be gone long.”

“Fra-ank!” the small woman whined, pout in full force, arms crossed over her chest. And to think, she had worn her best blouse today. “This is our first Valentine’s Day together.”

He shrugged helplessly again, turning back to the mirror to finish with his tie. He was sorry that he wouldn’t get to spend the day with his girlfriend, but secretly, a small part of him was relieved. Frank hated Valentine’s. All that pressure more often than not spelled death for a relationship, especially with a woman like Blake Marler, who might be hearing wedding bells in her ears. Better to be apart for a while, keep things balanced. Slow but steady, that was how Frank liked it now; no surprises, not like last time.

“Were you even going to tell me that you were going away?” Blake asked, pale eyes suddenly shrewd and narrow.

“Huh?” Frank asked dumbly, caught off guard.

“You’re leaving; you were getting ready when I showed up to surprise you... were you even going to call and say you would be gone?” she asked again, standing and walking around to face him. “Or was I going to have to wonder why my boyfriend hadn’t contacted me on Valentine’s Day?”

Frank froze, like a deer caught in headlights. He knew instinctively that he had to tread carefully here, but didn’t know how exactly to proceed. “Of-of course I was going to call

you, sweetheart. I was just running a little bit late, that's all," he assured her, offering a lopsided smile that he hoped was charming.

"Uh huh," was the unimpressed response.

"I swear," he insisted, leaning down and pecking her lips, trying to play it cool. "Look, I'll make it up to you when I come back, all right?"

"You had damn well better," Blake said evenly, turning and walking out of the room.

Frank let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding at the sound of his front door closing forcefully. "Dodged a bullet there, Frankie-boy," he muttered, finishing with his tie.

~~*~*

ACT 3

The sound of her phone going off pulled Olivia back from the trancelike state she had found herself floating in. After washing up and changing, Natalia and Emma had left the farmhouse in Natalia's car, off to have a girl's day out, leaving the older woman alone with the newest member of the family. As soon as the car had disappeared down the road, the child had decided that it was her duty to exercise her freedom of expression by throwing back her tiny, dark haired head, and wailing unceasingly. After about fifteen minutes of freaking out, Olivia realized the girl was just in a cranky mood, and the rhythmic sounds of her attitude had lulled her mother into a mental limbo. She had no idea how long she had sat on the couch, gently rocking the baby in her arms.

"Spencer's House of Pain."

"Jesus, Olivia, what are you doing to my niece?" Doris Wolfe quipped.

The hotelier snorted and rolled her eyes. "We've decided to learn a new game today, called make Mama Olivia go deaf before sundown." Wincing, she shifted the infant higher, pleading the little one with her eyes to quiet down. Francesca glared, her volume increasing in defiance.

"Put her on the phone, let's see if I can help," the Mayor offered.

"You gonna bore the kid to sleep with politics?"

“Shut up and put the darling little banshee on.” Sighing, Olivia shrugged and did as requested.

Within seconds, the crying had slowed to shuddering breathes and occasional whimpers, and Olivia’s eyes slid closed in equal parts gratitude and irritation. “What are you, the baby whisperer?” she grumbled into the phone, rearranging Francesca so the infant lay against her chest, ear resting above her heart.

Doris chuckled, and Olivia could almost see the smug look on her face. “What can I say, I have a talent.”

“Uh huh, so happy for you,” the green eyed woman grumbled.

“Now, now Olivia, no need to be grumpy. I call bearing an offer you can’t refuse.”

“I’m not going to wake up with a horse’s head in my bed... am I?” she asked wearily. Now Doris laughed loudly, and Olivia couldn’t help but smile.

To an outsider, their exchanges might appear mean spirited or antagonistic, but her friendship with the Mayor was something that she hadn’t known she was missing until it was there. Part of the fun was not really knowing where their banter was going to take them, what would come out of her own mouth, let alone the other woman’s. For those that did know them, it made for an entertaining floor show.

“So Madam Mayor, what, exactly, can you do for me? And what’ll it cost me?” Olivia asked, mind half preoccupied with deciding whether or not she should change the baby now, or before they were ready to leave the house. They would have to hit the road soon if her plans for the day were to come to sweet fruition. Doris sighed now, and something in the sound caught Olivia’s attention immediately. “Are you all right?”

“You wouldn’t happen to want a babysitter for your first Valentine’s Day with your disgustingly adorable soulmate, would you?” Doris asked, instead of answering. Olivia frowned in confusion and not a little concern.

“What, Anna suddenly get bit by the maternal bug?” she asked, already suspecting the truth.

“She got called away for some sort of training,” the politician allowed, trying for nonchalant.

The hotelier winced in sympathy. “Oh Doris...”

“Which means that I have an open slot in my schedule, and you, Spencer, have a willing babysitter,” the blue eyed woman interrupted, her voice a little too cheerful. The sound of it was almost painful to hear.

“I... I don’t know...” Olivia hesitated, sadness overtaking her for a second. “You can join us for Valentine’s, if you like?”

Even as she asked, Olivia wanted to take the offer back. She loved her friend, but she had special plans that were, at minimum, an immediate family affair. Why hadn’t she just accepted the offer for a babysitter?

“Uh, as charming an offer as that is, I think I will pass on watching you and Natalia be disgustingly cute and loving while my own lover is out of town on the official couple’s holiday. But thank you, really, you are *too* kind.”

Olivia let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding, and could only hope it didn’t reflect her relief too much. “Right then.”

“Don’t sound so crushed,” Doris quipped, chuckling genuinely. “Offer still stands, Spencer. Let me take the rug rats off your hands for the night. They can have a sleepover and everything.”

The offer was very, very tempting... Still, Olivia hesitated.

“Look, I have a back stock of fun Valentine’s Day activities from when Ashlee was a child. Honestly, I don’t want to spend the day alone, but the thought of going out is too depressing, and intruding on your day, as sweet as the offer is, isn’t my idea of a good time. I know you have something planned, Spencer, and while you are prepared to work it around your children, this presents a solution to both our situations.”

“Dirty tricks, Wolfe,” Olivia conceded finally, grinning.

“Ha! I speak only the truth. What time should I pick them up?”

“Tell you what, Natalia and Emma are having a ‘Girl’s Day’ at the mall, and Sassy here is scheduled to get her ears pierced in a bit, so how about we drop them off to you, say, around six-ish?”

“Natalia wanted it done, but couldn’t stand being there to watch, eh?”

“Yeah; I always have to do the dirty work,” the green eyed woman grouched.

"Welcome to married life, my friend," Doris teased. Olivia's heart skipped a beat, and she swallowed hard, hoping the sound wasn't audible over the line. "All right, sounds like a plan. See you at six."

"See you at six. Thanks, Doris."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You owe me your vote in the next election," the Mayor returned, only half serious.

"Yes ma'am."

"Bye bye."

"Bye."

Olivia blew out a breath, dropping the phone beside her on the couch and regarding her youngest daughter. Francesca stared back, dark eyes still red rimmed from crying. "Well, looks like you and your sister are spending the evening with Auntie Doris, and your mommies have a proper date." The baby seemed to nod her agreement, suddenly smiling and flailing her arms. "Come on, let's get you fed and changed so we can go poke holes in your head."

~~*~*

"So," Natalia said as soon as she pulled onto the road. "What do you want to do first?" Emma practically vibrated with excitement in the back seat, and the Latina smiled at her through the rearview mirror.

"Can we get our nails done?" the girl asked, eyes hopeful and smile wide. The dark haired woman chuckled, nodding.

"Of course we can, sweetie. It's our Girl's Day; we can do whatever you want." Glancing into the mirror again and seeing the expression on her daughter's face, Natalia amended her statement. "Within reason, we can do whatever you want within reason." Emma pouted for a moment.

"Can we get ice cream?"

"With all the fixings," the woman assured, checking her blind spot and changing lanes.

"Cool! Can we go to the toy store, and can I have something?"

“Sure, honey.” Natalia frowned, wondering when Olivia would reach the mall, not wanting to run into the other woman, knowing it would ruin her surprise.

If one thing was true, it was that Natalia was horrible at keeping secrets. Considering, then, the magnitude of the surprise she had planned for her lover tonight, it was a wonder she hadn’t already tipped her hand. But she was determined that this be a Valentine’s Day that neither of them forgot, and so had managed to keep it together. Worrying about Francesca’s appointment today had helped, giving her an excuse to be anxious without raising alarm. It helped that she *was* nervous, as any mother would be, but not nearly as much as Olivia believed. It was a good way to suggest they separate so she could implement her little plan...

Noticing Natalia’s attention was elsewhere, Emma frowned, annoyed. It was *her* day today, they had promised her. She hardly ever got even a second with one of her mothers alone anymore, and had been looking forward to this all month. That in mind, a little distraction wasn’t always a bad thing... “Will you buy me a pony?” she asked, half serious.

“When you graduate from college, sneaky miss,” Natalia replied, snorting. “But I will let you help me with my super secret plan for your mommy.”

“Ooo, secret plan? Yay! We get to be Spies?”

“Super Spies! And, there may be a special reward in it for you...”

“Count me in!” the girl exclaimed, bouncing in place. “Drive faster!”

~~*~*



Looking around the nursery, Francesca in hand, Olivia ticked off items on her mental checklist. Baby bag, check; wallet, purse, keys, check; cell phone, check. "All right, we got everything kiddo?" she asked, cradling the girl close. Francesca slowly opened her eyes, blinking once, twice, three times, before dismissing the question as random noise and falling back to sleep. "Right, well, good. It's good that you aren't cognizant of the fact that we are about to shoot bolts of metal into your head; no fear that way," the woman babbled, anxiety levels rising. "Okay, off we go..."

It took a surprisingly short amount of time to reach the mall, and Olivia felt a bit like a man walking down death row to his execution. She had readily agreed when Natalia had asked her to take their youngest to get her ears pierced, wanting to spare the woman having to watch the baby go through that pain. She was used to having to be strong, and for some reason, she had thought watching her child go through *that* would affect her less... she had been wrong...

Stepping into the shopping center, Olivia froze, regretting her promise to do this alone. "How about we go shopping first, and then Mommy can start giving you reasons for hating her for the rest of your life?" she suggested to the infant, who had woken up when she had been removed from her car seat. Francesca cooed, looking up at the auburn haired woman with complete innocence and trust. "Great, good, excellent. There is a special hel- uh, heck, waiting for me. In the mean time, to the jeweler's!"

They spent the next two hours doing everything feasible that Olivia could think of to delay the inevitable, including spending over thirty minutes in the arcade, watching children play skee-ball and trying 'their' hand at a few slot-machine like video games. But soon, she could find no more excuses to keep from doing the dirty deed, knowing Natalia would be disappointed if Francesca didn't come home wearing the gold, coral studded earrings she had left with her lover that morning – a family heirloom and tradition.

With a sigh, the green eyed woman approached the small, cheerful looking storefront, forcing herself to ignore the queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. A young blonde woman stood behind the counter of the shop, flipping through a magazine. Clearing her throat, Olivia made her presence known. "Hi, my name is Olivia Spencer; I called earlier."

With a smile, the woman – girl really – came around the counter, hand outstretched. "Hello, Mrs. Spencer, my name is Nina." Olivia's eye twitched, and she bit back a sigh. She couldn't remember the number of times people had called her Mrs. Spencer in the last two hours.

"That's *Ms.* Spencer, not Mrs."

Blushing faintly, the blonde nodded. "Of course, I apologize Ms. Spencer."

"Not a problem."

Blue eyes focusing on the baby in Olivia's hands, Nina cooed, reaching out with a finger and gently stroking the bridge of Francesca's nose. "And who do we have here?"

"This is Francesca; she's going to be your victim this afternoon," Olivia quipped, trying to hide her unease.

Chuckling, Nina focused back on the woman in front of her, nodding sympathetically. "You'd be surprised how often I hear that sentence."

"I could believe a high number."

"I'll take good care of Francesca, I promise. If you want to sign the paper work, you can be out of here in less than ten minutes."

Signing the necessary forms, Olivia handed over her daughter. "This must be what Judas felt like," she murmured to herself, startled when Nina laughed.

"Good one. Honestly though, she'll cry for a few minutes, but by tomorrow it'll be just an ache for her. She probably won't lose sleep over it," the piercer promised, placing the baby in a seat that looked similar to a high-chair, but allowed less mobility.

"I will," the older woman shot back, stress causing her to be short. Nina nodded and shrugged.

"Good," she said. "I would hope a mother would. But, I guarantee that Francesca here won't even remember this."

"Here's to hoping it doesn't scar her for life." Olivia sighed, swallowing the lump in her throat.

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"Okay," Natalia began, smiling down at her daughter as they exited the nail salon. "Made ourselves pretty?"

"Check!" Emma exclaimed, admiring her nails.

Rifling through their shopping bags, Natalia nodded. "Bought gifts for Auntie Doris and Auntie Blake?"

"Check!"

Adjusting her purse and packages carefully, so as not to ruin the last twenty minutes' work on her nails, the woman held out her hand. "So, we have one more stop." Emma grabbed hold of her eagerly and skipped beside her as they began to move.

"Is this the super secret spy part?"

Chuckling, the dark haired woman nodded, tapping the girl on the nose gently with her finger. "Yes, baby girl, this is the super secret spy part. You ready?"

"Yeah, yeah! Where are we going?"

"We are going to the jewelry store, to buy your Mommy a very special present..."

Emma stopped, pulling Natalia's arm, light eyes suddenly very wide. "Are you gonna buy her a ring?" Nervously, the woman nodded, her smile small and a little unsure.

"Is... is that okay?" she asked. "I hope you don't mind."

"Course not! You're already my other mommy... 'bout time!" Emma grinned, excitement and amusement causing her to practically float. Letting out a breath, Natalia nodded, bending down and covering the girl's face with kisses.

"Why thank you, my wonderful, beautiful, sweet girl!" Giggling, Emma pushed her away, grabbing her other hand and yanking the Latina in the direction of the jeweler's.

"Come on, let's go!"

~~*~*

Sighing dejectedly to herself, Blake Marler wandered up and down the aisles of the Springfield gas station-slash-convenience store. Every fourth step or so, she lifted a box of not yet paid for chocolates, selecting one at random and popping it into her mouth, sparing only a moment to contemplate the flavors. "Mmm, truffle," or "Ugh, toothpaste flavored," commentary was mumbled in the same glum tone.

Rounding a bend to begin her circuit of the establishment, for what must have been the eighth time in fifteen minutes, Blake didn't see Doris until it was almost too late. "Gah!" she exclaimed, jumping back at the last moment, managing through some miracle to keep her mostly eaten box of chocolates from spilling.

"There's this little concept called watching where you're going," the Mayor quipped, not unkindly. "You might want to look into it." Blake glared, mouth opening and closing a few times, as if she were going to reply. Doris just raised an eyebrow, expression lightly bemused.

"I, you, I..."

"Ye-es?"

As Doris watched, with not a small bit of terror, big, fat tears welled in Blake's eyes, trembling suspended in the lashes for a moment, before rolling determinedly down her cheeks. Panic was quick to set in, and Doris found herself sputtering, trying to figure out what she could have possibly done to elicit such a response from the usually feisty gossip. "Blake, uh, I, I'm sorry..." the brunette stammered, looking around frantically for help. She never knew what to do with a crying woman; they made her anxious and guilty.

"It's... it's not your fault," the smaller woman cried, covering her mouth with her free hand, as if it would make the sobs fighting their way out of her chest stop. "It... Frank, he..."

"Oh dear God," Doris sad with rising horror. "He didn't break up with you, did he?" She was in no way ready to console a jilted lover, ever, but especially not today...

Thinking quickly, Doris jammed her hand into her purse and pulled out a wad of tissues. "Here, take these!" The desperation in the public official's voice halted the crying, replacing it with thick giggles.

"Geez, you should see the look on your face!" Blake said, sniffing, and accepting the tissue. Wiping at her nose, she took a deep, calming breath. "Sorry, I just... Frank got called away on business today, and I... he just seemed almost relieved to get out of spending the day with me."

Doris tsked in sympathy. "I'm sorry Blake. I'm sure he wasn't happy about it; perhaps he was just trying not to upset you by being too..."

"What, expressive of regret? Yeah, no, I don't think so. He's just so..."

Realizing that she was about to spill her guts to someone in public, the shorter woman swallowed the rest of her words. Though she was certainly not distrustful of the Mayor, Springfield's walls – or aisle in this case – had very good ears. Anything one said, innocent or not, could easily be taken and twisted for someone's selfish, often vindictive, purposes.

"What are you doing here?"

Sighing, Doris shrugged. "You're not the only one whose other half was required elsewhere today."

"Oh no! I'm so sorry," the smaller woman said, sympathetically. Smiling wanly, she offered her friend a chocolate from the box, knowing better than to pry for details. "Drown your sorrows in a girl's second best friend?" Snorting, Doris accepted, grabbing the first candy she could and popping it into her mouth.

“Mmm, strawberry.”

“So, all these odds and ends are for...” Blake asked after a few moments of silence.

“I am so very generously baby-sitting for Springfield’s most sickeningly adorable couple tonight, so they can have a proper first Valentine’s together.

“Ah, Natalia and Olivia, huh?”

“Oh yes. I have some ideas for a few projects to keep Emma busy for the evening, and I was just stocking up on supplies,” the taller woman allowed, self consciously rearranging some of the contents of her basket. Glitter and construction paper were shoved under sugar cookie dough and frosting.

“So it’s going to be you and two children?”

Doris glared, not liking the tone of the question.

“I *am* a mother, you know. I am perfectly capable of caring for children for an evening.”

Eyes wide, Blake shook her head, hand shooting out to rest on the Mayor’s arm. “That’s not at all what I meant! I just, you know... two young kids, one adult... sounds kinda... rough...” she trailed off, blushing.

Doris shrugged. “If you’re that concerned, you could always help out,” she said off-handedly.

Blake appeared thoughtful for a moment, and immediately Doris regretted her suggestion. “That’s a great idea! I can bring Clarissa over, and we can all eat junk food and have a girl’s night!”

The politician had not been serious at all, did not in any way want to spend the evening babysitting both the Spencer-Rivera brood, and the Marler clan. “Now, Blake...”

“It’ll be fun! Okay, I’ll go get Clarissa and some things, and meet you at your place. Say, five-ish?” Doris’ mouth opened and closed soundlessly a few times, brain unable to form an excuse. “Excellent! See you in a few!” And then Blake was gone, leaving the taller woman with the distinct impression that she had just signed her own death warrant. Because, surely, someone would end up murdered by the end of the evening.

~~*~*

“Shit!” Olivia growled, shoving her finger into her mouth and glaring down at the butcher knife, now spotted lightly with her blood. She was reluctant to move it, because the throbbing pain in her digit almost convinced her that she had sliced off her finger at the second knuckle, and seeing a severed piece of herself under cold, not-so-stainless steel was something she could definitely live without. “Somabish,” she muttered around the injured flesh.

Natalia had left not twenty minutes before with the girls – it was surprisingly easy to get her to agree to the plan – leaving Olivia free to implement her super secret surprise. She would have had just enough time to set everything up, but now she had to recalculate the rest of her preparations to compensate for her blunder. Working it through in her mind, the green eyed woman realized that there was no way she would have everything set up by the time Natalia got back. There was only one thing to do...

Slowly sliding her left ring finger out of her mouth, the hotelier was relieved to see it attached, if sliced. “Ooo, not good,” she said to herself, grabbing the phone with her undamaged hand and dialing. The line was picked up on the third ring.

“Yell-o,” a deep, slightly scratchy voice greeted, and Olivia couldn’t help the smile that sprung to her lips. She would always have a soft spot for *this* particular Cooper.

“Hi, Buzz, it’s Olivia.”

“Well hello there, pretty lady. What can I do for you?”

“I have a favor to ask,” she said, hesitating a moment. Given their history together, what she wanted from the man could definitely be considered insensitive, if not downright selfish. “Actually, you know what, never mind.”

“Don’t you never mind me, woman! Come on, what’s up?”

“I... I kind of need help setting up a romantic dinner for Natalia, ASAP. I managed to cut my hand nicely, and I don’t think I can get everything done in the next,” she paused, looking at the clock that hung on the wall. “Forty-five minutes.”

“Say no more, darlin’. Anything for you, you know that.”

Grabbing a dish towel and wrapping her sluggishly bleeding injury, the woman sighed with relief. She felt a bit guilty, but the desperation to achieve perfection for her lover outweighed it. “Thanks Buzz, you’re the best...”

“That’s the word on the street. So, what’s the plan?”

“Well...”

~~*~*

ACT 4

Blake had shown up, youngest child in tow as promised, no later than five forty-five. Opening the door, Doris was struck by how content both the females standing on her stoop appeared: the girl bundled up in a bright red parka, clutching a large bag of what Doris could only assume was ‘junk food’, and the woman in her white snow jacket, holding out a brown paper bag shaped suspiciously like a bottle of wine.

“Hi!” the older Marler exclaimed, smiling softly, cheeks tinged pink with cold. “Sorry we’re late. But, we come bearing gifts!” Moving back and allowing them to pass, Doris repressed a sigh. There was no use being ill-tempered about the turn of events now; she would just have to resign herself to the fact that she was going to spend the evening in the company of a woman other than her lover, and deal with it.

For a moment, Doris felt annoyance rising in her at Anna. It was completely irrational; it wasn’t Anna’s fault she had been called away. Still, it seemed to her that the other woman didn’t take them nearly as seriously as she should. She hadn’t even *sounded* disappointed at being away from the Mayor on the romantic holiday...

Shaking her head to clear it, Doris closed the door and moved in, following behind the Marlers, who walked in as if they owned the house. “I called Natalia, let her know that Clarissa and I would be keeping you company,” Blake informed her.

“Did you?” the other woman asked, amused, coming to stand behind the publisher, who had stopped in the kitchen to unload her booty onto the table.

“Yup! Emma is very excited. I figured the girl’s could keep each other company, and we could bemoan the circumstances of our lonely little holiday.”

Rolling her eyes, Doris snorted. “You’re so very thoughtful,” she deadpanned, moving forward to help Clarissa with her bag. “Frank is a lucky man; whatever would he do without you?” It was meant to be playful and a little mocking, but it came out matter-of-fact, and Doris was a little shocked to realize she was sincere in her sentiment.

“Hah! That’s what I keep saying,” the strawberry-blonde agreed, turning and grinning. “Glad *someone* sees it! You’ll be the person I call if he doesn’t realize what he’s got!”

Doris was saved from saying something she might have regretted by the doorbell ringing. "Well, that'll be them," she stated unnecessarily, spinning on her heel. Reaching the door and throwing it open, she couldn't help but smile at Natalia, who looked a little frazzled as she juggled an infant, baby bag, and large purse. "Hello, come on in," the taller woman greeted, reaching out and taking the sleeping baby.

"Hi! Thanks."

~~*~*

"There," Olivia exclaimed, putting the finishing touches on the elaborate meal, looking up to catch Buzz's eye and smile. "Perfect."

"Have to say, didn't think we were going to pull this off," he admitted, nodding, impressed. Walking to the door, he pulled on his coat, using the motion to hide the look of nostalgia from his friend. He loved his wife dearly, but he had once loved Olivia Spencer just as fiercely. He, of course, wasn't the only man in the town that could claim the same, but...

"We make a good team, don't we?" the green eyed woman asked, smiling softly at the man.

"Absolutely, Kato," he quipped, winking.

"Ha! As if I am the side-kick. Try again, Robin," she retorted playfully, moving to stand beside him and hugging him in gratitude. "Seriously, though... thanks. This means a lot to me..."

"I know, kiddo, I know. Just, remember, no more using your hands as a sharpening block!"

"So, very, funny," she dead-panned, shoving him.

Relenting at the mock-wounded look he gave her, she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "Wish me luck, huh?"

"You'll do great," he assured her, voice soft but sincere. "You look beautiful, there is no way she can resist you."

"That *was* the plan."

"Achieved then. Now, I have to get going, before my wife sends out a search party." He moved, exiting the house, turning just outside the door. "Congratulations Olivia. If anyone deserves happiness, it's you."

Olivia looked at her feet, swallowing the lump in her throat. She didn't feel worthy of all her good fortune of late, but she in no way was going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Calloused fingers lifted her chin, and she looked up into kind, knowing eyes. "Thank you."

"Anytime. Now, I am going to make like a banana and split. Go get 'er tiger!" And then he was gone.

Looking around her, suddenly very nervous, Olivia took a deep breath. "Yes sir, confidence, can I have it please..."

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"Do you have enough milk?"

"Jesus, Natalia; I think there's enough milk here to feed Octo-Mom's brood," Doris said dryly, rolling her eyes. Natalia huffed, frowning slightly, and Blake took pity.

"Natalia," she began, wrapping an arm around the other woman's shoulder in comfort. "Everything will be fine, really. Worst comes to worst, you and Olivia have a very romantic evening, and then freak out and pick the girls up later."

"Oh, oh no, I mean, I wasn't..."

"Yes, you were," Doris interrupted, not looking away from the baby in her arms, who she was entertaining with silly faces. "Between Blake and I, we have nearly a half dozen little people's worth of experience," she reminded her, pausing at how oddly the phrase struck her. Shaking it off, she finally looked at the worried woman. "Both single mothers for long stretches as well, remember?"

"That's right, sweetie," Blake chimed in, squeezing her friend's shoulder. "Together, we're unstoppable. You can trust us."

"I do trust you, both of you!" Natalia exclaimed, a little horrified that she might have implied otherwise.

"Whoa there, it's okay," Doris assured, smiling in amusement. "Being away from a new baby can be hard on a mother, it's understandable. Blake's right, they are welcome to stay the night, but if you need to pick them up and take them home, that's perfectly understandable."

"I... I probably won't," Natalia said after a moment, looking embarrassed.

“But having the option takes a lot of the stress off leaving them here, huh?” Blake asked in sympathy. The Latina nodded, smiling gratefully. “Good, tonight is supposed to be romantic, completely stress free.”

“Right... stress free...”

Sighing, Doris walked to the two women, knowing that if something wasn’t done immediately, this would end with Natalia going back to the farmhouse still encumbered by the children. Handing Blake the baby, the Mayor straightened to her full height and gently, but firmly, took Natalia’s arm and began leading her to the door. “Everything is going to be fine, all right? Now, say ‘see you later’ to the girls, and get back to your girlfriend.”

“Bye!” Emma exclaimed, running up and hugging her other mother, before skipping back to Clarissa, who handed her a chocolate she had swiped from her own mother’s stash.

“Bye, honey,” Natalia said, eyes flickering over to Blake, who brought a dozing Francesca over.

Kissing the infant on her forehead, the Latina resisted the urge to call the evening off, instead turning and fleeing out the door, tears filling her eyes. She knew it was just for the night, and that the surprise she had for Olivia was better presented between just the two of them, but leaving her children was so very difficult. Not giving herself a chance to think, she opened the car and jumped in, quickly snapping her seatbelt in place and throwing the vehicle in reverse. With a final look to the house, she hit the gas, and drove away.

~~*~*

Olivia glanced at the clock for what seemed like the hundredth time in five minutes, anxiety levels climbing by the second. Natalia should have been back by now; what was taking her so long? Maybe she had changed her mind about a romantic evening; maybe she had lost track of time; maybe something had happened to her! Lights appeared at the end of the drive, and the hotelier released a breath she hadn’t known she was holding, her heart beating almost arrhythmically in her chest.

The black velvet box was suddenly very heavy in her pocket, and warm, as if it were on fire. Olivia had no idea how she was going to last through dinner without having a heart attack. Watching her lover climb out of the car, she felt her breath catch again. It never ceased to surprise her, the other woman’s beauty. Dark eyes found hers, crinkling at the corners as her lover smiled, and she couldn’t help but grin in return. She loved Natalia more than she could articulate in any language, and any plans tonight would never be enough to express the depth of that emotion. She would just have to spend the rest of her life showing the smaller woman...

Smiling almost shyly as her lover approached the porch, Olivia ducked her head, gazing up through her eye lashes. "Hey."

Smiling deeply, dimples on full display, Natalia stopped just in front of her. "Hi. You look... beautiful." Olivia plucked at her navy blouse a bit self-consciously.

"I do my best," the taller woman quipped.

Looking down, Natalia noticed an awkward bandage encircling one of Olivia's fingers. "Oh no, what happened?" she cried, reaching down and pulling the wounded hand to her chest, dark eyes filling instantly with worried tears.

Olivia considered teasing the smaller woman, but the sudden moisture in her eyes made her decide against it. There was no need to cause her any more distress than she was causing herself. "Ah, that. I nicked myself when I was cooking. No big deal, I promise." Reaching out and drawing Natalia to her, pulling her into a tight embrace. "I love you," she whispered, kissing the delicate shell of the other woman's ear. "With all my heart."

"Ah, so, you've decided then?" the dark haired woman said, choosing to allow her focus to be shifted.

"Huh?" Olivia asked, pulling back and frowning in confusion.

Grinning mischievously, Natalia pecked the older woman on the lips. "Between me and the cheese?"

"Ha, ah, right! Well, after a long mental debate, it looks like you've come out on top."

Pulling back, the dark haired woman winked. "Not yet; maybe after dinner," she teased, her voice a husky whisper. Olivia felt her entire body tighten at the words.

"Naughty thing," she mock-scolded, waggling her eyebrows.

"Aren't you lucky?"

~~*~*

"I can't do it..." Emma Spencer pouted, squinting at what was supposed to be her art project. Clarissa Marler looked up from her own creation, a much less ambitious one, and shrugged, glad she had chosen the simple version.

“Of course you can honey, you just have to take it slow, and make sure you follow all the steps,” Blake replied, rising from her seat and coming around the table to squat next to the girl’s chair.

“This one is hard, though.” Now the girl was pouting. Doris chuckled as she re-entered the room, perfectly warmed bottle of milk in her hand.

“That’s the one you wanted to do, kiddo,” the woman reminded, shrugging. “The harder the project, the more satisfying the end product.”

“Is that really true?” the nine year old asked, doubtful. The Mayor nodded as she passed, ruffling the girl’s hair.

“Look at it again, follow the steps. You’re a smart girl, you’ll get it.”

Emma glared at the bright pieces of construction paper in front of her, willing them to reveal the secrets of their compliance. How was she supposed to get them to form the ‘end product’? Tilting her head, it suddenly became clear, and she attacked the project again with renewed vigor.

Smiling, Blake stood and wandered towards the doorway that separated the dining room from the living room. Pausing, she leaned against the frame, filled with a rush of warmth and fondness, and a sad sort of longing, as she observed the scene in the other room. Doris was standing, cradling Francesca in her arms, humming softly to the infant as she drank greedily. The look on the taller woman’s face was completely unguarded, full of honest affection and joy. Seeing the softer side of the prickly woman was rare and, because of that, precious.

Blake felt something inside her shift, but ignored it, uninterested in self-examination right now. Life was complicated enough. There were so many things balanced on various houses of cards that even a wrong breath could send them toppling down. There was no reason to court disaster when it seemed to find one easily enough on its own. What disaster exactly was not really clear, but the feeling in the strawberry-blonde woman’s chest promised unrest if pursued. And so, she turned and headed back into the kitchen, resolutely shutting the door on the train of thought.

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Dinner was a surprisingly quiet affair between the lovers. They gazed meaningfully into each other’s eyes over the three light courses – Olivia had plans for after that would be better served by not having a heavy meal – and touched hands on occasion. With no young children around, they were free to engage in adult conversation, but it seemed

unnecessary, and so they communicated with tilts of the head and twitches of the lips. It was easy and comfortable, the way things were when they were at their most honest, and both women reveled in it.

Soon, however, the food was eaten, and the dishes done, and Olivia found herself suddenly anxious again. Natalia, noting the tension slowly creeping into her lover's body, dried her hands and insinuated herself into the taller woman's arms, snuggling against her chest and forcing her to lean against the counter. "Is it sad that I find doing chores together romantic?"

Laughing, Olivia kissed the dark head cradled against her. "It's part of your charm," she assured.

Taking a few deep breathes, the older woman gathered her courage around her, pulling back slightly so that she could catch Natalia's eyes. "Natalia, I..."

"What is it, querida?"

Sighing in frustration, Olivia tried again. "Listen, I have something I want to say..."

"What is it, sweetie? Are you all right?" Fear entered dark eyes, and Natalia pulled away suddenly, hand shooting to her mouth. "Is it your heart? Is there something wrong with your heart?"

"What? No, no! God no, the old ticker 2.0 is doing just fine!" Olivia said, bewildered by the reaction.

"Oh, thank goodness!" the shorter woman breathed, clutching her own chest. Frowning, she swatted at her lover's arm. "Don't do that!"

"Hey! I didn't make you jump to crazy conclusions!"

"Well, don't be so mysterious!"

Sighing, Olivia covered her eyes with her hands, groaning in frustration. Mostly with herself, and her sudden utter lack of suave-ness, but a little for her lover, who was not making it easy to be cooler. Suddenly struck with inspiration, the taller woman nodded to herself, uncovering her face and gently taking Natalia's hand. "How about we move this outside and try this again?"

Grinning, the smaller woman nodded. "Okay, take two, under the moon light."

“Right, good, let’s go then.”

“Perfect,” Natalia said, taking the lead and tugging the other woman through the kitchen. “Because I have something I want to tell you, too, but I kind of wanted the setting to be a little more romantic than the kitchen.”

“Well ex-cah-use me!” Olivia grumped, rolling her eyes.

“All is forgiven,” was the cheeky reply.

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Buzz Cooper sat back in his chair, idly contemplating the contents of his almost full wine glass. Right about now, Olivia would probably be finishing up her romantic dinner and moving on to the next phase of her ‘master plan.’ To an outsider who didn’t know him, it would appear that he was brooding, in a dark mood, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth. It was his deeply held belief that everyone deserved happiness, no matter how many times they got it wrong. After, knowing the woman for as long as he had, it became very clear to him that this could be considered even more true for her. Never in his life had he met someone so desperately in need of love than Olivia Spencer. And now it looked like she would finally get what she wanted.

He couldn’t have been more happy for them both, really. It seemed to him that, finally, everything was shifting to be as it should. Natalia had found someone who respected and cherished her; Olivia had found someone who understood her and loved her completely; and together, both women had forged a beautiful, stable family for themselves and their children. It was a good thing too, because worrying about his favorite girls – excluding Lillian of course – was going to give the man ulcers.

“What are you thinking so intently about?” His wife’s voice floated into his consciousness, shaking him from his thoughts. Smiling and searching for her, he found himself gazing into slightly concerned eyes.

“Just how glad I am things turned out like they did. Here I am, the luckiest man on earth; I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Charmer,” she accused, grinning happily and moving to sit on his lap. With a chuckle, he pulled her into a kiss with his free hand, contemplation forgotten in favor of seizing the moment and enjoying the holiday with his wife.

~~*~*

"I forgot there was no moon tonight," Olivia said, her voice betraying her nerves.

Natalia smiled. "Starlight will do just as well," she replied.

Olivia was frozen in place, trying desperately to regain the nerve to move forward. This was it, this was her moment; she had to do it right... But, how exactly did a woman, used to being pursued, go about pursuing? Now that the shoe was on the other foot, she had no idea how to proceed. There were so many ways this could go wrong, so many horrible scenarios to balance against the one that was good... How did men do this?

It hit her then, like a lightning bolt. Her lover was nothing if not a traditional woman, and there *was* a precedent for the general, if not overly specific, situation. With the finesse of a fifteen year old boy, Olivia turned, spinning her lover to face her. "What the?" Natalia began, but was quickly silenced by her shock as Olivia fell to one knee.

"I... I had this whole speech planned... because, you know, you deserve a good, meaningful speech but... Damn it, this is hard, so I am just going to say what is in my heart."

"Olivia..."

"No, wait, let me get this out, all right?" Taking the smaller woman's hand, Olivia laced their fingers together, and took a deep breath. "Natalia, I love you... I have loved you since... it seems like, literally forever. The way I feel about you must be divinely inspired, because honestly, I couldn't love you more if God showed up and ordered me to."

Reaching into her pocket, the kneeling woman pulled out the small box that had been waiting there since she had returned from the mall. Natalia gasped, her free hand flying to her mouth. "I'm not very good at explaining what you mean to me, but... I want to spend the rest of my life showing you that you are my everything." Opening the box, Olivia released Natalia's hand so she could pull the ring out. "You are my lover, and my best friend; you're the mother of my children, my conscience, and more often than not, my common sense. I don't know how I survived before you, and I know that I couldn't possibly survive without you..."

This was it, the moment of truth. Olivia felt her insides trembling with excitement. Logically, she knew that there was very little chance of rejection. She loved Natalia, and Natalia loved her. They shared children, finances, a home, a life. But, that knowledge did nothing to calm the humming of her nerves.

"Natalia Rivera; will you marry me?" Natalia was speechless, tears rolling down her cheeks as she gazed down at the love of her life. Then, she did something that Olivia hadn't even considered an option; Natalia threw back her head and laughed.

Olivia stared up at the dark haired woman, mouth hanging open in disbelief. Even in her worst case scenarios, she hadn't thought she would be laughed at. She didn't know whether to be heartbroken or offended. Her face must have been leaning towards the latter, because Natalia wiped her face and eased down onto her knees beside the older woman. "Oh, honey, no I... I'm not laughing at you."

"Huh, really? Cuz it kinda sounds like ya are."

Fighting off the giggles still bubbling up, Natalia reached into her own pocket, producing a small box, popping it open with a flourish. Inside sat a simple, elegant ring of gold.

"Oh, no way!" Olivia exclaimed, green eyes wide.

"Yes way, my love."

"This is so not fair! I was gonna be all smooth and ask you to marry me!"

"And, what... I was supposed to swoon girlishly into your arms and be swept away? This *is* 2010, Olivia." The older woman gaped at her, and she chuckled, gently stroking her lover's cheek. "Maybe I wanted to do the sweeping, huh? Ever think of that?"



The words were sincere, but kind, and it was Olivia's turn to feel tears filling her eyes. "I love you with all my heart, Olivia Spencer. You evoke a completeness in me, a wholeness that I didn't know was possible to feel until I met you. You are already my wife, in body and soul, and I know God is smiling on our union. I could have been happy with that, but I realized that you need the symbol as much as I do. You're sneaky, trying to pretend like it doesn't bother you, but I know it does. I want to honor what we have, because it is the most precious thing in the world."

"And what... do we have?" Olivia whispered. Natalia smiled softly, leaning forward and kissing her lover slowly, with all her emotion.

"That's simple," she replied as they pulled apart, sighing happily. "We have each other; we have a family. You, and Emma, and Rafe, and Ava, and Francesca are all I could ever want from life. So, the question is really: Olivia Spencer, will *you* marry *me*?"

Closing her eyes as her tears finally began to fall, Olivia nodded. "Yes," she whispered, voice thick. "God, yes!"

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Later, they would wonder how they got into the house and the bedroom, emotion and passion carrying away presence of mind and common sense. When those returned, they lay together, basking in the afterglow, both admiring their rings, slipping them on and off – Olivia's on her right index finger, to compensate for the injury on the left – reading and rereading the inscriptions. "What does 'Erotas' mean, exactly?" Natalia asked.

"Love: passionate and all consuming love," Olivia replied, quite proud of herself. Drawing her lover to her chest, she ran her fingers idly over the woman's back. "From the Greek, Eros, the little bugger that's floating around causing trouble."

"Are you implying that our love is trouble?"

"Of the best kind," was the reply.

"Don't you want to know what yours means?" Natalia asked, after long moments of easy silence.

"In Amore Familia? Familial love, right? Love of one's family."

Pulling back a bit, so she could gaze into her lover's – her wife's – eyes, Natalia smiled knowingly. "In Amore Familia; Family *in* Love. Remember just after you moved back in, when Emma was upset because that boy had told her that I wasn't her mother, and

Francesca wasn't her sister, because we weren't blood related?" Olivia nodded, frowning. "We told her that we were a family of love, and that *that* was more special than anything that had to do with blood. I meant that; you are my family and I am yours, because we love each other, completely."

Olivia could only nod, leaning forward and kissing the smaller woman, conveying all her emotions. "In amore familia; nothing more need be said." When she pulled back she was smiling. "Sooo," she said, and there was a new sort of excitement in her voice now, "how do you feel about a little honeymoon...say on San Cristobel?"

Natalia smiled slowly. "San Cristobel? You mean?"

"Where I grew up, exactly," Olivia finished for her, pushing a lock of hair behind her lover's ear.

Natalia's eyes shone with excitement. "Oh my God," she exclaimed. "How? *When*?"

Olivia's heart seemed to expand at the joy in the smaller woman's voice. "Well, the *how* is that the Xiaos – you remember them sweetie, right?" Natalia nodded, so Olivia went on. "Well, the Xiaos contacted me a few days ago because they wanted to give me the opportunity to buy one of their resort hotels on the island. They remembered I was from there, can you believe that?"

Natalia's smile grew soft. "You're unforgettable," she murmured. A slight blush tinged Olivia's cheeks.

"Anyway," the older woman continued swiftly, "that's the how. As for the when...how does two weeks from now grab you?"

For a moment Natalia was speechless. "Wow," she said at last.

Olivia laughed. "Best Valentine's Day ever?" she asked, grinning.

"Best Valentine's Day ever," Natalia agreed.

The End

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Here Beneath My Skin

by geekgrrllurking

ACT 1

Olivia Spencer ran a hand through her thick, honey-blonde hair and gladly stepped out of the stuffy confines of the airplane into the warm, welcoming sunshine of San Cristobel. She paused at the top of the passenger boarding stairs, inhaling deeply, breathing in the familiar salty air of the tiny tropical nation.

Home.

“Thank you for flying San Cristobel Airways, please watch your step as you leave the plane.” An overly perky flight attendant waved behind her. “Buh-bye!”

Olivia was ready to smack the blonde woman, hard, after being subjected to her chipper attitude for over four hours on the flight. She felt the soothing hand of her lover run along the curve of her spine, and smiled, the simple touch calming the urge to slap the stewardess silly.

“Oh, *querida*, it’s beautiful!” Natalia Rivera gasped, staring at the surrounding area. The view from the top of the boarding stairs was stunning. A cloudless, blue sky was surpassed only by the vibrant azure of the Atlantic Ocean, crashing steadily against the bright white beach. Palm trees swayed in the slight breeze and sea gulls flew overhead, as the heavy afternoon heat hit her like a wall.

“It is gorgeous, isn’t it?” Olivia grinned and pulled out her sunglasses, pushing them along the bridge of her nose into place as she lead the way down the stairs to the hot pavement below.

“How could you possibly leave all this, to come to snowy, freezing Springfield?” Natalia extended the handle on her carry on luggage and pulled it along behind her, tiny wheels squeaking as they walked across the tarmac to the white stucco airport buildings.

Olivia peered over the rim of her sunglasses, raking her eyes down sweet curves and tight denim jeans before heading back up the petite form again. Finally meeting her partner’s dark eyes, she levelled a heated, intense stare at the younger woman, moistening her lips

with the tip of her tongue, before slowly raising a single eyebrow. She smiled as Natalia swallowed hard.

"Oh, there are some pretty hot things about Springfield, too, sweetheart." Olivia's voice dropped to its most seductive register. She simply chuckled softly as Natalia flushed ever so slightly and a naughty smirk formed on her lover's delectable lips. A shiver slid down Olivia's back in reaction to those damn dimples. Dragging her eyes away from her lover, Olivia pulled out her Blackberry and powered it on, scanning quickly for any messages from Frank or Phillip

"Any emergencies?" Natalia slowed her pace towards the small building so Olivia could focus on the small device. She knew they were only going to be gone for essentially a long weekend, but still, it was a long time away from her sweet baby girl and Jellybean. Apparently for both of them, as she watched Olivia sigh with relief and smile back at her.

"Nope. Just an e-card from Josh wishing me an early happy birthday." Olivia's smile widened as she read his message. "He said he wishes he was here to tell me in person."

"Aw, he is so sweet," Natalia said. She glanced away, staring at the other passengers walking past them as she felt a momentary pang of irrational jealousy. Of all her partner's ex-husbands, Josh was the one she worried the most about sweeping back into Olivia's life and stealing her away.

A bright glimmer caught her eye and she glanced down at the ring on her finger, and then at the matching one on Olivia. Natalia turned into the slight breeze blowing across the airfield and let out a long breath. She couldn't help the smile that broke out every time she thought about being engaged to Olivia. Or for that matter, the heat that flushed her body from the knowledge that Olivia Spencer was hers and that she equally belonged to her. Maybe the reason for all of Olivia's ex-husbands was that what she had really needed all along was a wife.

Natalia smirked to herself and turned her attention back to her lover, as Olivia chuckled mischievously and her thumbs typed away a response to Josh's text message. God, she was like a little kid sometimes. "What are you saying to him?"

"I just told him I'm celebrating it somewhere hot and sunny with a scantily clad Natalia. I bet he wishes he was here." Olivia waggled her eyebrows and hit send, slowly leaning in for a quick kiss before swinging open the door to the airport building. The cold air-conditioning felt good against their skin and they made their way inside.

They stood in a long winding line up, Natalia ready with their passports in hand, Olivia flipping through the resort brochure and package that she'd asked for from the Xiao's

people in San Cristobel. Their invitation to discuss letting go of one of their many smaller resort locations had been a bit of a surprise, but a welcome one. Franchising the Beacon was definitely still her and Natalia's goal.

Olivia looked closer at some of the pictures. There was a swimming pool, an executive nine-hole golf course, top of the line fitness facilities and several clay tennis courts. There was a good stretch of beachfront, a five star restaurant and an outdoor patio. It wasn't a hotel so much as a resort facility. It would be an awfully big first expansion for the Beacon. And if she was honest, she wasn't sure it was a good fit for them right now, especially with world economics still shaky.

Olivia also wasn't sure this was the best idea for her personally. San Cristobel held so many hard memories, things she still needed to work through. She glanced over at Natalia who smiled sweetly and then shuffled forward again in the slowly moving line. So many things she still had to tell Natalia.

Chewing her bottom lip, Olivia sighed softly and tried hard not to think about that. Turning back to the package, she knew the Xiaos had put forward a very sweet deal. This weekend away together to check out the resort was perfect timing and a good opportunity to see if this could work as a Beacon franchise or not. Olivia could only assume that the Xiao's hotel chain must be hemorrhaging more money than she imagined.

A small part of her danced with glee, thinking of Decker and the new Barbie doll he placed in her old position, suffering in the still turbulent economic climate. However the Xiaos themselves were very nice people and she didn't want to see them in dire straits. Olivia glanced up and shuffled forward as their turn with the custom officers and airport security came up.

Finally making their way through the body scanners and answering all their questions, they quickly found the rest of their luggage and made their way through the busy terminal to find a taxi to take them to the resort. An older man was standing by the revolving door, holding a Galaxy Hotels sign with the name Spencer written on it.

"It looks like the Galaxy San Cristobel team have thought of everything," Olivia murmured, impressed. Their driver tipped his hat and grabbed their luggage, leading them to the waiting limo. Natalia slipped her arm through Olivia's and smiled up at her, sliding her dark sunglasses into place as she stepped out into the tropical sunshine.

"I've already got everything I need, right here." Natalia tangled her fingers with Olivia's and smiled contentedly as the driver opened the back door and they both slid across the soft leather seat and into the air-conditioned luxury of the limo.

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Francesca Rivera stared up into her father's smiling face and burst into tears.

"Hey, hey, now." Frank Cooper bent down and scooped his baby girl from the baby carrier and into his arms. "Shhh... Daddy's here." He paced in his small office, rocking his daughter and cuddling her close. He glanced over at the young woman smiling encouragingly from the door. Despite his good intentions, he knew police headquarters was no place for a baby, but Frank had been delayed and Jane had said it would be no problem to swing by. Still, he felt bad bringing Francesca's sweet innocence into his world.

"Ms. Spencer left specific instructions about looking after Francesca, Chief Cooper." Jane chewed at her thumbnail and quickly checked her watch. Her boyfriend would be waiting for her by now, but she knew that Ms. Spencer would kill her if she just left the baby here unattended with the Chief.

"I know Jane, but it's the first time I've really had her all to myself and I'd just like to spend a little time with her," Frank shifted the crying child onto his shoulder and sank down into his leather chair, bouncing her a little to try to distract her. Francesca just wailed louder.

Jane rolled her eyes and stepped over to the small carrier, pulling out Francesca's wubby, the soft pink blanket the child seemed to be lost without. Handing it over to the clueless man, Jane sighed and nodded. There was only so much she could do where the Chief was concerned. Ms. Spencer may be paying her to look after Francesca during the day while the Chief was at work, but Natalia had pulled her aside and told her to let Frank decide how much time he wanted with the baby. The extra hundred bucks she had slipped her definitely made her point. Jane smiled softly. She did enjoy working for Ms. Rivera; she was so much less scary than Ms. Spencer.

"Okay then, I'm just going to touch base with my boyfriend and I'll head out then when you're ready to leave for home." Jane pulled her phone from her purse and wandered out of the Chief's office.

"Finally, just you and me, little Sweet Pea." Frank smiled as the little bundle seemed to settle down into her blanket and her crying diminished into little unhappy squeaks. Her eyes slowly blinked shut and she was asleep. Frank stared down at her and felt his heart swell with love.

"Chief," Anna Li stuck her head into his office and took in the adorable sight of father and child. Smiling softly, she lowered her voice so as not to disturb the baby. "You're needed down in the lab. Desilva is going off the deep end again, ranting on the other investigators."

Frank rolled his eyes and stood with his daughter asleep in his arms. He really needed to find a more professional supervisor for the forensic department. The man might be a good crime scene investigator but his management skills were certainly lacking. Frank looked up to find Jane standing beside Detective Li, chewing her thumbnail.

"I'm sorry, Jane. Can you wait a little longer while I put out this fire?" Frank asked quietly. Jane sighed and nodded, taking the sleeping baby from him and tucking her back down into her carrier. She watched as the Chief disappeared into the pandemonium of his squad room. She knew meeting him at the police station had been a bad idea. At this rate, she wouldn't even see her boyfriend at all tonight.

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The long black limo pulled up outside Spaulding Enterprises and eased into the reserved parking spot out front. Before the driver could unbuckle his seat belt to let his young charge out of the vehicle, the back door popped open and Emma Spencer leaped out of the car.

"Thanks, Jake. See ya later!" Emma waved at her daddy's driver and slammed the car door quickly shut behind her. Slipping her backpack onto her shoulders, she yanked on the thick glass door and walked inside the imposing building, stopping at main reception.

"Hi, Virginia!" Emma smiled up at the young woman manning the desk. The receptionist turned and returned her smile warmly.

"Hi, Emma. You're right on time." Virginia hit a button on her telephone switchboard, sending all calls to the automatic attendant. She had learned the hard way that you don't ever take your eyes off of the boss' daughter. She picked up the handset and dialed an extension she knew by heart. "Emma's here from school, sir." She nodded as she received her instructions, watching carefully as the girl bounced and resettled her backpack. "I'll let her know."

"So is James coming down or Lizzie?" Emma asked, as she came around to peek behind the reception desk. She loved watching all the television sets mounted into the desk that Virginia sat behind. You could see so much stuff happening in her daddy's building.

"Your brother will be down shortly. Your father also said to tell you to not wander off." Virginia tried to keep her smile hidden as the rambunctious girl just rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically.

"I can't do anything. Besides, they were able to fix the photocopier no problem..." Emma grumbled, but was quickly distracted by seeing her Daddy on one of the monitors. He

looked like he was arguing with two really old men who were pointing at a folder in their hands. "Hey, isn't that my dad?"

Virginia turned to the monitor that Emma pointed at and nodded. "He's talking with two of the senior board members." Virginia just shook her head sadly. It didn't look like it was going well with Mr. Hamilton or old man Weckworth. Ever since Alan Spaulding had died, those two were circling like vultures and making trouble. She didn't know how Phillip Spaulding put up with them.

"They don't look like nice men," Emma stated, her little brow furrowing.

Virginia nodded and didn't say much, although she agreed totally with the girl. Best not to say too much, you never knew what might get repeated. And with the office politics flying around Spaulding Enterprises these days, she wasn't about to take any chances with her job.

"That's because they aren't nice men at all, Emma." They both turned as a familiar deep voice spoke up from behind them.

"James!" Emma's face lit up at the sight of her big brother and she leaped towards him for a hug.

"Hey, Squirt." James grabbed Emma's backpack by one of its many handles and dangled the girl a few inches from the floor before she could reach him.

"Lemme down!" Emma giggled as she spun a little in his strong grip, feet spinning in the air.

"I didn't hear the magic word..." James laughed as Emma squealed happily.

"James!"

Say it," James teased a little longer. Emma growled and finally gave in.

"Okay, okay! Pleeeeeease, James, my smartest and bestest big brother. Now put me down!" Emma finally squeaked out and was promptly dropped back down to her feet, with James chuckling at her.

"See, was that so hard?" James ruffled her hair and turned back to the security desk attendant.

"Thanks Virginia, I've got her from here." James smiled at the attractive receptionist. She just nodded at him and started answering her phone lines again, various red buttons blinking steadily from the switchboard. He led the way over to the bank of elevators and hit the up button. "Dad's meeting with the Board of Directors is running late."

"Why did those men look so mad at Daddy?" Emma asked as the elevator doors slid shut and James hit the button for the top floor. He looked at her and tried to figure out how much of the bullshit politics she would actually understand. Nodding slightly, he decided that she was a smart kid and should know the truth.

"Because they don't want Dad and Lizzie to run Spaulding. They think that they could do a better job themselves."

"But Granddad said it was Daddy's." Emma scratched her nose, trying to figure out why anyone wouldn't listen to what Granddad said.

"I know. Crazy, huh?" James smirked as the elevator dinged and the doors opened to the ninth floor. "I think Auntie Alex might have said something to get the Board all upset."

Emma grimaced. She didn't really like Aunt Alexandra very much. She always hugged her too tight and wore too much perfume. Mommy didn't seem very happy when she was around either. And Mommy always knew when someone was trouble. Besides, Natalia always says to trust your feelings, and in this case Emma knew she felt the same way her Mommy did.

James pushed open the big oak door to their father's office as Emma followed him in. His cell phone chimed and he pulled it from his pants pocket to see who had texted him.

"Say hi to Daisy for me," Emma chirped as she dropped her backpack and hopped into the leather chair behind the desk. James just shook his head, his thumbs already flying across the keypad.

"Did you get her that necklace for Valentine's Day that we looked at?" Emma spun the chair a little and looked up at her brother, who simply glanced over at her and smiled softly. "See, I told you she'd love it."

"Yeah, yeah, thanks, Squirt." James hit the send button and slipped his phone back into his pocket.

"Is James behaving, Emma?" Lizzie popped her blonde head into the room and grinned at her little sister. "You know what he's like. You can't leave him alone for a minute without him wandering off and getting himself into some sort of trouble." Lizzie came into the

office and stood beside her brother, elbowing him lightly in the stomach. He snorted and chuckled along with the girls.

"What's all this giggling in my office?" Phillip grumped from the door of his office, but he couldn't keep the frown in place, breaking into a huge grin, as his children all laughed a little harder at him. It warmed his heart to see them all together in his father's old office, now his office. Alan had been right about one thing, family was everything. It occurred to him that the future of Spaulding Enterprises looked pretty damn comfortable sitting in her rightful throne. Someday, it would be the three of them against the world. And he couldn't wait to be there to see it.

"Emma's plotting a hostile take-over and James and I are doing rock, paper, scissors for who gets to run the overseas operation for her," Lizzie teased and ran a hand over her softly swelling belly.

"But I want to be a marine biologist and swim with the dolphins..." Emma said, a little worried all of a sudden. She didn't want to have to sit inside all day with grumpy old men yelling at her.

"You can be anything you want to be, pumpkin." Phillip dropped a kiss to Emma's soft hair and scooted her out of his chair. Slipping on his reading glasses, he settled back at his desk and brought up his email. "Swimming with dolphins would be a fantastic job."

"So, does that mean I can drop out of school and race cars?" James teased, yanking his father's chain a little. Didn't want the old man to get too comfortable after all. Phillip just looked up at him over the rim of his glasses and shook his head.

"Nice try," Lizzie murmured and elbowed her brother again. She handed a file over to their father. "Did you tell Weckworth and Hamilton where to stick it?"

Phillip grimaced and pulled Emma onto his lap, very aware of tiny ears listening to their conversation. He ran a hand through his short hair and sighed.

"They're going to continue to be trouble, unless you can neutralize Alexandra," Lizzie warned, sitting on the edge of her father's desk. The man always wanted to believe in the good of everyone. Alexandra, however, needed to be watched very carefully. She was old school Spaulding, and that was nothing to take lightly.

"I know." Phillip hugged Emma closer as she started doodling a dolphin on some of his papers. There were days that he wished he were nine again. "But it's Friday night and I'm not going to worry about it right now, besides I've got a date with my littlest girl." Emma smiled up at him and nodded.

"Bill's picking me up in half an hour. Ever since he jumped in to help out with Josh gone, he's been working such late hours." Lizzie sighed and absently rubbed at her growing belly.

"I'm sure he just wants to get everything settled at Lewis so he can concentrate on you and the baby when the time comes." Phillip pushed his reading glasses further up along the bridge of his nose and quickly glanced through the file Lizzie had handed him.

"I'm meeting some guys from school. I'll see you at home later, Dad." James headed towards the door, it was starting to get late and he still needed to change.

"Not too late tonight, okay, James? We need to go look at tuxedos tomorrow, remember." Phillip glanced towards the door as James nodded, waving at Emma before disappearing into the hallway.

"Bye, James!" Emma waved back and turned to look up at her Dad. "Are you really going to dress up like monkeys, Daddy?" She watched as Lizzie and Phillip exchanged a confused look and turned back to stare at her. She blinked back in all innocence.

"'Cuz James said he hated wearing monkey suits..."

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Natalia swiped the card key through the lock and opened the door to the Xiao's private penthouse suite. Pushing it open, she took in her elegant surroundings. The suite was meant for royalty and special guests, or for the Xiaos whenever they were visiting the resort. And the Galaxy San Cristobel had obviously spared no expense.

"Oh, my heavens," Natalia whispered as she stepped deeper into the suite, her feet sinking into the thick plush of the carpet. There seemed to be picture windows everywhere, with amazing views from all angles, a huge sunken living room with a small kitchen attached, and a balcony overlooking the sea.

"Hello? Some help for the heart patient please..." Olivia grumbled from the doorway, struggling with their bags. Behind her was a bellhop with the rest of their luggage.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry!" Natalia went over and grabbed the door, holding it open for both of them. "Let me get the door."

Olivia sighed and shook her head, dropping their bags to the right of the door.

"Come on, kid, you can bring those in the main bedroom, over here." Olivia found her way to the master suite. Glancing around she could see why Natalia had been so impressed. The

entire suite was tastefully designed and elegant, yet homey. She picked up a framed picture of the Xiaos from the bookshelf.

"From our family to yours, welcome to the Galaxy San Cristobel Hotel. Your home away from home," Olivia read, nodding her head. "Nice."

"Hey, that was your idea, wasn't it?" Natalia peered over her shoulder. It was a cute photo, with Mr. and Mrs. Xiao, along with their three older children in a lush backyard garden setting.

"Yeah, apparently Decker and my replacement continued with some of my suggestions." Olivia set the photo down, a part of her imagining what it would be like with her family's photo in the frame. She snorted at the thought. Not exactly the same "family values" that Galaxy was promoting. A light tap on the door caught her attention.

"Ms. Spencer, welcome to Galaxy San Cristobel." A balding, dapper man in his mid-fifties stood at the door, a genuinely friendly smile gracing his face.

"Mr. Riker, so nice to finally meet you in person. And it's Olivia." Olivia grinned back, turning on her considerable charm. The hotel general manager had an excellent reputation in the industry and she had enjoyed the few initial conversations they'd had while planning their stay. She ushered the man in and shut the door behind them.

"In that case, call me Doug," He turned and smiled at Natalia. "And this must be Ms. Rivera. It's so nice to finally meet you."

"Natalia, please. I can't wait to see the facilities." Natalia smiled, pleased with his strong handshake. "The package you sent us was wonderful."

"I have your itinerary all planned, as we talked about last week." Doug smiled warmly, confident in his hotel staff to stand up well under their scrutiny.

"Good. I can't wait to tour the kitchen. I wonder if your executive chef will remember me." Olivia leaned back against the sofa. It had been a long time since her days working in the kitchen at the royal palace. She had started there the summer before—

Olivia shifted suddenly and turned her thoughts abruptly back to the here and now. She glanced up to find the dark eyes of her lover and was more than happy to lose herself there for a moment or two as Doug chuckled softly and continued.

“Ah yes. He definitely remembers you Olivia.” Doug smiled mischievously. He would never reveal the stories his executive chef had regaled him with about their potential new employer.

“Oh, no. Do I need to worry?” Olivia glanced at Natalia and then back to the older man as he just shook his head. She liked him already, and if she read her lover’s body language right, she did too.

“Massimo is quite the character, and very temperamental,” Doug tried to explain, “but he makes the best—”

“You name it, he makes the best version of it found on the island. So you just put up with all his quirks. I know.” Olivia chuckled, turning to Natalia. “Massimo never was very shy about how fantastic his cooking is, and with good reason. You’re going to love it.”

“So if you will excuse me, I’ll let you get settled in. We’ve made reservations for you tonight at 7pm at the Chef’s Table, with samples of all our signature dishes.” Doug opened the door and stepped into the hallway, Olivia moving to follow him to the door.

“Tell the big guy I can’t wait.” Olivia waved him off and shut the door quietly behind him. Turning she leaned against the door and sighed, happy to just finally stop.

“He seems nice.” Natalia grabbed her largest bag and headed towards the bedroom to start unpacking. She needed to get out of her jeans and into something a little cooler.

“Doug? Yeah, he does, and he’s done a good job of running this location.” The older woman paused and watched her lover head into the bedroom. “I’m just worried it might be more than we can chew, y’know?” Olivia grabbed another piece of luggage and followed behind.

“Well, let’s give it a chance, okay? Having a sunny Beacon destination isn’t such a bad thing either.” Natalia dropped her luggage and popped the small black bag open, hunting for her shorts. Pulling them out, she started to unzip her jeans when she felt strong hands slide along her arms, leaving a trail of goose bumps behind. Warm hands started to help peel her jeans off, thumbs hooking into the elastic waistband of her panties underneath, slowly easing them down over her hips as a cold nose nuzzled along her neck.

“H-how long do we have until dinner?” Natalia gasped, shivering as Olivia sucked and nipped at a tender earlobe.

“Long enough...”

ACT 2

Blake Marler entered the hustle and bustle of the Springfield Police Department with familiar ease. The energy was palpable, especially on a Friday night when all the crazies were out and about and she never knew what good gossip she could glean just from wandering down the narrow halls. She checked her watch and made her way to Frank's office. His text message earlier had asked her to drop by the station, saying that he had a surprise for her. She picked up her pace, not wanting to wait to see what it was.

Tapping the door lightly, she stepped into Frank's office with a flourish and stopped dead in her tracks, surprised to see Jane and Francesca sitting there.

"Jane. Where's Frank?" Blake quietly closed the office door, so the noise from outside wouldn't wake the napping baby. She stepped closer to peer down into the carrier at the child, Francesca's little hand snuggling the pink blanket close in her sleep.

"Oh, Ms. Marler, I'm so glad you're here." Jane smiled brightly at the older woman, sensing an opportunity to still salvage her evening. "Chief Cooper was supposed to take Francesca but was called away..."

Blake looked down at the sweet baby and waited for the inevitable shoe to drop.

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Phillip leaned against the doorway to the library and watched his lover working away, law books piled high as Beth chewed on the end of a pen, reading. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she had a small furrow between her eyebrows as she sighed softly and then scribbled something onto her notepad. To Phillip it had seemed as if he had flashed back in time, back to simpler days, when all they had to worry about was what to wear to school the next day.

God, he felt old.

Phillip shook his head at his wayward thoughts and quietly stepped into the room. He loved the library, always had. With the old oak wood everywhere, the smell of the books, memories of standing on the ladder as a child, his dad pushing him along the brass rail to the next set of shelves. Philip glanced up along the bookshelf and ran his fingers along a row of his old childhood favorites, sliding *Moby Dick* a little further back in line with the other books around it.

"You know, I'll never get my Juris Doctorate if you keep lurking around looking all sexy like that while I'm studying," Beth breathed in his ear. He felt her warm curves suddenly pressed along his back and he smiled, turning to wrap her in his arms.

"Oh, really?" Phillip murmured against her soft skin, breathing in her faint perfume. He dipped his head and nibbled along the delicate shell of her ear. "Was I lurking?"

"Most definitely..." Beth gasped, running her hands into his short blonde hair, pulling him closer. Her lips were soon captured, both getting lost in the familiar heat shimmering between them.

"I love dating a hot college student. It does wonders for my reputation." Philip waggled his eyebrows and squeezed Beth's toned butt as they slowly pulled apart.

"You are not helping, mister," Beth laughed, swatting him playfully before moving reluctantly away. "Once I get this report done, I can come down and watch a movie with you and the girls." Beth stared at the nearly completed document on her laptop. She just needed to tweak it a little bit more and then she could settle down for the weekend with her family. She slid back into the comfy leather chair and pulled the black laptop a little closer, her mind drifting back to her report.

"Any more thoughts on where you'd like to article after graduation?" Phillip followed, standing behind her and running his hand along the woman's shoulder, massaging the tense muscles he found there. He knew this was starting to bother her more and more. The stress of their impending wedding plus the push to finish her final year of law school was getting to her.

"I'm still not sure," Beth sighed and leaned back into his calming touch. "Alan's lawyers, Wittcombe and Nesbitt, seem interested, but..." Beth hesitated. She didn't know what it was about that law firm that she just didn't like. Maybe it was because they had a lot of questionable clients like Alan. Beth shrugged and looked back up at her tall lover. He would support her decisions, no matter what, and she knew it. She wasn't becoming a lawyer because of the money, but because she wanted to help people. Now she just needed to find a law firm that shared those ideals, too.

"Anyway, first things first, I still need to graduate law school this spring. And if I don't get this report finished, I'll never get out of here to go dress shopping tomorrow." Beth tapped her jaw with the end of her ballpoint pen as her mind started to spin with all she had to do. There was so much to still get ready for their wedding. She couldn't dwell on that now though. She felt a soft kiss dropped on her head and she smiled.

"Ok, sweetheart. I'll round up Peyton and Emma, make some popcorn and we'll meet you in front of the big screen in half an hour?" Phillip moved away and headed for the library door. Beth was already starting to tap away at the computer, filling in details from her notes.

"Make it forty five minutes and you have a date." Beth glanced up as Phillip smiled softly and headed off to find his little girls.

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"I couldn't eat another bite." Natalia leaned back and smiled at her lover over the rim of her wineglass. Tonight had been wonderful. The food had been superb, with several different samplings from the hotel's menu. However, the woman sitting across from her had been the best part of the evening. As much as she loved their home life with the kids, it was always a pleasure to sit and just talk with her partner.

"I warned you that Massimo was brilliant." Olivia grinned, leaning back herself and observing the filled to capacity restaurant. This part of the business was definitely booming, undoubtedly in no small part to her old friend's cuisine.

"About time someone around here appreciated me," boomed a large man dressed in a white chef's jacket and black pants who had appeared beside their table. His handlebar moustache and above average height made the man stand out in a crowd. "Bella! It's been too long."

"Massimo!" Olivia quickly stood and was swallowed up in a big bear hug. Kissing her on both cheeks, the large man stepped back and smiled down at the other woman seated at the table. "This is Chef Massimo Silvestri. Massimo this is my..."

Olivia paused a moment and then slowly smiled, levelling a heated stare at her lover. She had been dying to say this for weeks.

"This is my fiancée, Natalia Rivera."

Natalia's eyes widened and she flushed slightly, a huge grin spreading across her face. She would never tire of hearing Olivia call her that.

Massimo glanced back and forth between the women and nodded, a little surprised but happy for his old friend.

"My pleasure to meet you," Massimo took Natalia's hand and gently kissed the knuckles, bowing ever so slightly as she blushed at his Old World charm. He sat down and waited as

the maitre d' arrived with another bottle of wine, pouring a small sample into the glass for the executive chef. Swirling the dark red, he tasted it and nodded to the man to pour.

"I had heard that the 'Dragon Lady' had arrived. I cannot tell you the number of people who have asked me about you, Olivia. The staff is quivering in fright. Your reputation precedes you, my dear." The big man swirled his wine and leaned back.

Olivia merely raised an eyebrow, and lifted her wineglass to be refilled.

"Please, you were a terror at the palace in your Prince Richard days, don't bother denying it." Massimo leaned over closer to the beautiful brunette beside him. "She started out being in the right place at the right time, stepping in for a sous chef who quit in a huff in the middle of a huge royal reception at the palace. I grabbed her from the line of servers working that night and took her under my wing. Best thing I ever did." He glanced over fondly at the elegant woman across the table. He did have an eye for quality, in food and with people. It was a gift.

"Six months later, she was snatched out of my kitchen and working her way up the food chain in the palace. Ambitious little thing, hard working, then she caught Richard's eye and well..." The large man shrugged and winked.

Natalia grinned warmly, easily believing that her lover could have charmed the prince. She was enjoying these tales of Olivia's past, making her realize just how little she knew of Olivia's time in San Cristobel. She made a mental note to fix that, and soon.

"Hey, I still found time to come by and tell you all the good gossip, didn't I?" Olivia huffed, swirling her wine a little in her glass.

"Harass me, she means." Massimo chuckled as Olivia rolled her eyes and grinned.

"So, you trained Olivia as a chef?" Natalia stared hard, narrowing her eyes at her sneaky girlfriend. "Someone is definitely going to be cooking more around the house." Olivia whistled innocently and took another sip of her wine.

"Well," Massimo waved his hands, looking for the right words. "She certainly knows her way around the kitchen. And I've shown her a trick or two over the years."

"Tell me more about the bad old days, Massimo." Natalia locked eyes with the older woman, dancing with amusement. Apparently, there were a lot of things she still needed to learn about her lover and Massimo was just the man to help her out.

"Oh no..." Olivia groaned and covered her eyes with her hand. The Chef just laughed louder and shifted his chair closer to Natalia.

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"Jesus, Frank. There had better have been a murder or something for you to be gone so long." Blake checked her watch one more time and rolled her eyes. It was getting much too late for this little one to be out. Francesca should be somewhere quiet and warm. Decision made, she packed up the baby bag and zipped it tight.

"Come on, honey," Blake smiled at the child. "Let's write your daddy a note and blow this joint." Blake grabbed a pen and started scribbling quickly. Sliding the note onto the keyboard of her lover's computer, she turned and tugged on her coat. Winding her way back through the precinct, she waved at Remy Boudreau, who waved back while talking on the telephone. Leaning on his desk was his partner, Anna Li, who looked up from her file, smirked and nodded.

Something about that woman always made Blake nervous. Picking up her pace, Blake yanked open the door, and stepped outside into the blustery cold, not watching where she was going.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Blake nearly collided with a woman standing by front door of the police station. She felt strong hands grab her arms and keep her upright, the small baby carrier held fast and kept safe. Blake looked up into a familiar face. "Doris?"

"Are you okay?" Doris Wolfe breathed before stepping back and smiling sheepishly at the red head.

"I'm fine." Blake glanced down and saw that the baby hadn't even moved. The smell of cigarette smoke wafted past drew her attention.

"Doris!" Blake scolded as she realized that it was coming from Doris. She hadn't been aware that the other woman smoked.

"What?" Doris asked, looking around frantically to see what the issue was.

The baby is right here." Blake stared at the cigarette between Doris' lips and then down at the sleeping child. Doris followed her glance down and then looked back up at her frowning friend.

"Oh for Pete's sake," Doris rolled her eyes. "Ashlee grew up in a cloud of smoke and she turned out just fine."

Blake just narrowed her eyes and stared hard at her. The mayor sighed and stubbed out her cigarette.

"Y'know, you've got that disappointed, pissed off mom look down pat," Doris grumbled good naturedly.

"Oh, I don't know. It didn't seem to work so well with my boys." Blake looked off into the distance, watching fat snowflakes lazily floating past the streetlight. Her heart ached, it had been so long since the boys had called her.

"I forgot you had the two boys as well." Doris smiled softly, wanting to take that pained look from her friend's face. She hadn't meant to upset her.

"Yeah, I miss them so much sometimes. I was so torn up with Ross's death and then my mom talked me into sending them off to boarding school in Europe." Blake teared up a little. "Sometimes I think I should have kept my family closer together. I'm not a very good mother really."

"Hey now, you are great with Clarissa," Doris said, earning a warm smile from the other woman. Doris placed a gloved hand on the other woman's arm and squeezed it through the heavy jacket Blake was wearing. "And let's face it, none of your kids have shot anyone. Have they?" Doris double checked, after all this was Springfield a subdivision of the Twilight Zone. Blake just smiled at her and shook her head no. "Right. So really, compared to some of us other upstanding Springfield parents, I think you're doing just fine."

Blake snorted and stared at the smirking woman. Doris did have a point. Their eyes caught and held as the snow quietly fell around them. The mayor shifted a little under her scrutiny and looked down at the baby carrier as Francesca made a small squeaking sound from under her pink blanket.

"So where are you off to with the little miss?"

"Frank is tied up with work, so I'm taking her home until he can pick her up." Blake tried to mask the disappointment in her voice by tugging frantically at her scarf to block the wind from her collar. Francesca started to fuss a little louder. "I should probably get her into the car and head out."

"Yeah, I should..." Doris tilted her head and nodded towards the station. She moved to tug at the front door, watching as Blake waved and turned towards the parking lot. Sighing, she made her way into the warmth of the Springfield Police department

Massimo leaned across the small table and poured more wine into Natalia's glass, completely ignoring Olivia's pointed looks.

"This one, she was such a perfectionist. She drove the other high school kids working there a little crazy. But she was popular. So many boys chasing her, and a few of the girls, not that she ever noticed..." Massimo waved the small pastry before popping it into his mouth and smirked as Olivia looked up at that comment.

"Really?" Olivia cocked her head at her old friend. "I don't remember that at all." The older man just nodded, smiling softly at her as she took a small sip of her drink.

"Of course not, my dear. You were always so focused on the older boys, you didn't even realize the kids your own age falling at your feet. There was one girl, she was crazy for you, Bella."

Massimo turned conspiratorially to the younger woman beside him

"Olivia was very charming when she wanted to be and such a flirt! *Dio mio*, she went through the boys like they were dirty shirts. And then after her mother died she became so serious, working so hard to look after her sister and brother. She was like a demon possessed, working her way up, and tormenting her co-workers. I was worried about her..." Massimo's voice grew soft, remembering that poor girl from so long ago with the haunted eyes.

The confident professional woman before him looked so much more relaxed and happy than he ever recalled her being before. A lot of time had passed and Olivia seemed at peace with herself at long last. He watched as she stared over at the beauty next to him. Obviously this little thing had a lot to do with that. Nodding to himself, he leaned a little closer.

"And so, I don't know how you've tamed the savage beast, my dear, but well done." He tapped his glass with Natalia's as she smiled up at him, her eyes twinkling with amusement. Massimo blinked and turned back to the older woman. "Oh my, it must have been those dimples that did it."

Olivia rolled her eyes, but denied nothing. Massimo laughed and raised his hand, as another waiter arrived with delectable desserts.

"Does anything get past you, Chef?" Natalia grinned, stretching to pick out a tempting morsel and popping it into her mouth, moaning a little as it melted in her mouth.

"As my dear mother used to say," Massimo swirled his wine and glanced at the woman over the rim of his glass. "If you can't say anything nice, come sit down beside me."

Olivia groaned and snagged a decadent chocolate square. It was going to be a long evening.

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"Who the hell did that asshole Desilva sleep with to get his job?" Frank grumbled to himself as he shoved open his office door and made his way into the room. He really needed to look into getting a new forensic supervisor to replace the incompetent investigator currently running the lab. His phone started to ring the moment he came around to his leather chair and dropped down into it, exhausted. Reaching to grab it, his arm knocked a loose piece of paper off of his computer keyboard, fluttering to the floor behind his chair.

"Not now Sarge," Frank all but growled into the receiver, pinching the bridge of his nose tiredly. "I don't care if the president himself is walking through the front door. I am not in." He dropped the handset down onto the cradle and leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes with a sigh.

Peace and quiet at last.

Frank's eyes shot open.

"Oh my God... Francesca!" Sitting up abruptly he grabbed the phone and dialled the Sargent on duty back again.

"Sarge, have you seen a young woman and my daughter wandering the station anywhere?" Frank asked, starting to get really worried. Why didn't the girl just stay here like he'd asked. "Nothing? Not even in the staff kitchen or anything?" Frank listened closely and then sighed. Not a sign of them anywhere. "Thanks Sarge, if you see her call me right away."

Frank dropped the handset back onto the phone.

"God, this day is going from bad to worse..." He groaned and tried to think. Where would the flighty caregiver have disappeared to with his daughter? He chewed his bottom lip and tried not to panic. He snapped his fingers as it suddenly came to him. "Oh, she had a date with her boyfriend. Maybe she took the baby with her..."

Digging frantically down into his pockets, Frank found his cell phone and flicked down through the address book, finding Jane's cell phone number that Natalia had given him before she'd left for San Cristobel. Hitting the send button, he started to fidget in his chair.

"Come on, pick up...pick up...where are you?" Frank grumbled, tapping his fingers nervously on the desk top.

"The customer you have dialled is not available. Please try your call again later," an automated voice droned at him. *Who actually turns off their cell phone these days?* Frank flipped his cell phone shut and sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. Maybe something bad had happened to Jane and his daughter. A million scenarios ran through his mind, none of them ending happily. This was not good, and to top it all off he was so late already for meeting up with...

"Blake! Oh, my God, she was supposed to meet me." Frank started dialling the woman's phone number. "I am so dead."

"Hi, it's Blake. Leave a message at the beep." Blake's warm tones drifted back at him from his phone. The message tone beeped at him as he snapped his phone shut and groaned.

"What the hell are you doing, Frank?" Doris Wolfe shoved his office door open and stormed into the tiny office.

"Huh?" Frank just looked up at her and blinked. Great, just what he needed.

Doris rolled her eyes at the bumbling fool and stepped deeper into the Chief's office.

"I just ran into the duty Sargent, trying to find your daughter and her nanny. How can you call yourself a good cop when you don't even know where your own child is?" Doris sighed as Frank flushed a deep shade of red and stood, sputtering at her.

"I-I was dealing with issues in our crime lab, if you must know..." He came out from behind his desk to confront her. She didn't scare him. Much.

"I'm well aware of the problems here and I'm already working on that one, Frank. We haven't forgotten that whole corruption investigation and missing evidence that Harley brought forward. It cast a poor light on the Springfield police department and there has been continued incompetence from the forensic crime lab. Don't even get me started on the murder of Edmund Winslow and the shoddy investigation there. Death by baby stroller? Really?" Doris rolled her eyes. It was almost too ludicrous to imagine.

"And then you let Dinah, the alleged murderer, disappear into thin air. No, it's time to get back on track around here. No more covering stuff up, it's time to step up and clean house." Doris knew she could finally make a difference, if she just stood up and did the right thing. She pinned Frank with a hard stare and continued.

"The City Council doesn't trust the department to make a good hire from within Frank. We're not blaming you, this was well underway before you came in as Chief. The Council hired a consultant and we took matters into our own hands, putting feelers out in several cities to try to bring in fresh blood in many areas key areas. Meanwhile Detective Desilva and several others are under independent investigation. You need to worry about bringing this place back up to speed, Frank."

Frank sighed and stared at his feet. Why did he want this job again? He ran a hand through his hair and looked back up at the mayor, nodding. The woman had a point after all. Doris sighed softly and offered up a lopsided grin to the chastised man.

"And Blake has Francesca," Doris took pity on the man, the tensed muscles around his eyes relaxing a little and he sighed in relief. "I ran into her on my way in. Didn't she leave you a note or something?"

"I didn't see one..." Frank turned and looked around his desk, a white piece of paper on the floor behind his chair catching his eye. Grabbing it he quickly realized Doris was right. Blake had left him a note saying that she took the baby home where she would be warm and quiet. He looked up at the mayor and waved the note sheepishly. "Found it."

Doris nodded, knowing her friend wouldn't have taken the girl without giving Frank a heads up. What the hell Blake saw in the man, she would never know. She glanced at her watch and scowled. Anna was going to kill her.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have the last half of a basketball game to get to..." Doris shook her head at the relieved man, quietly shutting the office door behind her.

Frank crumpled the note up into a ball and tossed it into his garbage can. God, he felt like an idiot.

~~*~*

"Do you think Beth will let me pick a pink dress, Daddy?" Emma yawned as Phillip smoothed the blanket down and ran his long fingers through her soft hair.

"Well, you should wait and see all the dresses first and then decide." Phillip was almost afraid of what horrible shade of Barbie pink material his daughter could find.

"Okay, but I hope it's pink." Emma smiled up at her father. He looked so happy these days, always hugging everyone, laughing and playing like a big kid, kissing Beth all the time. "Daddy?"

"Yes pumpkin?"

"So, you're gonna marry Beth and Peyton will be like my sister, too, right?"

"Yes."

"So I'm going to have three mommies and another sister. Our family just keeps getting bigger and bigger. Cool." Emma giggled as her father smiled and leaned over to hug her. "What do you think I should call Beth?"

Phillip blinked. It was a good question.

"Whatever you feel comfortable with, sweetie."

"Well, I call Mommy, 'Mommy' and Natalia is just 'Natalia'..." Emma tugged at the blanket and glanced up at her father. "Can I tell you a secret, Daddy?"

"You can tell me anything, baby." Phillip moved in closer, wondering where this was going.

"I'd like to call Natalia 'Ma', like Rafe does. Do you think Natalia would let me?" Emma squirmed a little. "I don't want her to get mad and leave again."

Phillip closed his eyes, guilt washing over him. Olivia had mentioned that Emma had taken Natalia's disappearing harder than they all thought. He looked down at her little worried face. The girl had been abandoned so many times by the people she loved, by the people Olivia loved. He wished he could take that fear from her heart. He couldn't change the past; all he could do now was to make sure he never left her again and to reassure her, as often as she needed to be.

"Hey, you know Natalia wasn't mad at you, Emma. She loves you and your mom. She just needed some time to figure some things out, okay?" Phillip smiled sadly and tweaked the little girl's nose, making her giggle again. "And I think Natalia would love it if you called her 'Ma'."

"Do you think Mommy would be mad?" Emma asked tugging at the bottom of her shirt.

"Are you kidding, I think your mommy would really love it." Phillip tucked the blanket up tight to Emma's chin and leaned close to kiss her goodnight. "Good night, Jellybean."

"Night, Daddy. I love you." Emma's eyes started to blink slower and slower.

"I love you, too." Phillip switched off the bedside light and sat for a moment, watching the girl fall asleep before his eyes. He had missed so much time with her, and then almost lost it all with his illness. He treasured every moment spent together as a blessing.

A creak from the doorway caught his attention. There stood Beth, the light from the hallway glowing behind her like a halo, smiling. Phillip stood and made his way to the door, their fingers sliding and tangling together as his lover turned and headed for their bedroom, quietly shutting the door behind them.

~~*~*

Olivia wandered out of their hotel room and onto the balcony, quietly shutting the sliding doors. Natalia stood by the rail, staring out at the ocean, full moon shining down giving everything a silvery glow. A warm breeze blew, making her lover's dark hair sway slightly. Her heart nearly stopped when Natalia turned and stared at her, smiling and reaching a hand out to pull her close.

Olivia came to stand behind her lover, wrapping her arms around the soft curves and pressing a soft kiss to the dark hair, sighing. Natalia leaned back, turning slightly so she could look at her.

"The kids are fine. Phillip and Frank both sent a text, checking in." Olivia murmured, squeezing Natalia a little tighter, taking comfort in their closeness. They both were missing the kids.

"Good. I'm glad." As much fun as she had tonight, a part of Natalia had still been wondering about the children. They watched the tide crashing against the shoreline for a while, lost in their own thoughts and the peaceful easy feeling of being with each other, until the brunette finally stirred.

"I loved being called your fiancée tonight." Natalia stared up at her partner's strong profile, not able to stop her huge grin. Olivia's eyes locked with hers, the emotions reflected there taking her breath away.

"I loved saying it." Olivia smiled gently and dipped her head to capture the soft lips parted before her.

"I feel like I can't keep it inside, I want to tell everyone, shout it from the rooftops, take out an ad in the Springfield Journal. I'm so excited about it all." Natalia snuggled closer and sighed happily.

Olivia glanced out over the rolling restless waves. She desperately wanted this relationship to work out. Her marriage track record however gave her pause.

"Sixth time's the charm?" Olivia stared at her gold band reflecting the moonlight until Natalia's delicate fingers slid over and covered it, pulling her hand up and pressing it to her chest.

"Oh, querida. You just needed some time to get ready for me." Natalia shifted and cupped soft cheeks with her hands, gently bumping their foreheads together affectionately. Olivia closed her eyes and leaned into the smaller woman. "And now that I've got you, I'm never letting go."

"Promise?" Olivia whispered. Everyone left her eventually. Even Natalia had, not that long ago. She refused to slide back into that old black hole of hurt. She opened her eyes and stared into the serious dark ones in front of her, overwhelmed at the love reflected back at her.

"I promise."

~~*~*

Doris stared up at the ceiling, lazily stroking her fingers through the long silky hair of her lover snuggled tight against her, enjoying just being able to talk with the woman.

"...And he had absolutely no clue where his daughter was." Doris continued. "God, how did that man bed Olivia, Natalia, and now Blake? They're all smart women, what were they thinking?"

"I try not to..." Anna snorted and nuzzled along Doris' cheek, leaving a trail of butterfly kisses in her wake. "Maybe he's good in the sack."

"Ugh! Eye wash stations...eye wash stations!" Doris mimed splashing her eyes with water and then they broke into giggles together. Anna rolled and sat up slightly, staring down intensely, her eyes growing even darker.

"Now, are we gonna talk about the Chief and his sex life, or are we gonna work on our own?"

Doris just smiled, gasping as Anna dipped her head and started licking and nipping her way down her body.

~~*~*

The morning sun shone bright behind them as Olivia and Natalia jogged along the boardwalk, the salty spray from the ocean hanging in the air. Natalia slowed her pace, before stopping to tie her shoe, taking the opportunity to watch the sway of Olivia's butt as she jogged ahead.

"Don't think I don't see you checking me out, Missy." Olivia smirked as she turned and ran in place waiting for her girlfriend to lace up. Natalia flushed slightly but didn't deny it. Olivia just chuckled and they started running again.

"You know, I like it when you check me out. Makes me think I've still got it." Olivia teased as they fell into a leisurely pace together.

"Oh, honey, you never lost it," Natalia stated frankly. Olivia's bark of laughter made her smile too.

They ran in silence for a few minutes admiring the ocean scenery and the morning. Olivia swerved just in time to miss being hit by a nicely muscled man running straight at them. She turned to watch his tight butt jogging away from them, and then looked up into Natalia's smiling face.

"What?" Olivia grinned sheepishly, a little concerned that Natalia would be annoyed at her.

"Nothing." Natalia smirked knowingly. "Although you might want to check out what's headed this way though..."

Olivia looked up in time to see two pretty young things bouncing towards them, iPods blaring, blonde hair swaying around their tank tops. The tanned, toned women, bodies glistening in the sunshine, ran past, smiling warmly at the older women.



"I see what you mean..." Olivia grinned back at her lover, who simply nodded and smiled. They ran on for a little bit more.

"You know, I'm glad we can do that," Natalia said as they made their way towards the hotel again. Olivia glanced over, waiting for her to elaborate. "That we can admire other people around us and share it with each other and not worry about it."

"I know what you mean." Olivia slowed her pace a little, taking it down to a walk as they came up to the tiki huts of their hotel's beach area. "I'm still getting used to finding myself looking at other women, in that way. I mean... I think I did it a little bit before, but I always told myself I was checking out their outfit or hair. Now I know that there is more there that I'm admiring." Olivia glanced down, a little embarrassed.

"Me, too!" Natalia grabbed her lover's hand and squeezed it. "It's different isn't it? I mean I still find men kind of cute, but now it's as if there's a whole new world that's opened up. My horizons have expanded and it's fun that I can share it with you, too."

"Yes, I particularly liked your obsession with the Olympic ski team and that desktop image you put on your laptop, whew!" Olivia teased her as they made their way past the hotel's outdoor patio, the morning crowd starting to fill in for the buffet breakfast.

"Hey, those girls are amazing athletes." Natalia tried to look innocent, but her eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Riiiiight. You stick with that story, sweetheart.” Olivia smirked and tugged on the side door to enter the hotel, holding it open for her chuckling partner before they both disappeared inside.

~~*~*

“No Dad, it’s not cool,” Marina Cooper whined from her side of the booth. “It’s not right that Mom can just blow into town unannounced and then expect me to just drop everything to hang out with her after all this time.”

Frank snuggled Francesca closer to his chest, the baby wiggling excitedly in his arms, a pudgy hand whacking him in the face. What was with his feisty girls today?

“I just think it’s nice that Eleni thought to stop in while she was passing by.” He tried to explain, glancing over at Buzz for some help. Buzz wisely just shrugged and wiggled Francesca’s little hand, trying to distract her.

“You just don’t get it. She just takes off to Greece or California or wherever the hell she feels like and leaves her family behind. Doesn’t she understand you do anything for your family? Well, this mother will make sure her son comes first...” grumbled Marina, sliding out of the booth and putting Henry into his stroller.

“Aw, honey, don’t be like that. Eleni did the best she could.” Frank tried to reason with her. Marina rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Listen, I’ve got to meet up with Shayne, I’ll call you later, Dad.” Leaning over she kissed Frank on the cheek and then placed her hand on the soft hair of her baby sister, who looked up at her with big curious eyes. “See you later, little munchkin.”

Nodding to Buzz, she pushed the baby stroller and waved to Blake, who was working away behind the counter pouring coffee for the morning crowd. Marina wheeled her son out of Company and into the freezing cold outside. Frank shook his head and watched her go.

~~*~*

The hot afternoon sun beat down relentlessly on the throng of tourists milling in the packed marketplace. Olivia inhaled deeply, taking in the scents and sounds of the busy tourist area. She loved coming down here when she was a teen, wandering into the used book stores and bargain shops, trying to find something cheap yet trendy to help spice up her mom’s boring taste in clothing.

Olivia smiled as she watched Natalia haggle with one of the vendors. The woman was in her element. The silk pashmina shawl was stunning and well made and Natalia knew it. But there was a little bit of Chicago street still in the stubborn woman and the vendor didn't stand a chance, especially if she pulled out the big guns. She stood back and waited as her lover flashed those killer dimples.

"That's my girl," she murmured, sliding her sunglasses higher and shaking her head, grinning at her pleased girlfriend. Natalia smiled widely and shook the vendors hand to seal the deal.

A shiver ran down Olivia's back, a sudden creepy feeling that she couldn't shake. She glanced to her right, as something familiar caught her eye. There by the wall, an Asian man, large and lumbering, somewhat menacing even at his age. He was muscular and strong, with piercing black eyes. Eyes that were staring right back at her.

Olivia looked away, feeling self conscious. Where did she know that man from? It was on the tip of her tongue. She went to tap Natalia on the shoulder to point him out to her, but when she glanced back, the man was gone.

"Damn," Olivia cursed under her breath.

"What's that, honey?" Natalia tangled their fingers together, distracting her even more.

"Nothing, just someone I thought I knew..." Olivia looked back over her shoulder as they moved along the stalls and past the tiny stores. She glanced around one last time, unable to shake the feeling they were being watched.

Dark eyes followed their path through the crowd, before sinking once more back into the shadows.

~~*~*

"Beth, honey, look at this one," Lillian called from the far side of the small bridal boutique, waving at her daughter to come over. She loved looking for dresses with all her girls. She saw Beth glance over to make sure Emma, Peyton and Sarah were all behaving, and smiled as she saw all of them sitting to one side, watching as Lizzie tried on yet another bridesmaid dress.

Lillian pulled out the sweetest pale pink dress and held it up as Beth made her way over to the older woman. She smiled widely and nodded as she saw it. It was perfect.

"Emma, could you come here, sweetie?"

Emma was off the padded seat in a flash, running around several racks of dresses before winding her way over to the two older Raines women.

"What do you think?" Beth held her breath. A huge smile broke out on the girl's face and she looked up, thrilled.

"It's pink!" Emma bounced a little in excitement.

"Yes, it is." Lillian smiled. "Do you want to try it on? I think I have your size right here." She handed the dress over to the girl and she bolted for the dressing room.

"Thank God we found something we all like." Beth smiled gratefully at her mom. "Now if Lizzie would just be as cooperative..."

Lizzie tugged at the material around her hips, trying to get the material to fall differently. Short of putting a huge ugly bow on the front or by carrying a huge basket bouquet of flowers, there was no way to hide the fact that she was pregnant and growing. She glanced over at her mom and grandmother, who both just smiled encouragingly at her. She looked back into the mirror and sighed. At least the dress was a nice pink.

Emma hopped out beside her suddenly, standing next to her to look at the dress she was trying on. Lizzie stared at the reflection of the two of them. The dresses complimented each other well.

"You look beautiful, Lizzie." Emma said smiling up at her big sister. Lizzie wiped at a sudden tear and smiled back.

"So do you, Emma," Lizzie bent over to straighten out Emma's collar. "Us big sisters have to stick together. You sure you can show Peyton and Sarah the ropes? It's a big job being a flower girl."

"I know. But with this dress on, I can do anything." Emma grinned and spun around, enjoying how the full skirt billowed out around her. "Besides, I had practice when Natalia just about married Frank."

"Oh, right. I forgot about that..." Lizzie nodded.

"Well? What's the verdict girls?" Beth and Lillian came forward and stood with them, their fingers crossed.

"We love them!" Lizzie and Emma said together, before breaking into giggles.

“See, sweetheart. I told you it would all work out okay,” Lillian murmured softly, putting her hand on Beth’s shoulder and ran soothing circles on her back. Beth smiled and hugged her mom. Today had been a good day.

~~*~*

Natalia stared up at the thick oak beams arching high into the vaulted ceiling of St. Michael’s Catholic Church. The afternoon sun slanted through the stained glass windows of the sanctuary, bathing the gold crosses and marble statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in warm light. Even the well worn patina of the pews called to a part of Natalia that she found difficult to explain.

As one of the oldest Catholic churches on San Cristobel, St Michael’s was a beautiful place of worship. Natalia admired the history and architecture of a time long past that could easily be seen in the brick and mortar of the building. And to her, it seemed very fitting that St. Michael, the patron saint of warriors, was the name of the church where Olivia had gone to with her family. Watching over the girl who had to fight for everything good in her life it seemed.

Natalia crossed herself and stood up from the pew, moving towards the small candles, lighting several of them. She loved the smell of the candles and wax melting. It was comforting and felt like home.

“Who are you lighting these all for?” Olivia spoke quietly, appearing at her elbow. Natalia smiled at her lover and continued to light them.

“Well, one for Rafe, of course. These two are for your parents, and this last one is for your sister.” Olivia grunted and pretended not to be touched. Natalia wasn’t fooled, and stretched out her hand to squeeze her hand. She knew it was hard for Olivia to come back to some of her old haunts, especially one so intertwined with her mother. Natalia leaned closer and looked up into soft green eyes before turning the long match back to the row of candles.

“And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people and thy God my God.” Natalia softly quoted and touched the flame to the wick, flaring it to life. “This one is for us, querida.”

“That was so beautiful,” Olivia smiled softly, tears welling slightly.

“Book of Ruth, it’s one of my favorite passages.” Natalia blew out the match and slid her hand down to tangle their fingers together before drawing the older woman along with her to leave the church and head outside.

They followed a well-worn pathway into the attached cemetery. Olivia brought their entwined hands together and kissed her lover's knuckles, then pulled away to wander alone through the weathered headstones, looking for her parent's gravesite.

Natalia sighed, feeling for her lover, as Olivia stopped and knelt by a grave, Gregory and Rebecca Spencer carved on the face of the granite headstone. Olivia stood for a while and then moved on, to the left and down a row was the newer headstone for her sister Marissa, still shiny and black. Olivia ran her hand along the rough surface of the top of the stone.

Natalia couldn't take it anymore, needing to be there for her partner. She stepped deeper into the cemetery, making her way to her lover who was now just staring off into the distance, looking so lost and alone.

Olivia stared ahead, not really seeing anything but memories of her family flashing before her. There had always been so much drama, so much pain. The gaping hole in her heart was still there, but as she watched Natalia wandering between the headstones, the slight breeze flowing through her long dark hair, her light skirt billowing around her legs, she felt the warmth of her love for the woman who was slowly making her whole again.

Olivia knew her mother wouldn't have understood their love; hell, she didn't understand it herself. She knew better than to question it anymore, she only knew that being with Natalia felt right. And that was all that mattered. To love and be loved in return. What more could anyone want?

Olivia watched as Natalia walked up and smiled at her, once more squeezing their hands together. This was her family now, and that was all that mattered.

"I love you." Olivia felt the words slip from her lips, coming straight from her healing heart.

"What is it with you and cemeteries and declarations of love, sweetheart?" Natalia smirked and leaned in to gently kiss her. "I love you, too."

~~*~*

Frank looked down at his sleeping daughter, passed out in her little carrier. She was so tiny and peaceful when she slept. His heart seemed too small to hold the love he felt for this little girl. The day together had been wonderful, and once Blake was done with work, they would spend a quiet night together. He sighed sadly.

"What's wrong, Frank?" Buzz slid into the booth beside his son, dropping a cup of coffee in front of him.

“Nothing really.” Frank looked away, his eyes finding Blake just finishing up her shift by wiping down the counter and coffee machines. “It’s just all this talk with Marina lately about Eleni has got me thinking, y’know?”

Buzz nodded, taking a sip of his own coffee and waited for him to continue.

“And then yesterday, I-I...” Frank sighed sadly. It was hard to admit this part. “I was so preoccupied with work that I lost track of Francesca. And I never want to feel that stupid or that scared again. I’m such a bad father...”

“Now, stop that right now. You are a fine father. Look at Marina, at how well she turned out. You’ve been there for your family Frank and that’s what counts. Francesca is a lucky little girl and you will be there for her, too.” Buzz looked down into his mug for a minute, swirling the dark liquid as if looking for answers there. “I wish I had been half the father you are.”

Frank sighed. He hadn’t meant to make Buzz feel bad about their past. Buzz looked up and their eyes locked.

“You are, Dad.” Frank meant every word.

Buzz nodded, not exactly believing it, and they smiled at each other.

“Then relax already, Frank.” Buzz thumped his son on the back and tried to lighten the mood. “You can make it up to Francesca by buying her a car when she turns sixteen if it’ll make you feel better...”

Frank shook his head and chuckled, feeling like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

~~*~*

“So how did it go?” Beth asked, looking up from the law book she was reading. Phillip rolled his eyes and plopped down on the sofa beside her, feeling a little better as Beth gave him a quick kiss. “That good, huh?”

“We have the tuxes taken care of and we didn’t kill each other. So yes, a success.” He smirked and leaned his head against his lover’s shoulder. Emma and Peyton ran into the living room, yelling at full volume.

“Daddy, we found the best dresses today!” Emma bounced onto his lap and Peyton scrambled over towards Beth.

“Really?” Phillip snuggled her closer and glanced up at Beth. She smiled widely and nodded. “That’s fantastic, Jellybean.”

“And guess what. It’s pink!” The girl practically quivered with joy.

Phillip looked back at Beth, concerned this was a problem, but she just smiled and nodded again.

“It’s a lovely pale pink that matches Lizzie’s dress wonderfully.” Beth dropped her book to the floor and pulled Peyton up onto her lap.

“I can’t wait for the wedding.” Emma rolled a little closer and tickled Peyton’s tummy, giggling together. Then she stretched out and gave Beth a big hug. “And I love my dress.”

Phillip watched his daughter and Beth snuggling together with Peyton wiggling in between and smiled, his heart filled with love for them all. Beth looked over at him, their eyes locking and she mouthed a silent ‘I love you.’ Phillip smiled, feeling tears starting to well.

He was so glad to be alive.

~~*~*

A flash of lightning split the midnight air and crashing thunder rumbled but Olivia didn’t even notice it. Her heart was racing, like she had run for miles, and she was exhausted but afraid to go back to sleep. Afraid to move.

Just afraid.

Olivia pulled her legs to her chest and hugged them close, trying to get her breathing under control. It had been years since she’d had one this bad. She shook her head trying to dismiss the memories threatening to overwhelm her. The bottle of whiskey sat on the coffee table in front of her, open and calling her name, sweet oblivion beckoning.

“Olivia?” Natalia yawned and sank down onto the couch and stared at her agitated lover. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

She knew Olivia had nightmares. How could she miss the frantic movements in bed, as if fighting some inner demons that would sometimes torment her lover. There were nights the woman was in perpetual motion, and yet she would never discuss it in the mornings. Natalia knew she had played a part in Olivia’s nightmares, when she had left, but this was different. She didn’t know what this was.

"What's going on, baby?" Natalia was starting to get scared.

"What does it look like?" Olivia tore her eyes away from the bottle and stared at her lover with cold eyes. Natalia moved slowly, as if approaching a wild animal, not wanting to spook her and reached a hand out to gently touch her arm.

"I thought we talked about this. That you could come to me, instead of turning to a bottle," Natalia whispered into the night, feeling her lover shivering under her hand.

"I don't think you can help me this time." Olivia's lip trembled. She was only hanging on by a thread. Natalia brought her hand up to cup her cheek it was almost too much.

"Hey, we agreed. No more running, Olivia. Tell me what is going on with you."

"I don't want to talk about it, Natalia," Olivia growled and unfolded herself from the couch, grabbing the bottle and bringing it to her lips. Stopping suddenly, she panted in the darkness, trying to get herself under control. Stuff down the emotions, don't feel anything, don't remember him holding you down...

"Damn it! I just want to forget." Olivia squeezed her eyes shut and threw the bottle across the room, smashing into a million pieces against the wall, as the amber liquid ran down the wall like blood.

Natalia stubbornly set her jaw. This conversation was far from over, but her lover was nowhere near the head space needed for it. Olivia stood panting, her eyes wild, almost panicked. She needed to reach her somehow, and she could only pray that Olivia would let her in.

"Will you help me to forget, Natalia?" Olivia's eyes softened slightly as she took a tentative step forward and then another.

If Natalia couldn't reach Olivia by talking to her right now, then maybe she could by showing her just how much she loved the woman, even the dark side, when she was tormented like this. She nodded silently, letting Olivia know she wasn't going anywhere.

Natalia didn't move as Olivia stopped in front of her and nuzzled along her temple, breathing her in, slowly calming down. Olivia pulled her lover's thin night robe down her back, Natalia's arms tangling in the silky material. Spinning them both, she pressed her partner up against the wall, sliding a leg between strong thighs and tucking tight against her.

Snapping teeth descended, nipping a trail across the sensitive skin of Natalia's neck, followed by the lick of a soothing tongue. She squirmed, trying to reach out to Olivia's tempting body only to be held in place still wrapped up in the arms of her robe.

"Mine..." Olivia murmured, her voice laced with need and something more.

"Yes, always yours," Natalia gasped. "Take what's yours, querida."

Natalia's teeth nipped at a tender earlobe, almost daring her lover to make the next move, smiling as Olivia growled, flashing green eyes darkening with desire. It was the last coherent thought she had as she succumbed to her lover's touch.

Olivia stroked her fingers roughly through the thick dark tresses, Natalia seeming to cling even closer. She pulled back slightly before brushing along the brunette's lips, pressing nearer for a tender kiss, quickly melting into the moist heat of her mouth. Pulling away finally to catch her breath, Olivia caressed Natalia's flushed cheek .

"God, I love you so much."

"I know." Natalia smirked and wiggled closer, her movements still restricted by the sleeves of her robe.

"And don't you forget it." Olivia trailed long fingers down her lover's tempting curves, cupping a tender breast and squeezing, thrilling to the moan that caused. "You are wearing too much clothing."

Olivia tugged the offending robe from her lover's body, before moving her hands slowly down to the hem of Natalia's tank top.

"How are you feeling?" Natalia murmured, still worried about her partner as she felt her top being lifted and stripped from her body. She gasped as Olivia peeled off her own night shirt next and pressed their overheating bodies together, flushed and damp with sweat.

"Hot and bothered about covers it." Olivia tried to focus on Natalia's words, but slowly undressing the sexy brunette was distracting. So was the thought of seeing more of her toned body. "Come here."

"So impatient!" Natalia teased, as Olivia slid her hands around her waist, fingers dipping into the waistband of her sleep shorts, starting to push them from her hips. She watched enthralled as the honey blonde head kissed a searing trail down her body, nuzzling her bellybutton as sure hands removed the shorts from her.

Standing, Olivia moved in for a deeper kiss, tongues sliding and tangling together. Picking her lover up almost effortlessly, she groaned as she felt strong legs wrap around her, moist heat pressed tight to her, grinding slowly against her taut stomach.

Natalia moaned as she felt the wall suddenly behind her, the plaster rough on her back. She locked her legs around Olivia, who seemed to be easily supporting her, holding her slight weight.

Natalia arched her back as Olivia started moving down her throat, her wandering hand once more squeezing her breast, running the pad of her thumb over the tightening nipple, teasing it to become harder still. Natalia groaned, wantonly thrusting against Olivia, craving a harder, firmer touch.

Olivia tore her eyes away from the flushed skin and met Natalia's gaze, her own body throbbing with desire, its demands becoming very clear. Want, take, have. Natalia understood her perfectly in this moment. Panting, desperately needing her, Natalia couldn't seem to form words.

Sliding down Olivia's quivering body to stand, Natalia leaned in for another smouldering kiss. Caught off-guard and off-balance, Natalia was surprised to find herself pushed back roughly once more against the wall. Olivia pressed tightly against her body, trapping Natalia's wrists against the wall, while nipping and kissing her way to a sensitive earlobe.

"Please, Olivia..." Natalia moaned into Olivia's ear, unable to take much more, her body on fire. Pushing weakly on Olivia's shoulder, she could hear a soft chuckle as the blonde sank to her knees. Strong hands traced along lush hips, then Olivia kissed a return trail up the inside of a smooth thigh, stopping as she reached damp dark curls.

Olivia smiled as Natalia couldn't help thrusting forward, silently asking for her touch. Guiding a graceful leg over her shoulder, she opened Natalia further, breathing her scent in before dipping her tongue into wet folds, lazily circling the stiff clit she found there.

"Oh, God." Throwing her head back and rocking against Olivia's insistent mouth, Natalia was quickly losing control. She couldn't seem to get close enough, her left hand tangled in blonde hair pulling her nearer. Olivia teased her with quick faint flicks of her tongue, before starting to build a steady rhythm. Natalia felt Olivia's arm wrapping around her waist, as finger tips tickled along her most sensitive flesh, parting her, and then suddenly taking her completely.

Natalia gasped and thrust against the strong hand stretching and filling her, still wanting more. Olivia built the tempo steadily, pulling out slightly before thrusting into her again and again, taking her closer to the edge with each stroke. Natalia moaned, begging for

release as she felt every nerve end jumping, her body twitching in anticipation as she raced to her approaching orgasm.

“Please...” Natalia panted, bucking hard against her lover, who had slowed their pace.
“Please don't stop!”

Olivia just smiled, needing to be in control tonight almost as much as the release her body was aching for. She stilled all movement as Natalia just growled with frustration.

“Wait for it...” Olivia glanced up over the gentle swell of Natalia's belly, placing tender butterfly kisses there, before their eyes locked and held. Her thumb pressing and swirling, she watched the dark eyes flickering with love and desire as she once more started to thrust, her fingers curling to find the one spot she knew Natalia could not resist. Panting, needing the intense connection, they stared at each other, Natalia unable to hold on much longer.

“Now...” Olivia murmured against the sweat damp skin. “Come for me now.” Natalia tensed, so close to the edge, and then with a simple flick of Olivia's tongue she felt herself shatter, come together and shatter again.

Slowly Natalia returned to herself, aftershocks and waves of pleasure still flowing through her, as she calmed, trying to catch her breath. Sliding back up her body, Olivia caught and held her close, instinctively knowing she needed the strength and safety of her arms.

“I need you so much,” Olivia murmured against her cheek, a tear falling. She just needed to get lost for awhile in her lover.

“I've got you, baby...” Natalia husked, brushing damp tendrils from Olivia's forehead, feeling her energy returning. “I'm right here and I am going to make you forget everything but my touch,” Natalia slowly leaned forward, tasting herself on Olivia's lips as she kissed her softly. “And my love...”

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ACT 3

The storm had finally blown itself out, and the breeze blowing through the hotel room was fresh and clean. Olivia lay sprawled across the large bed on her stomach, Natalia draped across her back snuggled close. She slowly stroked long fingers through the honeyed hair of her sleeping lover, listening to the steady breathing as she watched the moon slowly sinking into the ocean. She thought of grabbing the bed sheets that lay in a heap at the

foot of the bed to cover them, but then she'd actually have to move, and at the moment she was too exhausted to budge.

Natalia's mind drifted lazily back over the night's events, knowing that they would still need to talk. Something was bothering her partner, and had been since they arrived here. She was determined to get to the bottom of it. And Olivia's need to control their lovemaking earlier had been new. Not a bad thing, she smirked, just different.

Olivia groaned and stirred, her eyes blinking open enjoying her partner's touch.

"Hey you," Natalia dropped a tender kiss to her lover's bare shoulder. "How are you feeling, hmmm?"

"Stiff." Olivia ran a hand through her hair as memories came crashing back, as she looked around the room. Was there a surface they hadn't christened?

"I bet," Natalia chuckled and shifted so her lover could reposition herself more comfortably.

Rolling over with another groan, Olivia settled on her back and pulled the younger woman close again, tucking the dark head under her chin. She closed her eyes and just soaked up Natalia's warm and solid strength for a moment. Her lover had such faith in her, it was almost scary.

It had been a long time since she'd had a flashback to that night. And it was the first time Olivia hadn't drunk herself into oblivion after it happened. She knew it was because of Natalia's strength and love and for that she would be grateful.

"Tell me." Natalia murmured against Olivia's tender skin. She needed to know what was going on in that beautiful mind.

"How do you do that?" Olivia whispered, more to herself than to Natalia, as she absently traced the delicate shell of her lover's ear with a finger tip. "You always seem to know what to say at exactly the right time."

"I have many skills, sweetie. You hired me for more than just my pretty face and above average cooking abilities you know." Natalia offered a teasing lopsided grin. Growing serious, she dropped a soft kiss onto the blonde head, enjoying the close contact. "Hey, you know you can tell me anything. I am not going anywhere."

Olivia closed her eyes and soaked up the solid strength for a moment longer. The time had come and she knew it.

"There is something I need to tell you, about myself." Olivia felt Natalia grow still beside her. Concerned, she sat up slightly and looked into sympathetic, dark eyes. The love reflecting back at her gave her the courage to continue.

Olivia's eyes seemed to dull, and Natalia could hear the older woman's heart beating faster. She ran her fingers into her partner's tousled hair, wanting to ease the pain she saw lurking just beneath the surface.

"Coming back to San Cristobel has stirred up a lot of old wounds and feelings. I've been back visiting here before, but coming with you has, I don't know, made me realize I've never really dealt fully with all of it. I've made some peace, but mostly I've just run away or drowned it in a bottle..." Olivia pulled away and sat up, hugging her knees to her chest. She didn't know if she could do this.

"Don't." Natalia moved to sit next to her, putting her chin on Olivia's shoulder and wrapping her arms around the suddenly tense woman, knowing instantly this was going to be bad. Very bad. "Don't let anything stand between us."

Olivia pulled away and turned to stare at her lover. She drew in a long deep breath and let it out slowly, getting her nerve up for what was to follow. She didn't want to talk about this, hell she didn't even want to think about it. If she didn't think about it, it wasn't real. She'd made peace with it, for Ava's sake. Why then did she still have the nightmares and the flashbacks?

Olivia sighed and covered her eyes, frustrated with herself. It wasn't fair! None of it was fair, but Natalia felt like the other half of her soul. If anyone should know, if she needed to share this misery with anyone, it was Natalia. It was just so damn hard to put into words, to relive it again. She felt Natalia curve her hands to her smooth shoulders and pull her close again.

"Tell me." Natalia commanded softly, knowing it couldn't continue to remain only Olivia's burden any longer. She sent up a silent prayer for strength and waited. "Don't let your past haunt you. It will always be with you, a part of you. Believe me I know."

Natalia's mind automatically flashed to her own sad relationship with her family. She shook her head to clear it of the memories. That would be a story for her to share fully another day, right now Olivia needed to clear the air. She gently pressed against the older woman, causing her to turn and face her.

"Whatever you say, it's not going to make me run away...or think any less of you. I love you no matter what and I need you to have faith in that. You need to know that there is nothing, *nothing* that could change that."

Olivia was quiet for a long moment, letting that sink in and taking comfort in it. Preparing to lay herself bare to the one person she wanted to share her true self with. And just when Natalia started to fear that she wasn't going to say anything, the words finally came, her voice flat and dead.

"It's always the same nightmare. It's not even a nightmare, it's more like a flashback. He's there and I-I can't make it stop and..." Olivia trailed off for a long moment, the memories becoming too much, tormenting her again, making her feel helpless. God, when would it ever end?

"Olivia," Natalia stilled as she started to put it together. She thought she was going to be sick. "Did someone hurt you, baby?" Olivia seemed to shrink into herself, into a tiny ball of pain not wanting to talk. She turned in Natalia's arms and burrowed closer, nodding against the soft skin as they lay back down on the bed together and held each other.

"*Hijo de puta...*" Natalia growled under her breath as Olivia's hot tears fell on her skin. A fury had never felt before almost overwhelmed her, followed by a pain just as great. Tears of her own welled and she held on a little tighter to Olivia, waiting for her to go on.

"Mercifully, I don't remember much." Olivia wiped at her eyes before sliding her hand along Natalia's chest, feeling the thundering of her lover's heart beneath her palm. She swallowed hard and continued, whispering into the darkness, relieved in a way to finally be confessing, praying that Natalia's love could burn away the numbing pain.

"My mother always warned me, telling me not to grow up too fast, but I knew better. I was so desperate to feel grown up and be free of her and that crappy life. I was always so sure she was trying to keep me trapped here, and I just wanted to feel alive, and on my own." Olivia's eyes seemed to darken a little, remembering.

"I developed faster than the other girls and when I was in high school all the older boys paid attention to me. And I liked it. I liked feeling important and the college boys seemed so much more interesting than the boys my age. My mom would have never let me go out, so there were nights where I would sneak out and go to a party or out on a date."

"So Emma gets that from you, does she?" Natalia teased, the humor helping to ease the tension in both of them. She ran a soothing hand through her lover's hair and pleased to see Olivia's answering soft smile. She shifted to grab a blanket from the floor and tuck it around them, snuggling close again.

"One night I was working in the kitchen at the palace, and some of the other kids were talking about a party at one of the embassies. The ambassador's son was hosting it and

some of them would be working it for some extra cash. I wanted to go so I got dressed up and I snuck out and went. It was amazing, Natalia.” Olivia’s eyes shined at the memory.

“It was so elegant and grand. The music was good and the dancing was out of this world and then, there was this punch. It was a really hot night, and I just kept drinking and dancing. And drinking some more. It was so sweet...” Olivia drifted off in her memories a moment and turned to cuddle closer to her partner, relaxing as strong fingers stroked through her hair, soothing her, calming her frazzled nerves. “The booze hit me all at once, and I had been dancing with this guy. He seemed really nice...”

“Oh...” Natalia’s stomach dropped, as she bit off what she wanted to say. How she wanted to warn that sweet innocent girl to stay away from the nice man. Instead she dropped a soft kiss to Olivia’s hair and waited for her to continue, dreading what she was sure she was about to hear.

“He was sweet. Fun, not like the other guys at the party, and all of a sudden I felt woozy, like I was going to pass out. I said that I wanted to lie down and he said there were some bedrooms upstairs. So he took my hand and led me upstairs to this room at the end of a really long hallway. I got on the bed and he lay down next to me and stroked my hair, and told me that everything was going to okay, that I’d feel better soon. And then he started to kiss me. And I liked it.” Olivia grew silent for a moment, taking comfort in Natalia’s silent strength. “I liked it...”

Olivia’s voice faltered as she started to remember it all again, reliving it.

The plush comforter underneath her, soft moans and gentle kisses. The room started to spin, as his kisses grew more demanding. She pushed weakly against his strong shoulders, the weight of his body suddenly on top of her, pressing her into the mattress, trapping her there. Her stomach churning, panic starting to rise as she tried to move, to get away, shaking her head no, her dress ripping, sound starting to disappear and then the room was fading to black...

“Hey, come back to me,” Natalia murmured, tugging the sheet tighter against them, holding her close and wiping away the slowly falling tears. “I’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

Olivia sighed and nodded against Natalia’s chest, needing a moment to just get back under control.

“H-he started to touch me and I knew he was going too far. I couldn’t make him stop. I didn’t want it, I told him no, but I passed out. Thankfully, I don’t remember any of it. I think I might have blocked it. Anyway, when I woke up, I was in the same bed, alone with a blanket tucked around me keeping me warm, but I knew. I knew what had happened.”

"Then out of nowhere there was some guy in a suit, throwing my purse in my face. I guess they realized I had crashed the party and was only sixteen, I don't know how they found me really. Anyway they let me leave through the back door, and drove me home, practically shoving me out of the car still in motion, they couldn't wait to get rid of me." Olivia's voice grew bitter and angry.

"What did you do? Did you tell your mother?" Natalia dragged her fingers along Olivia's bare back, trying to soothe her with the hypnotic movement across her soft skin.

"God, no!" Olivia shifted against her, not really wanting to remember the rest either. "At least, not right away. I was too ashamed. I shouldn't have been drinking, I shouldn't have been at that party. Hell, I shouldn't have left the house. I was sixteen and scared. I didn't even know the name of the guy at the party. And then, I realized that I was pregnant..."

"Wait a minute..." Natalia grew very still. *Pregnant?* Her mind swirled as tears filled her eyes and things started falling into place. Ava was conceived... Ava was the child of Olivia's rape? Pain rushed through her as this new information hit home and then the burn of fury washed over her again. She struggled to keep it hidden from her fragile lover, not wanting to upset her more than she already was. Natalia took a deep breath and then another. "It was Jeffrey? He raped you?"

Olivia nuzzled closer to Natalia's strong shoulder, breathing in the scent of her lover, bringing her comfort, soothing the ache of the thoughts that she could normally just ignore or stuff deep down inside, or drink away. She nodded silently into the soft skin at Natalia's throat. Natalia tenderly stroked the hair out of her eyes and off her forehead, the movement soothing her raw emotions, calming them both down.

"I'm so sorry, baby." Natalia whispered into the darkness, her heart breaking for the girl Olivia had once been. Green eyes slid closed and Olivia took another deep breath before she continued.

The thought of telling my mother was overwhelming and terrifying. So I pulled myself together and got angry. I went back to the Embassy because I wanted to tell them there was no way I was going to face this situation alone."

"What happened?" Natalia was almost afraid to ask.

"I spoke to a very nice receptionist at the front desk, who called someone else and then the guy in the suit came back. He seemed very nice and sincere and so I told him the whole story, everything that had happened to me at the party and that I needed to see the guest list so I could see who had done this to me, I needed them to stand by me when I went to the police. He listened and looked very concerned and then he left." Olivia paused,

remembering how proud she was of herself, that she wouldn't be treated like that. She sighed softly at her naiveté.

"When he came back, he had an envelope full of cash. And he told me that no one would ever believe my story and that I should take the money and get out of there. There was no way they were going to stand by me. He told me never to come back. So that's what I did. I took the money and left." Tears welled again. Bought and sold like a common whore. And she had let it happen.

"So I went home and I finally got the nerve up to tell my mother. I figured, she's my mother, she would help me and protect me, defend me. Instead all she could say was 'I told you! I warned you!' I was so hurt..."

"Oh, sweetheart..." Natalia ran a soothing hand through her partner's hair. She remembered similar words thrown at her, and how they had felt like a physical blow.

"I told her I wanted an abortion but she said 'No, no, no! You will carry this child to term and you will give it away, there will be no debate.'" Olivia started to shiver, the memories overwhelming her again.

Her mother stood looming in front of her, her arms waving in anger as she ranted and raved. The tears burning down her cheeks as her mother paced back and forth, pulling the bible from the drawer and throwing it on to the couch beside her, spewing scripture, calling her a slut, that abortion was murder. The fury burning as she screamed I hate you at the top of her lungs at her mother, confusion as the older woman suddenly stumbled, her words became slurred, garbled, her eyes blinking quickly as her hands flew to her head, and she crumpled in a heap at her feet...

"And this was when she had her stroke," Natalia closed her eyes, the weight of it all hitting her like a ton of bricks.

Suddenly everything made sense to Natalia, why Olivia was the way she was, did the things she did. Why Olivia needed to be in charge, putting her own spin on everything while appearing so strong, never needing anyone or anything, self made and independent. Sex was a commodity, a means to an end, power. It was all a façade, a carefully constructed shield. Olivia never truly trusted anyone or anything, she never let anyone in to see the real her.

At least, until she came along and slipped past the walls.

Natalia knew that hidden just beneath Olivia's skin, was this damaged, scared sixteen year old, alone in the dark, just wanting someone to protect and love her. Her heart ached for

Olivia. And her soul also burned with shame, as she fully realized just how deeply her own disappearance would have crushed her lover. Olivia had finally let someone in, to see the real woman inside and she had left her.

Never again. Natalia opened her eyes and looked down at the fragile beauty lying in her arms. She would never let anyone hurt her again. She would protect her with everything she had, body mind and soul.

"The stroke hit her while we argued. Do you know what it's like, when one minute you're yelling at someone and the next minute, they're dead because of you?" Olivia hissed, wracked with guilt, revealing everything to the woman she loved.

"Olivia, no..." Natalia rocked her lover gently, soothing her. "Your mother's stroke, her death, it's not your fault. She could have had it stuck in traffic or cooking dinner..." Olivia just sighed sadly, not really believing her.

"I just don't really remember much after that. I lay in my room and got through the days, someone had to look after Marissa and Sammy. Eventually when I snapped out of it, it was too late. I had to carry my baby full term, the whole time hating her. Hating Jeffrey." A single tear fell as Olivia's eyes blinked open and she bared her soul.

"Hating myself." Olivia rolled and buried her head against Natalia's neck, finally breaking down completely in the safety of her arms. "God, I'm so fucked up, Natalia..."

"Oh, my sweet baby." Natalia pulled her into an even tighter embrace "It wasn't your fault. None of it was your fault." She rocked Olivia who was choking back thick sobs of regret and grief, holding her close, just being there and letting her cry. Soon they were wrapped together, a tangle of arms and legs, weeping together.

"Nothing you do can ever change it or bring your mother back." Natalia whispered after a while. "But the life you're leading, the family you're building with me and our children, that's what's important. And I'm still right here, by your side and I'm not going anywhere." Natalia whispered, placing a soft kiss on a flushed cheek tasting salty tears. "Together we can work through this. I promise..."

A long moment passed before Olivia slowly nodded.

"I'll try, Natalia."

Natalia pulled her close and held her tightly. Another wave of fury at Jeffrey washed over her. How had Olivia ever been able to forgive her rapist, to become friends with him even? She didn't understand it, and didn't know if she could have forgiven him for hurting her

lover so deeply. It seemed to her that Jeffrey had gotten off a lot more lightly than he deserved. A dark part of her was suddenly very glad the man was dead.

“Sleep now, querida,” Natalia murmured against soft skin, smiling as the older woman snuggled closer and sighed softly, exhausted both physically and emotionally. She closed her eyes and listened to Olivia’s breathing deepen, feeling her slowly fall asleep in her arms.

The first rays of dawn began to lighten the sky as Natalia swore she would never let anyone hurt her family again.

“Please God, give me strength...”

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Church bells peeled in the distance as the Sunday morning breakfast crowd made their way to Company for brunch. Marina ran from table to table, filling empty cups of coffee and chatting with some of the regulars. Frank and Buzz sat at the counter, watching her work happily away. She looked up and smiled at them, waving happily as she dashed into the kitchen to place an order with the cook.

“What is up with her?” Frank murmured. “She was ready to kill someone yesterday.”

Buzz snorted into his coffee.

“Well she’s been hanging around with Shayne a lot more. Maybe there’s something going on that we don’t know about yet.” Buzz stood and went around behind the counter to refill his mug. He brought the carafe over to top up Frank’s.

Frank looked towards the ladies washroom, making sure that Blake, Clarissa and the baby weren’t out yet.

“I’ve heard from Eleni, a few months ago actually. We’ve been texting back and forth a little. She wants to see Henry. I don’t know if Marina is going to let it happen.” Frank looked away as Buzz just sighed. Just when he thought Frank was settling down with Blake, a new wrinkle develops. Nothing was ever easy around here.

“Well, if the woman wants to have some sort of relationship with Marina and Henry, then we have to give her a chance.” Buzz mumbled.

Frank just nodded, smiling as Blake and the girls made their way back out from the washroom. If he could work on being a better father, then Eleni deserved that chance just

as much. One way or another, he would get Marina to come around. Frank let the worrisome thoughts drift away as he reached to take a wiggling Francesca from Blake and cuddle her into his arms, wrapping her pink wubby tight around her as she giggled and squeaked.

Both of his daughters were happy. Frank couldn't ask for anything more.

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Natalia worried this might not have been a good idea, but Olivia had seemed determined. She stepped through the threshold of the tiny house and felt like she was stepping back in time. The jingle of Olivia sliding her keys into her pocket broke her out of her thoughts and they walked into the silent house.

"When I was here in 2006 the old place was for sale. There was a lot of Marissa's stuff in storage here on the island and she had a lot of our things from when we were growing up. So I thought I'd buy it and move it all back here for safe keeping. I have a property manager check in regularly. I kept meaning to come back and sort through stuff but life got a little crazy." Olivia touched her chest, right where her surgery scar peeked out of her shirt. Natalia grabbed her hand and squeezed before wandering deeper into the house.

Natalia stepped through into the small kitchen and looked around. The avocado colored appliances dated the room, but otherwise it was spotless. She could just picture a young Olivia yanking the fridge door open and grabbing a soda before running back into the living room to play with her sister and brother.

"Mom would stand by the sink, washing dishes and staring out the window, watching us tear around in the backyard. Or we'd sit at the kitchen table and finish our homework while she worked away cooking dinner." Olivia murmured quietly beside her. "Kind of like how you do with Emma at home." Olivia grew silent, smiling softly as, for the first time in a long time, she had a good memory of her mother.

Actually, Natalia reminded her of Rebecca Spencer a lot, if she really thought about it. Both had strong moral beliefs, were devout, hard working women, and not afraid to call her on her crap. However, where her mother had used her religion to scare and discipline, Natalia instead drew an inner strength and love from her faith.

"We should visit here again. Bring the kids. Emma should see where you and Sam grew up, don't you think?" Natalia ran a hand along Olivia's shoulders. "We could make some new family memories here."

Olivia smiled past the lump in her throat and nodded.

They moved back out into the living room, where several boxes were piled by the wall. Curious, Olivia popped one open marked 'Mom's room', unfolding the box flaps to find old clothing inside. She pulled out a blazer of her mother's and pressed it to her nose.

"You can still smell her perfume..." Olivia murmured into the material.

Natalia glanced over, a little concerned this was too much for her partner, but stayed silent. She opened a box too and dug down into it. It looked like a lot of letters and bills. She opened a shoebox, finding a treasure trove of report cards and saved artwork. She pulled one out and unfolded it, Olivia's name scribbled in green crayon at the bottom.

"Oh, this is so cute." Natalia turned the drawing around so Olivia could see it. Olivia had slipped her mother's blazer on, and was pulling her hair out from under the collar, when she looked up and smiled at the drawing.

"That was supposed to be Mom and me and our dog...God, what was his name..." Olivia wandered closer, tapping her lip. "Buster! He was this little black mutt that followed me everywhere." She took the drawing from her smiling girlfriend. "I must have been four or five when we had him." She looked down into the box Natalia was exploring.

"She kept all this stuff?" Olivia was a little surprised and touched. Sure she kept all of Emma's artwork, but she never realized her mom had done it too. There were three shoeboxes, marked Olivia, Marissa and Sam. She made a mental note to make sure Sam got his box.

"When Mom had...died, a few of her friends from church came over and packed up her room and a lot of her things for us. I-I barely remember it even happening, I was so..." Olivia swallowed hard. Natalia put a gentle hand over her lover's, her thumb caressing the soft skin.

"Well, now we can open a few of these boxes and find what treasures your mom left behind for us to find..." Natalia smiled as Olivia sniffed and nodded, before turning to look closer at the things in the shoebox with her name on it. Natalia moved to give her a little space to explore it all at her own speed.

There were report cards and her immunization record card neatly wrapped up with an old disintegrating red elastic around it. Various hand-made Valentine's Day cards and birthday cards, a Get Well Soon drawing and several hand paintings and fridge door artwork. And tucked at the very bottom of the box was a cross she'd made out of Popsicle sticks and macaroni. Olivia smiled remembering how her mother had loved it, putting it on the kitchen cupboard with tape where it stayed for months.

“Oh, my God, Olivia!” Natalia gasped, as she dug around in a third box she had just opened. She pulled out little knitted baby boots in one hand and a delicate white lace outfit, wrapped carefully in tissue paper. “It’s your baptismal gown.”

“What?” Olivia stepped forward to touch the soft material, taking the tiny gown as Natalia pulled out a faded letter and started to read out loud.



“Dear Becca, I wish I could be there in person for Olivia’s baptism but funds are still too tight for us to visit from Ireland. I’ve sent you the gown that you were baptised in, so that the family tradition can continue. Your Da and I love you so much and miss you and Greg so much. Send us pictures of the baby soon. Love, Mam” Natalia looked up and smiled. “This is definitely coming home with us, Olivia, for Francesca’s baptism.”

Olivia brought a hand to her heart, moved beyond words that Natalia wanted to continue this tradition with their little girl. She nodded and wiped at her eyes. She turned, moving to turn on a side lamp to look closer at the fragile gown. Natalia appeared behind her, her gentle hands curling around Olivia’s shoulders as she leaned back into the embrace.

“It’s too hard for me to be in San Cristobel. Everything here is still so raw and painful.” Olivia whispered, the admission difficult for her to make.

"I know, baby." Natalia husked placing a soft kiss to her lover's temple. "We have a lot of things to deal with, but together we can work through it. However, I don't think now is the time for us to set up a Beacon franchise here."

Olivia nodded. She didn't like being this fragile and vulnerable. She turned and felt herself wrapped in Natalia's strong arms, pulling her into a comforting embrace and holding on tight, the scent of her mother's perfume wafting around them. She closed her eyes and for a moment it was as if her mother was with her, holding her one last time.

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ACT 4

A light breeze blew in from the ocean, causing the candles to flicker on the small table set up on the balcony. High above them a million stars twinkled, easily visible in the dark sky, and a huge full moon hung low on the horizon as it started to rise. The crashing waves could just be heard in the distance and soft jazz music drifted up from the patio bar not far below them.

Natalia sipped her glass of wine, and stared out across the ocean. The night was so calm and serene, just her and Olivia alone together. It was the perfect way to spend their last night in this tropical paradise. However, they were both ready to get back home to their little girls and their normal lives again.

After spending the afternoon going through a few more boxes, putting sentimental things aside to have Olivia's property manager ship back to the States for them, they had returned to the hotel and sought out the General Manager. Doug Riker had been disappointed when they told him they were not planning on purchasing the Galaxy San Cristobel, but they thanked him for all the hospitality he and his staff had shown them. Olivia's personal call to the Xiaos had gone just as smoothly. Natalia swirled her wine, pleased that Olivia had made it clear that it wasn't the facilities or the staff that had been at fault. With Beacon business taken care of, they were both more than ready to get back home to their little girls and some semblance of their normal lives again.

Natalia glanced across the table at her lover, who was happily finishing up her meal, specially prepared by Massimo and delivered to their suite personally. It was only after promising to drag Olivia back for another visit soon, that the big man kissed them on both cheeks in farewell and return once more to his frantic kitchen.

"I am stuffed." Olivia leaned back and grabbed her glass of wine, sipping it and staring at her partner over the rim. "That piece of birthday cake just about did me in." She stood and took Natalia's hand, pulling her to the balcony railing where they could snuggle together.

“Do you remember your birthday last year?” Natalia whispered softly, nuzzling along Olivia’s strong jaw, not wanting to ruin the peace of the evening.

“Absolutely. It was a Saturday night so we could stay up late and watch movies together. I couldn’t believe you made a steak dinner. Hmm, I don’t think I’ve had one since, actually.” Olivia admired the silver moonlight highlighting Natalia’s dark hair and started to drift back in time, smiling at the memories.

“You had made a chocolate birthday cake, and Emma helped me blow out all the candles. You asked me if I’d made a wish and I said of course but I couldn’t tell you what it was or it wouldn’t come true...” Olivia grew quiet, remembering it all, the exquisite torture she had been in that whole spring.

“I couldn’t tell you then, but this, right here, right now, a future with you in my arms,” Olivia cupped Natalia’s soft cheek. “That is what I wished for.” She leaned forward, stopping a hairs breadth apart, and then shifting ever so slightly to claim the smiling lips waiting for her. Slowly pulling apart, they cuddled a little, their foreheads resting together as their fingers entwined and stroked along soft skin.

“I thought I was going to drown in your eyes that night,” Olivia murmured. “And then I asked Emma to go find the DVD of my favorite Disney cartoon, Beauty and the Beast, as we cleared up the dishes. I wanted to touch you so badly, run my fingers along your arms, through your thick hair...”

Olivia paused, letting the old feelings wash through her, the fear and longing, all the angst filled moments in time, never to be forgotten. Natalia laced their fingers together and smiled up at her.

“And then we all snuggled under the blanket on the couch and watched the movie. Well, Emma watched the movie, and I watched you.” Olivia glanced down at their hands and smiled. “It hadn’t taken ten minutes and you had nodded off, leaning against me and Em. And I could just watch you sleep. It was the best present I had that night. God, I was so in love with you, even then...”

Natalia nodded and shifted a little. She remembered that night as well, bittersweet and perfect.

“I was so afraid,” Natalia admitted. “God, I was so afraid of what I was feeling for you, Olivia...” Natalia admitted. “We just kept getting closer and that terrified part of me needed to prove to myself that I wasn’t falling for you, that I was just confused. And I hurt you so badly being with Frank like that. I just wanted to hold you and instead I felt like I had betrayed you. I just made everything so much worse for both of us. You don’t know how

sorry..." Natalia looked away, watching the waves crash against the beach, tears glimmering in her dark eyes.

"Hey, hey, stop that." Olivia's thumbs wiped at the moisture gathered there, catching a tear falling slowly down the flushed cheek. "It was a tough road for both of us, I know, but I will never regret Francesca and the joy that she has brought to our lives. Okay?"

Natalia wiped away more tears and nodded.

"Good." Olivia leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss to the tip of her nose, breaking some of the tension and making the brunette giggle a little. Olivia let a few moments pass in silence, both women taking comfort in the arms of each other, swaying slightly to the soft strains of music.

"Dance with me?" Natalia murmured against Olivia's shoulder.

"I thought you'd never ask," Olivia moved them away from the rail, into the middle of the balcony, her hands wrapping around Natalia's trim waist. It was hard to believe this gorgeous woman in her arms had ever been pregnant.

Natalia ran her hands up and over Olivia's strong shoulders to clasp around her neck, fingers playing with the long hair. One song, turned into two and they got lost in each others movements, the familiar sway of the other's body, pressed tightly together. Olivia hummed softly to the music before sighing softly.

"Some honeymoon getaway celebration of our engagement. I'm sorry this weekend has been hard..." She began only to be silenced by a finger landing on her lips.

"Shh...don't apologize. I wouldn't want it any other way, querida." Natalia smiled up at her lover, meaning every word. They could lie on the beach anywhere, any time. Olivia had truly opened her heart and soul to her this weekend and she loved the fragile, complicated woman even more. She hadn't thought that was even possible.

"I was afraid you...I don't know," Olivia looked away, out over the restless ocean. "I guess I was afraid you'd look at me differently, if you knew about my past. That you would pity me, and I don't want anyone's pity."

"I would never pity you." Natalia's eyes glittered dangerously, as a fresh wave of anger washed over her, her thoughts turning once more to Jeffrey. She understood it was because of Ava, but she still didn't know how Olivia could bear to be in the same room with the man, let alone be friends? She would need to pray and think about this more. "You are so much stronger than I ever imagined."

Olivia looked down and smiled softly. She placed a kiss on Natalia's sweet lips and they swayed to the music a little more.

"I should say thank you." Olivia murmured after awhile.

"For what?" Natalia grinned back a little surprised.

"You gave me a wonderful birthday present today. You helped me reclaim my past, to find my mother again. Together we were able to make her into someone I can relate to, instead of the one-dimensional tyrant that I had turned her into in my grief and anger and then fixated on all these years." Olivia snuggled closer and stared up into the night sky. Home wasn't a location any more. Home was right here in her arms. "Thank you for that, sweetheart."

"That has been my pleasure," Natalia pressed a kiss to her partner's cheek. "And we will keep working on that. The girls should know about your side of the family. We'll come back here again, with all of them."

"I love you." She whispered into the dark hair breathing in the younger woman's scent. "This has been my best birthday yet."

"And the night is still young..." Natalia smiled up at her lover, delighting at the raised eyebrow her comment caused. A knock at the suite door caused them to pull reluctantly apart and Natalia went to answer it.

A small Asian woman entered the room and took away the dishes, clearing their small table and leaving a bottle of champagne, compliments of the Xiaos. Olivia stared hard at the server, the cut of her hair and her dark curious stare, the quirk of her lips as she smiled and left the room. Something very familiar tickled at the edge of her mind. Another time and another place, the girl that Massimo had said was crazy about her. Asian, long dark hair, black eyes that seemed to see inside her soul, so serious all the time.

Olivia gasped and leaned against the balcony rail as it all suddenly came back to her...

Jeffrey stood, zipping up his pants and smiling. He wandered towards the door struggling to do up the buttons of his shirt. She was so tired, couldn't move, didn't want to, her body aching, the smell of sex and blood thick in the air. He opened the suite door and stumbled out and down the hallway. The relief was overwhelming and then she saw her, standing there. She was Asian, in a similar uniform, her dark eyes staring at her, tears welling. The girl saw her lying there, tousled and abused and she just stood there. Olivia tried to call out for help, but the room swirled and the darkness claimed her again...

“Oh my God. She was there...” Olivia visibly paled as the old memory fell back into place. Her stomach churned a little. She knew she had seen her before.

“Who was where?” Natalia looked back at her lover, perplexed.

“Anna Li. She was there that night at the embassy party. I knew her from school, and working in the palace kitchen. Only we didn’t call her Anna, we all called her Xing Lung.” Olivia turned to face a shocked Natalia. “Her father, I’m sure that was the man in the market. He was with the same man who threatened me to forget about being raped, who drove me home and told me that no one would believe me. Xing Lung was the daughter of the head of security of the royal family and the palace. For Richard,” Olivia’s eyes grew larger. “And Edmund

“We have to warn Doris.” Natalia whispered. “Anna Li could be a very, very dangerous woman.”

~~*~*

Doris sank onto the couch beside her lover, grabbed the remote and turned the DVD movie off. Anna was asleep, having drifted off after the first half-hour of the show. She glanced down at the sleeping woman in her arms, stroking long fingers through the silky straight black hair.

Doris sighed and looked around her living room. She stared at her built in bookcases, the family photos of her and Ashlee scattered there. The Dancing Daisy she still couldn’t believe Anna had actually found when she was training in Chicago and brought back as a late Valentine’s gift. Doris smiled, remembering how fantastic New Year’s Eve had been this year. Maybe it was time to add some new faces to her shelves. Blake had emailed her some shots from the day they all helped Olivia move back to the farmhouse, and Beth had sent some from the New Year’s Eve party.

She looked down at the woman who was beginning to infiltrate all areas of her life. And strangely it didn’t worry her at all. Doris merely wanted to shout it from the rooftops, but she couldn’t. And that hurt more than she thought it possibly could. She had been waiting for the one who would be worth throwing it all away for. Maybe she had finally arrived.

“I think I’m falling in love with you...” Doris whispered, dropping a soft kiss to the other woman’s head. She sighed happily and watched Anna sleep.

The End

~~*~*

Persona Non Grata

by Calliopes_Muse

ACT 1

The pile of paper on Olivia's desk didn't seem to be getting any smaller. She glanced at her watch and sighed. It wasn't even lunch time yet, and she still didn't feel like she had put a dent in the work. Sometimes the first day back from vacation was the worst. Not just because you wanted to be somewhere else still, preferably in the warm arms of a very sexy woman, but because the work that you left behind seemed to develop insane crushes on each other, had crazy desk sex while you were gone, and left you with their babies to come back to when you returned.

She sighed again, picking up another file, and tried very hard not to think about desk sex and babies. That just wouldn't work because then she'd think about Natalia, and she definitely wouldn't get any work done. She looked at the picture on her desk and smiled.

A sweet, old couple had taken it while they were in San Cristobel drifting through the marketplace, and Olivia had come in and downloaded it right away to her computer. She picked up the unframed picture and stared at Natalia, running a gentle finger along the image of her cheek.

"So much for not thinking about Natalia," she mumbled to herself and looked back to her desk with the pile of work. "Screw it. This is much more enjoyable."

The trip away had been more than just a vacation or even a pseudo business trip. A part of her knew they weren't ready to take on something as big as franchising the Beacon just yet, but the opportunity to simply look and get back in the game of wheeling and dealing again for the right time and the right place had whet her appetite for the real thing. One day there would be another Beacon site, but this wasn't the time for it.

In spite of that, the trip had been enlightening to say the least. Seeing her home again and visiting the graves of her family was hard, but it helped her realize she had a new family. One that she could lean on and trust, that she'd lay down her life for if needed. The brief visit she and Natalia made to St. Michael's had filled her amazingly with a sense of peace.

Even though her memories of religion as a child had left her scarred and disillusioned, there was something about experiencing it with Natalia and her calm, loving nature that soothed the old ache of her childhood.

Everything about the trip had been wonderful and even magical. She had felt connected to Natalia on a whole new level. Finally, she had opened a door to perhaps her darkest secret, her rape, and Natalia loved her anyway. She had kept it to herself for so long, fearing revulsion or disgust from Natalia, but she got rewarded with Natalia's amazing strength and insight. Natalia knew her like no one else ever had, saw into her soul, even the dark and ugly parts, only to declare it good. This kind of love, one that doesn't have judgment or boundaries, was something she couldn't understand being given to her and certainly not by Natalia's God.

A brief smile ghosted over her face. *Then again, her God isn't like any God I've ever known,* she mused to herself.

The smile disappeared though as she thought of that stormy night on the island. Anna. Xing Lung. Whoever the hell she was now! She hadn't imagined it. It wasn't some figment of her imagination. She had been there the night of her rape, had seen Jeffrey leave the room, and had done nothing. She closed her eyes feeling the cold chill slide down her back at the recalled emotions when it all hit her, when it all fell into place at the hotel; the burly Asian man in the market staring at her, the older Asian woman who reminded her eerily of an older Anna. Something was very, very wrong and her gut instincts were on high alert.

It took everything Natalia had, in spite of her own misgivings and fears, to talk Olivia out of finding Anna and confronting her in true Spencer fashion, particularly with a well-hidden gun for good measure. Natalia had made her promise to sit on it for a few days, they both would, to allow themselves to think with clearer heads, and feel out the situation when they returned. Even now, thinking about the possibility of Anna being one of Edmund's goons, just like Anna's father had been, was more than Olivia could tolerate. It put everyone she loved in danger and such a situation was simply not acceptable. Olivia ground her teeth together, fighting the impulse to bolt from her office and race down to the Springfield Police Department. But since assaulting a police officer was unfortunately out of the question, she took her frustrations out on the poor pencil in her hand and snapped it with cathartic glee.

A knock at the door made her jump, and she quickly schooled her face for business. "Come..."

She hadn't even gotten the rest of the sentence out when Doris pushed the door open with a huge grin. "Hey, newlywed!"

“What?” Olivia was truly confused.

Doris walked up to the desk and looked over the edge. “So, let me see it.”

It finally registered with Olivia what she was talking about, and she lifted her left hand with the glittering band on it. Doris took the proffered hand in her own and looked at the beautiful band from one side and then the other, whistling her approval. “Very nice! Who knew Natalia had such great taste. After all, she is with you.”

Green eyes slit dangerously as the hotelier looked towards Doris. “What are you doing out and about so early, Wolfe? I didn’t think vampires came out until after dark.”

Doris laughed good-naturedly, enjoying their comfortable banter. “Good one, Spencer.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Not much. Just thought I’d drop by and have a chat with a dear friend.”

Olivia looked over her shoulder, then back at the Mayor. “Where? I don’t see anyone.”

The Mayor’s face fell. “Bite me.”

“Bend over.” A dark eyebrow quirked up.

“Stop flirting with me, or I’ll have to get my girlfriend to beat you up. I’m trying to be serious here, okay?”

Olivia stopped smirking and made her face serious. “Fine. What’s up?”

The other woman leaned back comfortably in her chair and bit her lip, a smile of self-satisfaction and almost girly giddiness popped up on her face. “I’m in love. I’ve done it, Olivia. I’ve found my Natalia.”

Olivia smiled falsely at her, but she knew Doris hadn’t seen it nor noticed how Olivia had shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Doris had been going on about Anna, oblivious to anything else. “I mean, she’s so great, Olivia. She does sweet, little romantic things all the time, and she’s never rushed me about being out or being more open. She’s just let me - be me, and I think she’s making me a better person. More open, honest, caring.” Doris shook her head. “I don’t know. I just know I’ve never felt like this before, and I’m really happy... finally.” Doris looked off wistfully, lost in her own world.

Olivia looked down and closed her eyes. She pressed two fingers to the bridge of her nose, as she thought through the situation. It wasn’t good, and it had been exactly the position Olivia had hoped to avoid. Doris was her friend and she wanted to protect her. If Olivia told her about Anna, it would break her heart and maybe destroy their friendship. If she didn’t

tell her and Anna was up to no good, it would break Doris's heart anyway, if not actually endanger her life; Olivia would likely lose their friendship for not telling her, too. Either way, Olivia was royally screwed. Damn, this was exactly why she didn't get close to people!

It took Doris snapping her fingers in front of her face to get her attention. "Earth to Olivia! Where'd you go? No daydreaming about your girl. This is my party."

The blonde offered a half-smile to her. "Sorry." Olivia tried to think of a quick way out of the conversation, she raised the hand with her new ring. "I'm still in honeymoon land." She reached into her pocket, where she had placed her cell phone. She pulled it out and looked at it as if she had a call coming in. "Speaking of which."

Doris smirked at her and stood. "Fine, I can tell when I'm getting the brush off. Call me though. I need someone to talk to."

Olivia flipped the phone open and nodded at Doris. When the door closed behind the Mayor, she sighed and hit the numbers for home.

"Hey." Olivia smiled as she heard the cooing and laughter of their daughter in the background.

"Hey, what's up?" Natalia questioned with curiosity at the unexpected call from her partner.

"Doris just dropped by."

There was a stretch of silence on the other end. "Oh. And?"

Olivia closed her eyes, and pinched the bridge of her nose, as she spoke with a resigned voice. "She admitted to being in love with Anna."

"Oh." Natalia's tone added the unnecessary ending to the statement of "that's not good."

The older woman ran a hand through her hair and leaned her head back against the tall leather chair. "I don't know what to do now."

"At this exact moment, nothing," Natalia noted, sensing Olivia was not going to get any further work done that morning the more she worried. "Just come home and we'll talk it out, okay?"

Olivia smiled a little, soothed by her partner's calmness. "Okay. What's on the lunch menu at the Spencer-Rivera house today?"

Natalia laughed at something Francesca did before answering her. "Oh, a nice big serving of warm milk with a little rice cereal in it."

"Mmmm, sounds yummy. Save a dish for me."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm sure if you stand close enough to your daughter, she'll let you have a helping as it comes back up." A short pause of amusement. "I've changed shirts three times this morning, and that's with the burp cloth."

Olivia laughed at the mental image. "Ewww! I'll be there in a few. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Natalia put the phone down and wiped at her daughter's chin. Running a hand through her long hair, she felt a tad bit of spit up that had gotten her earlier.

She turned to the giggly little baby. "Oh, you think that's funny, mija? Give me a few more months, and I'll have the last laugh when I get you to eat strained green peas. I think somehow Mommy Olivia slipped in some of her genetic material 'cause you seriously have the Spencer attitude."

~~*~*

The lunch crowd was starting to pick up when Doris walked through the door of Company. She immediately spied a spot at the counter and slid onto a stool. She checked her phone to make sure Anna hadn't called, and then set it on the counter in front of her to make sure she wouldn't miss her, if she did call.

Blake raced out of the back, through the swinging doors, carrying a tray of food for a table in the back. Doris smiled as she peeked over her shoulder at the way the redhead shamelessly flirted for a big tip from the table of businessmen. It didn't surprise her either that when Blake turned to walk away that there were four sets of male eyes on Blake's ass. Not that she could really blame them. Blake was a damn beautiful woman and anyone with eyes could see that. What the hell Blake sees in Frank Cooper she'd never know.

"You know, Blake, the last time I checked the name of this place wasn't Hooters," Doris said with a smile to keep the sting out of her comment. "Keep up that kind of flirting and poor Frank will have to whip out his badge and gun on those boys." Doris tipped her head back indicating the table behind her as Blake looked up at her.

The redhead busied herself with filling several glasses with ice, not speaking right away, then turned to fill a coffee mug and walked over to Doris, handing it to her. "He's been

pretty busy lately. I doubt he'd notice," Blake spoke distractedly and with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Late nights?" Doris inquired.

She nodded. A small part of her wanted to share what Marina had said about Eleni coming into town because she couldn't help but have a tiny shred of doubt that Frank was entirely clueless about her being here. She shook off her own jealousy and focused instead on the blue eyes intently watching her. "Yeah, well, there's been lots of small crimes happening, and that means lots of paperwork and hunting for evidence, especially with Desilva screwing things up. By the way, weren't you supposed to fix that?"

Doris held up her hand. "I can't talk about employee details, you know that, but I am taking care of it. I've even been headhunting for a new CSI supervisor. I promise I'll take care of it."

The redhead smiled at her friend. "Good. Thank you."

Doris fought the uncharacteristic blush on her face. "No problem."

Blake kindly let it pass, even though she noticed the redness in Doris's cheeks. "Anyway, he has been really grateful to have Anna there though. He says she really knows what she's doing and has an eye for detail."

Doris smirked knowingly. "That she does."

Blake wiped down the counter to hide the blush the innuendo caused. "Going well then, I assume. You two looked awfully cozy at New Year's."

"Valentine's wasn't that bad either." Doris' smile grew bigger as Blake rolled her eyes.

Blake's retort was cut short when she looked up and saw a tall man in a dark suit standing behind Doris. She quirked an eyebrow and nodded to the space over Doris' shoulder, causing the other woman to turn around.

"Mayor Wolfe." The beefy man with crew cut hair stuck out his hand to her.

"Yes?" She shook his hand solidly and gave him a quizzical look. She knew him from somewhere.

"Gerald Sanders." He offered up his name when he realized she was trying to place him.

"We met last year in Chicago at the Republican Party's state convention. I was elected to the Faith and Family Values Committee."

Now she remembered and she had a sickening feeling come over her as she remembered getting lauded for her “Protect the Children” campaign that Emma had been at the center of last year. “Right, I remember.”

“We were very proud of the strong stand you took on family values. Your pro-family campaign was very inspiring to many of us.” He hesitated and dropped his voice. “I hope that will continue as you seek out your next term.”

She held his stare, refusing to be intimidated. It helped that she could feel Blake standing not far away because right now, she felt terribly alone. “And why wouldn’t it?” Doris asked evenly.

The man cleared his throat, giving away his obvious discomfort with having to be blunt. He leaned in a little closer to avoid being heard. “There’s been talk, Madam Mayor. That concerns us.”

She felt the hair standing up on the back of her neck, and she didn’t like it one bit. Fighting to keep her composure, she took a sip of her coffee, buying time, hoping that he didn’t see the slight shake in her hand as she raised the mug. “Well, there should be no concern, Gerald. I support nearly all of the Party’s platform. And as far as family values go, I have a family and I have strong moral values. I’m not a drug addict, murderer, embezzler, or cheat, so I can’t imagine what someone’s dreaming up that’s so immoral and anti-family.” Doris stood tall as she spoke with conviction.

He stared at her with dark eyes, the friendliness of their earlier exchange gone dead in the cold of his eyes. “I think you know, Madam Mayor.”

The door bell dinged as another patron entered. They both looked back to see Anna standing in the doorway, then spying Doris and smiling warmly at her. Gerald turned back to her with a dirty smirk. “Have a very nice day, Mayor Wolfe.” He spun on his heel and gave a curt nod to Anna as he passed her. “Ma’am.”

Anna watched him go then looked back at Doris. The older woman had sunk shakily back onto her bar stool as the fight left her. She raced to Doris’s side as Blake came around the corner of the bar.

Anna placed a hand on Doris’s arm, as she spoke, “Hey, baby, are you okay? What was that all about?”

Dark eyes looked at Blake for an explanation when Doris didn’t respond. Anna was worried because she could feel Doris physically shaking. “That asshole basically threatened her,” Blake spoke indignantly, protective of her friend.

“What?” Anna straightened up at that as her voice dipped to a growl. She looked as though she wanted to bolt out the door after him.

Doris grabbed her arm. “No, not that kind of threatened. It was a political threat,” Doris quickly added. After a breath, and a drink of her now lukewarm coffee, she continued, “Seems I’m no longer fitting the All-American Family Values image anymore.”

“Oh. God, Doris, I’m sorry. Maybe we need to, you know, lay low or something for a bit,” Anna offered.

The Mayor straightened up with that and looked her in the eye. By God, she wanted a little piece of happiness too. She was tired of bowing down to everyone else. She had been doing it all her life just to get ahead. But no more. “No. No, I won’t live my life in fear. I’m tired of being afraid.”

Blake smiled and gave her a gentle rub on the back. “Good for you.”

Doris glanced to the redhead and smiled softly. “Thanks.”

Anna’s eyes narrowed at the exchange and then she closed them again as she recalled the image of Doris kissing Blake’s hand at the New Year’s party. She took a deep breath and decided to steer things back on course. “So, um, Blake have you seen my boss? You know, your boyfriend, anywhere?”

She shook her head. “He was here first thing to get some coffee, but that was the last time I heard anything.” Blake shrugged, but she hadn’t moved from her spot alongside Doris. “Has he not been in the office?”

“Not yet.”

She raised her shoulders again. “Maybe he’s on a case.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Anna looked back at Doris as Blake reluctantly left them to walk over to a table to refill water. Returning her attention to her girlfriend, Anna asked, “You okay now?”

Blue eyes warmed as Anna inched closer. “I am now.”

“Good.” Anna leaned in and gave Doris a kiss on the cheek. Pulling back just enough to see Doris’ eyes, she whispered, “Missed you last night.”

“There’s always tonight.”

"I like the sound of that." Anna couldn't resist the soft lips only inches from hers. So she leaned in and gave Doris a soft kiss that didn't feel nearly as innocent as it would look to an outsider.

When the phone on her hip buzzed, the younger woman moaned and broke the kiss. Looking at the caller ID, she looked at Doris sadly. "Gotta take this. See you tonight?"

Doris quickly nodded and Anna gave her a quick peck on the lips before flipping the phone open as she slipped out the door.

~~*~*

Jonathan watched as Sarah's long dark curls bounced around her face as she ran from swing to monkey bars to the slides in record time. He kept a careful eye out on the perimeter, wishing he had eyes in the back of his head so he'd have a full 360 view of the area. He was trying desperately to give his little girl as normal of a life as possible when all he really wanted to do was hole her up in a compound away from dangerous men.

He growled into the phone. "Something's not right. I don't like it."

"This isn't your concern," The voice came over the line.

"It is when it involves my daughter. Edmund's out there, somewhere, and every second he's free and alive is another second my daughter's life and every other kid in town's life is in danger. And now you're telling me not to worry when some mysterious woman pops up in town." He ran his hand through his messy pile of dark hair, trying to reign in his fears.

"You have to trust me, Jonathan." The other voice was far too calm for his liking.

"Why? Why should I?"

"Because I know her, okay?" He was frazzled, probably just as stressed out and fearful for the people in Springfield as Jonathan was.

"I need to talk to her."

There was a sigh on the other end and a long pause. "I'll set it up. For tonight. I'll call with details later." A click and the line was dead.

He closed his eyes for a moment and rubbed at his forehead, the tension causing a headache to build. When he opened his eyes, he didn't see Sarah anywhere.

"Sarah!!!" He jumped up from the bench and ran to the middle of the playground. "Sarah!"

She jumped out from a slide behind him. "Boo!"

He spun and grabbed her up in his arms. "Don't do that again, Sarah. What have I told you about hiding?"

She dropped her head and pouted, the dark ringlets blocking her eyes. "You told me not to do it because it scares you."

"That's right, baby. So, please, don't do it, okay?"

"Okay." He hugged her tight before putting her down so they could walk back to the car.

From behind a tall thicket of bushes, a figure watched them leaving before slinking back into the semi-darkness of the surrounding woods.

~~*~*

Anna stood in the dark alley next to the dumpster that smelled like rotting hamburgers and cat urine. Occasionally, she would sneak a peek around the side to make sure Doris was nowhere in sight. Leaning her head back against the cold brick wall, she shook her head. This was getting far too complicated, and it wasn't helping that she was growing more and more attached to Doris.

She flicked her eyes quickly to the left and relaxed when she realized the noise she heard was just some newspaper being blown by the wind. Shoving her free hand in her pocket, she rocked back on the heels of her boots.

"I can't. Not tonight," She sighed into the phone.

"I'm not stupid, you know. I know what you're doing. You're getting too close to Doris Wolfe, and it needs to stop." She clenched her jaw at the paternal tone he took with her. He may have been older than her, even if only by a couple of years, and they may have had a lot of history between them, but she still couldn't help but feel ruffled by his demeanor.

"It's my life." Her tone was nearly pouty, and it seemed to soften him up.

"Look, Anna. I know. I know you just want a normal life with a girlfriend and a community to be a part of, but every day that you stay in her circle, you put her in danger." She swallowed down the fear the words put in her head. "I thought I could do it, too. I thought being closer to those I loved would help, and it almost cost me everything. Don't make that same mistake."

She dropped her head resigned to this not ending well. "I just want to end this so I can finally be free of him and the past, so it can all be over."

"Then meet with Jonathan tonight. Seven o'clock behind the ball field. You can't do this alone. He's suspicious. The least you can do is get him on your side."

She nodded her head. "So, what does he know?"

"Nothing. I thought I'd leave that to you." His flat intonation gave away no perspective on the matter.

Anna sighed, feeling more adrift than ever. "Okay."

When she heard the dial tone, she flipped the phone closed and headed back up the alley.

Rounding the corner to head back to Company, she nearly knocked Doris down. She grabbed her by the forearms and caught her before she could fall to the ground.

"Whoa! You okay, baby?"

Doris put a hand to her chest to slow her racing heart. "Yeah, I'm fine." She looked strangely at Anna when she noticed her girlfriend had been hanging out in the alley. "What were you doing down there?"

"Eh," she waved her hand around and quickly changed the subject, "nothing. Look, Doris, I hate to do this, but I just got a work call. There was a series of break-ins this morning over at some warehouses on the other side of town. I'll probably be late for dinner, but I'll be there, okay?"

Doris looked down, clearly disappointed, but she tried hard not to let it show. "Sure, that's fine. If you can't make it at all, just call me."

The shorter woman tilted her head a little and smiled sweetly. "I'll be there. Nothing can keep me from you."

Doris gave her a half-smile. She knew she was being sweet talked, but she couldn't resist Anna if she tried, so she decided to let it go. Work was work, and she knew how it could get in the way of a personal life. Boy, did she ever know that! She was making a conscious effort to not let her insecurity and jealousy get in the way of her relationship with Anna.

She leaned down and gave Anna a soft but lingering kiss. "I'll talk to you later then. Have fun with your investigation."

Anna twirled her finger in the air. “Wheee!”

One last kiss then Anna was pulling away from the curb and headed to the other side of town. Doris watched her drive away then looked back over her shoulder at the entrance to Company. She really didn’t feel like going to the office now, and she had no meetings. Sighing, she went back in. At least she had Blake to talk with.

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Halfway out to the farmhouse, Olivia got a text from Natalia, “SP’s going down for a nap. Be quiet.” With a little pout, she realized she was really sad about that. She wanted to see her daughter, but she also knew that for her and Natalia to really talk, they didn’t need the distraction either.

She gently pushed the door open, then quietly put her purse down and hung up her coat. The house smelled wonderful. It always did these days with Natalia staying at home with Francesca and working on some small projects for Olivia from home. That gave Natalia more time to cook some of those amazing meals that she did so well.

Olivia leaned over the stove and sniffed, then jumped a little as arms circled her waist from behind. She smiled and leaned her head back onto Natalia’s shoulder. Mmmm, now this was a welcome home she could get used to. No wonder men liked to have wives. She turned in Natalia’s arms and enveloped the petite woman into a kiss that pushed her back against the dining room table.

Natalia moaned and reluctantly pushed her away. “As much as I want to continue this, you know your little one will start wailing as soon as it gets good.”

The blonde sighed and admitted to the truth. “Too young for sleep medicines still?”

Her partner patted her chest. “Too young, querida. Sorry.”

“Damn.” Natalia smiled and stepped back from the temptation that was Olivia Spencer to focus on other matters.

“Have a seat. I’ll make you a sandwich.”

Olivia did as she was told and watched with pleasure as Natalia moved around the kitchen. Her girlfriend finished up making the ham sandwich and put it in front of her, then slipped over to the radio, turning it off before sitting back down at the table across from Olivia.

“So, what happened with Doris?”

Olivia sighed as she swallowed her bite of sandwich, then pushed her plate away and pushed up the long sleeves of her shirt, before resting on her elbows and looking at Natalia. "Pretty much what I said on the phone. She came in all happy and excited, rambling about finding her very own Natalia and being in love. She said more, but I kind of tuned it out. I...I just don't know what to do."

Natalia reached across the table and took her hand. "Maybe there's nothing for you to do."

Olivia pulled her hand away in frustration. "You still can't just believe this is some bizarre coincidence. That Anna, whose father was the head of the Winslow family's security detail and had one of his goons pay me off to stay quiet about the rape, just magically appears in Springfield after all these years and after Edmund Winslow has shown up here after many years to raise all kinds of hell here, and it's all just coincidence."

"It's possible, Olivia. Now, in my heart, I really don't think it is but there's a lot at risk here, baby. If you're wrong, it'll cause a big mess between you and Doris. If you're right, then that's an even scarier thought because you could put yourself and our family in the middle of a dangerous situation by knowing too much." Natalia tried to reason with her again. She thought they had talked some of this out on the trip back, but it still seemed to be eating at Olivia.

Olivia threw her hands up in frustration and could not believe she was hearing this. She stood up and paced the short distance in the kitchen. "You really believe I should ignore the situation?" Olivia asked incredulously.

Natalia pushed her long hair back and stood too. "Until we know for sure, anything's possible. And we've talked about this, Olivia. What if you're wrong? What if it is just coincidence? You could destroy Doris, her relationship with Anna, and the friendship the two of you have. She'll never forgive you for doing this."

The blonde sagged with the weight of it and ran a hand over her hair. Turning she walked into the living room with Natalia following. "I know. Either way, it's not going to end well."



Natalia walked around her to stand in front of Olivia. She watched the patented Spencer move of Olivia shoving her hands in the pocket of her jeans and rolling her head back in frustration. “All I know, Natalia, is that if she has something to do with Edmund and if she’s working for him, no one’s safe, not Doris, not you...me...our kids. The man’s unhinged and so is anyone who followed him. I won’t allow anyone to hurt my family, or my friends... ever.”

Stepping closer, Natalia took Olivia’s hands from her pockets and held them in her own in front of her like she’d done many times before in comforting a frantic Olivia. “No one’s going to hurt us, Olivia, and you have to promise me that you won’t do anything crazy. Please.”

Olivia quirked her mouth to the side a little. “I moved the gun. Don’t worry.”

The brunette smiled at her. “I know you did, and I know where you hid it.”

“You do, huh?” She smiled a little, some of the sadness of the situation dissipating, as her voice took on a sultry tone.

“I do. I know everything about you,” Natalia flirted back, the register of her voice dipping lower than usual.

“Scary.” She wrapped her arms around Natalia and sighed. Olivia’s phone rang and she reached down to pull it from her pocket. “Doris.” She dropped it back in her pocket and let it go to voicemail. She couldn’t deal with it right now.

“So what should I do, oh wise one?” Olivia asked as she pulled back enough to look Natalia in the eyes.

Natalia chuckled as she pulled Olivia back into the comforting hug and let her fingers trace along Olivia’s spine. The younger woman enjoyed the soft groan it elicited from her partner. “I can’t tell you that, baby. You’ll know what to do when the time comes.”

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The honk behind Olivia startled her. She was headed back to the office after lunch at home and took a road she normally never used. She caught all the stop lights and the further she drove, the more lost in her thoughts she became. The fire she had felt while talking to Natalia about Anna had toned down to a dull simmer and in that sense she felt better, calmer, but she wasn’t any closer to an answer to her dilemma than she had been before going home. Much to her chagrin, Natalia had left the decision in her court. Usually, when it came to moral and ethical issues, Natalia was her touchstone. But now...

Natalia was big on signs. What was her sign?

The horn behind her blared again, and she glared up and over her shoulder at the huge black truck behind her revving its engine. Coming back around, her eye caught the familiar white crest with the red cross. St. Joseph’s Episcopal Church. And, there was an open parking space out front. How convenient!

She decided not to think about it too hard. Instead, she pulled into the spot and cut off the engine. Taking a deep breath, she got out of the car and walked up the steps.

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ACT 2

A bitter cold wind cut through Anna’s leather jacket as a brilliant white moon lit her path from the parking lot to the stands behind the baseball diamond. Normally, she would appreciate the dark more so she could watch and observe unseen. But tonight, when she met Jonathan for the first time, she wanted to see his face and really get a good look at his eyes. But, more so, she needed him to see her and to understand. She couldn’t have him walking away with any doubts.

It was far too important to Anna, and the stakes were way too high to leave loose ends. She had come here for Olivia and Emma, but then she found Doris. It wasn’t something she expected. The intent had been to get into Olivia’s circle, that’s true, but Anna hadn’t expected someone like Doris.

She didn't know how all of this was going to get resolved, but it couldn't go on much longer. There were eyes everywhere, and she wasn't sure who to trust anymore. She had been guaranteed that she could trust Jonathan, and it was only because of those many years of trust between her and her boss that she dared to show up tonight.

She rounded the corner, silently slipping up on the dark-haired man on the bench, just like she had been taught many years ago.

"Jonathan?" He jumped in his seat and turned to her.

"Anna?" He stood and faced her.

She reached out her hand to shake his. "Actually, it's Xing Lung Li, but now it's just Anna." She gestured at the wooden bench next to them. "Sit, we have a lot to talk about."

He warily moved back down to the spot he had been in before but turned a little to face her. He needed to see her eyes so he could know for sure. They both pulled their coats tighter around them as a frigid wind ripped down from the trees and across the open field.

Jonathan couldn't take the silence and rushed his question. It was the one thing he had to know the answer to most of all. "What are you doing here?"

She looked at him with conviction, willing him to believe her. "Protecting you...protecting all of you."

Jonathan's shoulder-length dark hair obscured his face slightly as he spoke incredulously, "It's hard to believe. Edmund went crazy. Kidnapping kids, threatening people...then you suddenly pop up and what do I find out about you...you were part of Edmund's thugs."

She shook her head vehemently. "No, not me. That was my father. It was never me and don't you ever confuse me with my father." He saw it, a fire that flashed in her dark eyes, an anger that hadn't died. He swallowed at the shiver it sent down his spine.

"Tell me about it."

Anna took a deep breath, and looking out over the field she set her mind to tell this story. It was one she hadn't delved into in nearly 27 years. "Guess I'll start from the beginning then."

Jonathan shrugged. "It's as good a place as any. I'm not leaving until I know everything anyway."

“Fine. My father was head of the Royal Guard for the Winslow family on San Cristobel. I grew up living in a small cottage with my father on the far end of the grounds. All I knew, my whole world, was the royal family and the palace. My father even made me work the parties and do odd jobs around there. The only time I was free from the shadow of the palace and that world was at school.” She stood and started pacing in front of the chain link fence separating the field from the bench they were sitting on.

“What about your mother?”

She leaned back against the fence. “She died when I was four. Like I said, all I knew of the world existed in the walls of that palace.”

“Go on.”

“Anyway, as I grew up, I saw a lot of bad things happen around there. The Winslows were virtually untouchable. They had these lavish balls and parties...really wild affairs. When I was about 18, they threw this ball, at one of the ambassador’s homes, and you’d think everyone on San Cristobel was there. There wasn’t a spot to stand where you didn’t bump into someone. Dignitaries and ambassadors and their families were all flown in for it.” A small smile ghosted across her face then quickly disappeared.

“Everything changed that night.” She stopped and closed her eyes. Jonathan was transfixed. A part of him wanted to tell her to stop, that he didn’t need to know anymore, but he couldn’t seem to form the words. Instead, he waited, hanging on every word as she continued and feeling every bit of heartache that emanated from her.

It was like a fantasyland. Everything was gold and silver, shining and brilliant. The light clink of glasses rose as toasts carried the laughter around the cavernous hall. The young girl shifted and adjusted the vest of her tuxedo as she balanced the tray of hors d’oeuvres in her other hand. She had been helping at these events for nearly ten years and every year they seemed to get wilder and more extravagant.

The middle of the room was a dance floor and to one end was a large stage with a band. Young couples danced the night away while their parents drank and shook hands with other elite families. It was a political feast – the place to see and be seen and make lofty promises that were never intended to be fulfilled.

Then she saw her. Shoulder length dark hair and eyes that shimmered like emeralds reflecting the sun. She had first seen the young girl at school and then later as an apprentice to the palace chef. If she was real honest, she would admit that she admired the beautiful girl from afar. They had mutual friends, but they never really talked to each other. Tonight though, she couldn’t take her eyes off of Olivia Spencer.

“You liked her.”

She smiled sadly at Jonathan. “Everyone liked her. She was absolutely stunning that night, but then again, she always was, even if she didn’t know it. But she was way out of her league that night. She was too young to be there and you could tell by the way she looked nervously around the room. I watched her the whole night.”

Jonathan felt his bottom lip tremble in empathy as a lone tear slid silently down Anna’s cheek. “You were in love with her.” There was no question in the whispered words, merely a statement of fact. Then it occurred to him. “You’re not here for that, to cause problems for her and Natalia.”

She wiped at the tears on her face, roughly. “No...no, that was a long time ago. I still care about her, yes, but not like that. This is bigger than that.”

“Okay.”

She wasn’t the only one who had noticed the beautiful young girl. A handsome young man, a few years older than Olivia, walked up to her and offered her a drink. She felt a stab of jealousy rush through her as Olivia smiled up at him. Jeffrey was his name, the ambassador’s son. She had remembered him from other parties where he never seemed to go without a young woman on his arm, but tonight he was alone. It didn’t seem like that was going to last for long.

When Olivia had finished her drink, he escorted her out to the dance floor. He twirled her around and she laughed, thoroughly enjoying his attention and the admiring looks of the crowd around them. She was like Cinderella at the ball with her gossamer gown swinging around her long legs and swept away by her handsome prince.

She couldn’t turn away from the sight as much as it hurt her to watch. They did make a good-looking couple and Olivia seemed to become more comfortable and in her element as time went on. For several hours, she walked around the room, blindly carrying the tray of food, never letting her eyes leave Olivia for long. She lost track of how many drinks the young woman had been offered, but it seemed her impromptu escort had been matching her in kind.

The party was at its pinnacle with raucous laughter and drunken arguments breaking out. She saw on the last dance around the floor how Olivia had stumbled into Jeffrey’s arms, and she braced herself against his chest to keep from falling down. He whispered something in her ear, and she nodded her head. They left the room around a back corner and up a secluded stairwell. Fascination prodded her along, and she followed them.

Two flights up, she exited onto a long hallway and saw them disappear into a room. Stepping closer, she heard a distinctive female laugh as the door closed behind them and then silence. She moved closer to the door and could only hear muffled words. She wasn’t sure how long she

stood there, but eventually, footsteps warned her to move so she ducked back to her previous hiding place. Jeffrey stumbled out of the room, trying unsuccessfully to button his shirt back. The door closed behind him, and she waited until he disappeared around a curve in the stairwell, bumping drunkenly into the wall as he went, before she walked to the door of the room.

She wasn't sure why, but something compelled her to push it open. The room was dark and chilly so she couldn't see anything until she was directly over the bed. She gasped at the sight. The beautiful young woman was passed out cold, her makeup smudged and hair a tangled mess. The bodice of her flimsy dress was ripped to the waist, exposing her breasts to the cold air. The bottom half of her dress was similarly ripped up the thigh and what she saw made her recoil in disgust. Blood and lots of it, all over her thighs.

"Oh my God." She felt for a pulse and was relieved to feel it beating strong. Looking around the room, she found a blanket and covered Olivia with it. She brushed the dark hair out of the startling green eyes that briefly opened at the gentle touch before rolling back in her head as she passed out. She angrily brushed her tears away. "I'm going to get help. It's going to be okay."

She raced down the stairs and out the front door. Her father always worked front detail of security so she found him at the entrance barking orders into a walkie-talkie.

She waited impatiently but respectfully as he finished admonishing one of his guards for being lax. He turned to her. "Shouldn't you be inside serving the guests?"

"I need your help, Father. Someone's hurt upstairs." This got his attention. The Winslows couldn't afford bad publicity or a lawsuit, so he instructed one of his captains to hold down the fort while he checked it out. Following in their wake was Ditkin.

"Does he have to come along?"

Her father looked at her sternly. "You know everywhere I go, he goes." While her father was the head of security for the family, Ditkin was the muscle. Nobody got past Ditkin that her father didn't approve.

Once up the stairs, she pushed the door open and her father walked over to the bed. He lifted the blanket and looked her over, but didn't touch her. He turned to Ditkin. "Clean her up and make sure she gets home."

Ditkin nodded, lifted Olivia from the bed, and carried her from the room. She watched them leave and turned back to her father. He looked down at her emotionless. "Thank you for letting me know. I'll take care of it."

She stared at him in shock. "That's it? Don't you even want to know who did this?"

"No." He turned from her and headed to the stairwell.

Before he could take one step down, she ran up to him and grabbed his arm. "It's not right! You need to do something. She's hurt. Someone raped her!" When he looked at her in stony silence, then glanced down at her hand on his arm, she flinched back. How could this be her father? How could he turn away from this, from his own daughter's pleas?

"You don't know that. You never said it. I never heard it, and she was never here. Got it?" He adjusted his jacket. "Now get back to work."

"You can't get away with this. I won't let you." The look in his eyes chilled her. He was no longer looking at his own child, but someone who was in the way, who was going to cause trouble. He shook his head in a rare show of sadness and left. When he took the turn down the stairwell, she slumped back against the cold stone and slid to the floor. Tears of anger, fear, and frustration welling up in her.

Jonathan stared up at Anna, both of them crying. "Dear God. I had no idea. That son of a bitch! I'll kill Jeffrey." He jumped from the bench, and she grabbed his arm forcefully and pushed him back down.

"No. You don't know everything. There's a lot more to the story."

Reluctantly, he sat silently and waited. She took up her seat again and turned to him. "I had gone back down to find Jeffrey. Do something, I don't know what. I was freaked out and beside myself, but I couldn't find him anywhere and the party was winding down. For a few days, I thought it was all over. I didn't see Olivia at school or at the palace, and thought maybe something worse had happened to her or she just wasn't coming back. I didn't know what to do. Then one day, she showed up at the front gate screaming to be let in, to find the man who had raped her. Ditkin shoved a wad of money in her hand and forcefully removed her from the grounds. I never saw her after that, not even at school."

"That was the end of it?"

"Oh no, far from it. See, I have this problem where I can't keep my mouth shut. I always have to get to the truth, so I started asking questions. My father wasn't too happy with that and neither was Ditkin. I got a few bumps, bruises, and even a broken wrist for my troubles." She shook her head at the memory.

"Jesus! How could a father do that to his own daughter?"

“My father is a disgrace and he has no honor. He was a coward who sold his soul to the Winslows for power and money.” She stood again, agitated by the memory of her father. She paced and he watched as she chewed at a fingernail.

“Then how did you come to work for Jeffrey? I thought after what he did to Olivia that you’d want to take him down, not help him.”

She nodded her head. “I wondered when you’d get to that. Apparently, Jeffrey had been going through his own emotional torment in the days that followed. There was a dinner at the palace and his family had come to visit. This was probably a month or so after that ball. I followed him, waited until he was alone, and I confronted him.”

Jonathan lifted an eyebrow at the pause and waited. “He broke down, Jonathan. He bawled like a baby in my arms. It seems that after he sobered up from that night that he began to remember the events and remembering brought on the nightmares. I told him about what had been happening afterwards, how my father was covering it up and his goons were threatening me to stay quiet. He informed me that this wasn’t the first or last time that would happen. Jeffrey had tried to find out who this girl was that he had hurt to make amends somehow, but all he ever got from anyone, my father and his goons included, was that she had been ‘taken care of.’ It seems this had happened to many girls at many of the parties in the past. I just didn’t know about them.”

He ran his hands through his hair, taking it all in. She watched him for a moment, letting him absorb the information. “Jeffrey saved my life. I wasn’t going to let it go. I wanted Olivia, and even now Jeffrey, to get justice so I kept pushing, even went to Richard and Edmund, but the threats became more sinister. For some strange reason, I felt like Jeffrey was the only person I could trust, and I was right. He admitted everything to his father, the ambassador, and told him about the threats against me. They helped me escape and start over in the States, but only if I never spoke of what happened there. I took a new name and decided to join the police force. With a new name and a clean slate, it was easy to do, but I swore that I’d do everything in my power to take down everything associated with that time in my life. That includes Edmund and even my father. Having him go all loco on us and threatening everyone, just makes the deed easier. When Jeffrey called me to come here and protect these people, I didn’t hesitate. It’s the least I could do.”

He shook his head and stood too. “Wow! That’s a helluva tale. Olivia knows nothing about this?”

“No, no one does. Just me, Jeffrey, Edmund, and now you.”

“And your father?”

“He’s out there...somewhere. I’ve been trailing Edmund all over the world, helping Jeffrey out any chance I get. Edmund though always comes back here.”

“And he’s back here now?” Jonathan leaned against the fence, facing her, crossing his arms to ward off the wind.

“Yep. I haven’t seen him, but he’s leaving his mark.”

He looked at her with confusion. “His mark?”

She smiled. “He can’t seem to not cause trouble or chaos. Everywhere he lands, trouble follows. Starts with small crimes – vandalism, arson, robberies – but eventually, that’s not enough for him. He’ll have to do something big and soon.”

“Like trying to kidnap someone’s child.”

She pursed her lips. “Or worse.”

He threw up his hands. “Wonderful, so what do we do now? Just wait?”

“Pretty much. He’ll show himself. We just have to be vigilant and be ready when he does.”

He nodded his head in understanding and looked down. “Look, I...um, I just wanted to say I’m sorry. For being suspicious and all.”

She looked him in the eye. “Don’t. Don’t ever apologize for protecting your family and friends. Ever. If it was me, I would have done the same thing.” Then she winced, realizing that she wasn’t heeding her own advice about Doris.

He caught the expression. “Maybe you should tell her.”

“Tell who?”

He just cocked his head at her and gave her one of his cute smiles. “Don’t try to fool me. I’ve been watching. I know you’re dating the Mayor.”

Anna groaned and buried her face in her hands. “I can’t take that risk.”

“Anna, she could find out from someone else, find out after the fact, or hell, even get caught in the crossfire because she doesn’t know what the hell is going on in her own town.”

“Either way, I’m screwed.”

“But wouldn’t you rather be the one to tell her?” He didn’t wait for her answer. “Look, I better get back to Sarah. I’m sure Reva’s had her fill of kids for the night. And I hear you have a dinner date to get to. Just think about doing it, okay? And thanks...for everything.”

All she could do was nod her head and watch him go. She pulled her phone from her pocket and noticed she had three voicemails from Doris. Listening to the last one, she sighed. Doris was tired and going to bed. She’d talk to her in the morning.

“Shit! This is getting complicated.”

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Dinner time was well underway as Emma stood next to Natalia on a stool and stirred a pot of spaghetti while Olivia danced gently in the kitchen with Francesca. The music tapped out a happy beat making Natalia shimmy her hips. She looked over to catch the appreciative stare of her lover and winked when green eyes rolled at being caught in the act.

The brunette announced that the sauce was ready and so was the garlic bread, so everyone sat down. Olivia carefully put the little one in her high chair and made a face at the mashed carrots. She slipped some broken up pieces of noodle in front of the baby and smiled happily when she gobbled them up. The piercing cry of being denied further noodles though was not acceptable so the blonde found a small bowl and cut up a handful of plain noodles. Natalia and Emma simply watched the exchange and glanced at each other periodically, sharing a knowing smirk. No sooner had Olivia sat down then she got a face full of noodles and a giggle for her efforts. The other two couldn’t stop from laughing and Olivia good-naturedly gave them a moment to revel in it.

“Very funny.” She picked the last bit of noodle out of her hair.

“Just be glad it wasn’t sauce.” Natalia smiled at her across the table.

“Mmm, lesson learned. So, Emma, are you going to model the flower girl dress you got for us later?”

Emma’s face lit up as she described the pretty pink dress to her mothers, and related as many details as she could remember. She had no idea so much went into a wedding. Natalia’s wedding that didn’t happen with Frank was so quick she barely had any time to pay attention to what was happening. All she remembered was her Mommies being sad. Weddings were supposed to be fun, not sad, so she knew something was wrong.

Natalia smiled at the animated little girl. She loved to play dress up and be in the middle of everything. She thought about Olivia’s tale of the ball. How she had wanted to grow up

too fast and had been enthralled by the pomp and circumstance of the night, so excited to dress up and pretend she was someone else until...a sickening wave of anger rushed through Natalia as her adrenaline kicked in at the thought of Olivia being hurt. She looked at Emma smiling and oblivious to the dangers of the world, so intent on going out on her own without fear or care. A flash of white hot fear hit Natalia, and she looked down to see the fork in her hand was slightly bent from her grip.

Seeing that Emma was coming to the end of her thorough description of the upcoming wedding, she forced herself to focus and took several slow, steadying breaths.

"When is the wedding again?" Olivia looked at Natalia for the information. She was always better at keeping up with their schedules anyway. Then noticed the bent fork in her hand, and she fought the urge to rush to Natalia in worry for fear of scaring Emma. She touched fingers to the back of Natalia's hand. "Baby?"

Dark eyes seemed to come back to the present at the touch. Then there was a soft but haunted smile. "I'm sorry, I zoned out for a bit. What did you say?"

The blonde decided they'd get to this conversation later. For right now, she chose to focus on the present. "When is Phillip and Beth's wedding?"

"Oh! A week from today, I think."

"Wow, that's soon!" Emma bounced in her seat. "I'm so excited."

Natalia smiled genuinely, dimples on full display. "I can see!"

A few minutes passed as they quietly ate dinner with Francesca receiving regular assistance from one of her mommies.

"So, when are you two getting married?" Emma looked innocently between her Mommies; Olivia struggled not to choke while the other tried not to laugh at seeing the great Olivia Spencer one-upped by her own daughter.

Natalia took pity on her lover who was still coughing. "Baby, why would you think we're getting married?"

"Duh, I saw the rings. Wait! You two better not have gotten married while you were away!" Emma pouted.

Olivia finally got herself together and turned to her daughter. "No, Bean, we didn't get married yet."

“Good, because I really, really, really want to be a flower girl in your wedding.”

Natalia’s heart swelled with love at Emma’s declaration. She looked over at Olivia who also seemed a bit taken aback.

Emma looked between both of them again before putting on the finishing touches to ensure her involvement in the most important wedding ever. “Promise me that you’ll let me be in the wedding.”

Olivia looked up at Natalia. They hadn’t really talked about anything beyond the commitment they’d already made, but looking up into the tender brown eyes of her lover, Olivia couldn’t stop from saying the words that were already in her heart, even if her head wanted to declare mutiny. “Of course you can be in the wedding, baby.”

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Olivia smiled as she quietly pulled the door closed to the nursery. Francesca had a big dinner and was now full and very sleepy. She was out in a matter of minutes once Olivia started rocking her. Standing at the top of the stairs, listening to Emma and Natalia giggle as they washed dishes, made her borrowed heart dance happily.

Making her way into the kitchen, she lined up next to her other two favorite girls to put the dishes Emma had dried away in the cupboard. When the last dish was done, Natalia dried off her hands and waited for Emma to finish.

“Okay, baby, we need to make some cookies for your St. Patrick’s Day party at school tomorrow. Can you crawl down under the cabinets and get three of the big cookie sheets out?”

Emma excitedly jumped down and moved her stool to get under the cabinets. The two grown-ups laughed at seeing their daughter move so fast. An hour later, all three were cleaning up and wiping off spots of flour on each other’s faces when the oven buzzed with the first round of cookies finished. Natalia carefully placed the cookie sheet on the table as Emma looked on hungrily.

“You did a perfect job with the green sprinkles, Emma.” She smiled at how surprisingly controlled Emma was being. She knew she wanted the first taste of the cookies. “Since you did such a good job and it is past your bedtime, I guess you can have one cookie...just one though!”

Emma snagged the one she had been eyeing since they came out of the oven. It wasn’t too brown around the edges so it wouldn’t be too crunchy. She liked the soft ones best. She moaned in pure childlike abandon at the first bite.

Natalia looked at a smiling Olivia, who like her daughter had her eyes on a particular cookie. "Oh, go ahead, you. I know you can't stand it."

The brunette turned to open the oven door to check the progress of the next sheet of cookies before turning back with the platter she had out for the set Emma would take to school. Olivia watched her work while she savored her cookie. Usually, she'd sit down and share a cookie with them before doing anything else. Then she remembered how before the trip, she made chocolate cupcakes for Emma to take to Phillip's, but she didn't eat any herself.

"Aren't you going to have one?" Olivia caught her partner's eye and gestured at the plate.

"Maybe later." Natalia shrugged.

Olivia stopped chewing her piece of cookie and swallowed. "Okay, what's up?"

Emma looked between her mommies hoping nothing bad was wrong. Natalia caught the worried look of the little girl and quickly reassured both of them. "It's nothing. I'm...I'm observing Lent, okay?"

Natalia hesitated to discuss religion with Olivia. Not because she thought Olivia would make fun of it. Fortunately, they were well past that issue. She just didn't want Olivia to feel like she was imposing her beliefs on their family.

"Why would you observe the stuff that comes out of the dryer? That's silly! It has nothing to do with cookies anyway," Emma declared.

The younger woman sat down at the table with Emma and Olivia. "Lent not lint, baby. It's spelled with an E." She looked at Olivia seeking permission with her eyes to discuss it with Emma. She found the beautiful woman smiling gently at her. "See, honey, there's a certain time frame, right before Easter, where Catholics, and even other Christians, observe the sacrifice that Jesus made for us by giving up something we like or enjoy."

"Why? Seems kind of silly to not do something you like. I'd think Jesus would want us to have fun."

Natalia smiled at Olivia who was barely holding back her smirk at her fast-thinking and inquisitive child. "Let me guess, you were exactly like this as a kid."

Olivia simply shrugged. Natalia turned back to the other Spencer woman. "He does want us to have fun, but He also wants us to understand the importance of His own sacrifice of dying for us. Giving up sweets like I'm doing is very insignificant in comparison, but it does

remind me of what He did for me. He loved us so much that He gave up His life. I guess the least I can do is give up a cookie.”

“But you ate tons of sweets on the island.” Olivia wondered.

“I’m a lot of things, honey. Stupid is not one of them. I wasn’t about to pass up Massimo’s cooking!” Natalia stood and took out the next batch of cookies when the oven went off.

“Touché!” She thought for a moment and then stood, walking over to the garbage can and dropping her cookie in it. Natalia and Emma watched her curiously but before they could ask, she answered them. “I’m going to observe Lent too. No more cookies for me. I haven’t done this in years so why not?”

Emma bounced in her chair. “I’ll do it too. Well...as long as I can have a cookie at school tomorrow. Then I’ll quit. It’s only until Easter, right?”

“Right!” Natalia laughed.

“I can do it!” Emma stated convincingly.

Natalia raised her hands, smiling. “Great! We’ll all do it, as a family.”

She shared a look with Olivia. The older woman never ceased to amaze her. Just when she thought she had her figured out, there was a new layer to her complexity. She wasn’t sure what brought on her openness to observing this religious tradition, but she’d take it.

Olivia saw her daughter yawning out of the corner of her eye and snagged the opportunity. “Okay, Jellybean, it’s time to clean you up and get you ready for bed.”

“Awwww!” Emma whined.

“Eh, don’t ‘aw’ me...go.”

“Fine!” Emma ran over to Natalia, wrapping her arms around her neck. “Love you. Night.”

Natalia smiled, giving her tight hug back and kissing her head. “Love you too, baby. Night.”

~~*~*

Once settled in bed, Olivia found several books, including the story of Peter Rabbit, to read to Emma. When Olivia finished the first book, Emma rolled over and looked at her.

“Mommy?”

“Yeah, baby?” The look on Emma’s face told her whatever was on her mind was important so she put the other books aside and turned to face her, brushing her fingers through her soft brown hair.

The little girl bit her lip. She hoped what she asked wouldn’t make her Mommy mad. Her Daddy had said it wouldn’t, and she thought he should know better than anybody what would make Mommy mad. After all, he had done it enough to her!

“It’s okay, Emma. You can ask me anything.” Olivia encouraged her daughter.

Emma took a deep breath and decided to just say it. “I want to call Natalia ‘Ma’ like Rafe does. Unless it’s gonna make you mad, then I won’t but I’d like to.”

The comment took Olivia by surprise, but when it sunk in what Emma was really asking, that she really thought of Natalia as her mom and wanted to make it real, she felt tears sting her eyes. It took a moment for her to swallow around the lump in her throat before she could answer.

“Of course you can, baby. I think Natalia would love that. I know I do, but what brought this on?”

The little girl was quiet for a long moment in her arms and then Olivia heard a snuffle. “I just want her to know how much I love her.”

Olivia pulled Emma closer and kissed her head. “Oh, sweetie, she knows. Believe me, she loves you so much. She couldn’t wait to get home to see you after the trip. We both couldn’t. We missed you so much.”

“Even though you were having grown-up fun?”

Olivia chuckled. “Yes, even then. Now you need to get some rest.” She kissed her head again as she soaked up the scent of childhood and innocence for a moment. “I love you, Bean.”

“Love you too, Mommy.” Emma’s eyes were already drifting shut as Olivia headed toward the door, then they flew open. “Oh no! I forgot to model the dress for Daddy’s wedding for you.”

“How about tomorrow?”

Emma snuggled back down into her bed, pulling her covers back up to her chin. “Okay. Night.”

“Night, baby.”

Olivia leaned her head back against the door of Emma's bedroom, marveling at how much their lives and family were changing. "She wants to call her Ma," she muttered and smiled.

The object of her reverie flipped off the kitchen light, casting the living room and stairway in moonlit shadows. Even though she couldn't see the clock, she knew it couldn't be that late. She walked over and met her lover at the top of the stairs. "Tired?"

Natalia shook her head. "Nope." She then wrapped her arms around Olivia's shoulders and pulled her into a kiss that unsteadied both of them, making them fall back into the wall behind Olivia.

Olivia muffled a grunt at the contact, pinned between a hard wall and a persistent Latina. "Mmm, baby, what's up?"

Natalia pulled away with a gasp. "Me." She then latched onto the taller woman's neck, nipping down to the hollow of her shoulder before burning a fresh trail up to her ear.

"Whoa!" Olivia's knees gave out as the brunette sucked on the sensitive spot below her ear. She reached frantically for the doorknob to their bedroom. They stumbled back into the room as the door gave way, but it wasn't enough to break the hold Natalia had on her. When the door was closed, she felt her back meet wood. "Dear Lord, 'Talia!"

Natalia pulled back and worked frantically at the buttons on Olivia's shirt. When she couldn't get the buttons through the small holes, she finally just started tugging at the material in every direction until Olivia began pulling it off over her head.

The younger woman gave Olivia room to get the offending material off and worked at her own shirt, lifting it over her head. She crashed back into Olivia's waiting arms and kissed her deeply, tasting the sweetness of their connection. Natalia broke the kiss and looked into Olivia's sex dazed eyes. "Did you mean it?"

Olivia reached towards her, seeking out Natalia's mouth again, then guiding her back to the bed. "Mean what?"

Pants were soon scattered on the floor at the foot of the bed. "What you told Emma about a wedding?"

Olivia paused as Natalia kissed her way down the older woman's body until her tongue dipped into the bellybutton in front of her. The blonde swayed on her feet as Natalia's mouth eased lower. "Uh huh...anything for you, baby. Anything." God help her but she didn't even remember the question Natalia had asked. All she knew was that whatever Natalia wanted, she'd happily give to her a million times over.

~~*~*

ACT 3

The soft, even breathing of her daughter was a balm to Olivia's soul at the moment. Cradling Francesca in her arms, nothing else existed. She ran a finger along the baby's plump cheek, smiling when the little bundle squirmed in her arms at the ticklish gesture. A light creaking sound drew her head up as a sleepy Natalia pushed the door to the nursery open. The younger woman leaned against the wall and rubbed her eyes, letting a small yawn escape her lips. Olivia thought she was as adorable as the one she held in her arms. Every little thing she did seemed to make Olivia fall a little deeper in love with her and with their family.

Padding over quietly, Natalia caressed Olivia's cheek with the back of her hand and leaned over to kiss the top of her head.

"Did she cry out? I didn't hear her." Natalia whispered.

Olivia shook her head. "I couldn't sleep."

The brunette smiled down at the baby as the little one yawned and curled tighter into Olivia. "Your Sweet Pea doesn't seem to be having a problem with that. Come on, put her back to bed. You need your sleep, too."

The older woman sighed deeply but rose anyway to place the baby back in her crib. She gave Francesca a light kiss on the cheek then turned on the seahorse nightlight that played lullabies. She followed Natalia out of the room and back into their bed.

Natalia pulled her close as they got back under the covers, cradling the older woman's head in the crook of her arm. "Tell me about it," Natalia urged.

"I went to church the other day," Olivia ventured. "I didn't mean to, but I just saw it and thought I'd give it a try."

The younger woman had paused the tracing of her fingers through the honeycomb highlights of Olivia's hair. "A try?"

"It always seemed to help you when you had troubles. I thought I'd give it a chance to see what happened." The disappointment was evident in her tone.

"I take it, it didn't help." Natalia resumed her caress of Olivia's hair.

"I don't know if I can say that entirely. I know I need to tell Doris about Anna. It's the right thing to do, but I know I'm going to pay for it. So will Doris. How can God really help when there will be pain either way?"

Natalia knew that question all too well from past experience. "Sometimes praying is not about avoiding pain or consequences, but in finding the strength to endure them. And maybe feel a little less alone in the process."

The brunette could feel her partner snuggle in closer as she sighed with frustration. "Maybe that's part of it. I know the aloneness Doris has felt and will feel, and I hate to put her back in that place." Olivia wrapped her arm tighter around Natalia's waist. "This is good, you know. What we have. Everyone should have it. Who knew having friends would be so damn complicated?"

Natalia chuckled and kissed the top of Olivia's head. "It's just because you care about Doris and her happiness that makes it complicated."

Olivia looked up at Natalia, feeling that rightness of them every time she looked into her partner's dark eyes. "It's only because of you that I care. The old me would have reveled in Doris' situation, even rubbed it in. You changed me." She breathed the last part out on a whisper.

Natalia leaned down and gently kissed her on the lips. "Everything's going to work out the way it's supposed to. Just have a little faith."

The blonde stretched up and extended the kiss, needing the connection with the younger woman. "I don't need faith. I have you."

~~*~*

Doris bumped open the door to her office, her purse slipping from her arm and the contents scattering on the floor in front of her desk. She mumbled a curse and dropped her briefcase to the floor before bending over to pick up the items to return to her purse.

When she rose, her blue eyes caught the tall shimmering crystal vase in the corner. "Where the hell...?"

She stuck her head back out the door into the lobby, looking at her assistant. "Russell, how did these flowers get into my office?"

"What flowers?" He stood and rushed into her office. He stopped dead in his tracks at the imposing bouquet of pink and white calla lilies. "Wow."

"I take it you didn't know about this." He wilted a little under her stern gaze. Something was telling him that he should have known how the flowers got there. She waved him away with her hand. "Never mind."

He happily scurried out of her office, only smiling a little after he pulled the door closed. She turned back to the bouquet with suspicion and walked over to it. A small smirk broke out before she quickly tucked it away and pulled the card off that was tied to one of the lilies.

"I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you over breakfast? – A."

She shook her head and smiled. She propped the card up on her desk so she could look at it then pulled her phone from her purse and sent Anna a text.

"You're on. Tomorrow morning. – D"

Tapping the phone against her chin, she eventually tried one more time to reach Olivia. She had tried several times to get her to come out for drinks over the last couple of days, but either she got voicemail or Keira took a message.

When the line went to voicemail again, she flipped her phone closed and tossed it on her desk. Glaring at the phone for a moment, she picked it up again and sent a message to Olivia.

"WTF, Spencer?! Call me or I'm going through your wife."

~~*~*

The dew was beginning to burn off the grass in the surprisingly warm mid-March morning, causing a dreamy haze to hover over the lawn of the park. Patches of snow still clung to corners behind buildings, but they wouldn't last for much longer as the air hummed with the energy of spring approaching.

Doris had a spring in her step to go along with the shift in the weather as she swung the door open to Company. Immediately, her eyes found Anna seated at one of the small tables to the left. Blake had turned from pouring Anna some coffee and saw Doris in what appeared to be a new light tan skirt suit, her hair pulled back loosely with some loose tendrils falling in her face. The redhead turned back to the table and flipped over the coffee cup, pouring a generous helping of it into the cup.

"Morning, Doris."

“Morning, Blake.” Doris made eye contact before leaning over and giving Anna a quick kiss on the cheek. “Hey.”

The redhead shifted on her feet watching the exchange but trying not to watch too. “Anything I can get you ladies besides coffee?”

They pulled their eyes away from each other for a moment to look at Blake. Doris smiled up at her. “Not yet. We have time.”

Blake shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

When Blake came back out from the back, ketchup bottles now filled and ready for the lunch crowd, she thought enough time had passed for Doris and Anna to decide on what they wanted to order. Looking at the table though, she hesitated. They were evidently in an intense conversation and probably very intimate if their body language was a sign. Their hands were entwined on the table and Doris was playing teasingly with Anna’s fingers. When Doris dropped her eyes and blushed, she had to look away. A similar image of Doris flashed in front of Blake’s eyes and she had to immediately rid herself of the thought. She decided to think of Frank, and when her heart rate went quickly back to normal, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Eventually after checking in at a couple of other tables, she swung by Doris and Anna. “Know what you want yet?”

Anna looked down at her watch. “Actually, I probably need to run.” She looked at Blake. “But get the lady here anything she wants...on me.” Doris had the good grace to blush again at the innuendo, and Blake felt suddenly irritated. “See you tonight?”

“You bet.” She watched as Anna left and turned back to see Blake glaring holes into Anna’s retreating form. “What?”

The redhead jumped. “Nothing.” She tried for nonchalance. “You two need a room though.”

Doris smirked, rubbing it in. “That’s the point of going to her place tonight.”

Blake rolled her eyes. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Doris.”

~~*~*

Anna was checking her messages as she walked to the station. Looking down, she didn’t see Olivia coming down the sidewalk until it was too late. Even at a distance, she could see a flash of something dangerous in the green eyes as she approached. There was

nowhere for Anna to go. To slip down a side street or alley would only be suspicious, so she decided to act confident and give the cursory head nod as they passed.

But as she got within reach of the businesswoman, she felt herself spun around by a hand on her arm. Olivia was well within her personal space but not enough to raise curious looks from those passing. "I told myself I wouldn't do this, that I'd let this play out the way it's supposed to, just have a little faith, you know? But I can't."

The trained professional in Anna felt her hackles rise at being practically accosted in the middle of the street, but she fought to keep her panic under control. "Do what, Olivia?"

"Don't act innocent. I know you, and I know you know me. Let's just cut to the chase, shall we?" Anna shivered a little at the intense look being drilled into her. It would be one of the rare times she'd be grateful to hear Frank's irritating voice as he approached from across the street.

"Morning, ladies! Anna, were you about to head into the station?"

She broke Olivia's stare and looked at him approach. "Yeah, I was on the way."

"Well, we're having some issues down in the evidence lab that I need to check out, but it seems there's been another incident. Could you check it out?" Frank nodded at Olivia in acknowledgement.

Anna was grateful to have an excuse to leave. "Yeah, sure. No problem."

"Oh, and take Remy with you."

"That could be a problem. I think he and Christina have an ultrasound this morning."

He shrugged. "Have him meet you there then. I want two sets of eyes on Desilva and his crew to make sure he gets evidence right this time. I'm really tired of him doing his job half-assed. Speaking of which, where's Doris? I need to talk to her about that."

Anna gestured at Company down the street. "Your favorite place."

"Thanks." He looked at Olivia. "Care to get a cup of coffee? Best in town." Anna took the opportunity at the distraction and hurried down the street before Olivia could corner her again. Her heart was pounding as she rounded the corner to the station. She cursed each step she took up to the front door. Maybe she just needed to tell Doris what was really going on. Certainly, Olivia wouldn't say anything, but then again, that look in her eyes didn't look very forgiving. She cursed again before calling Remy.

~~*~*

Somehow, Olivia had managed to get away from a surprisingly friendly Frank Cooper, and at the moment, she was hiding out in an antique shop on the next block pretending to be very interested in a country-looking quilt. It would have fit in perfect at the farmhouse and for about ten seconds she considered buying it; however, she couldn't picture her, Natalia, and Emma curling up under it to watch movies. The quaint cows, chickens, and horses decorating the cover was just not her style.

She hadn't gone looking for Anna and had determined that if she was meant to talk to the other woman that she'd have her chance without seeking it out. So, when she saw the smaller Asian woman walking down the street this morning, she felt like that bit of faith her and Natalia had talked about was paying off. For whatever reason, they were on the same street at the same time of day without any other interested parties around. A bigger sign couldn't have knocked Olivia over the head than that.

Why she was hanging out at a store across from Company waiting for Doris Wolfe to leave was another matter? What was she going to do when she saw Doris anyway? Obviously, having Frank pop up in time to interrupt her talk with Anna could be seen as a sign too. Maybe she wasn't meant to be the bearer of bad news. Besides, Anna now knew that Olivia had pegged her so maybe she'd come clean to Doris on her own. Then again, maybe Olivia had done something really stupid and put all of them in danger by letting Anna get away without knowing her motives.

"Shit!" Olivia muttered to herself. She dropped the price tag on the quilt that she wasn't even looking at and left the shop. She needed to think about this, and she didn't need to do it there.

She was two blocks down and only a little past Company when Doris fell in step beside her. Olivia jumped a little to see her suddenly appear and stopped walking. "At least now you can't avoid me, Olivia."

She tried to be convincing but it wasn't well-played when she couldn't look her friend in the eye. "I wasn't avoiding you."

"A half a dozen unreturned messages in the past three days would say different."

Olivia started walking again. "That just means you're persistent. Now I know how you get women to go out on dates with you. Did you sing 'Henry the 8th, I am' to them, too?"

Doris was beside her again, keeping pace. "Snark is not going to keep you from having to talk to me."

“But it’s making it a lot more fun.” Olivia was trying to find a way out of the situation but was rapidly finding avenues closed to her.

“You’re coming back to my office, and we’re talking.”

“Says who?”

Doris touched her arm as they stopped at the intersection. “Says the woman who will sing ‘Henry the 8th, I am’ until you give in. I won’t stop. You know that.”

Olivia sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose with two fingers. “I really don’t want to hear that, do I?”

“Not really. I got kicked out of church choir as a kid. Now *that’s* bad! Come on, I’ll have Russell make a fresh pot of coffee.” Olivia followed and wondered briefly if she could quietly slip into the liquor store on the way for something for that coffee. She had a feeling she was going to need it.

~~*~*

Olivia swirled the dark liquid around in her cup before setting it aside on the table and looking up at Doris, who was perched on the edge of her desk. She ran a hand through her blonde strands waiting for the inevitable question from her friend.

“So, what’s wrong?” Doris cut to the chase.

“What makes you think anything’s wrong?”

Doris pushed away from her desk and walked to the window, looking out. “Oh, I don’t know. I’ve been chasing you around with call after call, and I feel distinctly like I’m getting the brush off.” She turned back around. “Not that I’m not used to that to some extent, but usually I’ve slept with the woman first. You, on the other hand, are supposed to be my friend, something pretty rare for me, so I’m just kind of surprised. If something was bothering you, Olivia, I never imagined you’d be the type of person to run from it.”

Olivia looked down at her hands folded in her lap, adjusting the ring on her finger. “I am your friend, Doris. That’s why I haven’t been able to talk to you.”

She noticed Olivia playing with her ring and the possibility finally struck her. “Oh my God. Natalia’s jealous and doesn’t want you hanging around me, especially now that you’re officially spoken for and all.”

That comment made Olivia stand and pace to the other side of the room. She ran her fingertips over her forehead. "No, that's not it. Not even close."

Doris threw her hands in the air. "Then what?"

"This is going to so backfire on me. I know better than to open my mouth. Every time I do, chaos follows. Just look at what happened at Natalia and Frank's wedding." Olivia scoffed at herself.

"And if you hadn't, you'd still be torturing yourself today. So what? What does that have to do with anything, Olivia?" Doris was getting agitated.

Olivia got that look on her face that was stern and made up. It was the look that Olivia had the day she walked out of Doris' office when Natalia had almost kissed her at the hospital. The blonde shook her head and picked up her purse to leave. "No, I can't do this. You need to figure this out for yourself."

She made to slip past Doris, but the other woman grabbed her arm and turned her around. "The hell I will. If it bothers you enough to act this way over it, then it's important enough for me to know...now. Not tomorrow or in some distant future, but now."

Olivia berated herself for even going to Doris' office. It was stupid to give in and be alone with her. She knew this would happen but did it anyway. Sighing, she let her hand move until it took Doris' own. "I don't think Anna is who she says she is. In fact, I think she's lying to you, to all of us, and she's going to end up hurting you."

A long moment passed as Doris digested the words. Disbelieving, she could only utter one word, "What?"

Doris pulled back and turned to walk back to the windows. Olivia watched her for a moment, unsure what to say so she just said it all. "I knew Anna when I lived on San Cristobel. When I saw her at the scene where the graffiti was on the hotel wall, I remember there being something familiar about her, but I couldn't place it. Then when Natalia and I went to San Cristobel, it all came back to me."

With Doris' back turned, she couldn't tell how the other woman was reacting to the news, but when she didn't comment, Olivia went on. "Doris, I don't even think that Anna is her real name. The bad part is that I'm not sure what she's doing here. It feels like more than coincidence because her family was tight with Edmund's family. I don't know if she's spying for him or what, but I think she's up to no good."

Another long stretch of silence passed and it made Olivia nervous. When she couldn't take it anymore, she stepped a little closer, almost close enough to touch the other woman on the shoulder and offer support.

"Doris?" She moved to comfort her friend when the woman spun on her, blue eyes shimmering with tears.

"You couldn't stand it, could you?"

"What?" Olivia was stunned by the coldness in her tone.

"A tigress never changes her stripes, huh? You can't stand for anyone to be happy except you. You have the girl now so the rest of the world can go to hell, right? Oh, and precious Natalia would never tolerate you sleeping with every woman in Springfield so you can't use your old tricks either. So, now you're inventing new ones." Doris crossed her arms and appraised the shocked green eyes she looked into. Eyes that were now bearing their own tears at Doris' harsh words.

"That's not..."

Doris didn't let her finish. "Get out."

Olivia shook her head. "But..."

The other woman stepped into her space, making sure she understood. "Get. Out. Now."

Olivia closed her eyes, tears falling for what she was losing, another mistake in the many she had made in her life. Shaking her head, she looked at Doris sadly. "I'm sorry."

~~*~*

Anna's apartment was unimpressive. It was more like a townhouse; efficiency with a loft for the bed upstairs and a big open floor plan. That was the inside anyway. The outside, as Doris peered up at the golden light flowing from the windows above, left a lot to be desired. On a cop's salary though, she couldn't hold that against Anna. She knew exactly how much the town paid the officers and this was about as good as it got.

She had spent most of the afternoon thinking over what Olivia had said, and while she could understand how Olivia had come to that conclusion, none of it added up with what Doris knew of her girlfriend. Anna was wonderful to her, attentive and affectionate. She was definitely not manipulative. She had never pushed Doris to do anything regarding coming out, and she had appreciated that immensely. Too often, the women Doris had dated were either sneaking around on their husbands or they wanted her to be the next

lesbian poster child. Doris was neither an activist nor a dirty secret. Anna had seen her for exactly who she was and never judged it.

How could she very well judge Anna now? Shouldn't she be returning the favor of trust that Anna had shown her? A flicker of anger and fire danced in Doris' eyes when she was reminded that earlier this afternoon she had almost listened to Olivia, almost let herself be convinced by someone with a winning track record in manipulation that she was merely collateral damage in Anna's devious mystery plan.

She chuckled a little, if for no other reason than to dissipate the anger she felt at Olivia. Right now, she didn't want to feel anger. All she wanted was to wrap herself in Anna's embrace and forget the day. She pulled her light coat tighter around her as she exited the car and walked up the short path to Anna's front door.

After knocking and getting the "just a minute" from Anna, she could have sworn she heard movement to her right behind the garbage cans. She blamed it on some nocturnal animal and danced a little on the balls of her feet, impatiently. Just to her left was the garage. Considering Anna's well-used Volvo was in the driveway, she was surprised to peer through a window and see a large black car taking up most of the room in the garage. There was something vaguely familiar about it, but she didn't have a chance to contemplate it anymore as the front door swung open.

"Hi," Anna smiled and tucked some dark hair behind her ear. "Come in."

"Hey, yourself." Doris kissed the smaller woman slowly and deeply, easing some of the tension of the day, just by being closer. She pulled her into a long hug as the kiss ended, relishing the feel of her.

Anna pulled back and took her hand to lead her into the small living room. "That was a nice greeting. What was that all about?"

Doris shrugged. "Just needed to feel you close."

She pushed Doris down to the couch with a smirk. "I can live with that. Feel free to do it as often as you like." She then straddled her hips and kissed her, letting her tongue tease a soft bottom lip.

A small moan escaped Doris. If this was heaven, she'd be glad to die right here, right now. "Mmmm, keep kissing me that way, and I'll do all your dirty bidding."

"Promise?" Anna sat up from nibbling on Doris' neck and smiled down at her with mischief.

Doris quirked an eyebrow up in wonder. "Exactly what do I have to do?"

Anna settled in her lap with her arms around her neck. "I bought all the ingredients for chicken cattiatore. I love the way you make it."

"Cooking? That's what you had in mind? Hmm, I think you just like to see me in an apron."

Anna smirked. "Uh huh, I like it when you're domestic."

Doris eyed the cleavage teasing her from the dip in Anna's button-down shirt and tried to move the evening's events in a much more pleasant direction. "But I have a much better way of being domestic. Much more fun than cooking."

She leaned in and nipped at the exposed flesh peaking out of Anna's bra. Anna pushed her back. "Oh no, you don't. I'm hungry."

Doris smiled evilly. "So am I."

Anna shook her head and slid off her lap. Doris was close to begging. Cooking, at least in the kitchen, had definitely not been on her agenda tonight, but one look at the crooked smile of her girlfriend and she knew she couldn't refuse her. "Okay, fine. But you're making it up to me later." Doris stood, wrapped her arm around Anna's waist and kissed her deeply, until she felt the smaller woman weaken in her arms. "And you'll do it over." A quick kiss to the lips. "And over." Another kiss. "And over again." One last kiss before Doris turned to the kitchen.

Anna faltered a little on her feet as Doris let her go. Somehow she managed to follow Doris and watch her pull out some pans from the cupboard. She spent the next couple of minutes lost in thought about after dinner activities when her phone rang, and it pulled her out of the moment. She glanced at the number and looked up to see Doris watching her.

"I need to take this." Doris nodded and turned back to the stove, but Anna knew she couldn't talk with Doris in the room. She hated to do it, but she slipped as nonchalantly as possible into the laundry room. She knew it would look odd, but she had nowhere else to disappear to. She didn't look back to see Doris watching her out of the corner of her eye as she chopped tomatoes nor did she notice Doris subtly look at her watch when she came back out of the room.

"Was that work?"

Anna turned the ringer off on her phone and put it back in her pocket. After a long moment passed, she looked up smiling. "Um, yeah. Frank needed a report on that incident out at the warehouse."

Doris glanced at her. “And you had to go in the laundry room for that?”

The other woman inwardly cursed and rubbed a hand along her suddenly tense neck muscles. “I couldn’t hear that well. You were banging pans in here.”

Doris didn’t look at her as she scrunched up her eyebrows thinking about the moment the phone rang. The loudest thing she had done was get a knife out of the drawer. Arms slipped around her from behind and gently took the knife from her hand.

“You know what? I think it’s time to skip dinner and go straight to dessert.” Anna moved her hands up to Doris’ breasts and quickly found her nipples, already straining through the material.

Doris arched into her and moaned. Whatever thoughts had been in her head, whatever concerns she may have had, were instantly gone at Anna’s touch. She really didn’t care anymore and she was sick of denying herself a piece of happiness. Instead, she subconsciously told her inner voice that sounded not surprisingly like Olivia to shut the fuck up and turned in Anna’s arms to claim her in a heated kiss.

She pushed the other woman back to the stairs leading to her loft and ripped at the buttons on her shirt, causing some to give way and others to fly around the room. Anna’s hands were roughly in her hair, tugging at her, moving her head where Anna needed her.

A rough bite on Anna’s shoulder made her hiss in arousal and she growled out, “Fuck!”

Blouses, jeans, and pants were scattered over the staircase as they pushed and pulled their way up each step, never losing bodily contact. When they finally made it upstairs, Anna turned Doris around and pushed her roughly to the bed. Later, they’d take their time and enjoy the slow, luxury of making love, but for now, in this moment, Anna fed both of their animal instincts – to take and be taken. The need and desire to connect overwhelming both of them. Over and over again, she pushed Doris to the edge and held her as she screamed Anna’s name on the descent. Doris wouldn’t see the tears that fell from Anna’s eyes or know the way her heart ached in her chest. Neither would admit it, but something felt different about this time.

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Natalia looked up from the math book in front of Emma when she heard the door open. A tired looking Olivia gave her a forced smile and placed something in a brown paper bag on the kitchen counter. The look in her eyes immediately made Natalia’s smile fall. She ran a hand down Emma’s ponytail and looked down at her. “Go wash up so we can eat.”

Emma ran to her mom and gave her a hug. Olivia closed her eyes and gave into the brief moment of serenity. As with all kids, the moment didn't last long and before she was ready, her daughter was out of her arms and up the stairs. Olivia leaned over the tiny form in the walker on the floor and gave her baby a kiss.

Natalia snuck a peek in the bag on the counter, and Olivia turned in time to catch her. "Don't say anything. After today, just one. Just one."

Worry was evident on Natalia's face, and she wondered what had Olivia stopping at the liquor store on the way home. "What happened today?"

Olivia ran her hands through her hair for what seemed like the millionth time today. "Doris cornered me outside Company this morning and refused to let me out of her sight until I talked to her."

Natalia's mouth was open. "Oh, Olivia. Did you...does she know now?"

"Oh yeah. She knows." She looked at Natalia sadly, quirking her mouth to the side and fighting back a new set of tears. "She didn't believe me though."

Without hesitation, Natalia wrapped Olivia up in a hug and let her have a quick cry before Emma came back. Leaning back, she cupped Olivia's face in her hands. "It was the right thing to do."

Olivia nodded but couldn't keep from being a little sarcastic. "Why does doing the right thing always suck so much?"

They both laughed remembering how much it sucked when they both thought they were doing the right thing in their relationship. Natalia gave her a tender kiss then turned to the cupboard for a glass. She filled it halfway with the amber liquid from the paper bag, took a big sip herself, and then handed it over to a smirking Olivia. She gestured with a waving hand in the air, her voice gravelly from the burn of the alcohol. "To doing the sucky right thing."

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A loud crash jerked Doris out of her sleep. She felt in the bed beside her but didn't feel Anna there. Quickly, she slipped on her shirt and pants and tiptoed barefoot down the stairs. Two steps from the bottom, she heard as much as felt a loud thump outside the back door.

She didn't see Anna anywhere. Not that she could see much in the dark. All she could assume was that it was Anna outside making the noise, but she didn't sound alone either.

Panic rose in her throat and her heart thudded painfully in her chest. Everything was focused like a laser point on the door as she approached.

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Anna spun with the force of the punch and landed hard into the side of the wall. The hooded figure was obviously male and definitely much larger than her. She didn't really stand a chance going at him with fists, but she didn't have her gun with her either. Most people wouldn't think to pick it up just to take out the trash. Then again, most people didn't take the trash out at two in the morning either. But she couldn't sleep so she had to do something.

As she slid to the ground, she searched all around her for anything she could use as a weapon. No pieces of wood or pile of nails. Nothing. Even the garbage can lid was connected to the can itself. It did her no good. All she could hope to do was dodge and weave, but that meant moving which was hard to do when her head was spinning.

She thought she may get a break when he bent down to grab her collar. She hoped he'd pick her up so she could use her legs to fight him off. No such luck. Instead, he pulled her forward and punched her hard in the mouth, snapping her head back hard enough to connect with the wall again.

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Doris jumped when the hard thump came again as soon as she reached for the door knob. She had a quick thought of looking for Anna's gun, but she had no idea where the woman kept it. Besides, she couldn't waste time if Anna was in trouble. As soon as the thought entered her mind, she heard a dull thud and cursing by a male voice. Then there were several more thuds and it registered that someone was probably being kicked.

All she could picture was a bloodied and hurt Anna being kicked by some hoodlum, and it was the last bit of courage she needed to yank at the door and pull it open.

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The loud crash of a door slammed open had been enough to make the dark figure pull back. It was exactly the opportunity Anna had been hoping would present itself. With both legs pulled back to her chest and braced against the cold brick wall, she kicked with as much force as she could muster. The man stumbled back but didn't fall.

A bloody Anna looked at a frantic Doris and screamed at her to get inside, but she stood frozen in place. Anna scrambled to her feet now that she had room to maneuver and barreled head first into the stunned man's abdomen. He grabbed her as they lost their

footing and tumbled to the ground. Not ready to lose ground, Anna kned him in the groin to immobilize him but she missed her target as her knee connected with the outside of his thigh. He rolled away from her reach and took off towards the woods.

He glanced back once he knew he had escaped, a wicked smile was all either she or Doris could see. "This isn't over, Xing Lung. It's only just started."

Anna bent over in pain and gasped for breath. She could hear Doris slowly approach from behind, and she closed her eyes hoping the other woman hadn't heard what he said. Straightening up and dabbing at her bleeding lip, she turned to Doris.

The closer Doris came, the more concerned Anna became. When she finally stepped into the light from the moon, Anna could see the traces of tears down her face.

"She was right." Doris' voice was shaky and broken. Anna could even see her bottom lip quiver as she spoke and it tore at her heart, forcing tears from her own eyes at the pain she brought on Doris.

"Who was right?" It was the wrong question for Anna to ask.

The other woman crossed her arms, protecting what she could that was left of her dignity. "Not that it matters, Anna. Or whatever your name really is. But it was Olivia. Maybe you should tell me the truth for a change so I don't have to be humiliated by hearing it from a friend."

Anna approached her cautiously. "Let's go inside and talk. It's cold out here."

"No. Tell me now." Doris stood resolutely and proudly even though she couldn't stop crying.

Anna sighed, rubbing a hand along the side of her face, wincing as it came in contact with the darkening bruise around her eye. She opted for as much truth as possible without ruining all the work she and Jeffrey had done. "Anna is my real name. I haven't gone by Xing Lung in nearly 27 years. I do know Olivia from San Cristobel. I know what happened to her there, and I'm here to try and right it."

Doris looked at her, feeling suddenly numb inside. "What about Edmund Winslow?"

As much as Anna wanted to divulge everything and make things right with them again, she couldn't discuss Edmund with her. Doris was the mayor, and if she knew about Edmund being around, she'd have their cover blown in a heartbeat. With regret, she deflected. "What about him?"

This was again not the right answer for Doris. She gritted her teeth and stepped into Anna's space, her eyes on fire with anger. "Are you working for him?"

"No. Of course not." Anna wanted to say so much more, but it was all she could offer. She had to content herself with knowing it was the truth. "Please believe me. I'm not here to hurt anyone. I'm just trying to help."

Doris finally closed her eyes and dropped her face in her hands. Anna reached up, wanting to make contact with the woman she loved. Her heart ached with the knowledge of it. She loved Doris and she hurt her. When Anna's fingertips touched Doris' wrist, she jerked them away but didn't break eye contact with Anna.

"I have to go. I can't...I need time to think."

A few minutes later, Anna stood in the same place outside as she heard Doris' car start up and pull away. When the silence became too much, she sank to her knees and let the tears come unhindered.

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ACT 4

Olivia rubbed at her tired eyes. She kept trying to focus on the computer screen in front of her as she scrolled through news feeds out of Chicago. She was paying particular attention to recent mergers and buyouts of properties in the area as well as any hint of people and contacts to know. Natalia had also found a couple of interesting bites that she had forwarded along.

A knock at her door was a grateful reprieve as her eyes blurred over with much needed sleep. Last night had been a long night as she and Natalia talked, among other things, much longer than usual. Unfortunately, neither expected Francesca to decide to wake up about the time they were going to sleep. The baby had taken to randomly sleeping through most of the night, but they never knew when those nights would come or if they'd suddenly end. Olivia had never realized how much she treasured consistency in her life until the babbling bundle of joy decided to snatch it away from her. Somewhere around four in the morning was the last time she looked at her clock and now her body was paying for it.

"Come in." She turned away from the screen and stretched quickly before the person on the other side came in.

“Hey.” Doris stood there looking pretty worn out, too. The dark circles under her eyes giving away her own restless night. After five glasses of scotch last night, she lost track of how much she drank, yet sleep still wouldn’t come. All she got as her reward was a pounding headache. “Can I come in?”

“Hi. Yeah, of course.” Olivia stood and came around the desk. Olivia gestured at the chairs. “Do you want to sit?”

Doris shook her head and crossed her arms. She cleared her throat trying desperately not to give away the emotion in her voice. “You were right...about Anna.”

Olivia watched her friend make a valiant attempt at seeming unaffected as Doris brushed at some imaginary lint on her black blouse. “I didn’t want to be right, Doris. I hate this.”

The other woman nodded and looked at her. “I know.”

“What happened? Did she tell you?” The blonde followed the careful movements of her friend and recognized the behavior as being hungover. Her heart broke for her a little thinking about the horrible night she must have experienced.

Doris reigned in the natural inclination to shake her head, knowing that wouldn’t bode well for her state of equilibrium. “No. Actually, she was attacked in the middle of the night outside her apartment.”

Olivia stood up and moved a little closer. “Oh my God! Is she okay? What...how?”

Doris raised her hand. “Long story. I’ll tell you all the details one day when I can properly function. All I know is that she was attacked and as he took off he turned and called her by her real name.”

“Damn.” Olivia mumbled. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t. It’s better this way. At least now I know. I kind of miss Ladies Night anyway.” Olivia smiled a little at their shared memory of Ladies Night before a realization came to her.

“Doris, if someone attacked her and they know her real identity that means there’s more than one of Edmund’s thugs here. This could be really a dangerous situation.”

“I know. I’m already meeting with Frank and putting some parameters in place for increased security.”

Olivia nodded her appreciation. “And Anna?”

The older woman sighed. "I need some time on that. Considering I compromised my professional objectivity by becoming involved with her, I need to take some time to sort out my personal feelings before I make any moves for suspension. If I do that, I need to do it for the right reasons, not just because I'm pissed off at her for lying to me."

"That's understandable."

Doris took a deep breath and straightened up as she tried to control her fragile emotions. "Oh, and um, I'm sorry for what I said about you not wanting anyone to be happy but you. That was mean."

"Don't be sorry." Olivia saw the reddening of Doris's cheeks and the shimmer in her eyes. If Doris lost it, she would, too, and could even feel her lip quiver as she spoke. She took a deep breath to fight it off, wanting to stay strong for Doris.

"You're my friend." A tear fell from the corner of Doris's sad, blue eyes and Olivia followed right behind her. "I want you to be happy. I do. I just thought I had found a little of that for me, you know?"

Olivia nodded her head unable to speak. Instead, she walked the short distance over to Doris and took her in a hug. "You will find it, Doris, because you deserve it, too."

~~*~*

A gentle breeze rolled over the freshly groomed lawn of the Spaulding gardens as guests milled around sipping wine and eating delicate finger foods. With the surprisingly warm weather ushering in an early spring, the women of Springfield donned their best light dresses and large hats. To an outsider, it would have looked like a festive Easter egg hunt, but all the guests there knew it was to celebrate Phillip and Beth's wedding...again.

Olivia and Natalia walked hand-in-hand through the garden. Natalia looked over at Olivia smiling. "I can't believe this weather!"

The blonde looked up into the nearly cloudless sky and sighed. "It is unseasonably warm." She looked back at Natalia coyly, realizing something suddenly. "What a difference a year makes."

Natalia looked at her strangely, stopping on the path. "A year?"

"I have a distinct memory of a freak snowstorm about a year ago." She waved a hand around her head as if trying to remember something. "Or maybe it's this bizarre memory I have of this stunning dark-haired woman in her big white dress declaring her love for me?"

A slow smile crept over the brunette's face. "Amazing. Hard to believe it's been almost a year already."

Olivia tilted her head, letting her eyes drop to Natalia's lips. "Best year of my life." Natalia quirked an eyebrow. "Okay, the last six months or so, at least."

They shared a laugh and turned towards the massive hothouse where all the flowers were kept from the cold and awaited the first planting of spring. Natalia meandered ahead of Olivia admiring the towering rose bushes surrounding them. The brunette smiled and pulled one closer to her smelling its sweet scent.

"These are gorgeous."

Olivia saw her partner's eyes dance at the sight of the beautiful flower, and she reached up to take it in her own hand, then snapped it off a few inches down from the bloom. The younger woman gasped. "Olivia!"

"What? They have probably hundreds here. They'll never miss it. Besides, these roses have been here longer than I have." She freed her hand from Natalia's and broke off the thorns from the stem then slid the stem into Natalia's thick hair that hung loose around her shoulders. Tucked securely behind Natalia's ear, Olivia tilted her head and regarded her shyly. "That flower's not nearly as beautiful as you are."

Natalia smiled, refusing to fight the blush staining her cheeks, before brushing her fingers along Olivia's jaw and softly kissing her. "I love it when you say things like that."

The older woman shrugged. "What can I say? Weddings make me sappy."

"Oh, you don't fool me. You're a romantic at heart."

Olivia laughed and leaned in for another quick kiss. "Don't say it so loud. I have a rep to protect."

As they shared a couple of quick kisses, they didn't see Emma racing across the lawn towards them, and it wasn't until they were nearly bumped apart by her running into them that they even knew she was there.

"Whoa, Bean! Where's the fire, baby?" Olivia laughed at her daughter.

"Ugh, there's no fire, Mommy!"

Natalia snorted. "Well, it is Springfield. Give it five minutes and that'll change."

Olivia shared a conspiratorial look with her then looked back at Emma. “Did you see your Daddy?”

“Yep! You should see him. He sure looks handsome. He said he’d be out in a minute. Seems James can’t dress himself or something.” The little girl shrugged then looked around bored.

Looking up, Olivia saw her ex-husband coming down the path, hands in his pockets looking awfully dapper and self-confident. Adopted or not, he was definitely a Spaulding! Natalia saw him coming as well and decided to give them some alone time.

“Hey, Emma, I think they have an ice cream bar over there.” She pointed in the general direction of the pond. “What do you say we get some?”

“Oh, can we? I want chocolate.” The little girl grabbed Natalia’s hand and tugged. “Come on, Ma!”

Olivia didn’t miss the shocked expression on Natalia’s face as she looked back at her, and she laughed as Natalia mouthed, “Ma?”

She turned back to Phillip, who caught the end of the exchange. “Emma sure does love her.”

“She’s not the only one.” She lovingly reached up to adjust his tie.

He gasped in fake surprise. “No way! I never would have known!”

She simply smiled at him, thankful for Emma’s sake that they’d put much of their bad past behind them. Little moments like this reminded her of what she had liked about him. He was funny and self-deprecating, a trait they both shared and, like Olivia, he saw Springfield as the Twilight Zone of middle America. Everything was kind of screwy and backwards here, but that was what made it so wonderful too.

“So, are you ready to marry Beth all over again?”

He nodded. “I’m just glad she’ll have me.” A quiet moment passed between them before he continued, “I wish Alan was here to see this.”

She reached for his hand and looked up into his blue eyes, shining with unshed tears. “He 021is.”

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Lizzie, Lillian, and Mindy all jockeyed for a position in front of the floor-length mirror in the bedroom as they made last minute adjustments to their dresses. Mindy’s was more last

minute than usual since the seamstress mismeasured the adjustments, and they had to order another dress that didn't arrive until yesterday.

She turned in frustration from the mirror to look at her best friend. "Are you sure you don't have a shawl or something I can wear over this? This dress is cut so tight it makes my ass look huge."

Lizzie muttered from the other side of the room. "As if you have room to complain." She ran her hand over her larger-than-life belly for emphasis.

"Good point."

Beth never even noticed the exchange. She was already dressed and ready to go, a law book sitting in her lap and a pen resting between her perfect white teeth. Her hair was done in a loose up-do that looked very Victorian and romantic and went perfectly with the gray long-tailed tuxedos and top hats that Phillip, James, and Rick were wearing. Mindy snapped her fingers in front of Beth at her silence. "Earth to Beth."

Lillian came over and reached for the book in Beth's lap. "Baby, I think you can put this away for a while."

Beth put her hand over the book to hold it in place and looked up at the clock on the dresser. "I have twenty minutes."

The youngest of the three bridesmaids clapped her hands together. "Well, you stay and study if you want, but I'm heading down to take my spot because the sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can get off my painfully swollen feet. Okay?" Beth stared at her blankly and wordlessly, making Lizzie sigh. "Well, alrighty then."

When she opened the door, Doris was standing there hand in position to knock on the door. Lizzie grumpily muttered at the officiate, "Maybe you can light a fire under her or if all else fails, just burn the book she won't part with. Either way, I'll be happy."

The other two women lined up behind Lizzie. Lillian smiled at a flustered Doris and put her hand on the other woman's arm. "See what you can do. I'll be back in a minute to check on her."

Doris blindly nodded and stepped into the room. Since when did anyone think she could convince a woman to get married? She couldn't even keep a girlfriend! The mayor sighed and shook off her feelings of self-pity and stepped over to the focused bride. "Beth, are you ready? Everyone's getting settled in and..."

The blonde slammed the book closed with a bang causing Doris to jump. "I can't do this. It's too much." Tears welled in her eyes as she looked out the window next to her. Down below she could see the gathered crowd and caught a glimpse of Phillip fixing the corsage on Rick's lapel. A small smile crept across her face.

"You're calling off the wedding?"

The question shocked Beth out of her daze. "No! Of course not!" She sighed, "That's not what I can't do. God, I could marry Phillip over and over again. Wait, I think I have!" She shook her head and looked at Doris again. She raised the book. "It's this."

Doris took the book in her hand, looking at the title. Oh yeah, she remembered that class well; she hated estate law. Doris loved arguing and even more so loved winning, and there was none of that in estate law. God bless Beth for wanting to do it because someone had to. Doris was damn sure it wouldn't be her; though she did sorely miss the power and drama of the courtroom.

"Is this for the bar exam?" Doris knew it was coming up soon.

Beth nodded. "And I don't feel like I know a damn thing."

"You'll be surprised how much you know when you get in there." Doris remembered the nightmares she had over that blasted test. Those were days she'd rather never relive. "You could always talk to Mel too since this is her specialty."

"And then I have to find a job!" The younger woman threw her hands up in the air seeming to not hear Doris's suggestion. "There aren't many firms worth working for here in Springfield, and I'll be damned if I'll work for Alan's lawyers."

"They've offered?" Doris was impressed, and Beth nodded. "Okay, look, you've lived and breathed this for a long time now. Today is your wedding, and you should be enjoying it. This will be here after today, but you'll never get this moment again. Don't ruin it with worry."

Beth took a deep, cleansing breath. "You're right. You're right. Okay, let's do this."

"Thank God!" Doris was thankful to get the panicky bride moving. She wanted nothing more than to get this day over with and get away from the happy love-fest. There was a martini with her name on it at home, and even if the drinks at Ladies Night were better, she just wasn't ready to head back out into the fray. The last twenty four hours hadn't been her best, but she sure as hell hoped they were her worst so she'd at least have something to look forward to in the future.

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Natalia smiled as Emma practiced her flower girl skills and showed Sarah how to do it in case Uncle Jonathan ever met a girl. The little girls giggled at the handsome man's rolled eyes as he walked off, jokingly leaving Reva with instructions to keep a very close eye on the two troublemakers. He winked as he walked up to Natalia and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"You're looking radiant today." She bit her lip and smiled shyly at the young man. She didn't see Blake coming up on the other side of her, as she raised her hand to his stubbly cheek.

"Thank you." He blushed a little as well, seeing easily why Olivia was in love with her.

He saw the flicker of sunlight on the shiny surface of her hand. "Oh my God. Is this...?" He took her hand in his and looked at the gold band.

The brunette giggled a little at the look on his face. "Is this what?" Blake interrupted.

Natalia only hesitated a moment unable to contain her excitement before she reached her hand out to Blake, showing off the ring. She hadn't been kidding with Olivia that she wanted to shout it to the world. She'd realized earlier that morning that she was doing everything with her left hand as if unconsciously trying to draw attention to it. She sometimes even had to remind herself to take it off when she showered because she never wanted to be without Olivia's ring.

The redhead's mouth fell open when she saw the ring. "Oh my...Natalia! This is beautiful! Did you two get married already?"

Before she could speak, Olivia stepped beside her. "I move fast, Blake, but not with Natalia. We are engaged though."

Natalia loved the way that sounded coming from Olivia and wrapped her arm around her waist, cuddling in close. This is what she had been missing. This was what love felt like, and it felt...absolutely beyond words.

Jonathan hadn't stopped smiling at the pair, and he leaned in to give Olivia a kiss on the cheek. "That's wonderful, Auntie O. I'm so happy for you." He looked over at Natalia. "For both of you."

Blake threw her hands out. "Of course. Congratulations!" A moment passed as she regarded the incredibly happy look on Natalia. "I hate to ask, but...does Frank know?" Jonathan flinched at the question and used the opportunity to drift away.

Blake's question caused both of their faces to fall as they looked at each other. Olivia raised a hand to rub at her suddenly throbbing head, but she felt Natalia stand a little straighter next to her and pull her a little closer. "Not yet. It would seem kind of cold to walk up to him and shove the ring in his face. He'll find out soon enough, but I don't want to make a big production out of it." She willed Blake with her eyes not to be intrusive, but let it work out how it was meant to.

She nodded at the look Natalia gave her. "I can respect that."

"Good. Speaking of Frank, did you all finally find a seat?" Natalia quickly changed the subject.

Blake pointed a few rows up on the right side. Frank was rocking Francesca in his arms, and he had made sure to get seats on the far outside of the row just in case the baby started to fuss in the middle of the ceremony and someone had to leave quickly. There were several seats on either side of him free so they made their way over. Both Natalia and Olivia gave their daughter a gentle touch before sitting down with Natalia next to Frank and Olivia on the other side of her. Blake took the empty seat to Frank's left where she had easy access to the stroller and baby bag.

They all settled in as Phillip, Rick, James, and Doris took their places up front.

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Anna tilted her head to the side as she peeked through a row of hedges to catch a glimpse of Doris. A sad smile darkened her face as she watched the other woman move from Phillip's side to take her place to officiate the wedding.

"I'm not stalking, okay." She addressed the silent footsteps behind her, causing Jonathan to pull up short.

"You're good."

She smirked a little without looking at him. "You should have seen what I did to get in here. This place could give Fort Knox a run for its money in security."

He stepped up to stand next to her. "Since you're not out there and skulking about back here, I take it you talked to her." She turned to look at him, and he saw the purplish bruise around her eye. "And it obviously did not go well."

Anna sighed. "No, it didn't, but this wasn't her doing." He scrunched his eyebrows together and she continued, "I got jumped outside my house."

He ran his hands through his shaggy hair. "That's not good."

She nodded her agreement and was about to turn around to watch the ceremony when a shadow behind them caught her eye. In the denseness of the woods surrounding the property, it was hard to see, but there was no mistaking the movement of a tree limb as a dark figure disappeared into the forest.

"Damn it!" She shoved him away from her as she pulled her gun from her waistband. "Go that way. I'll go this way."

They took off in opposite directions, watching the shadow through the trees as it dodged and ducked fallen and low hanging limbs. As quickly as they'd find the movement, it would momentarily disappear only to reappear mere feet from them. He was toying with them.

"Goddamn it!" Anna stopped in her tracks, Jonathan racing up behind her, having been turned around in the woods by the shadow. "Come out and face me, you son of a bitch!" She yelled into the thick shadows.

A low maniacal laugh came from far in the distance. "Soon...very soon."

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Francesca shifted in her father's arms, trying to get more comfortable, as the music started for the entrance of the bridesmaids. Blake watched Frank as he stroked his daughter's cheek in an attempt to sooth her. In spite of her getting upset about him being distracted and taking his daughter to the station, she had to concede that he was a good father. He was trying hard to do it right this time, and she saw how he doted on her. Little Francesca could easily be sleeping in her stroller right now, but he wanted and needed to hold her.

Glancing over, he caught the soft look crossing Blake's face as he traced a pudgy cheek with his finger. He adjusted the blanket around his daughter's face to block the light wind and turned back to the ceremony sighing. Being at this wedding today wasn't exactly at the top of his list of to-do items. He'd have been happy to keep Francesca while Natalia and Olivia attended. After all, this was more their family than his, but as Chief of Police, he was almost in a political position, and it wouldn't have looked good to avoid the wedding of the most influential man in Springfield.

He knew why he wanted to avoid the wedding, and both were sitting to his right. When he saw Olivia rest her hand on Natalia's knee, he also saw Natalia gently rest her left hand on top and his heart fell a little more at the sight of the gold band. Yeah, he really hated weddings. When he felt Blake raise a hand to rest on his shoulder, he sighed again. Why did nothing ever seem to come easy for him?

~~*~*

A slight quiver shook Phillip as the music started and the door to the house opened. Slowly, Lillian emerged followed by Lizzie, who smiled as Bill clicked his camera away like an obsessed paparazzi a few feet ahead of her. It made Phillip smile even larger to see his daughter loved so deeply. It was all he wanted for those he loved, to be happy and loved. It was the best feeling in the world. When Mindy followed a few feet behind Lizzie, he cast a glance at Rick who had a ridiculously silly smile on his face.

“Just like old times, huh, buddy?” The dark-haired doctor couldn’t peel his eyes away from the woman he had loved for so long. “So, when are you going to stand in my place?” Phillip really expected his best friend to blow it off, especially after all the ups and downs Rick and Mindy had experienced over the years. They seemed to be doing well now that they weren’t over-thinking things.

Instead, Rick turned and smirked at him. “We’re thinking sometime in September is good.”

Phillip was stunned silent for a moment. “Seriously?”

Mindy was almost even with the two men as she settled in a couple of feet behind Lizzie. When she turned and winked at him, he puffed up a little in pride. “Seriously.”

Phillip shook his head as the music for the wedding march started and the guests stood for the bride’s appearance. Emma nervously began to walk down the path towards her father. She looked around frantically for her mommies until she saw them standing together smiling and waving. She finally relaxed and smiled back, but wondered why her mommy was pointing down and pretending like she was reaching in a bucket. Then she looked down in front of herself and noticed her basket was still full of flowers. Uh, oh!

Quickly recovering and never missing a beat, the little girl began to toss the petals out on the ground in front of her. Olivia gave her a thumbs up and patted Natalia’s hand resting on her arm. Both smiled so proudly at her, and she felt so grown up being a part of such a grown up day. She sure hoped she’d get to do this at her mommies’ wedding one day, but maybe she’ll get to be one of the big girls standing at the front like Lizzie. Though she was literally a big girl right now and that wasn’t something appealing to Emma.

When she made her way all the way to the front, Phillip came over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You were wonderful, Emma. Thank you.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, baby.” She stepped back out of the way to make room for Beth just like she had been taught when they practiced.

Beth and Phillip both took deep breaths as she stepped up to the front, and they laughed a little at their mutual nervousness. "It's not like we haven't done this before, you know?" Beth tried to joke.

Phillip just looked at her seriously. "True, but I hope it's the last."

Doris waited until the pair had turned fully to her, letting her know she could begin. The standard welcomes and introductions were done before Doris turned it over to Phillip and Beth to say their own vows.

He turned to Beth and took both of her hands in his. Every word he had memorized suddenly disappeared from his mind, and a moment of panic started to kick in, but then Beth squeezed his hands lightly and smiled at him in a way that settled him. All he could do was try to convey the way he felt in this moment.

"We've been through so much together. I've known you over half of my life, and no matter where we've gone, what we've done, or how far apart we've been, my heart only feels at home with you. You're the best part of me, Beth. When everything else falls down around me, I know I have you. You're my rock and my strength and my shelter. I trust you with everything that I am or ever will be."

Olivia and Natalia shared a smile of understanding. They knew those words were true for them. Doris swallowed and looked down as she tried to keep up the façade of professionalism.

Phillip continued, "There have been a lot of people who broke my trust and let me down, but with you, I always knew, even when things were hard for us, that I was safe with you. I love you for loving me, and I want to spend all of my days giving that back to you."

Beth smiled through her impending tears, tilting her head a little to the side. "That's good, Phillip, because I intend on enjoying the love you give me for the rest of our lives. It has been hard for us. Nothing was ever easy, and we both did our fair share of hurtful things. I was never perfect no matter how much you want to say I was, but deep down inside, I never stopped loving you. You were my first love and you'll be my last."

Doris brushed at a tear that fell. When would this end? It was too hard for her to listen to these declarations about unending love and complete trust. She feared she'd never know what it felt like to share this with someone. She thought she had it with Anna. She thought she could trust her, and she dropped her heart into Anna's hands to use as a toy. Never again. She'd never be that stupid or naïve again.

She sniffed and looked up to see Beth and Phillip, as well as about two hundred guests, staring back at her. Apparently, Beth had finished her vows while Doris was trying to get her act together. She covered the moment with a big smile and whispered to the couple, "Great job!"

Doris straightened back up and she closed the ceremony by asking each if they wanted to be lawfully married. A few giggles and tears later, she announced to the crowd, "By the power vested in me as the Mayor of Springfield, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Cheers erupted as Phillip swept Beth into a kiss and spun her around.

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Anna stared out the window of her office. She had taken a couple of days off of work to clear her head. After what happened at the wedding, she couldn't stop herself from scanning the tree line out back, and she even had a hard time sleeping. Not that she slept much anyway as she thought about Doris; but the fear of what and who was coming at them next had her on edge even more. She looked at the cell phone in her hand again and struggled with whether to call Doris or not. She wanted to make it right. She wanted to find the right words, but the couple of times she had tried to call the last several days, Doris's phone had gone straight to voice mail. She knew she had no right to ask for understanding or even trust from Doris, but God, how she wanted it.

Remy dropped the file on Anna's desk, and she jumped at the sudden noise. "Hey, stranger! Where have you been?" His eyes got as big as saucers though when he saw the shiner. "Whoa! How did the truck fare that hit you?"

Anna smiled as best as her split lip would allow. "It's feeling it, too. Don't worry."

"Well, good, I'm glad it was just a truck. For a minute, I wondered if you were hitting on some guy's wife." He tucked his hands in his pockets, playing it cool with having a lesbian as a partner. Some guys on the force may have given her a hard time about it, but he wanted her to know that it was all good with him. "As long as it's not Christina, we're good."

"Oh no, I think I'm swearing off women for a while. Okay, okay, for only a little while," she added with a hint of arrogance so he wouldn't think something was wrong before turning back to the window.

He started to say something then stopped when he saw Doris standing in the doorway. He cleared his throat.



"I'll just...I'll be outside." He motioned between himself and the door, but when neither woman seemed to pay him any attention, he just excused himself.

Anna couldn't stop staring at Doris. Even tired and sad, she looked absolutely stunning. She set her coffee down on her desk and turned back to Doris, waiting.

Doris stepped into the office and closed the door behind her. "You lied to me."

She nodded, unable to deny it. "I didn't want to."

"But you did. And, in the process, you watched me and even encouraged me falling for you. You told me you loved me." Doris shook her head still unable to comprehend the audacity.

"I do, Doris." She raised her hand at Anna not to interrupt.

"And I told you that I loved you. We dated...often and very much in public. For you, I did something I never did for anyone else." Anna waited for it. She knew it was coming. "I was out, in public for the world to see. New Year's Eve I danced with you...in public. I kissed you...in public. The other day, I was threatened by a segment of my political party to stay in the closet, and you know what I did because I love you so much, I basically told them to shove it. I risked my career...for you because I thought you loved me, too. And you let me believe it, knowing it was all a lie, you let me put everything on the line."

Anna couldn't stop the tears coming again. She was so sick of crying. She thought she had run out of tears last night, but couldn't stop them at the pain on Doris' face. "I do, baby. I do. Please believe me. All I was trying to do is protect you. Hell, trying to protect everyone!"

Doris shrugged. "The sad thing is, I do. I believe you. Believing you though doesn't change the fact that you lied to me without regard for the damage it could do to me. I believed you before, and you lied. Whether I believe you or not doesn't change the simple fact that I can't trust you."

"You can trust me." Anna pleaded.

Doris shrugged sadly at her. "Then tell me the truth. Tell me what's really going on here. The whole story."

"I...", Anna stuttered and shook her head. "Baby, I want to. I really want to, but I can't. I can't put you at risk."

Doris barely contained the anger in her words. "You already did! You already risked my career and my heart. I trusted you completely, and you can't have the common decency to give that trust back to me. That's not a relationship, and it sure as hell isn't the kind of relationship I want anymore. Maybe at one time, but not anymore."

"Please, Doris. Give me a chance to make it up to you."

She shook her head. "I can't, and I won't."

"So, this is it?" Anna didn't bother stopping the tears anymore. She just let them fall. She had known this would be the end result of her lies, and she had no one to blame but herself for the pain.

"Yeah. But that's not all." Doris stepped in close, giving herself the luxury of running her fingers along Anna's cheek one last time. She spoke quietly but forcefully, her blue eyes never breaking contact with Anna's driving the point home. "I don't know what you're doing here because I'm sure you're still lying to me as sure as you're standing here, but I swear if you do anything, and I mean anything, to hurt Olivia, Natalia, their relationship, or their kids, I will make you pay. Do you understand, Anna? I love you, but I will destroy you if you hurt them. That, my dear, you can trust."

Anna swallowed hard at the cold look in Doris' eyes. Doris didn't wait for a response. She straightened up, put back on her mayoral persona, and turned to leave. When the door click quietly closed, Anna slumped to the floor and cried.

The End

~~*~*

Tempora Mutantur

by Wonko

ACT 1

“Barkeep! Another!”

Doris slammed her empty glass down onto the counter with a wince as her latest shot of amber liquid burned her throat. Olivia rolled her eyes as she reached for the now half empty bottle of Wild Turkey.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough now ma’am?” she said as she refilled her friend’s glass.

Doris shook her head. “I can still see, think and remember,” she replied.

Olivia smiled sadly. “Yeah...I get that.”

Doris knocked back her...she counted internally...fifth drink, and looked around the farmhouse kitchen. Her eyes lighted on all the cosy little domestic touches – the dishes lined up on the draining board, the fresh herbs in pots on the window ledge, the corkboard next to the fridge filled with photos and to-do lists and coupons and little notes from Natalia to Olivia and vice versa. She stood up, a tiny bit unsteadily, and wandered over to it.

“Aww, sweet,” she said, running her fingers over a little Valentine from Emma to her mom. “Ashlee never did things like that as a child. I don’t think I’m that type of mom, you know?”

Olivia surreptitiously screwed the cap back onto the bottle before walking over to her friend. “It’s the first time she’s ever done it,” she said softly. “I kinda think she had a little help, you know?”

Doris snorted in amusement. “Where’s Natalia’s card then?” she asked, her eyes scanning over the nearly full board. “Is the message too saucy to put up in public?”

Olivia smirked, and rolled her engagement ring to the left and right with her thumb. “Something like that,” she murmured.

Doris looked away from the board, and for a second Olivia thought she was about to dive back into the bottle. Instead, the Mayor sighed and wandered through to the living room. Olivia followed, just in time to see her friend slumping onto the couch and pulling up a cushion to hug against her chest.

"I don't know how you do it," she said quietly, so quietly that Olivia wasn't sure she'd heard her properly.

"Do what?" she asked, lowering herself onto the other side of the couch. She flicked her eyes briefly towards the baby monitor sitting on the coffee table. Francesca hadn't made so much as a peep for an hour, but she was bound to wake up from her nap soon, probably cranky and hungry for food and attention.

"This," Doris continued, waving her hand around to encompass the room, the house, the life. "How did you just get over it? Why is it so easy for you to trust her after what she did? How can you share your family and wear her ring when she broke your heart?"

Olivia took a deep breath and looked away, her cheeks burning. Silence stretched between them for several long, excruciating moments.

"Shit," Doris muttered eventually, rubbing her hands across her face. "Ignore me, please, that was way, way out of—"

"It wasn't *easy*," Olivia interrupted, staring at the baby monitor and refusing to meet Doris's eyes. Her voice was flat and distant. "You of all people should know that it wasn't easy. Sometimes I wake up in the night and she's in the bathroom or feeding the baby and for a split second I forget—" Her voice cracked and she had to take another deep breath. "I forget that she came back to me. And it's all fresh again, just like the day she left." She shook her head and wiped the faintest hint of tears from her eyes. "But you know what, she did come back. She came back for me, for our family, for our life." She set her jaw, and her eyes seemed to dare Doris to say any different.

"I know," Doris said softly. "I know. I just...you are *so* much more forgiving than I am." Their eyes met at last and they shared a small smile. "I thought she was it, you know? I thought I'd finally found my happily ever after only to discover it was more of a...a...I don't even know, what's the opposite of a happily ever after?"

Olivia raised one eyebrow and smirked. "Nice verbal acuity there Madam Mayor. Did they teach you those tricks in law school?"

"Oh screw you," Doris replied, flicking the cushion and smacking her friend on the leg, a little less gently than she'd planned.

“Abuse!” Olivia exclaimed. “I can see the headlines now.”

“Screw you times two,” Doris said, and this time the cushion was aimed at Olivia’s head.

Before an outright cushion fight could ensue, the baby monitor squawked to life. “Saved by the baby,” Olivia said, dancing out of reach as Doris attempted to land one last whack. Slightly bleary blue eyes followed her friend up the stairs before the Mayor sighed and dragged herself to her feet to trail after her.

She found Olivia in the nursery, holding Francesca against her chest and bouncing her a little as she paced from door to window. “Want me to do that?” she asked. Olivia shot her an incredulous look.

“Yeah, I’m going to hand over my infant child to you after you just downed five shots of bourbon,” she said. She flicked her head across to the Vertical Limit that Phillip had given them at New Year. “If you really want to help you can get me a bottle and warm it up.”

“You keep baby bottles in a Vertical Limit?” Doris said, shaking her head. “God, you are so whipped.”

Olivia stuck out her tongue and held Francesca more closely against her chest. “Yeah yeah, yuck it up,” she grumbled. “But I know a certain someone who’s already started eating a little solid food, don’t I?” She held Francesca up so she could look into her chubby little face. “Don’t I? And I think that mama will just have to let me use that thing properly once you’re weaned, won’t she? Won’t she, Sweet Pea, my little milk monster, hmm?”

The baby giggled, then stuck her fist in her mouth and began to gnaw gently on it. “Teething already?” Doris said, coming up alongside her friend and handing her a now warm bottle.

“Yeah, it’s *great*. An utter, utter delight.”

Doris laughed as she flopped down onto Natalia’s rocking chair and watched Francesca feeding gently as she stared up at Olivia’s quietly joyful face. The sweetness of the moment was so thick that for a moment or two Doris was afraid she might actually weep.

“I told you you’d love her,” she said softly.

Olivia’s eyes flicked over to the other woman before meeting the steady brown gaze of her daughter once again. “Yeah, you’re the all knowing Mayor, I bow to you.”

Doris’s face fell. “Not quite all knowing,” she murmured.

Olivia squeezed her eyes shut, internally kicking herself. "There was no way to know that Anna-

"Xing Lung," Doris muttered.

"Whatever she wants to call herself," Olivia continued. "I'm just saying, there was no way for you to know that she wasn't what she said she was."

Doris sighed and looked out of the window. "It's hard to know who to trust these days, for some reason. Something seems to be...in motion. But I have no idea what it is."

Olivia put the now empty bottle on the window ledge and cuddled her daughter close, rubbing the child's back as a shiver ran up her spine.

Doris shook her head. "Xing Lung...Anna...she says she's here to help us. To protect us."

Olivia's throat tightened. "Protect us from what?"

Doris swallowed hard. "I have no idea." She let that sit there for a beat, allowing it to sink in. "I don't even know – in my head – if we can trust her."

Olivia jutted her chin forward. "And in your heart?"

For a moment, Doris made no reply. Then she leaned forward a little, rubbing her hands over her face. "My heart is so in love with her it physically hurts," she admitted, her voice raw and broken. Olivia took a step towards her, but Doris held a hand up to keep her at bay. "I don't know if we should trust her or not," she said after a few moments of silence. "For now...be careful, Olivia. I couldn't bear it if my mistake...hurt you..." She swallowed hard. "Or your family..."

This time when Olivia moved towards her she was not rebuffed. She balanced Francesca on her hip, and leaned down to wrap her free arm round Doris's shoulders. Doris sighed, and leaned against her friend wearily.

"Don't turn your back on her, Olivia," she said softly.

Olivia's jaw clenched. "Oh, I don't intend to," she replied. "I don't intend to."

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Natalia smiled tightly at the priest, wringing her hands and resisting the urge to glance again at the clock. It would only show, as the last few glimpses had, that much less time

had passed than she would have guessed. Father Ray continued to smile impassively, one hand resting over the Bible on his lap, the other stretched out over the back of the sofa on which he sat. Natalia's eyes flickered down to the vase of flowers and the untouched coffee and biscuits on the low table separating them.

"I'm sorry Frank's late," she said, for the third time.

"That's all right," the priest replied, his voice low and even. "Maybe it's a good thing. We haven't talked in a while, have we Natalia?"

Natalia raised her eyes to meet his, and a sliver of tension rolled down her spine. "No, I suppose we haven't," she allowed. Absently, she began to play with her ring, rolling it around her finger, slipping it up and down. "I've been busy."

Father Ray's eyes dropped to the ring finger of her left hand. "I see that," he said.

Natalia straightened, preparing herself for what she expected he was about to say. To her surprise, he made no mention of her and Olivia's engagement, which had been the talk of the town since Phillip and Beth's wedding. Instead, he smiled. "So...why exactly do you want to get your baby baptized, Natalia?"

Natalia couldn't help but do a slight double take. This was the third of four scheduled baptism preparation classes that she and Frank were undertaking, and she considered it a slightly odd question to crop up out of the blue.

"Well..." she began slowly. "I want Francesca to be a part of the community."

Father Ray nodded. "Is that all it is?" he asked. "Just the community?"

Natalia frowned. "I don't understand."

The priest smiled, showing his teeth. "What I mean is," he said, "do you intend for her to share your faith?"

Natalia's frown deepened. "Well...of course I do," she said.

Father Ray nodded once in acknowledgement. "And Olivia?"

The faintest rumblings of annoyance made Natalia's eyes harden. "Olivia respects my faith," she said shortly. She thought of Olivia throwing her cookie away as a show of family unity in observing Natalia's Lenten sacrifice, and allowed a small smile to creep onto her lips. "We've discussed it," she continued. "Olivia agrees that Francesca should be baptized."

Reaching down to pick up a biscuit, Father Ray looked around the room. "Then where is she?" he asked.

The annoyance was back. Natalia bristled. "She's looking after our child," she said, her voice cold. "This is a meeting for Francesca's mother and father. She'll be here next week, with the other godparents."

"You want her to be a godparent?" Father Ray said, chewing slowly. Natalia's eyes flicked down to the biscuits, suddenly regretting her decision to choose sweet things to give up this year. She rather wanted some sugar right at that moment.

"Of course I do," she replied, dragging her eyes back up to his face.

The priest leaned forward. "Do you think that's really her place, Natalia?"

Before Natalia could answer, Frank noisily barged through the door. "Sorry, sorry," he breezed, pulling off his gloves to shake Father Ray's hand. Natalia was glad of the few moments this afforded her, because they allowed her to take a couple of deep breaths and calm down. Her knuckles gradually became less white as she unclenched her fists.

"So, what did I miss?" Frank asked, flopping down next to her and laying his arm over the back of the sofa. It reminded her of the moves a teenage boy would pull at a movie theater, pretending to yawn so he could put his arm round his date's shoulders. Surreptitiously, she scooted a few inches closer to the edge of the couch.

"We were talking about godparents," she said tightly.

Frank grinned. "Oh, well, I know my dad is really desperate to do it," he said breezily. "And Blake just loves Francesca, so..."

Father Ray looked to Natalia. "Those seem like acceptable choices," he said.

A tinge of colour appeared on Natalia's cheeks. "I want Olivia to be a godparent," she insisted.

Frank shrugged. "Okay," he agreed. "Well...people have three godparents sometimes, don't they? Two godmothers and one godfather for a girl; one godmother and two godfathers for a boy."

Father Ray nodded. "That's true," he said. "But I was just speaking to Natalia about Olivia, and whether you both think she's the best choice."

Frank glanced at Natalia briefly. "I don't have a problem with it," he said, and Natalia felt a sudden rush of affection for him.

"So that's decided then," she said, looking back to the priest. He shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not sure I can agree."

A sick feeling began to settle in the pit of Natalia's stomach. It felt just like the anxious near panic she'd experienced when she and Frank had first approached Father Ray to seek baptism for Francesca. She'd had nightmares the night before, with visions of refusal and condemnation following her all the way to church. But the priest had accepted them warmly, and his easy acquiescence had convinced Natalia to dismiss her fears. Now it seemed one of them had crept out of the dark corner to which it had been banished.

"Why?"

Father Ray smiled, a little sadly. "You know why."

Natalia leaned forward, the movement swift and sudden. "Explain it to me," she ground out.

"Natalia," Frank began, glancing between her and the priest like a spectator at a tennis match. She held up her hand, silencing him.

"Explain it to me," she said again, never taking her eyes from her priest's.

He sighed. "It's not church policy to deny the sacrament of baptism, if sought, to children being brought up by...by homosexuals." He coughed, and Natalia's face burned. "But that doesn't mean we can give that relationship the appearance of any kind of blessing. I'm afraid that having Olivia standing up as Francesca's godmother would not be...appropriate."

The feeling coursing through Natalia's veins was depressingly familiar. A slosh of panic, a cup of dread, a pinch of anger. It felt like what she'd endured when she first found out she was pregnant – weak and alone and so afraid of what it might mean. She imagined the look on Olivia's face if she went home now and told her she had to watch her own daughter's baptism from the sidelines. That she had to watch Frank grinning and laughing and being congratulated while she, Olivia, was the one who got up and talked to Francesca in the night, fed her, comforted her, changed her diapers.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I can't...that's not..."

Father Ray held up his hands. "Why don't we move on from this for the moment?" he suggested. "We have other things to cover today. Natalia, I think you should reflect on this and try to decide if this is really what's right for Francesca...or if it's just what *you* want."

Natalia bit back her impulsive angry retort. After a moment or two of consideration, she nodded tightly. Father Ray smiled.

"Okay," he said. "Frank. Let me start by asking you something I already asked Natalia. Why do *you* want your baby to be baptized?"

Natalia never heard Frank's answer. Her mind was in another place as he talked, imagining what it would be like to stand up next to Frank with her daughter in her arms, and to look down into the congregation and meet Olivia's eyes, filled with pain and abandonment.

And betrayal.

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ACT 2

Ideally, Natalia would have liked a long drive to clear her head after she left the church. An hour or two in an open top Mercedes, breezing along a tropical coast with the wind in her hair - that would have sorted everything out. What she got was twenty minutes in Olivia's Nissan, which she still wasn't used to driving, through a sudden downpour that forced her to squint all the way home and left her with the beginnings of a headache by the time she finally drew up outside her front door.

"Olivia?" she called, tossing her coat and purse over the back of the couch as she passed through the living room to the kitchen. There was no sign of her girlfriend anywhere on the ground floor. A flicker of annoyance joined the thrum of the headache and settled at the base of her skull. "Olivia?" she called again.

After a moment, footsteps travelled across the ceiling and down the stairs - stopping briefly in the living room, probably to clear up Natalia's abandoned possessions - before heading into the kitchen.

"Hey honey," Olivia said, smiling widely.

Natalia acknowledged her girlfriend with a curt nod before throwing the fridge open with quite unnecessary force and extracting a Saran wrap covered bowl. Olivia raised an eyebrow as she headed over to the counter.

“Everything okay?”

Natalia pursed her lips, pouring chilled leftover soup from the bowl into a saucepan, and setting it onto a burner to heat. “Thanks for making lunch,” she said.

Olivia winced. “Sorry.”

Natalia shook her head, before grabbing the bottle of Wild Turkey still sitting out on the counter and putting it back into the liquor cabinet. “I’m sure you had better things to do,” she said, with a small, mirthless laugh.

Olivia’s eyes widened. “Doris was here,” she said hastily. “That was...I didn’t have any. She was upset about Anna, so I-”

“So you plied her with booze,” Natalia filled in, shrugging in an exaggerated fashion. “That’s your answer to losing someone, huh? Get drunk?”

“You’ve never seen my answer to losing someone,” Olivia said quickly, and immediately regretted it. Natalia’s face shuttered closed, and Olivia winced. “Natalia-”

“I’m going to check on the baby,” Natalia said shortly. “Watch the soup.”

Olivia reached out to touch her as she passed, but Natalia twisted out of her reach, leaving her girlfriend with nothing to do but stir the soup, and contemplate what exactly she’d done to earn what was looking to be a very frosty afternoon.

~~*~*

Anna dragged herself into consciousness through a haze of pain and misery. Her mouth felt like a rat had climbed into it and died. Given the neighbourhood in which she lived, that wasn’t entirely impossible - she’d seen the occasional scuttling rodent out by the trashcans - but, after a moment’s consideration, she decided it was more likely she was just hungover.

Creaking one eye open and spotting five beer bottles in the immediate vicinity, she decided that this latest hypothesis was correct.

“Uh,” she groaned, raising herself up onto one elbow and rubbing what seemed like five layers of dried mucus from her eyes. She gave up a small prayer of thanks that she wasn’t working that day, and fell out of bed. After a moment or two, she dragged herself up and stumbled blearily to the bathroom.

After standing in the shower long enough to feel vaguely human again, she returned to the living room to the sound of her cellphone ringing.

"Yeah boss, what do you want?" she said tonelessly.

"Just checking on you," Jeffrey replied. *"How's your face?"*

Anna touched the fleshy spot under her left eye and winced at the flash of pain that still coursed through her, although the bruise had begun to fade days before. "I'll live," she said, slouching down onto her couch and closing her eyes.

"Any sign of the attacker?"

Anna shook her head. "Not since the Spaulding wedding," she said. "Things have gone quiet, at least for now."

"I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing," Jeffrey said ominously. Anna rolled her eyes.

"Considering it was *my* head he was trying to turn into hamburger meat, I'm going to go for 'good thing,'" she muttered.

"Yeah," Jeffrey said distractedly.

The conversation stalled for a few awkward seconds.

"Did you want something, boss?" Anna asked at last.

"When did you last see Doris Wolfe?"

Anna was unprepared for the pain that lanced through her heart at this question. She had to take a few deep breaths before she could reply. "A...a few days ago," she murmured. *From across the street before she ducked into a bookstore to avoid me. God, when is this going to stop hurting?* "Why?" she asked, directing her attention away from bad memories and back to the conversation at hand.

"Look...Anna, I know you don't want to hear this, but-"

"Save it," Anna snapped, cutting him off. "She dumped me, okay? It's over, finished, done. Happy?"

Jeffrey's deep breath travelled through the phone line as a distant crackle. *"I'm sorry,"* he said. *"But...it's for the best."*

Tears nipped at Anna's eyes. "Yeah," she said bitterly. "Whatever." With that she stabbed at the end call button, and tossed the phone as far away as she could manage.

~~*~*

Olivia had decided that she was definitely not going to apologize. Nuh uh; no way. Let Natalia be in a bad mood if that was what she wanted. So they'd spend what should have been a happy afternoon, a rare free weekend afternoon, with Emma off on a play-date that was scheduled to turn into a sleepover, in frosty silence - that was fine by her. Natalia was the one who'd come home in a temper. And so what if she'd promised to make lunch? She couldn't be expected to remember things like that while her best friend's heart was breaking right there in her own kitchen. A few shots of bourbon - what was the harm? It wasn't like she'd had any herself. She and Natalia had had enough conversations about alcohol and the abuse thereof for her to know better.

No. Olivia Spencer was *definitely* not going to apologize.

"She's asleep," Natalia said as she reappeared in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry."

Olivia's hands flew to her mouth, as if she could somehow pull the words back. Damn. Damn damn damn damn damn.

"Sorry for what?" Natalia said quietly.

Olivia sighed deeply. Too late to go back now. She'd just have to accept it - she was whipped.

"Sorry for forgetting to make lunch," she said. "Sorry for letting Doris get drunk. Sorry for waking you this morning when I got up to see to Francesca. Sorry for tracking wet footprints across the kitchen floor last week. Sorry for sneaking a burger for lunch a week last Tuesday." She crossed the room to stand in front of her girlfriend, whose face had softened. "Sorry for anything and everything I've ever done and ever will do to upset you. And especially for whatever I did today."

She ducked her head, looking for Natalia's eyes and smiling when she found them. She reached out and pushed a lock of hair behind Natalia's ear, tilting her lover's head up for a kiss.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Natalia admitted when their lips parted. She opened her arms and snuggled close to her girlfriend, resting her weary head against her chest.

Olivia let out a short breath through her nose as she kissed her hair and wrapped her arms round her shoulders.

“So what’s up?” she said softly, stroking her fingers through the dark river of Natalia’s hair gently, and slowly.

“The sky,” Natalia murmured.

Olivia recognized it for the diversionary tactic that it was - it was the kind of thing, indeed, that she might have said herself - and backed off. “Okay,” she said, pulling away. “Did you want bread or crackers with your soup?”

Natalia watched her as she stirred the soup, biting her lip, her brow furrowed. “I’m not hungry anymore,” she said at last. “I...we need to talk, Olivia.”

Olivia stilled. “I don’t think anything good has ever been preceded by ‘we need to talk,’” she said quietly.

Natalia hesitated. “Uhm...I guess not,” she admitted.

Olivia slowly turned off the burner below the soup. “All right,” she said at last, turning, and appearing to steel herself. “What’s wrong?”

Natalia began to wring her hands. “Will you...can we...let’s sit,” she said. “In the living room, okay?” She held out her hand, and seemed to breathe a little easier when Olivia slipped hers into it.

The two women settled themselves on the couch: Natalia fussing with the cushions; Olivia slouching with her bottom lip held lightly between her teeth. Natalia noted with a smile that Olivia *had* hung up her coat and purse for her - a jewel of routine domesticity that made her heart swell with love.

“What’s wrong, Natalia?” Olivia asked gently, reaching out to grab the other woman’s hand, which was nervously fiddling with the zipper on a dark red cushion.

“Father Ray was talking about Francesca’s godparents today,” she began hesitantly. Olivia’s spine stiffened almost imperceptibly.

“Yeah?” she said.

“Yeah.” Natalia rubbed her thumb over Olivia’s knuckles gently. “Frank would like Buzz and Blake to be her godparents.”

Olivia straightened. "And you told him / want to do it, right?" she said.

Natalia nodded. "Yes. He's fine with that."

Olivia let out a breath. "Okay. Good. You had me worried there for a second." Olivia smiled, but her face fell when Natalia didn't seem any less agitated. "So what is it?" she said.

Natalia looked up, meeting her girlfriend's eyes. "Father Ray...isn't fine with it," she said softly.

A moment of silence stretched between them. Olivia became very still. Her chest rose and fell a dozen or so times, and then she shook her head. "Because...because of this, right?" she whispered, gesturing between them. Natalia didn't have to ask what she meant.

"Yes," she said softly.

Olivia dropped Natalia's hand abruptly and stood, curling her arms round her waist as she stood in front of the fireplace.

Natalia watched her for a few moments, anxiety rising in her gut like bile. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

Olivia didn't turn around. "I'm thinking," she said slowly, "that St Joseph's is about to schedule another baptism."

"St Joseph's? The Episcopal church?" Natalia stood. "What?"

Olivia turned, a smile affixed to her face, reaching for Natalia's hands. "Yeah, the Episcopal church," she said. "I told you I'd gone there."

Natalia shook her head. "You just said you'd gone to 'a' church."

"Well, that was the one," Olivia said. "We can just take Francesca there."

Natalia recognized the look on Olivia's face - it was the look she got when she had a plan forming that wouldn't easily be derailed. It was the 'hire an assistant' face; the 'shoot Phillip' face. "Olivia," she said warily. "Let's just think about this for a second, okay?"

"Why?" Olivia replied, smiling. She stepped closer, running her hands up and down Natalia's arms. "Why kowtow to Father Ray and his opinion on who can stand up with *our* daughter?"

Natalia let out a small, nervous laugh. "Well, he is a priest," she began.

“And?” Olivia snapped.

Natalia smiled slowly, sensing danger, treading carefully. “Well...it’s just...I mean, it’s a religious ceremony...”

Olivia shrugged. “You can still have your religious ceremony,” she said. “The Episcopal church in Springfield would welcome our family, our *whole* family, and they’re really pretty similar to Catholics. It’d be so much easier.”

Natalia’s spine stiffened. “Easier?” she repeated.

Olivia pushed on, heedless of the tone that had crept into Natalia’s voice. “Yes, easier. So much easier.”

Natalia pulled her hands from Olivia’s. “So...suppose that’s the attitude I’d taken when I came back from my retreat...should I have gone ahead and found someone *similar* to you, just because you weren’t making things *easy* for me?”

Olivia took a step back. The distance between them wasn’t more than a foot, but it may as well have been miles. “What?” she said sharply. “What the hell has that got to do with this?”

Natalia threw her hands in the air. “Oh nothing, except you’re talking about me giving up something I love, just like that!”

“Something you love?” Olivia shot back. “What, the priests and the ceremonies that I’m not allowed to be a part of?”

“My church, Olivia!” Natalia said, her voice begging Olivia to understand. “My faith...my...my *God!*”

“You said...” Olivia began quickly, then stopped, almost laughing at herself through sudden, choking tears. “You said you loved me more than God,” she pushed out, in a voice as soft and fragile as gossamer.

Natalia frowned. “What?...Olivia-”

“Forget it,” Olivia snapped, running her hands over her face. She shook her head. “Stupid...” she mumbled under her breath.



“Olivia,” Natalia tried again, but Olivia’s face had hardened.

“No. When it comes down to it, this just means one thing. If I can’t stand there beside you while she’s baptized but Frank can, and Buzz can, and fucking *Blake* can...it means I’m nothing. Nothing to our baby...and nothing to you, too.”

Natalia’s face drained of color and a single tear rolled, glistening, down her cheek. “No... that’s not...Olivia...He just said that maybe it wasn’t...wasn’t exactly your place-”

“My place?!” Olivia interjected shrilly. Natalia winced.

“No, please, Olivia, just listen to me for a second-”

Olivia shook her head and pushed past her, grabbing her keys from the bowl by the door and throwing the door open. “I’m that baby’s *mother!*” she hissed savagely. “That’s my place. And screw anyone, man or woman or child or *priest* who says otherwise.”

The door slammed. Moments later, Natalia heard a car start up.

“Olivia!” she called, rushing to the door. “Olivia!”

A sheen of tears obscured her view of Olivia driving away. “Olivia...” she said again, this time as a choked sob. One floor above, Francesca began to cry; both a reflection of Natalia’s

mood, and a reminder of why she couldn't, for the moment, rush to her own car and follow her girlfriend.

Slowly, Natalia let the door swing shut. Finding Olivia would have to wait until after she'd seen to her daughter.

Although what she was going to say to the headstrong woman, she had absolutely no idea.

~~*~*

ACT 3

Olivia didn't know where she was going. She knew she should have stayed, talked to Natalia, tried to reason her way through this latest obstacle. That was what New Olivia did – talked, and reasoned, and understood.

New Olivia was not driving the car.

"Fuck!" she yelled, slamming her hand onto the steering wheel so hard that all the bones in her arm sang. She barely felt it.

A siren blaring behind her halted another streak of profanity. She darted a glance at her speedometer – five miles per hour over the speed limit. She pulled over, sighing deeply.

The cop that emerged from the cruiser was young, and green. She could tell from the way he walked, from the way he fiddled with his belt. Briefly she considered pulling loose a button or two on her shirt, and flashing a little Old Olivia charm. But no. The ring on her finger flashed almost accusingly in the sun, and she shelved that idea.

"License and registration, ma'am," said the cop, in a voice that sounded like it had just broken.

Olivia presented them quietly. She didn't know this kid and she could tell, from the way he scanned her documents without a flicker of recognition, that he didn't know her - or, more importantly, *of* her - either.

"You new in town?" Olivia asked pleasantly.

The cop glanced at her over his very dark, very new shades. "Just transferred from Oakdale, ma'am," he replied, handing her back her documents.

"How do you like it here in Springfield?" Olivia continued.

The cop flashed her a quick smile. "It's real nice," he admitted. "Everyone's pretty friendly."

"Chief Cooper getting you settled in okay?"

The young cop's eyebrows raised. "You know the Chief?" he asked.

Olivia opened her mouth to answer, and then considered what she might say. *"Yeah, his fiancée left him at the altar for me, and now I'm helping to raise his child in a big 'ole lesbian farmhouse dream."* Or: *"We used to date, and then I cheated on him with his father, and then I left his father at the altar, and now I'm a lesbian. Or bi. Not quite sure."* There seemed to be a lot of Coopers left at the altar, whichever way she put it. And lesbians.

"Small town," she said finally. "Everyone knows everyone."

The cop smiled at that. "Yeah, I can see that," he said. "Well, you were going a little over the speed limit, ma'am. I won't give you a ticket this time, but try to be more careful in the future."

Olivia smiled. "I will. Thanks, Officer..."

He coughed. "Greenhorn," the young man supplied, with a hint of a blush.

Olivia barely held in a laugh. "Thanks, Officer Greenhorn," she said, and pulled away at a more sedate pace.

Once a few miles had been eaten away, most of the anger had drained out of her. She didn't know what to do with what was left - a cocktail of regret, and sadness, and a little bit of embarrassment at how she'd behaved. Spotting a parking space up ahead, she angled the car into it, not quite sure what she was going to do, but knowing she didn't want to keep driving.

She was right outside St Joseph's church.

She stared blankly at the building for a few seconds.

"You've got to be fucking with me," she murmured, looking up at the sky. But, with a sigh, she gathered her things, locked the car, and wandered inside.

~~*~*

Blake ran a cloth over the countertop at Company absently, staring, and trying not to be caught staring, at a forlorn looking Doris Wolfe who was slumped over a table, nursing a black coffee. She had breakup written all over her.

Blake knew she should be feeling sorry for the woman who had become her friend. She ought to be over there consoling her, telling her there were plenty more fish in the sea, offering to keep her company some night with a weepy movie and a pint of Ben and Jerry's.

Instead, she was quietly pleased.

Anna Li had set off her alarm bells from the beginning. She could honestly say she'd never liked her much - with her smirk, and her swagger, and the way she looked at least ten years younger than she really was. Seeing her with Doris had made her blood boil for longer than she could remember, and she was secretly happy she hadn't been seeing it recently.

But then, of course, she also felt guilty for feeling happy. This contradiction was what was keeping her stuck at the counter, her hand wiping an already clean spot over, and over, and over again.

The bell over the door jingled merrily, announcing the arrival of a customer.

"Natalia!" Blake said, smiling broadly. "And my little soon-to-be-God-daughter."

Blake was staring down into Francesca's stroller at the little girl's quietly slumbering face, so she missed the flinch that ghosted over Natalia's expression.

"Hey, Blake," she said eventually, looking around the restaurant, which was empty apart from herself, Francesca, Blake and Doris. "Quiet today, huh?"

"Uh huh," Blake replied, still smiling down at Francesca. Finally she looked up to meet Natalia's eyes. "What can I get you?"

Natalia settled herself gracefully onto one of the stools lining the front of the counter. "Oh, nothing really," she said. "I was just wondering if Olivia had been in today?"

Blake shook her head. "Nope, haven't seen her."

Natalia's shoulders slumped. "Oh."

Blake frowned. "Have you two had a fight or something?"

Natalia shrugged. "Something like that," she admitted. She leaned forward, resting her forehead on the counter. "It's all my fault."

Blake abandoned her place behind the counter and came round to sit by her friend. Doris, her interest piqued by the mention of Olivia's name, came and joined them.

"What happened?" Blake asked, rubbing her friend's back in comforting circles.

Slowly, with a few pauses, Natalia explained what had happened that morning with Father Ray, and how Olivia had taken it.

"And then she just left," Natalia finished at last. "And she won't answer my calls and I can't find her anywhere."

Doris counted off Olivia's usual haunts on her fingers. "Have you tried Towers? Farley's? The Beacon?" Each was met with a nod from Natalia. "Hmm. In that case, it's certain. She's gone straight to the church to rip Father Ray's head off."

Natalia gasped, and Blake swatted the Mayor on the arm. "Doris!" she admonished. "Be serious for crying out loud."

"I am being serious," Doris protested. "It'll be a front page headline tomorrow. *Local Lesbian Lays in to Liturgical Lecturer.*" Blake swatted at her again, harder this time. "What?" Doris complained. "Too many L words?"

"You don't really think she'd have gone there, do you?" Natalia asked nervously. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth. Surely Olivia would realize that the last thing they needed was her particular brand of "negotiation". Not with a priest.

Doris took pity. "No, I'm sure she hasn't," she said, her voice softening. "She respects you too much for that."

Natalia sighed in relief. Of course Doris was right. Olivia wouldn't have gone to see Father Ray. But maybe...her eyes widened as an idea struck her.

"Blake?" she asked. "Would you mind looking after Francesca for a while?"

Blake smiled. "Of course," she said. "Frank and I could keep her overnight if you want."

"That'd be great, actually," Natalia replied. "You guys have everything you need, right?"

"Uh huh. Go on; go find your girl." Blake shooed her from the stool.

"Natalia?" Doris called, just as the dark-haired woman was about to leave the restaurant. She turned, looking at the Mayor expectantly. "Just a quick question. I've been lapsed for a while, maybe I'm not up on all the Catholic rules and whatnot. But is there a reason why Frank is allowed to have *his* girlfriend," she nodded towards Blake, "be godmother to Francesca but you're not allowed to have *yours*?"

Natalia looked back at her for a moment, her face expressionless. "Huh," she said at last, and then she was gone, the bell jingling above the door and signaling her departure.

Blake smiled. "You're one smart cookie, you know that?" she said fondly. Doris blushed, just a little, and Blake's smile widened. "Do you want anything? Another coffee?"

Doris shook her head. "How about," she began haltingly. "How about...a friend?"

Blake's heart melted at the uncertainty in Doris's voice. Impulsively she reached out and pulled the other woman into an embrace. Doris was stiff in her arms at first, but slowly, very slowly, she began to relax, leaning her head on Blake's shoulder and beginning to sob gently against the crook of her neck.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Blake murmured, rubbing her hand up and down her friend's back. She closed her eyes, breathing in the scent of strong coffee and faded cigarettes and expensive perfume - the scent of Doris. She'd know it anywhere.

"I thought I'd got it this time," Doris mumbled against her neck. "My happily ever after. How stupid is that?"

Blake shook her head. "It's not stupid."

Doris pulled back from the hug, wiping her eyes discreetly with the back of her hands. "Well, it feels pretty stupid right now," she said, sighing. "What's the opposite of happily ever after anyway?"

Blake blinked, trying to process the question. "The opposite of happily ever after?" she repeated at last, and then smiled slowly. "That's easy," she said, reaching for a Kleenex from her pocket and tenderly wiping away some smears of mascara from under Doris's eyes. She waited until she had the Mayor's complete attention before she continued.

"Temporary misery."

Doris's lower lip trembled, and for a moment it looked like she might cry again. But then she sucked in a shallow breath. "Temporary?" she said, her eyes beseeching.

Blake nodded firmly. "Temporary," she said, and then, a little more softly, added: "I promise," thinking of Ross and the loss of *their* happily ever after, what felt like so many years ago.

They stared at each other unblinking for a moment or two, and then Doris nodded. She took a deep breath. "Okay," she said softly, her voice only a little shaky. "Okay..."

Blake smiled, and then headed back behind the counter. "And I just happen to know one of the best cures for temporary misery," she said. "Buzz's double chocolate cheesecake with extra whipped cream..."

~~*~*

"So, yeah," Olivia said, staring up at the big, bare cross above the altar. "Basically I wanted to ask you, what's the deal? I mean, what's with all the constant obstacles? I'm not just talking about me and Natalia and the baptism - I mean my whole. Freakin'. Life. Why do I never catch a break for longer than two minutes? Huh? Is my life just some kind of...big cosmic soap opera being played out for your amusement? And the brief moments of sanity are like the commercial breaks?" She began to laugh, a little more loudly than she'd intended. It echoed through the empty church. "And now back to Olivia Spencer's life, sponsored by Procter and Gamble." She turned her head on one side, and reconsidered. "Nah, wait. Procter and Gamble probably wouldn't have let me be a lesbian."

She released another laugh, this time just on the right side of hysteria, and slouched down into the front pew. "Okay, seriously," she began again. "What exactly is it that you want from me?" There was no answer. No heavenly sign, no burning bush. Olivia sighed. "Typical," she said bitterly.

Just then, a familiar voice called out from behind her. "Olivia?"

Olivia turned. Her eyebrows rose almost of their own accord. "Funny place to meet you," she commented, before turning her attention back to the cross.

Sister Anne sat down beside her. She was dressed in dark jeans and a plain, long-sleeved T-shirt - a little more casually than the last time Olivia had seen her. Her hair was up in a bun, with the occasional blonde strand sneaking out to frame her face.

"I'd have thought a church would be a pretty common place to meet a nun," she said. Olivia half laughed, half snorted.

"Wrong kind of church," she said shortly. "At least, that's what Natalia says..."

Olivia trailed off and, as Sister Anne didn't seem to care to respond to that, a silence stretched between them for a few moments.

"Did you always want to be a nun?" Olivia asked suddenly. She turned to Sister Anne, watching as a grin broke out on her face.

"Oh no," she replied. "I wanted to be a priest."

Olivia barked out a laugh. "A what?" She shook her head. "Have I missed something? You know, the whole Catholic thing..."

"Yeah," Sister Anne said, shaking her head. "A bit of a shame, that."

Olivia gestured around her. "Why not go join a church that would let you be a priest?"

The other woman's face hardened. "And let those male celibates have *my* church?" she said. "I don't think so."

They lapsed into silence for a moment. Olivia cast her mind back to Natalia's appalled face at Olivia's suggestion that she should give up *her* faith, *her* church. She shook her head.

"I've gotta go," she murmured, and made to stand up.

"Anywhere in particular?" Sister Anne said quickly, standing with Olivia.

Olivia shrugged. "Not really," she admitted. "Just...somewhere else." She quirked her lips in a rueful smile. "Anywhere else..."

A slow smile spread over the nun's lips. "Do you suppose you could give me a ride?" she said finally. "I came here on the bus, but I'm in a bit of a hurry to get back."

Olivia's instinct was to demur. In fact, she had almost let an excuse slip out of her mouth before she checked herself. Where else was she going to go, after all? To some bar where she'd get drunk off her ass before having to make the inevitable embarrassing call to Natalia to come pick her up because she wasn't fit to drive? Or home, to a conversation she wasn't ready to have, with a woman she wasn't ready to face?

"All right," she said at last. "I don't really have anything planned for the afternoon, as it happens."

Sister Anne beamed.

~~*~*

It turned out that Sister Anne's destination was about as far away as it was possible to get in a small town like Springfield. Olivia had expected to be directed towards Father Ray's church. Instead, she found herself in one of the shabbier streets in town, pulling up outside a small building declaring itself *St Elizabeth's Mission*.

"Don't you have to be a missionary to have a mission?" Olivia asked, allowing a dash of sarcasm to leak into her voice. With the day she'd had so far, she felt she deserved it.

Sister Anne just smiled. "Everyone's a missionary," she said. "It just depends what your particular mission is."

Olivia rolled her eyes, thankfully hidden by her large, aviator sunglasses. "And what's the mission of this place?" she said. "Who's good old Saint Lizzie when she's at home?"

"Saint Elizabeth of Hungary," the nun explained, heading into the mission. Olivia found herself following, as if pulled on a string by Sister Anne's calm voice. "She's the patron saint of homeless people and beggars. She spent her life feeding the hungry. And that's what we do here."

Olivia took off her glasses and looked around. She found herself in a large, refectory style hall. Some scattered men and women were sitting at tables, eating soup and bread.

"I was just at St Joseph's putting up a sign looking for volunteers to help out here," Sister Anne explained.

Olivia smirked. "You don't care that they're the wrong denomination?"

The nun rolled her eyes. "If someone can cook, or serve food, or produce a kind word at the right moment, I really don't care who or what they are," she said. "And neither does God."

Olivia looked around again. A few women in pant suits and aprons moved among the homeless men and women, making sure they had enough, or just talking to them. The only things that marked them out as nuns were the small silver crucifixes round their necks, and the strangely serene air of calm emanating from them. Olivia had noticed it with Sister Anne before. The woman was so good at calming Olivia down she was practically a sedative.

"The lunch rush is just about over," Sister Anne said suddenly, and surprised Olivia by tossing something at her. She caught it on instinct. It was an apron.

“Huh?” she said.

Sister Anne just smiled. “We have to start preparing for dinner,” she said. “Are you any good in the kitchen?”

Again, Olivia began to protest, but something stopped her. What was the harm, really, in cooking up a few dinners? She still didn’t want to go home. And she knew what would happen if she went to any of her usual haunts. Either she’d get drunk, or Natalia would find her. Neither prospect was enticing.

“I can cook,” she said, tying the apron around her middle. “I trained as a chef under Massimo, actually.”

“Should I know who that is?” the nun asked.

Olivia gaped. “Massimo?” she said. “One of the most famous chefs in the world? More Michelin stars than you’ve had hot dinners?”

Sister Anne shook her head. “Doesn’t ring a bell,” she said. “But speaking of hot dinners...” She pointed to the kitchen. “Come on. I’m a good listener...”

Olivia managed a laugh. “Yeah yeah, I already noticed that,” she grumbled good-naturedly. “Just show me where you want me.”

~~*~*

“For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.”

Natalia made the sign of the cross. She’d never been in an Episcopal church before. It was interesting - both familiar and unknown at once. It was strange looking up at an empty cross while she prayed. But, she reasoned, it was the same God, even if the people who frequented this church worshipped Him a little differently. The same prayers would probably work just fine.

Natalia had come to the church on a hunch, thinking that maybe Olivia might have decided to seek answers there as she had before. She was disappointed to find no sign of her girlfriend, but decided to stay anyway. The church was totally empty, and quiet. Quiet was one of the things she sorely needed.

“Our Father, who art in Heaven,” she began again. “Hallowed be thy name.”

She mumbled the well-known words of the prayer, feeling their familiarity wash over her like a balm. These words had been with her for as long as she could remember. And not just these but also the Hail Mary, the Nicene Creed, the Memorare, all the prayers that had been written on her heart since she was a child. The smell of incense and candles, the chime of bells, the sonorous voice of a cantor intoning a psalm.

How could Olivia possibly expect her to give all that up?

She shook her head, and tried a different prayer. "I believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth..."

Her lips could say this prayer without her mind being involved, so she let it wander to what Doris had said as she was leaving Company. It was interesting, to say the least, that Father Ray had called Blake an "appropriate choice" at the meeting this morning. She and Frank weren't married, after all. By allowing Blake to stand up next to Frank at the baptism, was he not giving that relationship the "appearance of a blessing?"

"Hypocrite," she spat, interrupting her prayer. A flush ran up her cheeks as she realized she'd spoken her thoughts out loud. Olivia was obviously rubbing off on her.

But then, it wasn't the first time she'd thought something similar about Father Ray. She remembered biting her tongue at Billy and Vanessa's and Buzz and Lillian's weddings, trying not to grumble too much about the bizarre sight of her supposedly deeply conservative priest marrying a quartet of divorcees.

With a sigh, Natalia looked up at the unfamiliar cross. Maybe Olivia was right. Maybe it was time to stop treating Father Ray like the be all and end all of what was right for her, and for her family.

She glanced at her watch. She'd now been looking for Olivia for three hours. It was time to go home. Her girlfriend would surely have to come back there sometime.

~~*~*

It was two hours later when Natalia finally heard from her wayward partner, in the form of a text.

Set the table for three. Company for dinner.

Ordinarily Natalia would have been annoyed at such a brusque message. Tonight, she didn't care one bit. Olivia was coming home.

Okay. I love you, she replied, and set the table with a lighter heart than she'd had all day when she received an almost immediate reply of *I love you, too*.

It wasn't long before she heard the sound of Olivia's car pulling up outside the door, along with another vehicle she didn't recognize. She headed into the living room, a smile plastered onto her face for Olivia and for the surprise guest her girlfriend had brought home.

"Oh!" Natalia exclaimed when Sister Anne walked through the door, followed closely by Olivia.

"Surprise!" Olivia said, and held up some Tupperware containers. "I brought food, and look - a nun."

"I see that," Natalia replied evenly.

Olivia smirked as she leaned in for a quick kiss. "I know it's a cliché, but she really did follow me home," she whispered against her girlfriend's lips.

A surprised laugh followed her into the kitchen.

~~*~*

Natalia smiled at Sister Anne as she took the last bite of her meal - a more delicious meal than one might have expected to come out of a Tupperware container. "I can't believe you had her cooking for the homeless," she said for the third time.

Olivia rolled her eyes. "I give a significant percentage of my income to charity every year, as you well know," she said, with a hint of a whine in her voice.

"Yeah," Natalia replied. "But there's a difference between writing a check and actually putting on an apron and getting your hands dirty." She turned to Sister Anne. "Did she actually wear an apron?"

The nun nodded. "She sure did." At Natalia's delighted grin she added: "I have pictures. They'll be up on our website next week."

"I don't remember signing a release for that," Olivia grumbled.

"Like you'd sue some nuns," Sister Anne said. Olivia just rolled her eyes.

"I had no idea there was a place like that in Springfield," Natalia went on. "I mean...my church in Chicago ran a lot of projects like soup kitchens and the Saint Vincent de Paul society...but I've never heard of anything similar happening here."

Sister Anne's expression soured almost imperceptibly. "The mission is run by me, and some of the Sisters from my order," she said. "The parish actually has very little to do with it, although we're certainly trying to change that." She smiled. "You know, we're looking for volunteers - especially at breakfast and lunchtimes."

Natalia eyes widened. "Oh, I would love to help out," she said enthusiastically, and then glanced down at their guest's empty plate. "Can I get you some coffee?"

The nun checked the clock. "I'd better go actually," she said "I have a little errand to run before I head home for the night."

Olivia walked her to the door while Natalia cleared away the dishes. "Thanks," she said quietly. "For making me cook chicken drumsticks and...for listening."

"Anytime," the nun replied. Olivia pulled her into a brief hug, and then pressed a piece of paper into her hands.

Sister Anne looked down at the paper. Her eyes widened. "Olivia..." she breathed.

"Ssh," Olivia said, smiling. "It's for a good cause. Besides, Natalia's right. I'm more of a writing checks girl than an apron girl, after all."

The nun folded the check carefully and slid it into her pocket. "Thank you," she said. "And as for what we talked about..." She nodded toward the kitchen where they could both hear Natalia moving around. "You know where to find me if either of you need me again."

"I do."

When Sister Anne's car had reached the end of the drive, and her lights had faded away into the black, Olivia closed the door. She could sense Natalia's presence in the room behind her. She could practically feel her lover's eyes on her.

"I guess we need to finish that talk," she said softly.

"I guess we do," Natalia replied.

Olivia turned. Natalia was standing in front of the fireplace, with a crucifix hanging on the wall just behind her left ear, and a statue of the Virgin on the mantle to her right. Olivia swallowed.

Why do I feel like this is three against one?

~~*~*

ACT 4

Sister Anne tapped the steering wheel in time to the music blaring from her radio as she drove a familiar route through the town. A few breathy words slipped out without conscious thought. She was a good singer - leader of the church choir before she took her vows - and she happened to think this was a pretty good driving song.

“And that was Queen with ‘Don’t Stop Me Now’. Stay with us for more of the music you love after this word.”

She killed the engine, cutting off the DJ’s chirpy voice. The familiar shape of the Catholic church loomed in front of her in the darkness. However, the rectory beside it was her destination for this evening.

“Oh, hello, Sister,” said Father Ray when he answered her knocks. His voice was a little stiff.

“Hi, Ray,” she replied, walking past him without waiting to be invited in. He stood in the doorway for a second, his eyebrows raised, before closing the door and following her into the den.

“Coffee, Sister?” he asked politely.

“Oh Ray, you read my mind,” she replied, grinning widely. “Cream, two sugars. Thanks. Oh, and if you have a biscuit or a cookie to spare, that’d be great.”

“You haven’t given up sweet things for Lent?” the priest asked pointedly. Sister Anne just laughed.

“Oh, no,” she said. “I prefer to do a little something *more* during Lent, rather than give something up.” Her face hardened almost imperceptibly. “And besides, what I am or am not doing during Lent is really none of your business, is it?”

Father Ray held up his hands and flashed a smile on and off at her. “Just checking,” he said, and left to make the coffee.

He returned a few minutes later to find Sister Anne inspecting a new pen he'd left out on his desk. "Nice," she said, looking up at him. "Is this a Visconti?"

He had the grace to blush. "It was a gift from the bishop," he said quickly. "To mark the fifteenth anniversary of my ordination."

Sister Anne set it down carefully. "Some gift," she commented, accepting her coffee and sipping it delicately.

Father Ray sat down in his armchair and set his own cup down on the table beside it to cool. "What can I do for you, Sister?" he asked.

Sister Anne grabbed one of the biscuits he'd brought with him, and took a sizeable bite. "I actually just came to ask if you'd given any more thought to my proposal," she said. "Of expanding the mission. The church hall here would be a really useful extra base, and we could do a lot more fundraising, and really raise awareness of what we're trying to accomplish." She took another sip of her coffee, watching him over the rim of the cup.

"Ah," he said, and she knew from his tone exactly what he was going to say. "Yes, I've discussed your idea with all the relevant committees...I'm afraid we don't think the church hall is really the appropriate place. There are so many other groups who want to use the space...the scouts...the social committee..." He smiled. "But obviously we'll be happy to support the mission in any other way we can. Maybe a door collection in a few weeks? A note in the church newsletter?"

Sister Anne smiled tightly. "Well, I'm sure all of us at St Elizabeth's will really appreciate your support, Ray," she said.

The priest coughed. "I hope you don't feel in any way short-changed here, Sister," he began, but the nun cut him off with a wave.

"Short-changed?" she said archly. "Now why would I feel like that?" She quickly drained her coffee and stood up to leave. Just as she reached the door she turned back. "Oh," she said. "That reminds me of something..."

Father Ray frowned. "Was there something else?"

Sister Anne nodded. "Just what you said back there about *place*...how the hall wasn't the appropriate place. It reminded me of something else I heard today. Something about it not being Olivia Spencer's *place* to be Francesca Rivera's godmother, did I hear that right?"

Father Ray flushed. "Yes," he snapped, and for the first time that evening Sister Anne could hear a little anger in his voice. She crowed inwardly. It wasn't very Christian of her, but she did so love getting under this man's skin. "Surely even you would agree that she's hardly an appropriate choice, *Sister*."

The nun laughed. "Now why on Earth would I agree with that?"

Father Ray's flush deepened. "Practicing homosexuals," he began, but Sister Anne halted him with a quick roll of her eyes.

"Oh, don't," she scoffed. "You're completely missing the point."

She took a step towards him. "Being a child's godparent is about faith," she said. "And Olivia Spencer has plenty of that." She held up her hand to stop his imminent interruption. "Not the kind that brings people here every week to bob up and down at the right times and chant along with everybody else. Faith in Natalia. Faith in their family. Faith in love." Her face softened a little. "God *is* love, Ray," she said quietly. "Isn't that what we're always telling people?"

Before he had a chance to respond, she smiled brightly. "Well, thanks for the coffee, Ray, and the chat," she said. "I can see myself out."

With that, she headed back to her car, and from there to the mission, where it was time to distribute hot drinks before the needy had to go out and fend for themselves in the chill March night.

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Natalia shifted from one foot to another, watching Olivia as if trying to gauge how exactly to approach her. Olivia swallowed again.

"So..." she began, and then cringed at how lame that sounded, even to herself. Natalia didn't reply. Olivia's palms began to sweat a little. "Look," she tried again. "I'm sorry-"

Natalia cut her off with a shake of her head. She covered the distance between them in two quick strides, and slid her left hand possessively into her girlfriend's hair. Olivia fell back against the arm of the couch, her lips parted slightly, her breath catching as she looked up into Natalia's face. Such a strange sensation, to be looking *up* at her. But, she had to admit, it was kinda nice...Natalia having that extra inch or two over her. It seemed to give her a little more confidence; the confidence to quieten Olivia with a deep, controlling kiss.

“Mmph,” Olivia moaned softly, bringing her own hand up to slide gently against Natalia’s cheek. Their lips parted briefly, long enough for them to gaze at each other in a heated, breathy silence, before they crashed back together with force. Olivia fell back onto the couch itself, and Natalia followed her, stretching her body out against her lover’s and threading her fingers into her hair as she found her lips again.

“Mmm,” Olivia whimpered, arching up against Natalia and running her hands along the curve of her spine, feeling her shiver. “Shouldn’t we - ah - shouldn’t we be talking?”

Natalia buried her face in the crook of Olivia’s neck, nipping at her throat before soothing the minor ache with her tongue. “After,” she whispered in her ear, and then took her earlobe into her mouth.

Olivia’s eyes fluttered closed. “After,” she agreed, and then pushed up, flipping them both over and sending them crashing noisily to the floor. Somewhere behind them, a cup fell off a table. Neither of them noticed.

“Shit, did I hurt you?” Olivia said, pulling back a little to look into Natalia’s flushed face

“Nuh uh,” came the instant, breathy reply, before Natalia pulled her back down to her lips. For long moments their kisses were hard, almost combative, but then Natalia slid her hands again through Olivia’s hair, and sighed.

“I love you so much,” she whispered. Her lips travelled across the heated skin of Olivia’s cheeks, pressing soft, tender kisses wherever they went. Olivia relaxed in her arms, leaning her hands on the floor on either side of her lover’s face, her breathing deep and slow.

“I love you, too,” she murmured.

Slowly, Natalia began to push on Olivia’s shoulders, until the older woman relented and allowed herself to be rolled over onto her back. Natalia stretched out beside her, resting her head on her palm.

“I could just look at you forever, you know that?” Olivia whispered in awe, gazing up at Natalia through hooded eyes. Natalia sighed.

“You are so beautiful,” she breathed, allowing her heated gaze to travel down Olivia’s body. Her hand soon followed the trail her eyes had journeyed, caressing her lover in a meandering path from her forehead, to her chest, heaving with gasping breaths, to her thighs. When her hand began to travel back up, it slipped beneath Olivia’s skirt, causing her breath to hitch.

"I love it when you wear skirts," Natalia said softly. A dark flush was rising from her throat up to her cheeks. "Sometimes I see you leaving for work in those gorgeous suits you wear and I just want to lay you down on the kitchen table and..."

She trailed off as her wandering fingers began to push the material of Olivia's skirt up, gently at first, and then more and more insistently. Olivia raised her hips to help, and the words she'd wanted to say in response to Natalia's admission caught in her throat.

"You make me crazy, you know that?" Natalia whispered.

Before Olivia could reply - before, indeed, she quite knew what was happening - Natalia was on top of her again, straddling one of her thighs. Her hair fell down on either side of her face, creating a warm cocoon where their lips met, and for a moment the world simply dropped away. No disapproving priests, no harsh words, no arguments. The two of them were all that existed - friends, lovers, partners - and nothing else mattered at all.

"Natalia...", Olivia moaned, reaching down to pull the loose material of Natalia's dress up a little, so she could arch her thigh without hindrance.

"Oh...", Natalia breathed, half surprised, half something Olivia couldn't name. She opened her eyes, staring down at Olivia with love, and heat, and a deep, profound desire. "These need to come off," she muttered, scrabbling around the waist of Olivia's underwear. Once again, Olivia raised her hips to help her lover, inhaling deeply when Natalia's hands slid down her thighs.

Natalia looked down, her heart thumping loudly in her ears as she took in the sight of Olivia: lips wet and swollen from their kisses, her hair mussed, half-naked and breathing hard. "Dear God," she murmured, and then her fingers were sliding up Olivia's thigh again and inside her; first one, then two. Olivia gasped, her back arching automatically. Her eyes flickered closed, but not before she caught the look of wonder spreading over Natalia's face as she settled inside her.

"I love you," Natalia said. "I love this." She flexed her fingers, drawing a throaty groan from Olivia's lips. "I love being with you like this."

"I love you, too," Olivia managed to reply, before her breath was stolen by a gentle thrust. Her hands settled on Natalia's waist as her lover developed a rhythm. The smaller woman leaned down, capturing Olivia's lips in a kiss as they moved together.

Olivia arched her thigh up against Natalia, feeling the resultant shudder everywhere their bodies touched. "I love being with you too," she said, pushing Natalia's hips down just as

she arched her thigh up. "Let me..." She buried her face in Natalia's throat, kissing and nipping at her thundering pulse. "Let me, Natalia..."

"Mmph," was Natalia's only reply, but her free hand reached under her dress, fumbling furiously until she was finally able to push her underwear aside.

Their bodies established a rhythm together in moments, their lips meeting again and again in kisses that were at once fierce and tender. Then their movements began to change, becoming more frantic, their soft nips a little sharper, their kisses somehow more intense. Natalia rocked against her lover, moaning as the sensation of Olivia's thigh pressing up against her began to overtake her.

"Olivia..." she gasped, dragging her lips away from the other woman's with an effort. "I...oh, God, Olivia I-"

Olivia shook her head, threading the fingers of both hands into Natalia's hair and crushing their lips together again. All she cared about at that moment was Natalia: Natalia's lips, Natalia's slick heat against her thigh, Natalia's fingers moving inside her.

"Oh!" Olivia breathed against her girlfriend's lips, as if surprised, and then she stiffened, her hands gripping Natalia's hair almost painfully. Natalia continued to move above her for a few seconds more, but soon she slumped against Olivia, breathing hard in her ear, and muttering almost inaudible entreaties to God, the Holy Mother, and a few saints that Olivia hadn't even heard of.

Slowly, Olivia unclenched her fists, releasing bunches of Natalia's hair. "Sorry," she whispered, beginning to massage her lover's scalp to soothe away any lingering pain, waiting for her galloping heart-rate to return to normal. Natalia moaned in satisfaction, and nestled more snugly against Olivia's body.

"Isn't that how this got started?" she muttered.

"Huh?" Olivia frowned, her hands stilling.

"You apologizing."

Olivia laughed. "I guess it did," she admitted. "But honey, I think I need a little rest - and maybe some cushions - before we try that again." She pulled back to look into Natalia's eyes. "I am a heart patient you know."

Olivia's fingers combed through Natalia's hair slowly, and softly. Natalia seemed to snuggle even closer into her side, and smiled against the soft skin of her neck.

“That’s certainly one way to resolve a difference of opinion,” she said.

Olivia laughed. “I’ll bear that in mind the next time you won’t let me eat red meat,” she quipped. Natalia swatted her stomach playfully.

“Yeah yeah,” she muttered. They lay together for a few more moments, just enjoying the heady joy of being together, and then Natalia sat up a little, leaning her head on her palm.

“That talk’s happening now, huh?” Olivia said.

Natalia nodded. “Fraid so,” she murmured. She took a breath. “Olivia,” she began. “When I came back from church today, I was angry. I was so mad, at Father Ray and the whole situation, and I was looking to pick a fight.” She shook her head, her eyes sorrowful. “I think that if I hadn’t been like that then maybe what came after wouldn’t have just...got so out of control.”

Olivia opened her mouth, then snapped it shut again, fighting her automatic urge to absolve Natalia of all responsibility. “Maybe,” she admitted eventually. “I don’t know.”

Natalia nodded. “I do,” she said. “I should have started that talk differently, and I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” Olivia replied.

“All right,” Natalia said. “Next thing. When I told you what Father Ray said, about it not being your place to be Francesca’s godmother, I didn’t mean that I agreed with him.”

Olivia swallowed hard. “You didn’t?” she said. Her voice was small, and trembling.

Natalia leaned forward and kissed Olivia’s forehead, tears in her eyes. “Oh querida,” she whispered. “Of course I didn’t. I *love* you. Your place is with me. Always.”

Olivia buried her face in the crook of Natalia’s neck for a moment, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs. Natalia held her close, her heart breaking that Olivia could ever have doubted exactly where she belonged. But then, she knew that this too was her responsibility. When doubts reared up in Olivia’s mind about her place in the family, or about Natalia’s commitment, Natalia knew she didn’t have to look far to find the source of them.

“Okay then,” Olivia said at last, allowing Natalia to wipe away the last of her tears. “So what do we do?”

Natalia sighed. "It's up to Father Ray," she said. "But I can tell you this - there'll be no baptism without you, Olivia."

Olivia looked up at her. "Really?"

A smile spread over Natalia's lips. "Really," she said, leaning close for a kiss.

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After picking up Francesca from her father the next morning, Natalia went to the church when she was sure she'd find Father Ray - just as morning mass was letting out. She pulled up outside the building, waiting for the few die-hard worshippers who went to daily mass to begin spilling out onto the street. When they did, she unhooked Francesca from her child seat in the back, and headed into the church with the stroller.

"Natalia!" Father Ray said, pleased - as always - to see her. "And little Francesca. I didn't expect to see you until next Sunday."

Natalia smiled. "Oh, I just came to tell you that I thought about what you were saying, about Olivia being a godmother and all."

Father Ray raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Yeah," Natalia said. "I just came to say that I've thought about it and I definitely think that having Olivia as one of her godparents is the right thing for Francesca."

"Oh." The priest's disappointment couldn't have been more palpable. He frowned, shaking his head slightly. "I'm sorry, Natalia, it's just not possible."

Natalia's lips formed a straight line. "Why?" she snapped.

"You know why," Father Ray insisted sadly.

"Tell me one more time," Natalia said.

The priest sighed. "The role of godparent is inconsistent with Olivia's...lifestyle."

Natalia's hands gripped the handles of Francesca's stroller until her knuckles turned white. "Oh really?" she said. "And what about Blake Marler's lifestyle?"

Father Ray did a brief double take. "I...I'm afraid I don't understand," he said.

"I *mean*," Natalia said heatedly, "that it seems odd to me that Frank can choose his partner, his *unmarried* partner, to be godmother to our child, and yet apparently Olivia's 'lifestyle' rules her out."

The priest coughed. "It's a little different, Natalia-" he began, but Natalia cut him off.

"No, it's really not," she said. "It seems to me that you're rather more approving of Frank and Blake than you are of me and Olivia. And I can't help but wonder why that is." She leaned towards him, as if imparting a confidence. "Homophobia is a sin you know, Father."

The priest flushed darkly. "This isn't homophobia, Natalia," he insisted.

Natalia shrugged. "I'm not here to debate that with you," she said. "I'm just here to let you know what I've decided." She straightened, looking into his eyes calmly, and with confidence. "Olivia will stand up for Francesca with me, just like Blake and Buzz will stand up for her with Frank. If not...there won't be a baptism."

Her statement lay in the air for a moment as they stared at each other. "Are you turning your back on the church, Natalia?" Father Ray asked softly.

Natalia shook her head. "No," she said, quietly, but firmly. "I'm a Catholic. It's in my heart, and in my blood." The baby began to fuss a little in her stroller, distracting Natalia's attention briefly. "I love the church," she said, tucking Francesca's wubby a little tighter round her shoulders. She took a deep breath. "It's just..." She paused, searching for the words. "Sometimes...sometimes I feel like the church just doesn't love me."

A tear trickled down her cheek, and she wiped it away with her sleeve as she turned to go.

"Natalia," the priest said, stopping her in her tracks.

"Yes, Father?" she said, not looking back.

Father Ray wrung his hands together. If Natalia had been looking, she would have seen that he seemed as uncertain as he had ever been. "The church *does* love you," he said at last, with a gentle sigh. "Bring Olivia with you on Sunday, with Frank and the others."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "Thank you, Father," she said, and managed a small smile.

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Sister Anne beamed warmly at St Elizabeth's Mission's newest volunteer. "So that's about it," she said. "We might need you to cook, or we might need you to serve. It depends which volunteers we have on the day. I know you're a pretty busy woman, but do you think you can commit to two days a week?"

Natalia smiled, balancing Francesca on her hip. The baby was playing with her hair, wrapping it around her small, stubby fingers, and occasionally trying to put it in her mouth.

"Cook and serve, twice a week," she said. "Yeah, I think I'll be able to manage that." It wasn't as if she hadn't had enough experience with the church and its seemingly endless bake sales. The major difference was that, at St Elizabeth's, the products of her labor would be going *directly* to the needy.

"Perfect," Sister Anne said. "Can you start tomorrow?"

Natalia glanced at her little girl. "What do you think Sweet Pea?" she murmured. "You feel like eating Jane's hair tomorrow for a few hours?" Francesca laughed and kicked her legs. Natalia couldn't help but break into a fully-fledged grin as she held her daughter a little closer. "I think that means yes," she said.

"Great." Sister Anne reached out and stroked the tuft of dark hair on Francesca's head. "I'm so glad you came by, Natalia. I know you'll be a great asset to us here." She glanced up at the other woman through her eyelashes. "And you know...I've been told I'm a good listener. If you wanted to talk about...anything. For any reason."

Natalia nodded, and flashed the nun a knowing smile. "You know what, Sister?" she said, thinking of Father Ray, and her own recent decision that he could no longer be the sole touchstone of her faith. "I think...I think that I may well take you up on that sometime."

The End

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Felix Culpa

By Wonko

ACT 1

Olivia sometimes joked that she would know at once if Natalia ever died suddenly in the night – because she would be warmer to the touch.

This was brought home to her once again when Natalia slipped into bed at two am that night, her hands and feet icy cold, the scent of happy, fed baby clinging to her skin.

“Mmph,” Olivia groaned, still asleep and instinctively moving away from her girlfriend’s frozen limbs. Natalia didn’t let her get away so easily.

“Oh, no you don’t, missy,” she mumbled, wrapping her arms around Olivia and pressing the soles of her feet against suddenly flinching calves. Olivia shivered.

“Evil,” Olivia grumbled, but pulled her lover close nonetheless, allowing the combined warmth of their bed and her body to slowly seep back into Natalia.

Natalia moaned in appreciation as she nestled into Olivia’s side. “You’re so good to me,” she breathed against her neck, and this time Olivia’s shiver was nothing to do with the cold.

“Is Sweet Pea asleep?” she asked casually.

“Mmm hmm,” came the soft reply. Natalia tilted her head up and dropped a soft, sleepy kiss under her girlfriend’s chin.

“And Emma?” Olivia continued. Her hand began to dip lower on Natalia’s back in long, soft strokes.

Natalia smiled, her dimples invisible in the dark of the room. “Are you propositioning me, Ms. Spencer?” Her voice was throaty with interrupted sleep, but rich and mellifluous to Olivia’s ears.

“I didn’t know I had to proposition you, Ms. Rivera,” Olivia said, rolling over so that she half covered Natalia while her hand slipped under her shirt and caressed the soft skin of her stomach.

Natalia wrapped her arms around her lover’s neck, gazing up at her with a vaguely pensive look on her face. “Do you know what day it is?” she asked softly.

Olivia frowned, and had to think for a moment. “Thursday,” she said at last, after a glance at the digital alarm clock blinking away on the bedside table.

“And, uhm...” Natalia seemed to hesitate. “The date?”

Olivia frowned, and then groaned, dropping her face into Natalia's neck briefly. "April first," she said. "Oh hell, I'm pretty sure Emma has something in store for us at breakfast."

Natalia laughed - or rather sort of laughed - a tight, unnatural sound. Olivia looked up quickly, her eyes seeking Natalia's in the dark. "Why?" she said.

For a moment Natalia seemed to be deep in thought, as if considering something very important. Finally, she shook her head. "Nothing," she said. "I love you. Kiss me."

It was a well-known fact that Olivia Spencer didn't like taking orders. But this one instruction, from this one woman, she would always be happy to follow.

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As it turned out, the two women got through the day with little more than a quick sugar-salt swap at the breakfast table. Natalia used Olivia's coughing fit as an excuse to lecture her about her sugar intake, much to Olivia's annoyance, while Emma merely giggled her head off in harmony with Francesca, who seemed to be finding the whole thing very funny. So, Olivia had needed to go back upstairs to clean her teeth and rinse her mouth out another dozen or so times, and had been running late. She missed the faraway look on Natalia's face as she kissed her goodbye, and by the time she got home that night Jane was with the kids and Natalia was already at church.

"Mommy!" Emma squealed as Jane smiled and made her escape. "You're so late!"

"Sorry, baby," Olivia replied, rubbing the back of her neck. She was stiff and tired, having worked a little later than she'd meant. "Have you done your homework?"

Emma nodded. "Mommy, how come Nata- Ma's at church? It's not even Sunday."

Olivia flopped down onto the couch, feeling her heart swell with the same love and intense gratitude that she'd felt the first time Emma had claimed Natalia as her 'Ma.' "It's a special day for her," she explained. "Tonight's when the people at church remember the last supper, and some people get their feet washed by the priest up on the altar."

Emma's nose wrinkled. "Eww!" she exclaimed. "Feet!"

Olivia laughed. "Yeah," she said, reaching out and grabbing the little girl's toes and tickling them briefly. "Feet are gross, huh?"

"Totally gross."

Olivia sighed happily, leaning back on the couch and wrapping her arm round Emma's shoulders. She knew that Natalia had left dinner for her warming in the oven - that much had been communicated by text earlier in the day - but she wasn't hungry. Her mind drifted back to the odd look on Natalia's face in the early hours of that morning, to the strange hesitation before the rather more urgent than usual lovemaking. She frowned. She would have to talk to Natalia about that, she thought. When she got home. As soon as...she got home...

Instead, cradled by the comfort of the couch and the warmth of her daughter beside her, she fell asleep. When Natalia came home a little later, all smiles, with kisses for everyone, her worries slipped entirely from her mind.

~~*~*

The church was full, as it always was the night before Easter. Natalia looked around as she entered, clutching her candle and hymnbook. She met the eyes of a woman she vaguely knew from one of the church committees - Mrs. Elliot? Mrs. Ellis? - and smiled. The woman, whatever her name was, did not smile back. Natalia's face dropped briefly, and then hardened.

"Some people are so rude, huh?" a voice whispered in her ear.

Natalia spun round, and smiled when she met the twinkling blue eyes of Sister Anne.
"Hello, Sister."

"How many times have I asked you to call me Anne?" asked the nun, gesturing for Natalia to proceed to a pew ahead of her. Natalia felt the eyes following her as she walked down the central aisle to a free seat, but then Sister Anne sat down beside her and settled in, removing her scarf and getting out her missal and generally making it clear to all onlookers that she was going to be in that seat for the duration.

"Are you sure you want to be seen with me?" Natalia murmured.

The nun's lips twitched. "Do I want to be seen with one of my best volunteers?" she said. "With the kindest woman I know?" She pretended, briefly, to consider the idea. "I think I'll chance it."

Natalia smiled, a gentle flush appearing on her cheeks. "You know what I mean," she insisted, inclining her head in the general direction of Mrs. Whatever, who was still glancing at her occasionally.

Sister Anne looked up. "Hello Mrs. Elliot!" she called. "Have you thought any more about volunteering at St. Elizabeth's?"

The woman had the grace to blush at having been caught staring. "Oh, uhm, I'm still thinking about how I can fit it into my schedule," she blustered.

Sister Anne's eyes twinkled with almost sadistic pleasure. "Oh you'll find it doesn't take up much of your time at all," she said. "Natalia here comes in twice a week, and she has a young baby to think of. I'm sure you could manage an afternoon or two."

Mrs. Elliot coughed and mumbled something that might have been: "I'll drop by next week."

The nun grinned, then turned back to Natalia. "I do hate hypocrites," she whispered. "And yes, I know hatred's a sin, but what can I say? I'm only human."

Natalia suppressed a laugh, with effort. Olivia had said a few times over the previous weeks that she liked Sister Anne very much. Natalia knew exactly why.

For a few minutes Natalia busied herself looking up the hymns that had been chosen for the night and checking that she knew them. Before long it was time to go outside for the blessing of the Easter fire. She and Sister Anne processed out with the rest of the congregation to where Father Ray was standing.

The heat from the flames was particularly welcome, as the night was chilly. A little shiver raced down Natalia's spine as the priest held up the Easter candle. She had always loved the Easter Vigil - not just because it was a particularly beautiful service, but because there was something of the mystical about it.

The congregation returned to the church behind Father Ray and the altar servers and sat quietly while the boys and girls lit all their small candles from the new Easter candle. The church, which had been dark, slowly became lighter and lighter, as each tiny candle was illuminated like the spark of a new star in the heavens.

With a sigh of the deepest peace and contentment, Natalia forgot about Mrs. Elliot and her unsmiling eyes. She breathed in the scent of her childhood - incense, and candle-wax, and the polish used on the pews - and lifted her eyes to the altar where a cantor had appeared to sing the annual Easter Proclamation.

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It was late - after midnight - when the parishioners finally streamed out of the church. For some reason Father Ray had decided to use all seven possible readings, and there had been three adults being received into the church. Natalia caught Sister Anne yawning out of the corner of her eye, and had to try hard to avoid joining her.

Just ahead she spotted a couple of young boys munching on the chocolate eggs they'd been given at the end of Mass and she smiled, thinking of Rafe at that age. "The first year my son came to church with me at the Easter Vigil, he was so sad he couldn't have chocolate with all the other children," she said to Sister Anne. "So my priest asked him what was wrong, and the next year he bought an egg made from special diabetic chocolate, just for him." She smiled thoughtfully at the memory, wondering wistfully if they celebrated Easter particularly in the army.

"Sounds like a pretty great priest," Sister Anne said, then caught sight of Father Ray just ahead, and rolled her eyes. "If only we had one of those here," she muttered under her breath.

"What was that Sister?" Father Ray said with a smile glued to his face. A similar smile appeared on the nun's face as she caught his eye.

"Oh, nothing at all, Father," she said. "Happy Easter."

"Happy Easter to you too," he said, leaning forward to kiss her cheek. He turned his attention to Natalia, and his smile seemed a little more genuine this time. "Happy Easter, Natalia."

He grasped her by the upper arms and kissed her cheek. His lips were a tad moist and left a little wet spot that she had to resist the immediate urge to wipe at with her sleeve. Here lies the last shred of my heterosexuality, she thought, then felt a little bad for being so unkind.

"Mrs. Gonzalez tells me you haven't been going to the fundraising committee much lately," he said. The same smile was still fixed to his face, but there was a question in his eyes. She remembered him asking not so long ago if she'd turned her back on the church. Were church committees and the church itself interchangeable to him, she wondered.

"I've been spending a lot of time at St. Elizabeth's," she said, nodding towards Sister Anne.

The nun grinned almost wickedly. "Yes, Natalia's another convert to our little fold," she said. "Speaking of the mission, Father, I was wondering if we could talk a little more about something you suggested the last time we spoke." She raised her eyebrows at his blank look. "About a collection," she added helpfully.

"Oh...yes," he replied. "Uhm...come by the parish house one day next week and we can talk about it."

"Great," she said, then effected a yawn. "Well, it's late. I think it's about time I headed home. I'll definitely see you next week, Father."

“Looking forward to it, Sister,” the priest said, but his face said something else.

Natalia quickly made her escape before Father Ray could engage her in any further conversation. She had a family at home, and tomorrow was going to be a big day for its littlest member.

ACT 2

The farmhouse was dark when Natalia finally pulled up outside. Above her the moon gazed down through the frigid air - no longer full, but bright and clear nonetheless. It was forecast to be hot the following day, but tonight it was cold. The lawn looked gray in the silvery light, topped with pretty white frost that crunched loudly in the preternatural silence as Natalia made her way to the front door.

Once inside, she hung up her coat and kicked off her shoes. The house was hot - a quick glance showed her that Olivia had left the heating switched on. Natalia turned it off on her way into the kitchen. She left Emma's egg from church on the counter before opening the fridge and taking a quick slug of orange juice.

Francesca was gurgling softly as she passed the nursery, so she ducked in to check on her. Turning off the baby monitor so as not to disturb Olivia, she picked up her daughter and cradled her against her chest.

“Hey there, Sweet Pea,” she murmured softly. “What's up? You hungry? Wet? Just wanting some attention?” She smiled. “All three?”

In lieu of a reply, Francesca grabbed a handful of long, dark hair and shoved it in her mouth, cooing in delight when her mother laughed.

“Hungry it is, I guess,” she said as she settled herself into her rocking chair and arranged herself in a comfortable position for feeding. The baby suckled with her eyes closed, as if deep in concentration. “You really remind me of your mamma sometimes,” she murmured, then blushed hard as she realised what she'd said. “How glad am I that you don't understand what I'm saying?”

When the baby had had her fill, Natalia changed her and burped her, and finally set her down again and sang to her a little until she fell asleep. She turned the monitor back on as she left, ducked her head into Emma's room to check she was soundly asleep, and then continued into her own bedroom.

Olivia was sleeping, a book resting on her chest, her reading glasses lolling on the bridge of her nose. Natalia couldn't help but smile at the sight. Gently, Natalia took the book away, slipped a bookmark between its pages and set it down. The glasses came off just as softly and then, quietly, Natalia turned out the light.

Olivia's somewhat excessive use of the heating meant the room was still warm, so Natalia dressed in shorts and a tank-top for bed. She tried to slip between the sheets without disturbing her slumbering lover, but Olivia seemed to be hard-wired to react to Natalia, whether sleeping or wakeful.

"Mmm," she murmured, her body angling towards Natalia's on instinct. "Sweetheart?"

Natalia's heart swelled with a familiar yet exhilarating love. "I'm here," she whispered.

She leaned over, planting her left hand on the right side of Olivia's head while her right tangled itself in her hair. A breath of air was expelled from between Olivia's slightly parted lips as her own fingers slid up to comb through her lover's soft, dark tresses.

"Hi," Olivia whispered, and then leaned up to claim Natalia's lips in a gentle, almost chaste kiss that Natalia felt all the way down to her toes.

"How do you do that?" Natalia murmured when the kiss broke.

"Do what?" Olivia whispered against her neck, dropping soft, playful kisses there, and grinning when her girlfriend's breath caught.

"Make me feel...so much," Natalia replied.

Olivia leaned back to stare, blinkingly, up into her lover's dark, fathomless eyes. "Because I love you," she said simply.

Natalia smiled. "I love you, too," she said. "So much, Olivia. So much."

They kissed again, and settled their bodies comfortably together. Their legs intertwined as they each found a relaxed position. "How can you still have such cold feet?" Olivia grumbled. "I left the heating on all night so your feet would warm up when you came home."

Natalia laughed. "Oh, so that was your game," she said, digging her fingers briefly into Olivia's sides.

"You've got me," Olivia admitted, with a throaty laugh.

“Yes I do, don’t I?” Natalia replied. “Forever.”

“Oh yeah,” Olivia said. “Kiss me.”

Natalia’s eyes glinted. “Yes, ma’am.”

For long moments the bedroom was filled with nothing but the sounds of rustling bedclothes and languorous kisses, their lips and arms and legs twining together in patterns unique to them.

“What time is it?” Olivia asked when they separated, guiding Natalia’s head onto her shoulder.

“A little after one,” Natalia replied, yawning slightly.

Olivia grunted. “Father Ray sure knows how to ramble on,” she said, and Natalia managed a small chuckle.

“Yeah, I think he’s been writing his sermon for weeks,” she said, and then looked up at the clock on the bedside table. “Have you set the alarm?”

Olivia nodded, and yawned. “Yup - eight o’clock.” She glanced at the clock herself. “Uh, Francesca probably needs to be fed soon,” she grumbled.

Natalia shook her head. “Already taken care of,” she replied, smiling.

“You are an angel,” Olivia replied, dropping a soft kiss onto Natalia’s forehead.

The two women lapsed into silence. Natalia lay with her head against Olivia’s shoulder, rising and falling with each of her lover’s breaths, and listened to the occasional creaks and groans of the old house, the wind in the trees, the faint sighs floating in from Francesca’s nursery through the baby monitor. “Olivia?” she said softly.

“Hmm?”

Her girlfriend’s voice sounded weak and hazy, like she’d been dragged from the very edge of sleep. Briefly Natalia considered just kissing her and saying nothing. But then, there were some words that had been dancing on the tip of her tongue for days, and she knew they had to come out sometime.

“Do you actually know what an angel is?” she said at last.

Olivia’s eyes blinked open. “Huh?” She shook her head slightly. “An angel?”

Natalia nodded. "An angel," she confirmed.

Olivia cleared her throat. "Well...white guys, blond, dressed in white, white wings." She grinned mischievously. "You know, Aryan types." The smile slid from her lips when Natalia didn't laugh. She glanced down, but Natalia's eyes were hooded. "Honey? What is it?"

For a moment Natalia didn't speak, and Olivia almost believed that she'd fallen asleep in the warm dark. But then she cleared her throat. "Angels are messengers from God," she said. "I met one once, you know."

Olivia's eyebrows shot into her hairline. "Uhm...okay."

"Mmm hmm," Natalia continued, as if she'd just said something completely normal and rational. "Her name was Emma."

Olivia grinned and relaxed. "Oh, I see," she said, sliding her hand up and into Natalia's hair.

Natalia curled her arm round Olivia's waist. "My angel came to me on the worst day of my life," she said quietly. "A day when I lost a man I loved. A day when I had a choice to save a woman I thought I hated...or to let her die."

Olivia swallowed hard, unexpected tears springing to her eyes. "Gus," she whispered, and suddenly remembered the early hours of Thursday, when Natalia had seemed so pensive and distant, and her kisses had been charged with a kind of urgency she didn't recognize. "April first," she realized at last. "Oh my God, Natalia..."

"Sssh," Natalia hushed her, leaning up to kiss her softly. "It's all right. I love you."

Olivia couldn't speak. Her throat was tight and her eyes were glistening, but she nodded.

Natalia smiled. "I was trying to tell you about my angel," she said. Slowly and deliberately, she slid her hand under Olivia's tank top, stopping just at the base of the life-saving scar that bisected Olivia's chest. She stared into Olivia's eyes as she spoke. "I've never told you this," she murmured. "But I...I was going to say no. I'd decided I couldn't do it. It was too much to ask; to give a piece of him away, and to you of all people."

"I understand," Olivia said, but again Natalia quieted her with a kiss.

"When I think of it now," Natalia whispered. "God, when I think of it now." She screwed her eyes shut, allowing the full reality of what that decision would have meant to wash over her. "You're the love of my life," she said at last, her voice thick with emotion. Blindly she

pulled at Olivia's top, tugging it over her head so she could press her lips against the thud of her lover's heartbeat.

Olivia threaded her fingers through Natalia's hair, a tear escaping from her burning eyes. "It was meant to be," she murmured. Natalia nodded.

"I know," she said. She pulled back and leaned up on her side, resting her hand on her palm. With her free hand she trailed the pads of her fingers down from Olivia's collarbone to her bellybutton. "Because of Emma." She blinked a few stray tears away. "I met her that day, and she was so sweet. So kind. She'd come to the hospital to see you, and she gave me one of the flowers she'd brought." She nodded towards a vase full of Gerber daisies that she'd placed on her dresser a few days before. "One of those. And I knew then...I knew that I had to save you. For her."

Olivia blinked hard, attempting to smile but not quite managing it. "Thank-you," she murmured. Natalia shook her head.

"Don't thank me," she said. "Because I realize now...I was saving you for her, but for me, too. You were meant for me, Olivia. I just didn't know it then." She traced the outline of the scar one more time. "I look back at all the things that have happened to us over the last few years...Gus, and this house, and your illness, and Francesca...and I can't help but think that everything has worked out...the way it was meant to. Exactly the way it should."

Olivia smiled tremulously. "Exactly as it should," she agreed, and leaned up kiss her. It began sweet and chaste, and slightly sad, but before long a familiar heat fanned between them. Natalia pulled away just long enough to pull off her own top and toss it aside, and then their lips crashed together again. A moan rose up from deep in Olivia's throat as Natalia's warm, silky skin moved against hers in the dark secret warmth of their bed.

"I love you," Natalia whispered, pressing kisses against Olivia's throat, trailing down to her chest. "No more sadness. This is the night when sorrow becomes joy."

Olivia nodded. "Yes," she whispered, both in agreement and pleasure. Natalia's hands and breath and lips seemed to be everywhere at once. "Oh, I love you..."

"I love you, too," Natalia replied softly, and buried her face in her girlfriend's neck, kissing and nipping behind her ear where any marks wouldn't be seen.

With a supreme force of will, Olivia pushed on Natalia's shoulders and rolled her over onto her back. Her hair fell down on either side of her girlfriend's face, creating a warm, intimate shadow.

"You are so beautiful," she whispered, staring down into the dark eyes she so adored. Natalia blushed, but Olivia pressed on. "I'm going to make you so happy," she said. "Every day for the rest of my life. I'm going to make you smile. I'm going to make you laugh." Heat flashed in her eyes. "And I'm going to make you moan...loud, and often, and for my ears only." She leaned down and stole a kiss.

"And I'm going to start right now..."

ACT 3

Olivia woke before the alarm the next morning, warm and contented, and pleasantly sore in all the right places. Natalia was wrapped around her, her breath tickling her chest as she exhaled through her nose. Olivia smiled, joy bubbling up inside her like a boiling kettle. For the first time in her life she really felt like she was where she was supposed to be. It was an amazing feeling to know that - like Natalia had said - everything had worked out just the way it was supposed to.

A soft cry sounded from the baby monitor. Natalia stirred, but Olivia dropped a kiss onto her forehead as she gently extricated herself from her arms. "I'll go," she whispered. "You sleep now."

Olivia watched her lover as she nestled back into the warm spot she'd left in the bed, and smiled. Pulling her tank-top and shorts back on, she padded through to the nursery and lifted her daughter into her arms. Francesca let out another plaintive little wail as Olivia bounced her on her hip. "Sssh," Olivia whispered. "Don't wake your mama."

As quietly as she could, she readied a bottle and settled into the rocking chair to feed the whimpering child. She found herself humming a tune as she did so - an old nursery rhyme that had been passed down in San Cristobel since the days of the Armada and treasure and pirates.

"You used to sing that to me, too, mommy," Emma said as she wandered in, yawning and rubbing her eyes. Olivia smiled.

"I know, baby," she said, gesturing for her daughter to snuggle up with them on the rocking chair. Emma squashed herself in by her mother's side and began to play with the baby's toes as she fed. Francesca let out a little squeal and kicked her legs out.

"I think Francesca thinks feet are icky, too," Emma suggested, still attempting to play little piggies with her little sister's toes. "I think she looks like you, mommy."

Olivia did a slight double-take. "Uhm...in what way, sweetie?"

Emma shrugged. "She's got your nose."

Tears threatened once again - she'd cried far too much for her tastes in the last twelve hours or so - and she shook her head. "Oh, baby," Olivia sighed. "You know that she can't have my nose, right?"

Emma looked up. "You're her mommy, aren't you?"

Olivia opened her mouth to speak, but a voice from the doorway got there first.

"Yes, she's her mommy."

Olivia looked up to find Natalia watching them with a look of the fiercest love on her face. She walked over to join her family and placed kisses on each of their cheeks, lingering on Olivia's. "I think she's got your nose, too," she whispered in her ear.

Olivia looked down at her baby girl with shining eyes. It was certainly true that there seemed to be very little of Frank in their little girl - a fact for which she was eternally, although quietly, grateful. "Your eyes, and your dimples," she whispered.

"But definitely your sense of humor," Natalia finished, giggling a little as Francesca managed to whack Emma lightly on the cheek with a well-timed kick and then squealed with laughter.

"I guess you're done eating then," Olivia said, pulling the bottle away and injecting a harsh note into her tone. Francesca immediately quieted, a frown appearing between the dark eyes that were twins of her mother's. "Oh, don't give me that look," Olivia continued. "It doesn't work on me."

"Yes, it does," Natalia interjected, and was rewarded with a scowl and a quick flash of pink tongue as Olivia stuck it out into the air.

"Well it sure won't next time!" the older woman huffed, rolling her eyes.

Natalia laughed, leading Emma away to help her pick out her best clothes for church. "Yes, it will!"

~~*~*

Francesca looked particularly beautiful in white. She didn't wear it often because of how dirty she could get, even when seeming to be doing nothing, but it really was her color. Olivia reflected on that as she looked down into the crib, watching her napping daughter

wearing the very same Irish lace that she herself had been baptized in. Olivia, Marissa, Sam...and Rebecca before them.

"Penny for them," Natalia whispered, coming up behind her and wrapping her arms round her waist. Olivia smiled softly as she turned her head.

"Just thinking about family, I guess," she admitted, nodding back to the baby in her baptismal gown. "That's our own little family heirloom. I'm so glad you found it on San Cristobel."

Natalia nodded. "Rafe never had anything like that," she said. "He has nothing to connect him to his past. Nothing but me." A frown darkened her face, before quickly clearing. "Our baby's so different," she said. "Sometimes I think she has the biggest family any child's ever had. Like, the whole town. She's going to grow up calling everyone auntie and uncle."

Olivia laughed. "Like Emma," she replied.

Natalia nodded. "If Francesca grows up half as wonderful as Emma I'll be more than happy." She tightened her hold on her lover's waist. "You did such a great job with her."

"We're doing a great job with her," Olivia gently corrected her.

Natalia shrugged. "Emma was perfect long before I showed up," she said. "That's all you, mommy."

Olivia slid her hands up to cover Natalia's. "I always had one rule for parenting - think about what my mother would do...then do the opposite." A faraway, wistful look appeared on her face. "And now...I wish..."

She trailed off. Natalia didn't push. Instead, she just waited for her lover to be ready to say what was on her mind.

Olivia blinked back tears. "I wish she was here," she admitted at last. "I wish she could see her grand-daughters. I wish she could watch our little girl being baptized today in her old robe."

Natalia moved forward a little, pressing her side against Olivia's and turning her face up towards her. "She is," she said gently, her voice full of faith. "She can."

Olivia pressed her lips together, afraid to speak in case she ruined her carefully applied make-up. Finally, she nodded.

Natalia smiled. "Hold her," she instructed, nodding towards the baby. "I want a picture to put in Rafe's frame."

Olivia frowned. "Don't you want a group one later?" she asked.

Natalia nodded. "Yes," she said. "But I want one with just you and her for this frame."

Olivia nodded. "Okay," she said, and managed to lift Francesca up without waking her. Her eyes bright, her heart swelling with love for woman and child alike, Natalia took the photograph. Before it was even printed, she knew it would be one to treasure.

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The Mass that morning was almost as crowded as the Vigil had been the night before. Natalia was glad that their party had reserved seats at the front, otherwise they would have been standing the whole time. Emma ran on ahead of them to find their pew, while she and Olivia greeted Frank, Blake and Buzz. Frank and Buzz were in matching suits. Natalia had a feeling that Frank's was what he'd worn to their sham of a wedding ceremony - in this very church. The thought made her a little queasy. She wondered what Blake thought of it.

"Oh, she's adorable," Blake cooed, seeming to be ambivalent about her boyfriend's dress sense as she gazed down into the stroller. Francesca was awake now, but not crying. She was sitting up, regarding her surroundings with interest. "That's a beautiful gown," Blake continued. "Is it Irish lace?"

Natalia nodded proudly. "It's Olivia's baptismal gown," she said, and out of the corner of her eye saw Frank flinch slightly.

"Oh," he said. "I, uh...I guess I thought you'd be using Rafe's."

Natalia shook her head. "When we found this on San Cristobel I just knew it was right," she said, smiling up at her lover. Olivia smiled back.

"Yeah," Olivia said. "It was like it was...meant to be. Right, Natalia?"

"Right." Their eyes locked and a silent conversation passed between them which, for all it was being conducted in public, was so obviously intimate that Frank had to cough and rub the back of his neck with his hand.

Natalia finally turned her attention back to him. "I'm using Rafe's shawl, for the part when she's clothed in a new garment," she explained. "It's not exactly a family heirloom, but I made it myself."

“And it’s beautiful,” Olivia added, winning a small smile from her girlfriend.

The church bells began to ring, signaling to all those still milling around outside or in the porch that it was time to find their seats.

“Olivia!” a voice called. They all turned to see a rather out of breath Doris Wolfe appear, as if from nowhere. “Did I miss it?”

Olivia grinned and opened her arms for a hug. “No, you’re right on time,” she said, kissing her friend on the cheek. “Thanks for coming.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she said, moving on to kiss Natalia on the cheek too, and then Blake. After that it seemed a little silly not to include Buzz and Frank in the greeting, although it was clear even to the most inobservant of onlookers that her heart wasn’t particularly in it. Finally she leaned down and smiled at the baby, who smiled back. “Hey, little heartbreaker,” she murmured. “Off to get indoctrinated, huh?”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Shut up, Doris,” she said. “Come on. It’s time to find our seats.”

There were four babies being baptized that day - quite a number for such a small town. Natalia assumed that most of them, like her, had waited specifically for Easter Sunday. It was such a symbolic time for the church, and somehow she just felt it was right.

She settled in next to Olivia and Emma, with Blake beside her on her right and Frank and Buzz, in turn, to the right of her. Francesca was still wide awake and very interested in this new environment. She stared unblinkingly for a few minutes at a woman behind them who was wearing an interesting hat. Eventually Natalia turned round and smiled at her, as if to apologize, or at least to acknowledge that she’d grabbed her daughter’s attention.

The woman didn’t smile back. Natalia recognized her at once - it was Mrs. Prentice, a friend of Mrs. Elliot’s. Natalia’s heart sank, and she began to fidget in her seat. Quickly, she turned round and face the altar again, flushed and off-balance.

Blake leaned over and began to tickle Francesca under the chin. “You’re no different from anyone else here,” she whispered. “You’re a sweet little baby with parents and friends who love you very, very much. Anyone who can’t see that is obviously an idiot.”

She said the last part just loud enough to be heard in the pew behind them. Mrs. Prentice sat up a little straighter, and Natalia had to suppress a laugh.

“Mrs. Prentice!” a familiar voice called from across the church. “Mrs. Elliot thinks she’ll be able to fit in an afternoon down at the mission. What about you?”

Natalia glanced over at Sister Anne just in time to see her wink. This time she couldn't help herself, and a little chuckle escaped her lips. It seemed like someone was looking out for her today.

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Francesca was very good, right up until the moment it was time to perform the ceremony itself. Something about the priest seemed to frighten her, and she fussed a little in Natalia's arms. "It's his eyebrows," Olivia muttered, sotto voce, requiring yet another Herculean effort from Natalia to avoid bursting into very inappropriate laughter.

Father Ray posed questions to each of the parents and godparents in turn. Olivia muttered the responses to each of them, although when asked if she believed in "the holy Catholic Church," she mouthed the words of the reply without actually saying them out loud. Father Ray didn't seem to notice.

"Is it your will that Francesca Marissa be baptized in the faith of the Church, which we have all professed with you?" he said, looking to Natalia and Frank.

"It is," they replied together. The priest nodded, and gestured to Natalia to hold the child over the font.

He poured a little of the holy water over her forehead. "Francesca Marissa," he said. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The church was very quiet. Olivia could see Doris smiling a little too brightly out of the corner of her eye, and Emma bouncing excitedly in the pew.

The priest continued. "God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as members of his body, sharing everlasting life."

He drew a cross on Francesca's head with oil as Natalia rocked her. Her eyes were wide, but she didn't seem scared anymore. Olivia handed Natalia Rafe's shawl and helped her to wrap it round their daughter's shoulders.

"Francesca Marissa, you have become a new creation," the priest said, "and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven."

Olivia knew it was probably paranoia, but she was sure Father Ray kept glancing at her when he used words like “dignity.” She was certain he believed she didn’t have much of that left these days, what with getting married and divorced five times, and corrupting good Christian women onto a path of lesbian debauchery and really good sex. *Really* good sex. Not that Father Ray, a “male celibate,” to borrow a phrase from Sister Anne, would ever know anything about that.

The last part of the baptismal rite involved lighting Francesca’s baptismal candle from the new Easter candle that had been lit the night before. Olivia did that while Frank looked on, his hands in his pockets and a blank expression on his face. He hadn’t shown up to the practice - catching bad guys, he’d said - so Olivia had needed to take on this task which would traditionally have been his. Olivia was just glad he didn’t seem to know that she was taking away all his jobs in this little service.

“Parents and Godparents,” Father Ray said. “This light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. She is to walk always as a child of the light. May she keep the flame of faith alive in her heart. When the Lord comes, may she go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.”

“Amen,” Olivia said, holding the flickering candle in her hand like it was made of glass. Natalia looked over at her with shining eyes. “Amen,” she repeated softly.

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ACT 4

“Daddy!”

Olivia and Natalia watched their daughter with twin smiles as she raced ahead onto the lawn at the Spaulding Mansion and threw herself into her father’s arms.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” Phillip said, twirling her around before kissing her forehead. He looked up at the two smiling women, and then down at the stroller. Francesca was dressed in a pale green dress and matching hat now, having been brought home to change after the baptism. Olivia and Natalia had taken the opportunity to change too, not wanting to go to an Easter egg hunt in heels and skirts.

“We’re glad to be here,” Natalia said, accepting a kiss from her girlfriend’s ex with a warm smile.

Hey, Emma, why don’t you run up to the house and get yourself a basket. I think Sarah’s there,” Phillip said. Emma raced off, her happy laughter bubbling up and infecting everyone who heard it with a smile.

"She's been looking forward to this for weeks," Olivia said. "She's desperate to be the one who finds the most eggs."

Phillip grinned. "You know, I think she might be finding eggs in this garden until she's ready for college," he admitted. "I don't even remember where they all are."

"College?" Olivia said. "Uh uh. Didn't I tell you? Emma's going to stay nine forever."

Phillip laughed. "If only," he replied. "It seems like just yesterday that James was a little boy, running around in shorts and climbing trees and skinning his knees..." He sighed. "Kids seem to grow up real fast in this town."

Olivia and Natalia glanced at each other, recognizing the truth of it. "That's why you have to make every moment count," Natalia said softly, a gentle smile gracing her lips as she gazed at Olivia. She leaned forward and stole a quick kiss.

"I couldn't agree more," Phillip said.

Just then Natalia noticed Frank and Blake a few hundred yards away on the lawn. It had been decided that the Easter egg hunt would act as a sort of informal party for Francesca's baptism too, so it seemed like almost the whole town was there. Blake waved her over.

"I'll be right behind you," Olivia called as Natalia made her way over to exchange pleasantries with the couple. She smiled as she watched her go, allowing her eyes to wander from head to foot as a memory of the previous night danced across her skin.

"You look happy," Phillip observed, smiling.

"Oh, I'm happy," Olivia replied, turning to him with shining eyes. "I never knew that there was a kind of happiness that was this...consuming." She glanced over at Natalia. "She's just... everything, Phillip."

Phillip looked across the lawn and caught sight of Beth mingling among the guests, smiling and laughing, with her hair moving gently in the warm spring breeze. "I know exactly what you mean," he murmured.

Olivia followed the path of his gaze and smiled. "Who would have thought that you and I of all people would be standing here today...friends, talking about how happy we are with our wives."

Phillip barked out a laugh. "Don't get ahead of yourself," he said. "The word is fiancée."

Olivia shrugged, slipping an arm round his shoulder as they began to walk over to where Natalia was standing with Frank, Buzz and Blake.

“Just a matter of time, Phillip,” she said happily. “Just a matter of time...”

~~*~*

The conversation she was stuck in was, to Blake’s mind, incredibly dull. She was standing next to Frank, listening listlessly as he talked about the Cubs with a few of the guys, sipping beer and laughing raucously every few minutes. It was all she could do to suppress a yawn, and she began glancing around for a reason to escape.

Just then, she spotted a bright blue blazer out of the corner of her eye. Doris was standing by a table full of drinks, nursing a glass of wine and watching the happy guests, with a sad little smile on her face.

“I’ll be right back,” Blake said to Frank, who favored her with a glance and what sounded suspiciously like a grunt before he raised his beer to his lips again and turned back to the conversation he was having with Bill, Matt and Billy.

Shaking her head, Blake headed over to Doris, who greeted her with a quick smile. “That looks good,” Blake said, gesturing towards the wine glass. “I think I’ll have me one of them.”

“Knock yourself out,” the Mayor replied, and Blake realized that the drink she was holding was probably not her first. Hesitantly, she played for neutral ground.

“It was a nice service, huh?”

Doris shrugged. “You see one baby being half drowned you’ve seen ‘em all,” she said, then her expression grew pensive. “I never had Ashlee baptized.” She took a sip of her drink. “I didn’t really think the Church would want much to do with a gay single mother who got herself knocked up with a turkey baster.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what Natalia sees in it, I really don’t...”

Blake smiled, taking a sip of her wine. “It’s just...Natalia,” she offered. “Natalia’s a Catholic. It’s like saying she’s a woman, or she has brown eyes. She just...is.”

Doris downed the rest of her drink. “Yeah, I guess we’ve all got to be who we are,” she muttered. “Like me. I’m...well, what am I exactly?”

Blake placed her hand on her arm. “You’re my friend,” she said gently.

Doris looked down at the hand resting on her wrist. She thought of the New Years' party at this very house, remembered raising that hand to her lips and pressing a soft, almost seductive kiss onto yielding skin. A hint of a blush rose up on her cheeks.

Before she could respond, both women's attention was drawn to the crack of a twig a little behind them in the trees. Doris's head spun round, just in time to see a dark head pulling back, trying to get out of sight.

"Oh, hell no," she said, heading towards the tree line with quick, long strides. Blake had to trot a little to catch up with her. She was almost right on top of them when she suddenly realized who'd been watching them.

Anna.

"You're spying on me now?" Doris hissed.

Anna winced and shrunk back a little from the accusation in her ex's voice. "No," she insisted. "I didn't know you'd be...I just needed to make sure everything was okay here."

Doris gestured around her. "What, your secret big bad that's so awful you had to lie to me about it is going to show up at an Easter egg hunt at the home of the richest guy in town?"

Anna shrugged. "Maybe," she said.

Doris's lips curled into a sneer. "For God's sake," she snapped. "It's over, Anna. Leave me the hell alone."

Anna opened her mouth to speak again, but Blake cut her off, coming up behind Doris to place a comforting hand on her lower back. The Mayor's muscles stiffened slightly at her touch. "You heard her," Blake said, her mouth a thin line of dislike and disapproval.

Anna's eyes glinted. Slowly and deliberately, she turned back to Doris. "I know you don't trust me," she said. "I know you don't have any reason to believe this. But all I'm doing is trying to protect you." Tears collected in her eyes. "I love you, Doris. And I'm sorry."

She held the Mayor's gaze for a moment longer, then turned and disappeared into the woods. Doris held it together for roughly five seconds, then let out a choked sob, her hand flying to her mouth.

Immediately, Blake wrapped her in a warm hug. "It's okay," she whispered, rubbing her friend's trembling back. "It's okay..."

Doris accepted the comfort she was offering, but she knew that what she was saying was a lie. It wasn't okay. In fact, it was far from okay. Very, very far indeed.

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Olivia left Francesca with Frank so she could stroll unencumbered around the grounds. She hadn't seen Natalia for a little while, and was idly keeping an eye out for her while making a mental note of the locations of various chocolate eggs so she could direct Emma towards them when she saw her.

"Hey, Auntie O," a laughing male voice called.

Olivia turned to face her nephew, Jonathan, grinning as she enveloped him in a hug. "Hey trouble," she said, squeezing him hard. "Where have you been? I feel like I haven't seen you in forever."

He shrugged. "Oh, I've been here and there," he said noncommittally. "So hey, you got your kid baptized today, right?"

Olivia nodded, but her smile seemed a couple of watts less bright than before. Jonathan noticed instantly.

"What's wrong?"

Olivia shrugged. "Well," she admitted. "You know what Francesca's middle name is, right?" Jonathan shook his head. Olivia's voice gentled. "It's Marissa."

The man's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. "Mom," he said, and suddenly he sounded very young indeed.

A sadness washed over Olivia's face. "I miss her," she said, and wiped a tear from her eye. "Especially now I'm starting to know what it's like to have a real family...to love and be loved and...well, I wish she was here. That's all."

Jonathan nodded. "I wish she was here, too," he said, then his eyes narrowed. "But that's not all."

Neither of them noticed Natalia walking over to them across the lawn. Olivia shrugged again. "It was the baptism, I guess," she said. Natalia stopped a few feet away, frowning. Olivia went on. "Just...standing up there, me and Buzz and Blake, and Natalia and Frank, it was like...I don't know. I felt almost like...an optional extra? Does that make sense?" She shook her head. "I don't think I was really needed there. Not much room in the old Catholic rite for mommy's girlfriend, you know?"

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah, I get that." He frowned. "So why did you even do it?"

Olivia looked up at him sharply. "I didn't have a choice," she said. "I can't ask Natalia to change who she is, or what she believes. I'll never do that."

Natalia had heard enough. She took a step forward. "Hey, can I steal your aunt?" she asked playfully, reaching for Olivia's hand as if she had heard nothing.

Jonathan held up his hands. "All yours," he said, and smiled as Natalia led Olivia away.

They walked together in contented silence for a few minutes, just enjoying the sunshine and the sounds of happy children and chatting people that were drifting to them on the breeze. Eventually they reached a conveniently placed bench and sat down together, Olivia wrapping one arm round Natalia's shoulders.

"What were you talking to Jonathan about?" Natalia asked softly, closing her eyes and leaning against her lover.

Olivia reached up and stroked her hand through Natalia's hair. "My sister," she said quietly, deciding to omit the last few minutes of the conversation. "Family."

Natalia snuggled more comfortably against Olivia. She was quiet for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision. "I want you to do something for me when we go home," she said.

Olivia smiled playfully. "Like the things I did for you last night?" she said.

Natalia blushed. "No," she said, then stopped to think about it. "Well, maybe later."

"Raar," Olivia mock growled, wagging her eyebrows. Natalia laughed. "So okay, what do you want me to do?" Olivia asked when her girlfriend's giggles faded.

Natalia pursed her lips. "A family tradition," she said at last.

Olivia waited for more information and frowned when she didn't get it. "What kind of tradition?"

Natalia shook her head. "You'll see," she said, and wouldn't be drawn any further on what she meant.

Emma waved at them from across the lawn and held up a basket full to the brim with chocolate eggs. They smiled indulgently as they waved back, content for the moment to sit together in peace, listening to birdsong, and happiness, and the easy silence of each other.

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They got home just after five o'clock. Emma had gorged herself on chocolate in the car and now had a tummy-ache and a very messy face. Olivia sent her straight upstairs to wash, and Natalia took advantage of the absence of little eyes and little ears to give her girlfriend a kiss that she'd been saving up all day.

"Thank you for today," she said softly, combing her fingers through her lover's hair.

Olivia smiled. "There's no need to thank me," she replied. "I didn't do anything today I didn't want to do. It's been a great day, honey. A great day."

Natalia held her bottom lip between her teeth as she nodded. "I want you to know something," she said. "When I was a baby my parents had me baptized in church. But there was something else, too - a home baptism you might call it. A lot of Puerto Rican families do it. The baby is welcomed into the home and family by...the family matriarch, I guess you'd say. For me, that was my abuela."

Olivia blinked. It was so rare to hear Natalia talk about her family, or any traditions that didn't come from the Vatican.

Natalia moved from Olivia's embrace and retrieved Francesca's baptismal candle from the bag they'd brought it home in. She placed it in a holder and lit it before returning to stand in front of her lover.

"I want you to know," she said, in a soft, throaty voice. "You are her mother. My church won't acknowledge that. But I do." She looked up. "And God does." She swallowed hard. "What I believe is not restricted to what the Church teaches," she said. "And who I am...is yours, Olivia."

Olivia opened her mouth to speak, but no sounds came out. Natalia took her hand and laid it, along with her own, on Francesca's forehead.

"Dear Lord," she said. "We, the parents of this child, Francesca Marissa, thank you for the blessing of her life. We promise to love her, and cherish her, and guide her towards you as she grows." She looked up at Olivia. "God, thank-you for sending me this woman to share my life with. She is my light and my joy - my best friend, my love, the mother of my children. Thank-you for showing me your love every day, through her."

Tears were flowing freely down Olivia's face now, but she managed a tremulous smile. "I'm not much for praying," she said. "In fact, in the past I've doubted that there was even anyone up there." She took a deep breath. "But...I look back on my life, all the bad decisions, and wasted opportunities, and loves lost...and I can see how every moment was leading me here. To you. To our children." She looked up. "So for that, whoever you are...thank-you."

Natalia reached up and wiped Olivia's tears away, and sealed their prayers with a kiss. Francesca, unaware that there was anything momentous happening at all, slept peacefully on.

The End

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Family Matters

by Ceridwyn

ACT 1

As Olivia approached the farmhouse, she could hear the phone ringing through the open window adjacent to the front door. However, in between trying to juggle her youngest daughter, her purse and a bag of groceries in her arms, fitting the key in the lock was proving to be quite a challenge. By the time she managed to get inside the house, and put down her purse and groceries, the answering machine had picked up the call. Rather than immediately pick the up the message, she decided the infant required tending first; she'd get to the message later.

Olivia took a long breath then resettled the very tired Francesca in her arms. Murmuring soothing tones to her daughter, she laid her down in the playpen, and then covered her with a nearby blanket. She then moved to the kitchen and put the bags up on the table before putting away the groceries. Natalia was going make lasagne for supper, so Olivia kept those ingredients toward the front of the refrigerator. When she was done, she stood and looked up at the clock on the wall.

It was 3:30 in the afternoon. Olivia smiled as she recalled that today was one of the days when Natalia took Emma after school for some one-on-one time together. It was a routine

they'd developed so that Emma didn't feel like she was being left out. Sometimes, they'd go to the park and play, or do pretty much anything Emma wanted, within reason. Olivia and Natalia both knew their older daughter had a penchant for big excitement with the imagination to match and, after a visit to her dad's, she decided she wanted a horse. It took a bit of fancy verbal footwork on Olivia and Natalia's part to dissuade her. Natalia had pointed out to the girl that it wouldn't be fair to the ducks if they had to share Emma with the horses.

She chuckled softly, remembering Emma's exuberance every time she came home from an outing with Natalia, and the way the girl regaled her with every detail. Today, since it was nice and sunny, the plan was for them to go over to the park with a soccer ball. Natalia had mentioned it would probably be close to 5:00 before they got home, so Olivia decided that in the intervening time, she might as well get some work done while Francesca slept. She poured herself a large mug of coffee from the carafe on the counter.

Returning to the living room with her coffee, Olivia set the mug on the table in front of the couch and caught a flash of the blinking light on the answering machine.

The first two messages were Beacon-related; Greg wanted to confirm some bookings with her. Normally he'd have run those past her assistant, but Keira had left early for an appointment and Greg was under the impression that these bookings needed immediate attention. The third message, however, caught her attention. The soft Hispanic tone and sound of the voice was vaguely familiar, yet at the same time belonged to someone Olivia had never met.

"This message is for Natalia Rivera. This is her mother. Her grandmother is dying and would like to see her. She's at St. Joseph's Hospital in Chicago. If you need to call, you can reach me at 312-555-6982."

Olivia nearly dropped the phone. Unless it was about Rafe or Gus, Natalia never mentioned her family, and most of those stories had been about her grandmother, of whom the younger woman had been very fond. Olivia also knew that Natalia had been on her own, and out of touch with relatives, since she was sixteen and pregnant. Nevertheless, she knew her partner would be upset when she heard the news.

Knowing that, Olivia chose to set aside the paperwork in favor of preparing supper. She took the baby monitor into the kitchen, and then started preparing the food. She was a perfectly good cook, and she knew the other woman would appreciate it. Grabbing the bell peppers, celery, onions and mushrooms out of the fridge, she began to chop and scoop the vegetables into bowls. Then she began the job of cooking up the ground beef in a frying pan. While she worked, she considered how best to break the news to Natalia.

She had just finished the lasagne when Emma barrelled her way through the kitchen door, dropped her backpack on the chair, and began babbling excitedly about her day. Hardly able to follow the rapid chatter, Olivia held up her hand and said, "Whoa there, Jellybean. Quieter...and slower. Francesca's sleeping." Olivia had said with a smile on her face to offset the commanding words. "Actually, why don't you wait to tell me at suppertime, which will be soon? Go on upstairs and get cleaned up...How did you get mud on your cheeks?" Olivia asked as she brushed her thumb against Emma's cheek. Out on the porch, Natalia could be heard rustling about, presumably taking off her coat, and as the other woman entered the kitchen, Olivia looked up and smiled before returning her attention to their boisterous daughter.

Bouncing on the balls of her feet, Emma said in a hushed, yet no less excited tone, "I was trying to tell you! The ball landed in the rain water from yesterday. I was running to get it and slipped a little in the puddles." Suddenly, she stood tall, her bearing becoming suffused with pride. "I didn't fall, though."

Olivia looked her over from head to toe and noted the dirty sneakers on the kitchen floor. Glancing pointedly at her daughter, she pointed to the porch by the backdoor, "Shoes, missy," she spoke, as she nudged Emma towards the porch so she wouldn't traipse any further through the house. The girl got her shoes off quickly and came back to stand in front of her mother. "Now, go get cleaned up and we'll have supper, and you can tell me all about your afternoon."

Emma nodded before quickly taking off through the living room and up the stairs, not being quiet at all. A sudden wail came from the direction of the living room, indicating that Francesca had woken from her nap. Olivia and Natalia both grinned and shook their heads, as Emma's "herd-of-elephants" style of taking the stairs frequently woke the baby.

"Olivia, that smells divine. Let me go feed our youngest and then I'll help you with dinner. How long was she asleep?"

"About an hour-and-a-half. Listen, Natalia, I've got to tell you something," Olivia said as she put the lasagne into the oven and then followed the younger woman into the living room.

Retrieving Francesca from the playpen, Natalia sat on the couch and prepared to breastfeed. She looked up and spotted the older woman fidgeting nervously with the band of her ring. "Olivia, what is it?"

"There was a message today on the answering machine. I don't know how to say it." Olivia's forehead creased and she brought her hand up to scratch at her chin. She hated to cause the younger woman any pain. Even as she fretted, Olivia glanced up the stairs, listening for any sign that Emma's return was imminent, because she definitely didn't want the child to overhear this bit of bad news.

“Olivia, you’re starting to scare me. Is it about the girls?”

“No. It was from your mother.” Olivia stopped for a moment, and then moved over to sit on the couch beside her partner, and put one arm around a profoundly shocked Natalia. Her other hand came up to caress the younger woman’s face. “Sweetheart, your grandmother...your abuela that you told us about...she’s in the hospital. She’s dying and she’s asked to see you.”

“No...Abuela Hernández?” Natalia questioned very quietly. She sank back into the couch, not quite believing what she’d heard.

“I don’t know, sweetie. She just said your grandmother.”

“No, please, no.” Natalia buried her head against Olivia’s chest as she cradled her daughter against her breast.

While Olivia held her partner close, the tears the younger woman shed soaked through her shirt, though she paid them no mind.

After several moments of quiet crying, Natalia moved back slightly so she could see Olivia’s face. Wiping away the tears, Natalia whispered, “Olivia, I...” and then faltered, unsure what to say.

“I wrote down the information your mother left. The message is still on the machine. I wasn’t sure if you’d want to listen to it.” Olivia sat back against the rear of the couch, pulling Natalia against her, and she pressed a kiss to the side of her head.

Natalia closed her eyes tightly as more tears threatened to fall. She knew Olivia could be very tender and supportive with her, but the love she felt pouring from her partner right now far surpassed anything she could have ever anticipated. “I love you, Olivia. So much.”

Breaking the emotion of the moment, their infant daughter let go of her suction on Natalia’s nipple and fussed a bit. The younger woman covered her breast then brought the baby up to her shoulder and rubbed her back to get her to burp. The rubbing was as much for her daughter’s benefit as it was for her own. She heard Olivia let out a giggle as Francesca brought up a loud burp. When Natalia looked over at her partner with a dismayed look on her face, the other woman only laughed harder. After a moment, despite the somber mood, Natalia joined in on the laughter for a minute before she started crying again.

Aware of the time that had passed, and knowing that Emma would soon be coming back downstairs, Natalia pulled away again a bit and brushed the tears from her face. "I don't know what I should do."

Olivia reached up to cup Natalia's face in her hand and then caressed her cheek with the back of her hand. "Natalia, they are your family. As much of an estrangement as there has been between you and your family, I think you'd regret it if you didn't see your grandmother before she dies. I know that the prospect of seeing your parents must be terrifying you right now. I wish I had some advice to offer."

Natalia sighed, and then drew her bottom lip in with her teeth. "I know. You're right. I need to do this."

Olivia paused a moment, then looked Natalia directly, seeing the sadness in her partner's brown eyes.

"Remember though that you have another family - this family we have here. We will always be here for you, and I will always love and support you, no matter what you decide. However, Em will be down in a minute or two. Why don't you take Francesca up to the nursery and finish feeding her. I'll check on supper and be here to listen to Emma tell me about her day. Come down when you're ready."

"I repeat: I love you. What did I ever do to deserve you?" Natalia smiled and tilted her head to the side while maintaining contact with Olivia.

"I usually ask myself the same question about you."

"Any conclusions?"

"You are my family; you and our children. You are my home." Olivia stopped and smiled, which turned into a wry grin as she continued. "I finally figured out what I've been looking for all my life, though it took us forever to get here."

"That's awfully sappy of you."

"Don't repeat that. I have a reputation to maintain."

"Uh huh," Natalia muttered as she stood up somewhat unsteadily with her daughter in her arms. The other woman reached out to steady her until she got her bearings. Resettling the feeding blanket over her shoulder, Natalia rested Francesca against it and then turned toward the staircase. "What reputation?" Natalia said with a smile as she climbed the stairs.

Olivia chuckled to herself as she stood and moved into the kitchen. Natalia was right, the food did smell divine. She opened the oven door and looked in at the bubbling mozzarella on top of the lasagne. Just as she finished pulling the hot dish out and putting it on the counter, Emma came rushing into the kitchen.

“Em, sweetie, what have we told you about running in the house?” Olivia asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Not to,” Emma replied a little guiltily.

“Right. Now, will you help me get the table set? Then you can tell me all about your day at school and your time with Natalia this afternoon.”

“Yay!” Emma went over to the drawer and pulled out the silverware and napkins then placed them on the table. After that was done, she pulled the footstool over to the counter and pulled down three plates from the shelf. Olivia grabbed the glasses from the cupboard and put them on the table. “Mommy, where’s Natalia?”

“She’s just finishing feeding Francesca. She’ll be down shortly.”

“Okay. Oh, hey, Mommy? Guess what? Ms. Warner said we’ll be doing a dia...dio-rama?”

“A diorama? What about?” Olivia asked, remembering the last big school project Emma had and hadn’t told them what she was going to do.

Emma finished setting the table before she faced her mother. “It’s about our family and our city. We get to make little mini buildings and things. Can you help me make a mini-Beacon?” The girl gave her most charming smile when she saw her mom nod. “And maybe Grandpa Buzz can help me make a mini-Company.”

“Grandpa Buzz, huh?”

“Yep. Since he’s Francesca’s granddad, he can be mine, too.” Emma stopped for a minute then looked up at her mother, curious but slightly hesitant. “Mommy, do you think Granddad Alan would be mad at me if I call Buzz ‘Grandpa’, now?”

“Oh, Jellybean. No, I don’t think Alan would mind.” For all his faults, and there were many, in the last few months before he died, Alan had started to become a genuine human being. Perhaps it was due to Phillip’s illness and Alan’s desire to put things right. Whatever the reason, Olivia was glad he had come around and she knew the older man had loved her daughter. She put her arm around Emma and kissed the top of her head.

Natalia pushed off the doorframe where she'd been watching the last half minute of the exchange between mother and daughter. "How are my girls?"

Emma looked up at Natalia and smiled. "Good, Ma. How is Sweet Pea?"

Nothing about Natalia's bright smile gave any clue to the sadness that roiled beneath the surface. "Good. She's fed and now she's sleeping. Now, we should get some supper, and get your homework done." She grabbed the pot-holders and put the pan of lasagne on the hot pad on the table.

Emma continued to tell her mothers all about her day, what the other children in her class were doing, and relaying her afternoon adventures with Natalia at the park.

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As supper ended, Olivia looked over at Natalia and noticed that despite Emma's exuberant mood, the younger woman was unsurprisingly distracted. She heard her daughter call Natalia's name twice, without being answered, and saw the girl turn and look at her questioningly.

"Em, sweetie, can you go up and get your pyjamas on? Get started on your homework. I just want to make sure everything is okay with Natalia. After, we'll come check your homework and read you a story."

Concerned, Emma looked over at Natalia, and then back to her mother. "Okay." She got up from her seat and put her dish in the sink before heading upstairs.

After Emma had left the kitchen, Olivia placed a hand on Natalia's arm to draw her awareness back to the present. Once she got the younger woman's attention, she spoke to her. "Natalia, we need to let Emma know what's going on, especially since we'll be going out of town. We also need to call Phillip and Frank. You need to let Frank know we're taking Francesca out of town."

"Oh, God. I wasn't even thinking about that." Natalia dropped her head into her hands. "What are we going to tell Emma?"

Olivia placed her hand on her partner's arm. "We tell her the truth; that your grandmother is dying." She paused a moment, and then placed her hand under Natalia's chin. She coaxed the younger woman's head up so she could look into her eyes, and she tried to reassure her. "Emma will understand that." The older woman stopped to consider a thought then shook her head. "I wonder if we should bring her with us or have her stay with Phillip. It's not going to be much fun for her; all adults around."

“She’s old enough to decide what she wants to do. You’re right, though, we need to tell her about my grandmother. It’s just hard.” Natalia sighed deeply and dropped her head down, feeling all at once like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. With her head slightly bent, she turned and looked at Olivia. “I haven’t seen my family in nearly twenty years. What do I say about that?” Natalia was starting to get a little anxious.

“Emma’s had so much to deal with in such a short time and she’s adapted rather well. I know a lot of that, in the past couple years, has been thanks to you. Natalia, you’re one of the strongest women I know.” Olivia grasped Natalia’s hand, palm to palm, and threaded her fingers through the younger woman’s. She grew solemn as she continued, “I’ve tried to never willingly lie to my daughters. I believe that if we just tell her the truth – that you’ve been separated from your family for most of your life – it won’t matter to her why. She loves you.”

“I know. I’m just nervous.”

“Come here,” Olivia spoke softly, drawing Natalia into her arms. “I’ll be right here with you.”

After a moment she felt Natalia begin to relax. “I’m going to go up and get Emma to come down; then we can talk with her.” Olivia pulled away to go upstairs, but not before placing a kiss on Natalia’s forehead.

As soon as her partner disappeared up the stairs, time seemed to slow and Natalia began to fidget, needing something to keep herself busy.

She stayed into the kitchen to heat some milk for hot chocolate for each of them. Hearing Emma’s giggles, as the young girl and her mother returned to the living room, was like a balm to her soul. Sighing heavily with nervousness, Natalia joined them as she carried the steaming mugs into the room.

“Here you go; hot chocolate all around,” Natalia said as she placed the tray of mugs down on the table.

“Yay!” Emma grinned widely.

“Emma, sweetie, Natalia and I need to talk to you.” Olivia looked at Natalia then looked back at her daughter.

“Is something wrong?” Emma hesitated as she looked between both of her mothers. She’d had a lot of losses and knew how people looked when they had sad news.

“Emma, remember when I spoke about my abuela?” Natalia clasped her hands together on her lap, to calm the tremble of anxiety she felt.

“The one who told you about making New Year’s wishes?” Emma nodded and smiled as she remembered Natalia talking about the old woman; and about their first New Year’s together as a family.

“Yes, that’s her, sweetie. She’s in the hospital and she’s dying.” Natalia’s voice grew strained with the effort of holding back tears. “She’s dying and she’s asked me to see her.”

Emma’s shoulders deflated. “Like Granddad Alan?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know much right now. I need to talk with my mother a little bit later, but I do need to go home to Chicago to see my abuela.” Natalia unclasped her hands and immediately her fingers began to toy with her skirt.

Emma looked to her mother. “Are we all going?”

“Em, we’d love you to be with us, but there probably won’t be a lot for you to do. You’d find it pretty boring. You could stay with your Dad if you wanted or you can come with us. That is your choice.”

Emma looked at her mother, and with solid determination announced, “I love Daddy and I’m glad he’s feeling much better, but Natalia is my family, too.” The young girl turned her attention to her other mother; she gave her a hug. “She needs me now.”

Natalia felt tears build up along her lids, threatening to spill. “I love you, too, Emma. And you are my family.”

Olivia reached over and ruffled her daughter’s hair. “Okay, Jellybean, it’s going to be an early day tomorrow. Natalia and I have some planning to do. Why don’t you go finish your homework and then I’ll be up to read you a story in a little while? Come here and give me a hug.”

Emma did just that, then went and hugged Natalia again before heading up the stairs to her room.

Natalia lifted her mug and took a big drink then looked over at Olivia. “That went better than I was hoping.”

“She’s resilient, and smart.” Olivia spoke proudly of her daughter. Then in a slightly more somber tone, she added, “Now, I need to call Phillip and you need to call Frank.”

“Ugh. Thanks for the reminder.” Natalia shrugged.

"It'll be okay, Natalia." Olivia ran her hand over Natalia's back comfortingly.

Olivia picked up the now lukewarm mugs of hot chocolate and took them to the kitchen. She took her cell phone out of her pocket and placed a quick call to The Beacon to get a contact number for the Hyatt Regency in Chicago; and then she called that hotel to book adjoining suites for their family for the week. She didn't know how long they were staying, but she figured that it would not take more than a week. It was unusual to be able to book a suite on such short notice, but she had the benefit of it being off-peak season. Once that was settled, she placed a call to Phillip. After a short conversation during which Olivia continued to be surprised by how supportive Phillip was of her relationship with Natalia and of their family, she moved back into the living room to find her partner pacing the room. She heard part of Natalia's conversation with Frank and went over to the younger woman, enveloping her in a hug from behind. Olivia could feel the woman noticeably relax at the contact.

"I don't know, Frank. Probably a week. My grandmother's dying." Natalia sighed. Her interactions with her former fiancé had improved, but occasionally there were moments of frustration. "I still have to talk to my mother to find out more details, but I don't know how forthcoming she'll be. I haven't seen her in nearly twenty years, and our parting was less than amicable..." Natalia dropped her head forward and exhaled sharply. "Yes, Olivia and Emma are coming with me and Francesca. Frank, they are my family, of course they'll be there...We'll be leaving in the morning, probably by 10am...Okay, good night, Frank." Natalia pressed the off button on the handheld portable phone before replacing it on the charger.

Olivia placed a kiss on the side of Natalia's neck. She then brought her hands up to rest on the younger woman's shoulders and felt the tension in her shoulder muscles. Gently, she began to rub the muscles and when Natalia whimpered and her head dropped forward, Olivia applied more pressure.

"Oh, God, that feels good."

"There's more where that came from." Olivia pressed a gentle, soothing kiss to Natalia's neck. "Was Frank giving you a hard time?"

"A little. Just wanted to know how long we were going to have Francesca out of town. He half-suggested that maybe he and Blake could look after her. But I don't think he was that serious." With their heads close together, Natalia felt her partner's head shake slightly.

The hotelier brought her arms around her partner, and rested her head on the younger woman's shoulder. "Okay, why don't you head upstairs and get ready for bed. I'm just going to lock up and shut off the lights down here. I want to check on Em and read her the next chapter of her story."

Natalia nodded and headed up the stairs to the nursery, to check on the youngest member of the Spencer-Rivera household. Francesca had started to fuss and Natalia knew that her daughter was close to her last feeding before everyone went to sleep. She checked the infant's diaper first and changed her before she picked her up and brought her over to the rocking chair.

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Olivia tucked the sheets up around her sleeping daughter. It had taken three chapters of *Children of the Lamp: The Akhenaten Adventure* before Emma's blue-green eyes shut. Olivia loved this quiet time with her daughter. It gave her a peace of mind that never failed to help her relax. Until recently, Emma had been the only thing she felt she had done right in her life. Now she had Natalia and Francesca to add to this list, but it would never change her bond with her middle daughter. For so long, it had been just the two of them.

Olivia leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to Emma's forehead. "Love you, Jellybean," she whispered and then stood and turned off the table lamp before leaving the room. She quietly pulled the door shut, then headed down the hall to the nursery. She could hear Natalia singing a lullaby to Francesca.

"Hiya, sweetheart," Olivia said quietly as she entered the room. She moved over to Natalia and placed a kiss on her lips. "Have you talked to your mother yet?" Olivia asked the younger woman as she took their sleepy infant daughter from Natalia's arms and placed her in the crib.

"No. Not yet. I don't know what I'm going to say to her. The last words we spoke were in an argument. Actually, that's not completely true. Papa was yelling, Mama wasn't saying much at all, but she wasn't stopping him either. And I was a mess." Natalia looked over at her little daughter, who was already soundly sleeping.

"I remember my abuela was always so kind to me. She lived with us in our apartment in Chicago. I missed her so much after I was kicked out." As she spoke, Natalia's voice had become so quiet that Olivia had to strain to hear her words. "When I was at the unwed mother's home, I'd send letters to her, but every one of them ended up in my mailbox marked with 'Return to Sender'. I don't think it was her...who was turning them away. But I don't know which of my parents was responsible."

"Oh, sweetheart. Come here." Olivia reached her hand out to Natalia and pulled her into a standing position, and then enfolded her into a tight hug. After a little while, the younger woman pulled back; track marks from the tears that silently streamed down her face plainly evident.

Olivia ran her hand down Natalia's arm until she reached her hand and took hold of it, leading her out of the nursery and to their room.

Once inside, Natalia climbed up on the bed. She sat with her back against the headboard and pulled her knees up to her chest. Her chin came down to rest on the arms she'd crossed on top of her knees. A few strands of dark hair tumbled down over her face, having escaped the ponytail.

When she spoke, she looked up at Olivia but didn't change her position. "I cried myself to sleep more times than I could count in that first year. I was scared and alone, except for Rafe growing inside me. I didn't know what to do. They were my parents. How could they just dismiss me like that?"

Olivia moved over to the bed and climbed up to sit next to Natalia. She rested a hand on the other woman's arm. The older woman thought for a moment before she spoke, since she wasn't sure how to broach the conversation without sounding insensitive to her partner's state. "I don't mean to detract from anything you've told me, but I do actually know what that feels like."

Olivia paused; her voice sounded a little strained as she continued. "Only unlike you, I didn't want the pregnancy. I didn't think it was any gift from God, or anyone. Sure I love Ava like crazy now, but when I was pregnant, all I could think of were the circumstances surrounding her conception." She brought a hand up to touch Natalia's face as she drew it towards her own; making sure that the other woman could see her sincerity.

"At least now, you have the opportunity to interact with your parents as an adult; a confident, beautiful woman with so much love it overwhelms me at times. I never had the chance, and I want that for you." Olivia finished softly.

"Thank you." Natalia spoke with more conviction now than she had had all evening. Gathering her strength, she reached for the portable phone on the nightstand. "Well, if I'm going to do this, I might as well do it now. Do you have the number?"

Olivia fished the slip of paper with the information from Natalia's mother out of her pocket, where she'd stored it since the afternoon, and handed it to the younger woman. She was about to get up from the bed when she felt a firm hand on her arm, holding her in place.

"Please. Stay," Natalia pleaded. "I need you with me. You give me such strength, and right now I can use all of that I can get."

“Okay.” Olivia leaned back against the headboard and pulled Natalia towards her and the younger woman rested against her for a moment before she dialled the number for her mother.

A weary but familiar voice answered the phone and Natalia shivered. The strained tones of her mother’s voice brought her memories from twenty years ago back into sharp focus.

“Mama?...Yes, this is Natalia.” She paused a moment and frowned. She glanced at Olivia and saw her frown as well, apparently reading her tension. Natalia continued, “Mama, I didn’t take my own sweet time getting back to you, I wasn’t home when the call came...It was a shock to hear from you, that is all.”

The tension in Natalia’s face seemed to spread through her and Olivia could feel it. The hotelier strengthened her hold on the younger woman and pressed a kiss against her forehead, hoping to give her comfort as the conversation continued.

“Mama, I have a family I had to take care of...Yes...Can we please not get into this right now?” Natalia sighed, wearily. “How’s Nana?” At her mother’s lengthy response, all the fight seemed to drain from Natalia and her head dropped to Olivia’s shoulder.

Olivia curled her partner more tightly against her own body, feeling the sobs shake the woman’s form. She felt the phone drop onto her chest from Natalia’s hand. When Olivia heard a questioning voice come from the other end of the line, she picked up the phone.

“Hello? Mrs. Rivera. My name is Olivia Spencer. I’m a friend of your daughter’s...Not at the moment. She’s very upset...That’s neither here nor there. If you could give me the information about Mrs. Hernández, I’ll relay that to Natalia shortly.” She listened as the other woman told her about the condition Natalia’s grandmother was in.

“Thank you. We’ll be driving up first thing tomorrow morning...No, that’s okay. We’ve already booked a hotel room. Thank you.” Olivia felt a small amount of smugness over the tone of frustration in Natalia’s mother’s voice as she disconnected the phone call and reached over to place the phone on her nightstand, and then returned her arm to rest around Natalia’s body. Nobody was going to treat Natalia with any amount of disdain, no matter how related by blood they were.

Both women were emotionally drained by the time they’d changed into pyjamas and curled up together, drawing comfort from one another. While sleep came relatively quickly for them, it was an uneasy sleep as they both were plagued by memories of the past.

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ACT 2

When Natalia awoke, she noticed her partner was already up. From the scent of coffee wafting up from the kitchen, she guessed that Olivia was making breakfast. She pulled on her robe that was at the bottom of the bed and made her way to the bathroom, and when she was done she checked the baby's room. Not seeing the infant, she headed downstairs and saw Francesca curled into the crook of her partner's arm with her small head resting on Olivia's shoulder.

Olivia was on the phone making final work arrangements in preparation for their trip, so when the other woman gestured that she could take over, she passed over the little girl to her mama. The hotelier switched the phone to her other ear as she grabbed a couple plates from the shelf, and listened as her banquet manager laid out the week's bookings.

"Thanks, Greg. If you need us for anything, I'll have my Blackberry with me...It'll be a few days at least. Thanks again." Olivia disconnected the call and laid the portable phone back in its cradle on the counter. She moved over to Natalia and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"Hi, sweetheart. Emma and I have already eaten and there are a couple of toasted bagels on the counter, along with some coffee for you. Look, I need to go check on the 'Bean; see how much stuff she's packing. You know, I think she gets her packing skills from you - everything but the kitchen sink." Olivia laughed when her partner gave her a gentle push. "While you get Francesca sorted out, I've got to call Em's school and get her homework assignments. Meet you down here in about thirty minutes?"

"Sure, that sounds like a plan." Natalia smiled and tipped her head up for a kiss, which she knew Olivia would happily give her.

Olivia pulled away and headed upstairs to check on her other daughter. It looked like a small tornado had blown through the nine-year-old's room as clothes were strewn over the bed and floor, with a few items actually in the suitcase. Emma was lying on the floor, partially buried underneath her desk.

"Hey, Jellybean? Whatcha doin' under there?" Olivia asked with more than a hint of amusement.

"Getting The Velveteen Rabbit ; it fell off my desk last night." Emma called out, her voice partially muffled.

"Okay, Em. Let's get this cleaned up and get your stuff packed up to go to Chicago. We need to get you enough clothes for a week. I also need to call your teacher and get your homework." Olivia started around the room, picking up items of Emma's discarded clothing and sorting through them. "Em, which of these are you taking with you?"

Emma located the book she wanted and came out from under her desk to help her mother. After a few minutes, they had most of the girl's things packed, and her books placed in her backpack.

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Olivia came through the kitchen door with her cell phone balanced precariously between her cheek and her shoulder as she held her day planner in one hand and tried to make notes on it with the other. At Natalia's questioning glance, Olivia mouthed the name of Emma's teacher.

"Okay, thank you, Ms. Warner. I'll let you know if we need to have Emma out of school any longer than that." Olivia placed the planner on the table and closed up her phone before she moved over to Natalia. "Are you and Sweet Pea ready? We should get going soon."

"Yes, just finished getting her things all packed and my stuff is already by the door."

"You're so organized," Olivia said, as she kissed her partner's cheek.

"I've had to be." Natalia shrugged wistfully and then exhaled with a deep breath, as she looked at the pile of luggage. "I don't remember things being so hectic when Rafe was an infant. Mind you, we really didn't go very far, so I didn't have to pack much." She tied her still damp hair up into a knotted ponytail, to get it out of the way.

"And now you've got me to pick up the slack." Olivia smiled teasingly, her eyes reflecting the seriousness of her love behind the light banter of words.

Natalia moved over to face Olivia and covered the other woman's hands, bringing them close to her chest in a familiar gesture. "I love that...I am with you. You make me so happy."

"Never forget that. No matter what happens in life, I am, and we are, your family." Olivia moved closer to press their foreheads together and then angled her face and pressed her lips to her partner's, then deepening the kiss as she felt Natalia respond.

When the women separated, Olivia looked at her partner, with a wry grin. "Now, let's get moving before I get too mushy."

"Can't have that," Natalia punctuated her statement by leaning up against Olivia and kissing her again. Smiling contentedly, she pulled away and then picked up the car seat containing an already strapped-in Francesca. The baby was wide awake, gurgling happily as she looked up at her parents. She heard Emma bound down the stairs behind her, followed by a thump-thump-thump of something heavy hitting the steps. When she turned around, the girl had reached the bottom with her little pink suitcase.

"I'm ready!" Emma announced, excitedly. "Are we going now?"

Natalia shook her head and laughed at the girl's energy. "Come on. Let's get you girls in the car and secured, and then Mommy and I will get our suitcases and we can go." Once Emma and Francesca were in their seats, Natalia went up to the house and met her partner coming out. "Oh, hi. I was just coming in to get our luggage."

Lost in thought as she went over the list of "Things to do before they left", Olivia hadn't noticed the younger woman's approach. Only when Natalia spoke did she raise her head. She pursed her lips, hesitant but knowing she had to ask. "Sweetheart, did you call Rafe?"

Natalia put her hands up to her face. "Oh, God, no. I forgot."

Olivia smiled, reassuringly. "That's okay, Natalia. Just give him a call now and let him know what's going on." Olivia went back in the house and upstairs to check to make sure they had everything they needed.

Natalia leaned against the car as she removed her cell phone from her pocket and brought up the number she needed. The young woman dialled Fort Bragg, where her son was stationed, and then had to wait a few minutes before she was connected to the drill sergeant. She was informed that Rafe was out on field exercises and couldn't be called in, so she asked the instructor to pass on her message. She waited until she got a confirmation from the man before she disconnected the call.

"Everything okay?" Olivia asked, as she came out of the house.

"I don't know. His commanding officer said he's out on field exercises so he couldn't get hold of him. I left a short message letting him know I was going to be out of town due to my abuela's death. I asked if he could have Rafe to call me as soon as he was able." Natalia dropped her head. "This is not how I wanted him to find out."

Olivia reached out and grasped her hand. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry," she said as she drew her into a hug. They stayed like that for several moments and then Olivia pulled back slightly, as she cupped a hand on the other woman's cheek. "At least he'll know." She leaned in for a quick kiss. "Oh, you know what? I should call Doris and let her know what's going on. It will only take a few minutes and then we can go. I just want to ask her to look in on the house while we're gone." The older woman pulled away and moved back to the house.

Natalia nodded and finished putting everything in the car before she got in herself and got some tunes going. When she looked out the car window, she saw Olivia laughing after she locked the front door, and then become slightly somber as she spoke. The young woman saw a nod from the hotelier before Olivia hit the disconnect button on her Blackberry and

put it in her pocket. She turned around when Olivia opened the car door and dropped herself in.

“What did Doris say that had you laughing?”

“Something along the lines of meeting the in-laws never quite being the same, particularly after being married to Spauldings.” Mindful of small ears, she didn’t elaborate, but she gave Natalia a pointed look and knew the younger woman understood her meaning; that the town’s most influential family were a world unto their own. She’d had plenty of trouble from the Spauldings since she’d come to town a decade earlier, and had been married to not one, but two of them. She knew that Natalia’s own experiences with being married to a Spaulding had been eventful as Alan tried several times to sabotage the young woman’s union with his son. However, Olivia refused to let that poison her Emma’s relationship with Phillip, who had certainly turned his life around in the past nine months. Pushing aside those thoughts, Olivia smiled and said, “Then she said she wished us the best. Okay, let’s get moving.”

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The Spencer-Rivera family arrived at the Hyatt Regency and deposited their things in the suite before they headed over to the hospital. At first, Olivia had offered to stay back with Emma at the hotel, allowing Natalia some time alone with her parents and her grandmother, but the brunette declined, wanting her partner nearby. When the four of them arrived at the hospital, Natalia went to the reception desk and asked for the room number for her abuela’s room; Olivia stayed back with Emma at her side.

“She’s on the fourth floor; medical unit.”

“Natalia, are you sure you want Emma and I there?” Olivia paused. She placed her hand on the younger woman’s cheek, and lowered her voice before she continued. “It could be really uncomfortable for you. They threw you out for being pregnant at sixteen; I don’t think they’re going to be very accepting of you having a female partner.” She leaned in and placed a kiss to the younger woman’s forehead, before casting a glance at Emma, who was engaged in a game of peek-a-boo with Francesca.

Natalia leaned into her partner’s hand. “I don’t care about that, Olivia. You’re my family, too.” She paused, gathering the strength their bond provided. “I don’t think I could do this without you. I need you.”

Olivia closed her eyes, and pressed her hand to Natalia’s cheek. Slowly raising her eyelids, she looked into the soft brown eyes of her partner. “I just wanted you to know you had options. I’m...I’m glad you’ll let us be there for you.” The shadows of their past lingered in the hesitation of Olivia’s words.

“Always.” With that one word, Natalia banished the ghost of doubt once more, and she smiled, taking Olivia’s hand and twining their fingers together. Using the other hand to guide the stroller toward the elevator, she said, “Come on. Let’s do this.” Emma grasped her mother’s other hand, and they proceeded as a family.

Natalia led them up to the medical unit where her grandmother was located. When she reached the nurse’s station, she caught the attention of one of the nurses.

“Can I help you, Miss?”

“Yes, I’m Natalia Rivera. My grandmother is on this wing – Cecelia Hernández. My family called me to let me know she was here. Can you tell me how she’s doing?” She nibbled her lower lip nervously.

“Ah, yes, Ms. Rivera. How much has your family told you?” The nurse looked over at Natalia, and then at the family that accompanied her.

“Not much other than she had a stroke.” Natalia shifted her weight from one leg to the other as she felt the scrutiny of the older nurse.

“Yes. Your grandmother had a stroke two nights ago.” The nurse looked down at the grandmother’s chart, flipping a page for further information before looking back up the young woman before her. “She’s very sick. She’s partially paralyzed on her left side. She’s on an oxygen mask, as her O2 levels are very low.”

Natalia closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath. “Is she conscious?”

The nurse tilted her head to the side. “She’s in and out. The doctors have ordered her some medication to keep her comfortable, which also makes her drowsy. The medications may make her confused, but she has been aware of her surroundings and recognizes her family.” She gave her a sympathetic look as she looked between both women.

“May I go in to see her?” Natalia began to fiddle with the strap of her purse, and then glanced back at her partner.

“I think your family is in with her now if you’d like to go in.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. I haven’t seen my family in a long time. Maybe I’ll just wait.” Natalia gave another glance back at Olivia, her anxiety increasing, and she soon felt her partner’s hand on her lower back as she turned back to face the nurse.

"If that's what you want, Ms. Rivera." The nurse nodded in acceptance. In her years of practice, she had seen how family dynamics changed with an illness of one member; it could strain the relationships further, or it could bring them together.

Natalia nodded then headed back to her partner.

"Natalia?" Olivia asked the younger woman when she noted the sadness etched on her face.

Natalia all but crumpled into Olivia's arms; hot tears steadily ran down her cheeks. "God, Olivia. It's one thing to hear about it on the phone; now that I'm here, in the hospital where my grandmother dying, it's real."

"I know, sweetheart." Olivia ran her arms up and down her partner's back. "Do you want to sit down for a minute?" She felt a nod against her shoulder and then she directed Natalia over to the bank of chairs against the wall. Emma had already taken up residence there and had her coloring book and some colored pencils.

"Mommy, what's wrong?" Emma looked up from her coloring to question her mother.

"Natalia's upset about her grandmother being so sick. But it's also been a long time since she's seen her family."

Emma got up from her seat and went over to Natalia and stood next to her side. "Don't be sad, Ma. I don't like it when you're sad."

"Oh sweetie, I don't like it when I'm sad either. But you know what? You and Francesca and your mommy make me so happy, so I will always remember that. Even if I am sad, I'll remember." That seemed to content Emma, and the young girl melted against Natalia.

Olivia looked up when she heard voices coming from the direction of the nurse's station. An older woman with bobbed hair, and with a worn, dark grey sweater pulled close around her body, accompanied by an older man, dressed smartly but hunched over with rounded shoulders, came out into the hallway. Olivia looked over to her partner, who hadn't yet noticed the additions to the waiting area. When she looked back to the older couple speaking with the nurse Natalia had spoken to, Olivia observed several similarities between the older woman and Natalia, down to the pursing of lips and the furrowed brow that the younger woman exhibited when she was anxious and worried. After a moment, the couple returned to the room, with not even a glance in the direction of Olivia and her family.

Olivia looked down when her youngest daughter began to fuss; the little one was still ensconced in her stroller with a blanket wrapped around her. She peered closer at the little

scrunched up face as Francesca geared up for a wail. To head off the oncoming cry as much as she could, she picked up the infant and held her close. When it became apparent to her that Francesca wasn't going to easily settle, she patted the baby's bottom and felt a full diaper. Olivia looked over at her partner to see that she still held Emma and spoke quietly with her. She was reluctant to leave Natalia to go change Francesca because she wanted to be near when Natalia's family came back, but she knew the little girl needed to be looked after.

"Natalia, I need to go change Francesca. I'll be right back." At Natalia's nod, Olivia picked up Francesca's diaper bag and headed in the direction of the restrooms.

A few minutes later, she returned, Francesca gurgling with laughter at the faces Olivia made at her. The young girl reached out for the longish blonde-highlighted strands of hair that hung alongside Olivia's face. When Olivia went to push the strands back behind her ear, Francesca's face scrunched up at the loss of such a fascinating toy. When the strands fell forward again, Francesca's face lit up in a big grin that brought out the dimples she'd inherited from her mother. The baby reached out a fist to try to capture the strands again and giggled as she was successful. Olivia smiled and lifted Francesca up in her arms to press her forehead to the infant's.

Natalia looked up from where she sat cuddling with Emma and a wide smile crossed her face to see her partner and daughter so affectionate. Absolute joy rolled off the two of them and Natalia couldn't have been more proud of this family that she had helped create. However, that smile quickly fell and turned to apprehension as she caught a voice she hadn't heard in more than half her lifetime. Neither Natalia nor Olivia had noticed her mother's arrival in the waiting room.

"Natalia," the voice repeated a little louder. Apprehension enveloped the older woman as she approached her daughter and the other woman, but she stopped short of actually reaching them, wondering if it had been the right idea to call her.

Natalia looked over at her mother. "Mama," she spoke hesitantly. She looked up at the older woman and took notice of her appearance. Though her mother bore the same features she remembered as a child, Natalia thought she looked much older than her sixty-two years. She pursed her lips, and then sighed.

From Olivia's perspective, it appeared as though mother and daughter were at a stalemate, neither really sure how to broach the divide of years. Uncomfortable with the prolonged silence, she stepped in and extended her hand. "Mrs. Rivera, we spoke on the phone last night. I'm Olivia Spencer."

It took a moment before Carmen Rivera turned her head to acknowledge Olivia's presence. "Sorry. What?"

"I'm Olivia. I talked with you last night after you spoke with Natalia."

"Ah yes, Ms. Spencer," Carmen said, as she shook Olivia's hand. "Thank you for going out of your way to help Natalia. I'm sure she appreciates her friends being here."

"I'm happy to be here for her." Olivia turned her attention from Mrs. Rivera to look at Natalia, and then added, "Always." She drew back towards her partner's mother. "And it was no trouble. How is her grandmother?"

Mrs. Rivera looked back and forth between her daughter and Olivia, not sure where she wanted to direct her attention. "She is very sick. As I mentioned last night, my mother had a bad stroke."

"Was it unexpected?" Olivia's own experience of her mother's untimely stroke and subsequent death had undeniably colored her perception of that type of illness.

Latching onto the familiar ground of courtesy, Carmen replied, "It wasn't entirely unexpected; she's been having mini-strokes for the past year or two. After each one, she would lose more ground; changes in sensation, speech patterns, memory lapses." The older woman ran a shaky hand through her greying hair. "The doctors warned us then that she would very likely have a big stroke at any time." Carmen brought her purse around to her front and hugged it to her chest.

Olivia looked over to her partner to find Natalia's expression crestfallen, even as her hair hung forward and partially obscured her face. She badly wanted to go over and hug the younger woman, but with Mrs. Rivera there, she wasn't sure how that would appear. As if by some divine intuition, Emma glanced at her mother and then moved closer to Natalia and wrapped a small arm around the brunette's back. Olivia could see from the way Natalia closed her eyes that her partner was clearly soaking up the support. From the stories Natalia had told about her grandmother and how close she had been to her, Olivia knew that the younger woman was really bothered by the fact that her abuela had been getting sicker and she never knew about it.

Natalia looked up at her mother. "Can I go see her?" she asked. She hated the fact that her voice sounded like she was a scared sixteen-year-old girl again, looking to her parents for approval. She was better than that now, stronger. Natalia unhooked her arm from Emma's back and straightened herself up, stood and then moved closer to Olivia and her youngest daughter. She felt her partner's hand rub her lower back and she sighed deeply as she drew strength from their connection.

"Yes, she wanted to see you..." The unfinished words of before she died trailed off but were understood all the same.

“Thank you, Mama.” Natalia turned to her little daughter and kissed her forehead. “See you soon, Sweet Pea.” Francesca gurgled her response, and then curled back into Olivia’s shoulder and Natalia smiled.

“Take your time, sweetheart,” Olivia whispered into Natalia’s ear. She placed a quick kiss there before she pulled away and let the brunette head towards her grandmother’s room. It took a moment for her to register that Natalia’s mother had spoken to her while she’d been watching the younger woman move away.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“I said you must be very good friends. You care a lot about her.”

Olivia wasn’t sure if Natalia’s mother was just being nice, or insinuating something, but she didn’t have the energy for pretenses. “We are; best friends. And I do care very much about her.”

“I’m glad.”

“You’re glad?” Olivia questioned.

Carmen nodded, and readjusted her purse back over her shoulder. She appeared to relax a little after Natalia left the room, despite not knowing this other woman who was her daughter’s friend. “Yes, that she has a friend that will come help her at a moment’s notice. Your husband must be very understanding. Especially to allow you to bring your children with you so far from home.”

“My husband?” Olivia felt like she was somehow trapped in the Twilight Zone.

Mrs. Rivera pointed out Olivia’s gold band she wore. “You are married, are you not?”

“It’s complicated.” Olivia simply responded and she sincerely hoped the elder Rivera woman would leave it at that.

“Do you have any other children?” the older woman inquired.

Olivia smiled. “A daughter, Ava. She’s an adult now.”

Assessing the other woman with narrowed eyes, Mrs. Rivera commented, “You look pretty young to have an adult daughter.”

Olivia sighed, trying to gauge the elder Rivera's motivations in her comment. "I was young when I had her."

"It must have been difficult raising a child at such a young age," Carmen spoke with just enough insinuation in her tone to put the other woman on the defensive.

Uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, especially from someone she'd never met before and didn't know, Olivia hesitated to answer. She looked at her daughters, almost wishing Francesca would start crying so she could avoid responding to Carmen's baiting but nothing was forthcoming. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the scent of the infant tucked into her arms, taking comfort from the baby. "I didn't raise Ava. I gave her up for adoption." She looked at the older woman whose expression was unreadable. "I couldn't raise an infant, and raise my younger siblings at the same time."

At that moment, Francesca began to fuss against her mother's shoulder and Olivia was never so happy to believe wishes do come true. The plaintive cries of the baby, interspersed with quick breaths of air were felt by Olivia and she pulled back a little to look at her little girl. "Hey, Sweet Pea. Are you hungry? I bet your Mama put an extra bottle in your bag this morning." Olivia walked over to the stroller and scanned through the diaper bag until she found what she wanted, and then sat down on the row of seats next to Emma. Francesca reached out for the bottle Olivia held and Emma giggled at her little sister.

Mrs. Rivera watched the scene as it played out in front of her, before moving back by the nurse's station.

"Mommy, how come you didn't tell Natalia's mommy about you and Ma?" Emma asked quietly. "I thought you were excited about that."

Olivia sat still and fervently hoped Mrs. Rivera hadn't heard Emma's question. But when she looked up to see where the elder woman was, nothing about her, from Olivia's observation, seemed to give any indication that she had heard.

Olivia reached over and ran her hand over her middle daughter's head. "I am, Em; very much so. It's not the time, right now, Jellybean."

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Natalia closed her eyes when she first entered her grandmother's hospital room. It wasn't the machines that had shocked her, as she'd gotten familiar with them because of Olivia's heart transplant and subsequent care requirements; but what she hadn't been ready for was the absolute frailness of her grandmother. The once lively and animated older woman of her childhood bore little resemblance to the woman now in the bed; an oxygen mask

covered most of her face and wires to a cardiac monitoring system snaked under her gown. Hot tears ran down Natalia's face as she approached her grandmother and she sat in the adjacent chair.

After a moment, Natalia reached forward and picked up the older woman's hand in hers and caressed it in her own. "Abuela, it's Natalia, I'm here. I don't know how much you can hear me, or understand me. I've missed you so much." Her tears flowed more freely as she sat there quietly; the only sound came from the consistent beeping of the machines and her own breathing and sniffles.

"So much has happened and I don't know where to start." Natalia's head was bent down and she rubbed her free hand back and forth on her lap with nervous energy.

"Al principio, niña," came the distorted voice of the older woman.

Natalia's head whipped up at her grandmother's voice. "Abuela?"

"Sí, Natalia. Como estás?" Cecelia Hernández asked, as her hand curved slightly to grasp Natalia's.

"Why? How come this happened?" Natalia asked. She felt a jumble of questions run through her head but she sighed and tried to order her thoughts.

"I'm an old woman, Natalia." After a moment, Mrs. Hernández held up the nasal prongs to her granddaughter. "Could you switch this to the tubing? It's difficult talking with the mask on."

"Is that okay?"

"It's fine for a little while."

"Okay, I just hate seeing you so sick." Natalia disconnected the tubing from the mask and connected it to the nasal prongs and laid it on the bed. Then she lifted the mask and its elastic from the elder woman's head before replacing the prongs into her grandmother's nose and threading the tubing around her ears. Natalia returned to her seat and held her abuela's hand.

"I'm all right. It's my time." The older woman's voice remained gravelly despite the switch of oxygen source.

Natalia dipped her head as the tears began anew. She looked up as she felt a squeeze of her hand. When she looked into the brown eyes that were so much like hers, she could see that her grandmother had made peace with her destiny.

“Tell me about yourself before I need to sleep again. Are you happy?” the elder woman asked.

“I’m very happy, for the first time in a long time.” Natalia smiled brilliantly as she thought of Olivia and their family.

“Good. Tell me about him.”

“Him? My son, Raphael?” Natalia asked.

“No, Natalia. The one who gave you this beautiful ring.” The older woman smiled as the fingers of her other hand traced over the slim band on Natalia’s finger.

“It’s complicated.” Natalia didn’t know if she could tell her grandmother. But then she realized that she probably would not have the opportunity to tell her later. She’d always been honest with her grandmother; the elder woman had often been a confidante when she felt she couldn’t talk to her parents. “And a long story, but the person who gave me this ring, Olivia, she means the world to me.”

“She?” Mrs. Hernández asked. Then she continued, “Mmmm. And this Olivia makes you happy?”

“Very much. Aside from my children being born, she’s made me the happiest I’ve ever been.” Natalia’s grin lit up her face with a warm glow.

“Good. You deserve that.” The skin around Mrs. Hernández’s eyes crinkled as she matched her granddaughter’s grin.

Natalia paused for a moment in confusion, and then asked, “You don’t have a problem with me living my life with another woman? What about what the Church says?”

“Life is too short for recriminations and being unhappy. Never mind what the Church says. They’re a bunch of old fools. You know that God loves you. You’ve made peace with that. I see that in you.” Mrs. Hernández coughed and became short of breath. After a couple moments she settled and her breathing evened out.

Natalia had been about to get up to go get the doctor, but the older woman’s tug on her hand stopped her.

“I’m fine. Just an old woman,” she said with a smile. “You said you have a son?”

“He’s grown up, now, Abuela. 19 years old. He’s in the Army.” Natalia retrieved a picture of Rafe in his uniform from her wallet and handed it over to her grandmother.

“A young man, then.” Cecilia ran her finger over the photograph and smiled. “So handsome.”

“Thank you.”

“How did you and this Olivia meet?” the elder woman questioned with a grin.

Natalia smiled at her grandmother. “That is a very long story...and complicated. But the short version is I looked after her after she had a heart transplant. Even though we butted heads more times than I could count. I helped look after her daughter and her business as she got better. I bought a house with her help, and she and her daughter moved in, so I could take care of them both.”

Her face softened as she spoke, as she recalled her relationship with Olivia. “We got closer until the line between friendship and more blurred. I panicked and did something really stupid. A couple things, really.” Natalia shook her head as she continued. “I don’t know why she stays with me sometimes.”

“She loves you,” her grandmother spoke with conviction.

“I know. And I am very grateful for that, everyday.” Natalia paused, and then quietly asked, “Would you like to meet them? Olivia and our daughters?”

“They’re here, mi niña?” Mrs. Hernández’s eyebrow raised in curiosity.

“Yes, they’re outside in the waiting room.”

“Sí, I would love to meet your family.” The older woman’s eyes closed and Natalia hesitated.

“Do you want me to get your nurse?” Natalia began to stand, a little hesitant because of her grandmother’s condition.

“No, querida, I’m just tired. Go. Bring in Olivia and your family. I can rest later.”

“If you’re sure?” At her grandmother’s nod, Natalia left the room to go get Olivia and their daughters. A few minutes later, they all returned, with the stroller in tow, and Natalia holding her youngest daughter against her hip. Mrs. Hernández still had her eyes closed. Natalia moved closer and placed her hand on the older woman’s. “Abuela? They’re here.”

It took a moment for her grandmother to reopen her eyes, and when she did it took a moment to focus. "Hello." Mrs. Hernández turned to the older of the new entrants and held out her hand as far as she could. "You must be Olivia. I'm Cecelia."

Olivia took the older woman's hand in her own. "It's lovely to meet you. Natalia's spoken highly of you."

A faint blush brought color to the elder woman's face as she looked to her granddaughter. "And who are these little girls?"

Emma stood tall and stepped forward. "Hi, I'm Emma. And this is my little sister, Francesca. But we call her Sweet Pea, too." The girl tilted her head to the side as she thought about something. "You're Natalia's grandmother that taught her to make wishes on New Years and to stay up to see the ball drop?"

Mrs. Hernández laughed slightly at Emma's exuberance. "I am, sweetheart."

"Cool! We did that last year and I wished for big purple dreams. Bestest wish ever." Emma's face lit up and she clapped her hands.

"I'm glad. Little girls deserve the best dreams." The older woman looked at Natalia. "Now, show me this little one before I need to sleep."

Wiping moisture from the corner of her eyes at Emma's declaration, Natalia stepped forward and lowered the infant so her grandmother could see. "Abuela, this is Francesca. She's the newest addition to our family. Francesca Marissa Rivera. Or, as Emma said, Sweet Pea."

"She's so beautiful, Natalia. You both must be so proud of your family." The elder woman's warm smile spread as she reached out and caressed the baby's arm.

"Thank you. We are," Natalia replied. Francesca had fallen asleep in her arms so she placed the baby back into the stroller and lowered the back; the young girl hadn't even stirred.

"Do you have any other children, Olivia?" the older woman asked gently.

Olivia nodded with a smile. "I have another daughter, Ava, who's 25."

"You must have been rather young," Cecelia said softly.

"I was."

“Ava’s great. And I’m going to be the best big sister for Francesca like Ava is for me,” Emma chimed in.

Cecelia nodded. “I think you’ll do a great job looking after your sister.”

“Thank you.” Emma beamed with joy at the praise from the older woman.

Olivia noticed that the older woman’s energy was fading, and she asked if she could switch the mask back on so the Natalia’s grandmother could get her rest.

Mrs. Hernández nodded her assent, and when Olivia moved closer to replace the mask with the tubing, the older woman spoke quietly, but with feeling. “Do you love my granddaughter?”

“With all my heart and soul,” Olivia replied, her voice hoarse with emotion.

“I’m glad. Take care of her and make her happy.” The older woman’s eyes were clear and bright, and her voice, though weakened, was sure.

“For the rest of my life and beyond. She means the world to me.” Olivia’s voice was choked up as she responded. She brought one hand up into a fist over her heart and the other held fast to Mrs. Hernández’s hand.

Mrs. Hernández nodded her head slightly and Olivia placed the mask on her as the older woman began to cough. As the coughing subsided, Natalia leaned over to her grandmother and placed a kiss on her cheek.

“I love you, Abuela. Sleep now. Get some rest.”

“Te amo, Pequeña.”

Olivia directed their daughters out of the room and Natalia soon followed; tears created tracks down the younger woman’s face. Olivia enveloped her partner in her arms. There were no words offered or needed, the touch providing support from one and giving comfort to the other. After a couple minutes the couple moved apart.

Natalia looked up at Olivia. “I should go find my mother. I’m sure she’ll want to stay with Nana for a while.”

“She asked about us, your mother did, in a roundabout way. I didn’t say much because I didn’t know how much you wanted to tell them,” Olivia said gently, conscious of her partner’s unease where her family was concerned.

Natalia stood up straight and with a determined voice, stated, "I'm not ashamed of you, of us."

Olivia smiled. "I'm not suggesting otherwise. But I didn't feel it was my place to tell her when you weren't here."

"Thank you. Although when I do tell my parents about us, I want you there with me." Natalia looked over Olivia's face and settled on the other woman's eyes.

"I will be there with you whenever and wherever you need me to be. You know that." Olivia pressed a kiss to Natalia's forehead.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?" Natalia picked up Olivia's hands in a familiar gesture and brought them to her own chest.

"Last night, if I recall. Oh, and this morning." Olivia grinned broadly. "But who's counting?"

"Thank you," Natalia started. "I heard Nana's questions to you and your answers."

"And I meant it," Olivia said softly, with a smile.

"I know." Natalia brought Olivia's hands up her face and kissed them. "Now, I need to go find Mama and Papa."

"I think they went to the cafeteria. Your mother mentioned going for some tea."

Natalia drew back and looked at the older woman. "Do you mind staying here, in case they return before I find them?"

Olivia nodded. "No problem. Francesca's sound asleep now anyways and Emma and I can read from one of her books."

"Thanks."

When Natalia left to go find her parents, Olivia moved over to where Emma sat reading. Once seated, she felt the young girl shift closer and curl up against her side. Every once in a while Olivia would look up and check on Francesca, who slept soundly in the stroller.

"I miss Granddad Alan," Emma said softly as she rested her head against her mother's shoulder.

Feeling her daughter's sadness, she curled her arm around the girl and brought a hand up to caress her head. "I know you do, Jellybean."

About twenty minutes had passed before Carmen and Hector Rivera returned, with Natalia following slightly behind. Olivia could almost feel the nervous tension that rolled off her partner. The younger woman moved away from her parents and closer to Olivia and their daughters.

“Olivia, Mama and Papa are going to stay here for a while longer. They’ve invited us all for supper this evening.”

“That’s fine. What do you want to do now?” Olivia glanced down at her watch and noticed it was after two in the afternoon, and neither she nor Natalia nor Emma had eaten. “We could go back to the hotel room and order in a light lunch or we could find a restaurant close by. We can decide what we want to do after that in the meantime.”

“Food. Oh that sounds great. I...I just need to get out of here for a while. And Emma must be bored silly.” Natalia looked over at her daughter who had a book in her hand, resting on her lap.

“I’m okay, Ma. Mommy and I were reading Alice in Wonderland.” Emma grinned up at Natalia.

“That’s a good book. I read that when I was a little girl, too.”

“Really?” Emma asked, curiously. She looked between her two mommies. “Did you read it when you were my age, too, Mommy?”

“I did. But you know what? We’re going to go get some food, and maybe find a park to play in. How would you like that?”

“A park? With swings and slides and merry-go-rounds?” Emma was getting excited.

Natalia smiled at her daughter’s reaction. She sighed as she realized it would also give her time away from the hospital for a while and away from some of her worries.

“Sure thing.” Natalia turned to Olivia and continued, “There’s a deli not too far from here. We can pick up some sandwiches and drinks and then head over to the park.”

“Sounds good to me. Why don’t you let your parents know what’s going on and give them our cell numbers in case they need to get a hold of us? I’ll get Em all packed up here and check Francesca’s things and we can get moving.”

Natalia did that and returned and the two women and their children headed out of the hospital.

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The sunny spring day brought many parents and children to the park to play on the playground equipment or kick a soccer ball around. Olivia, Natalia and Emma had finished their lunch and Emma was anxious to head over to a group of kids her own age to play. Once the young girl had left, with the warning to stay within sight, Olivia turned to Natalia. She could tell by the way the brunette fidgeted with the hem of her sweater that her mind was elsewhere and from the look of things there was much unrest behind those big brown eyes. Olivia reached a hand out to halt Natalia's fingers.

Once she got the younger woman's attention, she spoke. "Sweetheart? What's bothering you?"

"I'm scared."

"Of what?" Olivia asked gently.

"So much has changed. I don't know where or how to begin. The last time I was in my parents' apartment I was sixteen years old and pregnant, and they threw me out." Natalia sighed deeply and felt Olivia's hand squeeze hers. "Actually, that's not entirely true. They gave me the option of staying and giving my baby up for adoption or being sent to a home for unwed mothers."

"You said that things have changed. Don't you think your parents might have changed as much as you have?" Although she knew her partner was hurting tremendously, Olivia tried to give Natalia a way to see that the chasm that had been created over time and distance had not yet become un-crossable. The young woman's mother had done the initial reaching out; Natalia needed to make the next move. It wouldn't be easy, but as Olivia knew well, things worth fighting for seldom were.

"I suppose. It just hurt so much." Natalia bowed her head, and drew in her lip before turning to face her partner with saddened eyes. "What if they can't accept us as a family?"

"What if?...Natalia, we can't live our lives with 'what if's'. Whatever happens, we'll deal with it together." Olivia was secure enough in their relationship to not have the misgivings she had when dealing with Rafe's objections. "Besides, they can't be all that bad. They raised you well, taught you how to love and cherish other people. They taught you to be strong when you needed to be."

"I can certainly be stubborn when it counts," Natalia said with a grin as she looked up at Olivia.

Olivia laughed as she drew Natalia into a hug. When she released her, she smiled at the younger woman, and then spoke. "You're the only one who's stubborn enough to out-stubborn me. You broke through my barriers like they were nothing and set up shop and refused to let go, let me go. More than once, I might add."

"I suppose I am," Natalia said as she giggled. Then after a moment, she tilted her head in thought. "I'm kind of surprised by my grandmother's acceptance of our relationship."

"Why? I could see that same spark of intelligence in her that I see in you. She might be old, but don't discount her experiences in life."

"She always seemed so devout and I just assumed she'd follow church teachings." Natalia's sighed with melancholy. "I'm just sorry that I didn't have more time with her, that I couldn't have known her as an adult; that Rafe didn't get to grow up knowing her."

Olivia grasped her partner's hand in her own, then tilted her head until she met Natalia's gaze and held it. "I know, sweetheart, and I wish you could have had that as well. But you know what? You taught me that everything that happens, does so for a reason." She briefly raised their joined hands and kissed the back of Natalia's. "We can't change the past, as much as we might like to sometimes. And what's happened in our lives brought us together, and I will never regret that."

Natalia smiled. "What made you so wise?"

"Don't you know? I'm Olivia 'Freakin'' Spencer, Business Mongrel Extraordinaire." Olivia sat straight up with her chin held high.

"You're not that funny," Natalia commented with a wry grin.

"Yes, I am. And you love it."

"Yeah, I kinda do." Natalia brought her hand up to cup Olivia's cheek.

"Kinda?" Olivia's right eyebrow rose.

"Fine. I do." Without looking to see if anyone else was in sight, Natalia leaned forward and pulled Olivia into a kiss. Neither had noticed that Emma had come up beside them.

"Mommy! Ma! Can I go play with the soccer ball with some friends? We'll be just over there," Emma said as she pointed to a small group of children with their parents standing close by.

"You've made friends already, it seems. Fine; just stay where we can see you," Olivia told her daughter.

"Thanks. Bye!" Emma took off in the direction of the other children as they started to kick a ball around.

"And there she goes. I swear sometimes that girl needs an electronic monitoring system attached to her." Olivia grinned wryly.

"Of course she's made friends easily. She has 'people skills.'" Natalia giggled before she continued, "Oh, and that electronic monitoring system thing? She'd probably hack it somehow."

"You're probably right." Olivia shook her head at the ingenuity of her daughter. Then again, given her gene pool, she shouldn't exactly be surprised at the breadth of talents Emma had inherited. "Speaking of Emma, I suspect it's going to be crazy the next few days. I'd like to call Jane and ask her to come to Chicago. Maybe she could take her to the science museum or the aquarium. I think Em would really enjoy those."

"That sounds like a good idea. Francesca's really too little to keep Emma occupied for long, and I don't know if any of my cousins have children her age." Natalia paused and shook her head slightly. "I also have no idea if my sister has children. She'd be about Ava's age, so it's possible." Natalia shrugged her shoulders, at a loss. Because of the years that had passed without contact, she'd just realized that she really didn't know her family, and that saddened her.

Taken aback by the mention of a sibling, Olivia nonetheless hid her surprise as she softly said, "You've never talked much about your family. I didn't know you had a sister."

Natalia nodded and then sighed. "I know. I should have said something sooner, but I made myself forget them. I had to, in order to be strong enough to stand on my own." She shrugged sadly. "I guess I just got used to not talking or thinking about them." Wistfully, she said, "Leyla was just five years old when I left – she may not remember me. Leo, he was seven years older than me and so much like Papa. He wanted to be just like him. As a little girl, I loved him so much, even though he was only my half-brother."

"What did your father do for work?"

"What didn't he do? Mostly janitorial, construction, and some security work as far as I can remember. He came to the U.S. in the 1950's with his parents as an immigrant from Puerto Rico. He was always very strict with us growing up. His rules or else. He never hurt us physically, but he could be quite controlling."

“How so?”

“He never approved of any of the girls that Leo brought home. Always said he could do better. And me, I wasn’t allowed to date at all. When I wasn’t in school or at church, I had to be home.” Natalia shook her head to dispel the unease growing from her memories. She tightened her grasp on her partner’s hand. “And I had to be very careful who I was friends with.”

“So when you started to date Gus...” As she spoke with Natalia, she kept watch on Emma’s little ball game, making sure she could see where she was.

Softly, Natalia spoke. “They didn’t know at first. Nicky was the first guy to pay any sort of attention to me. I was shy and awkward. I spent more time in the library than not. So, I kept it a secret from them, meeting him at lunch times, let him steal only a few kisses. There was a school dance, Homecoming, and I’d had to beg my parents to let me go. There were a couple girls in my class who were going by themselves, too. Anyway, Nicky met me at the school, because there was no way I would have been allowed to go with a guy to a dance. It was a great night. I had so much fun, and I felt so special dancing with him.” Her voice had taken on a dreamlike quality as she recalled the fond memories of her times with Gus, and then she frowned as she continued telling her partner about her past. “Gus kissed me and Leo saw that. He’d come to pick me up from the dance.”

“What happened?” Olivia asked her gently.

Natalia shook her head. “I was grounded. If anything, it felt like being a prisoner in my own home.”

“Then how did you even get to go out with Gus?” the hotelier asked with curious disbelief.

“I snuck out of the apartment,” Natalia admitted abashedly.

“So that’s where Emma gets it from.”

“Ha ha.” Natalia looked back down and began fidgeting with her sweater again. “On our first date, Nicky took me to dinner at this old burger shack. It should have been condemned, but it had good food. One night, a few weeks later, we were there again fooling around in his car, and one thing led to another, and we were having sex. God, it was awful.”

“The sex? The place? Or just that you were unprepared for the enormity of it?” Olivia asked her gently as she once again reached over and placed her hands over her partner’s fidgeting ones to try to calm her. The hotelier turned the other woman’s hands in her own and threaded their fingers together.

"All of that. And the fact that, at least according to the religion I grew up with, it was a huge mistake; a sin. I was so scared after it happened, I didn't talk to him for a couple weeks. He must have thought I didn't want to be with him anymore." Natalia stopped and pressed her lips together; a frown marred her forehead. "Anyway, he left town with his family and I never heard from him again. I went to his old apartment and the landlord said there was no forwarding address. A few weeks later, I found out I was pregnant."

"Oh, God, Natalia. I'm so sorry you had to go through all that on your own." Olivia disengaged one of her hands and brought it up to caress Natalia's cheek.

Natalia shrugged. "I did what I had to. When I was kicked out, I had to find a way to survive. I not only had myself, but I had a baby to look after. It was hard. More than once, I wondered if maybe my parents were right; that maybe Rafe would have been better off in a house with two parents who loved him." Natalia shook her head. "But I knew that Rafe was God's gift to me, no matter how he'd come into this world. And I knew I would love him and give him a home. That was what mattered to me."

Olivia realized that in many ways she and Natalia were both survivors; they'd just taken different routes to get there. Now they had each other to rely on and to support one another, and Olivia was determined not to let anything break that bond. If she had to fight for her family from now to eternity, she would, because they were so worth fighting for. "I'm with you; always."

Natalia placed a kiss to the hand that the hotelier had brought up to her face. "I know. However, as Emma's about to come back here at any moment, I suggest we pack this stuff up and head back to the hotel. I don't know about you, but I need a little rest before we head over to my parents' place." The young woman leaned a little closer and kissed her partner.

"That sounds wonderful." Olivia said as she pulled away and started to pack up the remnants of their lunch. She threw the trash into the garbage bins, and then she called Emma over. The young girl bounced over with plenty of energy. "Hey, Jellybean. We're going to go back to the hotel room for a little while before going over to Natalia's parents' home for supper. Why don't you say good-bye to your friends and we'll get moving."

"Okay, Mommy."

"Listen, Emma. I'm going to give Jane a call to see if she can come on up this evening and keep you company while we're here. It's going to be really busy the next few days. As much as you love your Ma and me, I think you might find it boring."

"What about Natalia's grandmother? Can we go see her again? She was really nice." Emma looked hopeful as she looked between both women.

"She was very nice. But sweetie, she's very sick. And we can't wear her out."

Emma's shoulders deflated. Then her eyes brightened slightly as an idea came to her.

"Okay. Can I make her a card?"

"I'm sure that she would love that, Jellybean. We can work on that tonight, okay?" Olivia drew her daughter into a hug.

"Okay Mommy. I love you." Emma hugged her mother and then turned to Natalia, extending her arms around the young woman. "I love you, too, Ma. I'm sorry you're so sad."

"So am I, sweetie. But you know what? Hugs from you and your Mommy and Francesca? They make things so much better." Natalia bent down and kissed Emma's head.

"From Rafe and Ava, too?"

"Definitely. My big family. You're my heart and I love you all." Natalia hugged Emma back and the little girl just soaked up the attention.

"Okay, enough with the mushiness," Olivia interrupted. "Let's get packed up and into the car. I don't know about you, but I hear a bed calling my name."

Emma scrunched up her face, shaking her head and smiled. "Beds don't call names, Mommy. That's silly."

"Oh yes, they do." Olivia and Natalia loaded the kids into the car, and the stroller and bags into the trunk before leaving the park for the hotel.

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ACT 3

The bustling city streets of Chicago could be heard through the open windows of the hallway outside the Rivera's apartment as Olivia, Natalia and their daughters awaited entrance. Natalia had knocked on the door, but there had been no response initially. She had her hand up to knock again when the door started to open.

"Marco, if that's you, I told you..." The voice that answered the knock stopped abruptly as the door opened fully, revealing a young woman with a big smile and dimples gracing her cheeks. Olivia was struck by the physical similarities to her partner.

“Not Marco,” Natalia responded.

“Natalia?” the woman asked, curiously. She had only vague memories of her sister and an old, worn school photograph of her. “How...” she paused as she stared at the new arrivals. “When...did you get here?”

“We got here this morning. Hi, Leyla.” Awkwardly, Natalia shuffled her feet where she stood. “Didn’t Mama tell you I was coming?”

Leyla shook her head in confusion. “Sort of. I was on the other line with Marco when she called. I was distracted.”

“I can tell,” Natalia commented with a smile at her sister’s reaction, realizing that she’d been expecting someone else at the door. “May we come in?” Natalia asked. It was her childhood home, but she wasn’t going to be presumptuous and just walk inside. She hadn’t set foot across the threshold since she was sixteen years old. Leyla nodded and stepped aside to allow them through the door. “Leyla, I’d like you to meet my family: This is my partner, Olivia.”

“You’re a family, huh?” Leyla commented curiously.

Not wanting to obfuscate the issue, Olivia responded simply, “Yes.” Given the Rivera family’s response to the teenage pregnancy aspect of Natalia’s life, she was sure that the ‘I’m engaged to your daughter’ aspect probably wouldn’t go down very easily, but she wasn’t about to lie about her relationship with Natalia.

Leyla looked at them a moment, and then glanced at the way this woman, her sister, gazed at Olivia with such familiarity. She shrugged her shoulders, very much aware from her social circles that families were made up of all different kinds of people. She didn’t ascribe to her parents’ narrow-minded perceptions of what families should be. Nodding, she smiled when she looked back at Natalia. “Looks like you found your Princess Charming.”

Natalia shared a smile with Olivia before returning her glance to her sister. “I have.”

“That’s great, Natalia.” Leyla asked curiously as she bent her knees, to get level with Emma. “So, who are the beautiful girls?”

Surprised again at the positive response from another member of her family, Natalia smiled nervously and said, “I’m sorry. These are our daughters, Emma and Francesca.” As she indicated each child, the pride in Natalia’s tone was unmistakable.

Emma looked at Leyla and tilted her head slightly with a contemplative expression on her face. “You’ve got the same dimples as Ma.”

"I do." Leyla smiled, charmed by Emma's forthrightness. "And you are a little cutie."

"My mommies call me Jellybean." Emma paused for a second. "Do you have a nickname?"

"Not since I was a little girl," Leyla responded wistfully, remembering a name her brother teased her with.

With a pensive expression, Natalia stood quietly a moment as she recalled a name she hadn't heard in years. "Sprout," Natalia responded with a giggle. "Leo used to call you that. He figured you'd sprout wings and fly away into the magical world of your books: all those stories about princesses and Peter Pan."

"After you left, I think I must have made him read Peter Pan to me every time he came over," Leyla said, her eyes getting misty. "I missed you so much."

Natalia smiled. Some of the tension she'd been feeling since the return to Chicago was receding; first because of her grandmother's acceptance of her relationship with Olivia, and now because of her sister's. However, she didn't anticipate that her parents would be so understanding. "How are you, Leyla?"

"Good. A little tired. It's been a bit crazy in the last several months." She sighed. "I was taking college classes and working temp jobs, but quit both and gave up my apartment to move home and help with Nana. Dad's working overtime just to cover the hospital and insurance bills." As she spoke her voice sounded resentful of the situation.

Leyla sighed and then headed over to a chair and collapsed into it. Emotions crowded her thoughts. It had been so long since she'd seen the sister she'd idolized as a child. She never understood why Natalia had left; their parents said nothing, outright refusing to talk about it whenever the subject was broached. As a child, Leyla had dreamt up wonderful, fantastical reasons for her big sister's absence, but as she'd grown older, and had faced harshly strict regulations from her parents, she'd grown angry, believing her sister had deserted them and left her to pay the price.

When she was a junior in high school, Leyla's frustration had gotten the better of her and as a result, she'd ended up having a huge argument with her brother. She'd caught him snooping around the high school, interrogating her friends and checking up on her actions. When she confronted him, he'd said he didn't want to see another sister disappear. Pressing him for details, he'd finally broken down and told her everything that happened with Natalia. She'd asked him if he had any pictures of their sister, and later on, in her room, he'd removed a slightly tattered photograph of Natalia from a small box of things he'd kept and handed it to her. After that, Leyla's opinion of her older sister ran the gamut from impressed

that she'd stood up to their parents to look after herself and her child, to saddened that they couldn't have been part of each other's lives.

Rather than focusing on the craziness of her life, Leyla decided to turn the tables and shift some of the insanity onto her sister's shoulders. "So, Natalia...aside from falling in love with Olivia, what have you been up to?"

"That is a long story." Natalia smiled. "Lots of twists, turns, heartache and joy."

"Sounds like a soap opera. I've got time." She grinned as she crossed her arms over her head and pushed back on the chair.

"Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction; with all the antics that go on, Springfield seems like a soap opera," Olivia quipped. "My life is often proof of that."

Leyla oozed curiosity. "Oh, do tell."

Olivia raised an eyebrow at Natalia's sister. "That would take a long time, and several martinis."

Moving over to perch on the arm of the couch next to Olivia, Natalia tried to act casual as she draped an arm around her partner's shoulder. In that moment, the familiar activity was filled with so much nervous tension that she had to center herself by glancing at the kids. Emma was curled up on a chair, reading, while Francesca slept in her carrier, oblivious to the goings on around her. The sight gave her the courage to speak.

"Long story short, Olivia got very sick and made a play for my husband. He died in an accident trying to find her. Olivia needed a heart transplant and I gave her my husband's heart. I looked after her and Emma and we got closer. I didn't realise how close we'd been getting. She kissed me to prove a point and it started us in all kinds of crazy directions. Olivia told me she was in love with me; I almost got married again, then ran away from the altar, and told her I loved her, too. We were just getting back to being a family again and I found out I was pregnant. I got scared and ran away. Came back and had to prove to Olivia I wasn't ever going to do that again. She forgave me. And here we are: another child to our family and I've never been happier." The words all came out in a rush, with Natalia barely taking the time to breathe in between statements.

Leyla sat in silence a moment as she absorbed what her sister had just told her, and then she laughed. "Wow. That really does sound like a soap opera."

"Oh there's plenty more craziness involved, but that's the barebones of it," Natalia responded, with a slight chuckle.

“At some point, you’re going to have to tell me more about this place; it sounds interesting.”

“That’s one word for it,” Olivia said, somewhat under her breath, getting a friendly nudge from Natalia.

The front door of the apartment opened and Natalia and Leyla’s parents walked in; both appeared very exhausted. Enough so that they hadn’t noticed the extremely friendly way their daughter was sitting with her friend. They hung their coats up and their father headed into the kitchen. He pulled a couple glasses out of the cupboard.

Gruffly, Mr Rivera turned to his younger daughter. “Leyla, did you ask your sister and her friend if they wanted something to drink?”

“Not yet, Papa.”

The old man sighed, as he was used to Leyla’s lack of hospitality. His attention shifting to her sister, he spoke, staring at them, “Natalia, do you or Ms. Spencer want something?”

“I can get it.” Natalia started to stand and get the drinks herself when she stopped herself, shaking her head, and sat back down, determined not to fall back into old habits of jumping in and ‘fixing’ things. She raised her head, meeting her father’s glare.

“Just some juice or milk. Em?” Natalia asked her daughter.

Emma looked up from her book to Natalia’s father. “May I have some juice, please?”

Pleased at the young girl’s manners, Mr. Rivera responded, “Yes, you may.”

“May I have some water, please?” Olivia asked Mr. Rivera. She’d prefer something stronger and equally clear, however, she was determined to be on her best behavior and support Natalia as much as she could.

Hector Rivera nodded and brought over a bottle of water, and some juice for Emma and Natalia before he went over to the lounge chair.

“Thank you,” Olivia said.

The phone rang. Reaching to grab it from the coffee table, Leyla exchanged a few quick words with the caller and then excused herself to take the phone into the guest room, where she was staying.

In an effort to quell some of her anxiety, Mrs. Rivera moved into the kitchen where she felt most at home. She busied herself with absently looking through cupboards, trying to think

of something to offer them for supper. Not finding what she wanted, she sighed and cautiously turned her attention to the living room. "Natalia, I've got some lasagne in the fridge if that's okay with your friend and her daughter. It will just take about half an hour or so to heat up."

"Thank you, Mama. That's fine." Smiling at her partner and Emma, Natalia responded, "We love lasagne."

"Natalia makes the best lasagne I ever had," Emma stated with a big smile.

"Well, I learned to cook from my Mama," Natalia told Emma, wistfully.

"Really? Cool." Natalia smiled at Emma's easygoing attitude. Emma addressed Mrs. Rivera. "May I help?"

Carmen Rivera paused, unsure of how to proceed. She really didn't know her daughter anymore or any of the people in her daughter's life. She had a grown grandson and a new baby granddaughter. She could see that Natalia had a close friendship with Ms. Spencer and her daughter.

Too many years had passed to ignore their history, but what she could do, though, was to try to move forward, or risk losing Natalia all over again. Since Ms. Spencer and Emma obviously meant a lot to Natalia, Carmen decided to make an effort to include them. "Well, the lasagne's already been made, so it just needs heating. I've just got to make a salad."

"I like making salads. What kind of salad?" Emma smiled widely.

"Would you like to help me make one?" Carmen smiled in response. Emma's mood was infectious. "Do you want a green salad or a Caesar salad?"

Emma appeared to think for a moment before she answered. "Mmmm. Caesar, please." She stood and followed Natalia's mother into the kitchen, excited at being able to help.

"Okay. You can help me clean the lettuce." Carmen moved over to the refrigerator and pulled out the Caesar dressing and lettuce.

"Do you put in those...hard bread pieces?" Emma asked.

"Croutons?" The corner of Carmen's mouth turned up, as she humored the young girl.

"You have a smile like Natalia."

The child's simple statement struck her like a slap, bringing home how much of her eldest daughter's life she'd missed. Those sweetly innocent words could have fallen from the lips of her grandson, instead of a stranger's child, and the pain of that was something Carmen Rivera would have to live with for the rest of her life. "Thank you." Carmen pulled out a bowl of water for Emma to place the lettuce in and some paper towel to lay it out on afterwards. She got the girl set up to clean the lettuce leaves then moved over to heat up the lasagne.

Olivia and Natalia sat in the living room, watching the interaction between Emma and Carmen over the counter dividing the two rooms, and sharing glances with each other. Their non-verbal communication conveyed a hesitant, possibly absurd, hope that their living arrangements and life partnership would be at least tolerated. Both women were cynical and realistic enough to realize that actual acceptance was not going to be very forthcoming.

They were jerked out of their silent communication when Natalia's father spoke. Though gruff, he was honestly curious about who his daughter associated herself with. "Ms. Spencer, what kind of work do you do? You were able to drop everything to be here for Natalia."

"Papa," Natalia started to interrupt her father's interrogation, his tone all too familiar to her from childhood.

"It's not a problem, Natalia." Olivia looked up at Natalia before returning her attention to Mr. Rivera. "I own a hotel in Springfield. I have a couple managers that I can leave in charge in my absence and they can contact me anytime. As for Natalia, I would be there for her in a heartbeat, whatever she needs."

Mr. Rivera nodded as he glanced at the two women. "True friends like that you hold on to. They don't come along very often."

"No, they don't. And Natalia has been there for me just as much, especially the past couple of years. She's a very smart, caring, compassionate, and funny woman." Olivia spoke with total conviction as she stole a glance at a bashful Natalia before returning her gaze to the younger woman's father.

Remaining suspicious of the woman, who spoke so highly of his daughter, he asked, "Why the past couple of years in particular?" Hector Rivera took a sip of his drink before putting the glass back on the table beside his chair.

"I had a health scare. After surgery, Natalia helped look after my daughter, my hotel and me."

“Health scare?” He was curious to know what kind of health crisis this woman could have had that led to their friendship.

“Papa, Olivia had a heart transplant.” She studied her father as she answered, but couldn’t read anything in his expression to tell her what he was thinking.

“Is everything okay now?” he asked, acknowledging the seriousness of the woman’s illness.

Olivia nodded. “It’s pretty good now. Did I mention that Natalia’s also very stubborn? If it weren’t for her persistence, I’d probably have given up the will to fight to live. I would do anything to help Natalia.” She watched his eyelids narrow as he took in what she said, and she realized how much that statement spoke to her commitment to her partner.

Natalia gave a shy smile at Olivia’s continued praise of her. She was just about to respond to deflect some of that praise when Olivia’s cell phone beeped in her purse. Since they were expecting a return call from Jane, who they’d called on the way over to the apartment, Natalia reached over to Olivia’s purse, which was closer to her own feet. She glanced down at the caller ID then handed Olivia’s Blackberry over to her.

“It’s Jane. Excuse me.” Olivia nodded at Mr. Rivera as she stood up and hit the answer button on her phone before heading down the hall and into the bathroom to take the call.

While Olivia was out of the room, Hector Rivera looked over at his daughter and spoke. “You look happy, Natalia.”

“I am, Papa. I am.”

“Olivia mentioned you helped her out with her hotel when she was sick. What kind of work do you do now?” he asked, searchingly. For what, he couldn’t pinpoint, just something to understand this person his daughter had become.

“Well, at the moment, I’m still on maternity leave, so I’m going to wait a bit before I go back to work. I’ve been Olivia’s personal assistant. She was the first person I knew as an adult who really believed in me and challenged me to be better, to do more than I ever thought I was capable of doing.” Natalia bowed her head.

Hector leaned forward in his chair, resting his forearms on his lap and clasping his hands together. He hung his head for a moment and sighed wistfully, before raising it to face his daughter again. “You know, all your mother and I ever wanted for you was that you were happy and you make a good life for yourself.”

Natalia tried to let go of the old hurts and resentments that she'd felt for her family. It was difficult. "It didn't feel like that when I was a teenager. I felt like I couldn't do anything right."

"We expected a lot from our children, Natalia, as any parent does. It wasn't easy but we did the best we could." Mr. Rivera picked up his glass and took a sip, giving his daughter a cordial nod as he replaced it back to the side table.

Determined not to seem like the young girl she felt, she asked with a sure tone, "Did you have to get Leo to frighten off any friend I started to have? I had very few friends in school."

"They weren't right for you," he responded brusquely.

"That should have been my choice, Papa." Natalia was getting exasperated but tried not to let it show. She didn't want to get into a fight. She didn't have the energy for it, on top of dealing with her grandmother's illness.

"Just like it was your choice to consort with that Nicky boy?" his voice grew harsher and more goading with each comment.

"Papa, please. Not now." Natalia sighed, pleadingly.

"Why not now, Natalia? This is the first time we've seen or heard from you in twenty years." Hector Rivera was raring for an argument to assuage his loss of control over the situation. With the gulf of years between them, the loss of everything he considered his rights as a parent became too much to handle. The need to assuage that grew into a violent need to dominate this wilful child who'd returned to his life, better for not having left it.

"Exactly, Papa. It's been nearly twenty years." Natalia sat forward in her position on the arm of the couch. With determination, she continued, "My children are happy and healthy. I'm happy and healthy. That's all that matters to me." She paused, and raised an eyebrow, in defiance. "And that Nicky boy, my son's father, I married him."

"Where is he now? Why didn't he come with you?" He asked her, his tone quieter, but still challenging.

Natalia spoke softly. "He died in an accident a couple years ago."

The deeply saddened tone in Natalia's voice rocked him, knocking the wind from his sails. "I'm sorry to hear that." He sat back in his chair and looked over at her pensively. "Where is your son now?"

“He’s in the Army. He’s stationed at Fort Bragg at the moment,” Natalia spoke proudly of Rafe, despite her misgivings about his career choice.

Hector nodded. “Good for him. He’ll learn a lot. Your brother is in the Army.”

“Papa, Leo’s in the VA hospital,” Leyla said exasperatedly as she came back into the living room, having heard part of the conversation. She put the phone back on the coffee table and perched herself on the chair near her sister.

“Is he okay?” Natalia turned to her sister, cautiously, unsure that she wanted to know.

“Six months ago, he lost the lower half of his left leg in a confrontation with Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Two of his best friends were killed. He’s been dealing with physical therapy as well as post-traumatic stress.” The tone of Leyla’s voice indicated that while she appreciated the fact her brother was serving their country, she disagreed with the reasons behind the war.

Natalia bowed her head, in part because of concern for her brother, but also because just the thought of Rafe being injured in any way terrified her. She knew that there were probably altercations in prison, more than the few times that she heard about. However, Rafe’s military career could have him halfway around the world, certainly more than the hour’s drive it took to get to the penitentiary, and she wouldn’t know that anything had happened until long after the fact. Natalia’s brow furrowed and her hands started fidgeting, first toying with her pantsuit, then one hand going up to her face near her mouth.

When Olivia emerged from the bathroom, a quick glance was all she needed to see that Natalia was troubled. Immediately she wanted to step in, and deflect any trouble that was heading her partner’s way. She moved over to her partner’s side and sat beside her, reaching out and capturing Natalia’s fidgeting hand in her own. Perceptibly, Natalia took a deep breath and relaxed into Olivia’s presence, the younger woman’s nervous worry abating considerably.

Leyla looked over at the two women, watching how they interacted and noting the obvious bond between them, and wondered if her father had seen it, too. By the slight narrowing of his eyes, she figured he had, but he didn’t say anything.

The tension of the room was broken when Emma emerged from the kitchen to announce that the food was ready. She had, with Mrs. Rivera’s directions, set the table for supper and was quite pleased with herself.

Checking on Francesca, who was still conked out in her car seat, Natalia decided she’d feed the infant after they’d eaten. The group seated themselves at the dining room table. Leyla

and Natalia were placed opposite of Olivia and Emma, with either end being taken by the elder Riveras.

Before they started in on their meal, Emma piped up. "Are we going to say grace?" She looked up at her mother and then across to Natalia.

"Yes, sweetie." Natalia jumped at the chance to include a piece of their daily routine in this moment. All day, everything had been out of sorts, and saying grace would be a perfect way to remind her that the normal world was still out there. She grasped her mother's hand on one side and her sister's on the other, while keeping her gaze firmly fixed on her partner and daughter.

Emma quickly said the grace that Natalia had taught her then looked up at the Riveras. "May we eat now?" Emma asked eagerly. Olivia grinned at her daughter's exuberance.

"Yes, you may," Mrs. Rivera replied with a smile at the young girl's jubilant manner.

After a moment, Natalia remembered to ask about the phone call. "Olivia, is everything sorted for Jane to come up?"

Olivia looked up from slicing into the lasagne. "Yeah, she'll arrive tonight at 9:15. I'll pick her up from the station and bring her back to the hotel."

"Jane?" Mrs. Rivera questioned.

"She's Emma's nanny. With everything going on, we thought Emma might get bored." Olivia turned to her daughter. "Maybe Jane can take you to the Science Museum. I was looking on their website earlier and I think there are some things you'd really like to see."

"She might also like to go to the Shed Aquarium," Leyla added.

Emma was almost bouncing in her seat with excitement. "Can I do both, Mommy?"

"We'll see, Jellybean." Olivia reached out and ran her hand over her daughter's head.

Before long, the meal was finished. While Natalia went to feed Francesca, Olivia and Emma assisted in the cleanup effort. Already feeling terribly exposed, Natalia chose to nurse Francesca in the privacy of the guest room. Looking around, she barely recognized the childhood room she'd shared with Leyla; gone were the brightly painted wall colors and pictures of them growing up, replaced instead with generic prints hung against muted paint tones. Once Natalia had the infant fed and her diaper changed, she dressed the girl in a sleeper and returned to the living room.

After she placed Francesca's things in the corner of the room, she lifted the baby in her arms and settled in beside her partner. Seeing the infant reach out to her from Natalia's lap, Olivia's face immediately softened in gentle affection as she picked her up. Francesca wrapped a small fist around hair that hung loose along her mother's face when she brought the girl close and kissed her forehead. Without forethought, Natalia ran her hand over her daughter's head before she rested it on Olivia's arm, and shifted back into the couch.

Olivia looked over at her partner then returned her gaze to Natalia's father. Figuring that her business was a pretty safe topic for discussion, she focused on that; and if it happened to show off Natalia's management skills in the process, all the better. "Mr. Rivera, you had asked before supper about my hotel? We're in the planning stages of possibly expanding it to a small franchise. We haven't focused on anything specific. Natalia and I had a brief look at some property in San Cristobel where my family is from, but we decided against that for the time being. We'd like something closer."

"We?" he asked, surprised. "I thought you owned the hotel."

"I do. However, I have investors, and Natalia's a partner and she has been instrumental in some amazing changes for the hotel. When I was sick, she pretty much took control of the day-to-day business dealings with staff. Truthfully, I think they run scared when I come, but they love Natalia. She's brilliant." Olivia kept her focus on Mr. Rivera but her smile was all for her partner.

Natalia bowed her head in a shy smile at Olivia's praise. "I just did what needed to be done."

"Mommy's a hotel mong...mogul," Emma supplied as she pulled her copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit* from her backpack and laid it on the coffee table. She then sat on the floor in front of her mothers and pulled the book to her, then looked up at Natalia. "Ma, can you read me a story later?"

Natalia looked down the girl affectionately as she responded. "Sure, Jellybean. Which one?"

"*Children of the Lamp*, please."

Mr. Rivera watched the obvious family scene play out in front of him and he seemed poised to say something when Olivia caught his stern facial expression and schooled her own to match, to challenge him.

"You live together? All of you?" His eyes narrowed in ire.

“Yes. We’re a family, Papa,” Natalia replied. She paused a moment then looked up, glancing quickly at Olivia and then directly at her father. “I love Olivia.” It wasn’t something she’d planned on telling her parents just yet, but now it was out there, so to speak. And then she waited, for what she wasn’t sure.

“You what?!” Hector Rivera shot to his feet. “How could you?” He started forward, anger making him appear to double in size. Olivia pulled Francesca close, readying for a fight if needed. “Didn’t we raise you right? Have you turned completely from God and His teachings?”

Emma looked at her mothers, and then looked warily at Natalia’s father. The child was smart enough to know what he meant, and the friendliness she felt toward the burly man was quickly fading.

It wasn’t the first time she’d heard this kind of argument or discussion. She’d overheard more than a few people talking like that about her family when they didn’t realize she was nearby. It made her mad sometimes. Natalia had told her that if people were saying bad things about them to let one of her moms know and they would do something about it. But this was Natalia’s family that was starting to say bad things.

“Hey, Emma?” Leyla interrupted the discussion, knowing from experience the expression on her father’s expression face, and her awareness of his bigoted ignorance towards things he disliked, that it was not something the girl should hear. Turning her attention to the girl, she nodded her head towards the hall. “How about we go into my room and we can read your book? You can tell me your favourite parts.” The young woman glanced over at her sister, and then to Olivia, who was cradling the baby protectively. “Maybe we can take Francesca with us?”

Olivia nodded and Natalia breathed a sigh of thanks for her younger sister. Briefly, Olivia stood up to pass the infant over to Leyla before returning to her partner’s side. Emma gathered her book in her hands and followed Leyla and Francesca down the hall to the young woman’s room. Then Natalia returned her attention to her parents.

Natalia took a breath and steadied herself. “Papa, you and Mama taught me how to love someone and to take care of my family. I’ve done that to the best of my ability for most of my life.” Her hands began to fidget slightly. She met her father’s eyes, determined to be strong, for herself and for her family. “For nineteen years I took care of my son on my own. I very briefly had his father in my life when Rafe was a teenager. And then there was Olivia. We didn’t know what was happening, only that we’d become good friends who’d come to rely on each other. You can’t plan who you’re going to fall in love with; it happens or it doesn’t. Somewhere along the way I realized that I couldn’t live without Olivia in my life, to love and be loved, and to raise our children together.”

With an affronted tone Carmen started, “But, what about the harm you’re doing to your children?”

About to respond with an acerbic, biting reply, Olivia held her tongue at a slight touch from Natalia. Glancing over at her partner, she was not surprised to see the fire of determination fill Natalia’s eyes. Nothing brought out the “mama bear” in her lover faster than to accuse her of being a bad mother.

“What harm, Mama? They’re happy, they’re healthy, they’re loved by both of us, and by their fathers.” Natalia looked first at her mother and then at her father. “If you can’t accept that, then I feel sorry for you. You’ve already lost out on getting to know one grandchild. Do you really want to push me, and my family, away, again?”

Hector responded, indignantly. “Push you? We didn’t push you, Natalia. You had a choice.”

“A choice, Papa? There was no choice. You gave me only two options and wouldn’t even consider anything else. I was keeping my son. I couldn’t give him up. It’s not who I am.”

Carmen spoke, her voice harshly and accusatory, “You were too young.”

“Yes, I was young, and naïve.” Natalia stood her ground.

“Your friend, here, gave her daughter up for adoption,” Mrs. Rivera added derisively, recalling her conversation with Olivia earlier in the day.

Both Olivia and Natalia felt like they’d been pole-axed. Natalia was at a loss for words, but Olivia was not. She abruptly stood up and stared down at Mrs. Rivera. “You don’t know the first thing about my life. What I went through has nothing to do with what happened with your daughter. What makes you think that you have any right to talk to Natalia like that?”

“We’re her parents! We have every right.” Carmen contradicted.

“Perhaps biologically speaking, but you forfeited that right when you kicked her out at sixteen. Natalia’s a grown woman, who has spent more than half her life on her own taking care of herself and her son. So, no, you do not have the right to speak to Natalia like you have.”

“We were doing what was best for her. We did not kick her out. She chose to leave,” Hector Rivera countered dismissively.

“Best for me?” Natalia responded indignantly. “I seem to clearly recall you packing my suitcase and driving me to the home for unwed mothers. You said I was a disgrace to the family. Do you even realize how much that hurt?” Natalia clenched and unclenched her

hands; frustration, hurt and annoyance rolling through her like wildfire as they sought an outlet. "I also know that all my letters to Nana were returned, unopened. And I know she didn't do that. Eventually I stopped writing to her because it hurt too much having them returned. So many nights I cried myself to sleep. So many times, I wanted to reach out, to share everything that was happening with my family. But I was alone; alone the first time I felt the baby kick, and alone when he was born. I wanted to be able to tell you, but I couldn't. I was afraid of being rejected, yet again." Natalia sighed and dropped her head into her hands. Olivia sat beside her, and she took strength from her partner's hand rubbing her back.

"When Rafe got sick when he was a young boy, the doctors asked me about family medical history. I didn't know any of that. I was so scared. I tried calling home but I'd get the answering machine every time and I never got called back. Why didn't you ever call back?" By this time, Natalia was at her wits end and old hurts were bringing new tears. She wrapped her arms across her torso. She felt Olivia pull her back and she let herself be enveloped in her partner's arms.

"I'm sorry." Natalia's mother spoke quietly. "I didn't know." No matter how old her children got, Carmen realized belatedly, she didn't like to see them hurting.

Olivia looked up at Mrs. Rivera. "Didn't know or chose not to know?"

The phone rang, startling them all in the silence that succeeded the hotelier's question. After the fourth ring, Carmen picked up the receiver, listened for a moment, and then let it fall to her lap.

Hector noted the ashen color of his wife's face. "What's wrong?"

"My mother's had another stroke. She's on life support until we can get there. Oh God." Carmen wrung her hands together, and then she tried to stand. At first the older woman wavered but Hector came over to steady her.

"Nana?" Natalia managed to pull herself a little from Olivia's embrace and focus on what was going on around her.

"She's had another bad stroke, Natalia. We should go to the hospital," Olivia said as she moved her hand to Natalia's back again and continued to rub the tense muscles.

"Sweetheart, I'm going to go check on Emma and Francesca and get them ready. I'll be back in a minute."

Natalia nodded her head then got up to go to the bathroom to tidy up and wash her face. After a few moments of deep breathing, she realized how much tension she was carrying. She was exhausted. The emotional upheaval had taken a toll on her and all she wanted to

do was go back to the hotel and fall asleep in Olivia's arms. Better yet, she would have loved to just return to the farmhouse and done the same. But the day wasn't over yet. Taking one last deep breath, she returned to the living room and found everyone ready to leave. She grabbed her purse and Francesca's change bag. Olivia had the infant all secured in her car seat; Emma's backpack was stuffed full and jauntily carried over one of the girl's shoulders. Natalia's parents and her sister were also all ready. The apartment was locked up and once down on the street, the families piled into the two cars out front, and headed to the hospital.

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Anxious to learn what had happened, they all had to wait for the physician to arrive and explain Cecelia's condition. He reminded the family that Mrs. Hernández had signed a 'Do Not Resuscitate' order during one of her previous visits and that the machines were only a temporary measure. "If you'd like to go in and say good-bye, you can. We can turn off the machines when you're done. Just let the nurse know when you're finished."

"Thank you, Doctor," Hector replied. He placed an arm around his wife's shoulders and guided her into her mother's hospital room. Olivia and Natalia stayed outside for a moment, allowing the older couple their privacy.

Natalia looked gratefully over at her sister. "Thank you so much for looking after Emma and Francesca back at the apartment."

"No trouble, Natalia. I know how they can get sometimes."

"Still, though, this was a long time coming." Natalia exhaled a deep breath, and then she shook her head uneasily. "I'm still kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop. That seemed almost too easy."

"I'll take it for what it is. We can deal with anything else later." Olivia was equally skeptical that they'd heard the last of the elder Rivera's thoughts on their relationship, but as she felt a familiar hand slip into her own, Olivia glanced over at her partner and recognized the young woman's need for comfort. Olivia brought their joined hands up to her face and kissed the back of her partner's hand.

Natalia led her family over to the chairs that lined the wall and sat down, and then Emma came over to curl up against her side. "Hey, Jellybean. Are you getting tired?" Emma nodded. "Come here." Natalia brought her arm around the young girl and caressed her face. "It's been a long day, hasn't it?"

"Is your grandmother going to die tonight?" Emma asked in a tiny voice as she looked up at her.

“Yes, sweetie, she is.” The young woman pursed her lips and her eyes welled with tears.

“Are you sad?”

“Very much so, Emma. I love her very much.” Trying to find something positive to cling to, Natalia said, “When I was a child, she used to tell me stories from when she was little, and they were so funny, they’d always make me laugh and laugh.” Even through the wave of sorrow rolling over her, Natalia could sense an echo of that laughter ringing in her heart.

“Really? What kind of stories?” Emma’s attention perked up.

“Oh, about princess and dragons.”

Emma grinned as she looked up at Natalia, head tilted slightly. “Can you tell me one of the stories?”

“Maybe later, sweetie,” Natalia said as she noticed her mother coming out of her grandmother’s room.

“Leyla, Natalia, if you want to see your grandmother, you should go in now.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Natalia responded, as she disengaged her arm from around her daughter and stood.

“Natalia,” Olivia started. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“I’m okay right now, but I’ll need you later.”

“Anytime, love.” Olivia stood up and wrapped Natalia in a hug before the younger woman left with her sister to go into their grandmother’s room. Mrs. Rivera followed them back in. Olivia returned to the bank of chairs where Emma sat slightly hunched and Francesca sat giggling in her stroller, playing with the attached toy rings.

“Mommy, how come Natalia’s parents didn’t like you and her together?” Emma sniffled a little. “They seemed fine before they found out.”

“Come here, Jellybean.” Olivia wrapped her daughter in her arms. “They don’t know us very well, right now. Sometimes people are afraid of what they don’t know or don’t understand.” Olivia looked at Emma directly, and gently ran a hand over her hair. “Remember what happened with Derek last year and why his parents didn’t want you playing with him?” Emma nodded. “Sometimes people just don’t understand that when two people love each other, it doesn’t matter if it’s two mommies or two daddies or a mommy and a daddy.

Sometimes, their beliefs teach them it's not right if the two people are the same gender." Olivia paused then leaned down and pressed a kiss to Emma's head. "But you know what? Natalia and I love each other very much, and we love you, and Francesca, and Ava and Rafe. That won't ever change."

"Will they ever like it that we're a family?" Emma asked softly.

"I don't know, Em." Olivia pressed a kiss to her daughter's head. "Maybe if they get to know us as a family, they'll see that we're really not that different."

"I don't like seeing Ma sad. I don't like it that they made her sad saying those bad things." Emma sighed, and pursed her lips to the side, much like Natalia did when she got upset.

"I don't either, Jellybean. But we can be there for Natalia and love her and take care of her."

A few minutes later, Natalia, her sister and her parents emerged from Mrs. Hernández's room; the three women had tears rolling down their cheeks, while Mr. Rivera remained more stoic. Emma was the first one up to rush over to give Natalia a hug. Olivia stood, looked to her partner for an indication of what she wanted, and at the open look of need on Natalia's face, went to her. Gently, she caressed Natalia's cheeks, wiping away the streaks of too many tears.

Natalia spoke softly as she leaned into her partner's hand. "Olivia, can we go to the hospital's chapel? I'd like to light some candles."

"Of course, anything."

"Thank you." Natalia looked up at Olivia and pressed her lips together. She felt certain that if she dared say much at the moment, she'd fall apart, and right now, the only place Natalia felt comfortable doing that was in Olivia's arms.

Leyla walked over to her sister and laid a hand on her arm. "Natalia, if you'd like, I can stay with the girls until you're finished. We're going to be here for a while until the doctor gets back and everything with Nana is settled."

"Are you sure it's not too much of a bother?"

"We'll be fine, Ma." Emma spoke up. "Leyla can read Sweet Pea and me some more of *The Velveteen Rabbit*."

"It's okay, Natalia. All Francesca's supplies are in the stroller, right?" Leyla asked.

Olivia responded, “Yes. There are diapers, toys, and if she gets hungry, there is a bottle of milk in there as well. Thank you so much. Natalia and I won’t be too long.” Before she and Natalia left, Emma was taking her book out of her bag and sitting down next to Leyla. Olivia nodded and wrapped an arm around Natalia’s back and led her down the hallway towards the elevators.

When the two women entered the eleventh floor chapel, Natalia felt almost instantly at peace in the dimly lit room. The high ceiling allowed for the beautiful, tall stained glass mural windows on either side of the chapel. At the statue of Mary at the back of the room, Natalia crossed herself and paused for a moment while Olivia stood silently behind her. She moved quietly through the chapel up to the front where the stand of prayer candles was housed. She lit five candles, one for her grandmother, one for Rafe, one for her brother, one for her parents and sister, and one for her family with Olivia. After each candle was lit, she spoke a short prayer of peace.



When Natalia was finished, she went over to one of the pews, genuflected and crossed herself before she sat. Olivia slipped in next to her and reached over to hold her hand; no words were necessary to offer her partner comfort. They stayed that way for several minutes as Natalia gathered her strength for handling the coming emotional blow. When

she was ready, she nodded at Olivia and they gathered themselves and left the chapel and headed back toward the medical floor where her family was.

Natalia looked down at her watch as she had noticed from the windows that the sky had darkened considerably. "Olivia, what time do you have to pick up Jane?"

"She gets in at 9:15. What time is it now?"

"Quarter past eight. I don't know how much longer we'll be, but hopefully we can get the details quickly and you can drop us back at the hotel before you go. I'm exhausted and the girls need to get to bed."

"No problem. I'll get Emma and Francesca sorted out while you go over things with your parents. If they have any further questions, they know how to contact us."

"Have I mentioned lately how much I adore you?" Natalia asked Olivia as she moved in to hug her.

"You may have mentioned it a few times."

"Smarty pants." Natalia gently swatted her partner's arm as she pulled back to look at her. She gently raised her hand and pushed a few stray locks of hair from Olivia's face.

"Seriously, I don't know how I could have done this without you. You mean the world to me, you know."

"You're welcome. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else." It had taken Olivia a long time to realize how true that was until the chance had almost been taken away from her. This family she had created with Natalia was more than she'd ever hoped for, longed for. If it were in her power, she would do everything she could to protect her family from whatever forces threatened to destroy it.

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They returned to their hotel room with time to spare before Olivia had to go pick up Jane, so they got the girls bathed and changed for bed. Afterward, Natalia showered and put on pyjamas. Emerging a little while later, feeling fresh and clean, Natalia settled into one of the plush chairs to feed Francesca while Emma worked on her homework at the desk. Olivia looked over some emails on her Blackberry and quietly conversed with Natalia about some small work details until it was time to leave for the train station. Just before she left, Emma finished her homework and asked Natalia if she could read her a story. Olivia gave her girls and Natalia a brief kiss before she grabbed her keys and left the room.

Natalia settled a clean, dry, fed Francesca into the crib that the hotel had brought up for them to use, and then went to lie down with Emma on her bed. The girl pulled out her copy of *Children of the Lamp: The Akhenaten Adventure*.

“Where did your Mom finish off last time?”

“I think just after John and Phillipa had the same dream about their uncle in England.”

“Okay, I’ll start reading from there,” Natalia said. Emma crawled under the covers and curled up next to her mother. Natalia started reading, and before the end of the chapter, Emma was fast asleep, her head pillowed on Natalia’s shoulder.

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ACT 4

When Olivia returned with Jane, she opened the door to Emma’s room to find her partner sound asleep with her daughter sprawled beside her. Jane quietly put her things on the second double bed in the room, and then followed Olivia over to the main area of the suite. En route to the hotel, Olivia had explained to Jane what had happened since they’d arrived in Chicago, so now they were just discussing things that the young woman could do with Emma over the next couple days.

After they nailed down the details for the following day at the Museum of Science and Industry, Olivia went into her daughter’s room to rouse Natalia.

“Natalia? Sweetheart, wake up for a minute, okay?” Olivia caressed her partner’s face with the back of her fingers.

A groggy Natalia woke from her slumber. “Olivia?”

“Yes, honey, Jane’s here. Come on. Let’s get you into the other room.”

“Francesca?”

“Still sound asleep.” Olivia guided Natalia over to the king-sized bed in the main room of the suite and tucked her partner in, then returned to where Jane sat at the desk. “You’re welcome to stay out here for a bit since it’s still pretty early. I’m just going to work on some business on my laptop for a little while.”

“That’s okay, Ms. Spencer. I have a book I can read in bed for a while. I’m going to try and get to sleep early. It’s going to be a busy day tomorrow.”

“Okay. I gave you the extra key card?”

“Yes, Ms. Spencer.”

“All right. Goodnight.” Olivia nodded her head as Jane turned and headed into the other room, closing the door behind her. She sat with her laptop open, working on answering some business emails and checking the news before shutting the computer down and heading to the bathroom and preparing for bed. After the long drive, followed by an emotional day with Natalia’s family, Olivia was as tired as her partner and all she wanted at the moment was to climb into bed and curl up with her. Sinking into the mattress, she sighed in pleasure as the kinks her joints and muscles relaxed. Without waking, Natalia had gravitated towards Olivia and wrapped herself around her, leaving Olivia feeling utterly contented.

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When Olivia woke to the alarm clock from her Blackberry, she was entranced by the morning light as it filtered through the curtains of the hotel room. She also noticed the weight of her partner holding her captive. Natalia still slept soundly, which was a very rare occurrence indeed. With one arm around Olivia’s stomach and one leg curved up and over her thigh, Olivia felt thoroughly possessed. From the baby monitor on her nightstand, she could hear the muffled cries of Francesca who’d begun to stir. Olivia tried to dislodge herself from under Natalia, which only made the younger woman tighten her hold.

“Natalia, I need to get up. Francesca is waking up and I’ve got to go to the bathroom.”

“Mmm?” A bleary eye opened.

Olivia chuckled slightly. “Your arm is pressed against my bladder.” She nodded her head towards the bathroom door.

“Oh, sorry.” Natalia retracted her arm and Olivia was able to get out of bed. “How long have you been awake?” She stretched out stiff muscles as she followed her partner’s movements with her eyes.

“Just a few minutes. Sweet Pea seemed to sleep well last night, just like her mama.” Olivia leaned over and pressed a kiss to Natalia’s forehead before disappearing into the bathroom.

Natalia got up and retrieved the robe from the end of the bed, pulling it around her to ward off the chill of the room. She wandered over to the crib and smiled down at her little girl.

“How are you, Sweet Pea?” Natalia asked her. The infant scrunched up her face, preparing for a cry. “That good, huh? Well, Mama’s going to get you all cleaned up and fed and then we’ll go get your big sister up.” Natalia grabbed the diaper bag and wash wipes from the stroller and got Francesca changed and dressed into a pink onesie and blue denim overalls, and then she sat back on the bed, leaned against the headboard and began to feed the girl.

Olivia emerged from the bathroom with a robe wrapped around her and a towel covering her wet hair. “Hey, is she all ready for the day?”

“Just about. Why don’t you go wake Emma and Jane and I’ll call room service for some breakfast.” Natalia had already grabbed the handset from the side table and started to dial.

“Sounds good to me. My usual and make sure the coffee is extra strong,” Olivia commented as she knocked on the door separating the two rooms. She waited for a moment before entering, not having heard anything on the other side of the door.

“Find out what Jane wants for breakfast.”

“Will do.” Olivia disappeared into the other room. Jane was easier to rouse from sleep and after a few exchanged words, the young woman headed into the bathroom, with some clothes and wash supplies. Olivia called out Jane’s breakfast request to Natalia through the open connecting door, before returning her attention to her daughter. Most of the time, Emma had a tendency towards Natalia’s chipper morning attitude, but today the young girl lay sprawled on the bed, arms and legs covering much of the double bed’s surface; the quilt in disarray.

“Hey, Jellybean. Time to get up, sweetie.”

“Mommy?” the girl’s tired voice responded without opening her eyes.

“That’s me. You’ve got a big day today,” Olivia said as she reached out to run her fingers through her daughter’s hair.

“I do?” Emma rolled over and sat up, suddenly energized.

Olivia smiled at her daughter’s quick wakefulness; she couldn’t do that without imbibing at least one cup of coffee. “Yep. Jane’s going to take you to the Museum of Science and Industry. There are some really neat things for you to see.”

“Are you and Natalia coming?”

"I don't know. We have to check in with Natalia's family and see if there's anything we can do to help. And then I'll know more about our schedule."

"Can I see Leyla today, too?" Emma's face brightened. Natalia's sister reminded her a little of her big sister Ava.

"I don't see why not. You like her, don't you?" Olivia knew her daughter was trusting, but she also knew that the young girl was a pretty good judge of character.

Emma nodded vigorously. "She's fun." Emma paused. "Maybe she can come with us to the Museum."

"I don't know, Jellybean. I think she'll probably be pretty busy with her family."

"But we can ask?"

"We can ask. No guarantees though, Em," Olivia noted.

"Okay." Emma nodded and then bounded out of the tangle of sheets on the bed. Jane came out of the bathroom and headed over to the small desk in the room.

"Okay, kiddo," Olivia extended her hand to her daughter. "Go get washed and dressed. Natalia's ordered breakfast and it should be here soon."

"Yes, Mommy," Emma called out as she disappeared into the bathroom.

Olivia went out into the main part of the suite and saw that Natalia had dressed the infant before she sat down to feed her.

Natalia looked up at her partner, acknowledging her. "Breakfast will be up shortly. I also called Sister Anne to let her know I wouldn't be able to be at the Mission this week. I completely forgot to do that yesterday morning but I didn't want to leave her hanging."

"How is she?"

"Good, but busy." She looked over to her partner. "Do you get the feeling that she likes to antagonize Father Ray?" Natalia asked with a smile. She was pretty sure that Sister Anne had a few choice words for Father Ray before the Christening, which led to him donating the proceeds from a week's monetary offering at the church to the Mission.

"I knew there was a reason I liked her." Olivia grinned widely.

“Olivia,” Natalia chided slightly, but it lost its effect since she was also giggling at both her partner’s response and the situation.

“Hey, I’m just sayin’...” Olivia paused for a moment. “I have to say, Sister Anne is a really good listener. For a nun, she’s very non-traditional. I’m glad I’ve gotten to know her.”

“Me, too.” Natalia smiled as there was a knock at the door. She answered it and wheeled the room service cart into the room as she handed the porter a good tip.

“Jellybean, your breakfast is here,” Olivia called out to her daughter. She smiled as the girl burst into the room, mostly dressed, with a sneaker still in her right hand.

“Mommy, can you braid my hair?”

“Sure, Bean. I’ll do it after your breakfast so the food doesn’t get cold.” Olivia quickly poured the hot coffee from the carafe into three mugs for Natalia, Jane and herself. Emma had some orange juice to go with her breakfast. Everyone sat down at either the table or at the desk to eat, and then afterwards, they used Olivia’s laptop to quickly browse the website for the museum. Emma got more and more excited as she looked at the different things she would see.

Natalia picked up her cell phone and called her parents’ home. On the third ring, the groggy voice of her sister answered.

“Hello?”

“Leyla, are Mama or Papa there?”

“I don’t think so. They were planning to head over to the funeral home first thing to get things arranged. What time is it?” Leyla asked groggily.

“Let me guess, you were sound asleep when they left.” Natalia grinned at her sister’s response. “And it’s 8:45am.”

“Yep. Are you always so cheery this early in the morning?”

“Yes, especially since I have two daughters who like to be up early.” Natalia’s smile was very affectionate as she glanced over at Emma, then at Francesca, who was lying on a play blanket on the floor. The infant had had grabbed onto a toy ring and brought it to her mouth; she had been fussy lately as one of her teeth was pushing through her gums.

“More power to you.” Leyla paused for a minute. “Oh, Mama asked if you could come over later this morning. They’ve got to meet with the priest at 11am to go over the funeral Mass. She asked if you could also pick up some healthy snack stuff for the wake at the funeral home; I think she has the idea that I’d pick up chips and dip and pretzels or something.”

Natalia laughed. As Leyla continued talking, she realized that her sister had similar personality traits as Olivia. “Okay, see you later.” She disconnected the call and relayed the requests to Olivia. Then she dug into her breakfast before it got completely cold.

Olivia had already finished hers, and then got Emma’s hair braided while the girl sat on the footstool by the lounge chair. Then she started to pack up Francesca’s things and put them into the diaper bag in the stroller before picking up the baby and playing with her until the others finished. Once everyone was ready, they headed out and piled into Olivia’s car. Emma was talking a mile a minute about all the things she planned to check out. Olivia told her to make notes of what her favorite things were so that she could tell them all later.

Once Emma and Jane were dropped off at the museum, with the two intrepid museum-goers promising to call or text updates throughout the day, particularly regarding when they would be finished, the two women breathed deeply. They both knew it could be a strenuous day and they took a few moments to quietly enjoy each other’s company before continuing on.

Their first stop was at a local market where Natalia picked up a couple vegetable and fruit trays. She’d also gotten some freshly baked muffins. Olivia had gone off on her own to pick up a couple items. When she returned with a bag of potato chips, Natalia rolled her eyes.

“What?” At Natalia’s raised eyebrow, Olivia continued, “They’re for Leyla.”

“Uh huh,” Natalia responded with a smile. She knew, given half a chance, Olivia would be into the potato chips. At least the hotelier had gotten a brand of healthier chips, ones that allowed her to feel like she was snacking without undermining her health. They paid for their purchases and realized they still had some time to kill, so they headed towards Grant Park. They located the nearby access to the Grant Park North parking garage and got the car parked, then grabbed Francesca’s stroller from the trunk.

It was a reasonably mild late-April morning with only a slight breeze, so they’d packed their jackets into the stroller base and walked towards the lakefront. While both women were familiar with big cities, they’d both gotten used to the quieter life that Springfield afforded them. The wide spaces of Grant Park leading forward to the lake were bracketed by the skyscrapers and other buildings that lined South Michigan Avenue. When they arrived at the Buckingham Fountain, they found an empty park bench and sat down.



Olivia took Natalia's hand as she realized the younger woman was distracted. "Hey, are you okay?"

The younger woman brought her attention back toward her partner. "I will be," Natalia responded. "Thank you, Olivia."

"Come here." Olivia put an arm around her shoulders to draw her close. "What's bothering you?"

Natalia laid her head on Olivia's shoulder, and placed a hand on her partner's lap. "I know I shouldn't let my parents' reactions to our relationship get to me, but it hurts." She looked up at the hotelier and sighed forlornly. "You know, it took a while, but I could deal with the reactions in Springfield from many different people. So I don't know why I'm having such a hard time dealing with this."

"This is different, I know, sweetheart." Olivia altered her position slightly so she could place a kiss on Natalia's forehead, and then rested her own head against her partner's. "A wise woman once told me that we have this strange loyalty to family, whether they deserve it or not. And as much as we don't like to admit it, their opinions and comments have a powerful sway on our own."

"A wise woman?" Natalia questioned, curiously.

“Doris,” Olivia chuckled as she mentioned her friend’s name, and then sobering up before she continued talking. “It was at a difficult time for both of us. It was last spring, and you and I were trying to figure out what we meant to each other. I was getting frustrated, mostly at myself. Doris and I went out for drinks and I made an asinine comment about her not telling Ashlee about her being gay. Even now, after she’s told her daughter and most of Springfield knows, her parents don’t know. She’d left home for university and never brought anyone home. She was, and still is to some degree, afraid to tell them.”

Olivia moved one of her hands up to caress Natalia’s face. “You know, I’m so proud of you for yesterday. That must have taken a lot of courage.”

“It did. But afterwards, as emotionally exhausting as it was, I could barely believe I had told them. It’s out there, now, and it’s a weight off my shoulders. And I’m not hiding how I feel about you any more.” Natalia ran her right hand up to cup Olivia’s cheek to draw her closer into a kiss.

When they broke from the kiss, they pressed their foreheads together, as they often did in affection. They sat together for a while, looking out over Lakeshore Drive onto the lake. Sailboats bobbed up and down in their moors or graced the lake’s light waves as their owners took advantage of the nice spring weather.

The quiet was broken with a chirp from Olivia’s Blackberry. When she retrieved it from her pants pocket, she noticed a text message from Jane: ‘JB having loads of fun - lot to tell later’.

Olivia sent back a quick text then looked at the time on her phone.

“Sweetheart, we need to get going, if we’re going to meet your parents,” Olivia said as she started to stand up, checking on Francesca as she did. The infant had fallen asleep on their walk through the park and was still out like a light.

Natalia sighed. “Okay. Let’s go. One of these days, I’ll bring you back here in the evening. It’s so pretty lit up in the dark.”

“It’s a date.” Olivia gave a quirky grin.

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Mrs. Rivera answered the door when Natalia and Olivia arrived - Francesca was perched upon Natalia’s hip while Olivia held the carrier. She invited them in and started to introduce them to the priest who stood upon their arrival.

“Natalia? Wow, you’ve grown up a lot,” the elderly priest interrupted. “How are you, dear?”

“Hi, Father Ramirez. I am - as good as can be expected. It’s good to see you.” Natalia fondly remembered the man who had presided over her Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation. She shook his hand. “Father, this is my partner, Olivia Spencer, and this cutie is our daughter, Francesca.”

Carmen Rivera stepped forward to interject, “What she means is –“

“I know exactly what she means, Carmen,” the old priest chided. “I’ve lived long enough to know that romantic love, in all its beauty, comes in many different forms.” Father Ramirez turned to Olivia and extended his hand. “It’s good to meet you, Ms. Spencer, despite the circumstances.”

“You, too, Father.” Olivia shook his hand.

The three women in the room were each slightly stunned for their own reasons: Mrs. Rivera, who was not used to being dismissed; Natalia, whose most recent experiences with the Catholic clergy had left her feeling a little jaded about the trust she placed in her priests; and Olivia, whose history with her mother’s brand of religious bigotry had left her with a distinct distrust of religion in general. Olivia fully respected and supported Natalia and so she had made the effort to honor her partner’s belief in something greater. To have not one, but two people of the Catholic clergy, Sister Anne and now Father Ramirez, be supportive of her relationship with Natalia had left her feeling a little off-kilter.

Father Ramirez took in the three expressions and moved forward. He gave Natalia a comforting glance before he continued speaking. “Now, I believe we should get down to the details of planning Cecelia’s funeral.” The Father sat down and took a sip of his now-lukewarm coffee. There was a pile of papers on the table along with an old, well-used Bible.

Over the course of the next hour, Natalia, her mother, and Father Ramirez went through some choices for the readings and the gospel and the liturgical songs for the funeral Mass. Olivia mostly listened to the proceedings while keeping an eye on Francesca, unless Natalia asked her for an opinion on something. When they finished, Natalia and her mother wished the old priest well and told him they would see him later.

When they returned to the living room, Olivia held out her hand to her partner. As Natalia grasped her hand, she looked up into the younger woman’s sad eyes and felt a strong wave of compassion. After a few moments, Natalia turned to her mother, who had sat down in one of the chairs.

“Mama, it’s getting late. Did you want me to make some lunch before we go over to the funeral home?”

“No,” the older woman responded abruptly. At Natalia’s questioning glance, she continued, “No. Thank you, Natalia, but I don’t know that I could stomach anything right now.”

“Mama, are you okay?”

“It’s just...everything seems unreal.” Carmen closed her eyes briefly. Despondently, she continued, “I knew she was sick and getting worse, but now she’s gone.”

“Nana’s at peace, Mama. She was ready to go.”

“I wasn’t. Ready for her to go, I mean.”

Remembering her sense of enormous loss when Gus died, Natalia felt wave of empathy for her mother. She walked over and laid a hand on the elder woman’s forearm. “We never really are when someone we love dies. Mama, she lived a good long life. She told me she was happy with her life, and that’s all that really matters in the end, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.” Carmen moved wearily over to the lounge chair and collapsed into it, leaving her daughter standing near her. She felt a headache starting and she pressed her forefinger and thumb against the upper bridge of her nose.

Olivia moved her hand from Natalia’s and placed it on the younger woman’s back, gently caressing. The brief period of quiet was broken when Francesca let out a cry of displeasure. Natalia leaned over to look at her young daughter and saw the girl’s fist up close to her face.

“Olivia, did she have her Advil this morning?” Natalia asked as she picked up Francesca and ran a finger along the gums of her mouth. In the planning and rushing around in the room that morning, she couldn’t remember having given the baby medication for her teething pain.

“Yes, I gave it to her while you were checking on something with Emma. Her gums are still swollen?”

“Yeah. Can you grab me her teething ring from her bag. I’ll give that to her while I get her changed.

Olivia handed over the ring and the diaper supplies and Natalia went into the bathroom to change the baby. When the hotelier sat back on the couch, she pulled out her Blackberry to check to see if there were any messages from Jane. She smiled when she saw one, and then fired off a quick response.

"You really love her," Carmen said, her voice flat and her expression unreadable.

"With everything that I am."

The older woman sighed but didn't say anything more. An uncomfortable silence seemed to fill the room and neither woman was sure how to break it. However, before it dragged on too long, Leyla came through the apartment door, her hands full of grocery bags. Olivia got up to help her, grateful for something to do other than be a specimen that Mrs. Rivera glanced at occasionally.

"Mama, where do you want these?" Leyla asked as she deposited the bags on the kitchen counter.

"Cold stuff in the fridge, everything else you can leave out. We'll be taking it over to the funeral home in a little while. I'm going to go lie down for a bit."

"Ooookay," Leyla said, drawing the word out as her mother passed them heading down the hallway. She could feel the tension in the room. "What just happened?"

"In a nutshell? Father Ramirez came over to discuss the Mass for your grandmother. When we arrived, Natalia introduced me as her partner and then Francesca as our daughter." Olivia smiled at that memory.

"Ohhh, I bet Mama loved that." Leyla grinned in response.

"It gets better. Father Ramirez basically dismissed her by saying he knew exactly what Natalia meant by partner and about knowing love in all its forms."

"Damn, I wish I'd been here to see that." Leyla looked around the apartment. "Where is everyone?"

"Not sure about your father. He wasn't here when we arrived. Natalia's in the bathroom changing Francesca."

"And Emma?" Leyla smiled. In a very short time, the girl had wormed her way into the young woman's heart.

"She's with her sitter, Jane. They went to the Museum of Science and Industry."

"Your daughter's adorable." Leyla laughed and shook her head.

"What?" Olivia smiled as she asked, curiously interested in the younger woman's perception of Emma.

“This may sound a little strange, I know. I was really young when Natalia left, but some of Emma’s mannerisms remind me of her. Natalia was usually quiet, a bookworm. She was very introspective; didn’t say a lot but she took everything in. She’d try to reassure me when Mama and Papa got into arguments, and there were plenty of those. She was fiercely protective of me, different though than Leo’s overbearing tendencies. Sometimes when it would get really loud, I would go and curl up with Talia in her bed.” Leyla smiled. “She’d read me stories.” The young woman bowed her head as tears filled her eyes. “I missed that so much after she left.”

“I’m sorry, Leyla,” Natalia spoke quietly. “I wish things had been different for you.”

Leyla started at her sister’s voice, having not seen her enter the room. “I know, Talia.”

Olivia looked at her partner and then at Leyla. Olivia had a bright smile on her face as she looked at her beloved. The three women sat down on the couch, with Francesca sitting on Natalia’s lap and entertaining them, as they regaled Leyla with stories of their family.

When Carmen came out of her room after her nap, she saw the three women nearly bent over with laughter, so great was their mirth. “Are you all ready to go?” she asked, annoyed that they seemed to be enjoying themselves even as she felt weighted down by the prospect of burying her mother.

Leyla stood up, with tears of laughter still rolling down her cheeks. “Just a minute and I’ll get the supplies to take over.”

“We’ll help,” Natalia said as she placed Francesca in her carrier seat and lifted her up. Olivia grabbed Natalia’s purse, along with her own, and the market items they had bought earlier.

“Mama, why don’t you and I drive over separately; that way, if Natalia and Olivia have to go pick up Emma, they don’t need to worry about getting back here first.”

“Fine. Just let’s go. It’s getting late. I have to meet with the funeral home director and your aunts are going to be there.”

“Really?” Leyla asked sarcastically. “I know she was their mother as well, but Aunt Drea and Aunt Jo never helped you or Papa out when Nana was sick. They barely even visited her while she was here.”

“It wasn’t all their fault.” Carmen started to make excuses for her sisters’ lack of assistance but she couldn’t muster up the energy to do so.

“Yes, it was Mama. They could have made the effort. Instead they saddled you and Papa with all the medical bills and the full-time care. I don’t care if they liked Papa or not, you don’t do that to family.”

“We can talk about that later,” Carmen said firmly, effectively killing the discussion. If she had her way, it wouldn’t be brought up again.

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A few more messages had come from Jane and Emma as the day progressed, each one a little more excited. And each time, Olivia thought how nice it would be if she and Natalia could sneak out for at least a few hours and have fun with them, rather than stay in a parlour where everyone mourned the deceased. There were flowers everywhere and people she didn’t know. From Natalia’s posture and plastic smile, she could tell her partner didn’t know most of the people either. She was uncomfortable, and the way these unknown people pawed over their infant daughter did nothing to improve her mood.

“Go, get out of here,” Leyla came over ushered the two women and infant out of the room. They managed to escape into the hallway without being seen by Natalia’s mother.

“But Mama...” Natalia started.

“Mama can take care of herself. Go on. You look uncomfortable and bored to tears.” Leyla accompanied them to the front exit. “Go, and if Mama does ask, I’ll just tell her you’ve gone get Emma.” She smiled and then handed Olivia a sheet of paper with a number on it. “Oh, and text me later and get me the hell out of here, too. I would love a chance to play with my nieces.”

Olivia grinned. “Sure thing. An hour?”

“That might be a bit conspicuous.” Leyla smiled. “An hour and a half?”

“Got it.” Olivia laughed.

Natalia leaned over and gave her sister a hug. “See you later. Take care of Mama.”

“Will do. Now go on before she comes looking for you and the baby,” Leyla called over to them before she returned inside to the various relatives and family friends.

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The restaurant where Olivia, Natalia and Francesca had met up with Jane and Emma was already starting to bustle with the after-work/late afternoon/early evening crowd. By the

time they'd managed to score a booth and a high chair, Emma had already rattled through the things she'd seen in the Science of Storms exhibit. Giddily, she babbled on about the live science experiments in which she was allowed to participate. The girl was lit up with excitement and practically bouncing as she commented on this or that, or asked her mothers if they knew about this or that fact that she'd uncovered.

Her pleasure was infectious and soon everyone was laughing or giggling along with her. They were just being led to their table, when Olivia spoke.

"Hey Bean, how about you take a breath and get settled here. Why don't you take a look at the menu and see what you'd like to have? Afterwards, you can tell us some more." Olivia grinned at her daughter.

"May I have a chocolate milkshake, with sprinkles?" Emma's eyes shone with hope as she questioned her mother.

"If they've got them, Em, sure." Olivia was hard-pressed to spoil her excitement. She leaned over to whisper into the girl's ear. "But at least order something a little healthy with your meal, or Natalia will have my hide

"Mommy, you're silly." Emma looked over the menu and spotted what she wanted: a bacon-cheeseburger with sweet potato fries and coleslaw.

"That's a lot of food, Bean. You sure you can eat all of it?"

"I'm sure," Emma answered. It was in the children's section after all, Emma reasoned to herself.

"Okay. Besides, if you can't finish your fries, I'll have some."

"Says who?" Natalia spoke quietly in Olivia's ear, before blowing a breath along the side of her face, causing Olivia to lose her focus.

"That was so not fair," Olivia pouted.

"I never claimed to play fair with you, did I?" Natalia grinned and winked. Actually, she would be thrilled if Olivia ate sweet potato fries. Much, much healthier. While they waited for their food, Natalia fed Francesca with one of the bottles she'd put into the change bag earlier and Emma continued to talk about the storms exhibit; her hands moving like the whirlwind she was explaining.

The duration of the meal was interspersed with comments and questions about other exhibits that Emma had seen. A few times Olivia or Natalia had to prompt the girl to take a

breath and eat some of her food before it got cold. It seemed to both women that the museum visit had been a huge hit. Supper was getting close to the end and Emma was contemplating something from the dessert menu, when Natalia put her hand on her tired daughter's arm.

"Emma, sweetie," Natalia spoke gently. "Why don't we wait for a while until later to have dessert, so we can get back to the hotel sooner? My sister's coming over a little later, and she was looking forward to seeing you and Sweet Pea again."

"Leyla's coming over? Cool!" The young girl turned to Jane. "I think you'll like her. She's fun! I can tell her all about the museum." Emma beamed.

"I'm sure she would love that, Jellybean." Natalia smiled affectionately at her.

Olivia had motioned for the bill to be delivered and she and Natalia packed up their daughters' things. It was quickly paid and they left for the hotel.

By the time they'd returned to the suite, Olivia texted Leyla, figuring it was a good time for her to make her excuses and get away from the funeral home for the evening. Emma got into her pajamas while Natalia got Francesca cleaned up and ready for bed. When Emma returned to the main area of the suite she asked Olivia for the use of her laptop.

"I want to write down everything I saw today, like a journal."

"That's a great idea, Em," Jane told her. "So you don't forget anything. Remember we have the brochures for the exhibits we saw today, in case you want to add some information."

"Maybe I can bring it to class, too."

"I think your teacher would like that, Jellybean," Olivia replied, as she opened up her laptop for her daughter.

"Oh, Mommy and Ma? I forgot to tell you the best part of the museum. I got to see a Fairy Castle! You could go see so many rooms with all the minia-," Emma stopped, unsure of the pronunciation of the word.

"Miniatures," Jane provided.

The girl nodded and smiled. "Yes, miniatures of lots of things, statues, paintings, tables. I loved it so much. It was a little like Daddy's house with the big rooms, but much smaller. Or maybe like from a book of princesses." Emma sat on the edge of her seat, kicking her legs back and forth under the table, as she started to type her adventures.

"You go for it, Emma," Olivia told her daughter as she sat back on the bed and pulled out her Blackberry, checking her messages. Something unexpected caught her attention and she excused herself to go into the other room. Once there, she quickly dialled Doris's number. After a few rings, the Mayor answered.

"What the hell happened?" Olivia asked her bluntly. Thoughts of Edmund or one of his goons trying to get to her family scared the daylights out of her. She certainly wasn't religious, but at that moment, she offered a quick prayer of thanks that Natalia and their girls were with her.

"I don't know all the details yet. I've been waiting for Anna to get back to me, but I don't know if she's stalling or just really busy out there." Doris's voice hesitated over the phone. "All I know is that someone damaged some of the property in front of the farmhouse. I was in the police station when the call came in. The officer who took the call told me that according to the officers on the scene, it didn't look like anyone got inside. Look, I'm just pulling up to the house now and Frank and Remy are here. Give me a minute--"

"Doris!" Olivia's voice could be heard through Doris's cell phone that she had dropped from her ear. Olivia growled in frustration when her friend didn't answer. She could hear the rustle of movement on the other end of the phone, so she knew Doris hadn't hung up on her, but being ignored was almost worse. And sadly, all she could do was sit and wait.

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"Frank, what's going on?" Doris asked in her no-nonsense voice, as she exited her car and sidled up the police chief.

Frank got defensive. The last thing he wanted on his crime scene was an interfering Mayor. "Doris, what are you doing here? This is a crime scene."

"It's also the home of two of my closest friends. I came to check on the house as soon as I heard."

"What, do you have a scanner in the car?" Frank asked, derisively.

"No, but it's an idea." Doris looked at the man with a smug smile, in a battle of wills. She noted with some satisfaction that Frank was the one to look away first. "I was at the police station when the call came in. Now, what happened and where's Detective Li?" Though on a personal level, Doris found it difficult to trust the younger detective, she recognized that the woman had been instrumental in cleaning up some of the old case files of the Springfield Police Department.

"She's on the back side of the house, checking to see if there's any way the perp or perps got inside from there," Frank responded dismissively, hoping she'd go away.

Doris, however, wasn't going anywhere until she got some more answers about what happened. "Who called it in?"

Frank debated telling her, given that it was a current investigation, but relented, given that she was the mayor and would find out sooner or later and it was probably better for him that it was sooner. "One of the patrol officers made a swing up by the house on routine rounds and saw something in the shadows. When he came up to the house, he noticed the barbeque had been turned over and some pots were broken. He stated he could have sworn he saw someone make a run for the tree line in the headlights, but he couldn't be sure. We're sending someone out into the woods to check."

"I want to know the minute you get the information," Doris insisted.

"Fine. I need to get going." Frank turned around and headed back to Remy, and then both of them moved to the side of the house. A patrol officer came out from behind the bushes on the tree line, pulling out a pen and notepad from her uniform pockets before changing her direction to intersect with Frank and Remy. Doris watched the young woman being questioned, and then saw Frank nod.

"What?" Doris called out, as she made her way across the lawn to meet them.

"Officer Banks confirms the first officer's statement of someone being here when he arrived. She saw fresh foot prints in the dirt. We're going to get a crime scene team out here to investigate."

Anna came around the house to meet up with Frank and Remy, and was surprised to see Doris there. She paused for a minute before turning her focus to Frank. "Chief, no signs of any break-in. Seems like the damage was limited to the outside of the house but the crime scene investigators will be able to tell us definitively what happened. My guess is that this was done mostly to scare them."

"It scares me," Doris spoke up. "Do you think they'll try again?"

"I don't know," Frank said. "I'm sure you've heard about the recent rash of vandalism. It's not the first time Olivia's been the victim of vandalism; as you may remember, her hotel was hit with graffiti damage a few months back. Do you think someone could be targeting her?"

"I doubt it's specifically targeting her as there have been several other properties damaged to which she has no connection," Anna replied. "I've got to get back to work. Chief, I suggest that until Ms. Spencer and Ms. Rivera get home, we step up patrols around the house."

"I've got a better idea," Doris interrupted. "They're supposed to be gone a couple more days. I can stay here overnight; I could come after work and with extra patrols in the daytime, we can all keep an eye on the place. That could work. Maybe with an extra vehicle in the driveway, whoever it was will think twice about coming back." She sighed, realizing as she spoke, the idea was ill-thought out. She really didn't want to be out at the isolated house on her own, especially since someone had just vandalized it.

"Sorry. It's still a crime scene and there will be investigators around," Frank said, and then huffed. "You'd think with all the money Olivia has, she could hire some big security company to watch the place twenty-four seven." Frank turned and head to his unmarked patrol car.

"That's not a bad idea," Anna said. "I'll set up the patrols on a regular watch." The detective paused as she contemplated Frank's comment about security system being set up. She realized any suggestion she presented to Olivia would not go over well, given their mutual distrust. Besides, she reckoned, Olivia could get any home security system information she needed from her hotel security team. She mentioned her thoughts on security to Doris.

"Thank you. I'll tell her," the Mayor responded. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other with unease. "You'll let me know what happens with the investigation? Olivia should really know."

"I'll copy you on the reports." Anna raised her hand to scratch her forehead, and scrunched her face at the request. It put her in awkward position. It wasn't strictly procedure, but she knew that Doris and Olivia were good friends.

"Thanks. I should go." Doris turned around and headed to her car and realized she still had her cell phone in her hand. She picked it up and saw that the call had been disconnected, but there was a text message showing: *What's going on?* She quickly dialled Olivia's cell.

"Olivia, Olivia, stop for a second," Doris interrupted the other woman's diatribe on Frank's perceived incompetence. "Look, it doesn't appear to be a break-in of the house, just minor property damage. There's nothing written on the house, like there was at the hotel. Olivia, I think you should check with your hotel's security to see if they can get a security system set up for the house."

"I'll give them a call shortly. Thanks."

Doris leaned back against her car and looked over the property. "Anna's going to copy me on her report of the vandalism and the crime scene investigator's report."

“Thank you, Doris. You’re a good friend. I owe you.” Olivia paused, realizing the hurt the mayor had recently suffered learning of the detective’s actual identity and her past history with Edmund’s family. “How did the conversation go with Anna?”

“Stilted. And a little weird.” Doris sighed, blowing out a heavy breath of air.

“Sorry. Now, I need to go break the news to Natalia.”

“How is she?”

“As good as can be expected.” The hotelier ran a hand through her hair, as she exhaled in frustration. “She had a rough time with her parents last night, so she’s been feeling down about that on top of her grandmother’s death.” Olivia paced back and forth her daughter’s hotel room.

“Oh, God, Olivia. Tell her I’m thinking about her. Is there anything I can do?”

“Thanks. Just look after the house, and I’ll talk to you later.”

“Will do. Bye.” Doris disconnected her phone and got in the car and started to drive. Before she realized it, she was parked in front of Company. She entered and plopped herself down on a bar stool. She didn’t even notice when Blake came over and put a cup of steaming coffee in front of her.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Blake asked.

“Sorry, what?” Doris responded, still thinking about Olivia’s property damage and Natalia’s grandmother’s death.

“I said, ‘penny for your thoughts’. You’re distracted. What happened?” Blake sat down beside Doris on another stool.

“Sorry, thanks,” Doris said, nodding her head to the mug of coffee. Turning her focus to the red-head, she addressed her question. “A lot. I just got back from the farmhouse. Someone vandalized the property; knocked over the barbeque, broke some pots. Not sure of the full extent of the damage but I should know more later on this evening. Frank’s pretty sure no one broke into the house.” Doris idly toyed with the bracelet on her arm.

“Oh God. Thank heavens they’re out of town and safe.” Blake reached out a hand and covered Doris’s fidgeting hand. “Do they know yet?”

“Yeah, I was just talking with Olivia. I’ll update her as I have more news. Anna’s going to increase the patrols, and have them check on the property overnight.” Her restlessness

seemed to ease as she'd been talking with Blake; Doris lowered her shoulders in relief at letting her friend know what happened. She blew out a breath, and then she brought the cup of coffee to her lips, wincing at the heat from the liquid as she took a sip.

"Good." Blake stood up and rested a hand on the other woman's shoulder before moving around the bar.

"Oh, I'm sure they'd want you to know that Natalia's grandmother passed away early yesterday evening. There was a wake for her today and the funeral is tomorrow. From what Olivia said, Natalia had a hard time with her parents, too. I don't know for sure, but I think she may have told them about their relationship. It's kind of hard to avoid showing the kind of love they have for each other." Doris sighed wistfully, wondering if she'd ever have someone to love her like that.

"Damn. I wish I could give them both a hug right now," Blake said, solemnly.

"So do I. So do I." Doris said as she dropped her head. "I should get home. Call Ashlee." The mayor was about to stand up when she felt Blake's hand on her arm.

"Stay. You have Ashlee's number on your cell phone, right?" At Doris's nod, Blake continued, "Call her from here. Stay for supper. My treat. Lynn gets back from her break soon, and then we can take one of the booths."

Doris was about to protest when she decided what the hell, she could use the company.

"Okay, but if we're dining on your tab, we're drinking on mine."

"Okay!" Blake agreed. "I'll go make sure there's a booth free and put a reserved sign on it. You're welcome to sit up here until Lynn comes back." Blake looked at Doris's partially empty and probably lukewarm coffee. "Here, I'll replace your coffee."

Once Blake was able to get away from the counter, they settled into the booth for dinner and drinks. The two women sat talking about this and that through the evening and through the better part of a large bottle of Shiraz.

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Olivia re-entered the main area of the suite. The room was buzzing with Emma's chatter. The hotelier glanced at Natalia, who had a questioning look on her face, clearly curious about why she'd disappeared. She quickly mouthed the word 'later' to her and Natalia nodded. Olivia then looked at her exuberant daughter.

"Hey, Jellybean, how would you like it if I bought us a family membership for the museum?"

“Really, Mommy?” Emma lit up with a huge smile; she was almost bouncing in her chair.

“Well, I’m sure you didn’t get a chance to explore everything in just one day. It’s only a few hours away, and I’m sure we’ll be making more trips to the city for business.”

“That’s true,” Natalia added. “And then we can all go. When Rafe was a little boy, and the museums had free visit days, I would take him and he always had so much fun.”

“Maybe Leyla can come, too?” Emma asked curiously.

“You can ask her when she gets here, Em. She should be here soon.” Natalia stood up and laid a sleepy Francesca in the crib. “Emma, is your outfit for the funeral hung up? We’ll need to have it ready for the morning.”

“Yes, Ma. The skirt and blouse are hanging up.”

Natalia looked over at Emma and good see that the girl’s energy level was starting to fade. “Good. How’s your journal coming?”

“Almost done for today,” Emma said, trying to stifle a yawn.

“Do you have your homework with you?” Emma nodded her head and got her schoolbooks out of her backpack. For the next little while as they waited for Leyla to arrive, Natalia and Emma went over Emma’s spelling homework.

When she heard a knock, Emma raced over to the door. She was about to open it when she remembered her mother’s recent warnings about not opening doors without knowing who was on the other side. “Who is it?”

“It’s Leyla, Jellybean.”

Emma opened the door to invite Natalia’s sister into the room. “Hi, how are you?” she asked with a big smile.

“Good. You?” Leyla asked.

“Jane and I went to the Museum of Science. I had so much fun!”

“I bet. It’s a great place.” Leyla smiled at her niece and then looked over at Jane and extended her hand in a greeting. “Hi, I’m Leyla Rivera. Emma was telling me about you yesterday.”

Jane smiled as she took the offered hand, shook it, and introduced herself. Her employers were quite accommodating to her needs as a caretaker for their daughters, and the girls were adorable though sometimes a handful, but sometimes she felt like she didn't have much time to herself. Finally, she had someone close to her own age nearby to talk with once Emma and Francesca were settled.

Emma looked from Jane over to Leyla, as she still wanted to tell Natalia's sister about her day's adventures and that she couldn't possibly see everything in just one day. "Mommy said she's going to get a family membership so we can go lots of times." Emma smiled tiredly.

"And you look like you're going to fall asleep any moment," Olivia commented as she looked at her daughter, who was trying not to yawn again. "I'm sure if you asked nicely, Jane and Leyla would read you a story." Olivia turned towards Jane. "Natalia and I are going to go out for a little while."

"Okay. That's not a problem, Ms. Spencer."

"Emma's bedtime is by nine o'clock unless she's asleep before then. Francesca should be good for now. If you find her gums are bothering her, there's some teething tablets in her change bag. If you need us for anything, you've got our cell numbers."

"Got it."

Olivia looked to Leyla, with an apologetic look. "Hey, sorry for ditching you, but we won't be gone too long, just need a little air." She directed her attention to her daughter. "Hey, Jellybean, come give us a goodnight kiss."

Emma quickly went over and gave each of her mommies a hug and kiss before returning to the bed, jumping up on it to retrieve one of her books she'd left there earlier.

Olivia and Natalia smiled at their daughter's actions and then they got their purses and headed out to the foyer.

"Where are we going, Olivia?"

"How about we go back to the fountain by the lake? It's not quite a date, but I need to walk for a bit." Olivia was restless after the news from Doris and she needed to burn off some energy.

"What's wrong?"

Olivia sighed. "Can't we just wait until we get there?"

"Olivia, what's got you so upset?" Natalia pressed, as she stopped her partner in her tracks.

Olivia fidgeted where she stood. "Look, can I tell you while we walk? I just...I just need to move."

Natalia nodded, knowing her partner's tendency when she got upset. "Okay. Let's go." The two women left the hotel and turned right on Stetson Avenue. They walked in silence for several minutes.

"Remember when I left the room after checking my messages?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"It was Doris." Olivia bit down on her lip. "Natalia, she called to let me know there were police at the farmhouse."

"Police, why?"

Olivia stopped and turned to face her partner, the fingers of her left hand inadvertently tapping her chest. "Somebody vandalized the house. As far as Doris knows from what she got from Frank, the perpetrator didn't get inside, just did some damage outside. They've got a team investigating. Doris said she'd let us know anything as soon as she does."

"But you want to go back," Natalia spoke matter-of-factly, understanding her partner's worries.

"I don't know. I want to be here for you, Natalia for as long as you need to stay in Chicago. You are my family." Olivia looked down at the ground and moved her foot over a loose pebble, before returning her gaze to her partner. "And I'm glad we weren't home." The hotelier pulled Natalia into a hug. "I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you or the girls. But the farmhouse is our home. I want to be there, too, and know what's going on."

"I know, love. And you will. Besides, the funeral is tomorrow morning. After that, I won't have any reason to stay here. I've done my duty to my parents and there's nothing more I can help with. I'd be fine if we got on the road and drove home immediately after the funeral." Natalia started to slowly rub one of her hands along her partner's spine and she felt the other woman melt into her touch. "I'm sure we probably wouldn't be able to stay at the house tonight anyway, if the police are still investigating."

Olivia pulled away and started to pace as she thought about the invasion; the perpetrator may not have gotten in the house, but he had invaded her sense of security. "Probably not, but I still don't like the fact that someone tried to destroy our home. Fuck!"

Natalia stepped into her partner's path and gently laid a hand on the woman's forearm. "Olivia, look. You said Doris was going to let us know what's going on. Why don't we just wait and see what they find out."

"I don't like waiting." Olivia pouted.

"Oh, trust me, I know that." Natalia smiled.

Olivia returned her smile. She knew there was nothing more they could do for now except await the police report and if she were in the way, it would probably only antagonize the police and delay the process. Besides, Olivia reckoned with a wry grin, Doris would enjoy being a pain in Frank's ass just as much as she would. "Come on, let's walk."

The two women stayed close to each other as they headed south along N. Michigan Avenue to Grant Park and the Buckingham Fountain. Close to their destination, they stopped at a food vendor and picked up a medium tray of French fries to share. Olivia pocketed a couple packets of ketchup and they headed to a park bench as they watched the lamps around the fountain turn color, and the lights from the buildings beyond illuminate the night sky. They sat in relative quiet as they enjoyed the fries and the scenery around them.

Natalia rested her head on Olivia's shoulder. "I know it's not quite the date night we'd had in mind when I suggested this, but, --"

"No buts, Natalia." Olivia paused as she turned slightly to face the younger woman, cupping her face as she did so. "We're here, together. Our girls are safe. This is beautiful."

"Thank you...for being here with me, with my family. It can't have been easy."

"I didn't expect that it would be. Given how many years had passed and how much hurt there'd been, there was no way for it to be easy for anyone."

"One bright spot, though, is Leyla." Natalia smiled as she thought of her sister.

"Emma really likes her. She's a pretty good judge of character," Olivia grinned.

"Yes, she is. Like mother, like daughter." Natalia smiled as she looked at Olivia. "Now, if you're ready, we should probably head back to the hotel."

"I'm a little beat. Let's grab a taxi back." They stood and made their way to South Columbus Drive, threw away their trash, and hailed a taxi, huddling close in the cool evening air.

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ACT 5

The next morning was busy as everyone got ready for the funeral. Olivia got Emma up and shepherded her sleepy daughter into the bathroom and started the bath. She stepped back into the room and laid out Emma's clothes on the bed and then headed into the main suite where Natalia was feeding Francesca.

"Did you check to see if there were any messages from Doris?" Natalia asked, as Olivia had taken her Blackberry when she went in to get Emma.

"Not yet. Doing that now," Olivia responded as she dug her cell out of her pantsuit pocket. "I wanted to wait until I was out of Emma's earshot. She doesn't need to know about this just yet." She waited as the messages downloaded into her email program.

"Anything?"

"Definitely no access inside the house." Olivia breathed a sigh of relief. "Police reports confirm the damage was only to outside property. At any rate, I called my security people last night. They're going to get a security system set up for the house once the police are finished. I'll talk with them later today to get an update."

Pensive, Natalia paused as she'd remembered reading about other similar incidents in the newspaper before she looked at her partner. "Olivia, do you think this incident is at all related to the hotel being vandalized?"

"I don't know. It could be. Doris mentioned something about there being a string of vandalisms in the town."

"It just seems more than a little coincidence," Natalia asked, concerned that maybe both incidents could be related and worried that they may be in danger. "Do you think they're targeting you?"

"I'd like to know that myself. Doris said there was nothing written on the house, like there was on the hotel, thankfully. I really don't want Emma seeing that." Olivia shivered, remembering her own visceral reaction on seeing the homophobic slurs painted onto her hotel.

"Do they have any idea who's behind these attacks?"

“Doris didn’t say. I don’t know if she has any information about that. The police are still collecting evidence, so I’m sure she’ll find out sooner or later. I’m betting on sooner, if she keeps hounding Frank about it.”

Natalia lifted Francesca to get the girl to burp. Once done, she handed the infant over to Olivia with a request to get the child dressed so that she could go take a shower.

Olivia checked on Emma after she’d gotten Francesca dressed and left her playing on the floor with Jane looking after her. The hotelier braided her daughter’s hair as Emma asked her a bunch of questions about Natalia’s family and about the funeral; particularly whether it would be different than Alan’s funeral. Olivia answered her questions as best she could and then kept her busy by reading to her. Once everyone was ready, and had packed up all their belongings to be ready to leave after the funeral, they piled out of the hotel room, pulling luggage behind them. They planned to drop Jane off at a bookstore she wanted to check out since there was no need for her to go to the funeral with them.

Our Lady of the Angels parish, where the funeral was to be held, was a moderately large church, with two aisles between three rows of pews, leading to the altar in front. Natalia’s family had gathered there speaking with Fr. Ramirez; her mother and her sister were visibly upset yet Olivia was impressed with their dignity and composure. She and Natalia and Emma advanced forward, Natalia carrying Francesca and they sat in the pew alongside Natalia’s sister and parents.

Despite the sadness, the ceremony was beautiful. Pall bearers wheeled up the plain, shroud draped casket from the rear of the church, giving everyone attending a chance to say a silent goodbye to the beloved woman. Through Father Ramirez’s homily, Olivia learned more about the woman who’d passed away; her bright spirit and her innate tendency to look out for those in need, her sense of humor and her humility. Olivia’s hand never left her partner’s except when Natalia went up for Communion. Once again, they locked hands after Natalia’s prayers, which caused a few glances their way from other, nearby parishioners, as well as friends of the family, but mostly the show of affection was ignored.

As the ceremony drew to a close, Father Ramirez anointed the casket with incense and then said a prayer before it was led out the side exit to a waiting hearse. Following behind, Natalia and the rest of the Rivera family moved to the foyer, to exchange brief words of comfort with the priest.

“Mama,” Natalia addressed her mother when Father Ramirez left. “Olivia, the girls, and I need to leave right after the burial ceremony. We need to get home.”

“Why are you leaving again?” Mrs. Rivera asked her suddenly.

Olivia was quite sure that the unspoken words of 'with her' were not far from the older woman's lips, but she didn't press the issue.

Natalia was taken aback by her mother's brusque attitude. "Because Springfield is our home," she responded. "And we have things to take care of, as well as a long drive ahead of us." Natalia saw no reason to mention that their home had been vandalized because she was sure that her parents would use that to press her to return to Chicago.

"Chicago is your home, Natalia," Hector spoke up.

"Not for a while, Papa. It hasn't felt like home for a long time. My home is with Olivia and our children."

"Why must you say such things in a house of God?" he asked, in a near-whisper.

"Why not, Papa? God is about love. We love each other." Natalia paused as she held Francesca a little closer to her. "I'm not ashamed of that. I came here to honour Abuela Hernández's life. She had no problem with my family." Natalia winced, knowing that her words were blunter than she'd intended, but she was tired of defending her relationship with Olivia to others. Without another word, she strode past both her parents, and Leyla, and headed to the car with Olivia and Emma in tow. Natalia had just gotten Francesca into the car seat when she heard her sister calling out to her.

"Natalia, look. Let me work on them. It was kind of sudden for them to meet your new family. I'm not promising anything, but if they want to see their grandchildren, to get to know you again, then they're going to have to learn to adapt." Leyla smiled brightly.

"Besides, Mama loves little kids, and yours are just adorable."

"Thank you." Natalia sighed. "I'm so glad I've gotten to know you again. You should come to Springfield sometime, soon. You're more than welcome."

"I might just have to do that. I'll see you at the cemetery."

"Thanks." Natalia climbed into the car after giving her sister a hug. She gave Olivia the directions to the graveyard and they dove off.

The burial service was short with only family attending: Natalia's parents, aunts and uncles and a few cousins, some of whom she didn't recognize. When it ended, Natalia exchanged a few quick, bitter words with her parents and then with Leyla, giving her sister their address in Springfield and their home number.

When Natalia returned to the car she breathed out a sigh of relief. "As much as I loved my grandmother, I am really glad this is over. Does that make me sound like a bad person?"

Olivia turned around in the driver's seat to face her partner. "No, sweetheart, it just makes you human. These past few days have been exhausting, emotionally and physically. You're allowed to grieve however you like."

"Kiss me."

"That's not what I was expecting." Olivia raised her hand to cup Natalia's face.

"Just kiss me, Olivia." Natalia turned sideways and met Olivia's mouth as they kissed.

They remained locked in an awkward embrace for a few moments until Olivia reluctantly pulled away. "Mm, as much as I would like to continue this now, it's not exactly the best place."

"Sorry." Natalia smiled shyly.

"Don't ever apologize for wanting to kiss me." Olivia grinned cheekily, and then continued with her voice lowered huskily, "but perhaps we can pick up this conversation when we get home tonight."

"Oh, I'll hold you to that."

Olivia pulled out her Blackberry. "Can you call Doris? Tell her we should be back around 5. We just need to pick up Jane and then we'll be on the road."

Olivia pulled out of the parking lot and set off down the road while Natalia called and relayed the message.

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"What did she say?" Blake turned to Doris as they pulled up to the farmhouse. They had new flower pots and yard supplies to replace what had been damaged. As she out the window, she noticed Bill and Shayne getting the last section of the front fence upright where it had been pulled down.

"Just when they'd be home. We've got a few hours to get things set up."

"Why didn't you say anything about this?" Blake waved her hand towards the work being done around the yard.

"It's a surprise," Doris started as she exited the car and headed up to the farmhouse patio. "Besides, I don't think that they've told Emma about the incident yet, so no reason to

expand on things in a way that would lead to a bunch of questions. I sent Olivia an email earlier about the investigators being out here much of last night and the better part of this morning, and I'd told her that I'd supervise the installation of the security system."

"I think they'll like it. When are Phillip, Beth, Buzz and Lillian coming?"

"In about an hour or so. Phillip and Buzz are bringing up the new barbeque. Let's get moving. There's lots of stuff to do."

Blake grabbed a bag of soil from the trunk of Doris's car and brought it up to where Doris had put the pots, and then returned to the car to get the flat of annuals. "You know, I never pictured you getting your hands dirty like this," Blake said with a smile as she looked over at the mayor.

"There's a lot you don't know about me." Doris partially filled one of the large pots with soil and some plant food. "I happen to find gardening relaxing." At Blake's raised eyebrow, she continued, "Now, if you're going to help, pass me those geraniums."

"Yes, ma'am."

They had just finished four large pots when Blake heard the gravel of the driveway being stirred by Phillip's SUV. Buzz, Lillian and Beth piled out of the vehicle and headed up to the patio while Phillip went around to the rear hatch.

"Bill, Shayne, get over here and help an old man get this big box out of the back." The two younger men arrived and unloaded the box with the barbeque out of the vehicle, taking it up to the patio steps. They got the box opened and the parts removed trying to figure out how to put it together, disagreeing on the directions. Finally, Lillian took pity on the men and picked up the instruction booklet.

"Okay boys, it goes like this." She read the instructions out slowly as they followed along, putting the pieces together.

"We're going to pay for this later, aren't we?" Bill asked Shayne as he followed Lillian's instructions for the side extension panels.

"Oh, yeah," Shayne replied. Phillip and Buzz stood back with Lillian and chuckled.

"What's the word from the police department on the damage done to the property?" Beth asked Doris.

Doris sighed. "Still unsolved, but going into the folder with the other acts of vandalism. I'm hoping that they'll get some leads soon, so we can see if they're definitely random attacks or if there's a pattern in there."

"I hope so, for everyone's sake. This has gone on long enough. Does someone have to get hurt before it's taken seriously?" Blake asked.

"I sincerely hope not," Doris said. "At any rate, I'll keep checking with Frank. There hasn't been any escalation beyond property damage yet. I want to keep it that way. At least Olivia and Natalia have got a security system set up now, for interior and exterior, so it will help protect them at home."

A few more of Springfield's citizens turned up throughout the afternoon. Frank showed up with Remy after work; Lizzie brought Sarah with her; Rick and Mindy brought enough food and drink to feed an army, and soon, the new barbeque would be put to good use.

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When Olivia drove up to the farmhouse she noticed the parade of cars parked along the driveway and the lawn.

"Mommy, what's going on?" Emma asked as she looked over and spotted people gathered on the patio.

"I don't know, Jellybean." Olivia turned to Natalia. "Did we forget we were throwing a party or something?"

"I don't think so." When Olivia put the car into park, everyone piled out, and they all headed up to the patio.

"Ma, how come there's a different barbeque, and there's a bow on it? That's weird."

Natalia sighed for a moment. There was no other way to answer it than to tell the truth about what happened; Emma was bound to hear from the other adults around about the vandalism and Natalia wanted the girl to hear it from them first. She didn't want to scare Emma, but she deserved to know the truth. She knelt down near in front of her daughter and looked at her directly. "Em, when we were away, there was somebody who caused some damage to our property, and they broke some things."

"Why would someone do that?" Emma asked, with a frown on her face.

"I don't know. But I bet Uncle Frank will find out and the bad people will be punished."

“I hope so. I don’t want anything to happen to you or Mommy or Francesca.”

“Neither do I, Bean. Neither do I.” Natalia enveloped the girl in her arms and held her snugly for a moment before letting her go and picking up Francesca’s carrier seat.

The barbeque is not all that’s new, Olivia thought as she looked around the front of the house. She pointed at all the new pots and flowers. “What is all this?” Olivia asked Doris.

Doris stepped forward and gave Olivia a hug. “It’s a gift.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Olivia was a little stunned, though she realized she probably shouldn’t be, since many of the same people had helped when she and Emma moved into the farmhouse the previous fall. The past couple years had shown her that she really did have friends who cared about her well-being; though she was quite sure that was Natalia’s influence on her and on others. Olivia knew her partner brought out the best in her.

“Thank you, always works,” Doris quipped with a smile.

“Thank you, so much.” Olivia looked over at the crowd that had gathered.

Buzz and Blake approached Natalia first, with Blake pulling the slightly stunned woman into a hug. “I’m sorry to hear about your grandmother’s passing. I wish we could have done more.”

“Thank you.”

“I was at Company with Doris when Olivia called her. She mentioned the difficult time you had with your parents.” Blake pulled back from the hug. “Doris and I figured you could use your friends around you for a little while.”

“I can’t tell you how much this means to me.” Natalia was near tears.

“Come here and give an old man a hug,” Buzz said in a gruff voice. As Natalia moved into his arms, he passed on his sentiments about her grandmother’s death.

Olivia looked on fondly as Buzz hugged her partner; he was very much a father figure in her life and she appreciated the support he had given Natalia since she’d arrived in town.

On the north border of the woods, a man in dark clothes watched the proceedings, hidden and unnoticeable in the shadows of the trees. He stepped back into the tree-line and retreated. You got lucky this time, Spencer. But next time, maybe not...

As the evening passed, many of the attendees gave the women warm hugs or kind words, along with plenty of gossip about the goings-on around town. Emma's bedtime arrived, causing Olivia and Natalia to bid their guests thanks and farewell. Olivia took Emma upstairs to help her get ready for bed and to spend some time alone with her, while Natalia took Francesca for her last feeding before bed.

Once Francesca was fed and sleeping in her crib, Natalia returned to her bedroom, sat down on the bed, and picked up the phone to check the messages. There were a couple from local businesses to get their support with sales pitches, one from Leyla which made her smile, and the final one was from Rafe.

"Hi, Ma, it's Rafe. What's wrong? I was out on field exercises and I just got the message about you going away for a family emergency. Is it Francesca or Olivia and Emma? The Chief wasn't specific. Please, call me back. I'll try your cell phone if you don't get this immediately."

Natalia could hear the worry in his voice. She knew it was getting late. She checked her cell phone and there weren't any messages from him, so she dialled the number of his base. After several minutes of calls being re-routed she finally got hold of her son. She calmed him down first by reassuring him that nothing had happened with her immediate family, and then explained that she'd been called to Chicago for her grandmother's death. She could hear the hurt in his voice when he told her that he wished he could have been there for her, but he was glad that Olivia could take care of her. They exchanged goodbyes after assurances that they would keep in touch more often. Natalia hung up the phone and rested her head against the pillow and sighed deeply.

She looked up and smiled when Olivia entered their bedroom, walked over, and flopped herself down on the bed. "You look as tired as I feel."

Olivia nodded, not wanting to move a muscle. But she had a message to pass on to her partner, "Emma wanted you to come in so she could say good night to you."

Natalia smiled and managed to push herself off the pillow. "Stay and rest. I'll be back as soon as Emma's settled." A wave of Olivia's hand was the only response and she chuckled as she walked over to the door and headed down the hallway.

~~*~*

"Ma, can you read me a story?"

"Which book do you want? *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Velveteen Rabbit*?"

“What about the one you said your abuela read to you, about princesses and fairy tales?”

“Okay. I’ll have to get the book from my suitcase. Leyla found it for me when I was home.” Natalia left and quickly found and picked up her copy of *La Princesa y El Campesino* and returned to Emma’s bedside. “Sweetie, this is all in Spanish, are you sure?”

“Yes, Ma.”

“Okay then. Let’s get you all tucked back in.” Natalia leaned back against the headboard, with Emma curled up at her side, and opened the book, and began to read.

“Un precioso día, como nunca antes había sido, con preciosas mariposas revoloteando de un lado a otro y un precioso y enorme arco iris que recorría el reino entero, la reina Isabel informó a su marido de que el medico había venido a visitarla y la había dicho que estaba esperando una niña. El marido, feliz, ordenó invitar a todo el mundo a una gran fiesta para celebrar la estupenda noticia.”

It wasn’t long before the cadence of Natalia’s voice had the young girl to sleep. When she looked up, she saw Olivia leaning against the door frame; a smile graced the older woman’s face.

“I forgot to set the alarm system,” Olivia said quietly. She approached her partner and held out a hand, waiting for Natalia to grasp it. When her partner did, she helped her to stand and led her back to their bedroom. “Have I ever told you how sexy you are when you speak Spanish?” Olivia whispered into the younger woman’s ear, and felt Natalia shiver beside her.

“Not recently.” Natalia could barely find her voice as Olivia traced a finger along her cheek, then blazed a trail down her neck and chest.

“Sí, cariña. Muy sexy.” Olivia’s lips followed the path her finger took, as she directed them backwards to the bed.

“Olivia sobre ese beso? No puedo esperar mas lo quiero ahora!” Natalia captured Olivia’s face in her hands, and feverishly pressed her lips to the older woman’s. She gently pushed Olivia back onto the bed.

Those were the last words spoken, as the two women spent the rest of the night as the two women revelling in their passion for each other.

The End

~~*~*

The Walking Shadow

by Calliopes Muse

ACT 1

Stepping into the kitchen, after leaving the spare room off the living room, Olivia smiled as she watched Natalia put the finishing touches on Emma's French toast – a light sprinkle of powdered sugar and a drizzle of syrup. A large glass of orange juice completed the meal. Emma dug into the food with gusto, kicking her feet excitedly under the table. In between bites, she rattled on endlessly about Natalia's sister, Leyla, being so cool. Olivia walked over to her partner and giving her a tender kiss on the cheek. A shy and flirty smile flashed back at her as Natalia handed her a hot cup of coffee.

"Leyla's not nearly as cool as you are though." Olivia gave the younger woman a saucy wink then turned her attention to her daughter. "Slow down, Jellybean. Jane won't be here for a few more minutes."

Olivia leaned over to give Francesca a kiss on the head as the little girl worked diligently to finish off her morning bottle. Then she ran a gentle hand over Emma's braid as she passed her and went around the table to sit next to her.

"But I have to get my bag packed for Daddy's!"

Natalia turned to place a plate in front of Olivia and refresh her coffee in one smooth move, the action coming second nature after her years as a waitress. "It's already taken care of, Emma."

"Really?" Olivia looked at her, incredulous. They hadn't really had a break in the month since they had returned from Chicago, and Olivia didn't even recall unpacking her own bag, especially with all the commotion over the vandalism at the house. All she knew was that one day she came home from work and everything was back in order.

A momentary feeling of darkness blanketed her mind as she thought of the violation from the vandalism, and her hands itched to hold her gun. Natalia's laughter cut through the anger taking over her mind, reminding her of what was truly important.

“Yeah, really.” Natalia blushed as she looked at Olivia. “I never completely unpacked her bag.”

Olivia gave a mock gasp. “That’s cheating!”

The younger woman shrugged. “Well, we have been kind of busy since we got back.”

Olivia nodded knowingly. They hadn’t even been back home a couple of weeks when Leyla called Natalia asking if they’d mind if she came for a visit. Natalia was surprised, but excited, to say the least. She told her little sister to get busy packing, and that it would be perfect for her to come the beginning of June after Emma was out of school. The same day that Leyla called they started clearing out the small unused office space off the living room, which had become more storage than anything.

Little had been done around the farmhouse that didn’t revolve around that task. Boxes had been taken to the attic and some unneeded furniture was taken to Sister Anne as a donation. Natalia had cleaned out all of the knick knacks and miscellaneous items, and now it was Olivia’s turn to paint. Leyla wasn’t expected for several more days, but it was the perfect time to get Emma out of the house for a little while to finish work on the room. The little girl was beyond excited to have her “cool” aunt come stay with them. She couldn’t seem to talk about anything else.

Olivia laughed as she watched Emma gobble down the last of her French toast and take off up the stairs to get her bag when she heard the knock at the back door off the kitchen, alerting them to Jane’s arrival. Natalia had just sat down to eat her own breakfast but started to stand back up when she heard the knock to go let Jane in.

Olivia put a hand on her shoulder. “Sit. I’ve got it.”

Francesca started to fuss now that she was finished with her bottle. The brunette sighed and set her fork down to get her daughter out of the high chair. They had just started using it and already Natalia could see it wouldn’t last long. They were lucky if they could get the little girl through a feeding before she fussed to get out. Sweet Pea seemed to prefer to be held by her mommies instead. Natalia settled Francesca on her shoulder, and after a couple of well-placed pats on the back, a burp came up and the little girl sighed contentedly.

She turned the child to set her in the crook of her arm and kissed her on the forehead. “Is that better now?”

Francesca gurgled and smiled. Picking up her fork again, Natalia took a bite of toast as her partner pressed the correct buttons on the alarm and turned the deadbolt to let Jane into the house. She heard Emma bounding down the steps before barreling into the kitchen.

“Hey, Jane! Are you ready?”

The young woman laughed at the little girl as Olivia turned with her hands on her hips. “Not so fast, young lady. We get hugs and kisses before you go, and you need a jacket.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Emma walked the short distance to the kitchen table to give Natalia and Francesca kisses and hugs. “Love you, Ma. Love you, Sweet Pea.”

Olivia knelt down with Emma’s light jacket to help her slip it on then gave her a big hug. “Be good for Daddy, okay?”

“Okay, Mom. Love you.” Emma picked up the bag Natalia had packed for her.

“And no petting strange dogs at the park,” Natalia added, standing to see Emma off. Puppies were Emma’s new obsession since she saw a very sweet Golden Retriever at the park in Chicago.

Emma sighed and rolled her eyes, jokingly. “Oh, okay!”

Olivia opened the door again, bracing herself for the chilly, morning wind. Ever since being in sunny San Cristobel, she’d been ready for warmer weather to reach Springfield. Emma and Jane left with a quick wave, leaving the older women in a suddenly quiet house. Olivia relocked the door as soon as it was closed and unconsciously reset the alarm.

She turned to Natalia who was standing behind her and saw she was shivering. She ran her hands over the goose-bumped arms. The brunette relaxed into the warm caress, cradling Francesca between them. “What’s up with this chilly weather? It’s nearly June.”

Olivia shrugged and pulled Natalia a little closer. “We can always blame it on Iceland.”

Natalia chuckled against her partner’s strong shoulder. “Poor Iceland. Nothing good could ever come from being named that.”

The blonde pulled back, smiling, with a twinkle in her eye, and she clapped her hands together. “Well, back to work!”

Before Olivia could get away, she was pulled back and kissed thoroughly by Natalia, making her go weak in the knees as she whimpered into the kiss. The younger woman pulled away with a satisfied smirk.

“Not so fast, Spencer. We have plenty of time to finish the room, and someone’s fast asleep again.” She looked down at the sleeping child in her arms. “And if we didn’t have to stay inside to hear the monitor, I would so drag you back out to that Jacuzzi Doris had installed.”

Olivia definitely owed Doris big time for that gift! Memories of them christening the new hot tub were wonderfully fresh in her mind. She lifted a mischievous eyebrow and gestured up the stairs with a tilt of her head. “I guess I’ll just meet you in the bedroom in five minutes then?”

Natalia’s heart raced at the thought of what was to come, literally, for the next couple of hours. She took a steadying breath to calm down. “With bells on, and nothing else.”

She kissed Olivia again with delicious intent before breaking away and walking up the stairs.

Olivia followed her with her eyes. “Oh, yeah!”

~~*~*

Emma flew down the slide as fast as possible, giggling as she went. She raced up the steps again and slid down again, hoping to go faster with each round.

Jane smiled at her as she texted her boyfriend about their plans for later that evening. The young woman shivered at the chill in the air. She shook her head at being crazy enough to bring Emma out in the cold, but she was killing some time since Mr. Spaulding had a meeting this morning. No one else was at the park so they obviously had the common sense to stay home. When Olivia had mentioned needing to get Emma out from under foot so they could finish the room for Leyla, she jumped at the chance to help out. Besides, she could always use a few extra bucks and what else was she going to do since her boyfriend was putting in more hours at the Beacon to pay for his new car? She liked the car. It was perfect for making out in down by the lighthouse, so she wasn’t going to complain.

A squeal from across the playground startled her, and she frantically searched for her young charge. Seeing the young girl wrapped up in the arms of a scruffy looking man, she took off in a run.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

The young man spun around at the angry voice behind him and adjusted Emma in his arms.

Jane stopped in her tracks, feeling rather foolish. “Jonathan? Sorry, I couldn’t tell it was you from way over there.”

The handsome man smiled at her, and she could have sworn she swooned a little. Having been Emma's babysitter for so long, she had seen many pictures of Jonathan, but hadn't met him personally.

He offered his hand in greeting, and Jane took it, blushing the whole time. At the moment, she really hated having a boyfriend that she actually liked.

"You must be Jane. I've heard a lot about you from my aunt and the pipsqueak here." He poked at Emma's side, making her squeal. He reached around, finding the shy little girl hiding behind him and coaxing her forward. "This is my daughter, Sarah." Jane squatted down to the little girl's eye level. "Well, you're a beautiful little girl, Sarah. My name's Jane." When Jane reached out her hand, Sarah shyly took it and thanked her.

A sudden ringing made both Jane and Jonathan look for their phones. Eventually, Jonathan realized it was his and he set Emma down on the ground. He looked up from the caller ID nervously.

"Um, I hate to impose, but are you going to be here for a minute? I really need to take this."

Jane quickly nodded. "Sure."

He looked down at his daughter. "Do what she says, Sarah. Okay?"

When his daughter nodded, her long dark curls bobbing with the motion, he walked away, going around the other side of a set of buildings.

Jane watched until he was out of eyesight and then glanced down at Emma and Sarah. "Okay, ladies, what do we do now?"

Emma smiled mischievously as she took Jane and Sarah's hands, and the young woman was suddenly very worried about the plans Emma had for them.

~~*~*

The long drive back into town had given Frank the time he had needed to clear his head. Over the last couple of weeks, he had taken to going on these drives when he couldn't sleep. They were becoming more and more frequent, but he somehow found himself more centered when he returned. Ever since he had gotten the text from Eleni back in November, he had grown increasingly agitated and distracted. He wanted to know what right she thought she had swinging back through town, after all that had happened, upsetting Marina and assuming she had a right to see her grandson? He had politely

returned emails and texts, telling himself it was for Marina and Henry's sake in case Marina ever got over her hurt, but the mere thought of her being anywhere nearby stirred feelings in him that he'd rather not think about.

He turned off the radio. If he heard one more sappy love song, he was going to scream. Blake had left him a message earlier about dinner; she wanted to have a romantic night out. He scrubbed a hand roughly across his face, scratching at the stubble on his chin. In all honesty, he really just wanted to go back to his apartment and have a beer, maybe watch the Cubs game coming on this afternoon. What the hell was his problem? Blake was a nice, charming woman, and certainly someone he had found attractive enough to sleep with years ago. Actually, she was still perfectly attractive, and he wasn't complaining about having a regular bed partner. He couldn't fool himself though; he knew something was missing from the relationship. He'd done the denial thing far too recently and it hadn't turned out so well; he didn't want to go through that again.

~~*~*

Jane had eventually convinced Emma that she needed to get off the merry-go-round or else she'd puke all over the little girl. Standing by the monkey bars, she looked up from her phone and her latest text when she heard a rustle in the bushes. Shrugging it off as a squirrel, she glanced back down at the display, a deep blush spreading across her face at her boyfriend's audacity. With her fingers flying across the pad, she hit send and then turned off her phone.

"Asshole. No, I'm not into threesomes," she grumbled to herself. Looking up, Jane noticed that Emma and Sarah weren't there.

This time she didn't let herself panic. Instead, she felt annoyed. Emma knew better than to leave her sight, but the little girl did have a tendency to disappear right from under a person's nose. She called their names and headed toward the closed refreshment stand.

"You two better just be getting a drink of wa..."

When she rounded the corner, she saw the back of a man. He seemed to sway a little and then she saw why. Struggling in his arms was Sarah, a gun at her head and a hand over her mouth.

A few feet away, Emma stood paralyzed as her cousin was lifted off the ground. She remembered what her mom had said once: if someone tries to hurt you, look at their face, stare at their face and memorize it. Then scream as loud as you can. She tried. She was panting hard and wanted to open her mouth to scream. But it was like one of those bad dreams she had once where no matter how hard she tried she couldn't run or scream or do anything. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement and wanted to run to whoever it

was, but her feet wouldn't move. All she knew was that she was scared and wanted her Mom and Natalia.

Jane edged closer, her heart pounding. She thought momentarily about the phone in her pocket, but she had turned it off earlier. If she turned it on now, she'd alert the man to her presence. She swallowed hard and tried to catch Emma's eye. She could feel the panic rolling off her young charge and a brief flicker of green eyes in her direction was all Jane needed. Emma had become like the little sister she'd never had, and she'd be damned if she let anyone hurt her.

Only a few feet away, Jane gritted her teeth and sprinted towards the back of the stranger. In panic and fear at her own possible insanity, she screamed mere seconds before hitting him in the back, knocking him to the ground.

The shock of being suddenly hit made him let Sarah go, and the younger girl scrambled to Emma. The two girls watched in horror as the man jumped up and kicked Jane so hard in the ribs that it lifted her off the ground, and she landed with a thud on her back. Emma finally found her voice and let out a blood-curdling scream.

Far away, Jonathan heard the scream and his blood ran cold. He raced back to the playground, berating himself when he realized how far away he was. When he had gotten the call, he had started walking down the road and hadn't bothered to stop and turn back.

The man turned on Emma and pointed the gun at her.

~~*~*

Olivia shivered at the chill that ran over her body when the warmth of an exhausted Natalia moved off of her to cuddle at her side. She sighed deeply and contentedly as she stretched muscles she didn't realize she had anymore. Natalia curled into her, her lithe fingers caressing the soft skin on Olivia's stomach.

"That was so good," the younger woman mumbled against Olivia's shoulder.

"Oh, just good?"

Natalia chuckled and looked up into the bright green eyes of her lover. "Okay, great. Better than great. The best ever!"

Olivia smirked. "Much better. I do have a reputation after all."

A naughty, playful rush overtook Natalia. It was like she couldn't get enough of Olivia. "I know; that's why I fell for you in the first place."

“Oh really?” Olivia lifted her eyebrow.

Natalia began sucking softly on the other woman’s neck. A low moan and the feel of an arm tightening around her back was all the encouragement Natalia needed to continue her explorations; the ebbing embers began to flame white-hot again.

“Really. I think I have a thing for bad girls.” Natalia whispered hotly into her lover’s ear.

Olivia found the small inkling of control she still had and flipped Natalia over onto her back. “I guess I need to give you what you want then.”

She kissed Natalia with fervor reminiscent of their first time. She loved kissing Natalia like this – deep, slow, and hungry – because it always got the same predictable and wonderful response. Olivia never tired of the feel of her lover’s legs wrapping around her, pulling her in close, as blunt nails slid down her back and dug in at the base of her spine.

Olivia arched her back with a hiss, her hips grinding into Natalia. She leaned back in to kiss the younger woman again, when she was pushed back slightly.

“What? What’s wrong?”

~~*~*

Jane struggled to her feet as blood ran down her chin. She found it hard to breathe and feared the attacker had broken some ribs, maybe even punctured a lung. With the little bit of strength she had left, she lunged again at the man to distract him, hitting him weakly. When he turned on her, she rasped out in a harsh voice, “Emma, take Sarah and run. Run as fast as you can.”

The man backhanded Jane, sending her back to the ground in a heap. He grabbed her by her blood-stained blouse, lifted her, and slammed her back against the wall of the building behind her.

The jarring blow stunned her but also got her adrenaline going. With one hand, she grabbed at the wrist of his gun hand, while the other went for his face, hidden under the hood of the sweatshirt. She groaned in agony as he pushed her against the wall again, his weight adding pressure on her broken ribs as blood splattered from her mouth. Over his shoulder, she could still see Emma and Sarah.

She cried in frustration, frantically reaching for any bare skin she could find. She knew the situation was bad. All she could hope for was to distract him long enough for the girls to

get away. She found purchase on his neck and dug in. He howled in pain and stumbled backwards.

Falling to her knees, she screamed one last time at Emma. "Goddamn it, Emma, run! RUNNNN!"

The scream jarred Emma into action. She grabbed Sarah's hand and pulled her away.

Jane shakily got to her feet and looked at the man with a bloody smile. "I know you, and I won't let you get 'em." She swayed on her feet and glared at him.

"You fucking bitch!" He sneered at her then shrugged. "I guess you'll have to do then."

~~*~*

When Jonathan was less than a hundred feet from where he'd last seen Sarah and Emma, a gunshot rang out. With tears running down his face, he raced the remaining distance, his lungs burning with the effort. A second shot sounded close. As he came around the refreshment stand, a figure disappeared into the bushes. Twenty feet away, he watched as a bloodied and beaten Jane crumpled to the ground.

"Oh my God!" He looked around desperately but didn't see Sarah or Emma anywhere. He called out to them, but heard nothing. Running up to Jane, he fell beside her on his knees. All he needed was a few seconds, just a little time to find out where his little girl was and who had done this. When he rolled her over though, her eyes were open...vacant. Even though he knew what it meant, he checked for a pulse anyway. Nothing.

He slammed his hand against the ground. "Shit!" Looking around again, he gave one last frantic call. "Sarah!"

~~*~*

Frank slowed down as he passed the church where he and Natalia had almost married last year. A sad sigh escaped his lips as he thought back on that time. He'd been hurt at first, and then he was just simply angry. He'd taken every opportunity to blame the situation on Olivia because she was an easy target, one that had been in his sights for years. The businesswoman had certainly earned the ire of most people in town, so his anger at her was understandable to most. Deep inside though, he'd known. He hadn't let himself see what was right in front of him, which was that Natalia didn't light up when he was near. Hell, he hadn't either in her presence. He'd just tried to make love happen when it wasn't there. It had been nice to have someone there – a nice, pretty woman to say was his own. He had been lonely for companionship and sad over Coop. It had been a poor reason to cling to Natalia.

A sick feeling hit him in the pit of his stomach as he realized, sadly, that what he had been doing the last few months with Blake wasn't so different from what had happened between him and Natalia. Blake had been his consolation prize when Natalia hadn't worked out, much like he had been for his ex-fiancé when Olivia hadn't worked out for her. He could pretend to have deeper feelings than he did, just like he'd asked of Natalia, but that wouldn't be fair to anyone. Blake deserved better and so did he. Just as he summoned the courage to pull up Blake's number on his cell to tell her they needed to talk, it rang.

"I guess it'll have to wait now." With a sigh, he answered the call. "Yeah, what's up?"

~~*~*

Natalia pushed back from Olivia and scrunched her dark eyebrows together. "Do you hear that?"

Olivia shook her head. "I didn't hear Francesca."

Then they both heard it loud and clear - a hard, steady banging at the front door. Olivia sighed and pushed off of Natalia. "You know, I'm really glad we got into the habit of locking doors, but this is kind of annoying."

"Imagine what would have happened if someone had just walked in here." They both stood and grabbed their robes from the back of the door.

Olivia smirked at her partner. "We'd be on You Tube before the day was over?"

Natalia gave Olivia a light smack on the arm, but laughed, nonetheless, at the naughty woman. She led the way out of the bedroom as Olivia made a short detour to check on the baby. Natalia tightened her black silk robe as she got to the bottom of the staircase. She peeked through the curtain before disarming the alarm and opening the door with concern.

"Frank?"

~~*~*

For a few seconds, Jonathan was completely still as he listened for any sound that may have been his daughter, but silence greeted him instead. Then he heard a muffled sound and realized he still had his phone in his hand.

Shakily, he lifted the phone. "Anna, he's escalating. He's killed someone."

Anna started to answer back but was drowned out by screams in the background.

Tears fell from his eyes as he recognized the sound. "Is that...please tell me that's Sarah... that she made it to the police station?"

"It is...and Emma."

Jonathan could hear Anna on the other end of the line issuing orders to Remy. Then he heard Anna talking to them softly, getting them to calm down.

After a long minute, she came back on the line. "They're okay, Jonathan. Neither are hurt. They were there alone?"

"Yeah. I mean, no." He stumbled. "They were with Emma's sitter, Jane, and um, Jane was shot."

"And you?" The subtle accusation laced her voice.

He rubbed at his forehead. "I was nearby."

"Not near enough. You got damn lucky."

"Yeah, I know." He mumbled, guiltily. He could hear talking in the background before she came back on the line.

"Frank's calling out all the stops. Be ready."

Jonathan sighed and flipped his phone closed, hearing the sirens in the distance grow closer. He looked down at Jane, wanting to close the lids of her eyes, but knowing he'd be stupid to touch her any more than he already had. All he could do was look at her sadly and pray for this nightmare to end soon, before anything worse happened.

~~*~*

When the door swung open, Frank was surprised to see Natalia still in her robe. He glanced at the clock on the wall knowing she'd normally be up well before then.

"Hey, Natalia, I'm sorry to wake you." His voice was hesitant and a bit nervous.

A blush flared across her face when she heard the door to Francesca's room close and the familiar tread of Olivia's feet as she descended the steps. She saw Frank glance over her shoulder, toward the staircase.

"You didn't wake me."

Frank cleared his throat, watching Olivia descend the steps in a red silk robe and bare feet. He fought to push the mental image of what he had interrupted out of his mind.

“Oh, um, good,” He stammered.

“Mornin’, Frankie.” Olivia came up behind her partner and ran her hands over the slender shoulders.

“Morning,” he mumbled back.

Natalia suddenly remembered that she had forgotten her manners. She still hadn’t quite made the mental adjustment to having doors bolted and alarms set, so she wasn’t used to actually having to invite anyone in. “I’m sorry, Frank. Do you want to come in, have some coffee?”

“Um, no, actually. Thanks though. This isn’t a pleasure call.” He looked down uncertainly and shifted on his feet.

Olivia was suddenly worried by his tone. “Why, what’s up?”

“You two should come down to the station.” Frank hated this part of his job.

Anger flared in Olivia. “No, Frank, you need to tell us what’s going on. Right now!”

Natalia gripped at Olivia’s hand to calm her, as much as to calm herself. “What happened?”

He swallowed. “It’s Jane. She’s been shot.” When the two women stared at him in stunned silence, he answered the obvious question. “She’s dead.”

Natalia grabbed at the chair next to her to hold herself up as Olivia pulled her close. Terrified brown eyes turned to Olivia, then to Frank. “Emma. What about Emma?”

He reached for both of them reassuringly, squeezing their shoulders reassuringly, all of their past issues floating away in their moment of shared worry. “She’s fine. She’s not hurt. Scared, but not hurt.”

Olivia let out the breath she didn’t know she had been holding. She grasped at Natalia’s hand for support and looked at Frank, “Jesus, Frank! You scare us like that ever again, and I swear...”

Natalia pulled back from Olivia’s embrace and wiped at the tears on her face, she looked at Frank with new determination. “We need to see her.”

Not understanding what she really meant, Frank nodded. "Of course. She's safe at the station. Anna and Remy are at the scene, but we have an officer with her."

"I'm not talking about Emma." Natalia looked at him hard. "I need to see Jane. I need to see her body."

Olivia and Frank exchanged concerned looks as the younger woman headed up the stairs to change.

~~*~*

ACT 2

Jonathan climbed off the swing as he saw Anna pull up. She had obviously left quickly to make sure she was the first to arrive on the scene. With determined steps, he approached her, his usual good cheer replaced by anger and worry.

"Is Sarah really okay?"

Anna nodded, but still surveyed her surroundings, examining the scene. "Yeah, she's at the station with an officer."

He moved to walk away. "I need to go to her."

She stopped him with a hand to his chest. "You can't. You called it in so you have to stay and answer questions." She noticed Jonathan tighten his jaw, making the muscles visibly twitch. Anna sighed, "It's the rules, okay? As soon as we get your version of things, you can see Sarah."

He rolled his eyes and ran a hand through his hair. "He's getting too close, Anna. That...", he pointed in the direction of Jane's body, "came too close. We can't do this alone. He's too good."

When Anna didn't answer, he closed his eyes, willing himself to stay calm. "You need to tell Doris what's going on."

"No." Anna shook her head resolutely.

"She's the freakin' mayor, Anna. She can get the FBI involved!" Jonathan was practically pleading with her.

She crossed her arms, determination in her face. "That was expressly forbidden by the boss, and you know it."

"Screw our boss!"

~~*~*

In the eerily silent ride to the park, Olivia watched her partner out of the corner of her eye, while keeping note of Frank's car ahead of them. While a casual observer would probably not even notice the actual meaning in Natalia's subtle non-verbal cues, Olivia knew something was different. A slight increase in her breathing meant she was nervous or excited. When she bit the inside of her cheek, she was not only nervous but also pondering something difficult or troubling. But, what she saw when she looked across the seat at her partner was new, even to her, and shook Olivia to her core – the younger woman's knuckles were white as she fiercely gripped the steering wheel, her nostrils flared with the rush of adrenaline, and her eyes were focused and clear.

Natalia was in fight mode. Gone was the flirty, joking woman of this morning and in her place was a woman ready to defend and protect those she loved.

Olivia couldn't stand to see Natalia like this. She reached over and ran a gentle hand through Natalia's long, dark hair. Olivia noticed the younger woman's eyelids briefly flutter shut as Natalia took a deep breath and a slender hand released its stranglehold on the steering wheel. Olivia relaxed a little when Natalia reached for her hand and entwined their fingers, squeezing her hand solidly and assuredly.

As the park came into view, Natalia pulled her car over behind Frank's. She drew Olivia's hand up and kissed it. Turning her eyes to Olivia, feeling tears well up, she forced a sad smile. "Thank you."

"For?"

Natalia shook her head, fighting to calm the turbulent emotions racing through her. "Everything."

Olivia reached over and brushed an errant tear away with her thumb, then kissed her softly. "Anytime. Are you ready?"

Natalia took a deep breath and nodded, and they got out of the car. Olivia carefully got Francesca's carrier out of the backseat, thankful that she was once again sound asleep, and walked around the front of the car to Natalia. A small crowd had already gathered and the area had been marked off with police tape. Even the news crew from the local station had arrived but they were being kept a good distance away from the scene by police officers.



Frank ducked under the tape and held it for the two women to follow. A small group of people were gathered at the edge of the playground. As they approached the scene, Olivia noticed Anna, Jonathan and Remy talking by the swings, and a short distance away she spotted Doris talking on the phone, her back slightly turned to them.

Getting closer to Jonathan, a sickening feeling enveloped Olivia as she noticed his shaking fingers rake through stringy hair. She quickened her steps and as she passed Frank, she handed the baby carrier off to him.

Her eyes focused intently on Anna as she spoke, “What the hell’s going on here?” When the other woman didn’t answer right away, Olivia looked to her nephew. “Jonathan, what’s going on? Why are you here?”

Before he had a chance to respond, Olivia interrupted, assuming the worst. “Oh my God! They think you had something to do with this!”

She turned on Anna furiously. “I swear, you just can’t stop yourself, can you?” Olivia questioned her derisively. “Everything and everyone you come in contact with ends up

destroyed or damaged. It wasn't enough that your family ruined my childhood, you had to show up here in Springfield and cause more trouble. You broke my friend's heart, and now you want to blame my nephew for murder?" Olivia stepped closer into Anna's personal space and noticed the mixture of awe and terror in the other woman's eyes as she stared back. Narrowing her eyes at Anna, she pressed on. "I swear to God, if you lay one finger on my nephew, I'll..."

Jonathan finally stood up, having heard enough. He pulled at Olivia's arm to get her attention. "That's not it, Auntie O. I was here with Sarah."

The blonde felt the world tilt a little at his words and at the sudden realization that the beautiful little girl wasn't around. She reached with one hand for Jonathan's hand and covered her mouth with the other. "Oh my God, she's not..."

He shook his head. "She's fine. She ran away with Emma. They're safe."

"Thank God." Olivia dropped her head and released a heavy sigh of relief.

The last few moments came rushing back to Olivia as the adrenaline faded, and she remembered what she had said to Anna. Feeling a little chagrined, but not wanting to admit blame, she avoided looking at the other woman and instead focused on Remy, who was nearby.

"So, what happened?"

Remy stepped up and looked at his notes. "Piecing together what Emma and Sarah have told us and the cursory evidence so far, I'd say that Jane interrupted a potential kidnapping and ended up in a struggle with someone bigger and stronger than her and obviously lost."

Olivia wanted to come back with a typical sarcastic quip, but she couldn't get it out around the lump in her throat. The mental image of Jane fighting and struggling against her attacker was too much for her.

Anna picked up the details from there. "Emma said that she and Sarah were playing over by the slides. She turned her back to climb the slide again and when she came down, Sarah was gone. She went looking for her and found her struggling with a man behind the concession stand. Emma doesn't remember much after that, except that Jane seemed to come out of nowhere and jumped the guy. They fought and he was beating her up pretty badly. Jane yelled at her to run and she did, dragging Sarah with her. She heard a loud banging sound, what she assumed was a gun, and just ran faster."

Frank finally made his way to the group, hearing the last pieces of information. He still held Francesca's carrier in one hand and was trying to dial a number on his cell phone with

the other. When he got the same message he'd gotten the last two times, he flipped his phone shut in frustration.

"Where the hell is the CSI team? I've been trying to reach Desilva for the last hour, but there's a message saying his number's disconnected. We need to get this scene cleared."

Doris had just ended her conversation and piped up. "Desilva won't be here."

"Why not?" Frank asked, visibly frustrated.

"I fired him this morning," she said nonchalantly.

Frank's mouth fell open. "What? Why?"

The mayor shook her head at the man before her, incredulous at his short-term memory problems. "Because he's an incompetent, lazy bastard. You even said that yourself, and coming from you, that's huge."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frank suspected he was supposed to be insulted, but wasn't really sure why.

Doris waved a hand in the air in dismissal. "Never mind."

"Fine. But what are we supposed to do without a CSI director?"

A knowing smirk crossed Doris's face as she peered over his shoulder at the approaching figure. "Don't worry your manly mind with such matters, Frank. I've taken care of everything."

"Hi, Frank."

Everyone spun around at the voice behind them, and Frank nearly fell over with the shock. All the text messages and emails in the world hadn't prepared him for seeing Eleni again face-to-face. She was still beautiful, with her brilliant green eyes twinkling as she smiled, the crinkles around her eyes highlighting a maturity she wore well, and dark hair cascading in ringlets over her shoulders.

"Eleni? What...what are you doing here?" Frank sputtered.
Doris leaned forward, pleased with herself. "Meet your new CSI director."

"What?" Frank spun on Doris then looked back at his ex-wife. "This is a sick joke, right? You've got to be pulling my leg."

Eleni raised her crime scene kit, and then it struck Frank what she was wearing, a royal blue crime scene jacket. "Nope, no joke."

"I thought..." he fought down the remembered pain. "I thought you ran off with Alan Michael."

"And I left him, came back to the States, got my training, and have been working in Los Angeles for the last several years." She smiled and Frank felt a rush of panic at the feelings that it brought up. He swallowed hard and pushed them away. He refused to get sucked into her trap again.

"In that case, I guess you should get to work."

Everyone looked over to where Jane's body was stretched out on the ground. Natalia stood at the dead woman's feet, hugging herself tightly, as if trying to keep from falling to pieces.

Olivia looked to Frank. "Do you need me for anything?"

He shook his head. "Nothing I can't get later." She nodded her appreciation and turned to approach her partner.

She didn't want to startle Natalia, so when she was close enough to be heard, Olivia whispered, "Hey." She brushed a hand over her shoulder. "You okay?"

Natalia shook her head and turned to collapse into Olivia's arms, burying her tear-stained face against the older woman's shoulder.

They stood there for a long moment, holding each other tight. As Natalia's tears subsided, Olivia leaned back and brushed away the drops still on her partner's face, and then the younger woman reached a hand up between them to wipe at her runny nose.

Natalia squeezed her eyes shut, struggling to say the words without losing control of her tears again. "Emma could have gotten hurt...or worse." Her bottom lip trembled and the mere thought of seeing Emma lying out on the ground instead of Jane shook her with fear. "It could have been one of you."

Olivia pulled further back and took Natalia's face in her hands. She fought down the tears that threatened to fall, but she couldn't hide the quiver in her voice. She tried to sound more confident than she felt. "But it wasn't. And it never will be if I have anything to do with it. We're okay." She nodded her head, willing Natalia to believe her. "Okay?"

The brunette nodded and leaned into Olivia's embrace again, seeking solace in the warmth and solidity. After a few moments, Natalia spoke up, "I need to go see Emma now. If you need to stay here...", Natalia started.

As the younger woman pulled away, Olivia reached for her arm. "Nuh, uh. There's a nut out there with a gun. We're not going anywhere alone. Come on, we'll go together. There's nothing we can do here anyway."

Natalia nodded and slipped her hand into Olivia's. On the way out of the park, they got Francesca and headed to the station.

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When Olivia and Natalia arrived at the police station, the place was buzzing with news of the crime. They went to the front desk and asked to see Emma, and were told an officer would be with them shortly. Unable to sit and relax in the uncomfortable chairs while they waited to see their daughter, Olivia paced the small foyer like a caged animal. Natalia was in no better state as she stood nervously, switching her weight from one foot to the other and chewed at a fingernail. An eternity seemed to pass in those few minutes until a young officer came out to get them.

The young man immediately put his hands up at Olivia's rapid approach, and spoke quickly to try and assuage her fears. "She's fine, ladies. A little shaken, but she and the other little girl are watching SpongeBob now in the break room. She's even laughing. She's a tough one."

While she was thankful that he'd looked after her daughter, Olivia wasn't the most patient person and at the moment she wanted nothing more than for him to shut up and get out of the way. "That's great. Can I see her now?"

"Yeah, sure." He moved aside so Olivia could go through the door to the main office.

Natalia paused on her way through and touched his hand. "Thanks. We really appreciate it."

He smiled genuinely. "Anytime."

In the back corner of the station, past all of the cubicles and desks, was the break room. Olivia hesitated for a moment, as she watched Emma through the glass window laughing at some antics of SpongeBob. Natalia came to her side and took a hold of her hand. With a light squeeze and a quick glance at each other, they opened the door.

When Emma saw her mommies, she jumped from her chair and ran over, hugging them both tightly as they went to their knees. Sarah was curled up in the chair that had been

next to Emma's. Olivia watched as the little girl's head dropped, her bottom lip starting to quiver. Her heart broke for her niece.

Olivia's voice was thick with emotion, and she had to clear her throat to speak. "Sarah?" When the little girl tentatively looked up, tears threatening to fall, Olivia let go of Natalia to reach out for the little girl. "Come here, baby." She waited as Sarah hesitated a moment, then she slowly unfurled her legs and walked over. Olivia pulled her into a tight hug. She felt the little girl's body crumple with exhaustion, and her soft sniffles turned to loud sobs.

Olivia pulled her closer. "Everything's okay now. We've got you. You're safe. And your daddy will be here soon, okay?"

Sarah sniffled and nodded.

Natalia watched the exchange over Emma's back where she was huddled between her mothers. She whispered quietly in Emma's ear. "Sarah's a little upset, huh?" She felt Emma nod against her shoulder. "I know you are, too, and I promise we'll talk about it, okay? But I bet you know what would make her feel better, right?"

She could almost sense the little girl smiling into her shoulder before she whispered back. "Ice cream with extra sprinkles?"

"I think that's a brilliant idea." Natalia lifted her head up to look at the other two. "Emma came up with a wonderful idea to help us all feel better." Sarah glanced at her curiously. "Do you know what it is, Sarah?" The little girl shook her head, and Natalia smiled, speaking slowly to emphasis the wonder of each word. "Ice cream with extra sprinkles."

Despite the sadness and tension of the morning's events, Olivia felt such gratitude towards her partner. With a big smile, she looked at the girls as she spoke. "Oh wow, that sounds awesome! What do you say, Sarah? You want to go to Company and get the best ice cream with extra sprinkles in the world?"

As if by magic, the little girl smiled happily and started tugging Emma by the hand. "Come on, Emma!"

The two women laughed when Emma nearly tumbled out the door of the break room as Sarah enthusiastically pulled her forward.

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Emma and Sarah sat in a booth in the back of Company, happily eating their ice cream and making a mess of their clothes. Only once did Natalia look at Emma and think about how much work it was going to be to get the sticky sugar off of her. Considering all that had

happened and could have happened to her family, she would deal with some chocolate ice cream on her daughter's clothes over the other possibility any day. She was pretty sure she'd willingly let Emma bathe in ice cream if it would just keep her safe. She looked down at Francesca in her carrier, and once again felt the force of the emotions she'd had at the park. Consciously, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath to stay calm.

Olivia was finishing up relating the morning's events to a shocked Blake; she conveniently left out the part about Eleni showing up. Honestly, she wasn't sure how to approach it and eventually convinced herself that it wasn't her business anyway.

"They're sure it's murder?" The redhead still hadn't quite gotten over the shock of the news.

"Two bullets to the body would say so." Olivia winced at her own sarcasm. She really just wanted to get a moment alone with Natalia so she could let her defenses down.

Blake didn't seem to notice Olivia's inappropriate snarky comment. She just shook her head. "Wow!"

The bell above the door chimed and they turned to see Doris walk in and make a beeline for the bar. Blake eyed the mayor as she plunked down, undignified, on the stool next to Olivia. Blake noticed the exhausted and frustrated way Doris rubbed her hand over her forehead and covered her eyes. Without a word, she retrieved a bottle of Buzz's best whiskey from beneath the counter and a tumbler from the shelf. She poured two fingers of the dark amber liquid into the glass and set it in front of her friend. Blake noticed Doris's grateful smile before the woman tossed back the drink. The redhead didn't hesitate in giving her a refill.

Doris put a hand on Blake's before she could move away. "Maybe you should just leave the bottle. It's been that kind of day."

The redhead leaned against the bar, smiling a sad half smile. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Maybe later?"

Blake smiled at the inflection that turned the statement into a question. "Absolutely. I'll call you. Hit ya again?" She motioned with the bottle at Doris's glass and Doris nodded.

When the door chimed again, Doris groaned at seeing Frank and Eleni enter. It seemed that the battle of wills she had been witness to out at the park had followed her and now the two exes stood in the middle of Company, making the stress-induced headache she already had start thundering behind her eyes.

Doris's frustration was replaced by shock when she felt the sleeve of her jacket suddenly soaked. She looked up to see Blake overflowing her glass with whiskey. She grabbed her hand, lifting the bottle. "Whoa, Blake, watch out!"

Blake started, finally realizing the mess she had made. "Oh God, Doris. I'm so sorry!" She noticed her friend was trying to dry her clothes off so she raced around with her bar rag. "Here, let me help." Blake took Doris's hand and wiped the sleeve of her jacket, which was already dripping onto her lap. When Blake went to dab the moisture away from her lap, Doris jumped a little.

"Thanks, but I got it." She took the rag from Blake and continued drying off.

"There you go, Blake, getting Doris all wet again." Olivia mumbled quietly, earning her a death glare from Doris and a nudge on the arm from Natalia.

Seeming to remember why she spilled the liquor in the first place, Blake spun around to Frank and Eleni still arguing.

Eleni wasn't in Frank's face, but she crossed her arms with defiant self-assurance. Frank's face had turned an abnormal shade of red because of the nerve of his ex-wife.

Calmly and very matter-of-factly, Eleni clarified once again, "I told you. I took extra samples from the scene to ensure they were collected and handled properly."

"But my men had already done that." Frank was doing his best to keep his composure in front of family and friends, but she was getting under his skin.

She sighed. "And they're not CSI agents either. Besides, I lived in Springfield long enough to know the police department isn't exactly top notch."

Olivia snickered, overhearing the comment, and Natalia nudged her again.

"Yeah? Well, you haven't been around in a long time, Eleni. A lot has changed around here." The clear shift from professional to personal was evident to everyone and a silence fell over the group. Eleni glared at Frank and opened her mouth to respond.

A commotion in the kitchen drew everyone's attention to the swinging kitchen doors. Marina barreled through with her arms full of huge pickle jars. "Hey, Blake, I found these..." She stopped mid-sentence when she saw Eleni.

"What are you doing here?" Marina's voice held no indication of honest inquiry. She had hoped her mother had given up trying to see her or Henry.

"I work here." The dark-haired woman regarded her daughter sadly. This wasn't exactly how she'd wanted everyone to hear about it.

"How here?" Marina asked with a trace of panic in her voice.

Frank piped up, clearly agitated, "She's the new CSI director. Mayor Wolfe fired Desilva this morning."

"What?" Marina gasped. Blake moved fast to catch the pickle jar that slipped from the young woman's hands.

Eleni looked incredulously at Frank then at their daughter. "Yeah, I am. And Frank, I can speak for myself, okay?"

Olivia and Natalia exchanged a look, trying hard to not chuckle at Frank being put in his place by his ex. Olivia's phone buzzed and she reached into her pocket to fish it out. She looked at it with confusion then glanced at her partner.

"It's Ava. I'd better take this." Natalia nodded and Olivia moved to find a quiet spot in the back of the restaurant.

Eleni turned to leave, but said, "This conversation isn't over, Frank." She excused herself so she could get back to the crime scene to gather more evidence. Then, she knew she'd need to go by the coroner's office to talk to him before he started the autopsy.

Frank moved over to the bar and got a beer, then set it down before going to pick up Francesca. Taking some time to play with his daughter seemed a lot more appealing than thinking about the mess his life was in at the moment.

Marina wasn't having it. She was tired of her father being walked on by every woman in Springfield. She stepped closer to him. "Why aren't you doing anything?"

Frank sighed. "There's nothing to do, except deal with it."

The young woman turned to Doris, who had sipped down her overfilled glass until there was almost nothing left. Marina glared at the mayor with her hands on her hips. "What the hell were you thinking? She can't work in this town."

Doris raised an eyebrow and looked Marina up and down for a moment before calmly replying, "She was qualified and we needed to replace Desilva. The timing was perfect."

"I've worked with Desilva. He does a great job." Marina's voice rose with anger.

“He was mediocre at best, Marina.” Doris’s words slurred together. “But I’m surprised you’d know the difference anyway.”

Natalia saw the look of rage on Marina’s face and thought fast. “Hey, Marina?” The other woman turned to look at her. “Can you do me a huge favor? We raced out of the house without any milk for Francesca. Would you mind getting some from the kitchen?”

Marina softened at the mention of her half-sister. “Sure.”

When she left, Natalia leaned over to Doris. “This might be a good time to leave.”

“The hell I will! And certainly not for the likes of Marina Cooper.” Doris threw back probably her fourth or fifth shot. She’d lost count and the headache was making her testier than usual.

Frank looked at the mayor. He knew his daughter was out of line, but he also knew that if anything bad happened, it wouldn’t be entirely her fault. “Doris, you’re drunk, and it’s not even noon. You need to go home.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Frank. You have a habit of that, don’t you? Telling women what to do.”

Blake’s eyes widened, and quickly she stepped forward. “You know what, Doris. My shift is over, and you owe me lunch. How about we go to your place and make some sandwiches or something?”

Doris looked at her confused. “I owe you lunch?”

“Yeah, don’t you remember?”

“No.” Doris pouted a little and Blake had to suppress a smile.

“That’s alright. Just trust me.” Doris shrugged and slid off the stool.

Blake grabbed the mayor’s arm and guided her to the door. On the way out, she turned her head slightly to give Natalia a wink and a nod.

When Marina got back, she almost looked disappointed to see that Doris was gone. She handed over the slightly warm milk to Natalia and went back to the kitchen. Olivia had since gotten off the phone and walked over to Emma and Sarah’s table. She cleaned them up as best she could and brought them over to where everyone was standing.

Natalia saw her walk up. “How’s Ava?”

Olivia scratched at her ear. "Um...good. Sort of."

The younger woman tilted her head a little. "Sort of?"

"She...um...kind of lost her job and wants to stay here for a little while." Olivia bit her bottom lip, worriedly.

Natalia raised her eyebrows. "And that's a problem? Well, aside from the job thing. That stinks. But she's family, Olivia, of course she can stay here."

Olivia swallowed, nervously. "That's good. I'm glad you said that because she's here...now...like, at the airport, now."

The brunette's smiling face fell slightly before she started giggling. She shook her head. "You Spencer women sure know how to make an entrance!"

Olivia and Natalia left with Francesca and the two little girls. After a quick call to Jonathan, Olivia made plans for him to meet them at the airport so he could pick up Sarah. Though he'd said the police were almost finished questioning him, she didn't want to take Sarah or Emma anywhere near the park for a while.

In less than ten minutes, they arrived at the small airport. Ava was standing near the parking lot looking for them.

Emma had overheard her mom tell Natalia that Ava was in town, and during the short drive to the airport, she had talked non-stop about her big sister. In the back seat, the little girl bounced excitedly as the car pulled to the curb and she saw Ava waving at them.

Olivia got out and helped Ava get her bags in the trunk. She took her daughter into her arms and held her for a long moment.

Ava pulled back, surprised at the intense hug and sniffle from her mom. "Are you okay?"

Olivia wiped at her eyes. "You won't believe the morning we've had. Murder, mayhem, all kinds of craziness."

The younger woman smiled slightly. "Sounds pretty typical for Springfield."

Olivia barked out a laugh. "You have no idea!"

A dark car pulled up beside them, and Olivia turned, tensing before she realized it was Anna.

Jonathan opened the passenger door. The back door of Natalia's car opened and Sarah ran with all her might into her father's arms. He hugged her tight, closing his eyes at the reassuring feel of having her in his arms again. He wiped a tear from his face and then waved to Ava and made a quick gesture to Olivia indicating that he'd call her.

She nodded, and she and Ava climbed into the car to head back to the farmhouse.

Natalia turned to look at her partner. "Have you noticed how wherever Jonathan is, Anna's not far away?"

Olivia looked at her for a moment clearly in deep thought. She didn't answer Natalia, but the brunette could tell the older woman was pondering the question.

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Act 3

Stumbling ungracefully through the front doors, Blake had a hard time guiding an intoxicated Doris to the couch so she could dump the other woman in the middle of it. Puffing out a breath to get her hair out of her eyes, the redhead shook her head at the well-dressed heap before her. Doris subconsciously scooted to the corner and lifted her feet, curling up in a ball.

Blake turned to head into the kitchen intent on retrieving a couple glasses of water and a bottle of aspirin, but turned back when she heard a moan from the other woman. Smirking, she responded, "Oh, it lives."

"Funny...um...are you leaving?" Her normally commanding voice sounded unsure and small.

"Do you want me to?" Blake's uncertainty seemed to match Doris's own.

Doris started to shake her head and then quickly thought better of it. "No. Besides, you're a waitress and you know how to make a mean pot of coffee. I think I could use some."

Blake smiled at the new, hopeful tone in Doris's voice. "Just this once, Doris. I don't make coffee for just anyone when I'm not working."

Doris smiled. "That's because you like me."

Blake blushed slightly and looked down at the floor. She raised her hand up, holding her thumb and forefinger close together. "Maybe a little, but don't let it go to your head, Wolfe. I can withdraw my coffee-making skills like that." She snapped her fingers.

“Tough love...I like that.” Blake rolled her eyes at the quip and headed to the kitchen.

Doris, though definitely drunk, sighed in appreciation as she watched Blake walk away. She rolled over, closing her eyes, and mumbling to herself, “Don’t even go there, Doris.”

Thirty minutes later, Blake came back with steaming hot coffee, two mugs, a pitcher of cream and a bowl of sugar on a tray, along with a glass of water and two aspirin. She set it on the table and tilted her head at the sight of Doris spread out on the couch, her mouth hanging open and one skirt-clad leg hanging off the side. She poured a mug of the coffee and made it exactly the way Doris liked it. She sat down on the edge of the couch next to her, and holding the mug in one hand, she shook Doris’s arm.

The other woman mumbled and stirred a little. “Mmmm, baybeeee, youf insafibul.”

Blake snickered a little and wondered for a brief moment what else she could prompt Doris to say while drunk, but then she shook her head and decided against it. The more time she spent with Doris, the more she found her quirky and charming, even likeable and sweet; no one would ever believe it if she told them. She couldn’t torture the woman who was quickly becoming her friend.

Instead, Blake poked her gently in the side. “Come on, Doris. Wake up!”

The other woman stirred slightly but didn’t crack her eyes open, so she tried again. She gave Doris another poke to the ribs. “Come on, Doris, get up.”

Doris squirmed but still didn’t open her eyes. Blake narrowed her eyes, thinking, and when the idea came to her, the redhead smirked evilly. She set the mug down on the table and leaned over, whispering in Doris’s ear. “I’m completely and totally naked.”

Doris scrambled to a sitting position. “Really?”

“No, of course not,” Blake smiled. “But I had to get you up somehow.”

Doris grabbed at her throbbing head. “Oh, damn! That hurts.” With a sigh of gratitude, she accepted the water and aspirin from Blake. After she swallowed the pills, Blake handed her the mug of coffee.

Blake bit her lip. She was dying to know what was going on with Doris; she had a pretty good idea, but she also knew how protective her friend was of her image. Doris wanted everyone to think she was a hard-hearted bitch, but Blake had seen her softer side and knew better. It was that side of her that the redhead hoped wouldn’t take offense to the question.

After taking a hearty sip of her coffee, Doris looked up to see Blake smiling as the other woman picked up her own mug. With a shy glance at her friend, she spoke, "Mmmm, this is absolutely perfect, Blake. Thank you."

Blake tucked some stray hair behind her ear before responding. "You're welcome. So, what has you drinking so early in the morning?"

"Well, my best friend's babysitter was just shot to death. Sounds like a good enough reason to me," Doris quipped. But she could see that Blake wasn't buying it, since the redhead just lifted an eyebrow and waited. Doris got exasperated with the silence. "What? Marina was acting like an ass."

"Oh, please! As if you would ever let someone like Marina Cooper get to you." Blake waited while Doris stared down into her mug. "What's really bothering you, Doris?"

Doris rubbed her forehead. Normally with any type of personal question, she'd just snap the inquisitive person's head off. She had spent so long blocking personal inquiries that it had become second nature. But she looked at Blake's open expression and couldn't do it. She knew the other woman was a horrible gossip but for some reason she felt compelled to talk to her.

"Can I simply say everything is getting to me? It's the easiest answer."

Blake smiled. "I don't need easy. I can handle complicated, so try me."

Doris looked at the other woman curiously, and then decided to let the immediate thought in her head pass. Instead, she took a long swallow of the lukewarm coffee and let her head fall back to the couch behind her. "I've wasted a lot of time worrying about and trying to plan out every step of my life. I'm tired of planning, thinking, and worrying all...the...time. I'm tired of the politics and the games and the constant maneuvering. I'm tired of not being able to just be me."

Blake nodded in sympathetic understanding. "I remember some the frustrations Ross had when he was Mayor; the politicking, and all the societal expectations to be something or someone he really wasn't. And you know me; I don't hold my tongue very well, so when he was frustrated, I let everyone know."

Doris smiled at that. "Very true."

The redhead shrugged and set her empty coffee cup on the table. "Needless to say, I get it. So, what are you going to do about it?"

Doris blew out a frustrated breath. "I'm not really sure yet. I just know that one day I'd like to feel free, you know? To do what I want, with anyone I want, whenever and wherever I want." She sat up and put her finished coffee on the table as well.

Blake had a feeling that last part of the other woman's remarks had to do with Anna, or at least love in general. She knew Doris was probably still hurting over their breakup, but from studying her friend's body language, she wasn't going to offer any further insight.

Blake gave her a reassuring smile. "You will, Doris. You deserve to be happy too."

Not exactly sure what to do with her friend's open sincerity, Doris stood, feeling like she wanted to bolt; it took her a moment to realize she was in her own home. She sighed, shifting uncomfortably. "Thanks...for the coffee and...um..."

Feeling sympathy for her friend, Blake stood and moved towards Doris, and placed a hand on Doris's forearm. "Look, Doris, I'm going to go now. If you need anything, you let me know."

Doris nodded and answered. "Yeah, I'm okay. Thanks." Blake headed to the door and Doris remembered the tragic events from earlier in the day and that a gunman was still on the loose. "Hey, Blake?"

Hearing the concern in Doris's voice, Blake turned around as she opened the door. "Yeah?"

Anxiously, Doris shifted on her heels. "Can you, um, call me when you get home?" Blake gave her an odd look, and she fumbled for the right words. "I mean, there is a killer out there and you're kind of a friend so...I just want to make sure you're home safe."

A big grin broke out on Blake's face and she felt quite pleased that Doris cared about her safety. "I can do that."

Doris came up behind her and held the door open. "Great! Be careful."

"You too. I'll talk to you later." Blake turned to go to her car and was surprised to find that she was humming a little as she walked away.

~~*~*

The road through town was unusually congested. While stopped at a light, Phillip checked his phone one more time to see if Olivia or Natalia had called. Many possibilities ran through his mind. Maybe they forgot Emma was supposed to stay with him this weekend. He discounted that quickly. Emma would never let them forget. Maybe Emma wasn't feeling well. In that case, a phone call would have been nice. Speaking of which...he found

Olivia's number in his phone's directory and tried calling one more time. When the voice mail picked up again, he flipped it closed and threw it on the passenger seat.

The light changed and he slowly drove forward down Main Street, and as he approached the lake at a crawl, blue and red flashing lights caught his eye. Yellow tape marked off a small area, and from a distance, he could make out the figures of Frank Cooper and Remy Boudreaux.

"So, this is what had everyone poking along." He shook his head at how morbidly curious people could be.

The traffic slowed enough that he was almost at a standstill when he came alongside the crime scene. Rolling down his window, he called to Frank.

The police chief turned, surprised, but when he noticed who it was, he jogged over to the car. "Hey, Phillip."

"What happened?" Phillip asked, jerking his head in the direction of the yellow tape.

Under normal circumstances, Frank wouldn't have told him anything about an active investigation, especially as the police had yet to iron out enough details to call a press conference. However, considering that the victim was Phillip's daughter's sitter, he didn't want Phillip to find out from someone else.

"Well, someone got shot." Frank hesitated at providing more information, scratching at the back of his neck.

Phillip cringed. "Was it anyone we know?"

"Um, it was Jane." Frank didn't know what else to say, but he became worried as Phillip's steel blue eyes turned cold. The look served as a good reminder to never piss off a Spaulding.

Phillip saw Frank's mouth moving, but didn't hear anything he said. He saw his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, but didn't feel the ache. Everything was blocked out, except for one small thought.

"Emma."

"She's with Olivia."

Wheels squealed as Phillip took advantage of a gap between him and the car in front of him. He jumped the curb and turned right down a side street. A left at the next block and

he was flying past the small shops of downtown Springfield. In less than a minute, he turned right at the highway heading out of town.

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No longer hearing Emma's animated laughter, Olivia looked into the living room. She smiled seeing Emma curled up in the corner of the couch, while Dora the Explorer still played in the background. The morning drama had zapped Emma of her usual energy. Olivia covered her with a blanket and shuffled back to the kitchen where Natalia and Ava sat at the table. A bottle of whiskey sat in the middle. The glass that had been poured for her was sitting in her spot. Ava took a long swallow from her glass, while Natalia rolled her glass in her hands, staring down into its contents.

Olivia sat down and resisted the urge to toss back the entire shot. Instead slowly, she raised the glass and took a small sip. While they all needed it to take the tense edge off, she wanted to make sure she kept her wits about her. Glancing at the back door to make sure the alarm was set, she finally let herself relax.

Natalia looked up then, taking a small swallow. Reaching across the table, she took Olivia's hand. "Are you okay?"

"I'd be a hell of a lot better if I knew who did this, so I could kill them." Olivia was serious; if she'd had her gun in the presence of anyone who threatened her family, she wouldn't hesitate to kill them.

Natalia squeezed her partner's hand, empathizing with the anger Olivia felt. "I know, baby."

"I just worry about Emma." Ava sighed and finished off her glass. "She's been through a lot."

Olivia ran her free hand over Ava's thick, short hair. "So have you."

Ava tilted her head a little, the calming touch putting a smile on her face. "I'm a grown woman though. I can handle loss a little better. She's just a kid."

"With Leyla coming, maybe that'll help." Natalia shrugged. "Emma likes her so much."

Olivia nodded and hoped she was right.

Not knowing who Natalia was talking about, Ava looked between the two women, confused. "I missed something, I think. Who's Leyla?"

Natalia perked up and smiled. "Oh, that's my younger sister."

“You have a sister?” Ava asked, surprised at the revelation.

Natalia nodded. “A brother, too. He’s older though. I’m not that close to him.”

Ava was genuinely intrigued. It seemed like she was always learning something new about Natalia. “And she’s coming here?”

Olivia had been smiling at the exchange but had a sudden realization. She cringed slightly when she spoke. “Uh, yeah, and she’s staying here too. You can share Emma’s room with her though.”

Ava shook her head and raised her hands, letting her mom know not to worry about the lack of room. “No, it’s okay. I know I surprised you. I can stay at the Beacon.”

As Olivia and Natalia exchanged a worried look, a decision was immediately reached; turning to her daughter, Olivia assuredly spoke, “No, you’re definitely not staying at the Beacon.

“Why not?”

Olivia threw up her hands in exasperation. “Because there’s a killer out there, that’s why.”

“Mom, the guy was probably some crackhead looking for a few bucks, and it went wrong. I doubt he’ll do anything else until the cops find him.” Ava watched as her mom stood and began to pace the small expanse of the kitchen.

“I don’t like it.” Olivia shook her head. “There’s been some crazy stuff going on in this town for the last several months.”

“And this is different from any other time? You don’t have to treat me like a child. I can handle myself.” Ava’s jaw clenched a little in defiance.

With a wry grin, Natalia watched the battle of wills between mother and daughter. When Ava straightened up in her chair, shoulders rolled in an all-too-familiar manner, Natalia realized the younger woman was gearing up for a verbal war. It wasn’t often that her partner lost an argument, but when she glanced at Olivia, she knew that the older woman wasn’t up to a blow out with her daughter.

Olivia sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “Fine! You can stay at the Beacon.”

A knock at the door made all three women jump. Since Olivia was closest, she stood and checked through the curtain.

“Damn it!” She cursed her forgetfulness.

“What?” Natalia stood, worried.

Disengaging the alarm and unlocking the deadbolt, Olivia opened the door to allow Phillip in. Chagrined, she quickly turned to Natalia and then back to her ex. “Sorry, we forgot to call; we had our phones off.”

Phillip looked worried and frantic. “Is Emma okay?”

Olivia ran her hand again through her hair. “She’s fine, Phillip. She’s shaken and exhausted from all the commotion, but fine.” She was about to tell her ex-husband that their daughter was napping, but before she could get it out, Emma came running into the kitchen.

“Daddy!” She leaped into his arms, wrapping them around his neck.

“Oh, baby, hey! Are you okay?” He stroked the soft hair on her head and held her close as she nuzzled into his neck.

The little girl leaned back and nodded. “But Jane got hurt.”

He brushed away a tear that fell on her cheek, his heart hurting for her pain. “I heard.”

“She was protecting me and Sarah.”

He looked at Olivia. “Sarah?”

Olivia closed the door and secured the lock again. “Yeah, Jonathan was there and left Sarah in Jane’s care.” She looked down, clearly discomfited, and when she looked back at him, her voice was lowered. “The attacker tried to kidnap Sarah and...um...he pulled a gun on the girls.”

Phillip closed his eyes tight as first fear and then fury washed over him. He pulled Emma close again. He never wanted to let her go. He just wanted to hold on forever. If he had his way, nobody who wasn’t family would get within fifty feet of Emma ever again. Then he had an idea.

“Come stay with me.” When he noticed that Olivia looked ready to disagree, he turned to Natalia. “Just for a couple of days while they look for the guy who did this. I have the best

security in the state. I have tougher background checks than the FBI. And while you're safe at the mansion, I'll get some for here, too. Round-the-clock watches and cameras."

"I don't know, Phillip." Olivia resisted the idea of anyone looking out for her family other than her. But when she saw the pleading look in her ex's eyes, his face haunted by the fear of his daughter being threatened – a fear she knew all too well – she gave in. "Okay. Just for a couple of days though."

"That's all I ask." Smiling, he set his now happy daughter down.

Natalia thought she should give Olivia and Phillip a moment to talk, so she stepped forward to run her hand over Emma's hair. "Hey, Em, why don't you come help me pack a bag for your mommy and Francesca? At least your bag's still in the car."

Glad that all of her family would be together, Emma happily ran ahead of Natalia and went up the stairs.

Ava looked at Phillip. "Do you mind dropping me off at the Beacon?"

He started to answer but Olivia interrupted him. "You can come with us. There's plenty of room at the mansion."

"You should." Phillip tried to help his ex out a little.

Ava tilted her head at the tall man. "Don't encourage her. Really, I'll be fine, Mom. Besides, no one, except the people in this house, even knows I'm in town."

Olivia threw up her hands. "Okay, okay. I'll stop."

While they waited for Natalia and Emma, Phillip talked to Olivia about how he could set up surveillance around the farmhouse and have his guards do passes of the house periodically. In spite of her changed relationship with Phillip, a small part of her hesitated at the idea of allowing the man who had kidnapped their daughter to have the ability to watch them day and night. She had to remind herself to have a little faith in him. He had been nothing but supportive of her and Natalia. He hadn't done anything to jeopardize Emma, and it didn't seem like he had any ill intentions now. All she could do was trust him.

After a few minutes, Natalia and Emma came down with their bags – one big one with her and Olivia's clothes and another a little smaller with all of Francesca's clothes and necessities.

Natalia looked at them. "I think we're ready."

Olivia went and got Francesca, who seemed happily oblivious to the madness around her. Her attention was totally focused on the little dangling toys on the bar over her carrier. The little dolphin seemed to particularly intrigue her. The little girl giggled and batted at it as her mom carried her to the car. Ava rode with Phillip so she could easily jump out and get her bag out of the back when they got to the Beacon. The rest of the family rode in Olivia's car.

By the time they came back through town, the scene at the park had been mostly cleared and the traffic had decreased significantly. The yellow tape and the police officer standing guard to keep the area from being trampled and contaminated were the only evidence that anything had happened. Natalia quickly distracted a curious Emma by pointing to a strange cloud formation in the sky and asking her if she knew what it looked like.

Emma smiled. "A puppy."

Olivia grumbled from the front seat. "Everything looks like a puppy right now!"

When they pulled up to the Beacon, Olivia gave detailed instructions to Ava to be vigilant of anything suspicious. She handed her a key to her oldest daughter. "In case you need it, this is a key for one of the Beacon SUVs. I'd prefer it though if you didn't leave the room."

Ava smiled and hugged her mother. "I'll be fine, and I'll call if anything weird happens."

Olivia climbed back in the car and reluctantly left Ava in front of the hotel.

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As soon as the large double doors opened onto the foyer of the Spaulding mansion, Emma took off up the stairs on a familiar track to her bedroom. Seeing that her partner was trying to juggle a squirming infant and the baby bag, Olivia dumped their luggage near the bottom of the staircase and gestured to Natalia to hand Francesca over to her. With a pat on the bottom, Olivia determined that the infant's diaper was still okay; she figured that her daughter was probably hungry after waking from her nap. She looked up just as Natalia handed her one of Francesca's bottles.

Beth came out from the library to greet them. She immediately walked up to her husband and gave him a quick kiss.

Natalia smiled at the newlywed bliss that still clung to the blonde like a comfortable blanket. Even in the midst of the kiss, Beth managed to smile and giggle. Natalia knew that feeling and wondered if she looked that enamored when she kissed Olivia.

She looked at the woman on her mind, watching as Olivia rocked their daughter in her arms and fed her. Green eyes glanced up at her, and she felt her heart beat in double time. Yeah, she was pretty sure that she looked just as giddy and in love as Beth.

The blonde broke from Phillip and went up to Olivia and Francesca. She cooed and made funny faces at the baby, who had the Spencer perfect timing of burping in her face. Olivia bit her lip to keep from laughing, and Phillip didn't even try to hide his laughter.

"Funny, little lady. I guess that's my cue to get back to work." Beth turned to Phillip. "John's waiting in your office. How do you all feel about homemade pizza?"

"Pizza?" Emma picked up the most important element of the conversation from the top of the stairs.

"Yep, pepperoni and triple cheese. Does that sound good to you?" Beth smiled up at her.

The little girl rolled her eyes. "As if you even have to ask!" The adults all giggled at the precocious girl.

When all the adults stopped laughing, she asked, "Can Peyton and I help?"

"You bet," Beth called back. "I'll come get you when I'm finished with my work in a little while."

"Okay!" Emma ran back down the hall behind her, presumably to tell Peyton they were going to help with dinner.

Beth gave Francesca's foot a quick tickle, making the baby smile, and then went over to Phillip. "I'd better get back to work. If you need anything, let me know." She turned back to Olivia and Natalia, remembering Phillip's earlier explanation when he called en route from the farmhouse. "I'm really glad all of you are okay. Stay here as long as you want."

"Thanks." The two women answered in unison.

Beth gave Phillip one last kiss and headed back in the direction of the library.

He looked at Olivia as she settled the baby back in her carrier, then angled his head towards the hallway across the foyer. "Let's go talk to John and get everything set up."

"Sounds good." Olivia followed behind him holding Francesca's carrier with Natalia on her other side.

At the end of the hallway, a large door opened to a spacious, but modestly appointed office. Similar in size to the library on the other side of the foyer, this room boasted floor to ceiling single-pane windows along one wall overlooking the massive grounds expanding behind the mansion. Rather than books, flat-screen televisions lined the walls; each panel displaying different channels from CNN, to foreign stock exchange feeds, and camera footage of the grounds.

Propped on a window sill just to the left of and behind the large desk in the middle of the room was a burly and handsome man who appeared to be only a few years older than Rafe. Stepping forward and acknowledging his head of security, Phillip extended his hand to the man. "Thanks for coming, John. I know it was last minute."

"Not a problem, Mr. Spaulding. What can I do for you?"

Phillip turned a little and gestured to the women behind him. "You probably saw these ladies at my New Year's party, but this is Olivia, my ex-wife and Emma's mom, and her partner, Natalia, and their daughter, Francesca. They have had a very unfortunate day. It seems that Emma's babysitter was attacked and killed at the park earlier, and Emma was a witness."

"Did they catch who did it?" The muscled man crossed his arms - his sheer size threatening to unravel the navy suit he wore.

"That's kind of the problem and why they're here. The attacker got away." Phillip answered.

John raised a dark eyebrow, his jaw instinctively clenching in sympathetic anger. "I'll help in any way I can. What do you need?"

"The works," Phillip supplied. "I want no expense spared to make their home secure. I believe an alarm system has already been installed and probably cameras. You may want to coordinate with their security company to avoid duplicity. Drive-bys every half hour, whether they're home or not. Escorts whenever they want or need it."

John nodded confidently at his boss. "Will do, Mr. Spaulding. I'll make some calls this evening and get started first thing in the morning." He reached over to the desk for a pad of paper and a pen. He scribbled something down and handed it to Natalia. "This is my cell number and pager number. Call me. Anytime, day or night."

The gesture made Natalia's eyes tear up. She finally let out the breath she had been holding. "Thank you. Both of you, so much."

Olivia wrapped her free arm around Natalia's shoulder and kissed her on the top of her head.

Phillip smiled at the two women then shrugged. "What else could I do? You're family."

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As Olivia descended the stairs, having put Francesca to bed for the night, she couldn't help but smile as laughter bubbled up from the den. Hearing her family so happy and safe, at least for a little while, had her fighting back tears. Poking her head through the doorway of the room, she simply watched the scene for a moment. Natalia and Emma were curled up under a blanket. A pile of pizza crusts and empty glasses sat on the coffee table in front of them. They giggled at Hammy from *Over the Hedge* as he chased after the elusive cookie of dreams. Looking around the room, she saw Phillip, Beth, and Peyton were curled up on the adjacent couch. Actually, Beth was sound asleep, her head resting on Phillip's shoulder.

Olivia pushed off the door frame and quietly slipped into the space beside her partner. She stretched her arm across the back of the couch, tickled at Emma's neck, and then leaned over to place a lingering kiss on Natalia's cheek.

"I love you."

With eyes full of love, Natalia turned to her, raising her hand and gliding the back of her fingers over Olivia's cheek, a part of her feeling that rush of wonder at being able to love this beautiful woman. She leaned over and kissed Olivia softly on the lips. "I love you, too."



They shared a long look that went beyond words. Natalia shook from the shiver that ran up her spine. It wasn't the usual heated rush that came from the smoldering look of her partner, but another feeling that gripped her heart – tender and protective. Setting the feeling aside with a brief smile, she refocused her attention on the innocence and humor of the movie they were watching.

Thirty minutes later, all but Olivia and Natalia were asleep. SnORES filled the room, and they turned to smile at each other.

On the other couch, Phillip was stretched out with both arms over the back of the couch. If his eyes weren't closed and his mouth wasn't hanging open, with a thin line of drool dripping from his chin, he would have looked awake.

Olivia nudged the brunette and pointed at Phillip. "I wish I could reach my phone without waking everyone. I'd so take a picture right now."

Natalia slapped her playfully on the leg. "Come on; let's get these sleepy heads to bed." She slid her arms under Emma's legs and shoulders and then pulled her over into her lap. The little girl barely stirred, so Natalia got a good grip and managed to stand, with the help of a little push from her partner. Quietly, she started to climb the stairs to the second floor.

Olivia stood and for a few brief seconds debated whether or not she could get away with taking a picture of her ex in his current predicament. Deciding it was worth the risk, she quickly dismissed the debate in her head and went to her purse. Walking up close to her ex-husband, she held the camera on her phone as close to him as possible and ensured she got a glimmer of light off the drool before snapping the picture. When Phillip jerked awake, she quickly dropped the phone into her pocket.

"Wha...?" He mumbled and rubbed at his eyes.

"Wakey, wakey, sunshine!" Olivia enthusiastically whispered.

"What? What did you do, Olivia?" He glared at her but with little effect.

She pouted and acted offended. "Nothing. See if I wake you again to prevent you from getting a nasty kink in your neck. Besides, you snore. It was really annoying."

The blonde man groaned and tapped his wife on the shoulder. When she stirred, he scooped Peyton up in his arms and carted her off to her room.

Olivia followed her ex up the stairs, while Beth turned off the television and the lights. At the top of the stairs, she wished them a good night and headed down the long corridor to the room she and Natalia were sharing.

Emma and Francesca's room was across the hall from theirs, and when she got closer, the door opened and Natalia came out.

The brunette walked across the hall and met her partner next to their door. "Em's out like a light."

Olivia tilted her head. "She's had a rough day. We all have." Olivia watched as Natalia's mood immediately became serious.

The other woman took Olivia's hand in her own. "Yes, it has, and right now, I just want to wash off the ugliness of this day."

The blonde nodded at her and opened the door to their room – one of several master suites. Within minutes, a hot bath was waiting and pajamas were set out on the bed. They brushed their teeth, side-by-side, and Olivia turned to go out so Natalia could take her bath first. This time, though, she stopped in the doorway when she felt Natalia's small but strong hand reach out to grab her and stop her from leaving.

Natalia moved closer to her partner and closed her eyes as she nuzzled into Olivia's soft, fragrant hair. She loved the exotic, sweet scent of the older woman. The fragrance reflected the nature of the woman in her arms – wild and tender, strong and fragile. Tonight, she needed the strength and solidity of Olivia Spencer; her confidence and power, her courage and determination. The significance of what could have happened today weighed on Natalia, and she needed to feel the power of their bond.

Turning Olivia around, she tried to convey every thought that had just been in her head with a single look. Capturing her partner's lips, she kissed her solidly and boldly then pulled back to whisper her tongue softly, reverently, over Olivia's lips. She quivered as strong arms wrapped around her waist. With a slight push, she guided Olivia to the wall. Slowly, she kissed her way along the older woman's jaw, eliciting a soft moan from her when she nibbled, then licked, the tender skin under her jaw just in front of her right ear. Olivia's knees went weak as the kisses eased down her neck into the shadow of cleavage on her chest. She rolled her head back against the wall and let the wondrous sensations take over her body. She loved this. Loved feeling this way with Natalia. She tangled her hands in the brunette's thick hair, guiding her lower. She felt Natalia push the hem of her blouse up; the younger woman's finely boned fingers tracing feather-light circles along her ribcage and kissing along her stomach. She moved her hands to Natalia's shoulders to brace herself up.

The quivering of Natalia's shoulders under her hands worried her. Gently, she pulled the younger woman to her feet and saw the tracks of tears down her face. She wiped at the wetness with her thumbs. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

Natalia suddenly broke out sobbing, and she collapsed into Olivia's arms. The dark head shook furiously against her shoulder, her voice determined. "I could have lost you today, querida. I'll never lose you. Do you understand? Never."

Olivia pulled her in closer, rubbing soothing circles on her back with one hand and holding her head close with the other, letting her lips spread kisses over her hair and down her cheek to her mouth. "You never have to worry about that. I'll always be here."

As they broke the kiss, the fear and desperation Natalia felt a moment ago was gone, and was instead replaced with a different kind of fire. She kissed Olivia passionately again, nibbling at her lower lip, then going back in for a hard kiss. Her words came out as a husky plea. "Show me, Olivia. I need to feel it. I need you."

Olivia didn't need to hear anymore. She captured her lover's mouth with her own and guided her back to the vanity, pressing against her to encourage her to sit on top of it. She leaned back and teased her hand down the opening of Natalia's robe, undoing the tie. She never ceased to be amazed by how Natalia took her breath away. She didn't pray often, but at moments like this she couldn't help but be thankful for someone seeing fit to give her her own personal angel.

Slipping the soft cotton robe off Natalia's tan shoulders, she leaned in and kissed the younger woman reverently. "Whatever you want, Natalia. I'm yours."

Dark eyes glittered with unshed tears, evoking a sadness so deep it nearly ripped the breath from Olivia's lungs to see it on her angel's face.

Natalia whispered, "Make love to me, Olivia, as if you'll never get another chance."

The pain her partner was in cut through Olivia's soul, and before the crying that was building inside her could escape, she descended on Natalia's mouth, reaching out with her body and soul. As their kisses deepened, their tears allowed free reign, coating their faces and cleansing their grief. In the dance of passion, their pain was pushed aside as Olivia pulled Natalia's naked body against her own.

Olivia continued to languidly kiss Natalia, letting her mind slow and absorb the sensation. She focused on the small details – how her skin tingled where Natalia touched her, the perfect symphony of love and desire filling the room, the warm press of skin, the exotic flavor of her lover's tan shoulder as Olivia's lips glided across it. She memorized the sound of Natalia's soft whimper as she kissed the hollow between her collarbone and neck and her moan of need as the back of Olivia's fingers teased her nipples.

Everything about the two of them and about this love was perfect. It made her want to love this woman perfectly, give her all that she ever dreamed of and wished for. Nothing she had ever felt or experienced before could explain the aching need she had to be able to provide the younger woman with everything her heart desired.

Kissing across Natalia's chest and up the other side of her neck, Olivia teased the sensitive spot below her partner's ear with her tongue before pulling back to look at her. If she was going to make love to Natalia as if she'd never have another chance, as her lover had asked, then Olivia wanted to remember the look on Natalia's face as she surrendered to her need.

Never breaking eye contact, Olivia grazed Natalia's hardened nipples with the palms of her hands, relishing in the ticklish feel against her skin. She took each one between her fingers and gently squeezed, rolling them a little, giving just enough pressure to send a tiny jolt of electricity through her lover's body.

Natalia bit her lip and a small moan escaped. "Mmmmm, Olivia."

Moving her hands to Natalia's sides, Olivia skimmed the soft skin of her partner's stomach and then back to the side to grasp her hips. She felt Natalia's legs wrap around her waist, their wetness meeting as they came together. A shudder ran through Olivia, and she couldn't resist pushing her pelvis against Natalia, seeking a little relief from the building desire. The motion seemed to spark a corresponding need in her partner as Olivia felt Natalia's hips buck forward.

That was Olivia's undoing. She wanted to touch her, feel the evidence of their love. As the younger woman leaned back, Olivia wrapped an arm around her waist to hold her up. When Natalia's head fell back, her eyes closing, Olivia felt the loss. "Please look at me."

Dark eyes full of love and passion met hers as Olivia slid her hand between their bodies. She fought her own urge to instinctively close her eyes when her fingers found the slick wetness between Natalia's legs. Her lover's body shook a little as three fingers entered her. They both closed their eyes for a moment, a little overwhelmed by the emotions surrounding them.

Slowly, Olivia built their rhythm, her hips increasing the force and pressure of her fingers inside Natalia.

Natalia tightened her thighs around her partner's waist, bucking her hips forward as she tried to pull Olivia in deeper. "Oh God...Olivia."

Olivia felt her partner's muscles tighten around her fingers, and knowing Natalia was close, she kissed her quickly to get her attention. "Look at me."

Natalia's eyes flew open, and with two more hard thrusts, her body went rigid and she groaned out her release.

Olivia felt the soft fluttering give way to strong pulsations. They stayed like that for a moment, gently kissing and simply enjoying the afterglow.

An hour later, the water in the tub had grown cold, even if Olivia's body hadn't. She was still trying to recover from what Natalia had just done to her. She relaxed into the soft curves of the woman behind her. Raising the errant hand of her partner from between her legs, she kissed the knuckles one at a time.

"I swear, you do have a little devil in you, Natalia Rivera."

A moment of silence was followed by a chuckle. "I did earlier and her name's Olivia Spencer."

Olivia laughed at the joke and she turned a little in the tub to look back at Natalia. "Are you okay now?"

Natalia brushed some loose hair behind Olivia's ear, running a finger along her cheek. "I'm much better than I was."

Olivia noticed that Natalia didn't really answer the question, but decided to let it go for now. "Good." She pulled her down into a kiss. It wasn't intended to ignite the simmering flame that always seemed to burn between them, but simply solidify a truth. "I love you."

Natalia returned the kiss with equal intensity, reverently whispering, "I love you too."

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Act 4

Eleni took her glasses off and rubbed at her tired eyes. When she slipped them back on, she glanced over at the clock on the wall to see that it was five o'clock...in the morning. It was a good thing she loved her work because she was a bit obsessive about it. She'd rather spend all night in the lab examining skin samples and stomach contents than anything else. In fact, it had been almost a year since she'd even been on a date. With round-the-clock crime and her compulsion for finding answers, she didn't find a lot of time to do anything else outside of work. She was hungry and tired but believed she was close to finding something - she could feel it.

Taking a deep breath to refocus on her work, she looked back through the microscope and examined the fibers again. One of her assistants had compiled trace evidence off the

victim's clothes. Anything that didn't appear to come from the victim's outfit was analyzed in hopes of finding a unique fiber. Eleni let out a frustrated breath. This fiber definitely didn't come from the victim, but it wasn't unique either; it could have come off any dark sweatshirt, anywhere in the world.

With the clothing thoroughly examined and the scene of the crime itself reviewed with a fine tooth comb, there was really only one other place to look for evidence – the victim's body. Earlier that day, actually Eleni realized it was the day before now, when she spoke with the coroner, and he had confirmed that the victim's primary cause of death was from gunshot wounds – one to the chest and one to the abdomen. Though the shot to the chest was the second wound site, it was the fatal one since it ripped through her aorta causing her to bleed out within seconds. She also had several broken ribs, a punctured lung, and numerous contusions on her face and body. As Eleni scanned through her notes from the coroner, she determined that the attacker must have worn gloves because there were no fingerprints on her, except those from Jonathan Randall, Sarah Randall, and Emma Spaulding.

Eleni had one last piece to examine. If she didn't find anything this time, she wasn't sure she'd ever find it, and that was completely unacceptable in her mind. During the past several years in Los Angeles, her investigative clearance level was perfect; she wasn't about to have her success rate change since she'd returned to Springfield.

With determination, she pulled the vial containing evidence from under the victim's nails. She took the coroner's samples, as well as a couple of additional samples she'd taken for good measure. Following the proper protocol, she applied the chemicals to the vial and set it in the machine. Tapping out a few keys on the computer, she set the machine to begin extracting the materials found in the sample. Most of the time, the procedure took fifteen to thirty minutes for results to come back, so she walked over to the coffee machine and started a fresh pot.

As the computer analyzed the information, she nervously paced and reviewed all of the work she had done during the night to make sure she hadn't missed any steps. When the coffee finished brewing, she filled a mug and sat down in front of the computer; her foot tapping on the floor as she waited. She glanced at the clock again. Twenty minutes had passed. Something should be coming back...

Almost as soon as the thought crossed her mind, several charts and graphs popped up on her screen. A slow smile spread across her face as she set the mug down and stared at the screen. The results showed the usual suspects like dirt but also came back with human blood and tissue.

“Yes! Now you better be in the database, you son of a bitch.” Clicking a few keys on the computer, she instructed the program to separate the blood and tissue from the sample and examine each independently.

Within minutes, the program had a DNA map from each and they matched. Excitedly, as if she was chasing down the attacker in her mind, she quickly entered the DNA data into the local and FBI files. Within seconds, file numbers and images of some of the most heinous criminals flashed on her screen as the computer ran through the data at lightning speed.

She raised her mug and cringed at the shock of the now cold coffee. She walked over to refresh her cup but almost dropped it when the computer started beeping; the sound letting her know it had found a match, so she raced over to see.

Her smile instantly faded at the image and message flashing on her screen: “Edmund Winslow. Deceased.”

“What the hell?”

~~*~*

Frank leaned over his desk. Spread out before him were photographs from the crime scene. Every once in a while, he’d shift an image, lift it, stare at it closely, then put it back down. He took a long sip from his coffee cup and sighed. There was nothing unusual about the crime scene, and he strained to find something he hadn’t seen before. If it was a typical drug addict or homeless person, they usually made mistakes – dropped something or left a clue behind – but the clean nature of this attack led Frank to believe that whoever it was, knew what he was doing and was doing it deliberately. There was pre-meditation to the attack; footprints were clearly seen coming out of the bushes so the attacker sat and waited for the right moment. Whoever it was meant to try and kidnap Sarah and maybe even Emma.

The thought sent a wave of anger through him. It was bad enough that a young woman with a long future before her was killed, but to think that someone out there was purposefully trying to hurt an innocent child set his blood to boiling.

His anger turned to frustration at himself as he continued to stare at the pictures. He kept asking himself, who would want to hurt Sarah and who would plan it so well as to leave no evidence?

“Edmund Winslow.”

Frank jerked his head up at Eleni standing in his doorway, gasping for air as if she'd just run a fast mile. He shook his head, her comment still not quite registering with him. "What?"

She stepped into his office, her eyes shining bright with this new knowledge. "I got a match on some skin and blood samples found under the vic's nails. It was strange that our local database didn't pick him up though, but he was in the FBI database and it came back with Edmund Winslow."

He came around his desk, shaking his head. "That's impossible. He's dead." He stopped when she smiled at him, and the look of joy and happiness on her face made his knees temporarily weak.

"Computers don't lie, Frank. It's him."

Realizing that this was no time for him to get lost in his memories, he turned his gaze from her smiling face and looked for his phone among the mess of photos and files that covered his desk. "If that's the case, then we have bigger problems than I thought."

Dialing a number he knew by heart, he waited for the line to be picked up, but when it went direct to voicemail, he tried another number. After several rings, he let out a relieved breath.

"Natalia, it's Frank."

~~*~*

A ringing phone wasn't exactly Natalia's ideal way of waking up. The warm body curled up behind her would have been much more preferable. Lifting her head and glancing at the clock, she knew that even for her, it was early. She groaned and reached for her phone. Without looking she flipped it open.

"Hello?"

Olivia stirred behind her. Warm hands pulled her closer and she struggled to stop the moan in her throat.

"Hey, Frank. What's up?" Her voice was still hoarse from sleep as she spoke.

At the mention of the name, Olivia stopped the movement of her hand and propped herself up on her elbow.

Natalia rolled over, looking up into concerned green eyes.

Olivia felt her stomach drop at the shocked and fearful look in Natalia's eyes. "What...what is it?"

Natalia sat all the way up in bed and Olivia followed her. "But...that's impossible, Frank. Isn't he dead?"

"Who?" Olivia was feeling panicked.

Natalia looked at her, shaking her head still a little in shock. "Edmund."

"What?" Olivia nearly screamed.

Natalia put a hand on her shoulder to calm her. She turned her cell phone against her chest to block the sound as she spoke to Olivia. "Frank wants us to come down to the station."

"For what? No!" Olivia grabbed the phone and jumped out of bed. She searched frantically for some clothes to put on. "Frank, we're at Phillip's. If you need to talk to us, come here, but I'm not letting my family leave here until I know it's safe." She paused, listening to Frank on the other end. "Okay, we'll see you in a little bit."

Natalia climbed out of bed and walked over to her partner, who was cursing under her breath as she looked for a shirt in her bag. She stepped up behind Olivia and ran her hands over the shoulders in front of her. Almost instantly, she felt the fight leave Olivia, her muscles softening under her touch. She turned Olivia around and cupped her face.

"Calm down, querida. Just take a deep breath."

Olivia followed the gentle instructions and Natalia smiled. She knew better than to say everything would be okay, because she wasn't sure if it was or not. All she knew was that their little girls were across the hall, and they had to keep it together for them. When Natalia saw that Olivia had calmed down, she went to the bag and found Olivia's favorite t-shirt. It was comfortable and soft and exactly what her frantic partner needed right now.

Silently, they finished getting dressed. Natalia pulled her hair back in a ponytail and regarded Olivia as she brushed her hair. The other woman looked back at her. "Thanks." Olivia offered with a small smile.

Natalia shrugged and winked. "It's what I do. Come on; let's get everyone up before Frank gets here."

"Okay."

Out in the hall, there wasn't a sound to be heard. They could tell that everyone was still asleep. Olivia gestured to their daughter's room. "Should we wake them?"

Natalia shook her head. "No, they don't need to know all that's happening. Let them sleep."

Olivia agreed. "I tell you what. Why don't you go make some coffee? I think we're all going to need it. I'll get Phillip and Beth up and let them know what's going on. I better put a call in to Doris too."

"Okay." Natalia reached for her hand and squeezed it, then leaned up and kissed her before heading down the stairs to the kitchen.

A few minutes later, the adults were gathered in Phillip's office waiting for Frank. Each of them had agreed that it would be smart to have all of their family and anyone affected by Edmund to gather in one place. Natalia and Beth watched as Phillip and Olivia paced the office space with their phones trying to convince their children to come out to the mansion. They didn't tell them why so they wouldn't panic, but they knew it would be better to have everyone there where they could keep an eye on them than out there somewhere.

Phillip had no problem convincing Bill and Lizzie to come out once he told them about what happened to Sarah. Olivia had a harder time with Ava who was stubbornly insisting that she was fine at the Beacon.

"Ava! Damn it, I'm still your mother. Just do this for me, just this once. Please!" The pleading tone finally broke Ava down and she agreed to come out.

Olivia flopped down on the couch behind her and looked at Natalia, holding the phone up. "Does Ava really get her stubborn streak from me?" When Natalia smirked and nodded at her, Olivia shook her head. "I'll apologize in advance then because I really feel sorry for you putting up with me."

~~*~*

On the way out of the station, Frank grabbed Anna to ride with him. The look on his face suggested she not argue with him so she grabbed her service weapon and phone and followed him out the door. She hesitated to open the conversation afraid of where it might go, but her curiosity had the best of her.

"So, what's happening, Boss?" She started nonchalantly.

He tapped his thumb on the steering wheel and looked over at her. "Maybe you should tell me."

She swallowed nervously. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"We'll see." He took the left turn at the light and headed out of town.

~~*~*

Slowing to stop at the four-way stop, Leyla motioned the car to her right to take her turn. She bumped the GPS system in the rental car and cursed its slowness. It hadn't caused her any problems in the city, but now that she was out of Chicago, it seemed to like to move as fast as the people in these small towns, which wasn't fast at all. Fortunately, it was a slow morning in Springfield, so there was no traffic behind her. She blew a stray dark hair out of her eyes and waited for it to catch up. After a few more seconds, the pin jumped and blinked showing her at the intersection where she'd stopped. The directions told her to go straight ahead. She drove through the intersection noticing the police station and courthouse on her right and a little restaurant called Company down the street.

A few minutes down the road and to her left a surprisingly large park came into view. Near the entrance was a playground and she slowed when something yellow caught her eye – crime scene tape. Having grown up in Chicago, she'd know it anywhere.

"I guess Natalia and Olivia weren't joking about this being a crazy little town. Hmmm, I think I just might like it here." She smiled to herself and turned up the radio as she followed the road out to her sister's house.

~~*~*

Ava was still fuming a little bit as she pulled up to the farmhouse. She was a grown woman and certainly she'd be safer at the Beacon, with a guard and pass keys, than wandering around town with a gunman on the loose.

In spite of her mother's insistence that she come straight out to the Spaulding's, she defiantly decided to go by the farmhouse first. Okay, it wasn't completely out of defiance. She wasn't twelve after all, but she did forget and leave her case of music CD's out there yesterday. She always fell asleep to music, so she had a terrible time trying to get to sleep last night; she absolutely had to have her music.

She pulled into the driveway and jumped out of the Beacon's loaner SUV, not even bothering to close the door because she knew she wouldn't be long. Running to the door, she pulled out the code to the alarm and unlocked the door. Even though she couldn't hear it, she knew it was going off somewhere. She punched in the numbers to turn off the alarm

and walked into the living room. There on the coffee table was the shiny black case. She grabbed it and headed back to the door. After activating the alarm again, she opened the door and turned to close it.

When she reached the edge of the sidewalk, she pulled out her phone and looked down to see if she had any messages. When she looked back up, all she saw was a board flying at her face. With blinding pain, her world went black.

~~*~*

Leyla eased the car into the driveway and let out a whistle - the large house and huge yard impressing her. In a world made up of apartments and parallel parking, this looked like a mansion to Leyla's young eyes.

"Wow, sis. You sure know how to marry up! Damn!" She pulled behind the dark SUV in the driveway with its door open and got out.

Assuming someone was home, she bounded up the steps. She couldn't wait to see Natalia's face when her sister realized she'd shown up a day early. Of course, that would mean explaining why she left early too. The fight she had with her parents wasn't something she really wanted to think about at the moment. Right now, she just wanted to spend some time with her sister, her sister's beautiful girlfriend, and little Emma.

She knocked on the door and waited. When no one answered, she rang the doorbell. "Hmmm, I would've sworn someone was home." She looked in the window, but it was dark. She stepped to the edge of the porch and looked at the vehicle with the open door again. "That's strange."

She got her phone out and decided she'd just have to forgo the surprise. She found Natalia's number and started to hit call when she heard a noise around back. She threw up her hands. "No wonder no one heard me."

She walked around back and stopped short when she saw a hooded man lifting a slender dark-haired woman by her shirt. Leyla looked around frantically. She needed something to use as a weapon. The entire area was immaculate. There was nothing loose like a shovel or board. She cursed when she couldn't find anything, and then she realized what she was hiding behind - an old metal garbage can.

It had been years since she and Marco had played Frisbee, but she sent up a quick prayer that she wasn't too rusty. Before the attacker had a chance to react, she jumped up and jerked the metal lid off the can. The rattle of the can drew the attacker's attention away, and as soon as he looked up, it hit him in the forehead. The blow wasn't enough to knock

him out, but it did shock him, causing him to stumble back a little. When Leyla saw him raise his hand, she saw the glint of the gun and dove to the ground.

“Jesus Christ!”

For a moment, everything was eerily silent, except the pounding rush of her heartbeat. There were no footsteps, no movement of any kind. Then she heard a low moan. She swallowed nervously and peeked around the garbage can.

The man was gone, but the injured woman was still there.

Leyla ran over to the woman and spoke to her, “Hey! Hey, are you okay?” She saw the bloody gash over the woman’s left eye and decided to let her come around on her own instead of move her.

The other woman’s head rocked side-to-side and she let out a low moan. Slowly, she opened her eyes and saw a dark-haired woman hovering over her. For a moment, she thought it was Natalia.

“Natalia?” Ava mumbled. When Ava’s eyes focused, she could tell it wasn’t her mother’s partner, but she reminded her of the other woman a lot.

“No, I’m not Natalia. I’m her sister, Leyla. Are you okay? Can you get up?” Leyla moved back to give the woman room to sit up.

Ava put her hand to her head, feeling the bloody spot over her eye. “Ow! Yeah, I think so.” She got up to her knees. “Did you say you’re Natalia’s sister?”

“Yeah, who are you? And who the hell was that guy?” Leyla stood up and offered Ava her hand.

“Um, Ava...I’m Olivia’s daughter. And I think I know that guy.” She took the offered hand and stood to her feet. She wobbled slightly as her head spun from the blow. She grabbed at Leyla’s shoulder and the younger woman reached for her arm to hold her up.

Leyla guided her to a chair. “Here, sit down. Rest a minute.”

Ava started to sit then stopped. “No, we need to get out of here in case he comes back.”

“Where are we going to go?” Leyla followed the taller woman as she walked around the front of the house.

Ava stumbled and Leyla grabbed her around the waist to hold her up. "We need to get to the Spaulding's."

"Get where?"

"Just trust me." Ava struggled to stay coherent. Her head was spinning, and she felt nauseous. She probably had a concussion from the blow.

Leyla struggled to get them to her car. She leaned Ava against the side of the car and clicked the door open. She helped Ava inside and then she leaned down. "Is that your SUV?"

"Yeah." She handed the keys to Leyla. "Here, get my bag out of the back and lock up."

She watched as the petite brunette did as she was told. She came back and threw Ava's bag on the back seat and handed her keys back. Sliding into the driver's seat, Leyla looked over at her, smiling. Ava couldn't help but smile a little too when she noticed a pair of dimples appear that looked very much like Natalia's.

Leyla started up the car. "Well, if you have directions, I have GPS. Sorta. It's pretty much worth shit, but we can try."

Ava smiled. "Don't worry. I know where to go. Just head back towards town." She watched as the younger woman put on her seat belt and put her car in reverse. When the car reached the end of the driveway and Leyla looked her way to check for traffic, Ava couldn't stop herself. "And thanks."

Another dimpled smile. "You're welcome."

~~*~*

Anna wasn't sure what the cryptic message of Frank's meant, but he wasn't offering up any other details. He definitely seemed pissed off. She fought off the wave of panic that surrounded her. She felt like she was walking into a trap, and she didn't like it one bit.

The Spaulding mansion loomed intimidating before them as Frank pulled his car into the large circular driveway. He rolled his window down and showed his badge to the security guard. "Mr. Spaulding is expecting us."

The young guard looked down into the car. "I need to see your identification, ma'am. Mr. Spaulding's orders."

Anna produced her badge and license. He looked both over and then compared the picture to the woman in the passenger seat. He handed them back and waved them through the gate.

When Frank parked and they got out of the car, Anna couldn't stand it any longer. "Are you going to give me any idea what's going on?"

"You'll find out soon enough, Li." He rang the doorbell, and in a matter of moments, the huge doors opened onto an expansive foyer with two arching stairways on each side that led up to the second floor.

A pretty blonde invited them in. She re-introduced herself to Anna, having remembered her from the New Year's Eve party, and led them down a hallway off the foyer. At the end of the hallway, there were a set of wooden double doors. Beth opened the doors and Anna suddenly felt like she was on display. This was not good!

Aside from Phillip and Beth, Anna only recognized three people: Olivia, Natalia, and Doris. She looked at Frank. "Why is Doris here?"

"The mayor should know that Edmund Winslow is alive, don't you think?" Frank crossed his arms and looked at Anna as if he was waiting for an explanation.

Anna nodded and shrugged, trying to play along with whatever was happening. "Of course."

Doris stood then. "Then why didn't you ever tell me, Anna?"

Anna stuck her hands in her pockets and forced a smile. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, cut the bullshit!" Olivia, who had been sitting on the arm of the couch next to Natalia, stood as well. "Just tell us the truth. You've been working for Edmund, and you've known all along he was alive."

"No, I'm not. I swear it!" Anna looked at Doris and felt her heart break at the look of disgust and complete disappointment on her ex-lover's face.

As she stepped into Anna's personal space, Olivia's green eyes burned with barely repressed rage. "Prove it...or so help me."

Anna looked at the woman she loved so long ago and shook her head, whispering. "Don't do this, Olivia."

"Don't test me." Olivia growled.

Anna dropped her head. "Call Jonathan."

Olivia was confused. "What? Why?"

"Just call him." Anna closed her eyes and sighed.

Olivia hesitated a moment, trying to read Anna's expression. All she picked up on was sorrow and remorse. "I've been trying all morning. He won't answer."

Reaching into her pocket, Anna pulled out her phone and handed it to Olivia. "Send him a text and put in the message: pawn shop."

She took the phone from Anna and repeated the words, "Pawn shop?"

Anna smiled slightly. "Yeah. When I first met Jonathan, there was a commercial that always played on TV for a pawn shop called Crazy Eddie's. Get it, Crazy Eddie's...Edmund."

Olivia shook her head not wanting to believe that Jonathan had anything to do with this, but she couldn't stop herself from sending the message. She found his name in the list of contacts and sent the message to him. In less than ten seconds, Anna's phone rang in her hand and Jonathan's name appeared on the screen. She flipped it open and held it up to her ear.

Everyone in the room waited to see what was going to happen.

Olivia waited, knowing the silence would be too much for Jonathan. He never could stand it when she used that tactic to force him to talk, especially when he was a teenager. "Anna?" The familiar voice cut through Olivia and she closed her eyes. She swallowed down the hurt in her voice.

"It's Olivia, Jonathan. You need to come out to Phillip's...right now. No argument."

He didn't answer her. The line just went dead. She flipped the phone closed and tossed it back to Anna.

Olivia moved to sit down next to Natalia again when a loud pounding came from the front door. Beth stood to get the door but Phillip stopped her. Something in the urgency of the banging worried him. He motioned his head to a guard standing nearby to follow him to the door. The guard stood to one side of the door while Phillip opened it.

He jumped back surprised. Standing in the doorway, struggling to stand up was a young dark-haired woman with another woman clearly passed out and barely hanging on to her.

“Is this the Spaulding residence?” The young woman asked.

“Yeah?”

“Leyla Rivera. Nice to meet you. I would shake your hand but they’re kind of occupied right now.” The words spurred Phillip and the guard into action, and they reached for the other woman she was holding up. Phillip turned the woman over and brushed her hair out of her face. “I think you know Ava.”

Phillip felt the panic rise up. “Olivia!”

Everyone ran into the foyer; Olivia and Natalia came up first. Olivia fell to her knees. “Oh my God! Ava!”

Natalia was shocked to see her sister there. “Leyla?”

The younger sister ran to Natalia and hugged her. “Hey! I’m a little early, but I think it worked out for the best.”

Natalia pushed her hair back and grabbed her face. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Leyla reached for her hands, smiling. “I’m fine, really. Wrong place, right time, I guess.”

Olivia looked to Phillip. “We need to get her to the hospital.”

Phillip stood. “Wait, I have an idea.” He took his phone out of his pocket and dialed a number. “Rick, buddy! Hey, I have a huge favor to ask. I know...I’m sorry to interrupt your breakfast date with Mindy, but we have a problem. Olivia’s daughter, Ava, has been attacked and she needs to be looked at.”

He paced the foyer, listening to Rick give him the third degree about the importance of an injured person being at a hospital where she could get proper care. Phillip finally had listened enough. “Rick...Rick...I know, okay? We can’t have anyone leave the house right now. It’s a long story, and I’ll tell you everything when you get here, but please...I’m begging you, help me out here.”

Another moment passed and Phillip let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you. I owe you, buddy.”

Olivia hovered over Ava, and Natalia had knelt down beside her partner. Olivia held her hand and gently stroked her face. “Come on, baby. Wake up, okay? Don’t worry me like this. Come on, Ava...wake up!”

Olivia started to shake with panic and worry, so Natalia pulled her into a hug.

In the back of the group, Anna stood and worriedly bit on her thumb nail. Doris came to stand beside her. "For your sake, you better hope nothing happens to Ava."

At that moment, Ava suddenly jerked and stirred as if she was pulled quickly from a nightmare. Her terrified eyes found Olivia over her, and she sat up too fast and hugged her mother. She grabbed at her throbbing head and tried to stand up. "Augh, oh...God!"

Olivia stopped her from getting up too fast. "Whoa, baby. Wait. Just calm down. You're okay. Let's get you to the couch and get you some water."

By the time they all moved back to Phillip's office and got settled, Beth came in with a wet washcloth and a glass of water, and then left again. Olivia asked the question everyone wanted to know. "What happened?"

"Edmund happened." Ava winced as her mother dabbed at the gash over her eye, which was now swelling and turning a nice purple-blue color.

Olivia gave her daughter a "don't joke" look. "And how did you two manage to run into each other?" She gestured between Ava and Leyla.

Ava was unable to look her mother in the eye. "I went to the farmhouse first."

"Damn it, Ava! I told you to come right here."

"I know, okay?" She braced her pounding head again. "Ow!"

Natalia reached for Olivia's hand to calm her. "There will be plenty of time to deal with this later." She turned to her little sister. "Besides I want to know what you're doing here so early."

Beth came back into the room. "Olivia, Natalia? I wanted to let you know that Emma and Francesca are up. If you want, I can take them to the kitchen with Peyton and get them breakfast so they won't get scared by all the commotion."

Natalia looked at her gratefully. "Thanks, Beth. I'll be there in a minute to feed Francesca."

Beth smiled at her. "No problem." She looked at Phillip. "I'll have some more coffee made, too."

As Beth left to get the girls from upstairs, the doorbell rang again. Olivia leaned back against the couch and sighed as she watched Phillip walk to the door. "Two guesses who that is. And if it's another unwanted surprise, someone's going to get hurt."

Everyone, including Olivia, breathed a sigh of relief when they saw Rick and Mindy come in the room. He knelt down in front of Ava and did a quick exam of her reactions and reflexes. Except for being a little sore from being banged up, she kept up pretty well. He examined the cut over her eye and decided it wouldn't hurt to put a couple of stitches in. He prepped the area and applied a couple of butterfly sutures.

Rick put away his stethoscope and stood up. "Odds are good that she may have a concussion. I'd be more surprised if she didn't with the knot and bruising coming up on the side of her face. Of course, without a scan, I can't guarantee there isn't something worse going on. As soon as you can, you really need to get a scan, just to be sure."

Olivia smiled gratefully at Rick. "We'll work that out, Rick. Thanks for coming out. It looks like you had a lot more fun things to be doing than coming here." She smirked at Rick's blush as he looked back at Mindy.

"Yeah, well...I should probably be going." Rick looked down at Ava. "Hospital. Scan. Soon."

She gave him a mock salute. "Yes, sir!"

As Phillip walked him and Mindy out to the foyer, the doorbell rang again. Natalia came back into the room and sat down next to Olivia. She glanced at Olivia and ran a calming hand down her back. "Beth has the kids out back playing with the dogs."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Great! More puppy talk." The blonde smiled at her partner, but it quickly fell as Jonathan and Sarah came in the room.

Leyla sensed the overwhelming tension in the room, but she also realized that the little girl at the man's side was almost shaking. She leaned over the couch to Natalia. "Did you say Emma's outside?" Natalia nodded. "I can take her out back and let her play."

Natalia leaned forward. "Hey, Sarah. How would you like to play with Emma and some puppies out back?" The little girl's face lit up, and she glanced up at her father. When he told her it was fine, she looked back to Natalia expectantly. "Follow my sister, Leyla. She'll take you outside."

Everyone watched as the two left, hand-in-hand. When the coast was clear, Olivia stood up and looked at Anna and Jonathan. "Alright...start talking."

"It's a long story, Olivia." Anna started.

"Well, we've been waiting all morning to hear this. You might as well entertain us." Olivia sarcastically retorted.

“Fine, we’ll tell you. We’ll tell you everything.” Jonathan offered. “But someone else really should be here to hear this...Reva.”

Olivia threw up her hands. “Sure, what’s a little more waiting?”

“She’s not that far away. She brought Colin to the library for story time.” He looked at his watch. “They probably just finished up.”

“Fine.” Olivia sat back down while Jonathan dialed the number. It took some convincing but eventually Jonathan was able to talk her into coming out.

He flipped his phone closed and set it on the side table by the door. “She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Natalia watched her partner - her head resting back on the couch and her eyes closed; every once in a while, her jaw would flex as she tensed the muscles. The younger woman could tell the waiting was driving Olivia crazy. She wanted answers, and she wanted them now. Olivia never did patience very well.

Anna had walked forward to stand in front of everyone and next to Jonathan. Natalia watched them for a moment and had a sudden urge to ask a question. “Why?” Everyone looked at her. She shrugged. “Can you tell us that at least? Why did you keep this from all of us? If this town was in danger, if we...and our children were in danger, why did you not tell anyone? Didn’t you think we deserved to know, so we could protect our families?”

Anna closed her eyes. “Natalia, I know it’s hard to understand why we couldn’t say anything. Believe me, I hope once we tell you everything that you’ll understand better, but I have to warn you, especially you, Olivia, if we tell you all of this, it’s going to mean knowing everything. What has happened here isn’t something that popped up out of the blue. It’s been brewing for years.” She looked at Olivia, making sure to send her a message. “Since you and I were kids on San Cristobel.”

Olivia immediately knew what Anna was referring to, and she was surrounded in a room full of exes, family, and friends who were all going to hear about her past on the island. Natalia squeezed her hand, and in one glance, she knew that Natalia understood what this meant.

Natalia leaned close, whispering, “If you can’t do this...”

“No.” Olivia shook her head. “No more secrets.”

Olivia looked back to Anna, who was waiting to see just how deep this story was going to go. Olivia sat up straight. "Do what you have to do, Anna. But whatever you do, it better be the God's honest truth."

Anna opened her mouth to respond when the front doors opened and Reva walked in, making herself at home.

The stout blonde could see the group gathered back in Phillip's office so she headed back there. She pushed Colin's stroller ahead of her as he chewed on a teething ring and kicked his feet in glee. When she entered the room, she immediately found Jonathan and gave him a hug. "Hey, darlin', where's the fire?"

She leaned against the door frame separating the foyer from the office and glanced around semi-interested in the motley crew assembled. Colin strained against his restraints to get out of the stroller so she leaned over and unbuckled him. "Okay, okay...hang on, big man."

The toddler hopped out and reached his hands up to Jonathan, indicating he wanted to be picked up by his big brother. In spite of everything, Jonathan couldn't help but smile and pulled the little boy into his arms, kissing him on the cheek.

Letting out a big sigh, finally feeling free momentarily of toddler demands, Reva looked at the group. "Well?"

Jonathan shifted Colin to his right hip so he could face Reva. This news would probably be best coming from him. "Something has happened and it involves all of us, especially our children. Yesterday, Sarah and Emma were at the park. I was nearby but didn't see it happen. Emma's babysitter, Jane, was watching the kids. Anyway, Sarah was nearly kidnapped. Jane jumped in and ended up getting shot and killed."

Tears sprang to Reva's eyes as she worried the worst had happened to Sarah. "Oh my God!" She raised a hand to her mouth. "Are they...please tell me the girls are okay."

He continued, taking Reva's hand in his free one. "They're both fine. They got away. But that's not the really big issue right now."

Reva looked at him like he was crazy. "What could be bigger than that?"

He sighed. "Well, Jane struggled and managed to scratch her attacker. The crime scene investigators analyzed it and found a match."

Reva looked around at everyone. The looks on their faces told her they knew the answer already. The thought aggravated and unnerved her, but she wasn't really sure why just yet. She looked back to Jonathan. "Who is it?"

He paused a moment before speaking. "Edmund."

She stared at the young man. She vaguely realized that Colin struggled in his arms to get down, but she really didn't notice anything, except the one thought running through her head. "No. That's not possible."

Jonathan set Colin down and he went right to his mother to wrap his arms around her leg. Jonathan looked back up at Reva. "It is."

She shook her head. "No! That bastard is supposed to be dead! He killed Jeffrey. He's supposed to be dead. He NEEDS to be dead!" Colin buried his face against her leg and started to cry.

The room silently watched Reva's frantic plea unaware there was more shocking news to come. At that moment, the phone sitting on the side table between Jonathan and Reva started to vibrate. In a split second, both of them noticed the name that flashed on the screen. They reached for the phone at the same time, but Reva got to it first. She stared at the name flashing on the screen in disbelief.

"Jeffrey."

To Be Continued

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The Road Less Travelled

by Geekgrllukring

ACT 1

Jeffrey O'Neill was tired.

Slumped in his chair, body aching and mind spinning, Jeffrey didn't even know what day it was anymore. He sighed as he fingered his cell phone, the lack of a decent signal screwing with his scheduled phone conference with Jonathan. This just needed to end, and soon.

Jeffrey was tired of the chase, of living in filth and jumping at the slightest sound, of running ragged through the night after shadows and a mad man. He was tired of it all, and this bone weary ache for home was the only thing he could think of to explain his carelessness today. Jeffrey pulled a small tattered photo from his shirt pocket, the only memento he had of his family. God, he missed Reva and Colin, but their safety was more important. It was the only thing that got him through the nights.

"I'm so sorry..." He murmured, sadly running his thumb over Reva's smiling face one last time before tucking the photo back into his pocket. Taking a sip of his Coke, he glanced over his shoulder to see if the men at the bar had spotted him yet. He sank down a little lower in his chair, trying to blend in with the other tourists sitting on the patio of the tiny bistro.

His local contact had said to meet him here; that a gringo named Winslow had a stronghold near the village, a base where his followers worked out of. Drugs, guns, even a lucrative black market slave trade was rumored to be coming out of the compound. He needed to find it and destroy it, hitting the man where his income was coming from. Maybe it would flush Edmund out into the open again. So he could finish the man properly and end this all.

However, Jeffrey knew he needed to avoid his own capture first. Winslow and his men would have a field day, torturing him and then destroying those he loved. His henchmen were hot on his trail and he needed to avoid capture at all cost.

Jeffrey glanced at his watch, worried. Where the hell was his contact?

Jeffrey hadn't seen the man in weeks. He was beginning to suspect that Edmund was sending him on a wild goose chase, keeping him occupied while he was off doing something else.

Doing something much more sinister.

Still, Jonathan and Anna had seen nothing of the man in Springfield itself, only some of his men, blundering about, knocking poor Anna around. He did feel bad about that, but she was a cop and knew the risks of the job. She didn't even hesitate to help him when he asked. Her sense of duty and personal honor continued to inspire him.

Crazy woman.

There should be more people like her out there.

Jeffrey glanced at his watch, worried. He had already missed his scheduled call in to Jonathan a half hour ago and there had been no sign of his contact at the rendezvous

point. The damn cell phone signals were so poor down here it wasn't funny. He'd been trying to find a land line when the goon squad found him. It had been a chase ever since.

Jeffrey saw the same two men at the bar watching him. Damn it, they had made him. It was time to go. Throwing some money on the table to cover his bill, Jeffrey made his way from the patio and headed towards the market area of town. Maybe he could lose them in the morning shopping crowd. The two large men followed, not making much effort to hide their movements.

Jeffrey had a bad feeling about this. A very bad feeling.

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Reva Shayne O'Neill stared at the small handset vibrating innocently on the table, before moving to quickly pick it up.

Jeffrey.

Alive.

It couldn't be, could it?

And yet there it was, blinking back at her. First Edmund and now Jeffrey. Reva closed her eyes slowly letting the truth seep into her soul, reluctant to believe it, silently kicking herself. You always make sure to see the body with your own eyes.

She should have known.

Reva stared once again at the cell phone in her hand the quiet ring tone was the theme to James Bond. She'd laugh except it hurt too much. Her eyes snapped up as she glared at her son, Jonathan's eyes, pleading with her to understand and trust him. And she wanted to, almost as much as she had wanted to trust her supposedly dead husband.

And look where that got her.

Setting her jaw, Reva flipped the phone open and answered it.

"Yes?" Her voice was cold.

"Jon... an? I d-d-d-don't have...a l-l-lot...ime." A very familiar voice sputtered through the phone. Despite the obvious scattering of the cell phone signal, Reva could recognize her husband's voice anywhere, bringing hot tears to her eyes. The cold hand of fear swept over her as she clutched the handset closer to her ear.

“Jeffrey?” She whispered into the phone, trying to wrap her head around what she was hearing. Her other hand went to Colin’s tiny head, his face hidden against her leg as he fussed. He could sense something was not right as well.

“No signal...Edmund’s men...have.... me cornered. Get Anna and...Devil’s Heart.”

Reva jumped when she heard a gun shot sound and then the phone line went dead.

“Jeffrey?” Reva called into the phone. “Jeffrey!!” He couldn’t be gone, not again, not so soon.

Jonathan reached for the phone, pulling it out of her freezing hands, trying desperately to reconnect the call. He locked eyes with Anna Li across the room, solemnly shaking his head. It was dead.

Reva glared at him and glanced around at half of Springfield standing there in Phillip Spaulding’s office as her youngest child clung to her leg, crying.

“Will someone tell me what the HELL is going on?”

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Edmund Winslow couldn’t rest.

His head throbbed uncontrollably and the gouges scratched along his neck itched like the devil. Just when he had thought his plan was starting to come together, it all started spinning out of control. He just needed to think, there was still time. All the tiny threads of discord and hate, pushing people off balance, getting them rattled and scared.

Edmund knew he just needed to focus. He needed a little sleep and some food and then things would work themselves out. He was still certain that he was on the right course. It was time to make them all pay. It would be glorious and worth it all. Make them all hurt the way Lara’s death had hurt him. Take their children, just as his daughter Lara had been taken from him forever.

Edmund leaned back against the singed barn boards and slid down to sit on the little bit of hay still scattered around on the floor. Jessup’s farm, it had been his present to Cassie so long ago now. He knew this place and all its secrets well. Olivia and her family lived here now, making the farmhouse a true home and that actually gave him some peace. Someone should be happy here. And he had always rather liked Olivia, despite her misguided affections for his brother, Richard. Although, she had lost some of her edge lately mind you.

Happiness only makes you soft. Pain on the other hand just proves that you're alive and kicking.

Edmund chuckled to himself, pressing a hand to his forehead, the swell of his headache threatening to overtake him. He couldn't believe his luck when Ava had arrived at the farmhouse alone. It was like a gift wrapped present after the debacle that morning.

The garbage can lid to the head hadn't helped his headache at all though. He worked his way through the accompanying wave of nausea and sighed as the pain in his head started to recede again. Now if the headaches would just stop life would be perfect.

Well, except for that little murder in the park.

Edmund hadn't meant to kill that girl. He knew he should have waited to snatch Sarah, biding his time like he had originally planned. But the opportunity was suddenly there and he couldn't let it go by. It was that damn nanny's fault anyway. If she hadn't jumped at the gun, she'd still be alive now. It was her own fault for trying to mess up his plan. Taking little Sarah would have ripped a hole in Reva's heart, twisting the knife in poor Jeffrey's back.

Selling that adorable child would have fetched such a fabulous price in the black market.

Such a pity about the nanny, though. Still, every war has its casualties; and make no mistake, this was a war.

Edmund shifted around in his makeshift hideaway, trying to take his mind off the pain. The old barn behind the farmhouse apparently was used mostly for storage now. He poked at the artificial white Christmas tree kept there with a few other boxes marked Beacon on them in Olivia's neat printing. Surely Olivia didn't have such horrible taste in decoration? It was almost criminal.

He could feel the headache starting to lessen, his breathing slowly returning to normal. The barn was the perfect place to lurk, at least part time. It seemed like all of Springfield eventually ended up at the farmhouse. And who would think to look for him here? The increased security was becoming an issue though. He knew he'd have to move on soon, find another place to stay to watch the excitement.

Edmund turned his head and stared at the burn marks on the walls still visible after all this time. He should have just let Jeffrey die in the barn fire all those years ago. It would have solved so much. On the other hand he was enjoying this little game of tormenting him through his family. With so many balls in the air, it was nice to see some of his plans coming together.

Oh, how he wanted to make Jeffrey suffer. It was almost as much fun as making poor Reva suffer.

His men had urged that disgruntled boy from the Beacon to spray paint those nasty words on the side of the hotel. The vandalism, the threats on Anna's life, and various other little things had been meant to escalate unrest and tension, breeding fear in town, with the desired outcome of having Olivia's daughter eventually turn up to make sure her mother was all right. It played right into Edmund's plans to exact revenge on Jeffrey.

Edmund couldn't believe his luck when suddenly Ava was there at the farmhouse, alone and ripe for the snatching. A little torture captured on tape to torment Jeffrey and then off to the slave trade with her. Jeffrey would spend forever searching for her, trying to save her from her new hell, but it would still be too late. Her life will have been shattered. Just like his world had been shattered.

Edmund smiled at his diabolical plan. Selling Ava into that twisted world would be a fate worse than death with the added bonus of making up much needed funds after losing the San Cristobel royal jewels. The jewels had been rightfully his anyway; he was the legitimate heir to the throne after all.

Edmund sighed and ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. That was all water under the bridge now. His plan to snag sweet little Ava Peralta had been perfect. It had just been a matter of time, and a little patience, of which he had both, in spades. However, what he hadn't planned on was that strange girl showing up and flinging a garbage can lid at his head.

Another wrench in his plans.

Edmund looked up at the morning sunlight filtering in through the barn boards and sighed. No wonder he had a headache.

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"Well, hello..." James Spaulding murmured to himself as he looked up from the sports page in time to see his mother talking to a stranger before the petite woman made her way outside onto the patio with his sisters. He looked the young woman over with an appraising glance - shoulder length hair, dark sparkling eyes, and faded blue jeans fitting her just right. Who was this new girl?

"James!" Emma raced over and wrapped her arms around her big brother, just about knocking him out of his patio chair.

"Hey munchkin." He squeezed her back. "Who's your friend?"

“Leyla Rivera.” The girl smiled warmly. “I’m Natalia’s little sister.”

James blinked. Oh my, those dimples. Of course she was related to Natalia. He smiled back and then it all started to click.

“Oh, you were the girl with Ava at the gate. When the guards called up saying that Ava was hurt and they were worried about an unconfirmed friend coming in with her...”

“That was me. Thanks for your vote of confidence and saying it was ok to send us through.” Leyla ducked her head shyly. “I didn’t think they would ever let me in. This place is like Fort Knox.”

“Yeah, Granddad was a little security crazy and Dad seems to be following in his footsteps lately.” James laughed thinking of Alan. Damn he missed that old man. “Still there are plenty of ways to sneak in and out of the place if you’ve lived here long enough.” He grinned slyly.

“James! Where are the puppies?” Emma interrupted anxiously.

“They’re in the kennels out back.” James ruffled his sister’s hair, smiling at the glare he got back in return. “Wanna go find them?”

“Yeah!” Emma and Peyton shouted together.

“Let’s go.” James smiled at the petite brunette before scooping Peyton up for a piggy back ride. Emma giggled and headed out across the lawn.

“Come on, Leyla!”

Leyla laughed and took off after the group of siblings.

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“Don’t even start with me.” Reva growled at her son as Jonathan gave her a look and frantically fiddled with his cell phone. “You are in so much trouble right now.”

“What did he say?” Anna appeared at Jonathan’s side.

Colin wailed a little louder at Reva’s leg. She kneeled down to hug his tiny shoulders, needing the comfort almost as much as the child.

“Shh, baby.” She cooed, rocking the boy and trying to get her bearings.

“Here, let me take Colin out back with the other kids. There are puppies!” Beth stepped forward as Colin’s tears started to dry up. Reva nodded and stood, her own tears falling harder. Once the child was out of sight, she let out a long sigh. It was all too much all at once.

“I know it’s a little early but here, I thought you might need this.” Phillip handed Reva a glass of whiskey. She accepted it gratefully and took a long drink before closing her eyes, shutting everything out if only for a moment.

Phillip could relate. He couldn’t believe the weekend they had all been having. People murdered and attacked, homes broken into, the dead coming back to life. His daughter and grand-daughter had almost been taken from him.

Phillip glanced over to Olivia and the weight, the true horror of what he had done to her in the past, fell heavy on his shoulders. How could he have stolen their daughter from her, taken his children away from all of their homes? What kind of monster had he truly been? He was no better than Edmund and this truth made him burn with shame. It was no wonder Olivia had wanted to kill him.

Olivia looked up from her perch on the couch, their eyes meeting as she smiled softly at him, oblivious to the dark turn of his thoughts, but somehow sensing his unease.

How could she have ever trusted him with Emma again?

Phillip watched as Natalia slid her hand down Olivia’s back, finally finding her hand and entwining their fingers. Olivia turned to face her partner, the love shining from her eyes.

Phillip smiled. They had both changed so much. It could have been so different, so much more difficult than it needed to be. He looked up found his wife staring at him from the doorway. Beth walked over and took his hand, adding her silent strength to his own.

“I’ve sent Hilda out with Colin and Francesca to play with the other kids. And there’s a security detail watching them.” Beth turned to look at the gathered friends and family in the room. Bill and Lizzie sat to one side, Lizzie nervously massaging her swollen belly. Ava sat propped up in an easy chair, trying to get comfortable despite her headache and various bumps and bruises from her attack. Frank, Doris and Anna stood by the small fireplace in the lavish mansion office, arms crossed looking like they would prefer to be anywhere else. Nestled on the couch sat Natalia and Olivia, holding hands, with Reva huddled in the other corner, clutching a throw pillow. The woman was as white as a sheet. Beth’s heart went out to her the most.

A part of Beth still couldn't believe she'd been married to Edmund Winslow. She knew better than many gathered here how the mind can play tricks with you. How Edmund could play tricks with you. How easily you can get lost in the shades of gray and make a mistake.

In this case, it had been a deadly mistake.

"Time to come clean." Anna murmured quietly as she looked up at the handsome man at her side. "The boss is in trouble, Edmund has finally revealed himself and he's escalating. We need Jeffrey here."

"Problem is we don't know where Jeffrey is now." Jonathan hissed back, shaking his head and avoided the pointed glares of most of the room.

"If you two don't stop mumbling away over there and tell us what's going on, I'm going to have to hurt someone soon." Reva grumbled. "Probably Olivia."

"Me?" Olivia turned stare at the stout blonde sitting beside her on the couch. "What did I do?"

"The last thing I want to do is hurt you, Olivia," Reva took a quick sip of her drink before smirking evilly. "But it's still on my list." She paused and then elbowed her old adversary, smiling wider as Olivia simply raised an eyebrow.

"Fine, I'll start then." Anna glanced up at a hesitant Jonathan and then looked around the gathered group, taking a cleansing breath before beginning.

"My full name is Xing Lung Li, I changed it when I came to America because I wanted to forget my past, distance myself from my father, but I soon realized some things can never be forgotten. Or forgiven." Anna looked over at Doris who merely stared at her harder, and unable to take the emotions barely contained there, she dropped her eyes to look her hands before continuing.

"My father was head of the Royal Guard for the Winslow family on San Cristobel. I grew up living in a small cottage with my father; my mom had died when I was small. Our whole world was the royal family and the palace. My father even made me work the parties, do odd jobs around there. The only time I had any sort of freedom was at school. That is where I knew Olivia from."

Olivia shifted as she felt the weight of the stares around the room. Natalia's hand gently squeezed hers, reminding her that she wasn't alone. She turned her attention back to the petite Asian woman as she continued her story.

“Well, I knew of her, but she never really noticed me. Anyway, as I grew up, I saw a lot of bad things happen around there. The Winslow family was virtually untouchable, and as head of the Royal Guard and chief of security, my father made sure of it. They had these lavish balls and parties...really wild affairs. One night when I was about eighteen they threw this gala ball and everything changed.

Anna paused trying to figure out the best way to phrase this next part, without hurting Olivia. Her family had done enough to the poor woman. Olivia made a small coughing noise and took the decision away from her.

“I was there that night.” Olivia’s voice sounded far away, her eyes never leaving Ava’s. “And so was Jeffrey. We both had too much to drink and ended up in a bedroom upstairs together and well...” Olivia paused, the pain coming over her again in a wave, looking down as Natalia squeezed her hand tighter.

Ava shifted in her chair. Although she knew she was the product of date rape, it was still difficult to hear it, to see Olivia still struggling with it.

“Anyway, the next thing I knew I was being bundled up and tossed out by security.”

“Dear Lord...” Reva took another gulp of whiskey, shaking her head. She felt like she didn’t even know the man she’d married.

“I had seen Jeffrey leave and I found Olivia messed up and unconscious. So I naturally ran to get my father, who told his second in command to take care of things and make sure Olivia got home. My father didn’t want anything to do with this. Angry at how Olivia had been treated and just dismissed, I confronted my father; he told me it was none of our business. And as I persisted, his eyes grew cold and it was as if he was no longer looking at me, his own flesh and blood but rather someone who was in the way, who would cause trouble for him. It stunned me and scared me.”

Anna’s eyes turned to Doris, a glimmer of hope that she would understand her a little more now. Doris steadfastly looked at her feet, but at least she was listening. Anna swallowed hard and continued.

“When Olivia eventually came back to try to get some justice, she was turned away and I never saw her again until I came to Springfield. When I once more went to my father about Olivia, I was beaten for my troubles. My father was a coward who sold his soul to the Winslow family for power and wealth. And I was disillusioned and disgusted but I was trapped.

“That bastard!” Olivia growled, unable to help her quiet outburst. She had no idea that any of this had occurred on her behalf; that this tiny dynamo had stood up for her against her

powerful father. She began to think that she had misjudged Anna Li. She glanced up at Doris who stood with her arms crossed, still stubbornly angry, and sighed, hurting for her friend.

“It wasn’t very long before I found Jeffrey and confronted him; he broke down with guilt and remorse. I told him about what had been happening afterwards, how my father was covering up the incident and that his men had been threatening me to shut up. Jeffrey told me it wouldn’t be the last time I would be harassed, and I knew he was right.” Anna started to pace a little, needing to physically do something. “He said that he had tried to find out who he had been with at the ball but all he had been told was that she had been taken care of, like usual. It seemed like what had happened to Olivia was not an isolated occurrence. “In fact it was business as usual, I just didn’t know about them.”

Anna looked up and met Olivia’s haunted green eyes, wondering how many other women like her were roaming the world because of her father. Disgust rolled in her belly.

“I was incensed and confronted my father again, even going to Richard and Edmund but the threats against me only became more sinister. I felt like Jeffrey was the only one who I could trust anymore, and I was right.” Anna ran a hand through her hair and smiled, remembering the boy who had changed her life that day.

“He took me to see his father, the ambassador, and he admitted everything, including the threats to my life. His father helped me escape to America, but on the condition that I never spoke of what happened there. With a clean slate and a new name I was able to join the police force and I never looked back.” Anna glanced up meeting Frank’s concerned eyes, not sure she was comfortable being so vulnerable and open with the man. There would be a lot of fence mending and trust building needed after all this was said and done.

“From that day onward, I swore that I’d do everything in my power to take down my father and everything associated with that time in my life. Including Edmund, as I am sure my father is involved somehow with him still.” Anna sighed and started pacing again.

“When Jeffrey contacted me about coming to Springfield to protect his friends and family here and to be his eyes and ears, I didn’t hesitate. Hell, it’s the least I could do.” Anna ran a hand through her hair, finally glad to have gotten the burden off her shoulders. Her eyes met Reva’s, deadly serious. “He’s a good man, don’t judge him too harshly.”

Reva merely looked away, not sure what to make of it all.

“Why didn’t you inform the mayor or the police force of what was happening?” Frank finally spoke up. “Surely this was something we should have all been aware of, guarded against. You can’t just take the law into your own hands, Detective.”

"I had no concrete proof and Jeffrey refuses to come forward. Jonathan and I have been trying to build a case, but Edmund was officially dead and his men are very clever. We unfortunately needed Edmund to make a slip in order to bring this into the light of day. And Jane ultimately paid for it with her life." Anna ducked her head, one hand clenching into a fist. Jonathan stepped forward, putting a comforting hand on the petite woman's shoulder.

"Jeffery swore us to secrecy. Edmund blames Shayne Lewis for his daughter Lara's death. And he has focused all his venom on Reva, vowing to make her suffer. That was why he tried to frame her in the first place for his murder. He seems to see her as the cause of all his misery."

"Well, if that ain't the kettle calling the pot black." Reva snorted, shaking her head.

"Why is he targeting the children?" Natalia leaned into Olivia, gathering strength from her warm presence beside her.

"Because he's a crazy son of a bitch..." Lizzie piped up across the room as Bill dropped a gentle kiss to his wife's hair.

"Well, there is that." Jonathan smirked. "Jeffrey had tried to lure Edmund out of hiding, suspecting that Reva was framed for his alleged murder. His plane went down and he found me and Sarah, encouraging us to return to Springfield for our own safety. Edmund apparently confronted Jeffrey during one of their many skirmishes, swearing to kill the Lewis children if Jeffrey told Reva he was alive. I think in his crazy head it's expanded to all of his supposed enemies, to all our children." Jonathan turned to look at his old friend Ava. "Apparently even the grown children of his enemies."

"Oh my God. Shayne, Marina and Henry are in danger, too." Reva gasped locking eyes with an equally concerned Frank.

"Jeffrey has continued to chase Edmund and his men around the world. He tried to flush him out and eliminate him, but Edmund keeps eluding him. I'm getting worried though. He missed his regularly scheduled phone contact and I think he might be in trouble." Jonathan chewed his thumbnail and stared at his mother. Why did all hell have to break loose now?

"I think the vandalism to the Beacon back in February was the first concrete step, gang activities in the schools, general break and entering happening around town, escalating now to the vandalism at the farmhouse. All of it has the familiar feel of my father's men while under the command of Edmund Winslow. Just part of the crazy man's diabolical plan. I think the attempted kidnapping, the assault on Ava and Jane's murder are just the start. To me, all of this clearly points to Edmund's return to Springfield."

The room fell silent as the full implications hit them all.

This was war.

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ACT 2

“So what do we do now?” Natalia asked the question that was burning in everyone’s mind.

“We fight back.” Olivia looked around the room, locking eyes with friends and family alike, seeing the same determination reflected back in each and every face. “We circle the wagons, protect and watch out for one another and we don’t let Jane’s death be in vain.” She smiled sadly as Natalia squeezed her hand, taking comfort in the simple connection with her lover.

“And we catch that sick bastard.” Ava growled from her chair, every inch her mother’s daughter. Their eyes met and they smiled at each other in understanding. No one messed with their family and got away with it.

“We need to find Jeffrey. There is no reason for him to hide now that you know,” Jonathan said quietly, looking at Reva, trying to gauge just how pissed she still was with him. “What did he say to you?”

“I could barely hear him, and I was so shocked.” Reva paused, frowning as she tried to focus on what she had actually heard. “He kept breaking up and I didn’t hear all of it but he said that he was cornered by Edmund’s men and you should get Anna and then it kind of faded out for a bit. All I heard next was Devil’s Heart and then...”

Reva closed her eyes a moment before looking up at her son again, tears welling as she realized what had ended the call.

“Oh, my God. I think I heard gun shots just before the line went dead.”

“Damn.” Anna turned to Jonathan. “What’s the Devil’s Heart?”

“I think it’s where he was supposed to meet his contact.” Jonathan ran a hand across the stubble on his chin, thinking hard. “A bar in that small town he’s been poking around in.”

“Where is my father now?” Ava wanted to know, worried that she’d lose him yet again, and not knowing if she could take it a second time.

“He had gotten some intel from an old CIA buddy that Edmund had a compound somewhere in Mexico, and he’s been trying to hunt it down.” Jonathan pushed his hand through shaggy hair, wishing he could have been there to help his step-father himself.

“Apparently that’s how Edmund has been funding his lavish lifestyle now. He still had several followers from his San Cristobel days and Anna’s father is still involved, despite his advanced age now. They helped steal the royal jewels last year to fund their Mexican operation from what we can tell. His men have been selling drugs, weapons; you name it, out of this place. The local police seem to have been easily taken care of.” Jonathan stared at Frank and smirked. Frank set his jaw stubbornly, refusing to be the implied poster boy for incompetent and corrupt law enforcement around the world.

“Well that sure as hell isn’t going to happen here.” Frank grumbled, finally finding his voice. “With Eleni finding the forensic proof placing Edmund as our murderer as well as Emma as an eye witness, he won’t be escaping justice this time.”

“We just have to find him, before he finds us.” Natalia shifted and looked at Olivia, both of them realizing that Emma and Ava were both prime targets now. She sent up a silent prayer for the added security Phillip had arranged, knowing that they were going to need it now more than ever.

“Jesus, I still can’t believe I was ever married to Edmund.” Beth turned to Phillip for a much needed hug. It was all too much to take in.

“I say that about several of my ex-husbands...” Olivia snorted, smiling wider as Natalia swatted her arm.

“Hey!” Phillip and Bill protested at the same time as Olivia just kept chuckling.

“I’m sure she didn’t mean you, honey.” Beth ran a soothing hand along Phillip’s arm, smiling gently as Lizzie did the same with Bill.

“Hell, don’t sweat it, Beth. Like it or not, between the three of us,” Reva looked over at Olivia before turning back to the slim blonde at Phillip’s side “we’ve been with half of Springfield.”

“Some of you are even moving on to the other half...” Phillip smirked, his eyes dancing.

“Hey!” Olivia grumped before starting to grin along with the rest of the room, everyone a little grateful for some much needed humor right about now. Natalia squeezed her hand and leaned a little closer as the conversation once more turned to guarding against Edmund’s next attack.

It turned into a long morning full of discussion, outlining plans for beefing up security around town and Doris immediately put the Springfield PD on high alert. Frank was to coordinate a task force with Anna working on any leads that had been scrounged up so far. Phillip had almost laughed out loud at the long suffering look on the detective's face as she left with Frank, both headed back to the station. He didn't envy her at all.

As Beth organized making a late lunch for their guests, Phillip made his way down to the lawn, quietly watching his girls playing with the squirming yipping pile of puppies. Hilda sat with Francesca, keeping a close eye on Peyton, who was patting the pups gently, just as her big sister Emma had shown her. They slobbered all over her tiny wrist and palms as she giggled away. Sarah was running around chasing Leyla and James, burning off as much energy as the puppies seemed to have.

Emma meanwhile was being followed by the small runt of the litter, a little white pup who looked nothing like her German Shepherd mother, nibbling at her heels. Giggling, Emma dipped down to tickle the little pick belly that was suddenly on full display. She scooped her up and snuggled the wiggling bundle close, dropping kisses onto her fuzzy head.

It was obviously love.

Phillip sighed. It would make him feel better knowing Emma had a dog around to protect her. He could get Emma into training the dog as the pup grew. And as much as the farmhouse was wired with the best security system money could buy, and the armed patrols starting tomorrow morning, nothing was foolproof, as the knot on Ava's head proved.

Emma stared up at him with the biggest eyes he had ever seen, smiling as the puppy happily licked her chin as the girl held her in her arms.

Now he just had to make Olivia think it was all her idea...

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"I am staying at the Beacon and that's it, Mom. I'm not going to let some psycho scare me from living my life." Ava jutted her chin out stubbornly holding her ground.

"Fine. But I'm adding more security at the hotel." Olivia sighed and leaned back, resting her head against the plush leather sofa. She looked over at Ava who smiled, clearly pleased that she had won yet another skirmish with her mother. Olivia shook her head, not exactly sure when she had let herself become so soft.

“So what happened in San Francisco?” Olivia probed gently. She watched as her daughter shifted a little, obviously not happy with what had occurred.

“Things have been going downhill since I went back to work after Christmas.” Ava’s eyes dimmed a little and she tugged at the hem of the light blanket covering her legs. “My boss doesn’t have the same loyalty to family that I do and wouldn’t let me take time to come home for Francesca’s baptism. Then when I heard about the vandalism, I wanted to come out for a quick visit and he said no again. We got into an argument; I think I may have used the words ‘heartless Nazi control freak’ somewhere along the line and well, here I am.”

“God, I’m sorry, baby.” Olivia felt for her daughter, remembering her own early struggles in the workplace back on San Cristobel.

“Don’t be. My manager overlooked me for a promotion I’d really wanted as well, so I had been looking around. He’s an asshole anyway.” Ava grumbled.

“Do you think you might come back to Springfield?” Olivia asked hopefully, not wanting to push too hard but she missed having Ava in their lives. She wanted all her girls close, even more so now.

“I’m not sure yet.” Ava looked away for a moment and sighed. Enough time had passed, and her reasons for staying away were not as important as they used to be. In fact, these days it hurt more to leave her family than the memories of her baby and everything she’d lost here. With Jeffrey alive and coming home, spending time with him again would be like a gift from above. Maybe it was time to move back here again.

“Whatever you decide to do, we’re behind you.” Natalia appeared beside the young woman, a ham sandwich and a soda in her hands, flashing her dimples. “Here, eat this before you fade away.”

“And you. Did you take your pills yet?” Natalia turned to her lover, smiling as Olivia’s eyes widened and she suddenly looked like a five-year-old caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “They’re upstairs, in your make up bag.”

Groaning as she checked her watch, Olivia stood, moving to drop a quick kiss on Natalia’s cheek and made her way up to their room. Natalia just shook her head and headed back into the kitchen to give Beth a hand.

Ava bit into her sandwich thoughtfully, watching the two women go, a part of her longing to have that for herself someday, to have someone who she could call home too.

"You should have told me." Reva stared at her son, tears welling in her eyes as they wandered the estate lawn, getting some sunshine. It did her good to be doing something, anything.

"I wanted to, from the beginning." Jonathan wiped at his own eyes. "It's been so hard not to. And now, Jeffrey's missing. I have to go down there and find him."

"I'm coming with you." Reva stopped and looked up at him, determined.

"No!" Jonathan stared at the very serious woman standing in front of him. "It's too dangerous. Besides, you can't leave Colin."

Reva bit her lower lip. She needed to find Jeffrey and pull his sorry butt back home. She needed to figure out her own heart, and the only way to do that was with him. There was so much she still didn't know or understand. How could he have just abandoned his family? They were a team, or at least that was how she looked at it.

"Colin can stay with Shayne for a while, or even Billy and Vanessa. I can't just stand around and wait for Edmund to strike. I either need my husband here by my side full time or I need to end it so I can rebuild my life." Reva's mind was made up and she suddenly felt a little better, more in control again. She glanced up at her worried son.

Jonathan wisely said nothing, simply sliding a comforting arm around her shoulders as they once more started walking. He would leave tonight and there was no way Reva was going to be on that plane with him.

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Detective Anna Li trudged into police headquarters and dropped down into her chair before punching the start button on her computer tower, waiting for it to boot up. So far, the day had pretty much sucked and, if the ride back was any indication, it was not going to be getting much better any time soon. Stuck with the Chief breathing down her neck on this whole task force thing was going to be a royal pain in the...

"Pok Kai..." Anna all but growled as Frank strode past on his way to his office, his distrustful dark eyes glaring at her.

"I'd recognize 'asshole' in any language." Cyrus Foley appeared from staff room, trailing not far behind his friend, Remy Boudreaux.

"What's going on, Anna? You and Frank dashed out of here like a house was on fire." Remy perched on the edge of the detective's desk. Cyrus simply raised an eyebrow and sipped at his coffee, curious but not wanting to give anything away.

Cyrus had been dabbling in many things since returning to Springfield, some of them a little shady but they were always legal. He had even buckled down and gotten his private investigator's license renewed, much to his girlfriend Mel's annoyance. He'd more than made that up to her.

Mel had even used his services on occasion. The latest time he had been hunting down a deadbeat cheating husband for a divorce case that she had been working. Yes, he was a relatively honest man these days, and it was driving him just a little bit crazy. But he would deal with it, after all Mel was worth it.

Cyrus had been a little surprised when Anna Li, the new hot-shot detective in town, had called him around Thanksgiving, asking him to keep an ear to the ground for her, to round up some guys to help follow local gang activity, break-ins, and thefts. He didn't question it too hard; her money was more than enough incentive to keep him interested and his mouth shut.

"You'll find out soon enough anyway, Remy. I'm heading up a task force to capture Edmund Winslow for the murder in the park this weekend."

"Edmund Winslow?" Remy leaned forward, incredulous. "Isn't he dead?"

"Apparently the reports of his death have been greatly exaggerated." Anna rolled her eyes and pulled her flash drive out of her pants pocket, sliding it into her computer. "I'm putting the team together and I want you on it, Remy."

The dark man stood, smiling widely at his sister's boyfriend. Cyrus shook his head and sipped his coffee. Anna pulled up her secret files on the Winslow case that she'd been gathering so far. It was going to take most of the day to organize it all to share it with the Chief and then the rest of the team.

"Cyrus, I'm going to bring you onto the team as well, as a civilian consultant on the case since you've been working with me on this since practically the beginning." Anna murmured, distracted by trying to find the file on her removable drive stick. Where did she put that file now?

"You knew already?" Remy stared hard at his friend, a little shocked.

"Sorry, buddy. She's a client." Cyrus shrugged a little, hoping this wasn't going to be an issue. Remy nodded, sort of understanding.

"So we'll be working together again?" Remy asked hopefully. He liked working with the man; he always learned a little something from him when they were on a case together.

“Just like old times...” Cyrus grinned. “Without the trip into the muck this time, thank you very much.”

Remy wandered over to his desk as Anna became engrossed in her notes and files.

“Mel is gonna kill you...” he said quietly, knowing his sister hated secrets.

Cyrus didn’t even want to think about it.

Supper that night had been a family affair, feeling very much like a big holiday meal. The dining room table had been full, with Hilda having gone all out with the food. Natalia glanced across the table at her sister, still thrilled to have a member of her family there.

Leyla and James had become fast friends, Natalia noted, as she watched the young man flirt and tease all afternoon. She would have to mention to Leyla that he had a girlfriend who would be coming home soon from college for the summer. Actually, Daisy and Ashlee would have been home already if they hadn’t decided to do a little traveling of the west coast before coming home.

Natalia grabbed a piece of chocolate cake to go with her coffee and smiled to herself. Blake had only recently mentioned that Doris had offered Ashlee a trip to Europe for the summer, but the girl had turned her down. She had made Doris cry when she had said she wanted to spend the summer getting to know her mom better.

She was happy for Doris, but a part of Natalia was a little jealous, and she wished Rafe would come around like that too. His latest letter had said he would be able to come home for a visit soon and he couldn’t wait to meet his baby sister. She didn’t want to think about what would happen after that. Deployment overseas surely couldn’t be too far off.

Grabbing her coffee mug, Natalia excused herself from the table, smiling at Olivia who was deep in a discussion about guard dogs with Phillip before heading into the living room. Pulling up the program menu guide for the satellite dish, she glanced up as Leyla followed her into the room.

“Hey, sis.” Leyla dropped down onto the sofa, propping her feet on the large coffee table in front of them. “Long day, huh.”

“Extremely long.” Natalia found a familiar cooking show she liked and selected it. She glanced over at the girl fidgeting with the throw cushion at her side. “Have I told you how glad I am that you’re here?”

Leyla glanced down, smiling shyly, dimples making their appearance.

“Not that I mind in the least, but why are you here early?” Natalia sipped at her coffee, enjoying the hint of cinnamon in the brew.

Leyla dropped her feet to the floor and stood, starting to pace. She needed to move, to try to not focus on the wave of anger and hurt that still was very fresh. She let out a long breath and leaned against the back of an easy chair, before looking over at her older sister, still calmly sipping her coffee.

“Father.” Leyla bit out.

Natalia nodded solemnly. Of course, it would have to do with their father.

“What did he say?” Natalia wasn’t sure she really wanted to know, but Leyla needed to talk about it. It had been so much easier in a way, having been completely cut off from her parents, but she wanted to be there for her sister if she could. She at least understood what living with the man had been like, even if it seemed forever ago now. She watched as Leyla pushed up off the back of the easy chair and started pacing again, still obviously upset.

“He was going on about you and Olivia. How he didn’t want me to be exposed to that kind of ‘lifestyle.’” Leyla made little air quotes as she ranted on. “Like it was some sort of contagious disease or something. And what’s with that lifestyle crap anyway? Straight people have lives while gays have ‘lifestyles,’ that’s just bullshit.”

“Swear jar.” Natalia smirked into her cup, warmed more than she cared to admit by her sister’s defense of her relationship with their parents.

“Excuse me?” Leyla stopped her pacing, not sure she’d heard her right.

“It’s a dollar for each swear word. By my count you owe the swear jar two bucks.” Natalia looked up at the surprised girl.

“Are you serious?” Leyla sank down into the chair, staring at her sister.

“As a heart attack.” Natalia laughed softly. “It’s the kids. We don’t want them picking it up from us. If it makes you feel better, Olivia provided a sizeable donation from the swear jar proceeds to the Heart and Stroke foundation after she first moved into the farmhouse with me.”

“That place was yours first?” Leyla grinned. “I thought Olivia...”

"Nope." Natalia shook her head. "I bought the old Jessup place from Cassie a year and a half ago. I added Olivia's name to the deed at Christmas." Natalia glanced down shyly, remembering the look of joy on Olivia's face. "I wanted to give her a real home."

Leyla blinked, taking in the soft glow of love on her sister's face. Their father had no clue. If this was a sin, then hello Satan, sign her up. The old man only saw darkness and suspicion where the light of love obviously shone. Leyla sighed and stared at the television for a moment, letting the soothing images of home cooking distract her mind.

"He's never going to change, Leyla," Natalia murmured softly. "All we can do is live our lives how we want, whether he likes it or not."

Leyla nodded her head sadly. There was so much wasted time that she would never get back with her sister, because their father was a stubborn fool. She glanced back at her older sister, and their eyes met.

"That's why I left. I want to live my life, not his twisted version of what my life should be. He said that as long as I lived under his roof, I'd have to obey his rules or I could get out. I packed and left an hour later." Leyla's eyes filled with unshed tears. "Momma never even said a word."

Natalia leaned forward and pulled her sister into a much needed hug.

"You are always welcome in my home. For as long as you want." Natalia dropped a soft kiss onto the dark hair, Leyla's head tucked under her chin as she held her tight. "That's what family means, to be there for each other, no matter what. If our parents don't understand that, then it's their loss."

Leyla nodded her head squeezing her big sister a little tighter, taking comfort in the words and feeling the truth in them. She sniffed and wiped at her eyes as Natalia leaned back to smile at her.

"And you still owe the swear jar two bucks, missy." Natalia grinned at Leyla's quick frown.

"Aw, jeez!" Leyla grumbled as her sister just shook her head and chuckled softly.

"Make that three..."

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The sun was slowly setting as Olivia pushed open the French doors to the small balcony off their guest bedroom at the mansion. It seemed like forever since she had lived within

the formidable confines of the sprawling estate. So much had changed for her that it was almost like another lifetime.

Olivia stepped out and leaned against the marble rail, swirling the white wine in her glass, thinking back to less pleasant evenings spent there. The ghost of Alan Spaulding still hovered here for her sometimes, as if she expected him to come blustering down the hallway, ranting about something that would screw up her life. Like the time she woke up in the looney tune ward at Ravenwood. Now there were some good times...

"Penny for your thoughts..." Natalia's soft voice broke the silence. Olivia snorted and turned to look at her lover standing in the doorway, her skin almost golden in the fading sunlight.

"Save your money, they aren't worth that much."

Natalia nodded and quietly closed the French doors before moving to wrap her arms around the taller woman, slipping her hands into the back pockets of Olivia's jeans. Olivia tucked her head under her chin, pulling her closer and they just stood there together, watching oranges turn to pinks and then finally deep purple.

"I love you, y'know," Olivia finally murmured into the dark hair, inhaling the clean, sweet scent of her partner. Vanilla and something all Natalia, it was an addictive combination.

"I think I recall hearing that recently but you were naked, and I'm sure I was a little distracted at the time..." Natalia wagged her eyebrows and her lips quirked up before she pressed tiny kisses along Olivia's strong jaw line, enjoying the soft laughter bubbling up from her partner. She ducked her head and nuzzled inside the collar of Olivia's blouse as strong arms wrapped around her tighter. They just held each other for a while, soaking up the other's presence.

"I finally got through to Jane's mother; she's coming in from Chicago to make funeral..." Olivia's voice broke and a tear trickled down her flushed cheek.

"Sshh, I know." Natalia held her closer. They had all been so focused on the children being okay, she knew Olivia still hadn't really had time to process the loss of the girl who had been an extended part of her family for a very long time. Olivia didn't trust easily and, as frustrating as Jane could be sometimes, she had somehow won her partner over.



“I told her that I wanted to pay for all of it. She refused at first, but I insisted.” Olivia wiped at the tears freely falling now. “It’s the least I could do for...for saving...”

Natalia ran her fingers through her lover’s thick hair, soothing her as Olivia suddenly turned and wept for long minutes into her shoulder.

“Maybe we could donate something to the park in Jane’s memory?” Natalia gently kissed Olivia’s temple. Olivia nodded slightly and sniffed. “Maybe a little covered area for nannies to sit and relax while watching the kids on the playground?”

“That sounds perfect.” Olivia leaned back with a watery smile. Natalia always seemed to know how to make her feel better. “I’ll call Billy about it later this week and see if Lewis Construction can fit it into their schedule. He was going on about the new school bid they just put in the other day at Company. He can’t wait for Josh to come home, too.” Olivia’s eyes suddenly grew wide as another thought hit her.

“Oh, God. Josh.” Olivia closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Someone needed to bring him up to speed. With Jeffrey still alive, that didn’t bode well for him and Reva getting back together anytime soon.

“This is all such a tangled mess,” Natalia murmured against soft skin, taking comfort in Olivia’s embrace. “What I don’t understand is Edmund’s obsession with the children?”

Olivia just shook her head and stared at the last dying rays of sunshine peeking over the horizon. She had liked Eddie back in the day, but could never quite trust him back on San Cristobel. He had always been so jealous of his brother Richard, desperately wanting their father's affection and attention.

Olivia thought back to one of the last times she saw him, drunk as a skunk playing that video game, dodging one of her flying drumsticks. He didn't seem that crazy then; however she had been a close personal friend of Jimmy Beam that night so her senses might not have been a hundred percent.

"I don't know." Olivia closed her eyes and snuggled a little closer. "He was always so interested in the royal lineage, producing an heir to make his father happy. I guess he had finally achieved some peace on that front when he found Lara. Then with her sudden death it must have tipped him over into the deep end." Olivia sighed, realizing how many mistakes she'd made herself when upset and scared of losing someone she loved.

"It's so easy for anyone to make a bad choice, to slip up. Nothing is ever black and white in this world, only varying shades of grey." Olivia shifted away slightly, leaning back against the marble railing, drawing deeper into herself, knowing she had done her fair share of things she was ashamed of. She sometimes worried about how easy it had been to go there in the past, to slip into the darkness. There but for the grace of...

Natalia cupped Olivia's cheek, smiling gently at her suddenly troubled lover, pulling her from her musings.

"Hey, stop thinking so hard, querida. You are not Edmund, okay?" Natalia leaned closer into the woman she loved, staring into the stormy green eyes, finding worth there. "And no matter how deep or dark you go, I will always come down after you and bring you back. You're mine now, and don't you forget it."

Natalia dipped her head and claimed the soft lips, thrilling at the small whimper coming from Olivia. Long fingers slid into her hair as Olivia kept her near, not wanting to break the kiss.

Finally they separated, panting against each other's lips, needing the other's touch.

"So, you and me against the world?" Olivia husked, wanting desperately to believe it, needing it to be true despite everything and anything that would be thrown their way. Natalia smiled and nuzzled along the fine hair at her temple, placing butterfly kisses along the tender skin there before pulling her lover close.

"Always."

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On the other side of the mansion, Jonathan kissed Sarah good bye and gave her one last bear hug. This was so hard; he had no idea how Jeffrey could stay away from his little son. He sighed and dropped a last squeaky kiss on Sarah's flushed cheek, making her giggle.

"Be good for mommy, okay, baby girl?" Jonathan whispered into her small ear, pleased when she nodded and giggled more. He slid her down to her feet and swatted at her little bottom.

He stared hard at Bill, silently acknowledging that it was up to him to protect his family now. Bill squinted slightly and nodded, sliding a protective arm around Sarah's tiny shoulders as she snuggled against Lizzie. Not on his watch.

"Come back safe, Jonathan," Lizzie said quietly from Bill's side.

Jonathan gave her his most charming smile, knowing he couldn't make a promise that he might not be able to keep, and disappeared into the night. He had a flight to Mexico to catch.

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Monday morning arrived bright and early, as Olivia stepped out the kitchen patio door, ready to gather Emma up to drive to school. They'd all be back in their respective homes tonight, the security details arranged to start first thing that day. Phillip had seemed to think he had seen Emma out back, playing with the dogs again. She stepped out onto the patio, seeing her daughter sitting on the lawn with a small white ball of fluff. Olivia's footsteps were silent in the grass as she approached, listening as Emma chattered to the pup.

"...and then it was like I was frozen. Y'know like those weird dreams, where you know you should run and scream, but you're feet are stuck in quicksand and you try and you try, but you just can't yell. I was so scared." Emma scooped up the pup, little blue eyes staring up at her, calm and peaceful. "You'd have barked and barked and barked. Wouldn't you?" Emma nuzzled into the soft fur sadly.

Olivia felt the prick of tears threatening to fall. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to calm down, it wouldn't do to fall apart in front of her too yet. Poor sweet Emma.

"I wish I was a doggie. Maybe then..." Emma's voice trailed off and she sighed.

"Maybe then you'd have scared away the bad man?" Olivia asked softly sitting down on the grass beside the surprised girl. Emma swallowed hard and tried not to cry, nodding slightly.

“Oh, baby.” Olivia wrapped her arms around the girl and hugged her close. “You know that Jane getting hurt isn’t your fault, right?” Emma shifted, seeming to melt deeper into Olivia’s arms, weeping into her shoulder.

“Maybe if I had yelled, he would have run away sooner.” Emma hiccupped.

Olivia pulled back and looked into the small flushed face. Olivia ran the pad of her thumb across the girl’s cheek, wiping away the tears that were falling freely now.

“You did everything right, honey and Jane knows that.” Olivia swallowed hard, realizing this was a hard truth the girl was learning. As much as she wanted to protect her girl, life had a way of happening and Emma would need to figure out how to deal with this, too.

“Sometimes bad things still happen, even when you do everything right.” Olivia dipped her head and made sure to catch Emma’s eyes. “But whenever that happens, you know that I’m right here to hold you close and wipe away your tears. And so is your Ma and your Daddy and Beth all the rest of your family. Family sticks together and takes care of each other when things get tough.”

Emma ducked her head but nodded. Olivia just held tight, gently rocking her for a while.

“I love you, mommy.” Emma whispered eventually.

“I love you, too, sweetheart.” Olivia dropped a kiss to the top of her head, wiping at her own tears.

The little puppy wiggled in Emma’s lap, sensing the sad mood and wanting to be closer. She suddenly stopped mid-wiggle to sneeze, and then once again moved to lick the girl’s hand. Emma smiled a little and dropped a kiss to the little fuzzy head.

“So, who’s your friend?” Olivia pushed some hair from Emma’s eyes, watching as they once again sparkled with excitement.

“Daddy said I could name her. I was thinking maybe Miley or uh...Snowflake?” Emma looked at the puppy, who tilted her head to the right and swished her tail back and forth excitedly. “Flakey?”

The puppy simply stared back, not exactly impressed. Emma laughed as she slid her to the ground and stood to go pick up her glass of orange juice from the patio table, the puppy following close to her heels.

"She keeps following you all over the place, huh." Olivia smiled as she slowly stood up herself. "Like a little white shadow or something."

"Shadow!" Emma laughed. "Cool name, Mom." The girl looked down at the dog, which was now half sitting on her foot. "What do you think, Shadow?"

The puppy yipped once happily, before doing a little circle and plopping back down on Emma's foot. Emma looked up at her mom and grinned.

"I think she likes it." Olivia raised an eyebrow at her very happy daughter.

Olivia bent over and lifted the little dog up, hind legs dangling down as it hung from her hands. They stared at each other a moment, Olivia tilting her head to one side. Shadow was pretty cute, obviously part Husky in her, with the most amazing blue eyes.

"Well hello, Shadow." Olivia murmured. The puppy sneezed and then shyly started to lick at Olivia's wrist, instinctively knowing who the alpha around here was. She smiled softly at the tickling tongue. "So, do you think she'd like to come live with us at the farmhouse, Bean?"

"REALLY?" Emma froze not sure she could believe her ears.

"If Natalia says yes, and you promise to look after her..." Olivia warned, already knowing that Shadow would be at the farmhouse by lunchtime.

"I will! I'll take her for walks and make sure she doesn't chase the ducks and brush her fur and...and..." Emma started to bounce excitedly. "Daddy said I could go to a special doggie training school with her so she could be a good guard dog...and...and..."

"Breathe, honey. Breathe." Olivia chuckled and glanced up to look at Phillip and Natalia staring at the two of them through the kitchen windows, grinning widely. Her eyes narrowed, suspicious. Shadow followed her gaze and barked at them, her little tail whipping back and forth happily.

"Exactly what I was thinking, Shadow..." Olivia smiled, pulling the little puppy into her arms and snuggling into the warm fur as Emma wrapped herself around her waist for a group hug.

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Anna rolled out of her bed and shuffled towards the bathroom in her tiny apartment. It was going to be a long day, with meetings pulling the new task force together and bringing

everyone up to speed. Brushing her teeth, she heard her cell phone chiming from her nightstand.

Grabbing it quickly, she caught the call on the last ring before it would switch over to her voicemail.

“Li.”

“Anna? It’s Jonathan.” His deep voice faded in and out but Anna could make it out clearly enough. “I’m about to meet Daniel Lopez at that bar Jeffrey mentioned. I’ll keep you posted on what the plan is after that. I don’t think Edmund’s men know I’m here yet.”

“Well, keep it that way.” Anna worried about the young man; the stress had been getting to him and like the rest of them, he just wanted this all to end. “Call me at ten to update me.”

“Will do.” Jonathan hesitated a moment before deciding that Anna really should have some sort of heads up about his mother. “Reva wanted to come along with me and I took off without telling her. You might have a visit from her later today once she figures out what I’ve done.”

“Thanks, just what I needed today.” Anna rolled her eyes and groaned. Great another diva she needed to deal with.

“Sorry.” Jonathan didn’t sound at all sorry, barely containing a soft chuckle. “I’ll touch base with you again, soon.” And with that the call ended.

Anna stared at the dead phone and shook her head. It was going to be an even longer day than she had first suspected.

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Doris walked into Olivia’s office at the Beacon without as much as a simple warning from her assistant, Keira. Looking up from her budget forecasts, Olivia smiled widely, happy for the break and pleased to see two cups of coffee in the mayor’s hands and a small bag from Company.

“Please tell me you’ve got blueberry muffins in there.” Olivia came around from her side of the desk and sank down onto one of the other guest chairs, snatching the paper bag from her friend’s hand. She dug down, smiling widely as she found the muffins. They were still warm.

"I'm beginning to suspect you like Blake's muffins better than Natalia's." Doris bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing as Olivia's eyes snapped open and she practically choked on the tasty morsel she had in her mouth.

"Don't even go there, Wolfe. Besides you know my thoughts on you and Blake and hooking up." Olivia smirked. Natalia never failed to whack her in the stomach every time she suggested trying to get Blake away from Frank.

"She's my friend and that's all." Doris rolled her eyes and tried not to go there in her head. Damn, too late...

"I guess I just think she could do so much better than Frankie." Olivia took a grateful sip of coffee before eyeing her slightly blushing friend sitting across from her. "Hiring Eleni was a stroke of genius, I must say."

Doris grinned for a moment, ripping a piece of muffin loose and popping it into her mouth.

"She is a very competent forensic scientist. The fact that she's Frank's ex-wife and Marina's mother is no reason to hold that against her." The mayor smirked unable to help herself. "Besides, I need a fresh pair of eyes in that police station. I'm afraid the council is going to want an internal review of the department, and I have no idea what we're going to uncover."

Olivia's phone rang and she groaned as she reached across her desk to grab the offending handset.

"Sorry, gotta take this. There is a convention coming in this week and there's been nothing but headaches happening." Olivia shook her head and listened to who was on the other side. Doris nodded and quietly nibbled away at her muffin.

"Pete, I don't care what the chef was whining about now, we need that seafood buffet for Wednesday night..." Olivia paused, standing to move around the desk to her computer, quickly punching up her booking calendar. "No, there is no wiggle room here. Just tell him to get it done." Olivia hung up and plopped down into her chair. She glanced up at a curious Doris.

"Hell week?" Doris smiled sympathetically. She'd had her fair share of those since becoming mayor.

"You have no idea." Olivia ran a hand through her highlighted hair and shook her head at her friend. She didn't even want to think about the emails waiting for her in her inbox.

"I should go then. Lunch later this week? We can go over the Winslow case; I can update you on any new findings." Doris stood and headed for the doorway, coffee and half her muffin in hand. Olivia smiled gratefully as her phone began to ring again. She waved as Doris headed out the office door.

Hell week, indeed.

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That night, after dinner, a lone car turned from the road onto the long gravel driveway and made its way up to the farmhouse. Shifting it into park, Reva Shayne sat for a moment, resting her head on the steering wheel for a moment to gather her thoughts. Once she had finally made the decision, everything else had fallen into place. Now it all hinged on whether or not she had some much needed backup on her little adventure.

"Damn it, Jeffrey, the things you make me do..." Reva grumbled into the darkness, before finally opening her car door and making her way down the small walkway to the farmhouse door. Tapping lightly, she heard a tiny yapping coming from inside and then locks turned and quickly opened by a frazzled looking Leyla.

"Hey! Come on in," The girl's leg suddenly shot out to keep a small dog from escaping out the door. "Quick before killer here escapes..."

"A puppy? I thought lesbians had cats." Reva frowned at the little bundle of energy bouncing around her feet as she came in. Leyla snorted and covered her mouth, trying not to let her laughter be heard as she shut the door and turned the lock again.

"I guess they didn't get the official handbook," Leyla chimed in as she made her way back to the kitchen table. Natalia glared at her sister as Olivia picked up the wiggling puppy and hid her own laugh in the soft fur.

"Good one, kid." Reva smiled at the girl, liking her already.

"Jellybean, would you come get Shadow and keep her in there with you?" Olivia called into the living room. Emma appeared immediately and took the pup from her arms. Dropping a quick kiss to the girl's head, she watched her daughter disappear with the newest member of the family.

"I-I need to talk to you girls. Kind of ask you for a... well, a favor." Reva stammered slightly, never very comfortable at asking for help.

Olivia's eyebrows rose almost to her hairline. Natalia walked over to the fridge, pulled out a bottle of wine and grabbed a bottle opener from the drawer.

“Okay, what are you up to, Reva?” Olivia asked as she slid wineglasses out onto the kitchen table and they sat.

“Jonathan left for Mexico last night without telling me.” Reva started to pace, thrusting her hands deep into her pockets, not wanting to think about just how annoyed she was with her son. “I wanted to go with him, to bring Jeffrey back myself. Mostly it was to make sure he really is alive and it’s not another horrible trick being played on me.”

Reva stared out of the kitchen window a moment into the darkness and sighed. Turning she leaned back against the sink, trying hard not to fidget.

“I went into the police station right away, to confront Anna. She stonewalled me, but I eventually weaseled it out of her.” Reva rambled.

Olivia nodded sipping her wine thoughtfully. Li was good, but she was no match for a determined Reva Shayne.

“Anna’s stuck here with the task force and Jonathan hasn’t contacted her when he was supposed to. She’s ready to mount an attack and I think we need to go in quietly and find out the lay of the land.” Reva looked down at her feet, wiggling one foot nervously.

“Where do we come into the picture?” Natalia glanced back and forth at the two women, not liking the way this seemed to be heading.

“Anna gave me Jonathan’s contact in Mexico. I want to meet up with him and find out what happened to Jonathan and to bring Jeffrey home.” Reva pushed herself away from the sink counter and walked over to the kitchen table. Leaning against a chair back, she swallowed hard knowing it was now or never. “I need someone to go shotgun, so to speak.”

Reva looked up and met Olivia’s intense stare, their eyes locking in understanding.

“Whoa, road trip!” Leyla grinned, completely missing the tension building in the small kitchen. Olivia turned to look at Natalia, watching as she placed her glass of wine down on the tabletop.

“Olivia, can I talk to you a minute?” Natalia smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

Reva gave Olivia a look, both women knowing that the brunette was not happy with this plan by the set of her jaw. Olivia sighed, her head dropping to her chest for a moment as she rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“In private.” Natalia cocked her head towards the back door.

"Of course, honey." Olivia glared at the older woman, who had smirked but held her tongue. She was sure Reva must be tickled by the thought of Natalia taming the mighty Olivia Spencer.

Olivia refilled her wineglass and calmly followed her lover outside onto the porch.

"Are you out of your MIND?" Natalia exploded, waving her arms angrily as she ranted. "Following Reva to God knows where to rescue Jeffrey? He's a trained government agent, for heaven's sake; I think he can take care of himself in this type of situation."

"Well, you wouldn't say that if you'd seen how bad a shot he is..." Olivia murmured, taking a sip of wine as she remembered the time she took him to the range at the gun club. It was most disappointing that she could not shoot the man. She didn't even want to think about what the Feds were teaching agents at Quantico these days.

"I just don't like you doing something so dangerous. You have a family to think about." Natalia closed her eyes, frustrated. He was her rapist, how could she be so loyal to the man? How could she put herself in harm's way, after everything with Jane still so fresh in their minds?

"He's Ava's father, Natalia." Olivia stared hard as Natalia opened her eyes again and looked back up at her. "How could I look my daughter in the eye if I didn't do everything in my power to bring him back to her?"

Natalia looked away, running a hand through her hair. She had a point, damn it.

"Then hire a small army and send Rambo Shayne in there with them. Your family needs you here," Natalia's eyes started to well with unshed tears. "I need you here."

Olivia looked down. She didn't want to leave her family any more than Natalia wanted her to go.

Putting her wineglass down, she took a step and tugged her lover into a tight hug and sighed. There was no right answer here.

"Damn it, I wasn't going to cry..." Natalia sniffed into Olivia's strong shoulder.

"Shhh, now. Come here." Olivia dropped tender kisses into the dark hair, running soothing circles along the Natalia's back. "As much as I would love to invade a foreign country with a black ops team, even I can't swing that one. Reva needs my help. Jeffrey is in trouble and Jonathan is down there already. We have to help them. Maybe once I'm there we can get the local police to help us find him. I won't know until we're down there and try."

Natalia sighed and rubbed at her eyes with the heel of her palm, looking very much as Olivia imagined she did as a little girl. Her heart melted a little more. If this precious woman wasn't reason enough to be very, very careful down there, she didn't know what was.

"I know. Just don't expect me to like it."

"Anna has some contacts for us. Once I'm there, we can get the local police to help us find out what happened to Jonathan today and where Jeffrey has been taken. Throw some money around and see what we can get moving." Olivia started pacing already trying to work out a plan of attack. It felt good to be able to do something.

"Use that old Spencer charm of yours?" Natalia teased half-heartedly, knowing that she had lost the battle. As much as she hated to admit it, Olivia really needed to take care of this. "They won't stand a chance."

Olivia gave her a lopsided grin before leaning in close and capturing tender lips. Pulling apart they bumped their foreheads together affectionately, enjoying the familiar closeness. She squeezed her lover a little tighter, already realizing that Natalia would need to cover for her at the Beacon this week.

They had talked about Natalia's return to the Beacon now that she had been added as co-owner of the hotel, but her official title hadn't been finalized yet. They had discussed Natalia shadowing Olivia at first and then taking the newly created position of Assistant General Manager while Olivia moved deeper into the franchising side of things as the General Manager. So much for easing Natalia into the position, it would seem she was about to have a baptism by fire this week.

"Your mission, should you choose to accept it," Olivia teased, hoping to ease her lover's worry, "is to run the Beacon while I'm gone. Without killing Greg."

Natalia snorted into her shoulder.

"Ok, I realize that's almost impossible. How about, you can hurt Greg, you just can't kill him." Olivia threaded her fingers through the thick dark hair as Natalia looked up at her, a small smile beginning to quirk her lips. "That's my girl..."

They held each other for a moment, Olivia nuzzling along the soft hairline, dropping butterfly kisses along the way.

"Promise me you'll be careful." Natalia whispered, still reluctant to let her lover go.

"I promise." Olivia murmured against soft skin, meaning every word. "Besides, you can't get rid of me that easily." Pulling apart, they smiled at each other and started back into the farmhouse. Grabbing her wineglass, Olivia's mind started running over everything that needed to be taken care of.

"I have to call Phillip and see if the Spaulding jet is available." Olivia took a sip and pulled the screen door open for Natalia. "And I'll need my gun."

Natalia paused and glanced up at her partner's serious eyes. She still didn't like this, not one bit.

"I've got a bad feeling about this..." Natalia sighed and stepped back into the warmth of their home.

~~*~*

Reva had left and the kids were tucked safely in their beds before Olivia disappeared from the farmhouse, heading towards the barn, flashlight in hand. She opened the heavy barn door slowly and made her way to where she had stored some boxes. She knew Natalia hated her having her gun in the house, and the thought of little Emma or Francesca ever getting their hands on it sent a shiver down her back. So she had packed it up into a box when they had moved out of the farmhouse and just never unpacked it when they returned. It had been out here ever since.

"Where did I put you..." Olivia muttered to herself in the half light.

A loud creak sounded and Olivia froze. Maybe coming out here, by herself, hadn't been the wisest move. She turned slowly, checking the shadows for anything unusual.

She heard the noise again, this time to her right. And fairly close.

Standing perfectly still, Olivia held her breath and tried to see what was there.

A small field mouse poked his nose out from behind a loose board, the board creaking as the mouse moved to toss a sunflower seed onto the floor with a quiet click.

Olivia exhaled and ran a hand through her hair.

"You scared me there little buddy." She laughed at herself and turned back towards the stack of boxes. Finding the right one, she popped it open and dug down into it, pulling out old newsprint and finally her gun. Digging a little deeper she found the package of bullets. Folding the box closed again, she made her way to the barn door and out into the late evening sunshine.

Edmund silently stepped out of the shadows and smiled evilly.

The game was on.

~~*~*

Act 3

Jeffrey O'Neill sat slumped on his bare cot, bruised and battered, his leg chained to the brick wall of his tiny cell. The Winslow compound was a fortress and, as he had begun to discover, it was as difficult to escape from as it had been to find in the first place.

The tired man squinted into the darkness of his cell, the dim light coming from under the locked door not really helpful. Jeffrey had lost track of time in the small six by six foot room, stripped of his watch and phone and drugged for God knows how long. His only hope now was that Jonathan and Anna would find him quickly and be able to break him out of here somehow.

Jeffrey looked up as he heard heavy footsteps approaching; the grumbling of his belly telling him that it must soon be meal time. The lock turned, sounding loud in the darkness, and then the door was flung open. Jeffrey blinked in surprise, his eyes having difficulty adjusting to the brightness. He stood, looking for an opportunity to escape, as two huge guards dragged in a new prisoner, dropping him to the floor of the cell in a boneless heap. Cuffing the new man's leg to the far wall, the thugs gave him a swift kick to the gut and laughed.

Jeffrey winced in sympathy, but stayed well back. He could just see the man through the guard's legs, clutching at his stomach as he cried out in pain, gasping for breath.

"Next time, shut the fuck up when I'm talking to you, asshole." The largest guard growled, before turning and noticing his audience. He glared at Jeffrey, who quickly sat down. "What are you lookin' at? You want a beat down too, O'Neill? 'Cuz that can easily be arranged."

Jeffrey shook his head and looked down, shuffling as far back on his cot as his own chains would let him. Laughing, the two men headed out the door, slamming the cell door shut behind them. Jeffrey could make out the scuffling sounds of the injured prisoner locked in with him as he seemed to be seeking the other cot. He heard the loud squeak of coils as the other prisoner found the tiny bed.

"Are you okay?" Jeffrey tried to focus in the darkness, listening for cues, to try and figure out if the new prisoner was going to be an ally or a problem. He heard a slight gasp and then more rustling.

“Did he call you O’Neill?” The man groaned from the other cot. “Jeffrey, is that you?”

Jeffrey froze, the voice sounding extremely familiar, finally it all clicked into place.

“Jonathan?” Jeffrey couldn’t help the grin that broke out, despite the circumstances. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I know it doesn’t seem like it at the moment,” Jonathan grinned as much as he could with his split lip. “But I’ve come to save your sorry butt.”

“Well, I see that’s gone smoothly for you...” Jeffrey shook his head.

“Shut up.” Jonathan chuckled and then coughed, grabbing at his ribs. “And don’t make me laugh, it hurts.”

“Tell me Anna is still free out there, coming to get us both. Did you meet up with Lopez at the Devil’s Heart like I told you too?” Jeffrey tried not to get too excited, but this was the best news he’d had in a long time, despite Jonathan being locked in chains as well.

“Uh, not exactly.” Jonathan rolled to his back on the narrow cot, his chains rattling along the wire frame. “She’s stuck in Springfield, heading up the Chief’s new task force in Springfield.”

“What?” Jeffrey frowned, confused. “A task force?”

“Yeah, it gets better. I’m sure Reva is on her way here as we speak.” Jonathan continued, knowing his mother wouldn’t be able to rest until she had her husband back in Springfield, safe and sound. If anyone was going to kill Jeffrey, it was going to be Reva.

“Reva knows?” Jeffrey closed his eyes and ran a hand through his hair. This was so not good. “How the hell did Reva find out?”

“From you.” Jonathan ground out as another wave of nausea came over him. “Edmund has struck in Springfield, Jeffrey. Anna and I were called out to the Spaulding’s to explain what we know. Reva was there and picked up my cell phone when you called, and recognized your voice. She knows everything.”

Jeffrey fidgeted, his mind racing. They needed to get out of this damn cell, now more than ever. Edmund was a time bomb waiting to go off. And their family would be his prime targets.

“Ava, Olivia, the Mayor, hell half of Springfield knows now. Edmund killed Olivia’s nanny while trying to snatch Sarah. The police now have all the proof they need that he killed

her. Everyone is scared and getting ready to fight back and watch out for each other. All they need now, is you.” Jonathan said quietly.

Jeffrey looked away and sighed. Things were quickly going from bad to worse.

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Reva stared out the tiny window of the Spaulding’s small private jet, watching the Mexican landscape move along lazily far below. She turned to glance across the aisle at Olivia, who was dozing in her seat, her laptop glowing on the seat beside her. She couldn’t have chosen a better sidekick for this fight. The woman had been like a demon possessed once the decision had been made to actually do this.

The older woman shook her head, impressed with the work ethic of her one-time rival. Olivia had nodded off after sending last minute emails to her staff and Natalia. She had also arranged for a meeting, as soon as they land, with some of the local authorities arranged through some of her Washington friends and some old San Cristobel movers and shakers she had kept in touch with, to try to smooth out their arrival in Mexico and to get them some much needed help navigating the legal system, or lack there of.

Reva smiled softly at the sleeping woman. Olivia wasn’t nearly as tough as she’d have everyone believe. No wonder Josh had fallen for her, she was just his type. Tough on the outside, gooey soft inside, if she ever let you see it.

She turned to stare out the window again and sighed, thinking of the last time she had seen her ex-husband. Reva couldn’t stop the flare of love and pain that suddenly bloomed in her chest. She missed him so much, too.

“We said one year, Bud.” Reva murmured sadly, realizing that was coming up quickly. She was going to need every minute to figure things out now.

God, what the hell was she going to do now?

~~*~*

Natalia opened the door to the small office and stepped into Olivia’s private domain. She felt a little like an interloper, but it hadn’t been all that long ago that she had sat just outside this very room and helped keep her partner organized and prepared to handle all situations. Now though, she was the one in the hot seat.

She could do this. Olivia had faith in her and deep down inside, Natalia knew she would be able to handle it. She made her way around Olivia’s large desk, and pulled out her chair, smoothly rolling it back. Sinking down into the chair, she leaned back and sighed. These

were some big pumps she was going to have to try to fill here. She glanced up as the office door opened a little wider

“Ms. Spencer left this for you,” Keira spoke quietly from the doorway, smiling at her temporary new boss. Although she had seen Natalia often in recent months, dropping in for quick visits with their adorable baby or just popping in as a surprise, their conversations had been brief and casual. However, she had heard a lot about Natalia Rivera from the other staff, and if even half of it was true, she already quite liked her. She brought in a shoebox sized wrapped present and left it on the corner of the desk.

“I’ll just let you get settled in and then I can bring you the reports for the Finance meeting later this afternoon.”

“Thanks, Keira.” Natalia nodded, smiling at the attractive blonde as she disappeared once more to the outer office. To what had once been Natalia’s old desk. She shook her head, still not quite believing she was a partner in the business now and pulled her surprise present closer. Lifting the lid off, she found a simple white card on top, the note written in Olivia’s neat handwriting.

Official Boss Kit
Use only in case of emergencies.
Love, O

Natalia smiled widely. Digging deeper into the box, she laughed out loud as her hand wrapped around a small bottle of scotch. Pulling it out she put it onto the desk top and then grinned some more as she found a bottle of aspirin and a box of her favorite chocolates. Pulling them all out from the tissue papered depths of the box, she looked and saw one more thing lurking at the very bottom.

A whip.

“Dear God.” Natalia blushed, not even wanting to know where her lover had found that on such short notice.

And then she laughed, armed and ready to take on the world.

~~*~*

Frank stared at the farmhouse porch from the comfort of his car and sighed. He had wanted to come by just to make sure everything was fine. The safety of Francesca and Marina were his priorities right now and even though Phillip had a security detail patrolling past the farm at regular intervals, he still felt better swinging by himself on

occasion. Just dropping by the farmhouse was something he hadn't done in a while but still felt familiar. Old habits die hard, he guessed

Turning his car around in the empty yard, his mind flashed back to his farce of a romance with Natalia. He still didn't know how he had missed the signs. Love truly was blind. And as painful as it had been at the time, Natalia had done the right thing, and he knew it.

At the thought of doing the right thing, Frank sighed, still unsure what to do about his feelings for Blake. Maybe they just needed a little more time. He hadn't spent as much time with her as he should, work and his little Sweet Pea taking huge chunks of it. Blake really deserved more from him.

With Eleni back in town and having to work with her on a fairly regular basis, Frank realized it was going to be a challenging time coming up for him, too. Marina was already having a holy fit about the whole thing. Frank sighed as he thought about trying to juggle all the women in his life. A part of him just wanted to crawl into bed and hide.

He suddenly stopped, as something caught his eye near the pond. Leaning slightly out of the car window, he squinted, trying to make out what it was he saw. There was something disturbing the long grass at the far side of the pond. Frank slid a hand inside his jacket, his fingers wrapping around his service revolver, loosening it in his shoulder holster but not quite drawing it, ready for anything. Suddenly there was a flurry of activity and then a duck took off into the air, flapping and quacking as it went.

Frank let out a breath he didn't even realize he had been holding, tucked his gun securely back into the holster and laughed at himself. This whole Edmund thing was making everyone so jumpy. It was high time to get back to his office anyway; his email inbox was probably overflowing by now. He finished turning his car around and headed down the long driveway, before heading back into town.

Dark eyes watched carefully from the loft of the barn, peering out through cracks between the barn boards. This place was turning into Grand Central Station. He grimaced and started thinking about other locations he could move to, as Frank's car sped up and quickly disappeared down the road.

~~*~*

The Devil's Heart was a bit of a dive as Mexican cantinas went, but the food was good and the bartender poured strong drinks. Sitting out on the tiny patio soaking up the afternoon sun, Olivia glanced at her watch for the millionth time, before pushing her aviator sunglasses a little higher on her nose.

"Where the hell is he?" Olivia murmured. She had just about all she could take with waiting for meetings and smooth talking the locals. Still their meeting with some of the local police authorities had gone very well and she was pleased that they all seemed very concerned of the illegal activities that have been coming and going out of the Winslow compound. In between meetings it had had taken them all morning to arrange a meeting with Anna's contact and now he was late.

"Relax, he'll be here." Reva speared a fry with her fork and dipped it into a blob of ketchup. "Did you hear back from Doris?" She watched as Olivia slipped her blackberry out of her pocket and checked, shaking her head.

"The cell phone signal down here sucks." Olivia grimaced and stuck it back into her pocket. "I don't even know if my text got sent for sure. I'll call her from the hotel when we get back and get an update on what's happening in Springfield."

"Mrs. O'Neill and Ms. Spencer, I presume?" A slightly stocky man stood beside their table smiling down at them. His handsome dark complexion and accented voice marked him as a local, but his light colored hazel eyes hinted at an interesting family history.

"I'm Daniel Lopez." He flashed a brilliant smile and bowed ever so slightly. "I'm so sorry I'm late."

Reva looked up and smiled, charmed as he kissed her hand. There was something about the man that reminded her of Josh. Maybe it was the smile or the way his eyes crinkled. Or maybe it was the sense of calm confidence that surrounded the man.

"We're just glad you could meet us on such short notice." Olivia waved at the empty chair at their table. "Have a seat."

Daniel pulled the chair out and nodded to the bartender, who quickly started to pour a drink.

"I'm assuming you're here for the same reason that Jonathan Randall was." Daniel leaned back, his eyes starting to wander along Olivia's curves and hollows. Reva moved forward and caught his attention again.

"You've seen Jonathan?" The blonde smiled. At last some good news, he had at least been here. "Oh, thank God. Do you know where he is?"

"He had asked me for the location of Edmund Winslow's compound and I told him that our local police have been watching this place a few hours drive from here. They think that a lot of illegal activity is going on out of that place." Daniel frowned a little. "It's not a pleasant place to visit."

He idly rubbed at a vivid scar, an angry red slash along his forearm.

“Are you with the police?” Olivia asked, a little suspicious of this helpful man. Anna had been very vague about where she and Jeffrey knew this man from but she seemed confident that they could trust him. She had her doubts. She was still waiting to hear back on her own background check from one of her friends in Washington.

“I used to be. Now I’m... how you’d say, freelance?” Daniel shrugged and smiled warmly, taking his glass of tequila from the waiter. “Thank you, Jose.” The waiter nodded and disappeared back into the busy cantina.

“We would like to hire a small security team...” Reva began, both women trying to get a feel for their contact.

“I’m assuming that you have not heard from either Jeffrey or Jonathan and you think they are in trouble?” Daniel cut to the chase. “Why beat around the bush ladies? Time is of the essence after all.”

Reva and Olivia exchanged looks. Why indeed?

“Go on,” Reva prodded.

“I can certainly provide the team and will show you myself how to get to the Winslow compound. However I cannot be caught doing anything, shall we say...questionable. After all I live here.” The man smiled, taking a sip of his drink.

“How much?” Olivia asked, her eyes narrowing. Everything in life always seemed to come down to a dollar figure. She suddenly felt like she needed a shower.

“I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” Lopez grinned and began the negotiations in earnest.

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Natalia sank down into the comfortable office chair ignoring the three lines blinking at her. She shook her head, having no clue how Olivia handled all this stress, day in and day out. She looked up as Keira quickly tapped at the office door, sticking her blonde head just inside.

“Blake Marler is here to see you, Ms. Rivera. If you have a moment.” The statuesque blonde was prepared to stonewall the redhead if necessary. She could tell that the new boss was a little overwhelmed and would help out as much as she could.

Natalia sighed, knowing that there were a million things needing her attention at the moment, but being a friend would always come first.

“Sure, Keira, send her in. Would you mind getting me the address for that restaurant downtown you were telling me about that your friend works at? I think I’ll treat the girls to dinner out tonight. Oh, and call Paul to tell him I’m going to be a little late for the Food and Beverage meeting. Thanks.” Natalia turned to quickly glance at the mountain of emails steadily growing in Olivia’s inbox. Only five of them had an urgent red exclamation mark beside the subject line. Her day was looking up.

“Hey, Natalia.” Blake pushed the office door open and took in the small office. “I don’t think I’ve ever been in the dragon’s lair before.”

“Shh, they haven’t quite figured out I’m a pretender to the throne around here.” Natalia smiled as she smelled fresh coffee, and if she wasn’t mistaken a small paper bag with hopefully something yummy inside. “What did you bring me?”

“Muffins, fresh from Company’s oven.” Blake sat down and handed over the small bag. “I thought you might need a little afternoon break by now.”

“Mmm...they’re still warm.” Natalia bit into the much appreciated muffin. “What’s in there, cinnamon?”

“And nutmeg, my secret ingredients.” Blake sipped at her coffee, grinning over the rim of her cup.

Natalia nodded, she’d have to try that next time. She watched as her friend seemed to slump a little in her chair. Something didn’t seem right with the usually chatty redhead.

“You okay, Blake?”

“Yes.” Blake nodded, and then shifted slightly before finally standing and pacing a little around the office. “No. Well, maybe...”

Natalia leaned back in the chair, frowning as she watched the older woman fidget. Something was definitely going on with her friend. She hoped Frank wasn’t being a total idiot again.

“It’s just,” Blake sat back down and leaned a little closer. “Eleni Andros is back in town and I’m a little worried.”

"About what?" Natalia's eyebrows rose and she leaned back. Frank's ex-wife had seemed nice enough of what she had seen and heard about her. "You and Frank are doing okay, right?"

"Oh, sure." Blake ran a hand through her hair, not sure how much she should talk about it. She glanced back up at her friend. "I'm just a little...I don't know, confused lately? Frank has been a little distant and has been working so much, trying to be the best Chief of Police he can possibly be. And then Eleni and I have old history too."

"What kind of history?" Natalia frowned, sure that there was more to the story than the red head was saying.

"It's complicated..." Blake cocked her head to the side and tried to figure out the easiest way to explain the tangled web of love from nearly twenty years ago now. She shrugged and decided to just cut it down to the bare essentials.

"Eleni and I were both in love with my ex-husband, Alan-Michael Spaulding, at the same time. I thought I could get rid of her by reporting to the officials that Eleni was an illegal alien from Greece, but my plan backfired when Alan-Michael married her." Blake looked down at her hands, knowing that she would still do just about anything for someone she loved.

"I was devastated. That was the first time that Frank and I got together, but it didn't last that long. I knew he was in love with Eleni and we were both just hurting. Besides, you know me, I never give up and I kept pursuing Alan-Michael. It didn't end up very well in the end though. I eventually lost him and my job at Spaulding Enterprises because of it all. Frank and Eleni did end up together though." Blake looked away a little depressed at how horribly wrong that whole escapade had gone. Eleni always seemed to beat her at her own game. It was annoying, damn it.

"So now you think she's going to...?" Natalia probed gently. She could certainly understand why Blake was a little worried; she probably wasn't Eleni's most favorite person in the world even after all this time.

"I think she might try to make my life miserable again. Try and break us up or make Frank's life difficult because of me. It's what she does." Blake stood and started to pace again.

"You don't know that for sure." Natalia made a mental note though to keep a closer eye on the new CSI supervisor. "She's changed, you've changed. I'm sure it's all water under the bridge."

Blake snorted, not quite believing it. Still Natalia had a point. She certainly wasn't that same person from twenty years ago. She wasn't the same person from five years ago even.

"I wonder what made her get out of catering and take up forensics." Somehow Blake couldn't quite picture the tall woman testing samples of blood and other gross things. She shuddered a little at the thought of what came across the woman's desk in a day.

"This from the woman who is a realtor, a romance novelist and whatever it is Buzz calls you at Company" Natalia grinned at her multi-talented friend, as she popped another morsel into her mouth.

"Hey, don't forget ordained minister." Blake replied with a wink, dropping back down into her chair.

"What?" Natalia blinked, nearly choking on the last bit of her muffin. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, ordained minister in the Church of Karma, but that's a story best told one night over several glasses of wine." Blake smiled and shook her head. Ah, the schemes she had come up with back in her bad old days. The redhead sighed, wondering just where that feisty girl had disappeared to anyway? She wouldn't be afraid to go after what she really wanted.

"A girl's got to keep her options open, I suppose." Blake mused as she swirled her cooling coffee and took a drink. The problem was she didn't even want to begin to look at her girl crush on Doris Wolfe. Besides, it was Frank that she was worried about losing, right?

"You never cease to amaze me." Natalia shook her head and made her way back to the other side of her desk. Glancing at her inbox she realized those emails were starting to pile up again. "And I thought I'd done a lot of different jobs to earn a living."

"I should let you get back to work." Blake stood and made her way back to the door as Natalia's cell phone began to ring this time. "Lunch later this week?"

"Definitely." Natalia smiled and nodded as she answered her cell phone, Leyla's name showing on the call display. Now what? The office door slid shut as she focused on her younger sister's voice.

"Ava is being a bitc...I mean, a royal pain." Leyla growled on the other end of the line. Natalia chuckled, her sister already owing the swear jar twenty bucks and counting. "She doesn't want to go to her appointment."

"I do not need to have a scan. I feel fine." Ava grumped in the background.

"Even I can tell you need your head examined," Leyla's voice rose, obviously still arguing with the other girl in the suite upstairs. "Because, seriously, you have a major attitude problem."

"I don't have an attitude problem, you have a perception problem." Ava shot back in the background.

Natalia pinched her nose, and counted to five. There was nothing quite like that Spencer stubborn streak. She could just march upstairs to their suite and shake some sense into the girl. She could do with seeing Francesca again. The thought of her littlest girl and her adorable baby dimples brought a huge smile to her face and Natalia felt calmer again.

"Leyla, could I speak to Ava for a moment?" Natalia sighed. She didn't need this right now, but hopefully Ava would see the sense of getting the head scan. Who knew what damage could have been done by that mad man. Natalia didn't even want to think about what would have happened if Leyla hadn't stepped in when she did.

"Hi, Natalia." Ava sounded a little subdued. Natalia could almost picture the pout.

"Ava, do me a favor and go for the scan. That way your mother will not kill me when she returns." Natalia looked up as Keira dropped a small mountain of file folders on her desk and disappeared out the door again.

"But—"

"Please, Ava." Natalia smiled into the phone. She hated to use it, but it was obviously time for the old guilt card. "For your mother's peace of mind."

The long suffering sigh on the other side signaled victory.

"All right. I'll go." Ava ground out. "Here's Leyla."

Natalia glanced over a letter on the top of the latest mound of files and sighed. The hotel's executive chef just resigned, his letter of resignation stating that he was leaving at the end of the week. Apparently the Food and Beverage manager had bullied him one time too many.

Natalia heard a little scuffle sound as the phone was handed back over to her sister.

"Hey, it's me." Leyla's voice came back over the line, obviously pleased. Natalia needed to nip the smugness in the bud.

"Be nice." Natalia warned, hoping that the girl listened to her. She picked up her pen and clicked it open and closed.

"I'm always nice." Leyla covered the receiver and Natalia heard a muffled retort. "I heard that Peralta."

"Listen, Ava is getting a little stir crazy so cut her some slack, okay?" Natalia shook her head. The young woman was so much like Olivia sometimes it wasn't funny. "If Rick gives her the go ahead, I'll get her busy helping me tomorrow and you will have the suite to yourself to keep an eye on the baby."

"Sounds good to me." Leyla grumbled. The tall woman was starting to drive her insane.

"Ava's appointment is for three at Cedars. Rick called to confirm it personally. So please make sure she gets there on time." Natalia chewed the end of her pen, deciding that she really didn't want to cook tonight and she was definitely going to take the family out to dinner.

"All right, I'll do my best." Leyla grumbled into the phone.

"That's more than enough for me then." Natalia smiled as her sister said good bye and hung up.

World war three successfully diverted. Time to update the General about the latest development.

Dialing Olivia's cell phone number from memory, Natalia waited patiently for her partner to pick up. She chewed her bottom lip as the call went directly to voice mail. She knew that the cell phone signals down there were spotty but that still didn't stop a little ball of worry from forming in the pit of her stomach. Now she just needed to find a new head chef before the convention arrived on Friday night.

~~*~*

"Li." Anna growled into her telephone handset, ready to kill whoever was on the other end of the line. The morning had been horrible with the Chief and forensics coming at her from all sides. She had been trying to organize which men she wanted to be on the taskforce and juggle the rest of her caseload. Remy looked up from his report and frowned at her, worried.

"Ben. What's up?" Anna took a deep breath and tried to focus on what was being said to her on the phone.

"I'm sorry, what?" Anna asked as Remy stood up and wandered over to his partner's desk.

"When?" Anna grew very still. She met Remy's eyes, before closing her eyes tight. "How long?" She nodded and sighed. This was not good. "Thanks, Ben. I owe you one."

Hanging up, she took a moment to gather her thoughts. Remy looked like he was about to explode with curiosity.

"Federal agent Daniel Lopez just washed up on shore. He's been dead for over a week."

"Damn." Remy rubbed his jaw. "If Lopez is dead, then who is meeting Reva and Olivia?"

"Good question." Anna quickly dialed Reva's cell phone. No answer. She tried Olivia's number next, it went straight to voicemail.

"I hope your passport is up to date, Boudreaux." Anna grimaced, not looking forward to trying to explain this all to the Chief. "Call Cyrus. We need to figure out how to get down there as soon as possible."

Anna stared at her cell phone, wanting to call Doris, to warn her of what was going on, to hear her voice, even if it was yelling at her. She sighed, resigned to the fact that Frank needed to be the one she reported it to. Pulling her blazer jacket on, she headed out of the office.

~~*~*

Jonathan sat on his cot in the dark room holding a small bowl of gruel and sniffed it.

"Do you think it's drugged?" He dipped a finger into the warm goop, the consistency reminding him of paper mache. Jonathan knew he should eat to try to regain some of his strength, but this didn't even look like food.

"No, but it's pretty disgusting." Jeffery scooped some of the mushy food onto his fingers and into his mouth. "You get used to it."

Jonathan put the bowl down and sighed. They needed to get out of here before Edmund figured that Reva knew everything. He grabbed the chain cuffed to his leg and gave it a tug, testing its strength. The chain pulled away slightly from the wall, the bolts in the mortar shifting ever so slightly. With a little brute force it just might give away.

Jonathan smiled. Things were starting to look up around here.

~~*~*

Eleni Andros shook her head, her long chestnut curls swirling around her shoulders as she looked through the files yet again. There had been so much unusual activity going on in the police department. Chief Wolfe had been totally oblivious to what was going on around him, and Frank was not much better.

“Well, we can’t have that...” she murmured softly to herself until a familiar voice from the doorway startled her.

“Can’t have what?” Frank stood there, a small smile on his face and two cups of coffee in his hand.

“Oh, Frank. I didn’t hear you come in.” Eleni smiled back as her ex-husband wandered into her office. The lab was generally a noisy place with experiments and machinery humming and buzzing around them.

“I brought you a coffee. Double, double right?” Frank placed the paper cup down onto her desk and grinned. It smelled heavenly and the timing was perfect.

“You remembered. Thank you” Eleni smiled warmly taking the offering as Frank nodded and stepped away, dropping down into one of the other chairs in her office.

“What’s with all the paperwork? Surely sleepy old Springfield isn’t going to keep you as busy as Los Angeles did.” Frank shifted under the woman’s thoughtful gaze. He remembered that look well. It usually meant that he hadn’t done something right and he was about to hear about it.

“I’ve been tasked by the Mayor to go over old cases. Double check the science and see if there were any mistakes or anything that could come back to haunt us.” Eleni swirled her coffee and took a sip.

“Oh.” Frank didn’t like the sound of this. Damn Doris Wolfe, sticking her nose where it didn’t belong.

“Frank, I think there’s been some funny business going on around here. For several years.” Eleni watched her ex-husband’s eyes grow wide. She leaned forward, getting his undivided attention. “And I have no idea how high up the chain this goes, but it could be bad news for the department.”

Frank swallowed hard and looked away. He needed this like a hole in the head. This could get very messy, very quickly. Who knew how many cases this was going to affect and how many political careers were going to be touched by this scandal. Frank looked up and met concerned eyes staring back at him. She was going to need his help. He never could say no to her anyway.

“Well, I have your back, Eleni.” Frank straightened his shoulders, suddenly feeling years younger. “Just get to the bottom of it and keep me in the loop. Let the chips fall where they may and together we’ll figure the rest out.”

Eleni nodded, pleased to know that Frank was at heart still an honorable man, after all this time apart. They smiled at each other, both thinking that maybe this working together thing was going to work out just fine.

They both looked up as Anna Li arrived at the office door, not looking happy.

The Rivoli was busy, and as Natalia held a fussing Francesca closer she realized she should have called for a reservation at the small restaurant. Emma was chattering about her day to a quiet Ava and Leyla. Stepping up to the small table where the host was, Natalia smiled at the overwhelmed server.

“Hi, we don’t have a reservation, but I was wondering if...”

“Ms. Rivera?” The woman looked up and smiled. “Your assistant called about an hour ago. We have your table ready.” She grabbed several menus and led the way, a slightly stunned Natalia following.

“Okay, Keira just scored bonus points for that one.” Leyla smirked as the family settled into the seats. She held the highchair steady as Natalia slid a squirming Francesca into it.

“It’s her job. A good assistant always anticipates her boss’ needs.” Ava said testily as she handed Emma a menu. Leyla grinned lecherously at the unintended innuendo by Ava and shot a sly glance at Natalia.

“Don’t even go there.” Natalia raised her finger as her sister’s mouth opened and then snapped shut. She felt herself blush a little anyway and prayed that it wasn’t noticeable in the dim lighting. Leyla helped her arrange Francesca into the high chair that had quickly arrived and before they knew it drinks had arrived and they had ordered their meals.

“So how did the CT scan go?” Natalia took a sip of her soda and leaned back, trying to let the stress of the day go. Leyla glanced over to the taller woman and waited for her to spill it.

“I’ve got a concussion just like Rick thought, but nothing more serious.” Ava sat a little straighter, she had known she didn’t need to go for the stupid scan.

“Leyla said that’s because Ava’s hard headed.” Emma added, grinning and then growing worried as her aunt choked a little on her drink. Natalia and Ava both turned to give Leyla a look, as she sheepishly wiped at her mouth with her napkin.

“Anyway, I have some meds from Rick that I have to take and he said to just take it easy for a few days. And it’s not like I have a job right now to rush back to, so...” Ava shrugged looking a little sad. She glanced up as Natalia reached over, squeezing her arm.

“Olivia left instructions if you wanted to help out at the Beacon until you figure out what you want to do. No pressure, but the offer is out there if you’re interested.” Natalia smiled warmly.

Ava nodded, touched by the gesture, and squeezed Natalia’s hand back in silent thanks. The moment was broken as their food started to arrive.

Natalia spooned some applesauce and sweet potato puree into Francesca’s mouth. Her bottom two teeth had come in last week and were showing as the baby smiled, gumming and smacking her food happily. Natalia smiled widely as her little hand gripped at the spoon, pulling it towards her mouth.

“Oh my God, this is so good.” Leyla moaned, practically at the same moment Ava sighed with pleasure over her own dish. Natalia realized the whole table was silent as they all dove into their food. After making sure that Francesca was doing okay, Natalia took a bite of her own meal.

“Wow.” Natalia could taste all sorts of exotic spices and flavors in her dish. She paused and looked around the packed restaurant, at everyone enjoying their meals. She glanced over at the lineup starting to form at the door. Natalia nodded to herself, wondering just what Keira’s friend did here at the Rivoli, and suspecting her assistant was up to something.

She smiled as an idea starting to take shape.

~~*~*

Olivia tossed another piece of wood onto the campfire and sank back down onto the log beside Reva. It had taken them three long hours to get to the rendezvous point with Daniel’s men. They had been on standby since Jonathan had arrived. Apparently he had wanted to scout the compound with one of the men who had been inside before and neither of them had returned. That was two nights ago now.

Reva silently stared into the fire as the flames started to lick higher. She wrapped her blanket a little tighter around her shoulders to ward against the cool night air and glanced over at their guide, who was laughing and joking with their men.

“God, sometimes Daniel reminds me so much of Josh.” Reva murmured, before turning back to a thoughtful Olivia. “Don’t you think?”

Olivia glanced past her and looked a little longer at the man. He was built a little like a buffer version of their ex-husband, and the little goatee added to the resemblance. She knew herself well enough to know that not that long ago she would have already had him in her bed, purely for the sake of comparison. She snorted, oddly pleased to find that the New Improved Olivia wasn’t sorry about missing out on that at all.

“I can see it, a little around the eyes.” Olivia smiled softly and took a swig from a small flask and offered some to the blonde, who paused, then took a drink before handing it back. Olivia closed the silver flask and sat it by her boot, and waited for Reva to continue.

“I thought that with a little time to get my head together, to get over Jeffrey’s...death,” Reva rolled her eyes at that, the pain and anger still very close to the surface. “I figured that I’d end up with Josh again. Give it time, a year we had agreed.” Reva sighed as if the weight of the world rested on her shoulders. “And just when I thought I’d finally found myself again, knew where I was headed and with who... damn it, everything has changed.”

“Life does that to you sometimes.” Olivia nodded staring into the flames, her mind going back to the changes in her own life in the last few years. “Just when you think you finally know what the right thing is, what you are meant to do...wham. Love throws you a curve ball.”

The image of Natalia running down the aisle, away from Frank and everything normal that Olivia thought she was supposed to want flashed across her mind. It was like yesterday, her memory of Natalia standing in the gazebo declaring her love, the snow falling around them, her heart thundering in her chest with joy and fear. Curve ball.

Reva glanced over at her old adversary. She knew she shouldn’t but she was just dying to ask. And if not now, then when would an opportunity for a heart-to-heart like this happen again?

“So, what’s it like?” Reva grabbed a longer stick and poked at the fire a little, waiting to see what Olivia would say. She watched as the other woman froze, then turned to face her, raising an eyebrow, obviously surprised and not sure she’d heard her right.

“Oh, come on, Olivia,” Reva smirked, goading just a little as she reached down for the flask again. “It must be something pretty damn good to make a leopard like you change your spots like that...”

“It wasn’t some-thing,” Olivia finally spoke, grabbing Reva’s stick to poke at the fire herself. If Reva actually had the guts to ask her, she could answer the curious woman. “It was some-one.” Her voice grew softer, tender, and she ignored the amused look on the blonde’s face.

“Natalia.” Her lover’s name tripped off her tongue with a sigh. Olivia shook her head and smiled softly, looking up at the stars twinkling up above. God she missed her and it hadn’t even been a full twenty-four hours yet.

“She just stepped around all my bullshit and emotional minefields, right past all the walls I put up and never gave up on me. She loves me despite it all. The rest of it, just kind of took care of itself...” Olivia stared back down into the fire. She flashed back to those first shy kisses in the hallway when she first moved back into the farmhouse, slowly rebuilding her trust, patiently waiting for each other, until they could wait no more.

“So, you’re saying that you’d never found women attractive before Natalia?” Reva wasn’t quite buying it. Olivia’s eyes twinkled with mischief as she turned back to the clearly skeptical blonde.

“Well, let’s see...who else have I argued so ferociously with? Who else has driven me insane with her bossy ways, dared to call me out when I didn’t do something that seemed right...” Olivia’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly and she seductively licked her lips, staring intensely at the older woman beside her.

Reva’s eyes widened and she swallowed self-consciously. Olivia couldn’t keep a straight face any longer and let her off the hook, breaking out into laughter and slapping her leg.

“Relax, I was just yanking your chain.” Olivia nudged the blonde with her elbow, smiling warmly as she shook her head and grinned back. “Besides you’re too old for me anyway, Reva...”

Reva’s jaw dropped, and her eyebrows descended, insulted.

“Shut up. You just don’t know what you’re missing, Spencer.” She huffed.

“You wish.” Olivia chuckled softly, and Reva soon joined her. “Besides you have enough man trouble on your plate, you don’t need woman trouble too.”

Reva grew quiet again. The fire crackled and popped into the night for a while, smoke rising lazily skyward.

“Do you keep in touch with him?”

Olivia nodded, knowing exactly who she was talking about, not wanting to hurt the woman. They had both loved Josh Lewis, it was one more bond they shared. If she hadn't found Natalia, she would have always wondered if he had been 'The One' or, more accurately, 'The One That Got Away'. Looking over at Reva she knew she was wondering the same thing.

“He sends me text messages pretty regularly. Natalia, too. I think he's checking to make sure I'm not messing things up.” Olivia smirked. Good old Josh, always worrying about her, at least when he wasn't worrying about Reva anyway. “The hospital construction is taking a huge chunk of his life right now. They're a little behind schedule and he's been battling the city council there on code restrictions.”

Reva nodded, staring into the flames, soaking up any information she could get.

“Has he met anyone? Is he happy?” She looked at Olivia with haunted eyes. If he had changed his mind about meeting her she needed to know.

“Reva, I don't...” Olivia reached out to squeeze the blonde's hand.

“Sorry, forget I asked.” Reva moved away slightly and wiped at a falling tear, before quickly taking another slug from the flask. “I have no right to know anyway. I'm a married woman after all, whose husband couldn't even be bothered to let her know that he was alive.”

The men by the van looked over curiously at her raised upset voice. Daniel stared at them, smiling slightly and nodding. Reva ran a hand through her hair and sighed.

“He's damn hot.” Reva grumbled, checking the man out. “Do you know how long it's been since...?”

“Too long by the sounds of it.” Olivia murmured, wishing Natalia was here to help her escape from this odd conversation. Actually, Lopez kind of gave her the creeps. She couldn't quite put a finger on what it was exactly but there was something.

Reva turned back to the fire, adding another log. The smoke grew thicker for a moment and then the flames licked higher once more.

“Where there's smoke, there's fire...” Reva mumbled and took another swallow, glancing back up at the handsome man joking with his friends in Spanish.

“Does Natalia talk to you in Spanish?” Reva suddenly asked out of the blue. Olivia’s flush spoke volumes and Reva laughed. “I bet it’s sexy.”

“You have no idea.” Olivia stood up and smirked. That was all she was willing to say on the subject. She took out her Blackberry and checked for the millionth time for a signal. Still nothing. She glanced up as Daniel made his way towards them.

“Still no luck?” Daniel’s appreciative gaze tracked down her body and back up again, finally meeting her eyes.

Olivia smiled back coldly, not appreciating the unwanted attention. She slowly put her hands on her hips, pulling back the tails of the long sleeved shirt she wore over her black t-shirt, revealing her loaded gun tucked into her waistband.

“No luck here tonight, Daniel.” Olivia’s eyes were deadly serious. She glanced over to the small group of men still finishing their cigarettes by the truck, watching the exchange with a little bit of interest. She didn’t know this man, or any of them for that matter, and she was not taking any chances.

Daniel nodded and smiled warmly back, clearly getting the message.

“Have a good night then.” He wandered back past the camp fire, talking briefly to Reva before making his way to his tent. Reva looked back at her and frowned.

Olivia didn’t trust that man one bit.

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It had taken Jonathan longer to dig away at the wall than he had expected. He had been able to shatter his bowl and use one of the larger shards to loosen the bolts around his chain even more. All it needed after that was a good yank and he was free. It had taken a bit of effort, but between the two of them they were able to pull Jeffrey’s out as well.

They stood quietly to the side of the door, listening for approaching footsteps. When the guard entered with their next meal they would be able to jump him and escape.

Jeffrey signaled that he heard a shuffling sound coming closer, possibly footsteps. And then they stopped. He pressed his ear tightly against the door, just able to make out what was going on outside. A cell phone chirped and then he heard a man’s voice.

“Yes.” A deep voice spoke quietly, quickly answering the call. “Miguel is bringing them in slow and easy.” There was a bit of a pause and then laughter.

“Yes sir. Tell the old man that everything is under control here and I’ll drop Miguel’s payment to him in the morning. Mr. Winslow will be very pleased. We should have Reva Shane in chains in a few hours.”

Jeffrey closed his eyes. He knew Reva was in danger, now more than ever. He turned his head again, listening closely as the man spoke.

“I’ll contact you when we have them.”

Jeffrey heard the cell beep as it was closed and then signaled Jonathan.

“Help me!. He’s going crazy!” Jonathan screamed at the top of his lungs. He sounded like he was being murdered. Jeffrey heard the jangling of keys. Jonathan screamed again and kicked his cot.

The key turned in the lock and Jeffrey and Jonathan flattened themselves flat against the wall. They each clutched a broken shard, ready to use deadly force if necessary.

The door swung open and the large man lumbered in, gun in hand. He never knew what hit him.

~~*~*

The small group made their way to the wire fence surrounding the Winslow compound. Barbed wire wrapped along the top of the twelve foot high fence. A gorgeous mansion could be seen a good mile inside the perimeter. Spot lights shone around the house itself. It was like a fortress.

“This is as far as I go.” Daniel turned to the small armed group. “I’ll wait for you here. If you aren’t out by the appointed time, I’ll call in the reinforcements.” He nodded to Reva and Olivia. “Good luck ladies.”

Daniel slid the door open and hopped out of the back of the panel van. He stood, watching them take off and head along the fence line to the gate. Pulling out his cell phone, he quickly dialed a phone number. On the second ring it was picked up.

“The eagle has landed.”

Lopez killed the phone, smiling as a second jeep appeared. Yanking the door open, he climbed inside and grinned. He almost felt sorry for the women.

Almost.

~~*~*

The sun was rising higher as the van pulled up to the main gate of the compound. The driver paused to speak with the security detail. Reva could just make out every other word and it was in Spanish.

“What are they asking him?” She hissed to Olivia, tugging her head scarf a little more over her face and rearranging her feather duster.

“Well if my Spanish lessons with Natalia are working, he’s either asking what happened to Isabel and Consuela or what the latest World Cup soccer score is.” Olivia leaned forward, straining to hear the conversation better.

The guard laughed at the answer and then thumped the side of the van, punching the button to open the gate, letting the cleaning service van enter the compound.

They were in.

The driver turned around and smiled a toothless grin at the two women.

“See, no one ever really notices the cleaning and maintenance staff.”

~~*~*

Wednesday morning arrived bright and early in Springfield. Natalia kissed her little Sweet Pea goodbye in the Beacon lobby, the baby starting to fuss. She had been making strange with people lately, not wanting to be very far from either one of her mothers. Leyla had a way with her though and soon Francesca was giggling away as they made their way to the bank of elevators, headed upstairs to Olivia’s suite of rooms.

“You know what your moms need around here is a daycare.” Leyla smiled, bouncing the seven month old in her arms before waving and stepping onto the elevator.

Natalia blinked and then smiled widely. She’d need to research it a little bit, but she was sure that they could convert that old storage room in the basement into an adorable space for staff and guests alike to use. Maybe she could bring it up at today’s senior management meeting.

She glanced at her watch and quickly made her way towards her office. It was never good for the boss to be late.

~~*~*

Jonathan peeked around the corner and then waved Jeffrey forward. He had the guard's gun drawn and ready to use. Who knew getting out of the basement would be so difficult.

The guard did not have a key fob they could use to swipe and gain access to the locked areas of the mansion. Obviously controlled access was necessary for just this scenario, an attempted escape from the prison cells.

A security desk sat unattended, the monitors showing several camera angles of the building.

"There, it's the parking garage." Jeffrey pointed to the monitor showing the feed from camera seventeen. "We just have to find a fob that will let us access that area." He did a double take as he watched as a maintenance company van pulled into a parking spot and two very familiar women jump out from the side of the vehicle.

"Dear God, it's Reva and she dragged Olivia here with her, too." Jeffrey covered his eyes. If either of them got hurt because of this he would never be able to live with himself.

"Auntie O is always up for a fight." Jonathan snorted. They froze as they heard footsteps approaching.

"Duck!"

~~*~*

Olivia and Reva followed the two men from the garage bay into the staff entrance of the mansion. They noticed the long line of limos and sports cars. Gambling, drugs, prostitution, all of it ran out of this place. It was like a naughty resort for the Mexican rich and famous, discretion guaranteed or a bullet for your troubles.

The small group carried their cleaning supplies with them and started to move deeper into the building. One of the men, the big guy Reva lovingly called Stump, lumbered in the lead. He had a fob that he easily swiped as they went along. They paused at the landing of a set of stairs in the middle of the mansion.

"I have never been downstairs, but that is where they have the highest security." Stump mumbled.

"Give us your fob and wait for us here. We can probably get away with acting lost, since we're the new maids." Reva whispered. Stump handed her his keychain with the electronic tag dangling from it and nodded. Olivia smiled up at him and his toothless friend and followed Reva down the staircase, her hand resting on her gun, just in case.

~~*~*

Natalia stormed back into her office, slamming the door behind her.

“Whoa, whoa, where’s the fire?” Ava sat up in her chair. Keira had let her in and she had been patiently waiting for Natalia to return from the staff meeting to discuss how she could help out.

“How your mother keeps from strangling those men, I don’t know.” Natalia growled. She had been to enough of them in her day as her assistant, but somehow Olivia always managed to control the meeting. She ran a hand through her dark hair, irritated that she handled that so badly.

Ava snorted sympathetically.

“I wanted feedback about how to solve our chef issue and then wanted to talk about starting a day care facility in the basement and you would think I had suggested killing someone.” Natalia sank down onto the chair and took a moment to try to calm down. Pulling out her Blackberry she sighed.

“Still no word?” Ava asked, concerned.

“No. Nothing.” Natalia was annoyed. She didn’t want Olivia to go in the first place and now she was missing too. Her stomach churned with worry. She quickly typed out a text message and sent it, hoping that maybe this one would get a response. Leaning back she ran a hand through her hair and waited.

“Damn it, where are you?” Natalia growled at her handset.

“Hey, at least you know why Mom left you...” Ava said it without really thinking.

Natalia’s eyes widened.

And there it was, coming out at last. Natalia looked up and locked eyes with the younger woman, a little hurt. She might deserve that crack, but not from Ava.

~~*~*

A walkie-talkie crackled, one of the men grabbing it from their belt.

“Targets are in the building and moving. They were last seen headed to the lower level.”

“Copy that. We’ll be ready.” The guard nodded to the others. Several of them started checking their weapons, to make sure they were ready to go at a moment’s notice.

Jonathan and Jeffrey stared at each other as they hid under the security desk, waiting for the security detail to move on. They needed to try to take down these men before Reva and Olivia were taken.

Everyone froze as a cell phone ring tone sounded out.

“Is that Madonna’s ‘Like a Virgin?’” Jonathan asked.

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“Is that Madonna’s ‘Like a Virgin?’” Reva asked. Olivia sighed and tried to muffle the ring tone.

“Great, now we have signal.” Olivia muttered. Still she was secretly thrilled that she’d received some sort of communication from Natalia. She grinned as she read the text quickly, and responded immediately, her thumbs flying.

Reva rolled her eyes and swiped the small grey fob across the reader.

“I think we’ve found the right place.” Reva murmured as the door clicked and swung open, revealing a security detail standing in front of her. They all drew their weapons at once.

“Oh, this is not good...” Olivia groaned.

~~*~*

“Ava,” Natalia sighed running a hand through her hair in frustration.

“I’m sorry.” Ava sank down into the nearest chair. “I didn’t mean...”

“Ava. We never did discuss my leaving your mom last summer.” Natalia picked at a folder sitting on her desk, not really looking forward to the conversation they were about to have, guilt washing over her in a wave.

“She was devastated, Natalia.” Ava’s eyes sparkled with old anger on her mother’s behalf. “Devastated.”

Natalia’s eyes snapped up. She knew she had hurt Olivia, badly. Olivia had talked to her about it, in fits and starts, and she realized she had probably glossed over a lot of it. Blake had filled her in a little about the barbecue fiasco, and Doris had outright threatened her

while dropping hints of a road trip to some retreats. They had both been hurt by her disappearance, and maybe that's what Ava needed to hear about.

"So was I, more than you can even imagine." Natalia glanced down, swallowing hard. "And if I could do things over again..." she looked back up, locking her eyes with the younger woman. "Well, I would have done so many of them differently. But I can't change the past."

"I'm just worried that at the first sign of real trouble, or when things turn really dark and hard, because you know what Olivia's like, you're going to run out on her." Ava finally opened up, needing to get this off her chest. "And I don't think Mom can survive that again."

"I know." Natalia looked down at the ring on her finger, twisting it with her other hand, contemplating the commitment it represented. She may not have officially said the vows yet, but in her heart and mind, in her very soul, they were already married. "And it's something that both your mom and I have discussed. And all I can say is that we are very aware of our past mistakes and are working hard not to repeat them."

"Then why are you so pissed off with her? She loves you, not my Dad." Ava shook her head not getting it.

"I-I'm not. I guess I'm worried that she's going to get hurt." Natalia's eyes started to water. "I don't want to lose her now that I've just found her and our lives are finally getting started in the right direction."

Suddenly Natalia's Blackberry vibrated. She grabbed the phone and smiled, tears starting to form.

OSpencer 11:43 am

I love you and have faith in you. And don't forget to use the whip. xoxo Olivia

Leyla pushed open the office door with Francesca's stroller, the baby giggling happily away and wheeled it into Olivia's office.

"Hey sis, you're supposed to meet the Bean at school..." Leyla took in the emotionally charged scene unfolding before her. She could tell something was wrong by the angry set to Ava's shoulders and the tears falling from Natalia's eyes. "Natalia? What's going on here?"

"Oh, I forgot. I told Emma we'd have a special picnic today." Natalia stood, wiping her tears away with the heel of her hands. She grabbed her bag and put her hand on Ava's shoulder as she passed. "We'll talk more about this later, okay?"

Ava nodded and Natalia smiled sadly.

"It's fine, Leyla. Thanks for popping down and reminding me." Taking the handles of the stroller from her younger sister, she made her way through the outer office, nodding to the busily working woman sitting there. "I'll be back at one, Keira."

Leyla watched her go, not believing a word of it. She glared at the taller woman standing beside her. She'd had about enough of this moody creature.

"What did you say to make Natalia cry?" Leyla stepped closer. She might be small but she could hold her own. She had taken care of herself just fine on the mean streets of Chicago when necessary.

"It's none of your business." Ava sighed, trying to ignore the girl. This was something she needed to work out with Natalia.

"Natalia is my family, so that makes it my business." Leyla took another step closer, this time moving directly into Ava's personal space. "I'm watching you, Ava. You might have everyone else fooled with your sweet daughter act, but I'm not buying it."

Ava just rolled her eyes.

Leyla stepped back and shook her head, raking her eyes disdainfully down the long lanky body before her.

"Not for one minute." Leyla turned and left, knowing that somehow she needed to find out more about Ava Peralta.

Ava sighed as the door quietly shut behind the petite Latina. So much for being friends...

~~*~*

"Don't move or I'll shoot." Jeffrey leapt out from behind the security desk, his gun raised. Jonathan made his way out a little slower, watching as each guard slowly dropped their weapons and lifted their hands up. He started to collect their guns as the two women stared at Jeffrey.

Reva and Olivia smiled from the far side of the room. It was so good to see the man alive and well, it was almost too good to be true. Reva ran past the guards, Olivia following a little behind her.

Reva stopped in front of her husband, the tears blurring her eyes.

"Is it really you?" Her lip trembled, as she struggled to catch her breath.

Jeffrey nodded, he couldn't speak past the lump in his throat, the tears welling in his own eyes. Reva launched herself into his arms, pulling his head down for a searing kiss. They pulled apart and just stared at each other a moment longer.

Reva shook her head and then slapped Jeffrey, hard across the face.

"Don't you ever do something like that again, y'hear?"

"I promise." Jeffrey rubbed his jaw, and nodded, pulling his wife back into his warm embrace. He glanced up and met Olivia's eyes, grateful. She nodded and smiled back, happy for him. She was happy for Ava, too, and was looking forward to telling her that her father alive and well.

"Now, let's lock these idiots up and get the hell out of here." Jonathan smirked, cocking his new semi-automatic toy. "It's a long drive back into town."

~~*~*

A warm breeze blew across through the park, gently cooling the few people wandering the pathways at lunchtime. A young couple sat by the slowly moving creek, having a romantic picnic in the sunshine. A jogger ran past them, making her way along and passing the small gazebo, smiling at the girl standing there who waved at her as she passed.

Emma glanced back at her other mother and frowned. Something was not right and she would get to the bottom of it. Walking back to the bench, she sat down and watched her wipe Francesca's chin with a damp cloth.

"Why are you so sad, Ma? Emma bit down on her peanut butter and banana sandwich as Natalia slowly fed the baby.

"I miss your mom." Natalia sighed, smiling at the perceptive girl. "And it's busy at work. I'm not used to that anymore."

"Would a hug help?" Emma asked, not knowing what else to do.

"Yes, baby. A hug would definitely help." Natalia's eyes welled with tears as Emma wrapped her arms around her neck and just held her for awhile. It reminded her of when she was small and she would hug her mother when she looked sad. She sighed and squeezed Emma a little tighter.

"When I was little and my mother was sad," Natalia leaned back and ran her fingers through Emma's messy hair, smiling as it came back to her now. "My Abuela used to say to her, it's

not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog. And I think I forgot that for a little while today."

Emma pulled back, confused.

"You want Shadow to fight? I thought you and mommy said that fighting was bad and..."

"And it is, honey. That was just a saying." Natalia's lips quirked up.

"Oh." Emma grinned as she remembered something. "Mommy used to say when I was having a bad day with other kids bugging me to never let them see they've got you down. Is it something like that?"

Natalia blinked. Out of the mouths of babes...

"Yes, it's exactly like that." Natalia hugged the bright girl. "You know, some day you'll make a great business mongrel, just like your mom."

"But I wanna be a marine biologist and swim with the dolphins..." Emma's eyes bugged out and she looked worried. Why was everyone always trying to get her to run the world?

"Of course you do, sweetheart." Natalia laughed and pulled the girl closer, dropping a quick kiss to her cheek. "You'll be great at whatever you put your heart and soul into. Just like your Mom."

"Just like you too, Ma." Emma stared up at her other mother, glad that she looked happier now.

"When did you get so smart?" Natalia stared at the girl's earnest face and smiled, tears starting to well.

Emma just grinned and shrugged, before offering Natalia a bite of her sandwich.

~~*~*

The Devil's Heart was quiet in the afternoons, after the lunch crowd had dispersed. The bartender looked up from wiping the bar as a group of rag tag people entered the cantina.

"Whiskey. Neat." Olivia ordered immediately, sliding onto a bar stool. She watched as Jeffrey and Jonathan wearily sank down onto their barstools, Reva fussing over her injured son. "Better make that four, Jose."

The bartender nodded and glanced over her shoulder.

"I think this just might be my lucky day." Daniel Lopez leveled his gun at Olivia's head and smiled, his sour breath making her stomach churn as he pulled her closer. His arm stretched across her chest, holding her tight as he nuzzled along her ear.

"Lopez?" Jonathan and Reva froze, not understanding what was going on.

"You're not Daniel Lopez." Jeffrey stared hard at the man holding his ex-wife hostage. The man laughed and tightened his grip on Olivia.

"Miguel Carrera, at your service. I'm afraid Agent Lopez met with an...unfortunate accident." Carrera smirked. "Now I'm afraid I must return you to Winslow's men. They should be arriving momentarily. You are all much more adept than I gave you credit for. Winslow and that crazy old man he has running things are currently not going to be very pleased with me. So I'm just going to hand you over, keep my little insurance policy here and take off."

Olivia hissed as he squeezed her tighter, trying hard not to freak out. This forced confinement, trapped in this man's arms, the smell of sweat and alcohol on his breath, it was all pushing a lot of old triggers. She bit down on a wave of nausea and tried to think, turning away disgusted as Carrera nuzzled into her hair.

"Did you really think you could escape me?" he whispered hotly into her ear, his arm pressing into her breasts as he pressed himself against her backside. "You're mine now, bitch."

Olivia felt the warm steel of her own hidden gun dig into her stomach, and she smiled.

She was no one's bitch.

~~*~*

Act 4

No one moved in the small cantina.

Carrera shifted, his back to the bar, watching the doors and making sure that he could see everyone. Once Winslow's thugs arrived, he could hand over the O'Neill's, collect his money and then escape to his jeep out back. His cousin Jose would steer the authorities in the wrong direction and he would take his pretty bonus prize to their hideout in the mountains.

"Are you sure you don't want Reva? You may not have noticed, I'm a little fucked up." Olivia hissed at the man, grinding back into his groin with her body. "But, maybe you like that."

Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, Olivia grinned and stomped down on his foot, hard. Spinning as he cried out, she drew her gun from her waistband, cocking it and putting it to Carrera's head.

Ice cold fear washed over her, making Olivia's heart beat practically out of her chest as they stared each other down. It was so much easier being ballsy and stupid when you didn't have a family waiting for you at home.

"Besides," Olivia pressed the gun against Miguel's head, leaning a little harder into the one against her own temple and smiled wildly. "Don't you know that being bitchy and unstable is all a part of my mystique?"

Miguel smiled. He was going to enjoy toying with this one; he loved it when they fought back. First though, he needed to take care of business. "I only need to hand over Reva and Jeffrey. You are just going to be very tasty icing on the cake, querida."

"Don't fucking call me that." Olivia growled. No one called her that but Natalia.

"I'll call you what I want to, puta." He snarled back.

Suddenly the place exploded in chaos around them, as several Mexican police officers crashed into the cantina through the plate glass windows and from the back storage room. Remy and Cyrus came rushing in through the swinging doors like a modern day version of Butch and Sundance, waiting to mow down at any second. Reva, Jeffrey and Jonathan scrambled for cover, pulling a table over and hiding behind it for safety. Anna just calmly followed her boys in and stood her ground. This was not going to end badly on her watch.

"Freeze!" Anna lifted her revolver, more than ready to use it.

"I win." Olivia smirked at the very outnumbered Carrera, before moving suddenly and cold cocking him with her gun. Stunned, and in pain, he clutched his head, slumping against the bar as Olivia dove for cover. Carrera recovered slightly and lurched towards her, his gun dangling loosely in his fingers.

"Don't even think about it, asshole." Anna warned as the room collectively seemed to hold their breaths. The man stumbled forward and Anna shot him in the knee, dropping him instantly to the floor. Olivia kicked the gun away from his hands as the petite woman came to stand before the whimpering man.

"My leg!" Miguel moaned rolling slightly, gripping at the bloody wound.

"Life's a bitch, Carrera," Anna growled, pulling out her handcuffs. "And so am I."

Olivia and Reva snorted. Anna Li was definitely growing on them.

~~*~*

It was finally quiet. Natalia had been on the phone all morning rearranging schedules, and meetings, as well as talking to Keira's friend, trying to cajole the very talented chef from the Rivoli to come in for a discussion on what opportunities she might find at the Beacon. Natalia was confident from that phone conversation that the restaurant's dynamic female chef could be wooed to join their staff, given the right salary package and the title of executive chef. Keira was all excited about it, too.

Natalia smiled, Friday was still a long way off and she had just stroked off all of the urgent items from her to-do list. Best of all she had finally spoken to Olivia a few hours ago, from the Spaulding jet winging its way back to Springfield. Natalia could easily tell she was exhausted. If she had her way, Olivia wouldn't be leaving their bed for several days. She had been so scared something bad had happened, when she hadn't heard anything from her partner for so long.

Natalia sat back in the chair, her hands behind her head. It had been a good day. She sighed happily and closed her eyes for a moment. Only one more thing would make it perfect...

"I can't leave you alone for a moment, Rivera, without you trying to take over the world. Have you been taking lessons from Jellybean behind my back?" Olivia leaned nonchalantly against the door frame to her office, anxiously waiting to see the dark eyes of her lover.

"Olivia!" Natalia gasped, looking up, their eyes meeting and locking. Two souls silently communicating, needing each other, loving each other, come what may. She smiled, fighting back tears, flashing her dimples. She launched herself out from behind the desk and met her lover halfway, their lips hungrily finding each other. Breaking apart, Natalia snuggled close, breathing in the scent of her partner, holding her close and never wanting to let her go again.

"I'm so glad you're home." Natalia reached up and cupped Olivia's flushed cheek, guiding her back down for a tender kiss.

"*I'm* so glad I'm home." Olivia pressed her forehead against her lover's, needing the closeness and familiar affection.

"Sit down, you look tired. I'll order some coffee." Natalia ran the pad of her thumb across Olivia's bottom lip, smiling as she kissed it gently. She turned and went to the office door to find Keira already walking in with two steaming mugs from the staff kitchen. Smiling her

thanks, Natalia took the mugs, elbowed the office door shut and turned back, stopping in her tracks.

Olivia sat behind her desk, already scrolling through her email, looking every inch back in command. Like she had never left. She glanced up as Natalia made her way around the desk, placing their mugs onto the desktop. She felt her chair spin and then grinned as Natalia sank down onto her lap. She wrapped her arms around the petite brunette, nuzzling along her warm neck as she spun them back towards the desk.

"I could get used to this." Olivia murmured, dropping her chin to Natalia's shoulder, and cuddling her close. She slowly dragged her fingers through long dark hair, enjoying the feel of the soft strands falling against her skin.

"Mmm." Natalia closed her eyes and hummed with pleasure, bringing her hand up to hold her lover's hand tighter, enjoying the warmth of being held. This was such a great way to spend a coffee break.

"Say, this desk looks awfully sturdy..." Olivia murmured from behind Natalia, smirking into the suddenly scandalized brunette's neck. "And you know, good girls are just bad girls that never got caught."

"Olivia..." Natalia giggled, still a little shocked, but her mind starting to imagine the possibilities.

"I'm just sayin'..." Olivia nipped a tender earlobe, grinning.

Natalia gasped and flushed shyly at the thought of being face down on the wide desk top, Olivia pressed against her, taking her, hard and fast... It was sending a hot flash straight through her whole body, settling deep in the pit of her stomach, pooling lower still. Natalia couldn't seem to stop the next fantasy of pressing Olivia down on the desktop herself, spreading her legs and having her way with her.

Natalia gasped as Olivia's hands slid down to cup her breasts, slowly starting to massage and roll.

"Whew, is it hot in here?" Olivia husked softly near her ear, her own thoughts not exactly pure as she squeezed them even more intimately. "Or is it just you?"



Natalia turned, shaking her head slightly at the corny line. God, she'd missed her. She claimed the teasing lips in a searing kiss. Finally pulling back for much needed air, Natalia made her last executive decision for the day.

"Home. Bed. Now."

~~*~*

Bright afternoon sunlight stretched across the floor of the master bedroom of the farmhouse, falling over the trail of discarded clothes led directly to the large bed dominating the room. Natalia nuzzled along a delicate shoulder blade, dropping lazy kisses across the soft skin. Olivia sighed and rolled over, coming face to face with her lover.

"I think someone missed me." Olivia murmured sleepily.

"Maybe." Natalia grinned before claiming the full lips before her again. She froze when she heard tiny paws tippy tapping across the wide plank floor, stopping right beside the bed. "I think someone else missed you, too..."

They rolled slightly peering over the edge of the bed at the small white ball of fluff playfully looking back up at them.

“Ok, new house rule. Shadow can not stay in our room when we’re making love. It’s just too...” Natalia struggled for the right words. Olivia looked at her lover and raised an eyebrow, trying hard not to smirk, but failing miserably.

“Performance anxiety, sweetie?” Olivia teased and waited for the swat to her shoulder. She wasn’t disappointed.

“NO! Yes...I mean...” Natalia blushed, making Olivia laugh a little harder as she rolled over and stretched out across her smaller body. “It’s just a little creepy, don’t you think?”

“Okay. Sorry, baby.” Olivia nuzzled along the strong jaw line. “New house rule, got it.” Natalia settled against her and sighed happily. They laid in each others arms for a while, soaking up the other’s presence, dozing a little until they would have to get up.

Olivia sighed, content. Sunshine streaming in, birds chirping outside, Natalia naked and in her arms. Buzz burgers on the way, once Leyla and the kids were home after school. Yes, it was so good to be home. Her mind drifted as she thought about how lucky she was.

She sighed thinking about Anna on the plane back to Springfield. The woman was so driven, so angry and yet honorable and strong. She had misjudged her and Olivia hated when she did that. She had been good for Doris, and the Mayor had been good for her. A part of Olivia felt bad that they couldn’t make their romance work.

“Do you think I should talk to Doris about Anna?” Olivia murmured into dark hair, as she snuggled closer. “Anna doesn’t want me to, I asked her about it on the flight. She thinks it’s for the best, but I don’t know. Doris deserves happiness, too.”

“I don’t think Doris will ever be able to truly trust her. And if you don’t have trust, then you’ve built your home on a foundation of sand.” Natalia swallowed hard, remembering her own mistakes, painfully aware of how hard she worked to rebuild Olivia’s trust. How they still were suffering the repercussions of her leaving. She wished she could go back in time and walk hand-in-hand with this amazing woman at her side, into the Bauer’s Fourth of July barbeque.

Natalia never wanted to hurt her lover like that again. Hopefully she’d get the chance to make it up to her somehow this year.

“Doris needs someone she can be honest and open with, who has her back and who she can depend on. And I don’t know that Anna can be that person.” Natalia sighed into Olivia’s chest. “I mean, look at Reva and Jeffrey. Poor Reva probably doesn’t know what to think.”

A wave of anger washed over Natalia and she shifted away from her partner slightly. Olivia may have made her peace with Jeffrey, worked through their rocky past but she personally

would never be able to forgive him for raping her, damaging that fragile insecure girl still hidden deep inside her lover.

“And I don’t trust Jeffrey as far as I can throw him.” Natalia all but growled, turning slightly to look into Olivia’s surprised eyes. “I’m sorry, but I don’t. He hurt you, deeply, and now he’s messing with his family’s happiness. What else is he capable of?”

Olivia pulled her closer, trying to soothe her upset lover. She rolled slightly on top, looking down into the dark, glittering eyes. She was so outraged on her behalf, such a passionate woman, in all aspects of her life. It touched her so profoundly, to be loved so completely. How did she get so lucky to have this woman in her life?

“I love it when you get all protective.” Olivia dipped her head and gently claimed the full lips beneath her, soft tender kisses, loving and sweet. She moved to kiss a dimple, and then more butterfly kisses tracing along a dark eyebrow. “I’m sorry I worried you by going on this road trip with Reva.”

“I guess you’ll just have to keep trying to make it up to me then...” Natalia waggled her eyebrows suggestively, her anger drained from her by Olivia’s touch. She snaked her arms up and around her lover’s neck, pulling her down for a searing kiss, tongues tangling and dancing together, fueling an urgency and igniting a need once more. Shifting slightly, she nibbled Olivia’s tender earlobe, sucking the sensitive skin before whispering softly. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Shadow suddenly felt herself lifted up from the floor, and unceremoniously dumped into the hallway, the bedroom door closed tight behind her. She sneezed once and stared longingly back at the closed door for a moment, before flopping down onto the floor, blinking sleepily. After all they’d have to come out of there eventually...

~~*~*

Reva stood in the kitchen at Cross Creek that night and smiled, watching Jeffrey sitting with his son, playing and tickling the boy’s tummy. It was something she thought she’d never see again. Colin looked up at his dad, his little face smiling, but a part of her wondered if he even remembered the man. She sighed and folded her tea towel, draping it over the edge of the sink to air dry.

Flicking the light off in the kitchen, she made her way over to the huge stone fireplace. She ran her fingers across the headstock and frets of Jeffrey’s guitar as it stood leaning against the stones. It had been something Reva just couldn’t bring herself to part with when she had started donating Jeffrey’s belongings to charity in the fall. She sighed, remembering how hard it had all been.

She leaned against the mantle, noticing the carved initials of her and Josh. Reaching out she traced them with her thumb. Reva smiled remembering all the good times, and all the bad times they had shared here as well. Josh had always been there for her, whether she wanted him to be or not. Even his leaving to give her a year to get her head together had been the right thing to do. Colin's giggles pulled her from her thoughts

Reva glanced over to the couch, watching father and son rough house a little. Jeffrey looked up at her, happy and content. She had married him, and loved him still, but she really had no clue who he even was. What kind of man could do that to his loved ones, to his wife, even to protect them?

Jeffrey's eyes dimmed, as if sensing her thoughts. Colin crawled into his lap, wanting to snuggle a little more but his little eyes were getting sleepy. Reva nodded. She could relate, she just wanted to slip under the covers and sleep for a month. Sighing, she moved past the couch heading for the bedroom.

"I know this will take time to fix, Reva." Jeffrey said softly, reaching for her hand as she passed.

"I don't know that I can get past this," Reva whispered back, her eyes welling with tears. "I need to be able to trust the man I'm with, to depend on him to be there for me, and my family. Not traipsing around the world risking his life."

Reva pulled her hand from his larger one, their eyes meeting and locking.

"I need a husband, Jeffrey. Not a superhero."

Jeffery knew she was right. He swallowed hard, knowing he had screwed everything up, despite his best intentions.

"I understand." Jeffrey looked away as Colin squiggled around on the couch. "My bags are already in the spare room, I'll stay there until we figure things out. You should go to sleep, I'll put Colin down, I'm sure you're exhausted."

Reva smiled and turned to leave. There were no easy answers for this problem, only time would tell how it all turned out.

"I love you, Reva." Jeffrey's words made the tired woman freeze in her tracks.

"I know you do." Reva nodded sadly, and headed to her bedroom. She might be going to bed, but she doubted very much that she'd be able to sleep.

She still had a lot to think about.

Jeffrey hugged his small son close, breathing in the clean, sweet scent of home, and cried.

~~*~*

A gentle summer breeze blew across Springfield cemetery, cooling the small group gathered in the summer sunshine. Puffy white clouds scudded across the brilliant blue sky, as the lush trees swayed in the wind, birds singing in their branches and bouncing along on the neatly trimmed cemetery lawns. Tombstones and monuments stood guard along the hillside, silent testament to the unending rituals of life and death unfolding before them.

Olivia, Natalia and Emma stood to the side as Jane's family gathered to say goodbye one final time. Jane's mother huddled with her children and other family members, all of them dabbing at their eyes. Jane's boyfriend was a mess, his eyes hollow and dim as tears trickled down his cheeks. It seemed like half of Springfield had turned up to say good-bye to the young woman who had left this earth too soon. The minister finished his the graveside blessing and the mourners began to disperse, most heading back to the Beacon for a small celebration of life.

Emma gripped Olivia's hand and looked up at her mother, who smiled and nodded. They both made their way to the graveside, pausing a moment before they each tossed a single red rose onto the casket. Stepping back, Emma waved goodbye to her friend, tears starting to well again.

Natalia dabbed at her own eyes and waited for her girls to move back towards her. She watched as Olivia kneeled and hugged Emma tight, wiping her tears away. Standing again, she took Emma's hand and turned around, looking for her in the milling group of people, their gaze locking.

Natalia moved forward, meeting them, gently running her hand across Emma's tousled hair, before dropping a soft kiss to the top of her head. Emma smiled and took her hand and together they headed towards the parking lot.

Olivia paused a moment as they neared Gus' monument, slowly meeting Natalia's eyes, remembering a different day they had spent together here. It had been a day of truths and being brave. The first steps on a road less traveled, a journey of a lifetime together, that neither woman would ever want to miss. It was the day that changed their lives, forever.

"I love you." Olivia whispered, eyes glittering with the hint of unshed tears, echoes of the past ringing in her ears.

“Don’t you know?” Natalia cupped her flushed cheek, so pleased that more than a year later she could stand here and finally, proudly, speak the words that she should have said in that precious moment. “I love you, too.”

They smiled a moment at each other, their hands tangling together, fingers entwined and followed their daughter out of the cemetery and back to their lives again.

On the far side of the cemetery a solitary figure stood staring down at a small memorial monument sunk almost level with the cold earth, blood red roses laid across the name Lara Pizano etched into the polished black stone.

Edmund wiped away a falling tear, ignoring the never ending throb of pain behind his eyes. He looked up watching the mourners in the distance scatter, making their way to various vehicles, moving on with their small, insignificant lives. He was just another parent without a daughter, his child taken before she had even begun to really live.

Soon they would all understand his pain. Not just Shayne for killing Lara, or Reva and Jeffrey for all the suffering they had caused. No, this was bigger than them now. It was going to be gloriously epic.

“You will pay.” Edmund smiled grimly, knowing the time would soon be at hand. “You are all going to pay...”

The End

~~*~*

Lingering Ghosts

by Ocean Gazer

ACT 1

“It’s July. Why is it so cold in here?”

Natalia moved from the kitchen counter to the table, fighting the urge to roll her eyes at Olivia yet again. “I already told you. I turned up the air conditioning because otherwise we’ll roast once I start baking.”

“I shouldn’t need long sleeves in July. And you’re wearing a sweater, for heaven’s sake.”

While Olivia's grumbling could occasionally be endearing, this was not one of those occasions. Natalia could tell her partner was truly annoyed. She just didn't know why.

She was almost positive it had nothing to do with the actual topic of conversation, since they'd discussed it the night before. She knew for certain that it had nothing to do with the preparations for the Bauer barbecue, since she'd already told Olivia she didn't have to do any of the work. Leyla was back in Chicago for the holiday weekend to visit friends, so it had nothing to do with her. And Ava was on board with the idea of looking after Emma, Francesca, and Colin while Reva was visiting, so...

She leaned over the back of her partner's chair. "Why did you invite Reva to come over if it's making you testy?"

Olivia's sigh seemed to echo. "It's not spending time with Reva that's the problem. I mean, hello, we just had 'Road Trip 2010' together and didn't kill each other. It's what she wants to talk about. She's got a little over two months before she's supposed to make the decision about whether or not to meet Josh at the lighthouse, and she doesn't quite know how she feels about Jeffrey at this point, let alone what to do about Josh."

Natalia shook her head. "Why is she trying to make this decision now? She's still got time to mull it over – to figure out what to do."

Looking down, she finally caught a glint of amusement in green eyes. "Yes, but that would be entirely too easy. In case you haven't figured it out by now, Reva can be a bit of a drama queen."

Olivia paused for a moment and Natalia saw the hint of amusement fade entirely. Her partner's tone was as thoughtful as her expression. "I don't know if we're friends, exactly, but we're something, and I want to help her out. I just...my own history with Jeffrey and Josh doesn't exactly make me the most impartial judge. And I don't want to give her advice that might backfire and come back to bite me in the ass later."

Natalia frowned a bit, feeling like there was something very obvious she was missing. After a moment of thought, she said tentatively, "Well, maybe she doesn't really need you as a judge. Maybe she just needs someone to listen while she talks. You don't have to offer any advice, just ask questions and make her come up with the answers."

She didn't think she'd said anything particularly profound, but the way Olivia's face lightened at the words suggested otherwise. When her partner smiled at her, she couldn't help but smile back.

"What would I do without you, Natalia? Seriously, I hadn't even thought about it that way."

Blushing slightly at the praise, Natalia looked at her partner, even as she felt Olivia lean back in her chair, the dark blonde head coming to rest against her shoulder. It was a gesture that spoke of trust and comfort and, in contrast to the other woman's grouchy mood all morning, she very much welcomed it. She reached up and placed her hand against Olivia's shoulder, rubbing gently, basking in the peace and simplicity of the moment. Their lives had been so hectic lately, and while they'd had time together, moments like this seemed to be few and far between.



Even as she revelled in the sensation, she knew it wouldn't last. Emma or Ava would come bounding in soon enough, or Francesca would start to cry, or Reva would show up. Then there was the matter of the baking she needed to do for tomorrow's barbecue. Natalia glanced down at the table top, seeing all the recipes she'd spread out there and contemplating them, even while her partner continued to lean against her. She dropped her hand away from Olivia's shoulder, bringing it down to rest against the woman's forearm, still caressing gently.

She felt a momentary flash of guilt for thinking about other things at that moment, instead of just being focused on the two of them, until Olivia said in an oddly dreamy tone, "I hope Emma has a good day tomorrow. Things have been so rough for her lately, and I just want her to have a good time and be a kid again for a day, without a care in the world."

Natalia squeezed her partner's arm. "We'll do everything we can to make it a good day for her."

She looked up from the table top then and met Olivia's eyes. Just as she was about to lean in from the side and kiss her partner to seal the promise, the doorbell rang.

"That's Reva; perfect timing as always." Olivia's eye roll said as much as her actual words.

Natalia chuckled as her partner got up from the chair, and then smiled as Olivia gave her a quick kiss on the forehead before heading out to the living room. Back to the merry-go-round that was their life. Shaking her head at the sounds of the ensuing snark-fest in the living room, she swept up the recipes from the table and moved herself over to the counter. It was time to focus on Rice Krispies treats and vanilla cupcakes and chocolate chip cookies. Maybe some peanut butter cookies too. And possibly banana bread.

~~*~*

Blake hummed under her breath as she changed her clothes, getting ready for her afternoon with Doris. She was determined that nothing, not even Frank's confused indifference about her watching a softball game and then going out to dinner, would bring down her mood. It felt sometimes like all she did was work and then sit around hoping that her boyfriend wouldn't have to work late or that something wouldn't come up for him. She knew it was par for the course for any police officer. But she also knew a little something about how the Springfield PD operated, and the other cops all seemed to have plenty of downtime.

She understood that part of the problem was that Frank, as the chief of police, was trying to establish clear boundaries with his ex-wife, who was in charge of the crime scene investigators. In addition to hammering out their respective roles, they were also bickering over paperwork. Apparently he'd signed off on some things that Eleni was questioning, and so they had to sift through the details. He'd complained for hours on end about how difficult it was to work with his ex-wife, how uncomfortable he was with having to be around her, how upset Marina was with Doris for hiring her, and how annoyed he was with the mayor for going behind his back to bring her on board.

All Blake knew was that for all Frank's protestations, he spent a lot of his non-work time thinking about and talking about the woman who supposedly drove him crazy.

She couldn't even remember the last time she and Frank had just gone out and done something on the spur of the moment. At most, they'd order takeout from somewhere and watch a movie before spending the night together. They hadn't had a real date in weeks.

He'd been distant lately, almost as if he was pulling back from her. She'd tried to talk to him about it, but he'd said that everything was fine. Then, a few times, he'd approached her and said he wanted to talk, but something else always seemed to come up. She

didn't think he was having an affair, and she was certain he was past his fear of being burned after what had happened with Natalia. She'd even asked him point blank if he was bothered that she was friends with Doris, his nemesis, and he'd laughed out loud at the idea.

If he wasn't interested in dating her anymore, she didn't know why he wouldn't just come right out and say it. Their friendship was certainly strong enough to weather that, even though it would be sad. Although she'd grown more and more irritated with the way he seemed to take her for granted, she did care an awful lot about him. Besides, of all the men she knew in Springfield, he was the only one she had the slightest interest in who wasn't already involved with someone.

She'd been lonely for a long time and it was nice to have an actual boyfriend. Maybe it wasn't a love like Olivia and Natalia had, but it was enough for her.

Her cell phone rang, startling her, and she picked it up without looking at the display, assuming it was Doris calling to see if she was ready yet or still fiddling around with her fashion choices. Just as she was ready to follow her "Hello" with a sarcastic remark, she heard Frank's voice. Swallowing the comment on the tip of her tongue, she listened to his babbled greeting, followed by his "I was just thinking...well...not just thinking...I've been thinking about it for a while...anyway, you get the idea...oh, wait, hang on a minute."

In the background, she could hear his home phone ring and heard his crisp, professional tone. The words were garbled, but she had a hunch it was a work-related call; she'd gotten good at tuning those out in the past several months.

Indeed, when he came back on the line, he was apologetic. "I'm sorry, Blake. I wanted to talk to you for a bit, but duty calls. Anna's trying to make out Mallet's notes on some old files and his handwriting is apparently impossible to read. I need to go. But I'll try again in a couple hours."

Blake raised an eyebrow. "I'll be at a softball game later, Frank. Remember? We just talked about this an hour ago."

If she hadn't known he was a grown man, she would have sworn he was pouting. "Oh, right. Guess you're just too busy to have time for me today."

Never mind the fact that he was the one who was always running off and coming home late and cancelling their plans. Somehow, this was all her fault. Her patience running thin, Blake nevertheless managed to keep her tone mild. "We'll be at the barbecue together tomorrow. We'll have plenty of time for each other."

Frank didn't sound convinced, even though he agreed with what she'd said, and then he reminded her that he needed to get back to work. She stared at the phone in her hand for a long moment after the call disconnected, bewildered by his odd manner and

abruptness. Before she could puzzle over it too long, she heard the doorbell. Shoving the phone into her pocket, she picked up her baseball cap and ran out to the living room to greet her friend.

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Beth hummed under her breath as she walked into the library. While it wasn't really her office, she was starting to think of it that way since she'd spent so much time there in recent months, studying. It seemed like all she'd done lately was hole up in the library and study.

For what purpose, she had no idea. Well, not entirely true, she mentally amended. She wanted to be a lawyer, to have a career that really meant something. That was the reason for all her hard work. But since she hadn't heard anything after her first sitting for the bar, she just wasn't sure her hard work was actually going to pay off. Sure, she'd heard all the stories about how many times people had to take the bar exam before they finally passed it. She just didn't know if she could handle going through such a nerve-racking process over and over again.

She froze momentarily when she got to the desk and saw a great big envelope from the Illinois Board of Admissions to the Bar. Swallowing hard, she reached out a hand to pick it up, and then froze again in mid-reach. One part of her wanted to snatch up the envelope and find out her fate. The other part just knew it was bad news and couldn't stand the thought of her dreams being dashed. For a long moment, she just stood there, playing mental tug-of-war with herself.

Finally, she realized how ridiculous she was being. Not seeing the rejection wouldn't make it any less real. And, melodramatic and soap-opera-divaish thoughts aside, it was far from being the end of the world. She could get Doris or Mel to help her study next time; she could get tips from them on how to remember all those arcane details.

She was proud of the fact that her hand only trembled a little when she finally picked up the envelope and slid her finger along the sealed edge to open it.

Unfolding the letter hastily, she scanned over it, looking for the confirmation that she'd failed. The wording was so formal that she had to read it twice to make sure she wasn't imagining things. Dropping the paper as if it burned, she ran out of the library and made a mad dash up the stairs, heading toward her and Phillip's master suite.

She burst in the door and jumped on the bed, heedless of the fact that her husband had been, up until that precise moment, napping. Quite peacefully too, from the sound of his snoring. She pounced on him and laughed as he blinked rapidly, his words slow and sleepy. "What's happening? Are you ok? Or have you suddenly gone insane?"

Leaning down, she kissed his cheek. "I'm better than ok. I passed, Phillip!" Seeing the confusion in his eyes, she elaborated, "The bar. I passed the bar!"

The smile she got in response looked like it would literally split his face in half. She was pretty sure hers was just as wide.

~~*~*

“I still can’t believe he did that to me. Honestly, I don’t know whether to kiss him or kill him.”

Olivia wanted to laugh at the exaggerated, whining note in Reva’s voice. The woman sitting across the kitchen table from her was in full-on melodrama mode today. While Reva had proven in the past that she could be quite practical and down-to-earth at times, the inner diva still liked to pop her head out now and again. Probably to keep everyone in town on their toes, she mused.

The only thing, frankly, that kept Olivia from laughing was the fact that she knew exactly how the other woman felt. She’d been there herself with Natalia – wondering how the woman she loved could just leave her without a word.

Ok, so their situations weren’t exactly the same. She’d at least known Natalia was alive, and if she’d really pressed, she could have coerced information out of either Father Eyebrows or blabbermouth Blake. Reva had truly thought that Jeffrey was dead and hadn’t had a clue about the magnitude of the secret her son was keeping from her. But still, even if the situations weren’t identical, she knew what it felt like to be left behind, to be left with more questions than answers, to have trust broken. She felt for the other woman.

Even so, she wasn’t about to let down her usual defenses quite that easily. “Maybe you could do both. Get in one last kiss and then strike him down.”

She didn’t have to glance over at Natalia to know her partner was glaring at her. But she ignored it, focusing instead on Reva, who merely raised an eyebrow before saying dryly, “That’s a thought. Without Mallet around to finally piece everything together, they’ll never figure out it was me. And I can always use an excuse to buy Colin a new stroller.”

Olivia nearly spit out a mouthful of coffee at that. As it was, she barely managed to swallow before bursting into laughter, Reva joining her. The memories of last year’s ridiculous – and, in retrospect, completely pointless – murder investigation flooded her mind. If it wasn’t so serious a situation now, with Edmund alive and on the loose somewhere, planning to wreak havoc on his perceived enemies, it would be funny. Seriously, how the Springfield PD had ever managed to solve any case at all still mystified her. She felt a sudden surge of sympathy for Anna Li; the woman was clearly competent and having to put up with the usual town clowns must be like fingernails on a chalkboard for her.

When Natalia moved closer to the table, Olivia half-expected a gentle rebuke of some kind for joking around when Jane was dead and their children's lives were in danger. But her partner apparently sensed that they needed the comic outlet, because she simply set out a plate of warm cookies and refilled their coffee cups without a word.

She didn't miss the sardonic quirk of Reva's lips at the charming little domestic scene, and turned a patented Spencer glare on the older woman, just daring her to say something. But her occasional nemesis simply offered up a simpering smile and stayed quiet, instead reaching out for a cookie and concentrating harder than seemed necessary on chewing it.

Olivia looked over at Natalia, who'd returned to the counter, her hands busy with a wooden spoon and a bowl. There were little dabs of flour on her cheeks and forehead; her dark hair was bound up in a messy ponytail with stray strands sticking up like they'd been gelled; her face was set in a frown as she bent over a recipe book. Olivia thought she was absolutely beautiful. Not because of how she looked, but because of how she was – the way she made this space warm and welcoming, even without being part of the conversation. Ava and the kids and the puppy were in the living room, so she and Reva had ended up in the kitchen by default. Even though Reva had fewer domestic tendencies than she did, she thought the older woman seemed as comfortable in the homey space as she was.

Her musings were interrupted when Reva spoke through a mouthful of cookie. "Seriously, though. For months, I hoped and prayed that there'd been some miracle and that Jeffrey was still alive, just stuck in some remote place where he couldn't make contact. But now that I have Jeffrey back and know that he is alive and safe, all I feel is numb."

Reva's next words were quiet, but Olivia could hear the pain in them. "I still love him, but I can't understand how he could just walk away like that. He says he did it to keep me safe, but Colin and I were in danger anyhow, we just didn't know it. How do I move past that? Should I move past it?"

Olivia swallowed hard, suddenly all-too-aware of Natalia's presence across the kitchen. But this was her truth to speak and so she leaned forward slightly. "Reva, I can't tell you what to do about Jeffrey. It really comes down to two basic questions. One, whether the reason he left is one you can understand and accept; and two, whether you think you can trust him not to do the same thing again."

She paused for a moment, watching Reva mull over her words, before getting to the heart of the dilemma. "Ultimately, only you can decide what level of uncertainty you can live with...and whether your love for him is stronger than the hurt you feel because of him."

Sitting back in her chair, Olivia took a drink of coffee, not because she was thirsty, but to cover her discomfort with this turn in the conversation. Unable to help herself, she

glanced over at Natalia, only relaxing when she saw the compassion in chocolate eyes and the slight nod that told her she had permission to say whatever she needed to say. Not that she needed permission from anyone else, since it was her life and her story. But it helped regardless. Not that she intended to go much deeper into detail with Reva; no matter how good a footing they were on now, she knew that could turn around on a dime.

Reva leaned forward, her elbows on the table, and Olivia was struck by the pensive look on her face. The older woman's tone was sharp. "If Jeffrey had only been gone a few months, then that would be one thing. But he's lived this lie for nearly a year and I only found out by accident. It's not like he came back to town and said, 'I know how this looks, honey, but I can explain.'"

Olivia chuckled at the phrasing, but nodded. She could definitely see that an intentional homecoming was a lot easier to understand than the "oops, I'll confess all because I'm busted" approach.

"Given everything I've found out about him in the past few months, I feel like I don't really even know the man I married." Reva paused there, and Olivia swallowed hard at the intense anger blazing in blue eyes. "I had no idea what he did to you, Olivia. The thought that he was capable of raping you...it makes me sick."

Olivia sat very still in her chair, tension flooding through her. After her disclosure at the Spaulding mansion, she'd braced herself for people prying into her past – whether showing friendly concern or looking for gossip fodder. Doris had alluded to it in one of their conversations, but Olivia had side-stepped it and her friend had let the subject drop. She knew better than to think that was the end of the matter – the mayor was almost as stubborn as any Spencer, after all. But no one else had said anything about it. She'd finally come to the conclusion that everyone there at the time had been too focused on the Edmund part of the story to register the other details. That piece of her life wasn't something she really wanted to talk about anyway, so she'd been somewhat relieved by the lack of attention.

Feeling unnerved by Reva's scrutiny, Olivia took a deep breath to calm herself, then turned her head slightly, her eyes drifting to the window. Her words were measured. "It was a long time ago. He's not the same man now that he was then. And you heard what Anna said, that he felt guilty and showed remorse for what he'd done."

"Don't you think it's time you stopped making excuses for him?"

Snapping her head back around, Olivia stared at Reva in shock, her mouth dropping open. If the same words had come from Natalia, she wouldn't even have blinked. But to hear Reva say that about her own husband...

"Olivia, I'm only going to say this once, and if you – or Natalia – tell anyone that I said it, I'll deny it. I'm sorry about what happened to you. No one deserves to be treated like

that. You can forgive Jeffrey and be his friend all you want...just don't make excuses for what he did. He still hurt you, no matter how much he had to drink or how sorry he felt afterwards."

Olivia swallowed hard again, not at all comfortable having this conversation, but touched more than she'd expected by the words. When Reva began fidgeting, however, she knew she wasn't the only one who was uncomfortable, and decided to put them both out of their misery.

"Thanks, Reva. Don't worry, I won't tell a soul what you said. It's just...don't judge him too harshly based on something that happened over twenty years ago."

Olivia leaned back slightly in her chair, trying to relax her tensed shoulders, and saw Reva's eyes narrow. There was no mistaking the hard edge in the other woman's voice. "Oh, don't worry. I've got plenty of other reasons to judge him harshly right now. It's not just that he lied to me and left his family behind. He also put my son in danger without blinking an eye. Even though it was Jonathan's choice to take on the assignment, you don't mess with my children and expect me to be your friend."

There was a deep scowl on Reva's face and it was one Olivia understood all too well. She had her own Mama Bear tendencies. She took another sip of coffee, letting the woman finish thinking out loud.

"And I know this is all stuff I have to decide on my own. I get it. It's just so damn complicated because there's Josh to consider as well. I have to choose and I don't know what to do. I'm tempted to clone myself on purpose so I can have one man and clone!Reva can have the other."

Olivia heard Natalia's surprised gasp, but was too busy spitting out coffee to pay much attention. She grabbed a stack of napkins, dabbing at her face and shirt. She didn't know the details, but had heard bits and pieces from various people about Reva having a clone who'd caused all sorts of problems. As if anyone with the woman's DNA could avoid being a troublemaker.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or annoyed that Reva just sat there cackling like a hen while she tried to wipe up the coffee she'd splattered everywhere. Luckily, she'd managed to miss the plate of cookies. When she looked up and saw the amused smile on the woman's face, she decided to be relieved. But she kept her tone gruff as she said, "The absolute last thing this town needs is two of you."

Olivia smiled up at Natalia, who'd appeared with a wet dishtowel to help clean up the mess. It was clear her lover was confused, but had decided against asking. Which was fine; she'd fill her in later with what little she knew.

Reva drawled, "Oh c'mon, honey. Two of me would just keep this town lively since you've gotten soft and boring."

Olivia narrowed her eyes, even knowing that the other woman was teasing. She was saved from having to come up with a suitable reply when Natalia said softly, "The last thing Springfield needs right now is more excitement, what with Edmund still being alive."

That managed to sober Reva up more than any of Olivia's snarky comebacks could have. She shot a grateful look at her lover, who patted her on the shoulder before heading back to the sink. Then, Olivia focused her attention on the woman across from her, noting the way the blonde seemed to have come to a sudden decision. The way Reva pushed her chair back and got to her feet only reinforced that idea.

"Natalia's right. Instead of worrying about whether to take Jeffrey back or set my sights on Josh, I need to focus on keeping Colin, Sarah, and Jonathan safe until that psycho is caught. That's way more important than my country-western-song love life. But thanks for listening to me think out loud...and for the coffee and cookies." Reva's voice practically dripped with syrup. "It was...quaint."

Olivia raised an eyebrow as Reva promptly flounced out of the kitchen, presumably to grab Colin and head home. She looked over to see confusion and amusement warring on Natalia's face as dark eyes trailed after their departing guest.

Pushing her own chair back, Olivia stood. She should go see the woman out, she supposed. But first, she walked over to her lover and gave her a kiss on the cheek, carefully avoiding the spots covered in flour. "Don't worry; that's just Reva. You'll get used to her. Eventually."

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"How can you not understand what just happened?"

Blake stared at Doris, whose eyes were still fixed on the baseball field, watching, well, whatever was going on in this softball game. Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, an urge the mayor brought out in her all too often, she shrugged and answered, "Because I've had better things to do with my time than learn all the ridiculous rules of various sports."

She leaned forward on the bleachers, an elbow propped against her knee, cradling her chin in her hand, and looked out on to the field, trying to figure out what was going on. Not that she cared all that much, honestly, but because it seemed appropriate.

Expecting another sarcastic response, she was surprised by the patience in Doris's tone. "The batter had two strikes against her and hit a foul ball, so that makes it an out. That was the third out for that team in this inning, so now it's time for the teams to switch places."

"Okay."

Blake knew she probably should have said more than that, but “thank you” seemed a little weird and she wasn’t about to ask for more information when she really didn’t care all that much. She felt the weight of Doris’s gaze on her and turned her head slightly, to find blue eyes studying her carefully.

“Why did you agree to come to the game with me when you don’t really like sports?”

There was no hint of mockery in the mayor’s voice, just honest confusion, and Blake smiled softly. Frank had asked her a similar question earlier, when she’d told him about her plans for the afternoon. Her answer to him had been fairly pointed, along the lines of how Doris, at least, was interested in spending time with her. Sadly, he’d seemed to entirely miss her irritation with him and his lack of attention, only rolling his eyes and saying women’s softball couldn’t begin to compare to baseball.

“Because I know you like sports and you’re my friend, Doris.” Blake didn’t miss the hint of a blush that graced the woman’s features, and took pity on the I-hate-sentimentality mayor. “Besides, you’re buying me dinner afterwards. That’s reason enough to sit through a game.”

She chuckled when Doris rolled her eyes and looked away, but knew the woman well enough to not be at all offended by the pretense of irritation. Turning her head again, Blake stared out at the field, watching the pitcher lob softballs over the plate and the batter not bothering to swing at them. She was sure there was some strategy to it all that she didn’t understand, but she didn’t bother trying at that point, just took it in visually while her mind was busy elsewhere.

Blake reveled in the feel of the summer sun against her bare arms and legs. She took in the blue of the cloudless sky and the green of the grassy field. She listened to the cheers of the crowd when their players did something they liked and to the murmurs of conversation around her. She glanced over at Doris, seeing the other woman relaxed and smiling in a way that had been all-too-infrequent in recent months after what had happened with Anna.

Taking stock of herself, Blake realized how content she was in that moment, and how happy she was just hanging out with Doris.

Too bad she didn’t feel this comfortable when she spent time with Frank.

The sudden awareness made her frown. He had been so charming when they first started dating, and they’d known each other for years, so it had been easy. But in recent months, she’d started feeling like more of a prop than a girlfriend. He was a good man, but clueless.

She sighed softly as she realized just how much he took things for granted – assumed that she’d want what he wanted, assumed that her work schedule and her activities

were less important than his own. And she couldn't even blame him for it; she'd noticed the same thing when he dated Natalia. He'd grown passive in recent years, and she'd known that before she started dating him. He needed a different kind of woman than either of them was – someone who would alternately challenge him and comfort him, who would bring out his feisty side, who knew when to take him down a notch and when to soothe his ego.

Blake could do some of that, had been doing it for nearly a year, but it was starting to feel like a game – one that she didn't really want to keep playing. She wanted to be able to be herself, not fit into whatever role he needed on a given day.

"Penny for your thoughts."

She started slightly at the unexpected sound of Doris's voice, and then chuckled. "Trust me – my thoughts aren't all that interesting."

Feeling a hand on her arm, Blake looked over at Doris and saw the concern in blue eyes. She covered the woman's hand with her own and shook her head. "It's nothing to worry about, honestly. But I appreciate the concern."

She could tell the other woman didn't entirely believe her, but apparently was satisfied enough with her answer not to push. Blake wanted to talk to her about all her confused feelings where Frank was concerned. But not here. Not now. Not when Doris was still broken-hearted over the loss of Anna. She couldn't do that to her friend.

Instead, she refocused on the immediate moment. "So why did that runner have to go off the field?"

She didn't miss the slight exasperation as Doris started in on an explanation.

The familiarity of it made her smile.

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ACT 2

Phillip smiled as he turned and ran across Rick's well-tended lawn to chase after the Frisbee. James had sent it flying well over his head and he suspected it had been done it on purpose. That suspicion was confirmed when he stretched to his limit, trying – and failing – to catch it; he tripped over his own feet and heard his son laughing uproariously.

He sprawled ungracefully on the ground, rolling over onto his back to shoot a mock glare across the grass. But he couldn't keep up his pretended outrage for long and joined in the laughter.

He remembered all too well that at this time last year, James would barely even speak to him, let alone play games at the barbecue with him. Phillip had been to the point of nearly giving up, knowing that as much as he wanted a relationship with his son, he couldn't take much more of the cold shoulder treatment. But then, slowly, things had started to shift. Between his illness and Alan's death, James seemed to have suddenly matured. He'd grown up amazingly fast anyhow, leaving Phillip almost dizzy at the transition between little boy and young man. But simply growing in years didn't always mean growing in maturity, and James had been – plainly put – a spoiled brat, still acting like he was seven years old.

One of the greatest joys of Phillip's life was that his son was growing out of that stage and that James actually wanted to spend time with his old man these days. Family was so important and he knew he was damn lucky that he was alive to have this time with his son, with Lizzie, with Beth, with Emma, with Olivia and Natalia, and with all the other people he loved.

He pushed to his feet with a smile, then turned to retrieve the Frisbee. Life was so good and so precious that he didn't plan to waste a moment of it.

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Olivia sat back in her chair at the kitchen table and rolled her shoulders, stretching. She yawned, then leaned forward to reach for her all-important mug of coffee. Taking a healthy sip, she could practically feel the caffeine coursing through her veins. Well, not really, but she enjoyed the illusion. She didn't know why she was so tired this morning. Amazingly, both Emma and Francesca had slept later than usual. And while she suspected Natalia had gotten up at the crack of dawn to finish the treats for the barbecue, she had been able to sleep until a little after nine.

But here she sat, at nearly ten-thirty, on her third cup of coffee, trying to wake up. Maybe it was because the house was quiet. Francesca was content in her playpen with her toys, Emma was doing something or other with construction paper and crayons, and Natalia had just left for church. It was unusual for things to be so serene all at once – and with Leyla staying with them for an undetermined period of time and Ava dropping in and out randomly, things had only gotten more chaotic. So maybe she was just reacting to the unexpected calm in the midst of the storm.

Even as she came up with the thought, she knew that wasn't it. She wasn't normally the most introspective of creatures, preferring to act instead of think. But there was no way she could ignore the fact that at this time last year, her heart had been broken.

Despite everything that had happened since then, despite the fact that she finally felt secure enough to believe that Natalia wasn't going to run off again without a word, the anniversary of that event wasn't something she could just ignore. It had been too big in

her life and caused her too much pain. And there was that little pessimist sitting on her shoulder, reminding her that what had happened once could happen again.

Old patterns were hard to break, as she knew better than anyone from her pre-Natalia train wreck of a romantic life.

No wonder she felt exhausted, even though she'd barely done anything since getting out of bed.

She lifted her coffee mug and drained the contents in one long swallow. Consciously, she made herself focus on the positive. Natalia had come back to her and had spent the better part of the past eleven months convincing her she was in it for the long haul. There was no reason to believe that would change. They were raising two beautiful daughters; the hotel was doing well, despite the lingering economic downturn; they'd faced aspects of their individual pasts together and come out stronger.

She wouldn't say their life together was perfect – but it was better than she'd had with anyone else before. And she knew – because she'd heard it more than once – that her partner felt the same way.

Shaking her head to clear it, she pushed up from her chair and took her mug over to the sink to rinse it out. She didn't have time to sit here wallowing in thoughts of the past. There were two little girls to get ready and a barbecue to attend. Despite Emma's current calm, she knew that her daughter would start bouncing off the walls the minute she realized they were getting ready to leave. Then there was the matter of getting Sweet Pea dressed in an outdoorsy sort of outfit and packing up all her supplies. Olivia was just thankful Natalia was coming back for the food so she didn't have to try and keep track of that on top of their daughters. It wouldn't have been a Mission Impossible – but it would have been difficult. Especially in her still somewhat foggy mental state.

As she walked out of the kitchen, one random thought related to the previous year's barbecue flashed into her head and made her smile.

At least this year, she knew there was no way in hell Natalia could be pregnant.

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Blake set the bag down on the picnic table near the barbecue grill with more of a thud than she'd intended. Wincing, she peered inside the paper sack, relieved when she saw that this one just held large boxes of plastic utensils. At least it wasn't anything breakable. She looked over at Phillip, who wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention to her, and then at Doris, who, predictably, had a smirk on her face. She just rolled her eyes in response, remembering that her friend had come close to dropping several bags of potato chips. Not that they probably would have been damaged, given that the bags held almost as much air as food, but it was the principle of the thing.

"That's the last of the bags, Rick," she said to the man hovering over the grill.

She watched as his eyes darted between her, the various things that had been unloaded on to the table, and the grill. "Where are the hamburger buns?"

She glanced over at Doris, who gave a one-shouldered shrug in response. Blake knew there was nothing left in the Bauer kitchen; she'd double-checked before carrying the last bag out here. "I didn't see anything else on the counter. Did you put them somewhere else when you got home from the store?"

Rick's face fell. "Y'know, I don't remember buying any. And I think I forgot about ketchup and mustard too. Blake, can you run into town and pick some up?"

Used to the man's notoriously forgetful nature, she simply sighed in resignation. "Yeah, that's fine. Where's your wallet?"

She wasn't surprised in the slightest when Rick coughed and fidgeted, at least having the good grace to blush when she pinned him with her stare. "I...uh...am a little short on cash right now."

Hadn't he done this to her last year? She looked towards Phillip, who was already reaching into his pocket. He peeled off a few bills and handed them to her. "Thanks," she said simply. Slipping the money into her own pocket, Blake turned to Doris. "Come on."

She caught the mayor's raised eyebrow and spoke quickly to head off the inevitable sardonic comment. "Until more people show up, do you really want to stand around and listen to these guys talk about grilling and baseball and how much better the fireworks will be this year?"

"I'll get my purse."

Blake couldn't help but smile as she watched Doris walk back to the house. While she could have run the errand on her own, it was more fun to have company. And it was nice that Doris didn't even bother to put on a show of reluctance in front of the other two. Not that either of them were paying any attention, their focus now entirely on the coals and discussing the relative placement of hotdogs and hamburgers. But still, it was nice to know that the other woman wasn't putting on her "must keep everyone at arm's length" persona with regard to them being friends.

Trailing after the other woman, she shook her head. A year ago, she never would have predicted that she would actually enjoy spending time with the prickly mayor. Funny how things had changed so much.

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Natalia pasted on her best sweet smile when Father Ray approached her after Mass, Mrs. Elliot trailing close behind him. She couldn't imagine what the two of them wanted, only knew it probably wasn't good for her self-esteem. While her interactions with Father Ray were usually fine when it was just the two of them, the older woman definitely had it out for Natalia and had a knack for getting the priest all riled up over nothing.

"Ah, Natalia. It's so good to see you here this morning."

Natalia gritted her teeth at the subtle insinuation in the priest's tone. Especially since she knew full well that she wasn't the only parishioner who didn't make it to Sunday morning Mass every week. She was pretty sure he didn't go around checking on the rest of the flock in such a manner. Refusing to rise to the bait, she said simply, "Good morning, Father Ray, Mrs. Elliot."

"I've been concerned about you. Is everything ok, Natalia?"

She stared at the man for a long moment, trying to decide if he was serious. Well, she knew his concern for her was genuine; he'd always been far more interested in her and her life than any other priest she'd had. What she couldn't figure out was whether he seriously thought she'd stand right there, out in public, with an openly hostile woman as an audience, and tell him if something was bothering her.

Keeping her manner as mild as possible, she said, "I didn't realize missing two Sundays in the past month and a half was cause for such concern. But to answer your question, yes, everything is fine. Life has just been busy."

Father Ray at least managed to look somewhat contrite at her words and his tone was apologetic. "I just know it's been a hard year for you and I couldn't help but think about what happened last July..."

He trailed off there, though Natalia didn't know if it was because of the sharp look she gave him or because the greedy curiosity on Mrs. Elliot's face reminded him that he had come dangerously close to violating her confidentiality. She didn't bother to hide behind pleasantries any longer. "I appreciate your concern, Father, but as I said, everything is fine. I know you're just trying to help, but there's nothing in my life right now that I need your help with."

She felt bad for her harsh words, but she was just speaking the truth. Last year, she'd run to her priest instead of her partner, turning to the person she'd been trained since childhood to trust implicitly. And while she freely admitted that she'd made the disastrous choices that followed that conversation, and that she was to blame for the hurt those choices had caused, she also knew that if he had advised her differently at that moment, she might have taken another path. Ever since she came back from her retreat with as much clarity as any imperfect being could have in the absence of Divine wisdom, she'd realized just how much the advice he kept offering was in a not-so-subtle attempt to get her back under...not his control, exactly, but his influence, certainly.

It bothered her, now that she was thinking about it, that he still didn't seem to understand that she had found her own path, made her own peace with God, and that her life was finally what she wanted it to be. He wasn't her confidante any more, no matter how much respect she had for his vocation and the work he did for his flock.

To his credit, Father Ray simply nodded, not seeming to be as offended as she thought perhaps he should be. "I just worry about you, Natalia. You've taken a difficult road and..."

Natalia held up her hand to stop the flow of words. "As I said, Father, my life is not something I need your help with. Unless, of course, you have a few minutes to talk about the charity work I'm doing down at the Mission."

She watched as the priest's face paled slightly, his smile slowly dropping away as she continued talking. "It's been hard finding time to balance that with taking care of the kids and working. Perhaps one or both of you could help me find more volunteers to cover the things I haven't had time to do." She glanced at the older woman, seeing her wide eyes and horrified expression, and pressed the point. "I'd love to hear Mrs. Elliot's thoughts on that as well."

When they both made hasty excuses and retreated, Natalia fought the urge to giggle. While she doubted the older woman had a single charitable bone in her body, she was a little mystified as to why Father Ray seemed so hostile towards the Mission. But it worked in her favor these days, so she wasn't going to look the gift horse in the mouth.

"Hey, Natalia."

She turned to greet Sister Anne, who had a big grin on her face. Before she could ask about it, the woman said, "I suppose I should be offended that the mere mention of doing work at my humble little Mission makes Father Ray run away like he got spooked by a ghost or something."

Natalia couldn't help it; she laughed at that. "So I've noticed." She quickly grew serious. "I hope you understand that things have just been really busy lately, which is why I haven't been around as much."

There was no mistaking the look of sympathy on Sister Anne's face. "Don't even worry about it. I know you've got a lot going on. But maybe you could give me a hand with something right now. I've got several boxes in the back of my car, but still have a few more that won't fit. Do you have some time to load them up in your car and bring them to the Mission? If not, it's fine. Just thought I'd ask."

Natalia glanced down at her watch. "I'm supposed to meet Olivia at the Bauer barbecue soon, and I still have to go by the farmhouse to pick up the food." Looking up at Sister Anne, she caught the question in the woman's eyes. "Ava's got brunch plans and didn't

think she'd be at the barbecue until later in the afternoon, and Leyla's out of town. Since Olivia had her hands full with Emma and Francesca, I didn't want her to have to deal with that as well. But it's fine; I can make time for this."

It was a matter of several minutes work to get the boxes loaded up in the trunk of Natalia's car. She told Sister Anne she'd meet her at the Mission, and then fished her cell phone out of her purse. Frowning in concentration as she stared at the keypad, she texted Olivia to let her know that she would be a bit later than she'd expected, as well as the reason why.

She opened the car door and slid in to the driver's seat, but didn't immediately start the engine. Her patience was rewarded with the ring of an incoming message.

Just don't take too long. Emma's bragging about all the treats you made and the natives may get restless if they have to wait too much longer. <3

Natalia shook her head, chuckling, as she started the car and fastened her seat belt. Easing out into the thin traffic, she mumbled, "Don't worry, Olivia; I'll be there before you know it."

~~*~*

"I could have sworn I had more cheese slices than that. And I thought I had relish around here somewhere."

Phillip raised an eyebrow at Rick's perturbed tone as he looked over the items spread across the table. It didn't surprise him in the slightest that his friend was missing things; how the man could expect to have enough supplies for his barbecue when he didn't bother to make a list of what he needed was beyond his comprehension. He was simply thankful that the man's forgetfulness was only a hallmark of his personal life, not his professional one.

He managed to keep from chuckling when Rick turned a beseeching gaze on Blake, who was holding her hands up in an apparent attempt at either deflection or self-defense. It wasn't entirely clear. But when Doris stepped in and said, "No, we are not running back to town for some other little thing you forgot; we've been twice; if we go a third time, we'll practically be on a first name basis with the clerk," Phillip couldn't keep from laughing.

The mayor raised an eyebrow at him, and he shook his head in response, still laughing. At one point in his life, he would have gotten angry at her dry tone or sarcastic comments about his friend. He hadn't been a very nice person for more years than he liked to admit. But having a second chance at life, having people around who loved him – faults and all – made him a lot more relaxed, a lot happier with the world and his place in it. He had Beth back in his arms, had a great relationship with Emma, and had a new

extended family with Olivia and Natalia. Life was a gift that he would never again take for granted.

He was suddenly aware that he had gotten lost in his own thoughts when he looked up to find three curious gazes fixed on him – Rick’s with a tinge of anxiety, Doris’s with a tinge of impatience, Blake’s with a tinge of concern.

Phillip smiled broadly, knowing that if he were to say what was in his head, he’d probably embarrass all three of them by being too mushy. Instead, he focused on the immediate issue at hand. “Don’t worry about it, Rick. I’ll run into town and pick up more supplies.”

~~*~*

Lillian sighed in exasperation as Frank and Buzz argued, looking past them at the various people roaming the grounds of the Bauer estate. She knew it was just a mock argument, neither man seeming all that serious about his respective point-of-view, but neither willing to back down. She didn’t even know what they were bickering about – something to do with baseball and time at work and, well, she’d tuned it out at about that point.

Normally, she was as tolerant as the day was long. But today, her husband and stepson had long since worn out her patience. Well, that wasn’t quite true; Buzz had only stepped on her nerves when he didn’t give up the argument. Frank, on the other hand, had been sullen and moody all day. He’d been griping at her and his father since they met up for brunch, had alternated between forced cheer and pensiveness whenever Blake came near, had been sarcastic whenever he crossed paths with Eleni, and had practically yelled at Marina earlier.

Actually, she had to admit the last bit wasn’t entirely fair to Frank. His daughter had started the whole thing by nagging at him because he’d said “hello” to Eleni, as if the chief of police and the head of the crime scene unit were somehow supposed to work together without speaking. At one point, the young woman had been almost beside herself with anger, which was when Frank had finally snapped at her. Lillian had to give his behavior a pass on that front. Whether Marina liked her mother or not, it wasn’t any of her business what relationship her father had with the woman.

She shook her head at the thought. No wonder she was annoyed – she’d spent the day surrounded by spoiled brats.

“Come on.”

She almost laughed when Buzz and Frank both jumped at her sudden intrusion into their argument. On the plus side, it shocked them into silence. She grabbed her husband’s hand and led him off towards the bushes.

Despite his sputtered protest, she was relatively sure he wasn't all that upset with her. She didn't bother to look back to see Frank's reaction.

~~*~*

"This is unbelievable."

Natalia was too frustrated to even care that she was talking out loud when there was no one else in the car with her. The trip down to the Mission had gone smoothly enough and the boxes were quickly unloaded by the handful of volunteers. Her trip from there to the farmhouse had held only minor, and expected, traffic delays. But her trip towards the Bauer estate seemed to have been cursed from the beginning.

First had been the series of streets closed for multiple Fourth of July celebrations – block parties and various neighborhood parades. Which was all well and good – except for the minor fact that they'd forgotten to put up detour signs. Confused motorists had made ill-advised wrong-way turns and u-turns and generally made traffic into a huge headache. She'd nearly been sideswiped enough times that she'd actually lost count.

She'd finally cleared that tangled mess, only to run into her second obstacle – an accident that completely blocked the street she'd been on. Everything slowed to a crawl as drivers alternated between getting out of their cars to gawk and inching towards any side street they could turn on to. She'd said a quick prayer for the people involved in the crash, then had joined in the ranks of those trying to inch their way off that street.

At long last, she'd succeeded. And then, she'd come across her third and current obstacle – a road construction project. On a Sunday. On the Fourth of July. She couldn't go forward, because there was a cement truck blocking the one open lane. She couldn't go to the side, because there were no side streets on this stretch of road. She couldn't go back because more trucks involved in the construction work were behind her, blocking her in.

Un-freaking-believable.

She fumbled for her purse and grabbed for her phone. She needed to tell Olivia about this latest delay. The typing took longer than normal, as she was keeping one eye on her phone and one eye on the road, knowing that with her luck at the moment, the lane would be cleared and the flagger would motion her forward when she wasn't paying attention.

Just as she went to hit send, her phone screen flashed the "low battery" warning. Right as her finger pressed down on the button, the screen went blank.

She shook her head. She hadn't even checked her battery, since she thought she'd plugged her phone into the charger last night. Either she was starting her "senior moments" early, or the charger hadn't worked. Or something.

Before she had time to start fretting about it, traffic began to inch forward as the cement truck slowly moved out of the lane. All she could do was concentrate on the road and hope that the message had actually gotten through.

~~*~*

Mindy stood under a tree, looking out over the lawn and the people milling around. Rick and Phillip were busy telling tall tales around the grill. Beth had gone off to talk to Mel about passing the bar and life as a lawyer. She was excited for her friend's success, but she knew she'd be a third wheel in that conversation.

So she'd decided to just spend a little time alone and take in the sight of people enjoying themselves in this annual ritual. At the worst of times in Springfield, people were divided, pitted against each other in battles both literal and figurative. But at the best of times, they came together like this and managed to put aside their differences. Well, most of them, anyhow.

Looking out over the expanse of grass, she let her eyes flit around, taking in some of the people there. Bill was hovering over Lizzie, treating her like a princess, their devotion to each other undeniable. Billy and Vanessa were sitting nearby, holding hands and watching the kids run around. Shayne was bent over Marina and his son, making faces at little Henry. Reva was sitting on the grass, watching as Colin toddled around on a square of blanket, periodically toppling over. A gaggle of little girls would occasionally run over and help him get back up whenever he fell. Danny and Michelle were strolling around, hand in hand.

It felt like home to be here, to be watching family and friends enjoy themselves. She was very glad she'd come back to Springfield. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed the place, not to mention all the wacky people who lived there.

She was especially glad that she'd been spending so much time with Rick. She'd missed him more than she'd ever imagined, and dating him was making her feel like a schoolgirl with a crush again.

Mindy smiled to herself. It had been a very good year.

~~*~*

Olivia glanced at her phone for the tenth time in as many minutes. Even though she had the ringer set to maximum and had it set to vibrate, she was still convinced she must have missed a message or a call. It had been nearly an hour and a half since Natalia's text message, telling her that she was helping out Sister Anne. Olivia had done the mental math of distances and routes and time needed to cart food around, and knew that even if her partner was moving at a turtle's pace and had taken the longest possible path from point A to point B to point C to point D, it still should only have taken an hour.

At the very least, Natalia could have sent another message to let her know if she'd gotten delayed again.

She stood under a tree, a bit off to the side of all the various groups of people, anxiety rushing through her as she remembered being in the same position last year. Waiting for Natalia to show up – a wait that had proven to be in vain. Everyone else had been laughing and happy, except for her.

Well, at least that was one difference between this year and last. She might be tense and a bit upset right now, but she wasn't the only one. As she'd glanced around earlier, she'd taken note of how stressed people appeared to be. Frank seemed to be grinding his teeth in an effort to keep a smile on his face, Blake alternated between looking happy and looking pensive, Marina and Eleni snapped at each other every time they passed within ten feet of each other, Lillian seemed exasperated with Buzz, Reva and Jonathan were avoiding each other, and so on and so forth.

Olivia couldn't help but smile a little at the reminder that she definitely wasn't alone in the whole "this isn't quite turning out the way I'd planned it" category. And, God willing, her situation was temporary. Still, she was annoyed that Natalia hadn't even bothered to text.

Pulling out her phone again, she glanced at the display. There were no new messages and no record of any missed calls. She fought the urge to send a message, telling herself that the burden was on Natalia to keep in touch, to explain what was going on. It wasn't on her. But even as she told herself that, she couldn't restrain herself.

Where are you? Any idea when you'll be here? Just let me know what's going on.

She held the phone for a few minutes, waiting for an answer. She looked over to where Frank now had Francesca balanced on his lap. As irritated as he seemed to be with this whole day, she had to admit that he'd brightened up when she asked if he wanted to hang out with his daughter for a while. While she and Frank would probably always butt heads, having too much history, usually entailing them being at odds, she was just glad that he seemed to have made his peace with her being Natalia's partner instead of him.

Switching her focus, she watched Emma running around with Sarah, Peyton, and Clarissa. She was glad to see that both Emma and Sarah seemed to be having a great time, able to just be in the moment the way kids should be. She had been worried about that in the aftermath of Jane's murder. Her daughter had been through so much already; how much more could any kid, no matter how well adjusted, actually take? But seeing her like this, happy with her friends, warmed Olivia's heart. Jellybean had had her moments of being sad and withdrawn and nervous. But the girl seemed to be bouncing back with her usual spunk, just needing a bit more attention than normal from her two mommies.

At that mental reminder of her partner, Olivia looked down at her phone. Damn it. Still no message. What the hell?

Resolutely, she shoved her phone into her pocket, mood shifting from somewhat anxious to downright angry. She wasn't going to spend the next hour or two staring at her phone, waiting for it to ring. She'd hear it or feel it if Natalia called or texted. She damn well wasn't going to make any more first moves.

At this rate, Natalia would be lucky if she didn't end up sleeping on the couch.

~~*~*

Act 3

Natalia shook her head as she pulled into a parking space at the mini-mart. After all the delays – traffic and otherwise – she still couldn't quite believe that she had to make yet another stop. She'd somehow forgotten to grab the little flags she had planned to stick in the cupcakes as decorations, even though they were right next to all the other things she'd taken off the kitchen counter. On the one hand, she knew it didn't really matter. People might "ooh" and "aww" over them for all of two seconds, but the real interest was in eating the cupcakes, not admiring them. On the other hand, she wanted to do something to commemorate the holiday. Those kinds of little touches were important to her.

Walking in to the convenience store, she quickly headed to the aisle she wanted, thinking that she clearly spent way too much time here since she even knew what shelf to look on. Bending down, she grabbed up the last package of the decorations. Then, she jumped slightly in shock when she stood and found herself face-to-face with Christina.

"I'm sorry, Natalia. I didn't mean to startle you."

Natalia waved off the apology. "I should have been paying more attention. I didn't even see you." She looked down at the woman's bulging belly. "Do you need help reaching anything, or is Remy here with you?"

Christina's laugh sounded a bit forced. "No, he had to work the day shift today. Detective Li offered to cover for him, but Chief Cooper didn't allow it for some reason. He's meeting me at the barbecue later. I just needed to pick up some candles for the cake I made."

Natalia bent over again, almost before Christina had finished speaking, and grabbed a package of red, white, and blue candles. When she straightened up and handed the package over to Christina, she was surprised to hear, "Oh, no..."

She frowned and glanced between Christina and the shelf, wondering what was wrong with the candles she'd picked out. After all, they were in the "seasonal" aisle and there were no regular candles anywhere in sight. Just as she was about to ask, she heard a slightly longer "Oooohhh" and abruptly knew what was happening. Looking down at the floor of the aisle confirmed her suspicions; Christina's water had just broken.

There was a look of mild panic on the woman's face and Natalia's mothering instincts kicked in. "It's ok," she murmured, placing her arm gently around Christina's back and slowly guiding her towards the checkout stand. "We'll get you to the hospital in just a minute."

Still supporting Christina, she cleared her throat to get the attention of the store clerk. The college-age kid behind the counter didn't so much as turn his head; his entire focus seemed to be on his phone call – not using his cell phone, but using the store phone. For all the notice the young man took of them, they could have robbed the place and made a clean getaway.

She could hear short, labored breaths that told her Christina's contractions were coming close together, and the strained, fearful look on the younger woman's face confirmed it. Natalia had a vague memory of her own fear when she went into labor with Rafe, having no real idea what to expect or how bad the pain would be.

Natalia murmured something in a soothing tone, though she had no idea what she'd actually said, and slowly walked the other woman over to a table near the coffee counter, settling her into a chair. She told Christina to call Remy and tell him to meet them at the hospital, and that she'd take care of the rest.

Returning to the checkout stand, she didn't waste time trying to get the clerk's attention, simply walked around behind the counter and tapped him on the shoulder. He'd clearly been oblivious to her presence, because he jumped as if he'd sat on a hot coal. She wasn't surprised when he resorted to rudeness to try and cover his reaction. "Hey, lady, are you stupid? You're not supposed to be back here. And can't you see I'm on the phone?"

Natalia crossed her arms over her chest and raised a challenging eyebrow. Using the same lecture voice she'd used on Rafe, she said, "One of your customers just went into labor and is going to have a baby. I need to use the phone to call her doctor."

The clerk's eyes nearly bulged out of his head and he literally dropped the phone. Thankfully, it wasn't cordless. "Oh my God, dude. She's like having a baby right now? Like, what am I supposed to do? They didn't cover this in my training."

While a small part of her wanted to channel Olivia and offer a suitably sarcastic answer, she took pity on him, since he seemed on the verge of genuine panic. Speaking calmly to the young man, she told him to go sit with Christina and keep her company, to try and

keep her mind off the pain. To his credit, he rallied himself enough to follow her instructions.

She hung up on the aggravated voice shouting “Dude!” over the phone, then dialed Olivia’s cell number, mainly because it was the only one she knew off the top of her head. But it would also kill two birds with one stone – she’d be able to let her partner know that she’d had yet another delay and she’d be able to have Olivia go tell Rick that he was needed at the hospital. She’d long ago stopped questioning why the man seemed to specialize in every kind of medicine practiced at Cedars.

After a handful of rings, she heard a disembodied voice say, “We’re sorry. The subscriber you’re trying to reach is out of service. Please hang up and try your call again.”

In disbelief, Natalia stared down at the phone in her hand. She disconnected the call and tried again, getting the same results. Un-freaking-believable.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she concentrated on remembering Blake’s number. Dialing it, she could only cross her fingers and hope that this call would connect.

~~*~*

Jonathan winced as his mother flounced past him on her way to the grill and the picnic table full of food, not even glancing at him. He knew she was still pissed at him for not telling her that Jeffrey was alive, and for running off to Mexico on his own. Still, he’d thought she was a little beyond the silent treatment at this point in her life. Apparently not.

He felt a presence behind him and turned to see Shayne standing there. Jonathan tensed instinctively, since he and his half-brother weren’t always on the best of terms. But the look on the other man’s face was pensive as he stared at the retreating form of their mother. “You know what she’s like, Jonathan. She can hold a grudge with the best of them, but she’ll eventually understand that you were trying to do what was best for everyone.”

Jonathan sighed softly, wishing he could believe it would be that easy. His answer was a simple, “There’s always a price to be paid for hiding the truth.”

He winced as soon as the words were out of his mouth, remembering the stories he’d heard of all the secrets Shayne had kept, particularly about his son. He didn’t want to hit a nerve or anything, but thankfully his half-brother didn’t seem upset when he turned away from watching Reva, his gaze landing on Jonathan. “And sometimes there’s a higher price when you don’t.”

Well, he couldn’t exactly argue with that, now could he?

Casting about for something to say, wanting to shift the conversation onto happier ground since it was, after all, supposed to be a festive time, Jonathan finally settled on, “You and Marina and Henry seem pretty happy together.”

And with that, Shayne was off and running, a smile on his face as he sang the praises of their lives. Jonathan didn’t particularly care all that much, but he was grateful for the distraction from his own life and his own problems. At least someone in this crazy town was happy, even with the threat hanging over their heads.

~~*~*

Standing under a tree, next to his girlfriend, Frank cleared his throat for what was probably the tenth time. He’d finally screwed up the courage again to talk to Blake about his realization – that she was his consolation prize, that he didn’t think he really loved her like a boyfriend should, and that they both deserved better than to settle for each other. But having the resolve to do it hadn’t exactly given him any idea how to go about it.

Having her stare at him like he’d lost his mind wasn’t helping matters either.

“Frank, you seem nervous about something.”

Well now, wasn’t that the understatement of the century? Clearing his throat again, he stared at Blake, wondering why it was so hard to do the right thing and break this off with her. It might have had something to do with the fact that they’d known each other for a long time and he didn’t want to lose her as a friend. It might have had something to do with the fact that he did genuinely like her and didn’t want to hurt her. It might also have had something to do with the fact that she was darned cute in her flowery sundress, her hair sweeping across her shoulders, her eyes soft and kind, her slim figure curved in all the right places...

Wait. No. He could put that aside. He could do this.

“I kinda need to talk to you, Blake. I’ve been doing some thinking and...”

A loud chirp interrupted him. Reflexively, he reached for his cell phone to see if the call was for him. A moment later, he saw that Blake had done the same with her phone. She mouthed “Natalia” at him and he waved a hand at her, telling her to take the call.

He wondered briefly why his ex-fiancee was calling Blake instead of him or Olivia, then decided he didn’t really care all that much. Not because he begrudged Natalia her happiness. At one point, he had, but not any more. It was just that now that he was in the same position she’d been in last year, he understood that it hadn’t been a walk in the park for her to find a way to break things off with him. He was having a hard enough time just bringing the subject up with Blake and he kept second-guessing his decision.

And that was without the added complication of the break-up being for a same-sex relationship. Not that he'd ever be in that position, but still.

He shook himself out of his wandering thoughts in time to see Blake end the call and look at him apologetically. "I'm sorry, Frank. But Natalia's at the mini-mart with Christina, who just went into labor, and I need to get that message to Rick. They've already called Remy and he's on his way to Cedars, so you'll need to find someone to cover the rest of his shift."

"Don't worry about it. Do what you need to do and I'll make some calls."

He pulled out his phone and mustered up a smile as she kissed his cheek quickly before practically running off. Scrolling through his contacts, he found the number he needed and dialed. While he waited for the call to connect, it occurred to him that every single time he tried to talk to Blake about their relationship, something interrupted and kept him from breaking it off.

It had to be a sign.

~~*~*

Rick smiled down at the grill, loaded with hotdogs and hamburgers, as he listened to his friends talking. Phillip, Beth, and Mindy were there with him – the Four Musketeers, together again. Danny and Michelle had been, but had wandered off to chat with other people. He turned slightly, glancing at the expanse of lawn behind him, his smile growing wider at the sight of so many people having a good time. This was what life was really about – friends and family and tradition.

He chuckled as Beth smacked Phillip on the arm in response to some inane thing he'd said. It was especially funny because he knew the other man did stuff like that on purpose to get a rise out of his wife. Rick was so happy that Phillip was back in town and had settled into the life of Springfield. He'd missed his friend.

It'd had been a hard few years. He frowned slightly as his mind replayed everything that had happened, turning back towards the grill and focusing on it harder than strictly necessary, to keep the others from noticing his sudden fit of melancholy. But things were getting better. Phillip hadn't died, Olivia was going strong now that she was taking care of her new heart, and he and Mindy were spending a lot more time together these days.

That last thought warmed him. Someday soon, he'd have the kind of happiness that Phillip and Beth had, once again, found with each other. Well, assuming he didn't lose his nerve before the end of the day.

Pulling his scattered thoughts back together, he turned a row of hotdogs and laughed as Phillip finished some wildly embellished tale of their younger years. Hearing the sputters

of laughter from the women, Rick turned his head and said emphatically, "He's exaggerating. We didn't actually tip any cows over. We tried...but the one we were pushing on woke up and wandered off. It was all very sad."

He rolled his eyes at the way Phillip clutched at his breast as though gravely wounded. "Oh, Rick. Why did you betray our secret?" The man's tone shifted from faux-hurt to faux-accusing. "Besides, you're the one who spread the story of our cow-tipping adventure all over town in the first place."

Rick shook his head, but couldn't keep from smiling at his friend, and saw that Beth and Mindy both wore matching grins. He pointed the grill tongs at Phillip. "Yes, but I stopped telling the story about twenty years ago. You, on the other hand...What the...?"

He was vaguely conscious of the fact that the other three were gaping at him as though he'd lost his mind, but the sight of Blake running towards them, a worried look on her face, was all he could focus on. He couldn't imagine what had gone wrong at the barbecue to cause that expression, and he hoped it was nothing serious. They all needed a nice, quiet, happy holiday. Of course, it being Springfield, the chances of that actually happening were slim to none, but he'd had high hopes anyhow.

The redhead skidded to a stop in the middle of the group, panting to catch her breath. Rick took a step towards her. "Blake, what's wrong? Is someone hurt?"

She shook her head, leaving him more puzzled than before. "No," she gasped in between breaths. "Nothing like that. Christina's water broke. She's gone into labor. Natalia's taking her to the hospital right now. You need to go."

And so much for his nice, relaxed holiday. Not that he should have expected anything different; he was a doctor, after all, and emergencies seldom happened when it was convenient.

Even as that thought formed in his head, he had handed the grill tongs to Phillip and was shrugging out of his apron, tossing it to Beth. He shot a series of questions at Blake about Christina's condition, stopping only when he felt someone whap him gently on the back of the neck. Turning his head, he saw it was Mindy. She jerked her chin in Blake's direction and he realized the redhead looked flustered and annoyed. Her words only confirmed that. "Honestly, Rick, I have no idea. Natalia was in a hurry to get Christina to the hospital, so she only had time to tell me the basics."

He swallowed his pride and said, "I'm sorry, Blake. I didn't mean to badger you."

She smiled at him, and he saw her normal good humor reflected in her eyes. "I understand. It did kind of come out of left field." He raised an eyebrow at her baseball reference, but she seemed oblivious as she waved her hand back towards the way she'd come. "I do need to deliver one more message...if you'll excuse me?" He nodded and watched her take off at a brisk walk.

He glanced at Phillip. “Buddy, I’ve got to go. Can you take over for me?”

“Of course. Beth and I have it covered.”

Rick smiled, even though he’d known that was what his friend would say. It was good to have people he could count on.

He turned and started to walk off, mind half on the happiness of the impending birth, half on the sadness of having to leave without the grand gesture he’d psyched himself up for, the hope he’d had for a fairytale ending to a beautiful day...

Abruptly, he spun on his heels. “Mindy, I...well, I had this all planned out...and this isn’t how I planned for it to go.” He stared into her uncomprehending eyes and blurted out, “I love you and I bought a ring and I want to ask if you’ll marry me and make me the happiest man in the world.”

He held his breath and watched her closely, seeing emotions cross her face in rapid succession – confusion, understanding, shock, awe. Finally, he saw tears in her eyes even though her face was split in the widest, most joyful smile he’d ever seen. “Oh, Rick. Of course I’ll marry you.”

He walked back to her and swept her up into a hug, relishing the feel of her arms around him. For a long moment, nothing else existed for him except Mindy and the happiness she brought to his life. Then he heard two stage whispers at once, from Phillip and Beth.

“Aren’t you supposed to be delivering a baby?”

“You should give her the ring now.”

Right, and right. He pulled back from his...fiancée for a moment, torn between his duty to his patient and his desire to stay here and bask in this moment with her.

Mindy still had tears in her eyes, but her tone was amused. “Why don’t I ride to the hospital with you? I can see the ring on the way, and we can talk about a date and all that. Then I can just come back here while you deliver the baby.”

Rick knew then just how lucky he was – he was going to marry the most thoughtful and practical woman in the world.

He swept her up into another big hug, not missing the way both Phillip and Beth were smirking at him. He knew he probably looked like a doofus, but he didn’t care. It might not have been the ideal, picture-perfect marriage proposal, but it didn’t need to be. He wasn’t exactly a picture-perfect kind of guy anyhow. Somehow, proposing in the midst of a mad rush to work seemed wholly fitting.

Releasing Mindy from his embrace, he grabbed hold of her hand and led her towards the house, to where his car was parked. He didn't bother to look back, knowing Phillip would keep things going in his absence, his whole focus on moving forward, the woman he loved at his side.

He thought it was safe to say this was his best Fourth of July ever.

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Emma sat down on the ground next to Clarissa, watching Sarah and Peyton climb on to the bench next to Marina to play with Henry. He was ok for a tal...toddler, she guessed, but Colin was more fun because his mommy actually let him get down from her lap and do stuff. Still, she thought Sweet Pea was way cuter and more fun than both of the boys.

She stretched out her legs on the grass, giggling when Clarissa lay back with a big sigh, like she was tired. Maybe she was. They had been running around for...well...a long time.

Emma looked around, wondering where her mommy was. Ma was supposed to be here, but she wasn't, and Mommy seemed both mad and sad at the same time. She didn't know why. And she was afraid to go over and ask. Grown-ups wanted kids to tell them everything, but they didn't tell kids everything. They didn't even tell each other everything.

Maybe her mommy was just worried because of what had happened to Jane. Maybe she was afraid it would happen to Natalia too. Emma shivered a little, even sitting in the sun, when she thought about that. It was scary to remember the man with the gun and to remember him holding Sarah. And it was sad to think about Jane. Even though Jane always left Emma alone when she wasn't supposed to and made her keep secrets about her boyfriend, she was nice.

Emma knew her mommies were worried about her. They'd talked to her a lot about what had happened. And she still got sad and scared sometimes. But she didn't want to think about it. She tried to forget it. She didn't want her mommies to think about it either. Not when it made them get all quiet and talk in whispers and follow her around.

She just wanted everything to be ok again. Ava and Leyla lived here now and they could take care of her just like Jane had. And they were nicer. Her daddy had guards for the house so no one could hurt them any more. She had Shadow to protect her and she could tell the puppy secrets – tell her all about the things that made her feel scared or sad and she always felt better when she did. Emma just wanted to run around and play like she had when she was a little girl. Well, Ma still called her a little girl, but she wasn't. She was a big girl now.

Kids at school always talked about wanting to be bigger, wanting to be adults so they could do what they wanted. Emma didn't understand that. Well, she did want to do whatever she wanted, like adults did. But she knew what it felt like to have grown-up problems, and she didn't like it at all.

She was glad that today she could hang out with her friends. That she could have fun. People needed to have more fun and not worry so much. She decided that when she took over the world, like her mommy always said she would, she wouldn't forget how to have fun. There would always be problems and hard things, but there were still good things like ice cream sundaes and playing in the grass and picking daisies.

Too bad adults didn't seem to remember that.

~~*~*

Olivia fought the urge to pace. Instead, she rooted herself to a spot next to a tree – out of the way of the people milling around and playing games, but where she could still keep a weather eye on Emma and her friends. Granted, Marina was also watching the four little girls, as they kept coming over to kiss and cuddle Henry. But she didn't exactly trust the younger woman's judgment or child-rearing abilities, so she was unwilling to turn her back. Even knowing that Phillip's security team was lurking about didn't help ease her worry about the kids. Ava was keeping an eye on Francesca now; Olivia was still disturbed by the fact that her oldest daughter, who'd planned to be late, had arrived before her partner, who hadn't.

She knew she should just say the hell with it and go mingle with people, grab some food, and try to take her mind off her worries. And by now, they were worries again, not anger. She'd spent roughly the last half an hour being angry, going over what had happened last year in the wake of the barbecue and Natalia's disappearance. She remembered all the second-guessing she'd done for months afterwards, all the walking on eggshells she'd done in taking Natalia back and coping with the unexpected pregnancy, all the doubts and fears that still flared up at the oddest times.

Then she'd looked down at the ring on her finger and she'd remembered all the other things – all the things her partner had said and done in the past several months to prove her love and devotion to Olivia and to their daughters. She remembered the other times when Natalia could have run away and didn't – when she got the news about her grandmother, when the graffiti appeared on the hotel and exposed their lives even more than they already were, when Olivia's drinking came between them, when Alan's will was read and Natalia ended up with the burden of more money than she ever could have imagined.

Hell, even Olivia's road trip with Reva could easily have triggered her partner's flight instincts. She'd left Natalia alone with two little kids and the burden of running the Beacon. Under normal circumstances, that wouldn't have been too big a deal, especially with Leyla around to baby-sit as needed. But considering that the farmhouse

had been vandalized and their daughter had witnessed a near-kidnapping and their nanny had been murdered and Edmund Winslow was alive and on the loose...well, that added a whole new level of stress to the situation.

And yet Natalia had stayed through all of that.

Unlike last year, there was nothing troubling her partner's mind. She could see now that she'd been oblivious last summer, tuning out all the clues that Natalia had been deeply worried about something. Olivia had been so caught up in her own vision of them being together that she hadn't seen what was right under her nose. To her shame, she even remembered the other woman trying to talk to her and her blowing it off.

But nothing like that had happened in recent days. There were no storm clouds on the horizon, no crises of faith looming, and no reason in the world for Natalia to stand her up again.

So now Olivia was left with nothing but worry – with the fear that whatever had delayed her partner without a word was not something of the woman's own choosing. What if Edmund's goons had slipped through their security and surprised her at the farmhouse? What if she'd been in a car accident? What if...Well, the possibilities were endless. She was making herself crazy with them. Maybe she just needed to hop in the car and head out to look for Natalia. At least then she'd be doing something instead of just standing around waiting for a call that never came.

Just as she took a few steps, ready to go tell Ava her plan and ask her to watch over Francesca and Emma, she saw Blake headed her way at a brisk walk.

Her heart started beating faster.

Blake came to a halt in front of her, breathing hard. "Olivia, I'm so glad I found you. There's something I need to tell you."

All Olivia could think was that she'd been in the exact same position last year. Worry faded, anger shining through in its stead. She'd be damned if she was just going to stand here and let this happen twice. Her words were cold. "Where the hell is she, Blake? Don't even pretend you don't know. She's going to talk to me herself this time."

She almost smiled at the look of fear on the redhead's face. Blake held out a hand, as if to stop her from charging or something. "No, Olivia, it's not like that. Natalia tried to call you, but your phone was out of service."

Olivia reached into her pocket and pulled out the device. Pressing a button experimentally, she was met with only a blank screen. She pressed the button to power it on, waited a few moments for it to connect, and was greeted by the "low battery" warning before the phone abruptly turned itself back off. No wonder she hadn't gotten

any messages from her partner. In an instant, the anger drained out of her, leaving her feel almost like a wrung-out dishrag. She was getting too old for this kind of drama...

Blake must have sensed the shift in her mood, because she stepped closer and put a hand on Olivia's arm. "Natalia ran into Christina at the mini-mart. Christina's water broke and she went into labor and Natalia is taking her to the hospital as we speak. She tried to call you, but when she couldn't get through, she called me so I could let you and Rick know what was going on."

Olivia caught Blake's brief headshake and heard a note of bemusement in the woman's voice as she continued, "Before that, she was stuck in road construction and traffic jams, and when she tried to text you to tell you about it, her phone battery died. It's almost like Murphy's Law is working overtime today."

Taking a deep breath, Olivia exhaled slowly, running her fingers through her hair. It was amazing how a few awkward sentences were enough to make everything right with the world again. Normally it didn't work that way, but in this case, it did. Just knowing that Natalia had tried to reach her and let her know what was happening made a huge difference to her mental state. Well, knowing her partner was physically ok helped a great deal as well, given all the madness of recent months; but that had less bearing on Olivia's mood than the reassurance that this wasn't a repeat of last year.

Suddenly noticing that Blake was still standing there, she managed to flash a smile and say, "Thanks for letting me know. Sorry if I..." She trailed off there, not really sure what, exactly, she was apologizing for.

Thankfully, Blake seemed to understand, and patted Olivia's arm again. "I probably would have reacted the same way if I were you. Don't worry about it."

Blake smiled at her and then wandered off without another word. Olivia took a few moments to breathe deeply, releasing the worries and doubts that had dogged her since the morning. They were only natural, all things considered; she knew that. But holding on to them now wouldn't do her any good. Or be fair to Natalia.

Especially since, as she pondered the case of the mysterious failing batteries, she realized the predicament was partly her own fault. She'd unplugged both phone chargers from their usual outlet in order to plug in her ancient boom box and play some cassette tapes. And while she'd left the chargers draped over the table in their usual spot, she didn't remember plugging them back in to the wall. So when they'd charged their phones last night, they'd done absolutely nothing. Oops.

Shaking her head, Olivia could finally chuckle at the absurdity of the situation. Heart light, she stepped out of the tree line and headed over towards the grill. Suddenly, she was starving.

Act 4

“It’s such a beautiful day!”

Doris rolled her eyes, not for the first time. “You said that already.”

It didn’t surprise her in the least when Blake’s only response was a swat on the arm and a smile. They were strolling side-by-side around the lush Bauer estate. Why, she had no idea. Oh, she supposed it was pretty enough, but she wasn’t exactly a “back to nature” type. Come to think of it, neither was the redhead.

She supposed the walk made sense, though. Every time Blake had gone off to spend time with Frank, she came back looking tense and unsettled, like she needed to burn off nervous energy. Doris didn’t want to pry, but she did want to go whap the man over the head with a tennis racquet. Not from any sense of personal animosity – while the two of them clashed frequently, he was a bumbling adversary at best, not an actual enemy. But she didn’t like the sense that he was jerking her friend around, and had resolved to do her best to keep Blake company during the barbecue.

She’d actually hoped to spend some time with her daughter today, but Ashlee had decided to stay home with Daisy – saying something about her friend having a spat with James and needing support. Not that Doris could complain too much, since she and Ashlee had spent quite a bit of time together already – more than she’d expected, honestly.

Doris had to admit, that even if admiring scenery wasn’t quite her thing, she always enjoyed spending time with Blake, even when they were doing nothing at all. Honestly, with Olivia being up to her eyeballs in her own dramas, Doris wasn’t sure how she would have gotten through everything with Anna without Blake to lean on.

The thought of her ex-girlfriend made her sad. Even though it had become apparent that Anna really was one of the good guys after all, she couldn’t quite bring herself to trust her. She trusted her with her life and with the lives of the people in danger from Edmund – that wasn’t in question. But trusting her with her heart again felt like too big a risk to take.

Doris sighed and came to a stop. She felt a hand grasp her forearm, stroking gently, and heard a soft, “Are you ok?”

She mustered up a smile. “I’m as ok as I can be right now.”

Doris saw understanding mixed with concern in the other woman’s eyes; they’d talked only briefly about the mess with Anna, but she knew her friend had picked up on some of what she hadn’t said. Before Blake could ask any more questions, she said quietly, “Thanks for asking, but I will be ok.”

She reached up and patted Blake's hand before moving slightly away and resuming the walk. She smiled when the redhead fell back into step beside her. While this hadn't been the best year of her life, by any stretch of the imagination, Doris still felt as though she'd started taking baby steps towards a future that would be better than her past. She didn't know exactly what that would look like – whether she'd still be in politics, whether she'd have another girlfriend – but she knew that at least this time, she'd be living life more on her own terms than she ever had before.

It was both exhilarating and terrifying to contemplate. But to paraphrase one of the great sages of the world, she'd get by with a little help from her friends.

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Rick jumped out of the car in his haste to get to his patient's side. The trip to Cedars had been a nightmare of detours and construction and it had taken three times longer than it should have to get here. The only bright spot in the length of the trip was that it had given him and Mindy a chance to talk.

Mindy!

He spun on his heel, belatedly remembering that he hadn't said anything to her since he navigated the doctor's parking lot and pulled into an open space. He had an apology on his lips, but the smirk on her face kept him from speaking. He walked back over to her, not missing the fact that she was rolling her eyes at him.

But her voice was warm as she said, "I know your work is always going to be a priority and that you can be a little scatter-brained about other things when a patient needs you. I understand all that. It's part of what makes you who you are, and part of why I love you so much."

He gave a mock sigh of relief before bending down to kiss her, his arms wrapping her in a warm embrace. For a long moment, nothing else existed except the love he felt for her and the softness of her lips whispering against his and the warmth of her body pressed against him. It was as close to heaven as anything he could possibly imagine and he said a quick prayer of thanksgiving that she was here with him again. Like many others in Springfield, they had a long history together – of good times and bad, of being together and being apart, of calm and storm. No matter what happened in their lives, though, they always seemed to find their way back to each other. Just like Phillip and Beth did. All he knew was that he was the luckiest man in the world to have such a wonderful, understanding woman to be his bride.

The distant wail of a siren brought Rick's thoughts back to where he was and why he was here, and with reluctance he pulled back from his fiancée. As he turned to go, she held out her hand and he stopped and stared at her, puzzled.

Mindy's voice was full of amusement. "Car keys. I need them to get back to the barbecue, since there's no reason for me to be here. If nothing else, I have to show Phillip and Beth the ring."

Right. He knew that. He fished them out of his pocket and handed them to her. She smiled up at him and his heart melted again at the sight. She lifted her hand and waved at him and he waved back, almost certain that he had the sappiest smile in the world on his face. But before he had time to worry about what an idiot he looked like, she turned away and walked towards the driver's side of the car.

He turned as well, heading for the hospital's sliding doors. The two of them would have plenty of time to celebrate their engagement later. Right now, he had a new life to bring into the world.

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If Olivia and Natalia were the stars of a romantic movie, this would have been the scene with them running towards each other across a field of tall grass and flowers, each step perfectly placed. The camera would have shown how, in perfectly timed motion, they stopped just short of colliding, the taller one sweeping the shorter one off her feet into an embrace, capped with them twirling round and round in a circle of joy.

But, Natalia thought to herself as she nearly lost her footing and slipped yet again, they were not stars and their life was not a movie. Yes, she was running across Rick's lawn towards her partner, and yes, Olivia was running towards her. That was pretty much where the resemblance ended. They collided with a solid thud instead of slowing to a dignified halt. There was a joyful and enthusiastic hug, but no one was swept off her feet.

All in all, she liked this better. It was real, not staged perfection. And no camera could possibly capture the way she felt with Olivia's arms wrapped around her.

"Querida, I'm so sorry. I must not have charged my phone and I was stuck in traffic and couldn't get a hold of you and I know you must have been so worried after what I did last year..."

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry. I forgot to plug in the chargers and I didn't even realize it, and I was thinking the worst about what might have happened..."

Natalia pulled back from the embrace long enough to look up into her lover's face, chuckling a little at the way their words rushed over each other. She caught sight of the slightly abashed answering grin on Olivia's face, before hugging her tight again, laying her head against the taller woman's shoulder.

If she lived to be one hundred, she would never find enough ways to make up for the suffering she'd put Olivia through. All she could do was take every opportunity to remind

her lover that she was here for the long haul and that she wasn't going anywhere. Whatever happened in life, they'd face it together.

She didn't realize she'd said any of that aloud, but she must have, since she heard Olivia's whispered, "We'll definitely face everything together. It's you and me against the world, sweetheart."

Despite the serious content of the sentences, Natalia couldn't help but chuckle at the melodramatic tone in which the words were said. Of course, it made perfect sense for Olivia Spencer. The woman could only do sweet and sappy for so long before some trace of humor snuck in.

It was one of the reasons Natalia loved her so much – that trait balanced out her own tendency to take everything too seriously. Or to look for deeper meanings in even the most innocuous of things...

She squeezed her lover tightly, and then released her grip slightly, pulling back and tilting her head up to kiss Olivia. The press of lips was soft and sweet and she reveled in the feel of it – in the way this woman felt like home. She'd never truly understood what that phrase meant before meeting Olivia. As much as she'd loved Nicky, there was never a sense of being completely understood, completely accepted. And she'd certainly never had that with her own family. As much as she adored her little sister, there was still a divide there, partly from the years spent apart, partly from not really knowing each other that well just yet.

With Olivia and their children, she finally knew what it meant to have a home that wasn't just a house.

After long moments, she pulled back from the kiss, slightly breathless, and looked up to see sparkling green eyes fixed on her. She heard Olivia whisper, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Natalia felt like she should say more than that, maybe apologize again for being so late, for not finding a way to get word to her lover. But before she could come up with anything, her stomach growled. Loudly. It sounded like the growl of a monster in a horror movie and she felt her cheeks grow hot. But Olivia only laughed mildly and said, "C'mon. Time to get you fed. There's lots of food and you've had a rough day so far."

She couldn't argue with that, and as Olivia pulled out of the embrace, draping an arm over her shoulder and steering her towards the laden picnic table, Natalia followed willingly. She'd already deposited her own treats there, but hadn't taken the time to stop and eat anything, because she was so anxious to see her partner. But the food had smelled delicious and she was looking forward to sitting on the grass with a loaded plate, her lover beside her, their daughters nearby, and their friends wandering around.

This was what she'd missed out on last year; she was determined not to miss out again.

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"Mommy? Ma?"

Natalia jumped slightly when she heard the unexpected voice right next to her elbow. She turned her head to look down at Emma, and frowned when she saw the worried look on the girl's face. Glancing over at Olivia, she saw the sudden concern in green eyes.

Certain that their daughter needed some reassurance about why she'd been late to the barbecue, Natalia knelt down next to the girl. Her voice was soft. "What is it, Jellybean?"

She watched with growing unease as Emma shifted from foot to foot before edging closer to her. Reaching out an arm, she pulled the girl into a hug and felt a slight sense of relief when Emma melted into the embrace, leaning against her. The child's voice was small, muffled against her shoulder.

"I thought I saw a shadow moving. In the trees over by the driveway. I couldn't see it very good and Clarissa didn't see it at all, even though she was looking over there too. But it made me a little scared."

That was the last thing Natalia had expected to hear. Instinctively, she looked across the lawn to the driveway, but she couldn't see anything distinct at such a distance. Holding Emma tightly, she glanced up at her partner, watching as Olivia stared across the lawn herself, trying to see what had spooked the girl.

Under normal circumstances, Natalia might have explained it away as a trick of the light or just assumed it was someone from the barbecue heading towards a car or something. But things were far from normal, with the vandalism at the farmhouse and in town, and with Edmund on the loose. There was no way in the world she would ignore what Emma said. Better to check ten times and find only imaginary monsters under the bed than to miss checking the one time the monster was real.

She ran her hand soothingly over the girl's hair and opened her mouth to speak, but Olivia beat her to it. "You did the right thing by telling us, Jellybean. You can always tell us when something worries you or scares you. That way we can take care of it."

Natalia felt Emma pull away from the hug to look first at Olivia and then at her. She heard the girl's faint sniff and saw the doubtful look on the little face. "But what if I'm wrong and there's nothing there?"

Her heart broke a little when she heard those words and a quick glance at Olivia showed that her partner was equally bothered by them. She spoke quickly, throwing out

the first idea that came to mind. “Do you remember the day that Shadow was barking and we found the little bird that fell out of the nest?”

Emma nodded, her eyes wide and shining at the memory. Natalia smiled encouragingly and said, “But most of the time when she barks, we don’t know for sure what she’s looking at, right?” The little girl nodded again. “Well, that little bird would have died if we hadn’t gone to look. It’s better to say something and have it turn out to be nothing, than not say anything at all.”

It was not one of her better comparisons, she knew. But it seemed to have struck a chord with Emma, because the girl’s face brightened. “So I’m being brave and helping like Shadow.”

Natalia smiled. She looked up when Olivia chuckled, and then watched as her partner dropped gracefully down to her knees beside them, pulling both her and Emma into a hug. She could hear the note of pride in Olivia’s voice. “That’s right, kiddo. You’re being very brave and helpful.”

They stayed that way for a moment before she felt Olivia pull away. Natalia looked over at her partner, seeing the determination shining in green eyes. Nodding in understanding, she said gently, “C’mon, Emma. Let’s go talk to Uncle Frank. He’s a police officer and he can go check to make sure everything’s ok.”

~~*~*

Frank groaned as he bent down, peering under the rented dumpster next to Rick’s driveway. He was the police chief, not a patrol officer; he shouldn’t have to do this kind of stuff any more. But Emma thought she’d seen someone sneaking around in the woods over here and hadn’t believed him when he’d said he was sure it was nothing. Not that he could blame her, he supposed. After all, her nanny had just been killed recently. Besides, everyone had been jumping at shadows since they’d learned Edmund Winslow was still alive.

Some days, it seemed like he was the only one who wasn’t convinced that Edmund was still in Springfield. By now, the man had to know that they were looking for him and he wasn’t the typical dumb criminal who’d hang around, expecting that he’d never get caught. Frank was certain that Winslow had skipped town and was holed up in Mexico somewhere with his henchmen. Still, it was no wonder the poor kid was a little frightened.

But that didn’t make wading through the overflowing mess of used napkins, soda cans, and food-stained paper plates any less disgusting. Straightening up, he headed away from the dumpster and into the L-shaped copse of trees that ran as a buffer between the road and the lawn, before merging with the deeper woods that ringed the Bauer estate. He shook his leg vigorously to get rid of a napkin stuck to the bottom of his shoe, and sighed. Maybe he should have taken Olivia up on her offer of “I’ll go check it out if

you won't." But no matter how much he liked pushing his ex-girlfriend's buttons, he didn't want to get into a pissing match with her in front of Emma; or in front of Natalia, for that matter. And with Blake staring at him all bright-eyed, like she expected him to play the knight in shining armor, he hadn't really had a choice.

Shaking his head to banish his annoyance, he stepped carefully over a pile of...well, he didn't know what and didn't really want to guess. It was darker back here in the trees than he'd expected and his eyes were still trying to adjust. He didn't see anything except mottled leaves and branches in front of him, hints of grey from the road off to one side, and hints of green from the lawn off to the other. There were no signs of movement and no hint of any intruder. Just a torn cardboard box and an old pile of rags heaped next to the box.

Wait. Was the pile of rags moving?

He took a step forward, squinting, and then another. At that point, all doubt was removed as what looked like a pile shifted and formed the silhouette of a man. The man glanced in his direction and then took off running – not towards the road as Frank had expected, but straight ahead through the trees.

Cursing under his breath, Frank took off after him. He nearly tripped more than once, his feet stumbling over plant roots and fallen branches and miscellaneous rocks, and then came close to knocking himself out on a low-hanging tree limb. The other man was at a full out run by then, sprinting through the copse of trees, almost to the deeper cover of the dense woods beyond.

Putting on a burst of speed, Frank raced after him, trying to catch up. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure facing his direction in the tree line at the very edge of the woods and the lane – a woman with long dark hair and oriental features. "Li!" he bellowed. "To your right!"

Even at a dead run, Frank noticed that the man suddenly changed directions, still aiming for the woods, but heading away from where Anna was skulking around in the bushes. He pushed himself harder, trying to catch up, crashing through the now-thick undergrowth. After a moment, he had no choice but to slow down or risk breaking an ankle.

About that time, he realized he could no longer see the mystery man through the brush and shadows of trees. He stopped running and bent over slightly, hands on his knees, panting for breath.

"Where did he go?"

Recognizing Anna's voice, he managed not to jump at the completely unexpected sound of it. He straightened up and drew in a deep breath, trying to look as dignified as possible under the circumstances. "I don't know. The trees are too thick in here; I

couldn't see which way he went." He gulped in more air, before adding, "What were you doing out here anyhow?"

He saw a flash of annoyance in her eyes, but her voice was perfectly calm. "Given everything that's happened lately, I thought a little extra security for the big barbecue might be a good idea. I know Mr. Spaulding has a security team here and that you've got a couple uniformed officers wandering around, but it never hurts to cover other angles as well."

Frank rolled his eyes. Oh sure, he appreciated her enthusiasm for her job. But still, this was Springfield, not a big city like Chicago, and they did things a little differently here. "Look, I know everyone's on edge with all the vandalism and Jane's murder and all, but there's no need to go overboard."

He didn't miss her pointed look and felt his irritation rise. His words were clipped. "The guy's probably just homeless. I mean, did you get a look at him? He looked like a walking pile of rags. You can't seriously think that's the big, bad, scary Edmund Winslow."

"And what if it was and we missed the chance of capturing him because you gave away my position?"

He stared incredulously at the woman, who stood in front of him with her hands clenched and jaw tight. What right did she have to lecture him? He mimicked her posture and snapped, "First of all, Detective, you weren't assigned to be here today, so there was no position to give away. Second of all, I've lived in this town a long time. I know the people; I know their habits. Edmund is too smart to hang around where he might actually get himself caught. At best, that was our vandal or one of Winslow's goons. But it was most likely just some old bum looking for a free meal."

Pausing for emphasis, he said, "If that was Edmund, then I'm Kermit the Frog."

Watching her carefully, he could tell she wanted to push the point. Her breathing was harsh and her eyes flashed with anger. A part of him wanted her to, in the mood for a good verbal sparring match. He was ready to take out some of his frustration with this whole damn day spent watching everyone else frolic, while he tried to pretend he was happy. Instead of granting his wish, she took a deep breath and unclenched her hands. Her words were quiet. "Fine. I'm going home now, Chief. If you decide you actually need me for anything, you know where to find me."

Without another word, she turned and left, picking her way back through the woods, heading towards the road. He watched her go, wondering why he felt like he'd lost even though she'd given in. After a moment, he decided not to worry about it. He knew he was right and that was what mattered. He turned and headed in the direction of the lawn, ready to get out of the trees. At least he'd done his good deed and could tell Emma there wasn't anything to worry about.

A squelching sound caught his attention as he stepped out of the woods and into the grass and he looked down to see his shoe planted firmly in the middle of a dog pile. Disgusted, he wiped his shoe on a tuft of longer grass and shook his head. It figures. That's what you get for being such a good guy, Cooper.

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Phillip clanked the grill tongs against the side of an empty wine bottle. He smiled as a relative hush fell on the group assembled on the lawn in front of him. Not all the attendees of this shindig were there, of course; trying to round up such a disparate group was like trying to herd cats. But at least he had the attention of the majority.

"I'm sorry our host couldn't be here for this, but as many of you know, he got called to Cedars to deliver Christina and Remy's baby."

His eyes fell on Lizzie, standing next to Bill, who had an arm protectively around her shoulders. He watched as his daughter rubbed her swollen stomach and he felt his heart overflow at the thought of this other new life that would be entering the world in a matter of weeks.

Self-consciously clearing his throat, Phillip continued, "As many of you don't yet know, he also proposed to Mindy today as he was running off to the hospital. She said 'yes', and while they haven't set a definite date yet, they're talking about sometime in September."

His eyes sought Beth's, seeing the pleasure that gleamed in her eyes at the thought of two of their dearest friends getting married. He felt the same way – unable to believe his luck that not only were the Four Musketeers together again, but that they would all be intertwined in marriage. He glanced around at the rest of the crowd, seeing Lillian nudge Buzz in the ribs and Billy tighten his arm around Vanessa. Those two couples had held the last big wedding ceremony in Springfield several months ago and it was refreshing to see how in love they still were.

His gaze strayed to Olivia and Natalia, their hands clasped together tightly as they stood side by side. While he knew they couldn't yet marry in Illinois, he secretly hoped they'd be the next couple to announce a ceremony. Legal or not, their devotion to each other deserved to be recognized and celebrated. And he'd be more than happy to throw them a huge bash.

Glancing over, he saw Mindy blushing at the attention of the crowd. But her voice carried a definite note of amusement. "I'm going to try and finally make an honest man out of Rick Bauer. It'll be hard work and I may need a lot of help in the process, but it's a challenge I'm willing to take on."

As Phillip expected, there were numerous chuckles from the gathered group – many of whom had known Rick nearly as long as he had. They all knew he was a good man, his absent-minded professor tendencies aside.

Before anyone could get too carried away with razzing her, Phillip took control again. “As you know, the town’s fireworks display is set for ten pm. The lawn is a perfect place to get a good view of them and you’re all welcome to stay as late as you like. If your kids are getting sleepy and you want to put them down for a nap, Ava has agreed to keep an eye on them in the living room.”

He noted the proud look on Olivia’s face at the mention of her daughter. The two of them were so much alike. So many people just saw their strong and stubborn personalities, completely missing the softness underneath. Not that he’d ever expose that little secret to anyone who hadn’t already figured it out. In a town as prone to drama as Springfield, having a reputation that scared people a little was generally not a bad thing. Still, he was grateful, not for the first time, that he and his ex-wife had managed to become friends. Given everything he’d put her through, he’d have completely understood if she never wanted to speak to him again.

Mindful of his role as de facto host, Phillip shook his head briefly to clear his thoughts, and then once again addressed the crowd. “I’ve shut down the grill for the night, but there are hotdogs and hamburgers staying warm in the oven in the kitchen. There’s still plenty of food out and ready to eat...so eat, drink, and be merry!”

He stepped back into the lengthening shadows for a moment, watching the crowd disperse. Danny and Michelle marched up to Mindy, talking a mile a minute, oohing and aahing over her engagement ring. Frank put his arm around Marina’s shoulders, escorting her and little Henry to the house. Eleni stalked off towards the driveway, apparently tired of the festivities and her former family. Doris went over and said something to Blake before they both meandered across the lawn and plopped down in the grass. Buzz and Lillian wandered off towards the woods. Billy and Vanessa went over to talk to Bill and Lizzie. Shayne headed over towards the food table, as did James and Matt. Reva hoisted Colin up into her arms, then paused to say a brief word to Jonathan before walking to the house.

Phillip smiled as he watched Sarah, Emma, Clarissa, and Peyton run towards Jonathan. Moments later, Beth appeared at the young man’s side as well. Between the two adults, they got the four little girls settled on a blanket in the grass to watch the fireworks – assuming they managed to stay awake. Two security guards took up an unobtrusive position behind the kids, just as two security guards had gone into the house with Ava to ensure everyone’s safety. Olivia and Natalia held hands as they strolled over to check in with Emma, Francesca already safely in Ava’s care.

Phillip shifted his gaze to the horizon, filled with the colors of the sunset – oranges, pinks, deep blues, and reds all painting the darkening sky. It was a breathtaking sight.

Another year, another successful Bauer barbecue. He hoped that trend would continue for a long, long time.

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“Push! Come on, just a few more pushes! We’re almost there!”

Rick’s voice seemed to echo in Remy’s ears as he held Christina’s hand tightly. Or, more accurately, as she held his hand in a vice grip that left him feeling like his fingers were being mangled. Not that he could complain about that – compared to the pain she was going through, his was minor.

He leaned over and wiped sweaty hair off his wife’s forehead with his free hand, murmuring softly, “You’re doing great, honey.”

Somehow, through her grunts of effort and cries of pain, she managed to smile up at him. He smiled back and kissed her forehead, doing what little he could to encourage her. She already had a doctor and a nurse telling her what to do; he figured she just needed a little moral support.

He moved his hand off her forehead and let that arm slide around her back, helping to prop her up as she arched forward with another push. Remy didn’t concentrate too hard on the specifics of what was happening at the other end of the bed, just kept murmuring softly to his wife. Within minutes, she gripped his hand even harder, if such a thing were possible, and he felt her body strain hard and then slump back against his supporting arm as Rick offered a cry of triumph. “You did it, Christina!”

Within moments, another cry was heard in the room – their baby’s first cry.

After all the horror stories he and Christina had heard in their childbirth classes about women being in labor for hours on end, about first pregnancies being the worst, about all the complications, he was relieved that their experience was the exception to the rule. He’d never figured out why people wanted to scare the bejeezus out of expectant moms. Wasn’t the prospect of bringing a new life into the world scary enough on its own?

He was distracted from his thoughts when Rick handed the infant off to a nurse. The doctor told Christina she’d feel more pressure while delivering the placenta, and Remy stood uncomfortably by the bed. He wasn’t sure whether to be there for his wife during this part or whether to go over to the nurse and make sure she checked the baby out thoroughly. Memories of what had happened to Max still haunted him and he didn’t think he could bear losing another child – especially not to an unexpected infection. A soft, tired groan from Christina decided the issue for him and he leaned over her again, brushing her hair off her forehead.

Soon, the birthing process was finished and a nurse came over to clean Christina up a bit, while Rick stood and went over to check on the baby. Remy stared across the room for a minute or two, looking for any sign that there was a problem with the newborn. Then, as the second nurse moved away from the bed, he refocused his attention on his wife. He eased his arm from behind Christina's back, and when the grip on his hand was released, he fussed over her, helping her get settled more comfortably in the bed, straightening her hospital gown.

Sooner than he'd expected, Rick walked over with a tiny bundle in his arms. "Christina, Remy – meet your son. He's got a good set of lungs, all his fingers and toes, and looks perfectly healthy."

Remy couldn't help himself. "Doc, are you sure he's ok? I mean, you just gave him a quick once-over."

He saw understanding in Rick's eyes. The two of them had had a heart-to-heart talk a few months ago, where Remy confessed his fears about having another child and talked about how devastating Max's death had been for both him and Ava. It hadn't been an easy conversation, since the hurt still hadn't entirely healed, but Remy felt better just for getting some of his feelings out in the open. He could only hope Ava had found someone she could talk to for support.

The doctor's words were kind. "We wanted to give you some time to bond with him. We'll take him in a little while and do a thorough set of tests on him, to make sure that everything is fine. But for now, just enjoy spending some time with the little man."

Christina reached out for their son and Remy forgot his fears and found himself awed by the blissful smile on her face. She sagged in exhaustion and he wouldn't soon forget how much effort she'd gone through to have this baby, but she looked happy and content. Watching her with their child, he couldn't imagine a more perfect moment than this.

He perched next to her on the narrow bed, looking down into the tiny, scrunched-up face. Cautiously, he ran a fingertip over their son's cheek, feeling the softness of his skin, amazed that this beautiful boy was his. Christina looked equally amazed as she cooed sweet nothings and ran her hand over the baby's head.

A throat was cleared beside him, and Remy looked up to see Rick there, looking vaguely sheepish. "I don't want to interrupt, but I wanted to get the paperwork started. Did you decide on a name for your son?"

It should have been an easy question to answer, but Remy blinked anyhow, because they hadn't exactly settled on one. They'd narrowed it down to two, but hadn't been able to decide. He wanted to name his son after his father, but she was unsure about having two people in the same family with the same name. She wanted to name their child after one of her heroes, but he didn't much like the name Martin and Luther was too easily

misinterpreted as being for the singer. Mel and Cyrus had taken to teasing them about how the kid would probably be five or six years old before they finally named him. So he was a little startled to hear Christina's voice, strong and decisive. "Clayton. Clayton King Boudreau."

He glanced at his wife and saw the calm certainty on her face. That was it – she'd nailed it. He felt like his face would split in half, he was smiling so widely. It was perfect.

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Seated in the grass, Natalia smiled up at her partner, who stood next to her. She laughed as Olivia winked saucily at her before sauntering back towards the Bauer house. The fireworks hadn't yet started and the other woman had decided she wanted a glass of champagne to toast to the occasion. Not in the mood for a drink, Natalia was content to stay where she was, enjoying the feel of the cooler night air, listening to the soft murmurs of conversation around her, basking in the peace of her surroundings.

She suspected Olivia mostly just wanted an excuse to go inside and check on Ava, to make sure her daughter was enjoying herself with the babies and toddlers. Not to mention making sure that both the young woman and their infant daughter were safe. Phillip might have the best security money could buy, but there was no stronger reassurance than seeing with one's own two eyes that everything was fine, given the threat hanging over their heads.

Reflexively, she glanced to the side, checking on Emma where she sat with her friends. Phillip, Beth, and Jonathan were sitting with the four little girls. As she'd half-expected, Emma and Clarissa were still wide-awake. But the younger girls were both asleep – Sarah curled up next to her dad, Peyton draped over her mom's lap. Natalia smiled at the precious sight before turning her attention back to the sky.

All her earlier frustrations had melted away once she'd made it to the barbecue and finally saw her partner. She'd tried not to worry too much, given that she'd done the best she could to let Olivia know where she was and what was happening. But the ghost of Fourth of July past had haunted her and she'd been afraid of what would be going through the other woman's head when she didn't show up as promised – again. As much as her lover had tried to hide it, she'd seen the sharp look of relief in green eyes once she arrived.

While she was ashamed to admit it, even to herself, she'd wondered for a moment how long it would be before she didn't have to worry about that every time something came up or she was late. She'd brushed that selfish thought aside as quickly as it had come to her, though, knowing that it was her bad choices that had left Olivia with such doubts. Soothing them for as long as it took was the only penance she could make for what she'd done.

Still, she couldn't complain about it. Compared to most of the rest of their friends, their lives were going well, lingering issues aside. Their relationship was solid, solid enough that they'd exchanged rings on Valentine's Day. Their kids were happy and healthy. Business at the hotel was booming and they were still looking into franchise options. Other than the specter of the not-actually-dead Edmund, things were as close to perfect as could be.

She just hoped that between the efforts of Anna and Jonathan, of the Springfield PD and Spaulding security, they'd catch Edmund soon. While she was determined to do anything and everything in her power to keep her family safe, the knowledge that Olivia hadn't put her gun back into storage after her little adventure with Reva unnerved Natalia to no end. It wasn't any distrust of her partner – going in with guns blazing was more Rambo Shayne's delightfully unbalanced style. But the idea that Olivia might actually pull the trigger in a confrontation and then have to deal with the consequences...that was more than she could bear to think about. She couldn't imagine what kind of a burden that would be on her lover's soul.

She shook her head, laughing slightly to herself. Leave it to her to ruin a festive celebration by worrying about things she couldn't control. She said a quick prayer to keep her family safe, and then concentrated on the mantra "let go and let God." She had friends and family around her, food and drink, beautiful scenery to look at.

It was definitely time to show her appreciation to God by enjoying the things He'd given her.

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Olivia smiled down at her lover as she offered a hand to help the dark-haired woman to her feet. While the fireworks display was truly spectacular, her butt was sore from sitting. She could enjoy the sight just as well if she was standing. She draped an arm over Natalia's shoulders as they walked down to the slightly lower ground near the swimming pool, so they wouldn't be in anyone else's way.

Finding a spot she liked, she stopped, her arm still around Natalia, smiling as the shorter woman rested her head against her shoulder. It was so good to be here with her lover, to feel her nestled close. It gave Olivia a sense of peace she hadn't had for a couple of days – where between her talk with Reva and her own memories, her mind had been focused on the past. What she really wanted was to think about the future.

Hearing a soft gasp beside her, presumably at a particularly vibrant burst of color, made her smile again. It still surprised Olivia sometimes how much she loved this woman. For all her experience with sex and marriage and husbands, love was still new. She'd felt degrees of it with her past lovers, definitely felt it for her daughters, but this was a wholly different experience and the strength of it sometimes took her breath away. It was more than she'd ever expected to find in her lifetime; that was for sure. She'd be damned if

she let anything or anyone get in the way of it...ever. Not Natalia's demons, not her own.

She watched the sky explode in colors, taking in the sight on one level but her mind elsewhere. She found herself, oddly, thinking of Rick – grateful for his nagging and his skill as a doctor, which was a big reason why she was alive and kicking today. Even though she'd barely seen him before he raced off to the hospital, he'd looked happy. And Mindy was positively glowing.

Olivia glanced to the side, to the dark head nestled against her, and visually traced the line of the arm she had around Natalia's slender form down to her hand, seeing the soft glint of the ring on her finger. They'd bought each other rings for Valentine's Day as a sign of their commitment. Even though she'd felt comfortable with that step, she'd had cold feet at the thought of taking the next logical step – that of having some kind of ceremony. Despite knowing her doubts were normal after everything that had happened, she realized now that she didn't want to wait any longer. Well, ok, maybe a little longer. After all, she didn't want to step on Rick and Mindy's toes. Or upstage them.

"We should get married."

Olivia heard a soft choking noise beside her at those words and couldn't help but laugh as Natalia pulled away from her so that they could see eye to eye. Answering the question she was sure was on the tip of her lover's tongue, she said quickly, "Yes, I know it wouldn't be a legal marriage. No, I'm not crazy. It's just, well, we've got these rings and we're clearly a family and we're still together – which in the history of Springfield is a remarkable feat – and...oh...maybe you're not ready...I'm sorry..."

She added the last part when she saw sudden tears in brown eyes, and swallowed hard as she realized she'd let her flair for spontaneity make her partner uncomfortable. Olivia knew better than anyone that Natalia's decision-making process was best described as glacial. As frustrating as it could be sometimes, she still respected that about the other woman, and...

Her self-recriminations stopped when she felt a soft hand against her cheek and heard Natalia's gentle words. "No, querida, that's not it. You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm just...it's overwhelming, that's all. With what happened today, with the reminders of last year, I didn't expect this."

Olivia leaned into the loving touch, her arms sliding around Natalia's body. "Well, you know me. Carpe Diem Spencer." She smiled at the laugh that greeted those words. "I don't mean we have to do anything right away. I just...I know you were ready to take this step before and I wasn't. But now I am."

The smile that lit her lover's face was the brightest thing in the night sky. Olivia pulled Natalia closer, looking fondly into the beloved face, listening to the woman's soft words.

“It means so much to me that you want this. But we don’t need to rush into it. We can take our time to plan a ceremony that has meaning for both of us. And you know Emma will want to be involved. I’m not trying to back out of it or anything...I just want to make sure we do this right. I want this to be something that’s truly symbolic of our love and our lives together.”

Olivia leaned forward, pressing her forehead against Natalia’s, the gesture comfortable and familiar and oddly intimate. “We could do something around New Year’s Day. That gives us almost six months to think about things and to plan what we want. And it’s pretty symbolic, what with starting a new year and making resolutions for a fresh start.”

Natalia’s arms circled her, wrapping her in a tight hug. “That’s a wonderful idea! I love it.”

Olivia couldn’t help but smile at the enthusiasm in her lover’s voice. It was, actually, a brilliant plan, if she did say so herself. She pulled back slightly, and then leaned in for a kiss.

The fireworks in the night sky were nothing compared to the fireworks she felt as she kissed her lover. There was nothing else in that moment except the soft body pressed against hers, the strong arms holding her close, and the warmth of the lips moving against hers. All her senses were consumed with the kiss, with Natalia.



A sudden sound of cheering finally broke through her dazed thoughts, and from the way Natalia pulled slightly away from her, she suspected the other woman had heard it too. Glancing around for the source, she noticed that the people gathered on the upper part of the lawn were looking at the sky. As she followed their line of sight, she gasped in awe herself at the marvelous explosion of colors against the dark canvas of night. The fireworks were now going off simultaneously, dazzling and bright and beautiful.

She glanced briefly at her partner, noticing that Natalia seemed equally awed. But even the beauty of the sight couldn't keep their eyes away from each other for too long.

"I love you, Olivia."

Her heart melted, just a little, at those words, and she whispered, "I love you too."

As she gazed deeply into her partner's eyes, Olivia was struck by the sense that being there, in that exact moment, was perfect. All the doubts of earlier in the day, all the frustrations of the past year had been worth it, because Natalia was here with her now.

The End

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This Time Next Year

By Ocean Gazer, Ceridwyn, Geekgrllurking, Calliopes_Muse

ACT 1

"It seems like there's something I'm forgetting."

Phillip heard the vague hint of panic in Rick's voice, and fought the urge to laugh. It was the day before Rick and Mindy's wedding, and he and Beth had come over specifically to make sure that everything was ready to go. Of course, Mindy could have done it all on her own, but she'd already spent most of the past two days finalizing various last-minute details; she didn't need more stress on her shoulders.

Before Phillip could say anything, he saw Beth get up from her chair and move around the table so she could stand behind Rick and look over his shoulder at the checklist. Her voice was even, but he could hear a definite trace of amusement as she started verbally checking off the various items. "The flowers will be here at 10am. The caterer will be here at 9am to start setting things up. The band has already rehearsed all the music pieces and is ready to go. All the groomsmen and bridesmaids have their outfits and

you know we've already practiced for the ceremony. The flower girl knows what to do. The..."

Phillip tuned out at that point, leaving the details to his wife and Mindy. Well, and Rick too, he supposed, though the reality was that while the other man was ostensibly involved, the two women had done most of the work of planning and getting things arranged. He suspected that Beth and Mindy mostly wanted to reassure themselves that everything was ready, and that soothing Rick's worries was just a convenient excuse.

Two weeks after the Bauer barbecue, Rick and Mindy had come close to canceling their planned wedding. Not because they didn't want to get married, but because tensions had been running so high with the fear of what Edmund might be up to. But there had been no sign of the man in recent weeks. There was none of the vandalism that had plagued the town, no further incidents at the farmhouse, and no suspected sightings of Winslow or his goons.

In fact, life in Springfield had been amazingly calm since the end of July. The town grapevine didn't even have any interesting tidbits about torrid affairs, troublemaking teens, surprise visitors, or any of the other dramas that seemed to happen on a regular basis. Things in town actually reminded him of a Norman Rockwell painting – showcasing idyllic times that had existed in some ways, but which were as much idealized and imagined as anything.

Phillip was glad they'd reconsidered and that the ceremony was moving ahead as planned. He almost thought he was more excited about it than his two friends. It was just that the first anniversary of his father's death was hitting him hard – harder than he'd expected, honestly – and he was taking comfort in the signs of new life and new love and the bonds with friends and family. Rick and Mindy's wedding was one such bit of comfort; Lizzie's pregnancy was another.

He drew himself out of his thoughts when he saw Beth straighten up and walk back over to her chair, sitting down next to him again. He looked at her and smiled, before glancing across the table to see Mindy reach up and gently caress Rick's shoulder.

Mindy's tone was kind. "See, honey, we've got everything under control."

Phillip couldn't help himself. "You do have the ring, don't you, Rick?"

He tried to keep a straight face as he asked the question, but couldn't. He mock-yelped when Beth hit him on the arm, and then ducked his head in apology when he saw Mindy shoot him a death glare from across the table. At least he knew his friend would get the joke.

And he was right. Rick merely rolled his eyes. "Of course. Like I'd really forget the most important thing of all."

Phillip shook his head and chuckled, as his friend fumbled into his shirt's breast pocket. He hadn't really expected that Rick would actually pull out the ring to prove he had it. After all, he didn't seriously think even the notoriously absent-minded doctor would misplace that.

But when Rick's self-pat-down grew more urgent and a frown creased the man's face, Phillip felt a twinge of alarm. He'd meant it as a joke, but now he was glad he'd said something. Better to find out today that it was missing, than to discover it tomorrow in the middle of the wedding. He was damn well going to insist that the ring be in his possession from now on, though. It wouldn't do to have the ceremony stopped dead in its tracks for any reason, but especially not because the groom had to go home to get the ring. It would be anti-climactic, to say the least.

Rick's eyes were darting frantically around the room and he was muttering, "Now what did I do with it?"

Glancing around the table, Phillip saw that Mindy was frowning and Beth's eyes were wide. He forcefully pushed up out of his chair, nearly overturning the thing. "Don't worry, Rick. We'll help you find it."

He started to walk around the room, ready to look under and over every single thing in the house, when it finally occurred to him that he was the only one moving. He spun around and fixed his gaze on the two women – Mindy just stared right back, but Beth had an overly innocent look on her face. A glance at Rick confirmed his sudden suspicions; the man was chortling and had a jewelry box in his hand.

Phillip mimed being shot through the heart with an arrow, before rolling his eyes and joining in on the laughter. It wasn't every day that his friend managed to get one over on him. He'd let Rick enjoy the moment. It could be an early wedding present.

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"I thought we were planning to leave soon, to get to the baseball game early."

Christina tried to keep her tone mild, even though she was a little frustrated with the fact that she'd walked into the bedroom to find Remy back in his sweatpants and torn tee-shirt. He was sitting on the edge of the unmade bed, holding the baby. It wasn't so much that she was chomping at the bit to go or anything. It was just that he'd come back an hour ago, after doing some police work, and suggested they go ahead and leave soon, so they could go out to lunch before the game. She'd raced around to get ready, and yet here he was, back in his old clothes.

If she'd known he wasn't serious, she could have taken a little nap and tried to get some more sleep. Well, that probably wouldn't have happened, since Clayton had a knack for waking her right as she was drifting off.

She saw the slightly abashed look on Remy's face as he spoke, even though his attention remained on their son. "Sorry, honey. I thought it would be nice to have a day out. But CK's fussy and...I don't know...does he feel warm to you? I'm not sure if we should go or not. Maybe we should take him to the doctor."

As always, she smiled at the nickname Remy had taken to using for their son. It seemed to fit the little guy somehow. Walking over towards the bed, she ran her hand over the baby's head, resting her palm against his forehead. The soft skin felt perfectly normal to her touch, but she made a show of trailing her fingers along Clayton's cheek as well. "He feels fine to me."

She saw the doubt on her husband's face before he schooled his expression and nodded. Christina understood his concerns; she really did. Even though she hadn't lost a child like he had, she could imagine just how paranoid she'd be if she'd gone through such a horrible experience. But at the same time, his constant worry about every little gurgle and sniffle was taking a negative toll on him, as well as on her.

Still, she knew she needed to be extra sympathetic and supportive for a while, until he finally could relax enough to believe that everything would be ok. All they could do was take care of their son to the best of their abilities and trust that it would be enough. It was all any parent could do.

Sitting down on the bed next to Remy, she put her arm around his back and rested her head against his shoulder. At first, she could feel the tension in his muscles, but after a minute or two, he started to relax. She kept her voice soft, coaxing. "Why don't you let me take him for a while? I'll get him fed and dressed, while you get yourself ready. And then we can take him to see his first baseball game and let everyone in town see our beautiful little boy."

Moving her head off his shoulder so she could look up at him, she saw Remy smile at the thought of showing off his pride and joy. Their family and some of their friends had, obviously, seen Clayton, but this would be his first public outing in Springfield. She was excited about it – proud of her family. And she knew her husband was, too – no matter how anxious he was at the moment.

She could tell he'd warmed to the idea when he said, "Maybe we could stop by and pick up Mel on our way to lunch, and then make a family event out of the game. I think she said she was planning to go and cheer on Shayne's team."

Christina nodded enthusiastically. While she hadn't spent a whole lot of time with Remy's parents, she loved his sister. She honestly didn't think she could have asked for a better sister-in-law. Now that Daisy and Ashlee were off at college and she was busy being a mom, her friendship circle had shrunk, so she was glad to have another person in her life that she could talk to and could consider a friend.

“Why don’t you go call her?” she suggested, reaching out for CK. Remy carefully handed the baby to her and she smiled down at the precious little bundle. Then she smiled up at her husband as he levered himself off of the bed and stood next to her. His eyes sparkled and she could tell he was back to his usual good-natured self. His words only confirmed it.

“Nah, there’s no need to call her. We’ll just swing by and pick her up; it can be a surprise. I’m sure she’s already up and about, probably doing some work from home or something. She always turns her phone off when she’s working anyhow. I’ll just go take my shower and get ready.”

His lips were warm on her forehead and she reveled in the feel of having her two favorite people in the world right next to her. She tracked Remy with her eyes as he moved out of the room, before her attention went back down to her son. He looked so peaceful and content, sleeping, his little face slack. Even as that thought came to her, she saw the baby shift and yawn, his face contorting as he woke up. It was darned cute and she was fairly impressed with Clayton’s sense of timing.

He let out a pitiful little cry and she couldn’t help chuckling. Time to feed her little milk monster.

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Mindy smiled as Danny finished his toast with, “To the happy couple.” She lifted her champagne flute and joined in on the clinking of glasses. She and Rick, Danny and Michelle, and Phillip and Beth were all enjoying a cocktail party luncheon – a sort of pre-wedding celebration. While most brides-to-be might be nervously running around the day before their nuptials, she had the luxury of being able to kick back and relax and enjoy herself. Mainly because she had the best friends in the entire world.

She smiled as Rick leaned in for a kiss, only vaguely hearing Beth’s murmured, “Aww.”

Someone else said something, but she didn’t hear it, focused as she was on Rick’s presence beside her. Whatever it was, it must have been funny, because the group broke out in laughter. That reaction, on what was supposed to be a solemn occasion, probably would have seemed strange to an outsider, but it warmed her through and through.

Mindy leaned against Rick and heard his dry, “It took a long time. A hundred and forty years.” She laughed along with everyone else, though she didn’t fail to poke him in the ribs and jokingly tell him to stop.

Predictably, he completely ignored her, continuing, “But I finally cornered her. I got the girl.” She didn’t miss his look towards Phillip as he added, “I got the girl, right?”

Mindy shook her head at the last part, still laughing. Like he even had to ask the question.

Then she heard Michelle, blessed with the same dry humor as her half-brother, jump in with, "Good luck, Mindy; he's all yours."

Before she could come up with a suitable retort, she heard Beth's encouraging, "If anyone can handle him, it's Mindy."

She chuckled at that. "My only concern is that he's on time for the wedding tomorrow." She couldn't resist poking him in the chest to emphasize the point, despite the fact that she was holding her champagne flute in that hand.

As she'd expected, Phillip stepped in to reassure her. "Don't worry. I will get him there."

She smiled when Rick didn't bother to argue the point and simply said, "Thanks, buddy."

She was so grateful that Phillip was back in Rick's life. She wasn't sure she'd be here right now if Phillip had died last year. That would have been a deep, deep blow to Rick and she doubted he'd have been able to open his heart to her.

Her attention only half on Phillip's response, she heard him say, "The best man's job, right?" But she knew the simple statement meant more than just the obvious; it was about the Four Musketeers banding together again, being there for each other.

There was more clinking of glasses as they toasted to the wedding, and then Michelle started clamoring for a picture. As one of the Spaulding's maids took the camera and the group lined up for the shot, Mindy found herself thinking that she couldn't have asked for a better way to spend the day. She was with friends and soon-to-be family, and they were sharing love and laughter. Really, that was what life was all about.

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James grinned as he took a curve in the road just a bit faster than he should have. What was the point of driving a sporty little car if he couldn't at least have a little bit of fun with it? Though he did know he'd better be careful – his dad would kill him if he wrecked the mini-Cooper. It had taken a lot of persuading before his parents had allowed him to drive out to California on his own to visit Daisy and Ashlee. He didn't want to give them a reason to regret that decision. Not to mention the fact that his girlfriend would kill him if he did anything stupid.

He was just happy for the chance at a little adventure. Sure, he loved his home town, now that he and his dad were getting along, and he could see that he had a pretty good life as a Spaulding. But the place just didn't have the kind of excitement he craved sometimes. He'd never admit it to Daisy, but part of him envied her for getting out and experiencing a whole new life and meeting new people. He enjoyed working at

Spaulding, learning more and more about the business and getting some valuable experience. And he didn't really want to commit to college and sit through boring classes when there were so many other opportunities he could explore. Most of them were even legal.

The car slid to a stop at a stop sign and he smiled at the trio of little old ladies picking their way cautiously across the street. One looked up in apparent alarm at his sudden presence, but another waved a slow hand and he waved back.

A year ago, he probably would have rolled his eyes at them at best, and debated whether to play chicken with them at worst. Now, he was content to sit and wait, even though he had places to go and people to see. It surprised him a little to realize how much things had changed in his life now that he wasn't angry at almost everyone and everything.

The past year hadn't been an easy time; that much was for sure. His girlfriend was across the country, his grandfather was dead, and even though he'd made peace with his father, it had been plenty awkward for a while as they settled in to their new reality. But he could honestly say that all the bad stuff had been worth it, because he was glad for the life he had now – even though things were a little boring from time to time.

Once the trio cleared the crosswalk, he stepped on the gas and headed down the road, enjoying the sunny day and the feel of the wind in his hair. Before long, he found himself pulling up to the spot on the side of the road where Daisy and Ashlee were waiting. The girls had decided to meet him off-campus after they had lunch with one of their friends.

He came to a stop and put the car in park, then honked the horn before getting out and heading over to his friends. Daisy came running over and he caught her up in a hug and kissed her. It was so good to see his girlfriend again. In reality, it hadn't been that long, he knew, but it seemed like forever. She and Ashlee had gone back to California two weeks before classes started, so they could get settled back into their little apartment. He hadn't seen Daisy all that much during her last few weeks in Springfield, between his job and her job and conflicting family schedules. It surprised him, just a little bit, how much he'd missed her.

When the enthusiastic kiss finally broke, he smiled at Daisy, before going over to give Ashlee a big hug. He'd barely seen the blonde at all over the summer and he found that he'd missed her company as well. She'd turned out to be a good friend to both of them.

He walked back over to his car and opened the door for his smiling passengers. Ashlee climbed in back and Daisy opted to sit up front. He paused long enough to give his girlfriend another kiss, before walking around and slipping into the driver's seat. The plan was for them to pick up a few essentials at Daisy and Ashlee's apartment, and then get on the coastal highway and take a nice, long, scenic drive. The duo didn't have to be back on campus for a few days, so they planned to have a little adventure in the meantime.

Putting the pedal to the metal, so to speak, he sent the car jumping forward, delighting in the girls' laughter. It seemed like they were as eager to get out on the road as he was. Well, he figured Daisy was, at least. She had the same kind of restless spirit he did; she liked being in Springfield, but needed excitement. It was probably one of the reasons they'd spent half their summer fighting with each other – it gave them something to do.

He kept his focus mostly on the road, listening with one ear as Daisy turned in her seat to talk to Ashlee. It wasn't that he didn't care, but they were rambling on about some college friend of theirs who he didn't know, talking about something that had happened earlier in the week. He didn't really need to pay attention to the whole thing. The lilt of their voices was pleasant enough and made him feel relaxed, happy that he was here and could spend this time with his friends.

Life really was good these days. He hoped that if his grandfather was up in Heaven somewhere, he was looking down on him and smiling.

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Dinah shut the door quietly behind her, so as not to disturb the wedding that was going on in the church's sanctuary. She'd convinced Mallet to stick around and watch the happy couple exchange vows, and he'd obliged her – the two of them opening the door slightly and poking their heads inside the room to watch. He'd already retreated and it was time for them to get out of there, before the ceremony ended and they got caught at their spying.

She walked towards Mallet, staring at him for a moment before letting him know she was ready to go. He asked if she wanted a ride, and while she didn't know exactly what he meant by that, she said "yeah" anyhow. When he bent down and reached for her legs, she figured out what he was doing and fought the urge to roll her eyes. Instead, she held out her arms so they weren't in his way and let him hoist her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.



Something about the vaguely Neanderthal move made her chuckle as he turned them in a circle and then headed towards the door to the outside. When they'd cleared the narrow space, he took off at a run. Now that they were safely outside, she allowed herself to laugh out loud at the absurdity of her boyfriend running away from a church like a bat out of hell, with her still draped over his shoulder. It wasn't exactly the reverse of carrying someone over the threshold, but that image came to mind for some reason.

When they'd gotten well away from the church, Mallet slowed to a jog, but didn't put her down until they were under the shelter of a tree. They'd crossed an open field that stood between this grove of trees and the church – the old building now appearing small and square against the horizon. They stood on a slight hill, allowing her to take in the scenery below – the softly rolling hills and thick woods surrounding this country chapel.

She felt Mallet's presence behind her as she looked around, her eyes feasting on the sight of daisies and small purple flowers dotting the hillside below them, bright green leaves fluttering in the slight breeze, and a handful of white butterflies dancing on the wind.

Something about the sight reminded her of home and she chuckled at the thought. They'd been traipsing all over Europe as part of Mallet's work with the CIA, and yet she swore every place they went ended up looking like Springfield in some way. As she'd noted when she was there with Jeffrey, the resemblance was strongest in Bosnia. It was truly uncanny.

Before she could get too sidetracked with that train of thought, she heard Mallet's amused drawl.

“So what made you decide we needed to crash a bunch of weddings today?”

Dinah fought the urge to laugh at the genuine confusion on Mallet’s face. He always looked so damned earnest when he was trying to piece something together and not quite managing the trick.

She wanted to answer his question, she really did. She felt like she owed it to him in a way, since he’d been so good-natured about following her around for the past several hours as they stopped at church after church – not to mention indulging her whims over the past few months. Any other man would probably have been frustrated long before now, instead of treating the whole thing as a source of amusement.

The problem was that she didn’t really know how to answer his question. She honestly didn’t know what had possessed her to run around touring various churches today. Except for the reminder that she’d missed her mother’s wedding several months ago... and how could she explain to him the reason that was suddenly on her mind? Well, she could; she just knew it wouldn’t be fair. He had a job to do here; she’d come with him, knowing the stakes. He couldn’t just up and leave because she was having a bout of homesickness.

She mumbled some nonsense about tradition and beauty, and watched him nod. She felt a stab of guilt for not being honest with him, but it was minor and easily ignored. After all, it certainly wasn’t the worst lie she’d told in her life. Hell, it probably wasn’t even the worst one she’d told since breakfast.

To soothe her conscience, she turned and smiled up at him. “Ready to head back to the city?”

Much to her surprise, he shook his head. “Let’s do some more sightseeing. I’ve heard about a couple of neat old churches in a town not far from here. They’re supposed to have some great architecture and stonework. You probably won’t find any weddings going on, though.”

Dinah grinned. “It’ll be a hardship, but I’m sure I’ll manage. Race you to the car?”

She laughed as he just gaped at her for a second, and then she took off running before he could gather his wits. It was a dirty trick, she knew. But after all, as the old saying went, all was fair in love and war.

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“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Mel groaned as she heard the knock at the door.

Before she’d even finished the sentence, Cyrus had scrambled out of her bed, wrapping a sheet around himself as he went. She stared at him in disbelief, not too surprised

when he simply smiled at her. “Maybe it’s the Publisher’s Clearinghouse, here to award us ten million dollars.”

She rolled her eyes. “Have you ever actually filled out one of their forms and sent it back?”

If anything, his smile grew wider at the question, his mischievous streak showing. “Well, no. So maybe it’s one of those door-to-door religion pushers and I can shock him or her into silence by opening the door like this.”

She didn’t bother to answer her incorrigible boyfriend, just pulled the covers over her head, jokingly, as he opened the door. And then there was a moment of silence and an awkward clearing of a throat and she heard the sound of her brother’s voice.

It was now official. Remy had the worst timing on the planet.

Hadn’t he done the exact same thing to them last year?

Why yes, he had. She remembered the scene clearly – she’d thrown open the door to find Remy and Christina standing there, the two of them struck by the sudden urge to make sure they were really married. They’d seen Cyrus lying in her bed, wearing nothing but a layer of blankets and a big grin. It had been a rude interruption to a very pleasant birthday celebration.

The moment had definitely been awkward, to say the least. At that point, she and Cyrus had just moved from being friends to being “friends”. But by now, since the two of them had been dating for nearly a year, it shouldn’t be any surprise that they shared each other’s beds. Then again, things had cooled between the two of them in recent weeks, and she knew both Remy and Christina had picked up on it, even as preoccupied as they’d been with the baby.

It wasn’t that she and Cyrus had stopped caring about each other; it was more that they hadn’t been able to decide whether to move forward into something more serious than dating, or take a step back and just be friends with benefits. Last night, Cyrus had shown up at her door and taken her to a fancy restaurant in a nearby town. They’d talked for hours, finally naming themselves as a committed couple for the first time. While the declaration hadn’t come with a ring or an engagement, from either of them, it had been a huge step forward.

They’d always had fun while dating, but she hadn’t really realized until recently just how much she appreciated being around someone she could goof off with and who could bring out her light-hearted side. Her natural demeanor, not to mention her job, usually kept her life tuned to a more serious note. It still felt a little weird that she, as a lawyer, would hook up with someone who, while not exactly a criminal, definitely had walked on the other side of the law as needed. But he was a good guy at heart; he’d turned over a new leaf and was even doing some work with Remy and Anna Li. Heck, with the kinds

of antics that passed for normal in this town, it shouldn't raise any eyebrows that someone with a shady past was now connected with the police department.

She wasn't counting on her relationship with Cyrus being love everlasting. But she was content for the moment with companionship and a splash of romance. It was more than she'd thought she'd find again, that was for sure.

Hearing the low murmur of Cyrus's voice pulled her back into the present with a vengeance. She pulled the blanket back and waggled her fingers at her brother. He had the good grace to look embarrassed, though she could see the amusement in his eyes.

Clearing her throat, she asked the obvious questions. "What are you doing here? Where are Christina and Clayton? Why don't you ever call first?"

She turned her best big sister glare on him and struggled not to laugh as he shifted from foot to foot. "Uh, we thought maybe we could have lunch with you and then head over to the big game. Of course, Cyrus can come too. Christina and CK are waiting in the lobby. And...um...well..."

She couldn't help it, she laughed out loud at his stammering. She sat up in the bed, clutching the blankets around her, and stared at Cyrus with one eyebrow raised in a question. He shrugged and said amiably, "Sure, we can do that. I was planning to go to the game anyhow, and you know me, I can always eat. I'm actually pretty hungry after last night..."

When Remy raised a hand, as if trying to keep the rest of that sentence from being spoken aloud, Mel laughed again. She took pity on him, though, and said, "Give us twenty minutes to get ready. Maybe we can meet you over at Company."

She saw Remy shake his head. "They're closing early to go to the game, since Buzz is supplying a bunch of food. We'll head on over to Towers and get a table for all of us." She watched his eyes dart between Cyrus in his sheet and her in her blankets, before he backed away from the door and finished with, "Ok, see you in a bit. Bye!"

She chuckled as Cyrus shut the door behind Remy. "Your brother really needs to work on his timing."

Rolling her eyes, she added, "Or learn the concept of picking up the phone and calling."

Cyrus laughed, then turned on his heel and headed toward the bathroom, saying over his shoulder, "Come on, we'd better get ready to go."

She smiled as she crawled out of bed to follow him. It wasn't the start to her day that she'd expected. But she had to admit, it was a pretty darn good one.

Rick smiled at his friends as he lifted his glass of champagne under a sunny sky. The day was gorgeous and tomorrow was supposed to be more of the same. While it wouldn't be the end of the world to have cool temperatures or even rain on their wedding day, he wanted everything – even the weather – to be perfect. He wanted it to be as beautiful and memorable as possible for Mindy. She and Beth had poured their hearts into the planning and arrangements and he wanted them to have the satisfaction of seeing their hard work pay off.

Besides all that, Mindy deserved the best of everything in the whole world, just because she was such a special lady.

He laughed and smiled along with everyone else as Phillip and Beth exchanged wisecracks in their attempt to make another toast, then watched as Mindy, Beth, Danny, and Michelle raised their glasses. Not that anyone was really paying attention to what was being said, since they were all too busy laughing at each other or razzing Mindy about having her hands full with him. But he wasn't paying too much attention to that last part.

He was glad that his half-sister and brother-in-law were here today, that he had the chance to celebrate his happiness with them. And he was overjoyed at having his best friends here with him, instead of them being off at the baseball game. He'd expected Phillip and Beth might prefer to go to that instead of spending the afternoon and evening here, especially since Lizzie and Bill planned to be there. But they'd decided that the Four Musketeers needed to be together today.

Standing in the side yard of the Spaulding mansion, surrounded by people he cared about, Rick couldn't imagine anywhere else he'd rather be. Well, as he thought about it, he knew he'd also enjoy being on a secluded tropical beach or at a fabulous resort. That, however, was an experience he'd save for when it was just him and Mindy. As much as he loved these people, he darn well didn't want any of them tagging along when it was time for him to be alone with his wife.

He glanced over at Mindy, struck by the beauty of her smile and the mischievous twinkle in her eyes. Life would never be dull with her around.

He smiled and laughed as they raised their glasses again, toasting to more long life and happiness. As they drank their champagne, his mind drifted. The past few years had been momentous, that was for sure. He was grateful for everything that had happened, though – both good and bad – because it had brought him here, to the eve of his wedding.

It had brought him to this moment, where he was ready to say “yes” to love and to let its light be his guide.

ACT 2

Buzz was wiping up some spilled coffee on the bar in Company when he heard the bell above the door chime. When he saw it was Lillian, he waved her in out of the already sweltering morning heat and into the air-conditioned restaurant. Thinking that she never looked better in her sleeveless black dress, he leaned across the bar to give her a kiss.

“Do you have everything ready to take over to the ball field?”

“Just about. The tray of sandwiches is in the fridge, and I have to load the cake into the cooler. Natalia’s bringing some cookies over later. Rafe’s coming home today for a week, so she’s been a bit anxious. His bus comes in quarter past eleven, so she, Olivia and Emma are going to pick him up, and then they’ll join everyone at the park.”

Lillian smiled; she really liked Natalia. “She’ll be so happy to have him home.”

“She will. I think she’s just a bit nervous with him meeting his new baby sister, and with everything going on with Edmund. It’s weighing them down. I know Frank’s been worried about Marina and Henry, with Henry being a potential target as well.” Buzz continued cleaning behind the bar, and then putting things on top that they’d need to take with them. “I’ll be right back. I just need to get a box to put this stuff in.”

As Buzz had left for the storage room, the door chimed and Marina, Shayne, and Henry came into the restaurant; the young boy wore his ball cap and was holding onto Shayne’s leg.

“Hi, Lillian, is Grandpa around?”

“He just went in the back. He’ll be out in a minute.” Turning her attention to the seemingly shy boy, she smiled at Henry. “Hello, little one. How are you?”

Peeking out from around Shayne’s leg, he looked at the lady who was talking to him. Recognizing her as family, Henry came around to see Lillian and smiled. “I’m good. I’m going to daddy’s game.”

“I think that you’re going to have a lot of fun!” Lillian took in the boy’s happy face and laughed.

“We are, aren’t we, little man?” Shayne said, as he picked Henry up and rested him on his shoulders. He could hear the young boy squeal and giggle as Henry’s legs settled alongside his neck.

“Yep.”

"Hey, Lillian, can you get the door here?" Buzz's voice preceded him as he was backing up into the main part of the restaurant, his arms loaded with cardboard boxes. It looked rather awkward as he tried to balance them against his arthritic hip.

Lillian moved around the bar and held open the door as Buzz came through. "Here, let me get some of those."

"Hang on; let me put them down first." Dropping the empty boxes to the floor, he sighed.

Marina and Shayne packed up most of the disposable cutlery, plates, and bowls into the boxes, including the condiments, and bottles of soft drinks. Lillian handed Shayne some packages of napkins and plastic table covers that he put in the box as well.

"Anything else you need?" Shayne asked as he stood up, picking up the boxes as he did.

Buzz stood up and moved back over to the bar where Marina was standing with Henry. "Not at the moment. We'll have to bring over the sandwiches and cake closer to the time of the game. In this heat, they'd spoil quickly. I've got the cooler stocked with icepacks." Buzz looked around the restaurant as Lillian had moved over to grab a mug of tea. He glanced over as the bell rang again as Jeffrey O'Neill walked in, and he waved the other man over.

"How are you doing?" Buzz asked him, warily. He'd heard that there were others in town who now knew about Jeffrey's history with Olivia and with his current involvement in trying to capture Edmund, and the man's separation from Reva. Company was often the hotbed of gossip; it often paid to be the local diner hang-out, Buzz acknowledged. He was very protective of Olivia, and felt, aside from Natalia, he was one of the few people she let see the real her.

"As good as can be expected, I guess." Jeffrey shrugged. Walking over to the sidebar, he snagged a mug and poured himself some coffee from the carafe.

"Can I get you something to eat?" the older man asked.

"A western omelette and some toast, please." After handing in his order, Jeffrey took his coffee and headed for a table against the wall. Sitting down, he took a sip of his coffee before pulling the newspaper from where it had been folded under his arm, barely looking up as Buzz headed towards the kitchen to get his order ready.

Just as he got to the door, Marina asked, "Grandpa, do you need someone to help out today?"

"Nah, I'm closing the place for the day since we're all going to be at the game. I may open this evening for family, but not general public. We'll see how it goes." Buzz smiled

and turning his attention to Shayne, he spoke, "Now, don't you have to get those boys in shape for the game this afternoon?"

"Sure do!" Shayne agreed, laughing. He waited as Marina gave her grandfather and Lillian a hug, and then they headed out the door.

Buzz wiped his hands on a dish towel and headed in to make Jeffrey's breakfast.

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Blake was sitting back on her Beacon bed, laptop perched on her legs as she worked away on emails from some of her authors. She had a few promising writers on her list of possibilities, and from the manuscripts they'd sent her, she'd been quite impressed by three in particular. Two were romance-mystery fiction writers and one was a young adult novelist. The first document looked really promising as she looked over the first chapter, and became completely enthralled. That was a keeper. Continuing through her mail, she noticed a couple additional submissions, and after glancing through the first couple pages, they immediately went to her discards folder. She made note of those as she would have to send the authors letters of rejection.

She shook her head at the bad grammar and spelling and wondered if the author had even bothered with a spelling or grammar check before they hit send. Blake knew she was a better editor than a writer, but she couldn't work miracles. Okay, she realized that she had worked one miracle in snagging Ashlee to finish Coop's book on Jenna and getting it submitted on time for publication. She'd been so happy to get that done for the Cooper family. It was a really good book, especially judging from the sales, and it gave the Coopers some much needed money for Company, for Daisy's tuition, and to fix up the boarding house.

An email popped up in her mailbox from Frank and Blake opened it. Reading through the quick notice, Frank mentioned having received a call from Olivia to see if he could pick up Francesca and take her to the park. Olivia and Natalia would meet them all there after they picked up Rafe from the bus station.

Blake looked down at her watch and noticed how much time had passed. "Oh, damn it! I was supposed to be out of here twenty minutes ago!" she muttered to herself as she hurriedly checked her appearance in the wardrobe mirror and straightened her dress, before grabbing her purse, phone and keys, and bolting out the door.

She'd made arrangements to meet up with Doris for coffee before the other woman had to head to the park gazebo dedication for Jane Peterson. She felt for Olivia and Emma as Jane had been such a big part of their lives over the years. Arranging the dedication had been Olivia's way of acknowledging the woman's sacrifice to protect two young girls from harm.

As she started her minivan, she checked her phone for messages, and then fired a quick text off to Doris to let the other woman know she was on her way. The short drive from the Beacon to the town council offices was pretty this morning, though the warm air and humidity was already frizzing her red locks. The air conditioning in the van was undependable; today apparently being one of those days that it wasn't cooperating, so she pressed the button to lower the windows, hoping for enough of a cross breeze to cool her down a little.

Arriving at the building that served the police department and town council offices, Blake shut off her car and went into the building and breathed a sigh of relief at the air-conditioning. Heading down the corridor to Doris's office, she met up with Remy.

Smiling up at the tall man, she asked him, "Hey, Remy, how's Christina and little Clayton?"

"Doing well. Christina's really tired, but she's going to bring the little fella to the game this afternoon for a while." Remy grinned broadly at talking about his infant son.

Nodding at his mention of Christina's exhaustion, she said softly, "I've been meaning to check in on them, but I know how crazy it can be in the first few weeks."

"Oh, yeah. Definitely. He wakes up three or four times a night. I usually take one of them so Christina can get some sleep, and he's growing so fast. I can't believe it sometimes." Remy paused, thinking of his son, Max, and how he died so young. It hadn't been the first time that he'd drawn comparisons between the two boys as much as he tried not to.

Noticing that his expression had changed more somber, Blake smiled, trying to brighten the mood, "They do that. And before you know it, they're going to kindergarten. So take your time and enjoy life with him."

"Oh, I intend to. And if I don't, I'm sure Christina and Cyrus are going to kick my ass."

Blake tilted her head at the mention of the name. It had been less than a year now since Buzz discovered that Cyrus was his beloved Jenna's son. "Cyrus?"

Remy grinned. "Yeah, he's Clayton's godfather. So if I mess up, Cyrus said he'd make me pay. Big time."

Blake laughed, and then paused as she heard a familiar voice. Looking down at her watch and noting the time, she glanced up to see Frank holding a folder and talking animatedly with Eleni. She frowned. "Frank? Aren't you supposed to be somewhere?"

Frank paused, a little bewildered, having been taken out of his argument with the crime scene investigator.

"Francesca?" Blake supplied.

Realizing he'd gotten caught up with work since Olivia's call, the chief's expression panicked. "What time is it?"

"Ten o'clock," Eleni supplied.

"Damn. I've got to get going." Turning to Eleni, he continued, "This discussion isn't over. There's no proof that Edmund is even still in town; at least nothing that we can pin down."

"Frank, just go," Eleni added, blowing out a frustrated sigh. Turning her sights on Blake and Remy, she acknowledged Blake and focused on Remy. "You. Come with me. We're going to have a little chat with Detective Li."

Blake took this as her cue to make her leave down the hall to Doris's office. She caught the other woman just as she was pulling her office door closed.

"Hey, Blake. I'm running a bit late. Can we get our coffees to go, and head over to the park?" At Blake's nod of agreement, Doris added, "Not here. The coffee is atrocious."

"Sure thing. We can stop by Company before Buzz closes, but we'll have to take your car; the air-conditioning is busted in mine, again."

"Sure thing."

The two women headed out into the humid air, into Doris' car and drove down the street to the convenience store on the way to the dedication. On the way, they talked a little about the ceremony, Olivia, Natalia and Emma, and general chit-chat; not really focusing on anything in particular, just enjoying each other's company. The ride to the park after that didn't take long, as Doris pulled into the small parking lot up the road a little. Stepping out of the car with her coffee in hand, Doris spotted Olivia leaning against a park bench.

"Oh my God, what is she wearing?" Doris chuckled at Olivia's black and white outfit and hat. "She looks like she should be going to the Kentucky Derby, not a memorial dedication."

"What?" Blake asked curiously, not having seen their friend yet. Olivia hadn't seen them either, as the other woman seemed to be lost in thought.

"Olivia, over there at the bench," Doris commented as she shook her head. "Look, I've got to head over and talk to Jane's mother for a moment. I'll see you at the ball park?"

"I'll be there. Maybe we can talk some more later?" Blake added hopefully. More and more, she was finding the time she spent with Doris was both relaxing and confusing at the same time. She could feel that there was something building with their friendship,

and she enjoyed their time together. At Doris's nod, she waved and started to turn up the small street. As she glanced back, she saw Doris walking over to a small gathering of people near the gazebo. Smiling to herself, she turned the corner onto Main Street and headed back to the station to pick up her van.

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In one of the station's conference rooms, Detective Anna Li laid out folders on the large table that dominated the small room. Flipping through the reports, she went over to the white board that filled part of one wall and drew a line across to begin a timeline of the events. She started with marking a line for the murder of the Edmund look-alike the previous year, and one for the disappearance of the San Cristobel crown jewels. Turning back to the table, she sat down with a notepad and pen and a big travel mug of coffee, and picked up a folder. The further she delved into the reports, the more she shook her head at the convoluted mess in front of her. Deciding on a different tack, she grabbed a handful of reports and as she went through the files, she sorted them by month, and placed them on the table, making note of the file number by order and the type of incident on her pad.

By the time she'd gotten that task finished, her coffee was lukewarm, and she was starting to get a headache. Anna rubbed her hand over the stiff and slightly sore muscles of her neck and sighed as she realized this was going to be a really long day. Turning her neck from side to side, hearing the cricks, she stood up and stretched. Picking up her mug, she took a sip and winced at the awful excuse that passed for coffee. What she wouldn't give for a strong brew of her favourite Starbucks blend. Figuring that no one had probably made a fresh pot, she grabbed some change out of her pocket and headed for the vending machine for a can of pop to get her caffeine fix and then headed back to the conference room.

Sitting down at the table, she looked down at her initial notes, and then she picked up the first pile of reports, detailing the death of the Edmund Winslow imposter, and made notes about the evidence and various leads that were followed up or abandoned. There were as many or more people that wanted Edmund dead now as then. Reva, Marina, and then Jeffrey set himself up to take the fall, disappearing to find the real Edmund. Then there was the disappearance of the San Cristobel crown jewels. There were notes, but not an official report, about a Dinah Marler confessing she'd killed the imposter, and then she'd fled the jurisdiction.

Looking at the next pile, she found the notes about Jeffrey's supposed death and the investigation into the sightings of Edmund and Dinah. She had her own notes of Jeffrey's account of things; his following Edmund back to Springfield and Edmund's tormenting of Reva from a distance, threatening her children and grandchildren, all in effort to get back at Shayne for his daughter Lara's death.

She was just getting through the vandalism reports, when the door opened and Eleni walked in, holding two food takeout bags and a tray of coffee cups. She took a sniff at

the bags and the relief that passed over her face was such that anyone in a two mile radius would have noticed.

Eleni smiled at the reaction from the detective. "I thought you could use it."

"Thank you. Not that I'm not very appreciative, but at the moment, as long as it's not departmental coffee and vending machine snacks, I could eat just about anything," Anna commented. "That smells so good. What is it?"

"Pasta primavera. I have two kinds, one with chicken and one with seafood. I didn't know if you were allergic to fish or not."

"Not. I'll have the seafood one, if you don't mind?" Smiling, Anna pulled the two containers out of the bag, and checking to see which container had which version, she handed over the chicken pasta dish to Eleni, and cleared enough space on the table without disturbing her organized piles. Sighing, she added, "I would love a glass of wine right about now; it would go great with this lovely food. But the wine will have to wait until tonight."

Eleni smiled as the thought had occurred to her as well. "Sorry?"

"That's okay. You brought real coffee." Anna closed her eyes as she inhaled the aromatic scent before her and grinned. "However, as sacrilegious as this might sound, I'm going to put that into my mug and heat it up later when I really need it. For now, the pop will have to do." Pouring the coffee into her travel mug, she put it up on the filing cabinet out of the way so it wouldn't get spilled as they enjoyed their lunch.

Looking around at the piles of folders and then back at Anna, Eleni asked, "Are you getting anywhere?"

"Nowhere fast it seems. It was just so circular; leads started and not followed, or if they were followed, never went anywhere." Anna sighed at the piles of folders, and then looked back at Eleni. "There's still the issue of the outstanding warrant for Dinah Marler's arrest for the fake Edmund's murder. The evidence for that is conspicuous at best, as there's no weapon in custody. To put it bluntly, it's one big clusterfuck."

"I'm waiting for some reports to come back, so I can give you a hand with this. If you want?" Eleni offered.

Not wanting to sound pathetically grateful, Anna smiled. "That would be a godsend."

The two women finished their meal and after tossing the containers into the trash, they set about reorganizing the folders. As Anna went through and continued making her notes, Eleni would grab the sheets and start marking timelines and information on the whiteboard. Looking over the table at the folders with brightly coloured sticky-notes on

them, Anna thought perhaps they were getting somewhere. Now they just needed to figure out a pattern.

~~*~*

The morning's humidity had only gotten worse the closer it got to lunch time and Blake figured at this rate, the poor kids playing in the game that afternoon would get overheated and dehydrated quickly. Since Company was the team's sponsor, she had picked up a couple flats of water bottles and Gatorade bottles for the kids to drink when they weren't on the field. Looking over at the near-empty Company parking lot, Blake slid out of her vehicle and shut the door, eager to get into the air-conditioned restaurant. The sooner she could get the van into be looked at and get the A/C working again, the happier she would be. Summer wasn't over yet, and the heat still lingered.

Entering the rear of the family-owned restaurant, Blake moved to front to see what Buzz might need her to take over to the park. But when she got around the dividing wall, she cursed her sense of timing as she spotted Buzz and Lillian locked in a kiss. Trying to escape before she got noticed, she made a noise as her purse got caught on one of the chairs and she tried to dislodge it, and alerted the older couple to her presence. "Sorry, I can just come back later."

Buzz just laughed at the red-head's flustered comment. "Nah, never mind. Come on. It's time to get things moving anyway." He headed towards the kitchen with the coolers. She followed behind and waited until he had organized the covered trays of sandwiches and snacks into the first cooler. "Hey, Blake, can you grab me that cooler over in the corner? It's got the cake in it."

"Got it." Looking at Buzz's movement, she moved over to help him. "Hey Buzz, I've got this. I'll put it in the back of the van. I've got the drinks in there as well for the kids." Blake lifted the cooler and headed out to the parking lot, and popped the back door. Loading the first cooler in, she returned to the restaurant to get the second. "Is there anything else you need me to bring over?" she inquired.

Lillian looked over at the younger woman with appreciation. "No, thanks. Marina and Shayne brought the rest over earlier."

"Okay, great then. Do you two need a lift?"

"We'll take my car over," Lillian spoke first. "That way we can get back here, to get things ready for this evening if we decide to have everyone over." She turned over to where Buzz was sitting behind the bar. "Sound good?"

Buzz grinned. "Great. Now we just have to get ourselves moving. See you there, Blake."

"Okie dokie. I've got to drop Clarissa off and I'll meet you at the park."

~~*~*

After driving Clarissa to her summer theatre group on the way to the park, Blake arrived at the park and had managed to convince Jonathan and Shayne to carry over the drinks to the team benches, and then the coolers over to the food supply table. Snagging a couple bottles of water from the food table for themselves, they then headed over to the bleachers and tried to find a shaded area. Looking out onto the field as people were gathering, Blake breathed a sigh of relief as a light breeze blew over her. Frank had come over and asked if she could hold onto Francesca for a few minutes as he helped his father get things set up on the table, so now she was holding the pink-clad girl on her lap and bouncing her on her knees.

She smiled as she looked up and saw Shayne interact with his young son and Marina just before he left to corral his players for a pep talk before the semi-final game. Like several other families in the town that had changed a lot in the past couple years, the younger Lewis's discovery that Henry was his son had been a life-altering one. Blake hadn't known him well, but she'd heard some stories from Marina, who'd been friends with him since they were kids, and since taking on being an active parent in Henry's and Marina's lives, she'd gotten to know him better.

Remy and Christina arrived with Clayton and Lillian and Buzz came over to greet them; Lillian asking to hold the baby. Informing the new arrivals of the food table, Buzz headed over there, with Cyrus and Remy following behind.

Frank grasped onto Cyrus's wrist, causing the younger man to pause. "Hold on, gentlemen, I have another assignment for you two," he said.

When Blake looked up from Francesca, she noted Doris had joined the crowd, stepping between Remy and Cyrus. She smiled at the other woman, who had changed out of her work clothes and now looked much more relaxed in a skirt, tank top, light over-shirt, and a pair of sandals. Blake got up from her spot on the bleachers and stepped closer.

"Hey, Springfield's own Butch and Sundance. Nice job," Doris quipped as she patted both men on their shoulders and moved off over to a spot in the shade.

Blake moved closer intending to talk with Doris, but sighed as the other woman walked away. She was feeling a bit awkward, and smiled at the child in her arms. Moving into Frank's line of sight, she told him his girls needed a kiss, to which he obliged quickly. However, like their previous kisses, which have been getting fewer and fewer, she was feeling less enthralled than she originally had. Frank's next words broke her out of her reverie.

"Oh, seems like someone else needs something," Frank commented as he felt his daughter's bottom as he moved back. "How come she's got two mommies and I'm the one that always changes the diaper?"

“That’s because the two mommies are at the bus station to pick up Rafe,” Buzz said as he came up behind his son and patted him on the arm. “So, take charge.”

Blake handed over Francesca to her father and he raised her up in the air before settling her against his shoulder. She smiled at the interaction between Frank and his youngest daughter. No matter what became of her relationship with him, she admired how much he loved his family. He didn’t always understand them, but he loved them nonetheless. As much as things had settled between Frank and Olivia in the past year, he still occasionally felt put out as being a third wheel in raising his own daughter. Blake knew it really wasn’t fair to remind him that he only had his daughter a couple times a week, and majority of the time Francesca’s mommies were the girl’s primary caregivers, so she let him have his moment.

A slight breeze broke the staid heat and humidity, as Blake noticed the boys finished up their stretching and practice throws, and they moved back to their dugouts for instructions and rehydration. Blake snagged a cup of lemonade and returned to the bleachers, and when she heard Francesca’s gleeful babbling, she looked over to see Olivia and Natalia arriving with Emma and Rafe in tow; the young man’s expression mirroring his sisters’.

Looking at the happiness of the Spencer-Rivera family, Blake wished she had something like that for herself, but she hadn’t been feeling that for a while. She and Clarissa had a small townhouse that they’d been in for a few years. Her sons were still away at boarding school, and in the year that she’d been dating Frank, neither one of them had made the move to cohabitate, either at Frank’s apartment or her house. Blake wondered if that, in itself, was telling about the amount of commitment both of them were putting into their relationship. She hadn’t wanted to uproot Clarissa from her home, and she didn’t feel like she was really ready to move in with someone else. She figured that if the time came, she would know if it was the right thing to do, and with Frank, neither had been willing to push it that far. And so, she looked on wistfully, and sighed, her shoulders rising with the deep breath.

As some of the guys tossed around a few balls as they waited for the game to start, Blake looked at Emma play with her little sister. She smiled, and then felt a gentle hand rest on her shoulder. She looked back and caught a knowing glance from Doris, who had been sitting behind her, and acknowledging her friend’s presence she smiled sweetly.

~~*~*

It didn’t take a rocket scientist for Doris to see that something had been bothering her friend since she arrived. She would watch Blake’s expressions when others weren’t looking, and she could see her friend’s face falter at times. She’d gathered from conversations that she’d had with Blake recently that things weren’t as fine as the red-head had tried to project to the public. She knew that since Eleni had returned to Springfield, there’d been a lot of tension between Blake and Frank; that hadn’t been her

intention when she hired the crime scene investigator. She hadn't wanted her friend to get caught in the cross-fire, but it seemed like Eleni's presence made Blake insecure for some reason. Doris only hoped that she could continue to be a friend for Blake.

As she placed a hand on Blake's shoulder, she met the other woman's smile with one of her own. Theirs had been a tentative friendship at the start, and Doris realized that since letting her guard down and developing a strong friendship with Olivia and Natalia, her friendships with others had expanded as well. She knew that she wasn't suddenly going to become Miss Merry-maker, and really she hoped someone would shoot her first if that happened, but she was starting to find since becoming more comfortable with herself and not having to hide a part of herself from others, she had been able to keep and hold meaningful friendships with other women.

When the crowd's started to cheer as the teams began to take the field, Frank, Rafe, Cyrus and Remy returned to the bleachers to watch the game. If Blake's lack of attention from this game was anything like the softball game she'd recently seen with her, Doris could see that it would be a long afternoon for her friend. Leaning over and resting her hand once again on Blake's shoulder, she asked her if she wanted to go for a walk. She smiled when she got an almost pathetically glad reason to not sit and watch the game with the others.

Stepping over the lowest bleacher, Blake grabbed onto her purse, and followed Doris over the gravel pitch to the small playground. After Blake tossed her purse on a picnic table, she went and sat on one of the swings, idly kicking her sandals at the pebbles beneath her. She was glad of the distraction when the game started to play before her. She didn't know what to say. It was only when Doris's voice calling her name at a louder voice that she turned her head to face her friend.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Doris asked softly once she had Blake's attention.

Blake sighed at the offer. "I doubt at the moment that they're worth that much."

"Don't sell yourself short. Ever. I've done that, it's not pretty."

"It just seems like I don't know what I want in life. I mean, I'm doing three jobs these days but it doesn't really seem like I'm getting anywhere, or really accomplishing anything meaningful."

"Are you happy?" Doris sat down in the swing next to her and began to push back and forth a little, thankful for the small breeze it created.

"I don't know. I mean, I like working at Company and interacting with people, and I like my publishing work; real estate is not what it used to be. Is this what a mid-life crisis is like? Because it's confusing as hell, and that's not even touching the relationship front." Blake brought her hand up and rubbed the skin at the back of her neck as she turned towards Doris. "Do you ever feel like that?"

“Definitely. You know, I’m thinking of getting out of politics.”

Completely startled at Doris comment, she jerked her head back. “You are? What brought that on?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a little while now. You and Olivia are the only ones to know for now.”

Blake knew that for Doris to tell her this, when in the past she’d been known to be quite the gossip, was big. She’d been much better over the past couple of years though. It was probably not the best example, but she’d kept Natalia’s pregnancy a secret, because the other woman had asked her to, until Natalia was ready to tell people herself. It had earned her some scorn on Olivia’s part, but she could be trusted to keep something quiet when necessary. She tilted her head as she regarded her friend. “What would you like to do?”



“I don’t know. I was thinking of going into private practice in a law firm.” Doris looked down at the ground and she bit her lower lip, thinking about what she was interested in doing. “I could take cases and work that I want to, without pressure to prosecute, or not have to defend city council decisions, not have to have this public persona that is different from who I really am.”

“That sounds like a really good plan.” Blake smiled brightly at her friend as they occasionally glanced over at the game before them when claps and calls indicated a good play. With a big grin on her face, Blake suddenly looked over at Doris as she remembered one of the manuscripts she had been reading earlier in the morning. “Hey,

Doris, remember those movie titles you were talking about sending to Olivia and I'd asked you send to me?"

"Yeeeeessss?" Doris asked, curious where the conversation was going.

"What about lesbian fiction?"

"Say what?" Doris raised an eyebrow in surprised amusement; the switch in focus definitely wasn't going where she thought it was.

"Lesbian fiction? Have you read some? If so, what would you recommend?"

Shaking her head at what Blake could be thinking, she asked, "What makes you ask that?"

"I got a manuscript this morning for editing and then likely publishing. It looks really good, well written. I've only had a chance to read the first chapter – part of why I was late this morning as I was reading it – but it had two good leads, one of them was a detective and it was a murder mystery with a lesbian couple as the protagonists. So, as that's never really been my area of publishing before, I thought it might be a good opportunity to get to read something other than my usual repertoire." Blake paused, realizing that it could be a touchy subject, or that her friend may not have even read much in the way of lesbian fiction – certainly she hadn't found much in any of Springfield's bookstores.

Doris bristled. "Our lives are not a spectacle for the general public to be viewed and ogled and ridiculed."

Blake was a bit taken back by her tone. "Hey, that's not what I'm trying to do." Blake stopped her movement in the swing and stood up to face her friend. "I'm trying to understand, and I can see where you might think that, but that's not where I'm coming from. Haven't the last few months proved to you that this friendship with you means more than that?"

"What are you trying to say, Blake?" Doris shook her head, feeling as if she was getting so many messages in this one conversation.

"Right now, I'm saying that your friendship means a great deal to me. I don't know where it's going, but I'm thankful for it all the same. I'm also a reader and an editor, so it will broaden my knowledge. And to the benefit of the author who sent me her manuscript, I'd like to know what other writers are doing in the same field, so I can be a better editor and publisher. If you have any titles, fiction or not, that you recommend, I'd like to check them out."

Doris took a few moments to think about it, and nodded her head. "Okay, that works. I'll email you some titles this week. I have a few in my library at the house if you want to borrow some."

"Thank you."

Before Doris had a chance to react, Blake bent forward and pressed a soft kiss to her lips and then moved on to pick up her purse and head back to the stands. Shaking herself out of the surprise of the kiss, Doris soon followed; more confused than she headed over to the playground to start with. Moving closer to the bleachers, Blake saw Olivia smiling as she held Francesca on her lap, bouncing her up and down. The other woman had removed her hat at some point, and currently Natalia had one hand behind Olivia's head drawing her down for a kiss. Blake could see the joyous affection evident in their faces, and she wanted that; she just didn't see getting that with Frank.

Catching herself staring at the two women, she turned her attention back to the ball game. Though she still didn't understand the nuances of the plays, even after Doris's previous game-day explanations, she smiled as she remembered the fun time she had.

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Act 3

Josh Lewis shifted in his seat, knees pressed against the back of the one in front of him and peered out the tiny window of the airplane. Below lay Springfield, with the vibrant green and yellow fields surrounding it and he soaked in the sight of the familiar network of roads running like a web around the town. It seemed to him now that all roads led to Springfield. To home.

To Reva.

He jumped a little as his cell phone chimed and he received a text message.

OSpencer 9:45 a.m.

Is your sorry butt here yet or do I have to go to Oklahoma to personally make sure you get here?

Josh snorted at his ex-wife's text. The woman never failed to make him smile. Glancing out the window, he realized just how happy he was for her, that Olivia had finally found what she needed to be complete.

Running a hand through his short hair, Josh sighed. He had missed so many people while away, not the least of which was Olivia and her new family. Sure, he had kept in contact with friends and family, and he had Billy filling him in on a regular basis on the latest gossip, but it just wasn't the same as being there.

Glancing back down at his phone, Josh's thumbs flew over the tiny keypad as he found the name he was looking for in his address book. He murmured to himself as he hunted for the right letters.

"Your girlfriend ... is being... a pain in the ass. Distract her... for a while...will yah?"

Josh chuckled to himself and hit the send button. He could easily see what Olivia loved about the feisty woman. A part of him looked forward to seeing if his ex had finally found a little peace now that she had the love of a good woman. He jumped a little as his cell phone suddenly chimed twice in a row.

NRivera 9:49 a.m.

Lol! My pleasure. See you soon. xo

OSpencer 9:50a.m.

Dirty pool Lewis ;)

Josh laughed and shook his head. It was going to be so good to be home again. He glanced out of the window again as the plane started to bank, preparing to land. He could just make out the lighthouse glinting in the sunshine as it sat along the bay, silently standing guard. Now he just had to wait a few more hours to find out where his future lay and in which direction its guiding light would shine.

~~*~*

"Harlan William Lewis Junior, what the hell do you think you are you doing?" Vanessa Chamberlain entered their small kitchen, staring in disbelief.

Billy stood stock still, afraid for his life. It was never a good thing when his wife called him by his full name.

"Um...I was just taste-testing your delicious apple pie, Vanessa, honey." Billy began, smiling weakly while chewing slowly on the still warm pie. He quickly gulped down the rest of his coffee and blinked innocently at her.

Vanessa didn't fall for it.

"For breakfast?" Vanessa grumbled, taking the pie from the kitchen table, and out of the man's reach, sliding it onto the counter beside the microwave. "I made that pie for your brother, it's Josh's favorite."

"It's my favorite too, darlin'..." Billy grinned around another forkful of pie.

Vanessa just glared at him a moment longer and then sighed, shaking her head, realizing that it was a losing battle.

"What time does his flight arrive?" She grabbed the carafe from the coffee maker, before turning and refilling Billy's empty mug on the kitchen table. The hospital project had run over time and over budget, with Josh rearranging his flight three times. She thought Billy left things to the last minute, but apparently his brother was just as bad. Vanessa smiled as Billy looked at his watch, and then jumped to his feet.

"Damn. It should be touching down in ten minutes. I gotta hustle..." Billy looked longingly at the half eaten piece of pie.

"Don't worry," Vanessa sank down into the chair her husband had just vacated and grabbed the fork from his loose grip. "I'll take care of this for you; your doctor will thank me. Hurry now, you're gonna be late." She grinned and took a sip of his coffee, before starting to flip through the paper looking for the Suduko puzzle. Billy sighed and grabbed his car keys from the counter and left the house, grumbling to himself.

Vanessa chuckled to herself and speared a piece of apple and a bit of crust. Hearing the car pull out of the driveway, she reached over and grabbed her purse. Digging inside a moment she pulled out an envelope, staring a moment at the address scrawled on the front, her thumb tracing over the familiar loops and swirls. She'd recognize her daughter's handwriting anywhere.

"Dinah Adele Chamberlain Marler, what are you up to now?"

~~*~*

Reva Shayne pulled her son's clothes out from the dryer and dropped them into the laundry basket, before taking them out to the living room to fold. Sinking down onto the couch with a sigh, she glanced over to her cell phone as it vibrated away on the coffee table. Seeing Jonathan's name on the display, Reva leaned back and ignored it. He was still in her bad books, but she was starting to thaw where he was concerned. She never could stay very angry with her children for long. She glanced down at Colin sitting on the floor, chattering to himself, happily coloring in the book his father had given him. He was looking more and more like Jeffrey every day...

Her eyes watered slightly as she noticed Jeffrey's guitar still leaning against the fireplace. She'd have to call him to come pick it up. He'd left in a bit of a hurry, so it was understandable that he'd have forgotten it. She wiped away a stray tear with the heel of her palm. The man had made his bed, now he'd have to lay in it.

Reva couldn't stop the memories as her mind flashed back to that final argument, several weeks ago...

"I can't do this anymore." Reva leaned against the kitchen counter, looking into the living room where Jeffrey paced like a caged animal. It felt like they had been arguing non-stop since he had come back to Springfield, and whenever it seemed like they had

taken a step in the right direction, the inevitable argument would take them two steps back.

Something had to give, and it looked like it was going to have to be her.

"Reva, please." Jeffrey took a tentative step closer to her, but she raised a hand to stop him.

"Jeffrey, I don't know what more I can say. I just can't trust you. I'm afraid you're going to run off on some fool chase any second and leave Colin and me in the lurch again..." Reva's voice broke slightly with the pain of those long months thinking he was dead. The incredible joy of finding out he was indeed alive had been overshadowed by the deceit and blatant disregard for her feelings and their relationship. Now he wanted her to just forget all about it? Not possible. She didn't work that way.

"I love you, Reva," Jeffrey pleaded, his eyes watering slightly.

"I know you do, and a part of me still loves you, but I don't think I can do this. I don't want our son to live like this. I don't want our life to be some crazy adventure, gallivanting around the world. We need a home and a solid foundation to raise our son. I just can't live with the constant doubt hanging over my head. I can't understand how you could just walk away from us like that." Reva's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "How you could walk away from *me* like that."

"I did it to protect you, Reva," Jeffrey whispered, trying to make her understand.

"Damn it, I wasn't going to cry..." Reva pulled a tissue from the box on the counter and wiped her eyes. She sniffed and looked back at him, shaking her head. "I know your intentions were good, but we all were in danger from Edmund or his men anyway, we just didn't know it." Reva glanced away from her husband's sad eyes. "And don't even get me started about putting Jonathan in harm's way."

"He's a grown man, Reva," Jeffrey growled, starting to get angry now. "Jonathan knew the risks and did it anyway, for the same reason I did, because we love you."

"I'll deal with my son in my own way; I don't need you to lecture me." Reva scowled, turned her back on Jeffrey and started pacing herself, needing to do something, needing to just move. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair, leaning against the fireplace mantle. She stared a moment at the carved initials there and thought of Josh.

Of all the arguments she had had with Josh Lewis over the years, of all the torment and pain they had caused in each other's life, Reva had never felt deep down like she couldn't trust him. Reva glanced down and then looked over to Jeffrey, standing there. She couldn't say the same about her current husband.

Olivia's voice seemed to echo in Reva's ears, making her face the ugly truth. She had to decide what level of uncertainty she could live with and whether her love for Jeffrey was stronger than the hurt she felt because of him. She met his eyes and they stared at each other. Who was he, really?

"I know about Olivia, she told us about what went on in San Cristobel, how the two of you met." Reva's eyes grew hard as Jeffrey turned away. She leaned forward and pressed her point. "How Ava was really conceived." She watched as her comment hit its mark and Jeffrey's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing. They stared at each other for long minutes, before he ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

"That was a long time ago, Reva. Olivia and I have made peace with it." Jeffrey started to pace, staring at his feet, not wanting to meet his wife's eyes.

"Maybe so," Reva said quietly. How Olivia could ever get past that, she had no clue. Reva pushed herself away from the fireplace and took a step towards her husband. "That's between you, Olivia, and I suppose, Ava. But you still should have told me, trusted me with your demons."

"You don't want to know about my demons..." Jeffrey growled, his past weighing heavy on his soul. The things he had done for his country, and sadly, for his own personal gain had seemed necessary at the time, but still not something he was always proud of. No one could truly understand unless they had taken that same shady path. He looked up as Reva gently touched his arm.

"Of course I do. I'm your wife, Jeffrey." Reva sighed sadly. "I feel like I don't even know who you are."

"Reva, that's not true. You know me better than anyone..." Jeffrey started, but Reva just turned away from him. She didn't need more lies.

"I don't know. Maybe if you had kept me in the loop or come home on your own, told me yourself, explained and asked me to forgive you," Reva moved a little closer, never breaking their eye contact. "But I only found out by accident. Would I still be in the dark if I hadn't intercepted that damn phone call?"

Jeffrey glanced away, as if afraid of what his eyes would reveal. Reva felt a fresh wave of anger wash over her. Of course she'd still be in the dark.

"Exactly." Reva glared at him, swallowing the hurt and anger down deep inside once more. She loved Jeffrey, but she couldn't live with this uncertainty any more. Without trust, what did they have? She suddenly realized she had made her decision.

"I'm done, Jeffrey." Reva raised her chin, feeling as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders now that she had made up her mind. "I'm filing for a divorce in the morning."

Reva opened the door and headed outside, needing time alone and some fresh air. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jeffrey just nodding in defeat...

Reva sniffed slightly and tried to get her head back into the here and now. She had cried enough tears over Jeffrey O'Neill. It was time to look to the future now. She smiled and pulled out two dresses from the laundry basket, a velvety dark green one and the other a soft robin's egg blue. Decisions, decisions...

"Which one do you like, sweetie?" Reva glanced down at her son, playing with his toy truck on the floor. The boy stood and wandered over to his mother, pointing to the one in her right hand.

"Green it is then." Reva bent over and picked him up swinging him into her arms and kissed his flushed cheek, smiling as he rubbed at his eye sleepily. "Time for someone to have his good-humor nap, and then we'll go for a little drive. We have an old friend to meet."

Reva hugged her son's tiny frame closer, breathing in his clean scent. Things could only get better from here on out. No matter what happened today at the lighthouse, this year had shown her who she was deep down inside.

Reva Shayne was a survivor.

~~*~*

Billy smoothly rounded the curve with his car and made his way down Main Street, glancing over occasionally to watch Josh take in the sights and sounds of home. He had missed his brother more than he imagined he would. Hopefully things would quiet down a little now that the Lewis boys were reunited once more.

"City council finally awarded us that new grade school contract. I thought Doris Wolfe was gonna eat us alive at the town meeting about it, but she seems to be mellowing with age." Billy shook his head. It had reminded him of some weird science fiction movie where the pod people take over the town. Doris had even smiled and joked around with him afterwards. It had been creepy...

"I think she just has more important things to worry about than building permits for a new school." Josh smiled sadly out the window, wondering for a moment where Edmund was hiding. He should have killed the bastard when he had the chance, it would have saved everyone such heartache. But at what cost to his soul?

Ah, and there was his eternal spiritual debate with himself. Josh rubbed at his jaw, scratching his beard and staring out the window as Cedars Hospital went by. He had visited too many friends and family there over the years. He had learned the hard way

that protecting your loved ones, no matter what, was worth it. He would just have to make peace with his Maker when the time came and live with the consequences.

"Hmm, good point," Billy murmured beside him, pulling Josh from his darker thoughts. "Still, with Bill taking some time off to be with Lizzie when the baby arrives, I'll be glad of the extra pair of hands in the office. It just isn't the same around here without you." Billy grinned, slowing the car down and stopping at a light.

"About that." Josh looked down at his hands and then back to his older brother. "I don't think I can stay, Billy. If Reva doesn't show today..."

"Oh, please. That girl is probably already there," Billy teased, taking off from the light.

"I can only hope," Josh grinned. "But if Reva for some reason doesn't show at the lighthouse, then I'm on the first flight out after Mindy and Rick's wedding. And if she does meet me, then I think we're due for a little adventure together." He stared at his brother, waiting to see how this news was going to sit.

"Well, hell..." Billy blinked slowly, letting that sink in. He had been looking forward to slowing things down at work a little bit again. The constant pace and stress was starting to get to him and he really wanted to spend some quality time with Vanessa, maybe take a short vacation. There would be no time for that now. Still Josh and Reva needed the time more, to reconnect and get back on track. Billy pulled the car to a stop and turned to smile softly at his worried brother.

"What do you think about Jonathan taking on more responsibility? He's been working hard this year with the men, really pitched in on that little gazebo that we just put up in the park. Y'know I think he'd make a great foreman for the grade school job, don't you think?" Billy turned off the car and released his seatbelt before once more meeting his brother's eyes. "We'll be here when you're ready to come home for good, Josh."

"Thanks for understanding," Josh said quietly, feeling the disappointment in the other man.

"That's what family does." Billy opened the car door, smiling wide as he got out.

A loud creak sounded as Billy yanked the stiff garage door up, slowly revealing HB's vintage green Ford pickup truck. He dug around in his pocket and pulled out a set of keys, dangling them from his fingers.

"Well, she's all yours."

Josh stepped forward, his fingers wrapping around the warm metal, taking them from his brother's hand. Their eyes met and held, years of history and family flashing between them in that instant, both good times and bad. Home wasn't a place, it was found in moments like this. He smiled and nodded, fidgeting with the keys.

“Now go get her. Never keep a lady waiting.” Billy smiled, squeezed his brother’s shoulder with his meaty hand and turned back towards his car. His brother had an appointment to keep, and he was meeting Bill and Lizzie at the park.

“I wonder if there will be hot dogs...” Billy murmured to himself as he slipped back into his car and headed off to the ball park.

~~*~*

Company was busy with the tail end of the breakfast crowd still finishing up their meals. Jeffrey sat at the small counter, reading the newspaper, scouring the classifieds for potential clues or secret messages. It was unlikely he would find anything, Edmund and his men weren’t stupid by any means, but still his old school training wouldn’t let him slack on any front.

He looked up as he felt someone sink down onto the stool next to him.

“Hey, Boss.” Anna Li smiled warmly and waved to the barista to order herself a coffee.

“Hello, Trouble.” Jeffrey spun a little to smile at the woman. “Last time we met in a café, you were shooting the place up. Remind me never to piss you off...”

“And don’t you forget it.” Anna grinned back at him and they both looked up as the woman behind the counter slid a mug of coffee towards the detective. She slowly stirred in a spoonful of sugar. “I heard about you and Reva.”

She watched Jeffrey take a big gulp of his own cooling coffee and sighed.

“I’m sorry.” Anna gently blew on her coffee and took a small sip, waiting to see if the man would open up to her or not. If anyone could commiserate about lost love, it would be her. She had seen Doris making her way to the baseball park and the woman still made her pulse jump.

“Yeah, me too.” Jeffrey sighed as he started to fold up his newspaper and then slowly stood. Anna just nodded, realizing that he wasn’t ready to talk about it right now.

“I’ve got to go,” Jeffrey smiled sadly, tucking the newspaper under his arm. He had heard the rumors in town that today was the big day. Would she or wouldn’t she? Was it so wrong to hope that Reva wouldn’t show? It was never wrong to hope; it was all he had left.

“I’ll call you later and we can go over the latest security reports. Surely we will see a pattern somewhere soon.” Anna nodded, knowing the rumors around town as well about Reva and her ‘soul mate’ Joshua Lewis. As if there was such a thing as a soul mate. In her opinion, Reva Shayne was a selfish woman who liked to be the center of attention

and play with all the various men in her life. Just how many times had the woman been married anyway?

Anna stared at her friend, and her heart went out to him. Jeffrey shifted on his feet and glanced back up at her, looking like he was ready to bolt out the door any second. She couldn't blame the man for wanting to just disappear and crawl under a rock for awhile.

"Edmund has been quiet." Jeffrey sighed, a little voice inside screaming that something was in the works, he just didn't know what.

"Too quiet," Anna agreed.

Their eyes locked, both knowing a storm was brewing on the horizon. They could only pray that they would be ready for it.

~~*~*

It was a gorgeous day at the park, sunny and warm, a great day to be alive. Billy inhaled deeply and sighed. Wandering towards the bleachers he saw many old friends and family already starting to gather. Josh was home, however briefly. Vanessa was on her way to pick up her daughter Maureen and they would meet up with him a little later. Mindy's big day was all set for tomorrow, her small engagement party with her friends a nice touch today. Bill and Lizzie were wandering around, the girl obviously uncomfortable in the summer heat and both of them more than ready for their child to arrive.

Billy smiled at the thought of his little grandson waiting to make a grand entrance. He couldn't wait to hold the littlest Lewis man in his arms. The next generation was ready to grab Springfield and give it a good shake. The future was still an adventure waiting to happen for all of them, even for an old dog like himself. He stared down at the small group gathered at the ballpark, savoring this one perfect moment in time. A snapshot almost, something to remember and hold dear.

"Ah, I'm getting so damned sentimental in my old age..." Billy chuckled to himself and headed towards his friends and family. It was time to go make new memories.

~~*~*

Jeffrey couldn't stay away.

How could he? He'd heard the rumors, the gossiping whispers behind his back. It had been almost too much to take, but he still had a job to do, despite his broken heart. Edmund Winslow was still out there and by God he would catch him, or die trying. Everything he had sacrificed would not be in vain.

Now though, he stood along the tree line, just skirting the edge of the small park where the lighthouse sat, as he waited for his world to truly fall apart and helpless to stop it.

Jeffrey saw the vintage Ford truck pull up and Josh Lewis get out, walking slowly to the foot of the stairs of the old lighthouse. Both men glanced at their watches, wondering the same thing. Would she or wouldn't she?

Jeffrey saw her coming first, walking around the building from the small parking lot, small Colin in tow beside her. She looked radiant, in her long green dress, her hair swept up, smiling and happy. Certain of what she was doing.

The rest seemed to pass in painful slow motion. Jeffrey watched as Josh walked over from the lighthouse steps, Reva waving shyly at him, encouraging Colin to give him a small high five. The couple spoke quietly, their gentle laughter carried in the breeze, his son fidgeting beside them. Jeffrey gasped when Colin seemed to find him in the tree line, as if looking right at him.

Dear God, what had he done to his family? How could he have messed this up so badly? The magnitude of his choices hit him in that single instant.

Just when he didn't think it could hurt any worse, Jeffrey thought his heart had been ripped out and handed back to him as Josh cupped Reva's cheek and dipped his head, their kiss sealing his fate. They pulled apart and Reva wiped a tear away. Holding hands, they walked towards the parking lot, smiling at each other, his son following along.



A picture perfect family.

Jeffrey hadn't seen Reva look that happy in a long, long time and sadly, he knew he had done that to her. He had broken Reva's spirit in a way, just like he had broken the spirit of the girl Olivia had been so long ago, and God knows how many other women in between, with his selfish actions. He ran a hand through his hair as tears welled in his eyes. He had no one to blame but himself.

And Edmund Winslow.

Jeffrey's eyes grew hard and he wiped a tear away. Turning away from the wreckage of his life, he headed back to his car. He needed to focus on getting the job done now, concentrate on work, to find the bastard and make him pay. It was time to end this once and for all, and he had nothing left to lose.

Jeffrey O'Neill was suddenly a very, very, dangerous man.

~~*~*

Josh slammed the truck door closed and settled on the seat. Colin wiggled beside him, his little feet dangling over the edge of the bench seat. It hit him that someday he would teach the young man how to drive this very truck. And that thought felt damn good. His gaze rose to meet Reva's bright blue eyes, glistening with happy tears. Finally Josh Lewis had come home.

"Are you ready?" he smiled softly.

Reva stared at the man who she would always love, who understood her better than anyone, even herself. She knew she had been a fool to ever let him get away, but that was all in the past now. Reva was more than ready for their adventures to continue, to build a future together on a solid foundation of love and trust. She sighed, content at last.

"Always, Bud." Reva smiled back at him, her heart full.

Josh started the truck and shifted it into gear.

"Here we go."

The truck lurched forward and the little family headed down the road, back to Springfield, back to their lives. Today wasn't a happy ending; it was just the start of a new adventure...

~~*~*

Act 4

The slight breeze on the warm air took out some of the wilting sting of the summer morning. It was still cool enough in the shade for Natalia to open the kitchen door for a moment and let in the fresh air. Upstairs she could hear Olivia's heels as they moved from bathroom to closet and back to the bedroom, only occasionally muffled by the area rugs over the wooden floors.

In a bowl, she whipped up fluffy eggs, adding a touch more milk to make them even plumper. She poured them into the hot skillet and added veggies, ham, tomatoes, and cheese. They had to have cheese or Emma wouldn't eat them saying they tasted yucky without it. As a special treat when the omelet was finished, she sprinkled more shredded cheese on top. After all, it was a special day and a special day deserved a special treat.

As Natalia turned with the plate to set it in front of Emma, who was elbow deep in glitter and glue, the young girl proudly lifted her piece of art and showed it to her. "What do you think, Ma? Do you think Rafe will like the card I made him?"

Natalia raised a hand to her mouth to hide the amused smile. On the card was drawn a beautiful rainbow with red, orange, yellow, blue, green, and purple in the right order and underneath in more rainbow glitter was the message: "Welcome home, bro. My hero!"

"It's beautiful, Em. He's going to love it! Here, let's set it over here to dry and clean this mess up." Natalia took the card and set it on the side table, away from Francesca's wandering and sticky hands; since she was fascinated with playing with her food more than eating it lately. The brunette then went into the pantry and pulled out a broom and dustpan as Emma wiped off her mess on the table.

"We're going to have glitter on everything for weeks!" Olivia smirked from the doorway.

Two of her favorite girls turned to her. Emma smiled. "I made a card for Rafe!"

"I see."

Natalia, on the other hand, did a double-take. Everything from the shoulders down was more than appealing – a tight, white pencil skirt that showed off gorgeous calves, stilettos that would kill the best drag queen - Greg would be so proud - and a form-fitting black blouse. It was what was above the shoulders that made Natalia shake her head.

"What?" Olivia saw the strange look on her partner's face.

"What's with...that?" The younger woman motioned with her hand at the...honestly, Natalia wasn't sure if it was a hat or if a flying saucer had landed on her girlfriend's head.

Olivia raised an indignant eyebrow and huffed. "It's a dedication for the new gazebo. I have to dress nice."

“Honey,” Natalia came closer, smirking a little to let Olivia know she was teasing, and motioned down Olivia’s body, “this is nice. That...” she pointed at the hat, “looks like Cruella de Vil on crack.”

Olivia gasped at the very clever remark and Emma giggled catching the reference. “That was a good one, Ma!”

“For siding with her, you get to stay home.” Olivia stuck out her tongue at her daughter, a petulant pout on her face. “I’m having a bad hair day, okay? Don’t pick on me; I had to overcompensate.”

Emma was about to protest, knowing her mom was going to the dedication of Jane’s new gazebo at the park. She had wanted to go and wasn’t ready to give up the fight until her Ma jumped in with the perfect distraction.

“Actually, Em, I need your help with doing some cookies for Rafe. We don’t have a lot of time before his bus gets here so I could use all the help I could get. Besides, that means you’ll get the first hot cookies out of the oven.” When Emma’s eyes got huge, Natalia knew she had her.

“And with that, I’m out of here.” Olivia grabbed her purse, kissed Emma and Francesca, careful to avoid the smeared peaches on her littlest daughter’s hands, and then kissed Natalia. “I’ll see you at the bus depot?”

Natalia smiled into the kiss and nodded. “Rafe’s bus will be in at 11:15.”

Olivia pulled back and then looked around them. “Are you going to be able to get all the food and the kids to the depot alone?”

The younger woman wiped at her forehead with the back of her head and swallowed. “Oh yeah, sure!”

“Okay, if you insist.” With one last kiss, she was out the door. On the way, she dialed a familiar number. “Hey, Frankie, I got a favor to ask.”

~~*~*

The bus rattled along the interstate as it crossed the state line. Rafe looked out the window at the rolling fields of grain punctuated by an occasional house. Reaching into the pocket of his camouflage jacket, he pulled out two pictures. One was of him and his Ma when he was ten years old. It was a Christmas picture taken of them at the church after Mass. In the picture, he held his beloved set of Pokémon cards and his Ma held him. He smiled and ran a finger over the picture; its edges worn and colors faded.

Slipping it back inside his coat pocket, he looked at the other picture. His heart clenched at the look of pure joy on his Ma's face.

It was a candid shot after Francesca's christening. She and Olivia were sitting on a bench behind the church with the baby between them. Olivia was looking at Francesca in total adoration, her little hand gripping Olivia's finger as she stared at Olivia wide-eyed. The older woman had been so captivated by their daughter that she didn't see the look of wonder and awe on her partner's face.

He had been oblivious to it all too, but not anymore. Looking at the picture, it was plain as day.

Sighing, he gently placed the picture back in his pocket and let his head roll back onto the seat. He closed his eyes and thought about every moment since he had confronted his Ma about her relationship with Olivia, the harsh words he'd said to Olivia at the ballpark and at the bridge last summer, the anger he hadn't been able to let go of until he saw how ugly and cruel the world really was, the sound of rockets and guns ricocheting in his head, and the gentle calm outside his window as he headed home...to his family.

~~*~*

The late summer sun was rising higher in the sky. The dew had burned off the blades of grass in the mid-morning heat, making the air almost shimmer. Olivia cursed herself, and her bad hair day, for wearing a black hat as she strode across the park. She could already feel a fine sheen of sweat down her back and groaned at the disgusting feel of a rivulet that ran down her spine. Sweating was only sexy during sex, and unfortunately, that wasn't happening at the moment.

Passing the gazebo where Natalia had confessed her love for Olivia over a year ago, the blonde smirked, her steps a little lighter in spite of the heat, as she headed to the more shaded end of the park by the playground. A small crowd was gathered. Several families that Jane had babysat for greeted Olivia as she approached. Near the front of the group stood Mrs. Peterson, Jane's mother, and Jane's boyfriend talking to Doris. A handful of Jane's friends, most of them Beacon employees, were seated nearby waiting for the dedication to begin.

Doris caught Olivia's attention while she was looking for a seat and brought her over. "You have a reserved seat up front."

"That wasn't necessary, Doris," Olivia mumbled to her.

Her friend looked down with an embarrassed expression but tried to cover by tugging sharply at her tan jacket and smoothing out the non-existent wrinkles. "Yes it is. It'll be easier for you to get out of your seat to make a speech this way."

Olivia had her hand halfway extended to shake Mrs. Peterson's hand when she jerked it back, looking around at Doris. "What?"

Doris let out a short chuckle. "Oops, didn't I tell you? You're giving a speech." She glanced down at her watch. "Oh, gee, look at the time. We better get started."

It took everything Olivia had not to rush the stage and strangle Doris Wolfe. Why she put up with that woman, much less called her a friend sometimes, she never knew.

~~*~*

Natalia checked her watch and realizing she was running behind, she raced up the stairs to change. She called down the hall to Emma. "Hey, Em, are you almost ready?"

"Almost!" The answer came back down the hall from Emma's room. Natalia cringed slightly at how loud Emma yelled. And then, right on cue, Sweet Pea let out a cry to let everyone know she had been rudely awakened from her sleep.

Quickly, the brunette found a lightweight dress in the closet, which was perfect for a hot day at the ballpark, hauling food and chasing a baby around. In the doorway, Emma hopped on her tiptoes. "What do you think?"

Natalia smiled at her daughter with her ponytail flipping back and forth and her cute little white capris making her look so grown up. "Absolutely perfect, baby. Hey, can you get Francesca for me? She's fussing up a storm in there!"

"Sure!" Emma bounced off, happy to help out. A few minutes later, Emma walked back into the bedroom with her sister on her hip as she stood in the bathroom doorway and watched Natalia put on her makeup. The little girl carefully watched and then tilted her head to the side. "When do I get to wear makeup?"

Natalia stopped mid-motion in applying eyeliner, not sure exactly how to answer. She and Olivia hadn't talked about that yet or how to handle it. She sighed, knowing that it was inevitable that Emma was growing up, even if she didn't want to accept it. "I tell you what. Let me talk to your mom about that and then we'll sit down and discuss it with you."

Emma looked deep in thought for a moment. Natalia could tell she wasn't entirely pleased with the evasive answer, but this was a big part of Emma's next step in growing up. She didn't want to treat it lightly. It was only right that she talked to Olivia about it first and they'd decide together what was best for their daughter.

Eventually, Emma nodded. "Okay. Can I go check my card for Rafe to see if it's dry?"

"Sure, honey." Natalia turned from the mirror, finally finished with her makeup. "Bring her here."

Emma handed over her little sister and bounced out of the room. Natalia watched her go then turned to Francesca in her arms. "Don't grow up, okay? Like...ever."

The baby squealed and laughed as she put each hand on Natalia's cheeks and squeezed, making her look like a fish. Natalia made squishy fish sounds on her neck and the little girl squealed louder. The brunette pulled back, laughing. "Come on, you. There's an adorable pink onesie in your room calling your name."

A few minutes later, Natalia was standing in the kitchen with Emma as they loaded up a small box with cupcakes, sandwiches, and other snacks. Francesca banged on her high chair table making animal crackers fly all over the place. The surprised look on her mom's face tickled her so she did it again.

Natalia quickly picked up the ones that hadn't fallen on the floor and put them in a plastic bag. "How about we put these in a baggie so you can eat them in Daddy's car and make a mess there, huh?"

Francesca was none too pleased when the bag of snacks was placed out of her reach. She tilted her head to the side, thinking about how to get to them then leaned forward. When she realized she couldn't get them, she let out a huff of frustration.

Emma continued to help her Ma but smiled amusingly at her sister. When her Ma turned her back, Emma opened the bag and took out a cracker, handing it to Francesca. Emma whispered conspiratorially to her. "I know it sucks when you're not old enough to do what you want." The little girl smiled as Francesca crumbled up the cracker in her small hands, making a huge mess.

Natalia turned around at the giggles from her youngest to see animal cracker crumbs all around her. She looked at Emma who smirked and looked away. "Emma!" She shrieked.

"What? I can't resist, Ma. Just look at those dimples." Emma smiled and knew that comment would get to her Ma.

Natalia shook her head and turned back around to finish putting her daughter's sippy cup together. "Like mother, like daughter." She grumbled but smiled in spite of the mess.

A knock at the door had Natalia brushing off her hands on a towel and moving to the kitchen door. She pulled back the curtain to make sure it was Frank. He raised a hand in a wave through the glass, and she turned off the alarm to let him inside.

"Morning, ladies! How are you all today?" He stepped inside when Natalia moved aside and motioned him inside.

“We’re good, Frank. You?” Natalia noticed that Frank’s smile didn’t quite reach his face. He had looked like that quite a bit lately, and even though, with time, they had all become more comfortable with the unique status of their family, she was still cautious about expressing too much concern for his personal well-being. He was a good father and good to Francesca. That’s really all that mattered anymore.

“Oh, I’m fine. Just happy to spend some time relaxing with everyone at the game today, and with my favorite girl,” he gushed as Natalia lifted his daughter from the high chair and handed her over. Acknowledging the other girl in the room, he looked at Emma. “So, Emma, are you going to let me show you how to throw a ball today?”

Emma made a face. “I don’t know, Uncle Frank. That’s boy stuff.”

Natalia made a gasp. “Ah, no it’s not! Your Aunt Doris played. Your mom played too last year, remember? The day you two moved in. Even you did.”

The little girl rolled her eyes as if the answer was obvious for why she wouldn’t want to play catch. “Uh, but that was last year, Ma!”

Natalia raised an eyebrow but didn’t respond. She looked at Frank who was smirking a little. “I guess she’s growing up.”

He nodded and adjusted Francesca in his arms. “Guess so.”

She sighed and picked up the baby bag with snacks and juice stuffed in it. She handed it over to Frank and gave her daughter a kiss on the cheek. “We’ll see you at the park in about an hour.”

“Okay, if anything comes up, let me know. I have my phone on.” He turned to the door as Natalia opened it. “It’ll be good to see Rafe.”

She nodded at him and smiled. She had been trying not to think too much about it because it always made her get anxious and excited to think about him being home. As it was, she fought the feeling of wanting to jump out of her skin with anticipation. She took a deep breath and sighed, still smiling from ear to ear. “I know. I’m so excited. I can’t wait to see him.”

He smiled at Natalia, appreciating her deep love for her son. “It’s going to be a good day. See you there.”

She watched him before closing the door then turned back to Emma. “Alright, Em. Let’s finish this up so we’re not late to get Rafe.”

~~*~*

The dedication ceremony seemed to be taking much longer than expected. Olivia was quickly losing her patience in the rising late morning heat and the steady drone of the Petersons' family pastor. He was a stout, pinched face man who seemed to have forgotten that this was an outdoor dedication and not a Sunday sermon. Several of Jane's immediate family had spoken as well, and Olivia hoped they were nearing the end. She looked at her watch, noticing she'd have to hustle if she wanted to get to the bus depot on time.

Olivia shifted in her seat next to Mrs. Peterson and re-crossed her long legs. She caught Doris's gaze from her seat on the small platform stage in front of the gazebo and a brief quirk of the mayor's lips made her smile. They gave each other a subtle eye roll and went back to pretending to listen.

After a brief prayer, Doris was invited to the podium for the official dedication portion of the event. She glanced up and saw Olivia with a raised eyebrow, imploring her silently to hurry up.

Doris cleared her throat and looked briefly at her notes. She took a deep breath and came to a decision. Turning over her notes, she looked out into the crowd and to Olivia seated on the front row. "I remember Jane Peterson fondly. As mayor, I usually don't have the opportunity to know the residents of this small town on a personal basis. Jane, however, was a dedicated caretaker and friend of the Spencer-Rivera family, who are close friends of mine. Emma Spencer absolutely adored Jane and she was treated by Olivia and Natalia as another member of their family. It was Jane's honor and respect for this family that led her to make the ultimate sacrifice. As any of us would do for our family and for those we love, we'd give our lives to keep them safe. Jane did exactly that. Often, when I'm asked to speak at a dedication, there is sometimes doubt as to the validity of such a request. I don't always know the circumstances or the character of the person in question. In this case, however, I can say that I'm all too aware of Jane's character. For that reason, it is with pride and honor that I dedicate this gazebo as the Jane Peterson Family Memorial Gazebo on this day the 1st of August, 2010."

Doris turned with a large pair of scissors to cut the symbolic ribbon above the steps of the gazebo behind her. The crowd clapped and began to disperse to a set of tables with drinks and snacks as a band played.

Olivia walked with Mrs. Peterson up on the stage so she could speak with Doris. Before she turned to leave, Mrs. Peterson hugged Olivia tightly. "Thank you, Olivia."

The way Mrs. Peterson spoke made Olivia wonder if she knew that Olivia had paid to have the memorial built. When she pulled back to look at the slightly older woman, she knew she did. Olivia smiled at her. "It was the least I could do for what Jane did. I could never repay that...ever."

Mrs. Peterson squeezed her hand. "I know my daughter. She loved Emma, and I'm sure she'd do it all over again if she had to. Catch this guy, okay?"

Olivia could only nod. She couldn't speak for fighting back tears. She watched as Mrs. Peterson walked up into the gazebo and took a seat on a bench, gathering a few quiet moments for herself.

Doris came up behind her, having heard the last comment. "We will get him, Olivia. Her death won't be wasted."

Olivia nodded her head, her jaw clenching. "You're damn right we will." When she looked back at Doris, her friend had her head tilted to the side and she was smiling. Olivia knew a classic Doris quip was coming so she braced herself.

"What's with the mad hatter get up?" The other woman motioned to the oversized hat Olivia was wearing.

The blonde rolled her eyes. "Not you, too!" She looked down to her watch. "Since it seems to be drawing such a response, I was going to go home and change, but I don't have time now."

Doris nudged her. "Oh, like you give a damn what anyone says about you!"

"I'm going to look terribly out of place in this outfit." Olivia argued.

Doris shook her head. "No, you'll stand out in true Olivia Spencer fashion."

Olivia smiled, conceding. "Good point. I need to get moving though."

"I'll go with you. I'm parked that way, too." Doris already had her purse and keys in hand.

The blonde looked at her friend strangely. "Okay, but isn't this official mayoral duties or something? Don't you need to stay for appearance's sake and shake hands, kiss babies, or whatever?"

"Please, I'm so done with all of this. If I have to play nice with one more person, I'm going to scream. At least with you, I can get my frustrations out with mutual snark." Doris walked ahead of Olivia but looked back when she realized she was alone. "You coming or not?"

Olivia caught up with Doris and they took a mostly deserted path back to the parking lot. She glanced over at her friend who was lost in thought. She had a feeling that Doris wanted to talk, but she also knew their personalities were similar and Doris wouldn't want to be pushed.

As they turned a corner under an overhang of shaded trees, Doris sighed. "I think it's time for a change. I think I'm getting out of politics."

Olivia stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Really? What brought this on? I thought you loved being mayor."

"I did at one time. I lived my whole life thinking it was what I wanted. Even as a kid, I loved politics. That's why I worked so hard to protect my personal life and really never let myself have one. Now that I'm here, it's not all it's cracked up to be." Doris looked down and shuffled her feet. "It's kind of...lonely. I drove myself to reach this point and allowed life to pass me by. I don't have friends. I don't have a love of my own."

Olivia heard the sniffles as Doris raised one hand to wipe at her nose. She let her other hand slide down to take Doris's. "You do have friends, Doris, and a daughter who loves you. And as for the other, you could have that, too."

"Not as long as I'm mayor."

"Then get out of it. If that's what you have to do to be happy, do it. Trust me, you have to let go of your past and your fears sometimes. You're holding each one of those in each hand, and when you're doing that, you can't grab hold of the love that's offered to you." Olivia squeezed her hand to emphasize her point.

Doris leaned her head back, looking up through the leaves of the tree above them to the cloudless blue sky above. She swiped at the tears coming down her face with her free hand and then chuckled lightly, looking back down at her friend. "When did you become a philosopher, Spencer?"

Olivia smiled at her. "About a year ago when I had to decide what was worth holding on to and what had to be let go of so I could."

They looked at each other for a long moment before Doris pulled her into a hug. "Thank you."

Olivia tightened her hold a little. "Anytime, friend." She pulled back and looked at her now smiling friend. "Come on, or I'm going to be late for a date."

Doris laughed and wrapped an arm around Olivia's waist as they headed to their cars.

~~*~*

Natalia pulled into a parking space at the bus station and glanced at the clock in the car. She automatically subtracted the ten minutes she adds on to ensure she gets everywhere on time and breathed a sigh of relief noting that they hadn't been late for Rafe's arrival.

She looked into the rearview mirror and asked Emma. "Do you want to get out now or wait here?"

The little girl wrinkled her nose. "It's hot out there. Let's stay here as long as we can."

"My sentiments exactly!" She smiled. "I'm going to get out for a second though and see if your mom's car is here yet."

She opened the door to the gust of hot air, almost feeling the breath sucked from her lungs with it. Looking over the roof of her car, she didn't see Olivia's car in sight. Slipping back inside the cool car, she sighed and looked at her watch. "I guess she's not here yet."

Five minutes later, Natalia tapped nervously on her steering wheel and rechecked her watch. Looking up, she could see a bus coming down the road and knew it was Rafe. In front of it was Olivia's white Altima. Something about the image made her smile.

"They're here, Jellybean. Let's go." The two of them jumped out of the car and ran to the other side of the road from where the bus would pull up. They lined up with a couple of other groups waiting for family and friends to arrive.

Olivia pulled into the parking lot and took the first spot she found. Climbing quickly from the car, she ran as fast as she could in three inch heels to stand with Natalia and Emma.

"Perfect timing, honey." Natalia goosed her partner.

"You know me, I like to make an entrance." Olivia smirked.

The bus pulled to a stop right in front of them. They couldn't see through the dark windows to find Rafe, but they knew he had to be there. Olivia had her arm around Natalia's shoulder and could feel them shaking from excitement. Almost a year ago she was holding Natalia in exactly the opposite scenario as they watched Rafe leave for boot camp. It was hard to believe it had been almost a year.

With a whoosh of air, the automatic doors of the bus slowly swung open. Several people disembarked to stretch their legs or get a bite to eat. Then they saw him. Standing proudly in his uniform, Rafe stepped down to the bottom step and mock saluted his family.

Smiling, Natalia pulled away and walked up to her son, cradling his face in her hands. "I'm so glad you're home." She pulled him in for a tight hug.

"I missed you, Ma." He buried his face in her neck like he had done as a little boy, feeling calmed by her presence.

"I missed you, too, baby."

They pulled back from each other and Rafe dropped to a knee as Emma raced up to hug him. "Hey, Munchkin!"

"I grew two inches!" Emma drew back indignantly.

"Oh, okay, missy. I guess I shrunk then." Rafe laughed and tickled his little sister, who giggled.

He stood up and looked at Olivia. She stood back a little waiting to see his reaction. He walked over to her and stuck out his hand. "It's good to see you, Olivia."

She swallowed her disappointment at the obviously different reaction he had to her and put her hand out to take his. "You, too, Rafe."

Leaning in close, he spoke in a whisper, his face giving away nothing. "We need to talk, okay?"

She nodded. "Sure."

He turned to look at his Ma. "So, where's the newest member of this family?"

She caught the worried look on Olivia's face, but decided to ask her about it later. She smiled at her son. "She's already hanging out at the park with Frank."

"We better get there before he starts trying to teach her how to throw a ball, too." Emma mumbled as Rafe retrieved his duffle bag from the cargo area.

"Jellybean!" Olivia half-heartedly scolded, though she agreed with her daughter.

Emma threw up her hands as they walked over to the parking lot. "But why do guys do that? They always want to rough around or play ball."

Rafe laughed. "It's just what guys do, kiddo. It's kind of hard to explain."

"It's stupid." The little girl pouted.

When they got to the parking lot, Natalia looked at Olivia. "Do you all want to ride in one car?"

"Why don't I just ride with you, Olivia?" Rafe rocked on his heels, nonchalantly. Olivia looked uneasy at the suggestion. "That is, if you don't mind, Ma. It really doesn't make sense to leave one car here anyway. You'll have to come all the way back out later to get it, and neither of you are going to want to do that after a day at the park."

Natalia looked at her partner, sensing her unease. "What do you want to do?"

“All I know is it’s hot out here so climb in, Rafe. But no side-seat driving.” Olivia gestured with an arm for him to get into her car.

He smirked. “I’ll try to control myself.”

~~*~*

When both cars pulled out of the parking lot and were on the road, Olivia took a deep breath and looked at the young man in the passenger seat. He did look older and more mature with his clean-shaven face and close-cut hair.

“So, what’s on your mind, Rafe?”

He smiled, looking out the window at the familiar scenery going by. “See, that’s why I like you, Olivia. You don’t run from confrontation.”

She gripped the wheel a little and focused on Natalia’s car in front of her. “Oh, I’ve done my fair share of avoiding issues.” Then some of Rafe’s words came back to her. “Wait a minute, did you just say you like me?”

He laughed out loud at that. “And you’re getting slower in your old age.”

She pointed a finger at him. “Hey, watch it, bud.” She smirked at him as the laughter died down, but she also noticed how he fidgeted a little in his seat. “What’s really going on?”

He stared at his hands, closing his eyes at the remnants of blood and sand that only he could see, and then clenched them tight. His voice was soft as he spoke. “I haven’t been overseas long, but it didn’t take long to see the ugly side of people, you know? The things that people will say or do in the name of a belief or cause. And nobody is innocent in it. All of us are guilty.” He paused and looked up at her, really taking her in, before continuing. “Olivia, I did and said some really horrible things to you last year. I blamed you for my mom bailing. I blamed you for my dad dying. I blamed you for everything from the rain to the stock market, I think, but...I was wrong. And I’m sorry.”

Olivia didn’t know what to say. She sat there silently, letting the words sink into her, and the tears slide quietly down her cheek.

He looked up when he heard her try to quietly sniffle and was surprised to see tears. “I know you didn’t corrupt my Ma. I couldn’t see it then because I was so blinded by the way I thought things were or were supposed to be, but I know better now.”

Slowly, he raised his hand over the gear shift until it was in her line of vision. She gazed down at his upturned hand and hesitated. He watched as another tear fell and she reached over to take his hand.

She briefly glanced in his direction, just long enough to make eye contact. "Thank you."

He nodded. "Just take care of her, okay?"

"You have my word."

~~*~*

The family parked and took the path leading to the ball field. Natalia waited for Olivia to walk up to her and took her hand as Emma raced ahead. They let Rafe go ahead of them. Natalia glanced at her partner. "Is everything okay with you and Rafe?"

Olivia smirked and squeezed the hand in hers. "You picked up on that, huh?"

"Kind of hard to miss." The brunette nudged Olivia with her elbow.

Olivia slowed and looked at the woman she loved. "We had a good heart-to-heart, and we're okay now." Against her wishes, a small sob choked her voice. "He apologized for last year."

In spite of Olivia's tough exterior, she knew Rafe's reaction to their relationship had been hard on Olivia. She couldn't hide the joyous smile that spread across her face. "Really? I'm so glad, querida."

"Me, too." She glanced at the object of their conversation and Natalia followed her eyes. "He's a good kid, Natalia. You raised him well."

Natalia's smile grew bigger and she pulled Olivia into a hug.

Rafe turned at that moment and shook his head. "Come on, you two! None of that mushy stuff."

They caught up with Rafe, and Natalia hugged him without warning. "I love you, baby."

Olivia watched mother and son walk ahead and she smiled to herself. She never thought her life would turn out like this, but she felt a rush of gratitude that it had.

As they climbed the slight rise to the field, Olivia noticed that almost everyone had arrived. The blonde looked around at the gathered crowd and noticed that even Doris had beat them there. Rafe and Natalia approached Frank with their daughter.

Natalia scooped her daughter out of Frank's arms and turned to Rafe. "Hey, Francesca, look. It's your big brother Rafe. He's a soldier."

Rafe leaned down and looked at his little sister in awe. "Ma, she's gorgeous. Look at her eyes." He took her tiny hand in his and she gripped his finger tightly. He caught Frank

shifting uncomfortably behind his Ma and felt bad for him. He pointed at his friend. "It's from this guy, right?" He smiled up at the older man, knowing that while the compliment wasn't true it would make Frank feel good to hear it.

Olivia stood behind Natalia, her hands resting gently on her arms as they stood between Frank and Rafe. She could feel the smaller body in front of her lean back slightly and she relished the freedom at being able to be close to Natalia like this. She was proud of her family and proud of her love for Natalia.

Natalia rested back against Olivia, smiling at Rafe teasing his little sister. But they all jumped back a little when Francesca swatted at Rafe when he poked her one time too many. He stood up, laughing. "I think she has your right hook, Olivia." He teased her one last time. "You're one tough little cookie, kiddo. Just like your Mama Olivia."

Olivia wrapped her arms around Natalia's waist feeling the warmth of the comment down in her soul.

Frank spoke to get Rafe's attention. "Hey, Rafe, you want to toss the ball around for old time's sake?"

"I'd love to, but I don't have my glove."

Frank handed his daughter to Natalia and fished his keys out of his pocket. "I have an extra in my trunk."

Rafe smiled. "Thanks, man!" He took the keys from Frank and took off to his car.

Olivia with one arm still around the younger woman's waist guided her to the stands. "Let's go sit down."

As the day wore on and the sun dipped lower, Shayne's team played a tough game, and going into the last inning, the teams were tied.

Unable to take the heat anymore, Christina moved from the top of the bleachers with her new baby in tow so he could play in the shade of a tree behind the stands.

Eventually, Olivia and Emma joined them with Francesca, leaving Natalia to chat with Blake about some of the new authors the other woman's working with. While the guys stood by the dugout giving Shayne pointers.

After two extra innings, Shayne's team finally hit the winning run. Everyone congratulated them and hovered around wondering what to do next. Finally, ice cream at Company was decided on and the kids cheered.

Olivia held a sleeping Francesca in her arms as Natalia gathered up their bags. Rafe and Emma picked up what remained of the snacks their Ma had brought, which wasn't

much, and took them to the car. When Olivia and Natalia got down to the cars, Olivia told Rafe to put them in her trunk.



“You all head on to Company. I’m going to get into something more comfortable and let little Sweet Pea here sleep a little more. I’ll be down there later, okay?” Olivia’s words were partly true. She did want to get out of the monkey suit she was in but she also knew that Rafe and Natalia needed some one-on-one time.

Natalia smiled up at her knowing what her partner was up to. She stretched on her tiptoes and kissed her softly on the lips. “Okay. I love you. Be careful.”

“Love you, too.” Olivia whispered back before Natalia pulled away to climb into her car.

~~*~*

The drive over to Company was filled with small talk and Emma’s animated voice filling the empty spaces with tons of questions. Rafe told them about what he could of his military experiences. He kept it neutral because he didn’t want to worry his mother or scare his sister. He impressed Emma by telling her that he could do two hundred push-ups now and his mom was glad to hear that they provided healthy meals.

“It’s not like the movies show, Ma. They don’t feed us mush or make us eat rotten bread.” Rafe chuckled.

When they got out of the car, Emma raced ahead inside with permission to get a big bowl of ice cream from Buzz.

Natalia put her hand on her son's arm to stop him in front of the restaurant. "Olivia told me that you two talked."

He tilted his head down and looked at his shoes. "Did she tell you how things were while you were gone?"

She shrugged. "Some of it, but it's in the past so we're working on moving forward."

He looked up into dark eyes like his own and a face so full of love and patience. He suddenly felt shamed and he swallowed around the words stuck in his throat. "I...I was really bad to Olivia while you were gone. I owed her an apology and she accepted. But, I never did apologize to you, Ma. The way I acted over your relationship with Olivia. It was...there was no excuse for it. I had no right. I'm sorry."

Tears fell from Natalia's eyes as she pulled her son into a hug. "I'm so proud of you, baby."

He held on tight and buried his face in her neck. "As long as she makes you happy, that's what matters."

Natalia couldn't hold in the happiness inside any longer. She started crying and laughing at the same time even as she pulled him into a tighter hug. "I'm so happy, Raphael. So happy." Then she whispered, "She asked me to marry her."

He pulled quickly away from the embrace and Natalia worried momentarily that he was upset about it.

His eyebrows were creased. "Really?"

She held up her hand with the ring. "Really. I've been wanting to tell you, but I wanted it to be in person."

The young man took his mother's hand in his own and looked down at the ring. "Do you have a date picked?"

Natalia shook her head and shrugged. "Probably around New Year's though. Why?"

Rafe took a deep breath and smiled at his mom. "Because I need to ask for time off so I can come home and give my Ma away."

She put her hand to his cheek and burst into tears again. "I love you, son."

He pulled her into another hug. "I love you, too, Ma."

The End

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Madness Unconfined

by Calliopes_Muse

ACT 1

The late afternoon sun was turning the horizon orange and gold as Josh took the I-70 split into St. Louis. Seeing the arch loom high on the city skyline, Josh had a spontaneous thought. Sure, they could keep going and get to Oklahoma in the wee hours of the morning, but this would be something they may not get a chance to do again.

He glanced over to Reva, who was amused by Colin's "ohhing" and "ahhing" at the big city in front of them. She glanced up and smiled warmly as she ran a hand through her son's golden hair.

"I have an idea." He paused for a moment as he changed lanes to take the exit into downtown. He saw the look of surprise when he quickly stole another glance Reva's way. "A mini-family vacation. A couple of days here in St. Louis. We'll take Colin to the top of the arch, wander through downtown, and eat some great food. What do you say?"

The thought of some quality time with two of her favorite men warmed Reva and her smile showed it. "I guess there's no reason to rush to Oklahoma. This is our new adventure, right? Let's do it, Bud."

Taking an exit off of Memorial Drive, Josh pulled into the valet parking area for the Adam's Mark Hotel.

Reva was stunned. She expected something far less extravagant. "Um, Josh?"

He shook his head. "No, if we're going to do this, let's do it right. We deserve this. It's been a long time coming."

She smiled at him. "Okay."

Once they had settled into their suite, Reva got Colin fed and bathed. They all sat on the huge king sized bed and watched a movie until Colin fell asleep against Josh's shoulder. Reva got the rollaway cot set up and Josh carried the little boy over to settle him down into it.

Quietly, they exited the bedroom area and went to sit and talk in the adjoining suite. Reva sat next to Josh. He automatically put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. It was as if they had never been apart; the comfort of their history making old habits easy to fall into again.

He closed his eyes and kissed the top of her head, enjoying the feel of her in his arms. It was what he had been missing and what he had needed for so long. Their lives were finally coming full circle.

She sighed and closed her eyes, letting a hand settle on his smooth stomach; a ball of desire was already building in her at the simply touch. She had forgotten how much she loved this with Josh; how he brought it out in her. There was something truly special about him; about them.

The ringing of her phone interrupted her wandering thoughts. She sat up and picked it up off the coffee table in front of them then settled back down against Josh

"It's Shayne." She flipped the phone open and raised it to her ear. "Hey, sweetie, how did the game go?" The noise in the background made it hard to hear him so she pressed a finger to her other ear. "Where in the world are you?"

"We're at Company. Buzz opened up for a private celebration." He nearly yelled over the cacophony.

She smiled at the happiness in his voice. "I take it that means you won."

"Yep, we're heading to the championships!"

She could hear Henry in the background asking to be picked up and it made her smile. She already missed the rest of her family, but she needed this time, too. It was time to move on and make some new memories and a new life. She talked to Shayne a few minutes longer and gave Henry some phone kisses goodnight before hanging up.

She looked up at Josh who was smiling sweetly at her. A long moment passed between them with no words said. Slowly, he leaned down to kiss her, and she felt the familiar warmth that loving Josh had always brought her radiate through every inch of her body and soul.

She leaned back and saw the look of desire on his face. She stood and reached her hand down. "Come on, let's go to bed."

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The noise in Company was deafening even though the crowd from the ballpark had come in over an hour ago. Olivia came in and spied Natalia in a booth near the back.

Emma and Rafe were playing darts and generally goofing around. She snuck by before the kids could see her, and as she got closer to Natalia, she could tell her girlfriend was feeding Francesca French fries.

“French fries? Bad eating habits are my job. I’m the good momma.” Olivia loved the look of surprise on Natalia’s face as she snuck up on her.

“Hi! This is all your fault, you know. I think she can sniff them out now. She wouldn’t eat any of the mashed up veggies I had for her. She only wanted mashed up fries with ketchup.” Natalia directed a mock glare at her.

“Oh, you love my bad influence.” Olivia leaned over and gave Natalia a soft kiss. Natalia smiled as they broke their kiss. “Mmmmm, I sure do,” she said huskily as she quirked an eyebrow at Olivia. “And maybe later you can show me what a bad influence you are?”

Olivia let out a little groan and kissed her again, a little slower. “Anything for my girl.” Natalia had to look away from the hungry look in her partner’s green eyes. The woman could undo her so easily and for a moment she even entertained the idea of putting their quiet corner booth to good use.

She cleared her throat, an action that brought an amused smile to Olivia’s face, and changed the subject. “Is the farmhouse still standing?”

Olivia had almost forgotten to tell her. “Oh, yeah. Actually, Leyla was there. She had just gotten in. She would have come out but I think her trip home to see your folks and her friend Marco wore her out. She was crashed on the couch with popcorn and chocolate, watching a movie.”

Natalia snickered. “That girl’s too young to be acting so old! Did you hear from Ava yet?”

Olivia slid into the booth next to her. “Yep. Her flight should be in any minute now.”

“Do you need to go get her?”

Olivia shook her head and snagged a fry. Natalia popped her hand, drawing a giggle from Olivia as the food disappeared in her mouth. “Nope, she insisted I stay here and have fun with you all, so I sent a Beacon car to get her. She got everything packed up and the moving van should be here in a couple of days.”

The younger woman leaned against her partner, smiling happily. “It’s hard to believe we’ll have all of our family here at one time.”

“It is a feat of epic proportions, yes.” Olivia laughed.

On the other side of Company, Olivia saw Frank helping Marina behind the bar. She glanced at Natalia. "I'm going to get a bite to eat. Do you want anything?"

"Salad."

Olivia looked at her surprised since she'd hardly eaten anything during the day. "For you?"

"No, missy. You." Natalia smiled sweetly.

Olivia groaned and grumbled, "You know I can't resist those dimples!"

"I know."

Olivia made her way to the bar; glancing to the game area to make sure that Emma was nowhere within ear shot. She edged her way up and settled in front of where Frank stood as he pulled the lever for the tap. Marina, who was standing nearby, took the glass and handed it to a guy down at the end of the bar before coming back to stand by her father.

"Hey Frankie!" She acknowledged the redhead glaring at her. "Marina."

He glanced up. "Oh, hey, Olivia. Is Francesca insisting on more fries?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, actually I needed something."

He wiped his hands on the bar rag. "Great. What can I get you?"

Olivia leaned a little closer, her voice dropping. "The rundown on what happened to that chase in the woods at Phillip's. Was it Edmund?"

Frank sighed and dropped his head. He rubbed at the tense knot in the back of his neck then looked back up. "Of course it wasn't Edmund. It was just some homeless guy."

She didn't buy it. "A homeless guy that took off like a bat out of hell when you got close? Really, Frank? You buy that!"

"How did you know that anyway?" He glared.

She narrowed her eyes at him. There was no way she was telling him that she saw Anna earlier. "I have my sources."

He huffed and tossed down the rag in his hand. "This is none of your concern, Olivia. The police are taking care of it."

“None of my concern?” She growled. “My daughter was nearly kidnapped and could have been killed. That damn well makes it my concern. And don’t give me the company line about the police taking care of this. You don’t even believe it IS Edmund. At least Anna, Jeffrey, and Jonathan have been doing something about it, which is more than I can say for the PD.”

He shook his head at her. “I can’t believe you’d even defend Jeffrey after...”

She threw up her hand. “Don’t!” She didn’t want to discuss that with him and certainly not with Marina hovering around.

“Olivia...” Frank started to apologize but she interrupted again.

“Frank...” her voice was a low warning.

He held up his hands. “I’ll talk to Eleni. She’s been digging up some stuff.”

“Just...” Olivia tried not to make her voice sound pleading. She heard Emma’s laughter rise over the crowd and she felt more determined than ever to protect her family. “Just keep an open mind, okay?”

He nodded and let the earlier tension go. “So...a Buzz burger?”

She smiled. “With extra onions. And a salad.”

He laughed. “Gee, let me guess who gets the salad.”

“Don’t remind me,” she grumbled.

~~*~*

The good thing about being an early riser was moments like this; Natalia loved lying here in bed, propped up her elbow, watching Olivia sleep. Last night, Olivia had certainly been a bad influence, just like Natalia had teased her about. She came back from the bar with their food, acting feisty and affectionate. She didn’t know what had gotten Olivia so fired up. It certainly wasn’t the salad she picked at. Whatever it was though, Natalia wasn’t complaining as she stretched and felt the soreness in her muscles.



The memories of last night came back to her and she traced her hand over Olivia's back, smiling as the goose bumps rose on the creamy skin beneath her fingers. She slid the sheet down Olivia's back and sighed. It still surprised her a little at how easy this part of their relationship had come to her. For someone who had fought her desire and panicked, she never imagined she'd so easily yearn and ache for Olivia.

Natalia's light and teasing touch caused Olivia to stir. She stretched her arms out above her head and looked over at Natalia. "Mornin', beautiful."

Olivia loved the sexy dimples that took over Natalia's face at the compliment. The hand drawing gentle circles on her back was creating a warm feeling low in her belly. It slipped lower and caressed the sensitive skin at the base of her spine, drawing a soft groan from her. She couldn't seem to get enough of Natalia. Just when she thought she was satiated, a simple touch from the beautiful woman stirred her again.

"Good morning to you, querida," Natalia whispered.

Olivia recognized the desire in Natalia's breathy voice and it caused a rush of heat to flood her body. She tried to focus on the words she needed to say. "What time does Rick and Mindy's wedding start?"

Natalia leaned in and ran her tongue over the back of Olivia's exposed neck, up to her ear. "Noon. We have plenty of time."

“The kids? Breakfast?” Olivia gasped as Natalia’s roaming hands ran down over her ass and dug in with her nails.

She could feel Natalia’s naked skin pressed against her and the hoarse whisper in her ear made her forget everything else. “God made cereal and door locks for a reason.”

Natalia nuzzled at Olivia’s neck, taking a gentle nip at her shoulder. “I want you...so bad. Olivia’s hip rose involuntarily as Natalia’s hand continued to caress her ass and the back of her thighs. She was throbbing painfully, and she buried her face in her pillow to let out a loud groan of frustration.

Natalia’s kisses drifted lower over Olivia’s back, stopping to suck firmly at a sensitive spot on the inside of her shoulder blade.

Olivia rolled her head back to the side, looking over her shoulder to see Natalia’s naked form stretched out over her back. A firm thigh slid between her legs and she instinctively moved against it.

“Nuh uh. It’s not going to be that easy, my love.” Natalia moved her thigh away so Olivia couldn’t reach her. With aching slowness, she propped herself up on her hand over Olivia’s back and used her free hand to trace the path her kisses had taken earlier. She did this over and over again until Olivia writhed beneath her.

“Natalia,” Olivia moaned with need.

Natalia wasn’t trying to torture her lover or make her frustrated; she just wanted to love her and give her everything she needed and desired. With a soft moan of her own, she moved her hand between Olivia’s legs and relished the feel of the warmth and wetness. She closed her eyes as she took it all in; the feel of Olivia surrounding her and the sound of her lover’s heavy breathing as she got closer to the edge. Making love to Olivia was intoxicating and exhilarating, like a drug Natalia couldn’t overdose on, but gladly would.

The other woman was an addiction, and Natalia only wanted more. Her mouth watered at the direction her mind and body was taking her. She continued to move her fingers as her mouth descended lower, nibbling at the indentions at the base of Olivia’s spine then moving to the side to run her tongue over the sensitive skin of Olivia’s ass. She nipped at the spot where the curve of it met the back of her thigh, making Olivia lift her hips.

The passion of Olivia’s scent overwhelmed Natalia and she tugged with her free hand on Olivia’s hip, encouraging her to her knees. Natalia sat back on her heels mesmerized by the image of Olivia complying. She slid her fingers out so she could tease around Olivia’s clit.

Olivia’s moans became louder as she buried her face again in her pillow. Her hips moving faster seeking Natalia’s roaming fingers. She gasped in surprise as Natalia’s

mouth settled on her ass again, slowly moving closer to her center. “Natalia?” When she felt Natalia’s tongue bury itself inside of her, she cried out. “Oh my God...oh God!” She clawed at the sheets beneath her pillow, aching for release as Natalia drove in deeper and harder with her tongue.

Natalia couldn’t get enough of Olivia. Eventually, she pulled away and leaned over Olivia’s back again. She shoved in three fingers effortlessly. She could feel the tightening against her fingers as Olivia rocked harder against her hand. She waited for the right moment and moved up to whisper in Olivia’s ear. “Come for me, querida. For me.”

Olivia shuddered and cried out, burying her face in her pillow to muffle the noise. Natalia nuzzled at her lover’s neck, placing gentle kisses on her shoulders, as she waited for Olivia’s body and breathing to settle. A deep sigh let her know Olivia’s contentment and she moved off to the side.

Olivia rolled wearily to her side and ran a shaky hand along Natalia’s cheek. “You...are...amazing.”

Natalia wrinkled her nose. “Is that why you’re marrying me? Because I’m good in bed?”

Olivia laughed. “It’s definitely an incentive.”

She slapped Olivia on the arm playfully, making Olivia laugh harder. Olivia peeked over Natalia’s shoulder at the clock on the side table. “Hmmm, only a little after nine.” A sudden banging and giggling was heard from downstairs. “And it sounds like the kids are taking care of breakfast.”

Natalia got a scared look on her face. “Have you ever seen Rafe cook?” Olivia shook her head. “Maybe we should get up.” Natalia moved to get out of bed.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Olivia grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down onto the bed, wrapping her legs around Natalia’s so she couldn’t move. “I’m not done.”

Olivia rolled her over onto her back and kissed her way down to Natalia’s breasts. As soon as Natalia offered up a protest, she latched onto a nipple to quiet her.

“Olivia, what are you doing?”

The older woman flicked at a nipple with her tongue and moved down Natalia’s stomach. “Getting some breakfast.”

~~*~*

Beth felt like her life was one whirlwind event after another – the worry and fear over Phillip’s illness last year, Alan dying immediately after, her wedding to Phillip, the

endless studying for the bar exam, taking and passing the exam, and now all the fast and furious preparations for Mindy and Rick's wedding. As soon as all of this was over, she wanted to sit down with Mel Boudreau about joining her private practice. She felt like their very different specialties and approaches could be a strong combination. Besides, someone had to balance out the dirty pool of Alan's lawyers in town.

She poured two fresh cups of coffee and ascended the stairs to the bedroom. Phillip was brushing off his tuxedo to make sure it was in perfect condition for the ceremony. "I got you some coffee." She handed it over to him.

He took a grateful sip and smiled at her. "Is Peyton up yet?"

"Yeah, Hilda's making sure she eats some breakfast. I got her dress and shoes out. And you're sure Olivia said it was okay to use the suites to get dressed?"

He nodded his head and swallowed the sip of coffee he'd taken. "I called her last night to be sure. It's all set up with hors d'oeuvres and champagne in both suites. In fact, Rick texted earlier that he and Mindy are already there. We're good."

She turned to leave then did an about face. "Remind me to double-check the caterers when we get to the park about making sure the food stays cold. I don't want anyone getting food poisoning from this heat."

He smiled at his wife. "Honey, they're professional caterers, and it's like the ovens of hell outside. I'm sure they've thought of ice."

She rolled her eyes. He was such a man sometimes. "Just remind me."

"Okay." He looked at his watch and jumped. "Oh, when are Bill and Lizzie supposed to get here again?"

She glanced at her own watch. "Oh...damn it!" She frantically set down her coffee and ran to the closet to get her dress and shoes out then ran to the bathroom for her makeup bag. "I need to grab Peyton's stuff. Be right back."

As soon as she walked through the door, the front door rang. Phillip picked up his tux and shoes and headed down the stairs where he could hear Bill and Lizzie talking to Hilda.

Bill looked up and saw the taller man coming down the stairs. "Hey! Is everyone ready to go?"

Beth came scurrying to the top of the banister, her arms loaded with clothes and shoes.

"We're ready! Peyton, honey, are you finished with breakfast?" she called out for her daughter.

"I'll get her, Mrs. Spaulding." Hilda hurried to the kitchen for the young girl.

Beth got to the bottom of the steps and saw Lizzie miserably sitting in a chair.
"Goodness, Lizzie, I think you grew overnight! You look like you're about to pop."

Quirking an eyebrow at her mother, Lizzie didn't move her head, which was resting against the railing of the stairs behind her. Sighing at the physical exhaustion of the pregnancy and the heat of the later summer, Lizzie said, "Just put a fork in me...I'm done."

Beth smiled with understanding. "Just a few more weeks. You'll make it."

Lizzie whimpered at the thought of a few more weeks. Yesterday wouldn't have been soon enough for her. The first few months had been fun and thrilling, but now, she was done with it. She could certainly confirm the belief that summer is the worst time to go full term with a pregnancy. If she got any bigger, she was going to look like that mean aunt in Harry Potter that he tried to explode.

As quick as her oversized body would allow, she stood with Bill's help and made her way to the car behind everyone else. They climbed in the limo Phillip had rented for the occasion and headed to the Beacon.

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Orders were coming in fast as Marina made quick work of the coffee pot to set it up to brew a fresh batch. She pushed her hair back and blew out a frustrated breath. It seemed like half of Springfield decided to stop into Company for breakfast. Of course, half of that half was heading to Rick and Mindy's wedding. That's what happens when a local doctor and a girl from one of the most influential families in town get married. Everyone comes out of the woodwork for it!

Buzz called out an order from the back, and she went back to gather up the plates for table five, which was a family of six and all of them with huge appetites. She hustled to the table to drop off the order and ran back to the bar for the coffee that had finished brewing. She made her rounds to check on everyone and came back to stand behind the bar again.

The bell over the door rang and in came Frank and Eleni. Marina felt her hackles rise just at seeing her mother, but the way the other woman was on her father's tail didn't help matters. Frank rested his hands against the bar and dropped his head down between his shoulders. Eleni stood right next to him, gritting her teeth and trying to speak quietly; it wasn't quite working and Marina could make out some of what was said.

"Why are you being so hard-headed about this, Frank? I told you that Anna and I have been sorting through the evidence, what there is of it, and not only is something off with

the case on Edmund but it looks as though there could be other cases with evidence missing. This isn't something you can brush over." She was nearly pleading with her ex-husband now.

"Eleni, I'm not brushing over it. I have a lot going on right now, and I'm doing the best I can."

"I know, but this is about the safety of this town and its people, and very well could be about the integrity of your department." Eleni tried to get him to see the importance of this issue. He was so damn stubborn sometimes that it drove her crazy. When he didn't respond, she lost her temper and slammed her hand on the counter. "Damn it, Frank."

"Why don't you lay off of him?" Marina had heard enough. "You don't have any right to come in here, after all these years and lecture him about anything. He raised me on his own. He's taken care of Grandpa and this restaurant, on top of protecting the citizens of this town. And you come up in here and mess everything up. You always mess everything up. Why couldn't you just stay gone?"

Frank and Eleni, along with some surprised patrons, watched as Marina ran out through the kitchen. Buzz popped his head out of the kitchen, and seeing Frank and Eleni, he gestured after Marina. "What's that all about?"

Eleni scrubbed a hand through her hair and looked at Frank. "Something has to give, Frank. You can't keep pretending that you don't see what's staring you right in the face."

The moment seemed to stand still as their eyes locked, and for a brief moment, Frank wondered if she was still talking about the cases or something more. The thought made him swallow hard and he had to look away. He heard her sigh and half expected her to continue on in her tirade like she had been for the last few weeks, but he was surprised when all she did was run her hand over his, squeeze it slightly, and leave. For a few seconds, he sat perfectly still. He closed his eyes and could still feel her touch. Something was staring him in the face and it was time to do something about it.

~~*~*

In the alley behind Company, Marina paced the small, dark space. She chewed at a fingernail and kicked an empty can in her way.

"Hey, what did that poor can ever do to you?" She jumped at the deep voice behind her and turned to see Shayne at the end of the alley holding Henry. "Buzz told me you got upset at your mom and dad."

Marina waved it off and came over to take Henry, giving him a tender kiss on his cheek. "It was nothing. She was just jumping all over my dad, and I didn't take it very well."

He watched her for a moment as she cooed and giggled at Henry. "She really gets under your skin, doesn't she?"

"Well, she did kind of abandon me and my dad for that...that bastard, Alan-Michael." She flinched at her own cursing in front of Henry. She kissed him again. "I'm sorry, baby."

Shayne shrugged and decided to let it go. He really didn't want to get Marina all worked up over it. He had learned the hard way that Eleni was one topic he needed to steer clear of if he wanted to keep Marina happy. "So, do you need to go get changed so we can get to the wedding?"

It was then that Marina realized that both Shayne and Henry were in dress shirts and navy dress pants. She had been so preoccupied that she had forgotten about the wedding. She shifted Henry nervously to her hip. "Actually, it's kind of busy here. I don't think I can make it."

Shayne looked at her curiously, "It didn't look that busy when I was just in there." "Oh," she ran a hand through her hair and hesitated. "You know, I'm just not really in the mood to go with all the stuff going on with my mom and seeing a bunch of happy families is not at the top of my agenda."

He nodded. "Okay. It's my cousin's wedding though. I probably should go. Henry and I will make a stunningly handsome pair, if I do say so myself."

Marina smiled a little at how good Shayne was with Henry. "Tell you what, go to the wedding and leave Henry with me. That way you can relax and enjoy it without having to keep up with a kid."

He honestly couldn't argue with the logic so he shrugged. "If you're sure."

"Absolutely."

He gave her a kiss and high-fived Henry. When he turned the corner out of the alley, Marina leaned back against the wall, breathing a sigh of relief.

~~*~*

Olivia heard the laughter in the kitchen drift up the stairs as she finished getting dressed. She smiled as she listened to Emma's giggles and Rafe's good-natured chuckles. Natalia had taken a shower in a rush when Leyla knocked on the door to let them know that Rafe's culinary skills left much to be desired. So, Natalia was down there now trying to regain some semblance of order to her kitchen. A knock at the back door and cheers from her family let her know that Ava had arrived.

She put in her earrings and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She hadn't worn the sleeveless red dress since Natalia's engagement party, but red seemed to be her color for weddings. When Natalia had made a pointed comment about how sexy she had been at that party, she couldn't resist wearing it again.

She picked up her black handbag and headed toward the bedroom door then stopped as her hand touched the knob. She had been trying not to think about the necessity of protection for her family since talking with Anna and then Frank, but the lightness of her purse reminded her that she was forgetting something. She walked with purposeful strides over to the closet and opened the door.

She was probably just being overdramatic and paranoid. "Better safe than sorry though," she mumbled into the empty room.

~~*~*

ACT 2

In the kitchen, Natalia and the kids were laughing and having fun as they cleared the plates from the table. Emma and Rafe were joking around while Leyla fed Francesca some cereal and peaches; the infant batting her little fists against the highchair table in excitement. Ava stood at the sink next to Natalia, drying dishes as Natalia finished washing them.

Olivia leaned against the door frame and watched her partner. The sheer, flowing fuchsia dress was flattering to Natalia's curves, especially where it dipped into her waist and highlighted the firm ass that Olivia recently had privy to hold. Thoughts of what had transpired little more than an hour ago upstairs made Olivia sigh with renewed desire. Damn but Natalia had some wicked ways!

Sensing her lover's presence, Natalia turned around and almost dropped the plate in her hands. "Wow! Look at you."

Rafe watched as his mom and Olivia admired each other silently. He hid his unease by gulping his orange juice down and dumping the glass in the sink. It was one thing to know your mom was sleeping with someone, but quite another to feel the air crackle with energy when you're around.

Olivia made her way over to Natalia and reached for the cup of coffee made for her on the counter. "I could say the same about you." Her voice was low and meant only for Natalia's ears.

Natalia swallowed, a teasing smile lighting her face, and announced to the room. "Okay, you all go get dressed. You," she motioned to Olivia, "sit and eat."

"Yes, ma'am!" She happily sat down as Natalia set a plate of pancakes in front of her.

Natalia hovered for a moment and Olivia smirked at her partner, humming out the word as a question, “Yesssss?”

Natalia bit her bottom lip, a becoming shade of pink tinting her cheeks. “I really like you in that dress.”

Olivia crooked a finger at her and beckoned her to come closer. She smiled as Natalia leaned in. She cupped her hand around the younger woman’s neck and pulled her in for a kiss. When Olivia leaned back, she smirked at Natalia who was slow to open her eyes. “I know you do. Why do you think I wore it?”

Footsteps on the stairs made Natalia stand back up straight. She gave Olivia a pointed look. “I’ll deal with you later.”

Olivia smiled around a mouthful of pancakes. “Pwomish?”

“Mom! Don’t talk with your mouth full!” Emma told her as she walked into the kitchen. The other three snickered behind the youngest Spencer kid.

“Swowy.” Olivia did it again, this time on purpose.

“Mom!” Emma stomped her foot and all of them started laughing at the young girl.

Natalia put away her dishrag and put Olivia’s dirty plate and cup in the sink. “Okay, are we all ready?”

They loaded up Francesca in the car seat and left the house. The drive to the park seemed quicker than usual, but it could have just been because everyone was in good spirits. Olivia had never seen Natalia so happy. They had their kids and Natalia’s sister there. The whole town seemed to be happy or in love. Life couldn’t be any more perfect than it was at that moment.

~~*~*

Frank sat in a booth at the back of Company and stared at his phone. Eleni’s words still rattled around in his head. He had been willingly avoiding doing what he needed to do, personally and professionally. In most matters he was a laid back kind of guy. He didn’t think he had a lot of high expectations or demands. When he stopped to look at the situation though, he knew it was best for everyone. No one deserved to be second-best or an afterthought and he knew he hadn’t given his all to his relationship with Blake. He really understood it. He got it now how Natalia must have felt when she ran out of the church. He didn’t have his one true love waiting for him, but even still, this was hard. He bucked up his courage and found Blake in his contact list. Holding the phone to his ear, praying this time there wouldn’t be another interruption, he waited for her to pick up.

On the other side of the town square, Blake pulled her ringing phone from her purse. She looked up at Doris who was leaning back in her leather chair behind her desk. "It's Frank."

Doris rolled her eyes. "Don't mind me."

Blake sighed and answered it. "Hey, Frank. What's up?"

Doris pretended to look through some paperwork on a new bridge construction contract, but she could not avoid listening to the one-sided conversation.

"Just having some coffee with Doris...Um, yeah, I guess...Now?" Blake made a face and glanced at her watch. "Tell you what, let me finish here and I can meet you at Company in thirty minutes....Okay, bye."

Doris waited a moment, absorbing the fact that Blake hadn't told Frank the mandatory "I love you" when hanging up and that the redhead obviously wasn't anxious to see her boyfriend. "So..."

Blake slipped her phone back in her purse and looked up at Doris. "Frank wants to talk." Doris raised an eyebrow. "That seems...coded."

For a moment Blake didn't respond. She simply looked at her hands in her lap, thinking. "I'm going to break up with him."

"What?" Doris mentally slapped the imp that was happy dancing in her head, reprimanding it not to read more into the situation.

"Yeah, it's just...you know when something doesn't feel right. You try to make it fit and force it together, but it just doesn't matter what you do, it doesn't...fit." Blake ran her hands through her hair and stood up.

Doris chuckled a little to herself. "Oh yeah, do I!"

Blake made her way over to a window that looked out over the heart of the town. She turned around and looked at Doris. "Some people aren't meant to be together and some are. I mean, look at Olivia and Natalia. Who would have thought it? But you see them together and it's just...destined."

Doris had been playing with a pencil, a coil of nervousness tightening in her belly. She had to lighten the moment before it got too deep. The last time that had happened Blake had kissed her. She quickly stuffed down the feeling that memory gave her and shook the pencil in her hand at Blake. "You read too many romance novels, Blake. The real world isn't like that. Sometimes, you just have to make do."

“Bullshit. You don’t buy that, I know you don’t.” Blake crossed her arms.

Doris squinted at her friend. “Oh really?”

“Really. Because if you did, then breaking up with Anna wouldn’t have been so hard for you. Like it or not, you’re as much of a romantic as I am.” Blake quirked an eyebrow at her saucily, knowing she was right.

“Pffftt, whatever!” Doris found herself getting more and more uncomfortable with the conversation. “Didn’t you have somewhere to be?”

She rolled her eyes at Doris, knowing this wasn’t over. “Fine. I’m going. Will you be at the wedding?”

“Be there? That’s an understatement. I’m officiating.” Doris looked at her watch. “Speaking of which, I probably should make my way over to the park in a little bit.”

Blake picked up her purse and went around the desk to where Doris was now standing. Their eyes locked for a moment. “I guess I’ll see you there then.”

“You’re going to be there?” Doris swallowed, tucking some hair behind her ear and looking away from Blake quickly.

Blake tilted her head to the side, noticing that Doris seemed a little nervous all of a sudden. She couldn’t help but smile at her socially awkward friend. “Of course, I’m a hopeless romantic after all and all hopeless romantics love weddings.” Blake hesitated for a moment then leaned in to kiss Doris on the cheek. “See you there.”

When the door closed behind Blake, Doris slumped in her chair finally letting out the breath she had been holding. She dropped her head in her hands. “Dear God, help me.”

~~*~*

The limo rounded the corner of the town square to head towards the front door of the Beacon. Phillip glanced at his wife nervously eyeing the park as they drove past it. Beth visibly sighed when she saw the catering van parked at a corner space.

He tightened his hold on Beth’s hand to get her attention. “I told you it would be fine.” She glanced back out the window. “Yeah, but do you see the florist’s van? The chairs were supposed to have this cute arrangement of flowers at the end of each row.”

Phillip looked out the windows and searched for the van. She looked at him and he gaped open-mouthed and shrugged. “I’m sure it’ll get done.”

She tilted her head to the side, her eyes pleading with him. He tried to resist but couldn't and finally rolled his eyes, giving into Beth. "Okay." He tapped on the glass divider. "Driver, pull over at the park."

The driver did as he was told. When he stopped, Phillip helped Beth out of the limo, and he instructed the driver to wait for them to return. He glanced back into the car at Bill, Lizzie, and Peyton. "Give us just a minute."

All three smiled understandingly at him, and he closed the door before jogging off to catch up with his wife.

Beth walked briskly between the rows of chairs to the low platform in front of them. An elaborate arch of vines and bright flowers in every shade of pink and purple imaginable covered it and stood to the back of the platform.

A figure was crouched over at corner of the stage, searching for something in a purse. Beth assumed it was the caterer or decorator.

She cleared her throat. "Excuse me?"

"Son of a bitch!" The woman dropped the contents of her purse to the ground in a sloshy pile, stood and turned.

All three stared at each other for a brief moment before Beth broke the silence. "Oh, hi, Doris. I didn't realize that was you."

Doris looked down at her hands that were apparently wet from something. She glanced around for some way to wipe her hands, but when nothing seemed to appear feasible, she pushed her shoulders back and hoped to regain a modicum of dignity. "Um, hi."

Phillip couldn't help but smirk, reaching into his pocket for a tissue. He had grabbed a few earlier because he knew how emotional Beth could get over weddings. He handed the tissue to the mayor. "Tough morning, Doris?"

She took the tissue gratefully. "Oh, no. It was great until a few minutes ago when I knocked my coffee over and into my purse. Fortunately, the wedding script wasn't in there, nor my phone, so all's okay. It'll dry out." She looked at the couple then. "Shouldn't you two be getting ready at the hotel?"

"We were on our way. I just had to stop and check on things." Beth glanced around, trying to appear nonchalant. The caterer was nearly done setting up and that was one small relief. "Have you seen the decorator from the florist?"

Doris shook her head. "No, but it's still a couple of hours until the wedding starts. I'm sure they'll be here soon."

Beth worried her bottom lip. Phillip and Doris shared a quick look at each other and then at Beth. When Doris saw Phillip was about to say something to Beth, she spoke up. "I tell you what, why don't you give me the name and number of the florist you're using and I'll give them a call? I'll make sure things get done."

The blonde looked at Doris gratefully but still a little hesitant to not deal with the matter herself. "Are you sure?"

Doris waved her hands. "Of course. You two need to get ready. Besides, Beth, consider it a favor from one lawyer to another. I heard about that. Congratulations!"

Beth smiled genuinely and even blushed a little. It felt strange to be called a lawyer. "Thanks."

Doris sighed a little wistfully. "I actually miss practicing. It was fun to get into the courtroom and go head-to-head with another lawyer. I'm sure you'll be great at it."

"Maybe you should go back to it then," Beth commented.

Doris shrugged. "Maybe. Who knows what the future holds?"

"Around here, you never know!" Phillip commented as he dug into his pocket and fished out the business card of the florist. Handing it over to Doris with more words of thanks, he and Beth turned to head back to the car.

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Billy popped another piece of bacon in his mouth as he watched his future son-in-law struggle with the black bow-tie around his neck. He wiped his hands on a napkin and finally stood to make his way over to the flustered younger man.

"Come here, turn around," Billy mumbled around the food in his mouth.

Rick sighed and turned to the large man behind him. "I'm a doctor. You'd think I'd be better with my hands."

Billy tugged at the material. "Aw now, you know why it's so difficult to do this, don'cha?"

Rick shook his head. "So the father of the bride has the perfect opportunity to do this." With a quick jerk, Rick felt the tie choke him slightly. Billy laughed at the panicked look on the man's face and let up the tension. Fixing the tie just right, he gave Rick a slap on the shoulder. "I'm just messin' with you, son. Sort of."

Rick ran a finger inside the collar of the tux and eyed Billy suspiciously. The bigger man may have been smiling at him, but the message was still sent loud and clear – don't

mess with his little girl's heart. Message noted and stored away. Rick sighed with relief when there was a knock at the suite's door.

He walked over to the door and opened it to find Phillip and Bill smiling back at him. Phillip surged forward and gave his best friend a big hug. "Hey, buddy!"

"Hey, where are the ladies?" Rick looked over Phillip's shoulder after the hug.

Phillip brushed past carrying his tuxedo bag and Bill followed suit. Phillip dumped the bag on the bed and turned to Rick. "Oh, you can't hear the giggling from here? They're already down there with Mindy and Vanessa having a grand old time plotting your demise, my friend."

Billy laughed behind them. When they looked at him, he was finishing off a doughnut and laughing at something on his phone.

"What's so funny?" Rick asked and came over to the food cart to get some grapes.

Billy took a drink of his coffee so he couldn't choke from laughing with a mouthful of doughnut. He held up his phone to Rick with Phillip and Bill looking over his shoulders. Everyone laughed but Rick, though he had a hard time containing his amusement. It was a picture of Josh and Reva from the top of the St. Louis arch mimicking a human version of the ball and chain with Colin holding a sign behind them saying "Welcome to the Dark Side. The cookies really aren't that great!"

"Funny!" Rick barely held back his smirk as he tossed the phone back to Billy. "So, are we going to open that bottle of champagne and start this party or what?"

Bill jumped in then. "Oh, I've got it!" He grabbed the bottle from the ice bucket. "I love doing this part."

All the guys stood behind Bill as he pulled the wrapper from around the cork and began to twist to pop it. Billy rubbed at his chest and swayed a bit on his feet.

Rick noticed and clapped him on the back. "Are you okay?"

Billy tapped his chest and burped loudly. "Much better now. Doughnuts are not my friend, I guess. They gave me some indigestion from hell."

Bill looked at his father over his shoulder. "Yeah, the doughnuts, the pies, the cookies, the cake..."

"Are you gonna pop that cork, son, or is your old man gonna have to show you how it's done?" Billy reached for the bottle as soon as it went off. Bill had jerked out of the way and ended up hitting a table lamp, shattering it into a million pieces.

All four of the men looked at each other. Finally, Phillip said what was on all of their minds. "So, um, who's going to tell Olivia about the lamp?"

A few seconds passed in silence until all of them said in unison. "Natalia."

~~*~*

The twigs and grass crunched under Jeffrey's feet stirring the mosquitoes and bugs from their resting places. As he squatted low behind a bush, finding a perfect view of the rows of white chairs, the twigs and grass crunched under his feet and stirred the mosquitoes and bugs from their resting places. Ahead, he noticed Doris Wolfe walking around pointing to different parts of the stage and set-up as she spoke with another well dressed woman.

He looked around the low hanging trees and thick bushes before standing and moving a few feet to the left. This was a better spot. He could remain comfortably standing and ready for action if needed.

He smiled a little at the almost nonexistent sound behind him. A soft clearing of a throat was far more audible than the steps the person made when coming up.

He turned. "You're pretty good at that, Anna."

She shrugged. "I learned from the best, Boss."

Jeffrey chuckled a little. "Some things can't be taught. Some things are a natural talent." A quiet moment passed before he continued, "I assume you'll be around during the festivities today."

Anna nodded and glanced through the trees. When she caught sight of Doris, her heart beat a little faster. She wondered if there would be a day when she wouldn't respond like that at the mere sight of the other woman. "I have a spot on the other side actually."

"Good. We'll have it covered from both angles then."

She continued to nod and look out over the field with the white chairs in the middle. "And Remy will be in the crowd."

Jeffrey thought that was curious. "What about Frank?"

Anna sighed and looked at him. "He still doesn't think we have anything to worry about. He's convinced that Edmund took off now that we're onto him, and we're being paranoid for nothing."

He shook his head. "I sure hope he's right. It has been awfully quiet since Jane Peterson was shot. I can see why he'd think that."

Anna leaned against a tree trunk. "Yeah, but he's been presented all of this evidence. Eleni's tried to show him proof but he keeps discounting it. Those two argue like..."

"Exes?" Jeffrey smirked.

She laughed. "Exactly." She paused for a moment, deep in thought, before continuing, "It's more than that though. I think she's digging up something more going on in the department. There's a lot of holes and missing information, misplaced evidence and lost leads."

"Corruption?" He tilted his head and looked at her closely.

"It's suspicious, Jeffrey," she admitted.

"Are you thinking Frank could have something to do with it and that's why he's so defensive?" Jeffrey turned fully to her.

She sighed and blew out a breath of air with force. "I don't think so...I don't know. Who knows? There's enough to deal with right now. That's all I know."

"True." Jeffrey turned back to see wedding guests beginning to arrive. Anna waited, silently, for him to continue. "She left with him yesterday. I watched it. I've never seen her so happy."

Anna closed her eyes, feeling the residual pain of hurting Doris flow over her. She opened her eyes to see a tear slide down his cheek. "Have you talked to anyone else here? Olivia or Ava?"

He sniffed and swiftly shook his head. "No. I can't. I...it was hard enough to look Reva in the eye knowing what I had done, to see her disappointment in me. This is the only way I can repay the debt I owe."

"You know there's really no way to fix or change what happened, right?" She fixed him with a hard look. In spite of knowing the full story from all those years ago, her anger at what happened to Olivia would still rise to the surface occasionally.

He looked out over the lawn. "I have to try. As long as a Winslow continues to breathe, I have to try."

~~*~*

ACT 3

When Olivia and Natalia got to the park, a few guests had already begun to arrive. Ahead of them, Emma walked with Leyla, while Rafe carried Francesca. In the stroller that Ava pushed were some toys and a blanket to keep the baby occupied during the

ceremony. Walking hand-in-hand to a row about halfway back, Olivia and Natalia chose a place close to a shaded area of trees to keep Francesca out of the sun.

Once they all got settled, Ava took the blanket to a flat spot beneath a large oak, where Rafe joined her with Francesca, and Leyla and Emma soon following suit. The older siblings laughed as the baby basked in the attention being doted on her. Francesca shook a toy and giggled at the noises it made.

When they realized their family was comfortable, Olivia walked with Natalia over to Doris, where their friend was instructing the musicians on where to set up. With an amused grin, Olivia spoke first, "Mornin', Doris. Taking up a new career as a wedding coordinator?"

Doris turned to her friend with a smirk. "Oh, Spencer, have you ever seen a wedding done by a straight person? Atrocious! Seriously, we put the style in lifestyle," she finished with a wink.

Olivia looked at her partner. "Is that why our banquets always look so fabulous?"

Natalia nudged her with her hip and tried not to laugh. "Maybe you should give Greg a raise. He makes you look good."

Dropping her voice to a level she knew Natalia loved, Olivia quirked an eyebrow as she edged closer to tempting lips, and whispered, "You make me look good."

Doris cleared her throat. "Um, you're not alone, ladies."

The two women chuckled as they pulled back a little. Sighing happily, Olivia glanced at her friend. "So, Doris, what's made you so chipper this morning? Did you make a grown man cry before you came over here?"

Doris hesitated a little. She was desperate to talk to someone, but she also felt a little guilty for what amounted to gossiping about Blake. Until the last year or so, she really hadn't ever had any female friends and she didn't know how to handle it. Eventually, she just gave in because if she didn't tell someone she was going to burst. She simply reasoned that she'd have to threaten Olivia and Natalia within an inch of their lives if they said a word to Blake. "Frank probably is crying right now, but I swear, it's not my fault."

Natalia dropped her mouth open in shock. "Doris Wolfe, what did you do?"

She raised her hands in defense. "Hey, Spencer, call off the Latina Lesbian Mafia there. I didn't do it. It's Blake's fault."

When both women gave her a dual "spill it" look, she waved her hands in the air. "Blake went over to Company this morning to break up with Frank."

Olivia sighed and rubbed at the bridge of her nose. She had really hoped things would work out for Frank and Blake, if for no other reason than to keep him happy and occupied.

Natalia, however, was the one to actually voice the thought. "What happened? I thought they were doing fine. Even yesterday, I saw them kiss at the game."

Doris snorted. "Yeah, but you didn't see her kiss me." The words were out before she could stop them; the belated hand over her mouth only emphasized the shocked looks on Olivia and Natalia's faces.

"Oh my God, Blake kissed you!" Natalia's voice was a little louder than she expected it to be and Doris shushed her.

"Seriously, Doris, you couldn't just pick up women at Ladies Night?" Olivia couldn't stop the amused smirk on her face.

Doris pointed at her then at Natalia. "You're one to talk. Best friends, remember?"

Natalia raised her hands. "Wait! Does this mean you and Blake...?"

Doris waved her hands again. "No, God no! It was nothing, and I'm sure has nothing to do with her breaking up with Frank. She's been frustrated with him for a while. The kiss was a...friend kiss. That's all."

The couple waited silently as Doris couldn't make eye contact with either of them, her body language giving her away. Nervously, she brushed a hand through her hair and fidgeted with the hem of her jacket with the other, blowing out a frustrated breath.

When Doris finally looked back at them, the two friends were still staring at her. "What?" she asked, exasperatedly.

Olivia shook her head. She could tell her friend was already in deep trouble. "Oh, Doris."

Doris faked a look down to her watch, eager to drop the line of conversation and ignore Olivia's pitying look. "Oh, damn, look at the time! I have a wedding to perform."

~~*~*

Frank poked at the remnants of his chicken salad sandwich and the now cold French fries on his plate as he waited for Blake to arrive. It had been a strange morning. There had been excitement and happiness in the air with the talk of Rick and Mindy's wedding, but he could also feel a strange energy around him, as well. He wanted to blame it on the constant fighting with Eleni, the way Marina flew off the handle earlier, and even the weight on him of needing to break up with Blake. Deep down inside though, none of

those reasons felt like the right one. He couldn't put his finger on it and the detective in him hated not having answers.

When the bell jingled over the door and Blake's familiar face came inside, he knew he at least had the answer to one problem.

Blake approached the back table where Frank was sitting. Pushing some hair behind her ear, Blake shifted her purse from one hand to the other. She felt awkward and exposed as if a spotlight was on her. She tried to smile but it felt forced.

Frank stood and gave Blake a kiss on the cheek. There had been a time when the stilted looks and awkward pauses were explained away with the excitement that comes from being new lovers; now, he wasn't so sure.

As neither seemed to be able to make eye contact, the long pause that followed was growing uncomfortable; each fidgeting and not sure how to start the conversation that needed to happen.

"We need to talk." They looked at each other with surprise and a little recognition as their words overlapped.

Frank gestured towards her. "Please, go ahead. Ladies first."

Blake shook her head and laughed nervously. "They say nothing good ever comes from the words 'we need to talk,' but obviously, you and I were thinking the same thing. So, maybe it is a good thing after all."

He smiled at her with understanding. "It seems like it, yeah."

She paused for a moment then reached her hand across the table to take his. "This isn't working, is it?"

Frank shook his head and looked down at their hands. He really had wanted this to be right, and he had tried. "Blake, I don't want you to think it's you. I..."

She raised her hands and feigned disgust. "Oh, please, no. Let's not do the whole 'it's not you, it's me' routine. Really, Frank, we're adults. I think we can decide if a relationship isn't working out."

He chuckled a little to himself. "We do have a lot in common though."

Blake smiled wistfully, as she tilted her head to the side. "Most friends do. I hope that's what we'll continue to be." When Frank nodded, she sighed and then continued, "But we both deserve more than that. We know what it's like to have that in our lives, and we shouldn't settle for something that's safe and comfortable because we're afraid to seek out someone who will enrich our lives more than we ever thought possible."

Frank reached over for her hand again, smiling. "You're right, and I know you'll find it."

"So will you." She smiled and squeezed his hand.

For a few moments they sat there like that, just being friends, when Frank heard a rumble from across the table. He smiled at Blake. "Hungry?"

She rolled her eyes, indulgently. "Famished!"

They ordered a large plate of nachos that they shared. Frank looked at his watch, realizing it was almost noon. "Are you going to the wedding?"

Blake finished chewing a chip before speaking, her face lighting up in a true grin as she raised a hand and pointed at herself. "Um, hopeless romantic, here. Of course!"

He tapped his watch. "You better get moving then."

She glanced at her watch and almost coughed on the food in her mouth. "Oh shit! I gotta go."

Frank stood with her, carrying the empty plate to the bar where Marina was standing. "Hang on, Blake. I'll walk you there." He caught Marina's eye. "Put it on my tab, okay?"

"Dad!"

Frank told Blake to go on ahead before turning back to his agitated daughter. "What's wrong, Marina?"

She crossed her arms and shook her head in disgust. "What's wrong with you? She broke up with you and you're still chasing after her. You did this with mom. You did this with Natalia and now Blake. Where's your self-respect?"

Frank's temper flared. "I don't know what's up with you, Marina. Maybe you're just upset over your mom being back or something, but whatever it is, dial it back a couple of notches, okay? This attitude of yours is really wearing thin."

Marina barely held back her tears as she watched her father spin on his heel and leave. With a frustrated growl, she picked up a glass and hurled it against the brick wall, watching it shatter into pieces, just like her life. She looked around the restaurant at the unusually empty tables and chairs and felt the silence close in on her.

~~*~*

"Hey, Ma, look!" Natalia turned from where she and Olivia were talking to Jonathan about his new foreman job with Lewis Construction when Rafe called to her.

As Natalia got closer, she saw Francesca crawling over the blanket. One hand went to her mouth as tears welled up and the other reached for Olivia who was at her side, smiling. "Oh, our Sweet Pea. She's growing up."

Olivia let go of her partner's hand to wrap an arm around her slim waist. She couldn't stop the huge smile that was plastered on her face and the sheer joy she felt at seeing Natalia so content and happy.

Looking over Natalia's shoulder, Olivia noticed Frank and Blake approach their group. After a perfunctory greeting with them, however, she noticed Blake head off to find Doris. Tucking that little bit of information away to needle Doris with later, Olivia smirked; her friend was definitely not off the hook from their discussion on whatever was happening with Blake.

"So, what's going on here?" Frank wondered why everyone was gathered around.

Natalia proudly stated. "Oh, nothing major. Francesca just crawled for the first time, that's all."

Frank smiled happily and reached down to lift up his daughter. "Oh, yay, that's my big girl!" He gave Francesca a big kiss on the cheek and the little girl squealed in delight.

"Hey, everybody!" The group parted to show Remy with Christina and Clayton.

Frank clapped his fellow officer on the shoulder. "Hey! The proud Papa!" He tried to get Francesca to wave to the smaller baby, but she turned away and buried her face in his shoulder.

While Christina showed Clayton off to Olivia and Natalia, Remy made his way around the group until he got to Ava, who had stood as he came closer.

"Hey, I hear you're moving back to town." Remy mentioned nervously and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Ava nodded and tucked some hair behind her ear. "Yeah, moving truck should be here tomorrow."

A few silent moments stretched between them until Ava looked over where Christina had sat down on the blanket with Emma and the others.

"He's beautiful, Remy. He looks just like..." Ava swallowed around the lump in her throat.

"I know. I almost called him Max the other day." Remy couldn't keep the guilty sound out of his voice and Ava looked at her ex.

“He’s healthy, right?” Her forehead creased together in worry.

Remy quickly nodded his head. “Oh yeah...yeah. Perfectly healthy.”

He swallowed hard as Ava’s saddened face looked away. He had wanted to tell her about the little things – the slight fever he had this morning or the way his stomach would hurt and make him cry. Those little things that kept him up at night unable to sleep for worry. He knew she’d understand, but this wasn’t the time or the place for that. However, when Blake came around letting everyone know that it was time to take their seats, the moment was lost. Ava didn’t look back as she took a seat near the end of the row next to Rafe and Francesca, and Christina was oblivious to his distraction as he silently followed her to a row.

~~*~*

The grass crunched under Alex’s feet as she walked hand-in-hand with Fletcher along the path to the small gray cobblestone church. It was a quaint and quiet little place that the clerk at the hotel’s front desk had told them about the day before, as they made plans to finish their last day in Germany. According to the clerk, the church was a popular spot for weddings because of its romantic medieval style.

Fletcher pushed hard on the heavy solid oak doors that were stained a rich woodsy brown, and guided Alex through them.

A hand went up to her mouth as she held back a tearful smile. “Oh, Fletcher, darling! This is stunning!”

“Just like you.” He brushed the back of his hand over her cheek. “I love you, Alex.”

“And I love you.” She kissed him softly before taking his hand to spend a few moments wandering around the church looking at the beautiful stained glass and gothic architecture before leaving.

The walk back to the hotel was peaceful and leisurely. The clerk smiled at them upon their return and asked how they liked the church. After Alex raved about it, they turned to go to the elevators.

The clerk called to them. “Be sure to tell your friends and family back home to visit us. We already seem quite popular with the residents of Springfield.”

Alex frowned at him and went back to the desk with Fletcher close behind. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, I was sure it was a word-of-mouth thing since another couple from Springfield stayed here recently.” The young man behind the desk seemed unaffected by the scowling faces in front of him.

Fletcher leaned on the desk, nonchalantly. “Really? Do you remember their names?”

The clerk pulled a book out from under the desk and flipped through some pages. After a minute or so of searching, he paused with a flourish. “Ah ha! Yes, though I doubt it was their real names. It seems they registered under the universal name of Mr. and Mrs. Smith.”

Alex looked at Fletcher as she tapped her nails on the desk. “Do you recall what they looked like?”

The young man smiled, pleased to be able to help with more information. “Oh yes, they were a very handsome couple. Both were tall, blonde, and good-looking.”

“Did the woman have long, straight hair?” Alex pushed a little further but made sure to ask in a way that was non-threatening.

“Why, yes, she did! I assume you know them then?” He smiled at the older couple.

Alex laughed. “Actually, we do. Small world, isn’t it?”

The clerk laughed with them. “Indeed. When you see them, be sure to tell them Lukas thanks them for their business and to visit us again.”

“We most definitely will, Lukas. Thank you.” Alex turned with Fletcher at her side, whispering as they headed to the elevators. “Interesting.”

~~*~*

After Blake had corralled the attendees to their seats, she glanced over at Doris; the other woman had been thumbing through her notes, refreshing her memory on the order of events Mindy had outlined. Blake was momentarily distracted as Natalia moved closer and smiled at her, touching her shoulder as she passed by then heading to her seat. Returning her attention to Doris, she noticed the other woman trying to adjust the collar on her blouse, unable to get it inside the lapel of her jacket. Blake deftly moved close to Doris, and swirling her finger in a circle, she spoke softly, “Turn around.”

When Doris turned and lifted her hair out of the way, Blake slid her fingers beneath the collar to fix it, grazing the digits over the soft skin of the other woman’s neck. At Doris’s soft gasp, Blake smiled to herself, slowing down the process of actually fixing the material, and she allowed her fingers to caress the skin purposefully.

Doris cleared her throat and moved away, a light blush coloring her cheeks. “Thanks.”

Blake tilted her head to the side and smiled. "You're welcome."

"Not just for...", Doris gestured to her collar and then out to the crowd, clearly flustered and unable to finish her sentence, "But also for..."

The other woman laughed softly as she replied, "You're still welcome, but you don't have to thank me, Doris. You're my friend, and I like helping you." Blake watched as Doris looked down and swallowed.

When surprisingly tender eyes glanced back up at her, Blake's heart skipped a beat. "I like you, too."

The moment was broken when Doris's phone chirped and she glanced down at the message. Looking back at Blake, she spoke again, "The limo's at the corner."

Blake nodded at her and walked to the front row of seats. Doris noticed she didn't go back to where Frank was sitting in the back with Remy and Christina. "You're not sitting with Frank?"

Blake smirked at her, thankful that Rick and Mindy kept the seating informal so she could remain near her friend. "I would if we were together, but we're not." She was even more amused as she watched Doris try to fight a smile from appearing on her face. As she took her seat, the words Doris had spoken a few minutes earlier rang in her ears. She reasoned that Doris liking her could mean many things, but the flash of fire in Doris's eyes and the way it affected her, meant something more intense than bonding over manicures. The most interesting thing for Blake though, was the realization that the prospect didn't bother her. Doris was a fascinating, intense, and passionate woman. Aside from gender, Doris was exactly the type of person she would have been attracted to in the past. Sighing, Blake leaned back in her chair, and let her eyes wander over in Doris's direction as the mayor waited on the stage for the wedding party to arrive. Truth was, the package wasn't all that bad if Blake had to be completely honest. Not bad at all.

~~*~*

The limousine pulled up to the walkway that led down to the lawn. Rick and Mindy sat anxiously in the plush leather seats holding hands as the music began to play. The doors of the car opened and Billy and Vanessa exited first, followed by Lizzie and Bill.

Phillip waited until Bill and Lizzie got to the first row of seats before reaching across the expanse to slap Rick on the shoulder. "Ready, buddy?"

Rick turned to smile at Mindy. "You betcha."

The tall man nodded to his friend and exited the limo. He reached down for Beth's hand, guiding her out of the car, and then escorted her down the aisle. As he walked, his hand brushed against his pocket – his very empty pocket. His heart sank as he swiftly reached his hand inside and came up with nothing. He reached into his pants pocket, again nothing.

Beth turned and saw the panicked look on his face as she moved to their respective sides of the aisles. "Honey, what's wrong?"

The wedding march music started as soon as he spoke. "I forgot the rings."

Both Rick and Mindy were smiling until they saw the upset looks on their best friend's faces. When they came to a stop in front of them, Rick looked at Phillip. "What did you do?"

"I, um...I'm sorry. I forgot the rings." Phillip closed his eyes and braced for Rick and Mindy's response. All he got was silence. When he opened his eyes, he saw Mindy pointing back at the limo.

Rick crossed his arms. "I suggest you tip the driver to go fast. Oh, and Phillip, don't ever make fun of my forgetfulness again."

"Right. Okay...be right back." He ran as fast as he could to the limo which took off on squealing wheels.

Everyone enjoyed a chuckle over it, but Lizzie was none too pleased at her father. She kicked one of the hospital's Board of Directors out of a chair and sat down. Mindy and Rick went to stand under some trees in an attempt to stay cool. Several others stood to get refreshments for the same reason.

Emma turned to her mommies, suddenly remembering something. "Ma, did you bring my camera?"

Natalia reached into her purse. "Yeah, baby, I did. Why do you need it now?"

Emma rolled her eyes. "To get a picture of you and Mom, of course!" When the grown-ups didn't move right away, she motioned with her hands for them to move. "Come on!"



Olivia groaned. “Emma, why can’t you take it here?”

“Because it’ll look better under the trees. More...romantic.” The little girl smiled sweetly at her parents.

Natalia stood and took Olivia’s hand. “Come on, you. She has your stubborn streak, so we might as well give in now.”

Olivia followed her, smiling. “And she has your charm so I’m a goner.”

Natalia pulled her to her under the large oak tree where they had been with Francesca earlier and put an arm around her waist. Olivia smiled down at her partner before having her attention drawn away by her daughter calling out, “Say cheese.”

Emma looked down at the image on the digital screen and declared it, “Beautiful.”

Olivia ran a gentle hand down Natalia’s back, making her lover curl and sink into her. When warm brown eyes looked up at her, she melted a little inside. “Yes, she is.”

The brunette smirked and stood on her toes to give Olivia a soft kiss. “Mmmm, I think she got the charm from you.”

~~*~*

The midday sun was becoming increasingly suffocating as the crowd waited for Phillip’s return with the rings. Most guests had moved to the shade under the trees. Frank leisurely strolled away from Olivia and Natalia after playing with his daughter for a few

minutes. From across the crowd he caught a glimpse of Blake talking to Doris. She seemed happy and relaxed, and as he stopped and thought for a moment, he realized he was happy, too.

A buzzing in his pocket distracted him, and he pulled out his phone and read a text from Marina, *'Company is getting slammed. Need help.'* Frank sighed and typed out a reply, *"Be there in a few."*

As he slipped his phone into his pocket, he had to admit to being both annoyed with Marina, and grateful that she got him away from the wedding. He moved down the sidewalk, not really in a hurry to either leave the wedding or to go to Company. Despite being relieved that the breakup with Blake went well, it was still hard to sit at a wedding and watch everyone else get their happy ending.

Lost in his own thoughts, Frank didn't see the limo speed around the corner. He nearly stepped into the crosswalk when the blaring horn made him jump back.

~~*~*

Jeffrey was so focused as he walked the perimeter of the tree line around the park, that he didn't notice the buzzing mosquitoes incessantly biting at him. Somewhere across the park he was assured that Anna was doing the same thing.

The one good thing about being here and focused on Edmund was that he wasn't focused on Reva. His self-deprecating mind wasn't wondering what she was doing with Josh. He wasn't imagining her smiling and happy in another man's arms or thinking about Josh making his son laugh. This was the life he had chosen, the path he had willingly decided to follow as a young man back on San Cristobel. The mistakes and pain caused by his life on San Cristobel and his connections to the Winslow family were still a debt to repay. Olivia, Ava, Reva, Colin, and everyone else he cared about deserved to have a life free of the fear Edmund projected onto those Jeffrey loved.

This wasn't a fight he could give up on now. He had to see it through to the end. He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't immediately hear the rustling of leaves behind him. He swung around reaching for his gun as his heart pounded from the rush of adrenaline, but there was nothing there. Looking left and right and remaining perfectly still, all he could hear was the wind in the trees and the sudden loud buzzing of mosquitoes. One landed on his arm and he swatted at it quickly – the blood of the insect oozing between his fingers.

~~*~*

Phillip scrambled out of the limo and ran up the path waving his hands and yelling. "Got 'em!"

The crowd filed back to their seats as the musicians played the Jeopardy theme song causing everyone to laugh. Phillip gave a pointed but amused look to his best friend.

Rick merely shrugged his shoulders. "I couldn't resist."

Once the crowd settled and everyone took their places, Doris raised her hands and looked at Phillip. "Are we ready now?"

He gave her a thumbs-up sign. "We're good."

"Excellent," Doris said as she looked out over the crowd gathered and began the ceremony. "Ladies and gentlemen, family and friends, we are gathered here today to witness the joining of this man and woman in matrimony."

~~*~*

When Frank opened the door to the nearly empty restaurant, he stopped short, confused. When he noted that Marina wasn't even at the counter, he nodded to the two customers before picking up some dirty plates from a table and heading around the bar to go into the kitchen. Spotting Henry on the floor playing with a wooden spoon first, he turned and saw Marina washing one of the boy's sippy cups at the sink.

"What's going on, Marina?" His quiet entrance startled the redhead and she jumped. She swung a soapy scrub brush around before continuing her cleaning on the cup. "It's was really weird. There was this crazy rush of people and then they just all seemed to leave at once. It was a bunch of old people, too. Guess it was one of those tour groups." She shrugged and looked at her perplexed father, who was scratching his head. "I'm sorry that I pulled you away from the wedding. I'm sure you could get back in time if you wanted to."

He waved his hand in dismissal. "No, that's fine." He walked over to his grandson and squatted down to ruffle his hair. "It's miserably hot out there. I think I'll just stay here."

She smiled at him. "Good, we can spend some quality time together." Then she changed the subject. "Have you heard from Grandpa and Lillian?"

Frank stood up and went to the fridge for a beer. "He called me when I was heading over to the wedding and said that Lillian still wasn't feeling great. She must have gotten too much sun at the park yesterday."

She smiled at her father. "It's cute. Two old folks in love."

He smirked and nodded as he took a swig of his beer.

~~*~*

Anna rubbed at her tired eyes and refocused on the scene in front of her. The long expanse of lawn shimmered in the blistering sun, and not for the first time did she wonder about the sanity of anyone who would have an outdoor summer wedding. Her dark eyes settled on Doris as her ex stood confidently before the couple and crowd, her hands clasped in front of her as she spoke from memory.

Anna's eyes drifted around the crowd to watch for any one out of place, and then to the tree line opposite her, looking for movement. Somewhere over there was Jeffrey in a similar state of mind, intently keeping his focus on those he cared about. She scanned the crowd again and her eyes landed on Doris's friend Blake. The redhead's eyes were trained on Doris and a soft smile was on her face. Anna wondered if she imagined the slight flicker of Blake's eyes taking in the full length of Doris's body.

She clenched her fist, nails digging into her palm, as a wave of illogical jealousy came over her. Shaking her head and refocusing, she pushed away the thought. After the lies and deceit, no matter how well-intentioned, Anna knew she didn't have a right to want more from Doris. The fact that they were even able to indirectly work together was a miracle anyway. Doris could have used the opportunity and her power to fire Anna on the spot, but she didn't. Deep down, she knew that Doris still cared for her, but she also knew that they'd probably never be the same. It didn't mean that Anna didn't hope and wish for more though. She wasn't sure if she'd ever get over Doris, but she also wasn't sure if it was right to hold on to someone who didn't and probably wouldn't ever trust her again.

Sighing, she rubbed at her forehead. She couldn't tell where Doris was in the ceremony from where she was located, but she hoped it would be over soon. A splash in the lake behind her made Anna jump and she turned with wide eyes as she pulled her weapon. Staying absolutely quiet, she couldn't see any movement except the ripples in the water, and the only sound was the low mumble coming from Doris as she led the ceremony. Letting out the breath she had been holding, she turned back around to focus on the situation at hand.

The shattering crack of a gun being discharged caused a sudden silence, and it drew Anna's attention to the hooded figure that calmly walked up the path towards the now frightened crowd.

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ACT 4

Jeffrey crashed through the bushes that obscured his hiding place as soon as he heard the first shot. From the opposite direction, he could see Anna in a full sprint with her gun drawn. From the back of the crowd, people were already beginning to scatter as others screamed. Even from this distance, he could hear screams abruptly ended as bullets hit their targets.

The hooded figure walked slowly and methodically up the aisle between the rows of seats. He'd carefully scan and then pick a target that would drop to the ground within a split second.

Jeffrey knew the seconds were flying by, but it felt like he was in a horrible dream where he couldn't move. His legs felt heavy and his panic increased the harder he tried to move faster. Even Anna seemed to be moving in slow motion.

His attention was split between the shooter, Anna's proximity, and the location of Ava and Olivia. He caught a quick glimpse of Rafe shoving Ava out of her chair as they ran for cover.

Jeffrey dove behind a bush as gunfire ricocheted off the small stage as he approached. Several people dove over the stage seeking cover and someone tackled the mayor rolling safely off into the bushes. He didn't have time to pay attention to who it was. There was no time to waste. He checked that the safety was off on his gun and rose to his feet taking aim at the shooter approaching.

~~*~*

The first thing Anna thought about was Doris. It wasn't the fact that her fears of Edmund's imminent arrival were being confirmed with deadly proof; it was if Doris was okay. There were only two images that she saw at that moment – the shooter, who had to be Edmund, walking calmly between the rows of chairs firing on the audience, and Doris, frozen on stage in fear.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she struggled to run faster to reach Doris before it was too late. Her eyes flipped to Doris, then back to Edmund. His gun pointed forward in a direct line for Doris.

Anna knew she had to have screamed; she felt like she was screaming even though she couldn't hear her own voice over the rushing of blood in her ears. In the instant that Edmund's gun discharged and her eyes flitted to the stage, Doris was gone and Anna skidded to a stop in terror as the crowds rushed around her seeking a hiding place. She raised her gun and screamed for Edmund to freeze as he jumped to the stage. Faster than she could react, he fired off a round at her, hitting her in the shoulder and knocking her to the ground.

~~*~*

For Phillip, the instinct to reach for Beth and Peyton was second nature when he heard the shots fired. He grabbed Rick by the lapel of his jacket with a free hand, after pushing Beth to run with Peyton and yelled for him to get Mindy. Bill bumped his father and their wives along with the frantic crowd to the food tables off to the side.

Phillip waved his hand and pushed everyone ahead of him. "This way...go, go, go! Get down!" He flipped the long metal table on its side as they crouched down behind it.

When a bullet hit the table, the group jumped and Beth huddled closer to him with Peyton in her arms. He whispered in his wife's ear. "It's okay. Just don't move. It's okay." He closed his eyes tight and chanted it like a prayer. He hadn't considered himself the praying type but intense moments of fear would make anyone change their behaviors.

Rick grabbed his shoulder. "What do we do? We have to do something."

"The only thing we have to do is stay alive. Just stay here. Don't move!" He looked at his friends and family and begged them to follow his lead with his eyes. He looked at Lizzie several feet away as she curled up against Bill. He feared how this would affect her and the baby, and he found himself praying some more as his mind went to Emma. A momentary thought passed through his mind of standing to see if he could find Emma, but as bullets hit the tree overhead, raining down leaves and debris on them, he tucked that thought away.

Time seemed to move at a crawl. Phillip could hear the gunfire and the frightened people all around him. He clung tight to Beth and fought his instinct to charge into the battle; he hated feeling helpless against a threat. It had always been his nature to fight and protect those he loved. To sit idly by while a madman opened fire on the town was not acceptable to him.

A frantic arm crossing in front of him startled Phillip from his musings. Once his eyes caught Vanessa's and he saw the raw fear echoed back to him, he turned his focus to where she grabbed onto Billy's hand. The elder Lewis's face was ghostly pale and his other hand clutched the left side of his chest. Phillip immediately recognized what was wrong, and he turned and grabbed hold of Rick's tuxedo to get his attention.

Pulling Rick in front of him, Phillip shuffled on his knees out of the way, as the doctor crouched down next to Billy. Rick ripped Billy's tux shirt open and leaned down to listen. He looked up briefly to Vanessa, who was cradling Billy's head and crying, then to Phillip.

"His heart stopped. I need your help."

~~*~*

At first, Blake thought the noise was firecrackers, but then she saw the look of terror cross Doris's face and people began to scream as the popping sound came closer. The moment seemed strangely surreal. It was like watching a movie of someone else's life; one of those moments in the horror movie where you argue with the heroine for being stupid at putting herself in mortal danger. Why didn't she run away or call someone? Why did she hesitate when she should have just gotten away from the bad guy?

That was how Blake was feeling about herself at the moment. She was the stupid heroine in her own movie. She'd never understand what possessed her to do it, but

when she saw the wood from the stage Doris was on begin to fly apart and splinter from bullets, she jumped out of her seat and into the direct line of the mayor, tackling her to the hard surface and rolling off into the bushes.

Blake landed on top of Doris. She had no time to think about what she was doing, or the position they were in. She wrapped her arms around the other woman to protect her from getting hurt as bullets and debris continued to fly around them.

~~*~*

A cold sweat broke out all over Rafe as soon as he heard the gunshots. He pulled Francesca close and reached automatically for a rifle that wasn't there. Without a weapon, he felt defenseless and instinct kicked in so that he sought out a place to take cover.

He saw the frozen look in Ava's eyes and shoved at her. "That tree, go!" He raced behind her with Francesca in his arms. The trio scrambled behind the oak tree where they had played with Francesca earlier. It was barely large enough to block them, but it would have to do.

The adrenaline was pumping through his veins and he felt the familiar tunneling of his vision that always happened in combat. He now recognized the physical reaction for what it was. Often when he had become angry - whether at Gus, his mom, or Olivia - he had reacted the same way. However, his training had allowed him to use the response to his benefit and to hone his fight or flight response on the field. Instead of panic, he now focused on his immediate proximity and anything he could use as a weapon. He growled in frustration when he realized nothing was handy. He was helpless to stop the attack being unleashed on his family and friends.

Pulling Ava and Francesca closer to him, he looked back over his shoulder. Almost everyone had either been hit or hidden. He surveyed the grounds for the rest of his family. Leyla and Emma were hiding about twenty feet from him behind a bush. Leyla was holding on tight to her niece as Emma, who was visibly shaking, buried her face in her aunt's neck. Olivia was waving her hand and screaming, and that was when he saw her. His mom was crouched between a row of chairs and covering her head with her arms.

The gunman had reached the stage and pounced on it as if it needed to be conquered. He flipped his hood back and waved the gun out ahead of him then pulled another from under his sweatshirt. Rafe buried his feet into the ground, ready to make a run for his mother as soon as the gunman turned away from his line of sight. He started to hand off Francesca to Ava, but when he turned back, he saw Olivia running towards his mom.

~~*~*

One of the last things Natalia remembered was inching closer to Olivia as the older woman draped her arm across the chair behind her. She glanced up into smiling green eyes before they were drawn away to look behind them. Natalia saw the confusion on Olivia's face transform to an emotion rarely seen in her partner - fear.

Olivia jumped to her feet and tugged on her hand. She saw Olivia screaming at her, but she couldn't make her feet move. A bullet shattered a wooden chair next to them making them jerk apart. Natalia landed flat on her back with a hard thud. Above her, she caught a glimpse of the gunman as he passed by her. When she wasn't in his line of sight, she scrambled to her knees and that's when she saw it.

Olivia's gun. Shiny and bright like a beacon in the harsh afternoon sun. She didn't think about how it got there and really didn't question it. All she could think was that she had to get to it.

As soon as her hand landed on the warm metal, another bullet whizzed past her. She quickly tucked the gun under her and buried her face in the cool grass underneath her. She was sure if the gunman had seen her move that he'd shoot her. So, she waited and, when nothing happened, she looked up. Beyond the row of seats, she could see Olivia with Emma and Leyla. Olivia was waving frantically for her to make a run for it. Where was the rest of her family?

She looked around and finally spotted Rafe holding Francesca, and she thought she caught a glimpse of Ava just beyond his shoulder.

With her heart feeling like it was going to beat out of her chest, she eased her head around to where the gunman stood on the stage. Recognition struck her in an instant, and she realized the fear that everyone in town had spoken of had come true; Edmund Winslow was on a rampage and he held a large portion of the town hostage with his guns.

She swallowed down her fear and waited. Certainly someone would come to help. Looking back up at her partner, she noticed Olivia watching Edmund. Olivia held up a hand and after a few minutes passed, she waved for her to run towards her. She could tell Olivia, someone not used to inaction or waiting for reinforcements, was getting frustrated, but she couldn't seem to make herself move from the spot on the ground. Natalia could hear voices; a female voice from one side and then a male voice that sounded a lot like Jeffrey, from the other. Edmund said something back, but Natalia wasn't worried about that. All she could do was watch as Olivia's panic rose. The older woman ran her fingers through her hair, and if she was standing, she'd probably be pacing.

Instead, Natalia could see the moment that Olivia made a decision. The other woman sneered menacingly from behind the bush, preparing her body and mind to act. Natalia wanted to call out to Olivia to stop, but she couldn't without endangering her life. A rush of panic and fear propelled Natalia up from the ground to reach for Olivia's outstretched

hand. They made contact and Olivia clutched at her hand fiercely to drag her back behind the bush to safety.

Olivia held her close then pulled back to check her for injuries. "Are you okay?"

Natalia nodded quickly, tears soaking her face with relief. "I'm fine. Terrified, but fine. What do we do?"

Olivia pulled everyone closer and whispered to all of them. "Just stay perfectly still. Don't make any noise or draw any attention to our location. I think I heard Anna and Jeffrey earlier so they're here, and even though I haven't seen him, Remy's somewhere."

A realization came to Natalia. "What about Frank?"

Olivia shook her head. "I don't know. I haven't seen him since the ceremony started." An idea came to her then and she smiled, "The wonder of technology. I'll text him and he can call in the cavalry. Where's my purse?"

Natalia watched as Olivia searched their immediate area. When she found it and pulled it open, she realized her gun was missing. "Where's my...?"

The question was stolen from Olivia as a shrill cry pierced the silence. Both women looked over their shoulders to see Rafe struggling to silence Francesca.

Edmund's evil laugh and Francesca's cries created a horrid chorus of perversity mixed with innocence. "Well, what do we have here?"

In an instant, Olivia and Natalia made eye contact, and before Olivia could react and pull Natalia back, she saw her partner shake her dark head and stand to her feet, pointing the gun that Natalia had been hiding at her side at Edmund Winslow.

Natalia stepped out a few feet to ensure she stood between Edmund and her children. Her raised hand was surprisingly steady, and her eyes focused in on the cold emptiness in Edmund's eyes. She could hear Olivia begging her to get down, but she couldn't – no, she wouldn't – let anyone hurt her family.

In a voice that was far calmer than she felt, she asked one simple question of Edmund. "Why?"

He tilted his head a little and flashed a shockingly charming smile. "Have you ever lost a child?" She shook her head. "I have. Do you need to lose a child in order to understand the lengths you'd go to in order to right a wrong?"

Natalia shook her head. "No, I don't. I know exactly what I'd do."

He smirked at her, as his finger twitched on the trigger. "And that is?"

"Anything." In the split second it took for him to pull the trigger, Natalia read the evil intent in his eyes and fired her gun.

Falling to her knees, the sound of gunfire ricocheting around her finally made sense, and all she could hear was Olivia screaming, "NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!"

TO BE CONTINUED...NEXT SEASON.

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