

Beginnings

By Wonko

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 energises. 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."

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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."

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

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.*

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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 early!” 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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

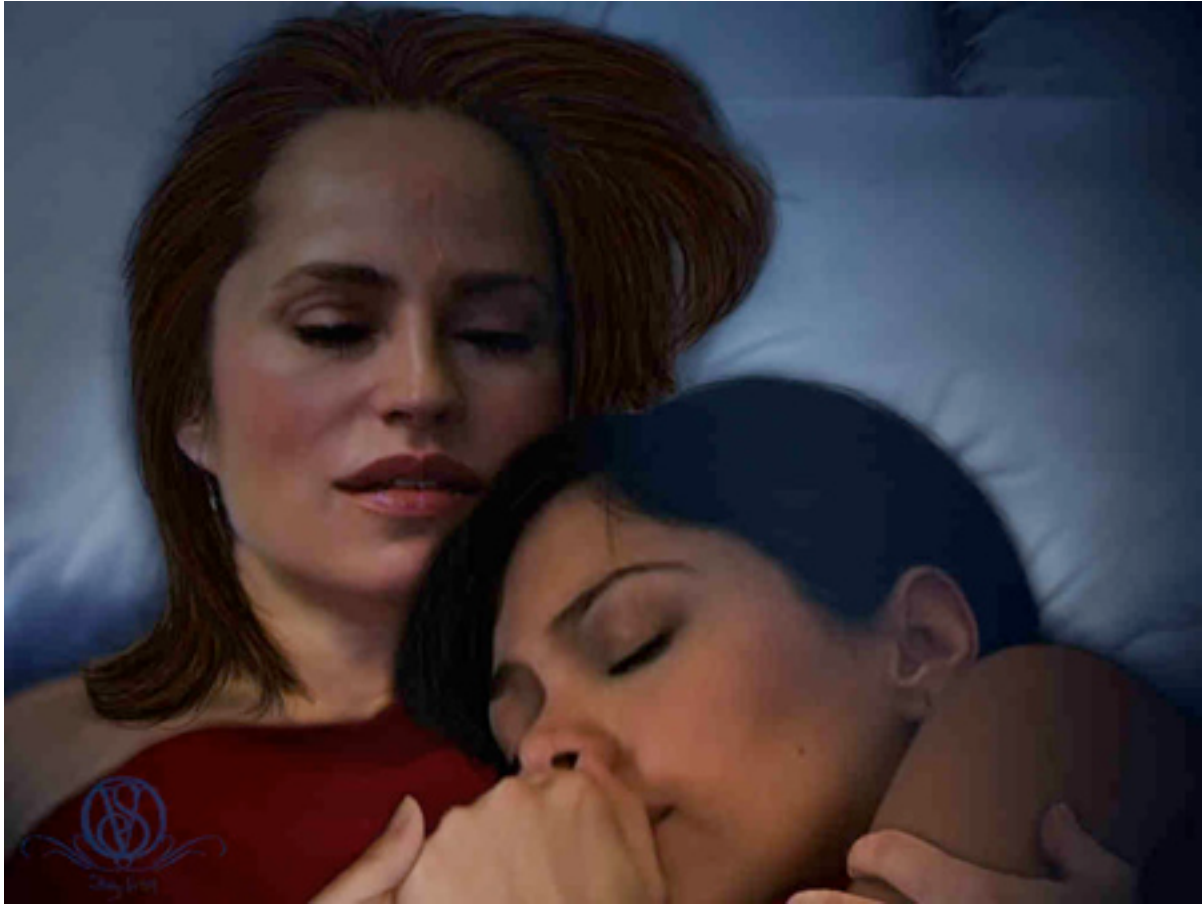
Olivia stroked her hair. "I love you," she said softly. "And you were perfect. Please, don't ever worry about that." Natalia glanced up and immediately got lost in Olivia's eyes. A slow smile spread across her face.

"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.

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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.

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To Be Continued in Episode Two...