

A Helping Hand

By ladyvictory

ACT 1

Doris Wolfe was late. She knew it even before she glanced down at her watch as she slipped silently, and hopefully stealthily, into her office and ran smack-dab into her one o'clock appointment. Her very impatient, very irritated one o'clock appointment. Her very impatient, very irritated, very *gay*, one o'clock appointment. Wincing, she chastised herself; she had no way of knowing if the tall, thin man sitting in her office tapping his obviously pricey leather ankle-boots was gay. There were plenty of men who liked tan suede heeled footwear... and Burberry cardigan sweater vests with matching bags... and pink button-down shirts tucked half-in, half-out of their designer jeans... Nope, this man could definitely be straight. More than anyone, she should've known better than to judge a book by its cover; sometimes the inside was not at all what was pictured on the front.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They tell me you’re good at what you do, Mr. Graham,” she said, doubtfully.

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

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

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“Hmmm... what about this one?” Natalia asked, holding a dark frock up against her body. Olivia winced but said nothing. She wanted desperately to scream that the sorry excuse for a dress wouldn’t do her lover’s body justice, but knew that in the end, it really didn’t matter. She would find Natalia beautiful no matter what she wore for Halloween, even if it was a piece of cloth that made a potato sack look like designer fashion.

“No, huh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Frank chuckled, discarding the remaining costumes on the chair.

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

"Happy Halloween!" Natalia and Emma said together, giggling.

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

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

"And that's why you had the biggest birthday party that any nine year old has ever had," Olivia countered, rolling her eyes. "Besides, you'll have so many sweets tonight you won't know what to do with them. That should be enough."

"Ooooookay..." the girl sighed, dragging her feet as they made their way to the counter.

"Jeez; where does she get this from?" her mother grumbled, shaking her head.

"I believe that would be you," Natalia replied playfully, linking their arms together. Emma turned back and looked at her non-existent watch impatiently. "Yup, definitely you."

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Doris Wolfe felt the other woman's stare like an accusation, burning into her skin through the flimsy protection of her clothing. "Look, Jamanda... it's nothing *personal*, all right?" the older woman tried, raising her hands in a placating manner and approaching her agitated lover as if she were a cornered animal. Jamanda only glared, and for a moment Doris feared for the objects on her coffee table; she was beginning to reevaluate the wisdom of having this particular discussion in her home, near her fragile, mostly beloved collection of possessions.

"I just don't think--"

"*You* don't think, Doris, or... or that *man*?" the younger woman interrupted pointedly, even as she hugged her middle defensively. "Because it seems like not that long ago you were introducing me to your daughter, and-and taking me to weddings as your date. So, please, explain to me how this is *your* idea?"

"Look," the Mayor tried again, blowing out a frustrated breath. "I'm not breaking up with you - Jesus that sounds so juvenile."

"Juvenile? Now I'm being immature?"

"No, damn it, that's not what I meant! Look, I'm not *ending* things between us, okay? I just, I think we need to... slow down a bit."

"How much more *slow* can we get? Christ, it took us this long to move forward from secret meetings in hotel rooms and quickies in my car." The older woman had the good grace to blush at that, coughing to cover her embarrassment. "We finally get past all your fear, and... what, we have to go back to sneaking around? Because some man thinks I'm bad for your image?" Jamanda spat, flames practically shooting from her eyes as she paced jerkily along the length of the room.

"Not sneaking around, sweetie, just..." The blue-eyed woman tried again, her voice a little hoarse with the desperation of wanting her lover to understand. "Andre says I need to focus on making myself more approachable, presenting myself as 'Doris Wolfe, woman of the people.' He thinks pushing my sexuality into the public sphere will alienate large portions of the more conservative voting demographic, at least, for now."

Jamanda made a disgusted sound at the back of her throat and rolled her eyes, but said nothing. Doris took this as a good sign and moved forward to gently grasp her lover's upper arms, pulling their bodies together so she could embrace her loosely. After a few moments of resisting, the bartender relaxed into her, sighing.

“It won’t be forever, all right?” Doris began again softly. “He says that after a few months, maybe six, I can start introducing-” She was quickly interrupted.

“Six months!” the younger woman exclaimed, breaking free and stepping back. “You can’t be serious!” Dark eyes flashed, and the Mayor felt her own temper flaring.

“I don’t think a little patience is too much to ask for here.”

“There’s a difference between patience and denial, Doris.”

“I’m not denying anything, *Jamanda*,” the politician ground out through clenched teeth.

“He tells me this is the right move for me to make professionally, and I don’t see the harm. He’s the best at what he does.”

They stared at each other silently, for long moments, before Jamanda finally spoke. When she did, her voice was soft and low, pleading. “Doris, I... I can’t go back to being a dirty little secret...”

“You’re not! It’s not about you, I promise. I just-I need to start thinking about the election *now*, start assuring the vote.”

“Doris,” Jamanda tried again. She moved forward, taking the other woman’s hands in her own, bringing them to her face and kissing the knuckles. “What we have, it could be something... something real, meaningful...”

“I think so too! That’s why, after a few months, we can start slow, attend events together, be seen in public...”

The younger woman sighed, eyes filling with tears. “I can’t take hiding who I am, who *we* are together anymore. We won’t survive the six months, baby. I’ll get restless, stifled, and you’ll get resentful, and it’ll end... so badly,” she murmured, whispering the last words. It sounded almost as if she had done this all before.

“But, I have to think about my career,” Doris insisted, seeing their relationship curling and blackening, but not wanting to believe this was it.

Jamanda let go of her hands and moved back, shaking her head sadly. “I won’t pretend not to know you when I see you in public, if we’re together. Not when I want you to hold me, not when I want to kiss you.”

“Are you forcing me to choose, you or my job?” The Mayor asked, voice suddenly bland and steady, almost pleasant; it was like the calm before the storm. Jamanda laughed, though the sound was hollow.

“No, you’ve already made the choice. I’m just making you see that.” She walked forward, into Doris’s personal space. Sliding a hand up, she cupped Doris’ cheek, urging her closer, until they were breathing the same air. “Remember, this was *your* choice,” she whispered, leaning forward and kissing her lover slowly, sweetly. Pulling back, she swallowed hard, fighting against the tears. “Goodbye.”

And before Doris could respond, she was gone.

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In the end, after another half hour of shopping without luck, they had unanimously decided to call it quits and go home, still having a few important chores to get done before the evening came. Knowing her lover would be disappointed about not dressing up, Olivia had promised her that next year they would go shopping early. Natalia had just smiled enigmatically and said she would work with what she had. When they had returned home, the smaller woman had disappeared into the bedroom stealthily, chasing her lover away and down the stairs when she tried to come in. “Time to make pumpkin cookies!” she had announced, distracting both her girls successfully.

“How long is this gonna take?” Emma asked impatiently, bouncing in place at the end of the counter. She had insisted on wearing her Halloween costume all day, and thus had been banished to the opposite side of the room when the orange food coloring had been introduced to the project. To make up for that, she had been promised a cookie from the first batch.

“Not too much longer, sweetie,” Natalia replied for what must have been the hundredth time in the last five minutes, her patience seemingly infinite. Olivia observed the scene, hidden from view in the doorway, amused by her daughter’s eagerness and enjoying the normalcy of the moment the rest of her family was sharing. Her family; even the thought of it made her feel warm and relaxed.

“This is taking forever!” Emma groaned, shuffling from foot to foot, the movements causing the ivory-white feathers on her back to rustle.

The sound of Duran Duran’s “Hungry Like the Wolf” pulled Olivia back to reality, and she smirked like she did every time the ring-tone played. Doris would probably roll her eyes and grumble if she knew, and the thought of her friend’s reaction always made her chuckle.

Moving into the living room, she retrieved her phone from the coffee table and pressed the green button. "What can I do for you, Madam Mayor?"

"Olivia..." came the soft, hesitant voice, and immediately the hotelier was serious, a frown creasing her forehead.

"Doris? Are you all right?"

"I... I'm fine," was the response, but the thickness of the other woman's voice made it obvious she had been crying, and Olivia felt her heart clench.

"What's wrong?"

"I... she... Jamanda... she left me, Olivia..."

Olivia's breath caught in her throat. "Crap..."

"Yeah... Do you...can I talk to you?"

"Uh... yeah, sure; just gimme a sec."

Walking back into the kitchen, Olivia covered the phone with one hand and motioned to Natalia with her head. The smaller woman wiped her hands on a dish towel and made her way over. "Doris just got dumped," she whispered without preamble.

"Oh no!" the dark-haired woman gasped, hand flying up to cover her mouth.

"Yeah, I'm going to take this upstairs. Send Em if you need me; I don't want you climbing if you don't have to, okay?" Natalia just rolled her eyes but nodded, used to her lover's over-protectiveness by now.

"Ask her if she wants to come trick-or-treating."

Olivia snorted. "I doubt getting kicked to the curb is going to make her eager to parade around town and beg for candy."

"Olivia." Natalia's voice was stern. "Just ask."

Sighing, the taller woman nodded, leaning forward for a kiss, which she was easily given. She wouldn't consciously admit it to herself, but deep down she needed the reassurance of her lover's touch. The sound of her friend's heart-broken voice brought her back to where

she had been not too long ago, lost and alone. She needed a reminder that Natalia was there, wasn't an illusion.

"Yes dear," she drawled as they broke apart, spinning away and power-walking to avoid the dish towel snapped at her. She took the stairs two at a time, mind racing, trying to think of what to say.

"Okay, I'm here. Tell me what happened." Olivia spoke into the phone, walking into the master bedroom, but stopping short as she spied something very out of place. A large white bag sat on her side of the bed with a card on top of it, her name written out in Natalia's unmistakable script. Approaching the bed, she opened the bag, unable to help the smirk when she peeked inside and saw the contents. Pushing the bag aside, she cradled the phone between her shoulder and ear and grabbed the card, tearing the envelope open. It read simply, 'Couldn't resist, hope you like it. Love, N.'

"This is partially your fault, you know," Doris began, dragging Olivia back to reality, her tone not a bit accusatory, instead just resigned. "Damn Evil Image Consultant from hell..."

By the time the Mayor finished her story, Olivia was wincing with guilt, biting her lip to keep from apologizing for the millionth time. If she had thought for a second her friend couldn't handle the opinionated PR specialist, she wouldn't have suggested him to her. It was a new friendship, and she sometimes forgot that, despite her sarcasm, bluster and larger-than-life persona, Doris Wolfe was sensitive and easily wounded. She personally would have just told the man to find a way to integrate her sexuality into her new image, insisting that the people would appreciate honesty over sugar-coating.

But she was never one to hide who she was while, conversely, Doris's public persona was based entirely on what she thought others wanted her to be. They would have to work on that; she would have to help the other woman be unapologetic of her true self. If anyone had told her six months ago that she would be helping Doris Wolfe come out of the closet, she would have laughed in their face. Still, the other woman had been there for her when she'd needed her, supporting her and telling her it would be all right. Olivia owed it to her to be there in return.

"Doris, I..."

"Please don't apologize again, Olivia, it's getting tiresome." The Mayor sighed, sounding defeated.

"No, I wasn't going to. I mean, I *am* sorry, but... Listen, I'll talk to Andre, okay? You just have to know how to talk to him. He obviously misunderstood what his place is, so we'll just

have to make sure to remind him who's paying who." The businesswoman practically growled, and the other woman chuckled thickly.

"We'll get him straightened out... so to speak."

"You... do you think I was wrong? Would you have done it differently?" Doris asked suddenly, her voice small and unsure.

Olivia froze for a moment, before forcing herself to relax and answer honestly. "Look, Doris, what I would've done doesn't really matter. What *does* matter is that you worked so damn hard to get where you are; you put everything you had into it. If she can't understand how much a part of you being Mayor is, how important it is, then she didn't really know you. And you deserve to be with someone who can support you even if they don't necessarily agree with you."

"Yeah, I... I suppose...you're right..."

"Pfft, that's right I'm right! I'm Olivia Freakin' Spencer; I'm *always* right!"

"Except when you're not."

"Which isn't the case, at least not here."

Doris was silent for long moments, but the other woman could hear her breathing over the phone. Finally the politician sighed again, a slow, even release of air.

"Okay," she said, and Olivia could almost see her nodding, pulling herself together.

"Olivia... thank you. I didn't mean to unload on you like that."

"No problem, that's what friends are for. Or, so I'm told," the green-eyed woman replied, joking to try and chase away the lump of emotion in her throat.

"Ha, right! I think I read that in a book somewhere." Doris acknowledged the shift in mood, a smile evident in her voice. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

In the ensuing silence Olivia's mind wandered back to the bag in front of her, which she grabbed after a few moments and upended onto the bed so that she could thoroughly inspect the contents.

“Well then, I think it time for me to shut up...” Doris said reluctantly, snapping the businesswoman’s attention back to their conversation again. “So, I’ll... talk to you later, I guess.”

“Oh, wait! Natalia wanted me to ask if you want to come trick-or-treating with us tonight.”

“Oh, Olivia, I don’t know...”

“Free candy and a chance to be someone you’re not for a night... come on, who *doesn’t* love Halloween? Plus, Natalia and Emma are baking up a few batches of her famous pumpkin cookies...” she enticed, fingers toying with her loot absently.

“Oh. all right.”

“Well that was easier than I thought it would be.”

“It was the promise of your lady friend’s cookies that did it,” Doris quipped, and Olivia snorted.

“So, what are you gonna be?” the hotelier asked after a moment, truly curious. Perhaps, if the outfit was sexy enough and a certain someone just happened to be out and about, that someone would be reminded of what she was missing...

“Wouldn’t you like to know? You’ll see when I get there,” the Mayor replied, chuckling.

“Awww, come oooooon! Gimme a hint?”

“Don’t whine, Olivia, it’s unbecoming.”

“Sigh, fine, don’t tell me. You, here, at six. Don’t be late.”

“Okay, Tarzan, see you then.”

“That would make you the chimp,” Olivia teased, smiling, relieved her friend would be all right.

“And you a man,” Doris retorted. “See you in a bit, Spencer.”

“See you soon, Wolfe.”

When Olivia reentered the kitchen, she found an extra person sitting patiently at the table. Taking one look at the newest arrival, Olivia burst into loud, uncontrollable laughter, so overcome that she had to hold on to the edge of the counter to keep upright.

“What?” Clarissa Marler asked, frowning in confusion. Chuckling, Natalia rolled her eyes.

“Nothing, honey, Olivia’s just rude,” she chided, swatting her lover as she walked by with cellophane wrap for the cookies.

“What... oh man, *who* are you supposed to be?” Olivia giggled, trying to restrain herself.

Clarissa sniffed, clearly annoyed. Standing, the girl picked up her briefcase and did a little spin, showing off her black pencil skirt and blaringly loud black, red, and white blazer. “You can’t tell?” she asked, a little disappointed.

Olivia took a deep breath and wiped her eyes. “Oh, no, I think I got it. But you can tell me if you like.”

“I’m Mayor Wolfe!” the girl exclaimed, proud of herself. “My mommy said I could be Mayor some day if I wanted, but I didn’t want to wait.”

“That is both the most adorable and most shrewd thing I have ever heard,” Olivia commented, eyes narrowing in thought for a moment. “Jellybean, I think mini-Wolfe here is going to give you a run for your money when you rule the world.”

“We’re gonna to do it together,” the girl replied easily, smiling cheekily at her mother, by now used to the odd comments about her conquering the globe.

“Of course, why didn’t I think of that?” Olivia asked, rolling her eyes.

Inching her way to the cooling rack, the businesswoman reached forward, mouth watering at the scents teasing her nose. Surely, her lover wouldn’t notice if *one* cookie went missing.

“Don’t even think about it,” Natalia said evenly, her back turned to the still-hot confections and her guilty-looking partner. “Those are for the hosts!”

“Only you would take gifts to give to people when *you’re* the one trick or treating!” Olivia muttered, annoyed but backing off. “All right then, who wants to help decorate candy buckets?”

“Oh, oh, me!” the two girls exclaimed, jumping up and down excitedly.

“Excellent. To the living room!” Olivia shouted, turning and jogging back through the door.

“To the living room!” they repeated, dashing after her.

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Anna Li was bored. She knew she should be listening more attentively to the gruff voice detailing instructions and information to her over the phone, but she found herself sitting behind the wheel of her car, holding back a yawn and idly wondering what she would have for lunch instead. Part of her apathy towards the man on the other end was the fact that they had been over this before, many times, in preparation for her placement in Springfield.

“Are you listening to me, Li?” the voice barked, and she sighed quietly, rolling her eyes and adjusting her sunglasses on her face.

“Of course. I could repeat back the last five minutes if you’d like,” she replied, frowning as she looked around the parking lot. She had been not-so-patiently waiting for her contact to stop talking so that she could commence with the next part of the operation, but it looked as if she would have to, once again, reassure him that she was up to the task before her.

“Make light of my concerns if you want, *Anna*, but you’ll find out soon enough that small towns don’t necessarily mean small problems. You’re going to have to play this one real smart if you’re going to succeed,” was the reply, and she nodded, mouthing the words along with him, having heard this, too, many times.

“If you didn’t think I was qualified, I wouldn’t be here,” she reminded him flatly, wanting to get on with it.

“Credentials and training don’t make the man,” he countered readily, tone fierce.

“Fortunately for you, in this case, not only do I have experience, I’m no *man*.” Spotting a figure approaching in the distance, she closed her eyes briefly in relief.

“Make sure to keep in close contact with my partner.”

“My new boss is here; I have to go. I’ll be in touch. Happy Halloween.” She smirked, hanging up on him before he could reply. She would hear about it later, but the little power-play was well worth it. “Trick or Treat, Chief Cooper,” she murmured to herself.

Getting out of her car, Anna stretched mightily, relaxing her posture to one of hesitant friendliness as the man reached her, a perfect combination that would undoubtedly lead

him to let down his guard. Frank Achilles Cooper Jr., new Chief of Police in Springfield. Father: Frank “Buzz” Cooper Sr., sister: Harley Cooper-Aitoro, daughter: Marina Cooper, formerly Camalleti, and, more importantly, adopted grandson: Henry Cooper Camalleti.

“You Anna Li?” the man asked, grabbing her hand and shaking it before she could answer.

“Uh, yeah. Chief Cooper, right?” she asked, frowning and feigning an air of ignorance.

“That’d be me. Sorry I’m late; I had some business with my ex-fiancée and her family,” he replied, shrugging as if to say, *Women*.

Reviewing her mental file, Anna frowned ever so slightly. Ex-fiancée: Natalia Rivera, left him at the altar. But who was her family? And more importantly, why was she still involved in Chief Cooper’s daily life? As far as the operative knew, the son was now out of the picture and there were no concrete ties to the Coopers. She would have tell her contact that his Intel was incomplete.

Shaking her head, she focused on the task at hand, namely, gaining the trust of her new employer. Schooling her expression to appear sympathetic and relieved, she laughed a little. “Oh, I understand, believe me,” she assured, squeezing the hand still in hers and nodding in what she hoped looked like sympathy. “No harm done.” Letting go of Frank’s hand, she inclined her head. “If you don’t find it to be too much trouble, though, I’d absolutely love a tour.”

“Of course! Let me just grab some papers from the office, and then I’ll take you to the best coffee in town. I always work better over at Company anyway,” he said amicably, clapping her on the shoulder and moving forward to lead the way into the police station. Rolling her eyes behind his back, Anna held back a sigh. It was going to be a *long* day...

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Checking herself over one last time and using the glass of the china cabinet as a mirror to put the finishing touches on her crimson lipstick, Olivia blew an air-kiss to her reflection, grinning in satisfaction. Skin tight, almost indecently short red dress? Check. Red cape and pitchfork? Check. Horns and matching tail? Check. Four inch black pumps that drove her lover crazy? Double check.

Clicking her heels together almost giddily, she made her way to the living room, chuckling at the sight of Emma and Clarissa sitting on the edge of the couch, watching SpongeBob as if he held the secrets to the universe. “Em, sweetie, why don’t you go get Natalia? Doris and your cousins should be here soon.” Nodding, the girl got up and scurried to the bottom of the stairs.

“Natalia! Mommy says hurry up cuz Doris and Jonathan and Sarah are gonna be here soon!” Emma shouted, tapping her little foot impatiently and casting furtive glances back at the television screen.

“Ya know Jellybean, when I said go get Natalia I meant in person... quietly...” Olivia commented flatly, wiggling a finger in her ear to try and dispel the high pitched ringing. Clarissa giggled from her seat on the couch before turning her attention back to the Halloween themed cartoons.

After a few moments of nothing, Olivia realized that she was going to have to take things into her own hands. Rolling her eyes, she moved forward and past her daughter, flicking the girl’s braid as she walked up the stairs. “Entertain your guest, pretty girl,” she reminded, pausing for a moment as an idea struck her. “And, if two cookies were to come up missing, I’m sure no one would notice...” The two girls froze for all of two seconds, before bolting for the kitchen door. “One each!” she called after them, chuckling.

Climbing the stairs quietly and moving down the hall, Olivia paused in front of her old room. The door stood shut, a fresh layer of soft yellow paint making it stand out amongst the rest of the colors in the corridor. The inside was almost complete, all that was missing now was the rocking chair she had secretly special ordered for Natalia – an early Christmas present – and the baby herself. “Soon,” she murmured, the thought filling her with warmth. Soon, her family would be complete. Nodding to herself, she smiled and began walking again, to her new room, to *their* room.

“Natalia, sweetheart, are you close to ready? The natives are getting restless...” Olivia called from outside the door, trying to resist the urge to look inside. The other woman had informed her that she had actually gotten her costume the day before, when she had been at work, and wanted to surprise her. She lost the battle, peeking into the room and frowning when she didn’t see the younger woman.

“In here,” Natalia called back, arm appearing through the entrance of the adjoining bathroom and waving for a moment before disappearing again. “Just putting on the finishing touches. You can come in.”

Olivia wandered into the room and sat on their bed, sighing happily. Their bed: she would never get tired of that thought. “Better hurry, before Angel Emma and Doris 2.0 eat all the cookies and use the energy to mutiny.”

“Don’t even joke about that!” Natalia cried, popping out of the bathroom and darting out of the bedroom. “Emma Spencer, you can each have one cookie, *one!*” Olivia bit her lip to keep from laughing.

“You move fast for a pregnant lady,” she commented off handedly as her lover stepped back into the room.

“You calling me fat?” the smaller woman growled playfully, hands on her hips.

Opening her mouth to back peddle, Olivia was struck dumb by the vision before her. Natalia, who had apparently decided to be a witch again this year, had managed to find a long, flowing dress that somehow was both perfectly form fitting *and* tastefully accommodating of her rounded belly. It hugged her stomach but flared at her hips, so that the black material seemed to shimmer and flow like liquid whenever the woman moved. What really caught Olivia’s attention, however, was the way the dark cloth plunged dangerously low at the smaller woman’s chest, accentuating her larger bust and giving her amazing cleavage...

“Gii-uh huh, what?” the older woman mumbled, blinking slowly and shaking her head, trying to come back to reality.

“Hey there, my eyes are up here.” Natalia giggled, smiling indulgently, eyes crinkling at the corners. The expression drew attention to the subtle indigo eye shadow she had applied, which made her dark gaze smoky, almost indecent.

“Uh... yeah, can we just skip the trick or treating and go straight to unwrapping the candy?” Olivia suggested, wiggling her eyebrows to indicate she was joking... mostly.

“It was either this or Catwoman, and I don’t think anyone wants to see me in a leather cat suit right now...” Olivia’s eyes glazed over and her jaw slowly slid open. The Latina wasn’t sure, but there might have been drool. “Olivia? Hey!” Natalia snapped her fingers in her lover’s face. “Dirty mind,” she muttered.

“Hey, don’t say things like that and not expect my mind to buy a ticket for the gutter bus!” the taller woman defended, trying to hide her embarrassment.

The dark haired woman smiled, natural shyness causing her face to color slightly as she moved to stand in between her lover’s legs. “Flattery will get you no where,” she chided gently, leaning down to kiss the other woman.

“You do know that you are beyond drop dead gorgeous in that dress, right?” Olivia asked, incredulous when Natalia shook her head, unconsciously denying the sentiment. “I mean you’re always beautiful, but, you set phasers to ‘knock-out.’”

“Stop it,” Natalia blushed harder, obviously pleased even as she hid behind her hair.

“Sweetie, you are absolutely stunning.”

“You really think so?” The seated woman let out a bark of a laugh.

“Uh, no honey, I don’t think so, I *know* so! Seriously witchy-woman, you cast a spell on me!”

Sliding into the hotelier’s lap, Natalia hummed in contentment. “*Somebody’s* getting an extra treat tonight, I think,” she murmured, leaning forward for another kiss.

“Ooo, pick me, pick me,” Olivia whispered against her lips, hands wrapping around the smaller woman to hold her securely in place. The baby chose that moment to make her presence known, kicking hard enough to poke Olivia firmly in the stomach. Resting their foreheads together, the two women grinned, a peace settling over them. “Yeah, yeah, love you too Sweetpea.” They were rewarded with another strong kick.

“MOM, NATALIA! JONATHAN AND SARAH ARE HERE!” Emma shouted from the base of the stairs, shattering the stillness and startling them.

“All work and no play make Olivia a grumpy girl,” the taller woman muttered, before sighing and smiling sheepishly. “Why yes, she *was* raised in a barn.”

“Aw, my poor baby. I’ll make it up to you,” Natalia promised, pecking the other woman on the lips one more time before standing. “Come on, lazy bones! We have candy to scam.”

“And they say *I’m* wicked...”

“Hey Auntie O, Natalia.” Jonathan greeted with a smile as the women descended the stairs. “Ladies, you look stunning.” Natalia blushed but smiled back, ignoring her lover’s ‘I *told* you so’ as she pulled the man into a hug.

“You’re not too bad yourself there, kiddo,” Olivia replied, nodding at him. He cut quite the dashing figure in an obviously tailor made tux and bow tie.

“But, Auntie O, where’s your costume?” he teased.

“Oh, very cute, cheeky boy. Looks like someone is gonna get more tricks than treats tonight!” she replied, poking at him with her pitchfork.

“I was just curious...” he said innocently.

“She’s in it Jonathan!” Emma exclaimed from her position on the couch, jumping up and rushing to her mother’s side and defense. “See, we match! I’m an Angel, and Mommy’s a devil. See the horns?”

“Of course, how could I have missed it?” he said, bending down to her level and tweaking her nose.

“I picked the outfit,” Natalia admitted, her blush and unrepentant smile at odds with each other.

“Did you now? I’m impressed,” Jonathan said, smirking.

A tug at his sleeve brought the man’s attention to his daughter, who was hiding behind his leg. “What is it, baby girl?” he asked, reaching back and hoisting the child up with one arm, settling her onto his hip. She was growing so fast; soon he wouldn’t be able to pull off that little maneuver. She reached forward and pulled herself to his neck, whispering into his ear. “Uh huh, why don’t you ask them?” he suggested, smiling when she shook her head and hid her face against him.

Turning back to the others, he gave them a mock serious look. “I have been informed that I am to ask you if you like Sarah’s costume,” he reported, chuckling.

“Oh, of course we do honey!” Natalia cooed, moving closer and brushing dark curls from the girl’s face. “You are the cutest Fairy Princess I’ve ever seen!” And, indeed, the girl looked absolutely darling in her layered green and pink dress and gossamer wings. Sarah smiled shyly, clearly pleased. She reached forward a tiny hand and tangled it in Natalia’s hair, playing with the waves. The woman smiled back, nose crinkling in delight. The girl was so timid that even this was a big step.

“Yeah, and I love your crown Sarah!” Emma added, moving next to her second mother and grinning.

“What do we say, sweetie?” Jonathan prompted.

“Thank you. Like your ring,” the younger girl replied, taking her hand away from Natalia and pointing to Emma’s head.

“Oh, my halo? You wanna trade for the night?”

“Okay. Daddy, down please,” Sarah requested, kicking her legs impatiently. With a chuckle, the tall man placed his daughter on the ground, poking her in the ribs.

“No, Daddy!” Sarah scolded, glaring for a moment before turning to her cousin.

Carefully, the dark-haired girl removed her tiara and walked forward, presenting the piece of plastic to Emma as if it were the most important treasure in the world. With equal reverence, the older girl removed her own headpiece and handed it over, first affixing her new one in place before helping the smaller girl do the same.

“Come on, let’s finish watching SpongeBob.”

“Kay.” The younger girl agreed, leading the way to the couch. Within seconds, all three girls were engrossed in the bright colors and odd sounds.

“And just what are *you* supposed to be, young man?” Olivia asked her nephew, bringing the attention back to the adults.

“You mean besides painfully handsome?” he countered, winking at her. “Bond, James Bond,” he clarified, turning to Natalia and taking her hand, placing a kiss on the back. The smaller woman giggled.

“Definitely your nephew,” she commented, utterly taken.

“Easy there, tiger, turn the charm levels down from eleven. She’s with me,” Olivia muttered, trying hard to appear annoyed, but failing as her fondness for the man shone through in her eyes. It was evident that she adored him and their easy banter.

“Okay, Jane of the Jungle,” Natalia chastised as she pulled away from Jonathan and walked towards the kitchen. “I’m going to grab my hat and the cookies; you call Doris and tell her we’ll have to meet her in town.”



“In a second,” Olivia replied, catching the younger woman’s arm and gently pulling her back. With a wicked glint in her eye, she cupped her lover’s cheek in her palm and slid closer, leaning forward until they were barely an inch apart. “Jane, mine,” she grunted playfully, and pulled Natalia the last few millimeters forward. The kiss was slow and deep, and for long moments, both women forgot there were other people around them. The shorter woman reached up, fingers gripping the silky material of Olivia’s cape, crushing their bodies together as much as possible, considering her pregnant state.

“Ladies, are you going to come up for air, or should I get out the hose?”

Pulling back reluctantly to wolf whistles, Olivia glared at her nephew, who gave her his best wide-eyed look. She opened her mouth to say something off color, but before the words could pass her lips, the doorbell rang, startling them all.

“I’ll get it!” Emma shouted.

“Inside voice,” Olivia said, pulling away from her lover and following their daughter.

The girl reached the door first, yanking it open with the enthusiasm and excitement that only a child has at the thought of someone at the door. “Who is it, Bean?”

“It’s... uh...” Emma trailed off, head tilted to the side. She knew she recognized the woman standing on the other side of the threshold from *somewhere*...

“Trick or treat?” the woman at the door purred, leaning casually against the frame.

“Holy crap!” Olivia exclaimed, stepping up behind the girl and gawking at the waiting figure.

“Olivia!”

“Mom!”

The green-eyed woman winced. “Sorry!”

“Well, are you going to invite me in, or do I have to egg your house?” Doris asked, amused by the reactions to her arrival. Gaping, Olivia moved aside to allow the other woman to strut into the house. And *strut* was the only word to properly encapsulate the movement and the attitude - and the *outfit*.

“Oh my!” Natalia exclaimed, eyes wide in surprise.

Skin-tight leather pants, which partially covered black Converse high tops, held up by a black leather belt with a ridiculously large silver belt buckle in the shape of the female symbol, were only the beginning of the ensemble. A form-fitting black tank top with Debbie Harry’s face embossed in white – ripped strategically so that there was a hint of cleavage and midriff – added to the air of what could only be termed ‘Bad Ass-ery’. Dark aviator glasses and a motorcycle jacket thrown carelessly over one shoulder rocketed the effect into the realm of “Epic with the intent to Awesome,” a phrase Olivia had overheard from a very excited Ashlee months earlier. Mussed, just-rolled-out-of-bed, *black* hair completed the look.

“Sweet Je-” A stern look from Natalia silenced the stunned businesswoman for a moment. “Let’s try this again. Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?” Olivia heckled, shaking her head in disbelief.

“I believe she’s at home, buried in a pint of mint choc-chip ice cream. Her part tonight will be played by Joan Jett of Blackheart fame,” was the easy retort, delivered with a nonchalant shrug.

“Your hair...” Natalia breathed, still in shock.

Doris snorted, gazing at her friend over the top of her glasses. "Washes out. Trust me, come Monday morning, there will be no evidence of this."

"That's what *you* think!" Natalia chuckled, pointing to Emma, who had managed to get a camera and snap a few photos unnoticed.

"Darn paparazzi," the "rock star" deadpanned, rolling her eyes but otherwise seeming unconcerned.

"Tell me about it," Olivia laughed. "She's like a ninja with that thing!"

Catching sight of the eldest of the children hovering at the edge of the group, Doris did a double-take. "I stand corrected; apparently the role of Mayor Wolfe will be played by Clarissa Marler!" she amended, clearly taken by surprise. The girl blinked, blushing hotly. Motioning her forward, Doris bent down to her level.

"Are you...did you dress up as me for Halloween?" Clarissa only nodded, eyes firmly glued to the floor. The Mayor smiled, obviously delighted. "And why is that?"

"Scariest thing she could think of," Olivia quipped, grimacing at the twin glares she received for her trouble. "Sheesh! Some people have no sense of humor!"

"Cause my mom says you're important and powerful. And you're real good at softball," Clarissa replied, shrugging, trying to seem unaffected.

"Well, I'm very flattered," Doris said, tugging the girl's blazer straight and winking. "You have excellent taste."

"All right, ladies and gentleman, let's get this show on the road!" Natalia announced, emerging from the kitchen with stacks of Tupperware.

"Ooo, cookies!" Doris all but moaned, reaching towards the bounty.

"Ah, ah, ah! These are for the hosts!" Natalia admonished, slapping the blue-eyed woman's hand away.

"Ouch! Hey, what gives! That's no way to treat your guests!" the Mayor grumbled, rubbing her wrist.

"You're not a guest, Doris," Olivia said casually, wrapping an arm around her friend's neck and half-hugging, half-choking her.

“Oh yeah? What, then?” the Mayor grumbled, prying the arm from her body and scurrying away towards the door.

Natalia rolled her eyes at their antics, but smiled as she moved past them to the door. “That’s easy,” she said motioning for the others to follow with her head. “You’re family.”

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By the end of the evening, the merry group of seven had collected enough sugar to power a small nation...

“I don’t think that there have ever been this many peanut chews and Hershey’s Kisses in one place... ever!” Doris said, impressed, as she surveyed the chaos that had once been the Spencer-Rivera kitchen table.

Once the candy was sorted, and after a small misunderstanding...

“Well now, all we have to do is check it all and...” Natalia trailed off, staring incredulously at her lover.

“Muroh?” Olivia asked around two cheeks full of candy. Swallowing hard, she tried again. “Check it?”

The loot was divvied up equally so that each party member had just enough to induce a sugar coma, ensuring that no one was left wanting. And because it was a Saturday, each party member promptly ate half of their booty. While the children passed out soon after, the crash hitting them as if the Sandman had swung the entire bag at them, adult heads did not hit pillows until well after midnight.

In fact, after an hour of sitting around making idle conversation, they decided to hold an impromptu Wii Bowling tournament...

“You’re cheating!” Jonathan cried, mouth agape as he watched Doris get yet another strike, the screen proclaiming it a ‘Six Pack.’

“Having a system doesn’t mean cheating. Stop being a sore loser,” she replied, stepping with unrepentant swagger over to the couch and clapping the man on his shoulder.

The winner of which was rewarded with Olivia’s secret stash of Andes Candy...

“Hey, no fair! I actually bought those!” the hotelier complained as Natalia smirked and devoured the last of her prize. “And just how did you get so freakishly good at bowling anyway?”

“Worked at a bowling alley one summer when I was a teenager,” was all Natalia would say.

“Isn’t that much sugar bad for the baby?” Doris asked, eyeing the last mint longingly.

“Two days a year I get to eat as much candy as I want; Halloween and Valentine’s Day. Stop being sore losers!” the Latina gloated, popping the chocolate into her mouth and slowly licking her fingers clean.

Olivia whimpered, torn between enjoying the view and mourning the loss of her sweets. “So not fair...”

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ACT 2

Monday morning saw Olivia Spencer, businesswoman extraordinaire, back at the office. She stared balefully at what used to be her desk, but was now an avalanche of papers. It was amazing how much work accumulated while one was dealing with a relationship crisis. Her inbox had spilled out across the surface of what had been an organized plane, giving the impression that a filing cabinet had exploded. “Well, Spencer, you should have seen this one coming. This is what you get for letting things slide,” she sighed to herself, tossing her jacket onto one of the guest chairs and rolling up her sleeves. “Time to be a business mongrel...”

Three hours, countless mutterings, and a few nasty paper cuts later, Olivia could once again see the beautiful wood finish of her desk. Sitting back in her chair, she blew out a breath of relief, hand coming to cover her tired eyes, fingers rubbing her temples. “Sweet Jesus, I thought I’d never hit the bottom,” she murmured. The sound of the office phone ringing pierced the air, and she groaned in frustration, resisting the urge to fling the hunk of plastic and circuitry across the room. With a sigh, she picked up the receiver. “Olivia Spencer,” she said evenly, impressed with herself for not growling. It was only noon and already it had been a long day.

“Hello, Ms. Spencer; my name is Karen Miller and I am calling on behalf of Jacob Anderson.”

Olivia sat up straight, eyes widening. Jacob Anderson, one of the prospective investors she had been communicating with months ago when she had been trying to franchise. But that plan had fallen to the wayside in the last few months, all the parties pulling their

money out one by one as she became distracted by *other* things. It was one thing she had regretted not paying closer attention to, especially because it took so long to gather so many interested backers. The slow crumbling of that project should have meant that no one would touch any of her propositions with a ten-foot pole until she proved herself again...

"Ms. Spencer, are you there?" the voice asked, interrupting her internal monologue.

"Yes, yes I'm here!"

"Excellent. As I was saying, Mr. Anderson was reluctant to renew talks with you at this time, but when he was informed about the circumstances surrounding the dissolution of the project-

"Circumstances?" the hotel owner interrupted, suspicious.

"Your ex-husband's terminal illness, the experimental procedure and his subsequent recovery, the death of Alan Spaulding..."

Frowning, Olivia's mind worked quickly, trying to narrow down who had made contact with her former investor. "Of course," she said slowly, rolling with it in the meantime. "The circumstances; go on."

"Mr. Anderson is an understanding man, Ms. Spencer, and the Beacon franchising is a prospect that gives all appearances of being very lucrative. If it is all right with you, he would like to reenter the venture. Would that be agreeable?"

"Of-of course!" Olivia exclaimed, blinking slowly and shaking her head in disbelief.

"Excellent. I'll relay your interest back to him."

"Please do. My assistant has my schedule, she'll handle the details of setting up a meeting. Tell Jacob I'll see him sometime next week for a face-to-face," the business owner said, regaining a bit of her composure.

"Of course. Thank you for your time, Ms. Spencer. Have a good day."

"Thanks; you too."

Olivia hung up the phone and sat quietly for several moments, stunned. Franchising the Beacon was something she had wanted, so badly, since that mess with Decker. Partially because it would be an interesting, new, and likely profitable experience - but if she was

honest with herself, mostly she wanted to succeed just to rub it in his face. She had thought that the distractions of the last few months had closed the door on that possibility but, if Anderson was still interested, others would follow... Which raised the question of *who* had been talking to Anderson. The only person she could think of who would know about her business and personal life, and care enough to do anything about it, was Phillip.

"Note to self, send Phillip a gift basket, possibly full of chocolate and booze..."

"I see I'm just in time," an amused voice commented, startling her despite it being immediately recognizable. Jerking forward, the hotelier slammed her knee into the desk

"Jesus! Natalia, you scared me!" she hissed, bending over to cradle her throbbing joint. "Christ, that smarts!"

"That's a lot of blasphemy for one breath," Natalia said mildly, walking in and setting a covered dish on the desk, trying to bite back a smile. Her dimples gave her away. "Good day?"

"Oh, you know, cleaned my desk, checked my email, got an offer to help franchise the Beacon..." was the casual reply, betrayed by the huge smile on Olivia's face.

"Olivia, that's great!"

"Nothing finalized yet, just some feelers... we'll see."

"Still, this is good."

"Definitely of the good," she agreed, green eyes fairly glowing with pleasure.

The smell of garlic and paprika reached Olivia's nose, cutting off any other smart remarks. "Please tell me that's what I think it is..." she begged, sitting up and reaching for the plastic container. Popping it open, she moaned in appreciation. "Oh God, it is! Chicken and rice!"

"What do we say?"

"Thank you!"

"Uh uh, en español," Natalia said, playfully wagging her finger at her lover.

"Nataaaaaaliaaaaa," the hotelier whined, gazing longingly at the open container of food.

“Hey, it was *your* idea to start integrating Spanish into our everyday life so that the baby grows up bilingual,” her lover reminded her, rolling her eyes.

“Ugh, why did I do that again?” Olivia asked, slumping across the wooden surface dramatically.

“Something about respect for my culture; I forget,” was the sarcastic response, softened by a smile. The smaller woman walked around the desk.

“Riiight...” Olivia made a face. “Promise not to make fun of my pronunciation?”

“Scout’s honor,” Natalia swore, holding up three fingers. The businesswoman laughed, reaching out and pulling the dark-haired woman closer, so that she had to look straight up to see her face.

“You were never a scout.”

“Hmmm, you’re right. How about on my love?”

“Grassias...”

Natalia giggled, cupping the seated woman’s face gently, fingers stroking the edges of her mouth. “When you articulate the ‘a’, it’s an ‘ah’ sound. Grr-AH-see-Ahs.”

Olivia snorted, choosing to nip at her instead of trying again. Language could wait; there were more pressing matters at hand. Natalia just raised an eyebrow as her fingertip was gently captured, first by straight white teeth, then soft, pink lips. Those lips closed around the digit, trapping it in wet heat, and she bit back a moan when the suction started, watching as the other woman’s cheeks hollowed slightly.

“Olivia... you’re gonna get yourself into a lot of trouble.”

Olivia released her with a quiet ‘pop’ and smirked. “My middle name,” she teased, running her hands up the other woman’s sides, around to the small of her back, softly massaging what where sure to be sore muscles there. Natalia groaned, resisting the urge to collapse into a boneless heap at the sensation.

“Painful or good?” Olivia asked, laying a kiss on the round belly before her.

“Ow, and, yes,” was the whimpered reply.

“Should I stop?”

“Only if you want me to hit you,” Natalia growled, brown eyes fluttering closed as Olivia found a particularly tense spot.

“And here I thought you loved me for my personality and winning good looks,” the taller woman quipped, working at the knot.

“And now you know the truth,” Natalia hissed, losing the battle and leaning forward, bracing herself with her arms against the back of the chair, resting her cheek on top of Olivia’s head.

They stayed like that for long minutes, the pregnant woman gripping the chair to keep from melting into a puddle on the floor, while her lover worked the tension from her abused back. Finally though, the sensitivity of the position occurred to Natalia, and she pulled away with a sigh. “Thanks,” she murmured, moving back around the desk and sitting in the guest chair.

“Uh uh, en español,” Olivia chided, grinning.

Rolling her eyes, Natalia chuckled. “Gracias mi amor, me dio mucho gusto.”

“Yeah, uh, about that... De nada?” The taller woman tried, wincing a bit. Laughing loudly, the smaller woman leaned forward and pushed the food towards the other woman.

“Very good, now, eat it before it gets cold,” she commanded.

“Don’t have to tell me twice!”

They sat in silence for a while, the businesswoman enjoying her lunch, and Natalia watching, lost in thought. Nodding to herself, she took a deep breath, before focusing her attention on the other woman. “So, I’ve been thinking about middle names,” she said casually as Olivia swallowed the last of her lunch.

“Oh?” the older woman asked, smirking to cover her sudden nervousness. Despite what she felt were giant leaps in personal growth she had made as of late, this was still an uncertain area of discussion. “And what’s caught your fancy?”

“Weeeeelll... I was thinking, maybe, possibly... Olivia?” Natalia said hesitantly, cringing a bit.

“Are you asking or telling?”

“I’m serious! I, I want her to be *ours* in every way. I know Francesca was your way of trying to show you were okay with this, with her... But I want you be connected to her too...” she

added, voice fading uncertainly, eyes fixed on the desk. She hated to push the other woman, who had been so patient and remarkably accepting considering the circumstances.

“And I am. You don’t have to saddle the kid with my name for me to love her. Crisis of identity over, I promise. I, I’m looking forward to her too, y’know? Seeing her, holding her, telling her stories. I don’t need her to have my name for me to think of her as my daughter,” Olivia insisted.

Natalia smiled a watery smile, reaching across the desk for her lover’s hand, squeezing it when their fingers intertwined. “I know that, I do. But this is important to me. I want her to write out her name one day, and to see that she’s as much yours as mine, just from her signature.”

“Hyphenated last names are also a good compromise...” the businesswoman said, smiling winningly.

“Olivia...” Natalia groaned, rolling her eyes. “You know this is important to me. Middle names are a critical part of my cultural identity.”

“Well that’s a mouth full,” Olivia teased, cringing at the glare she got. “But, I mean, Francesca Olivia? What are we, Vikings?” she quipped, succeeding in breaking what was fast becoming a serious the mood.

Natalia sighed and rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped her. “Well, I was considering Emily but, I think it’s a little too close to Emma,” she said.

“Yeeeah, I don’t think that would work anyway,” Olivia agreed, shrugging. With a small sigh, she tried again, mindful of keeping her tone light, so as not to put off her partner. “Look, I think it’s sweet that you want our daughter to be named after me, but, I have a feeling you’ll just end up calling her Olivia and confusing us both when you yell.”

“I don’t yell!” the dark haired woman denied, sticking out her tongue.

“Yea-huh, riiight,”

“And, if I yell your name, I’m sure you deserve it!” Natalia winced, shaking her head ruefully. “Darn, that came out dirtier than I wanted.”

“Been spending too much time with me, kiddo,” Olivia teased, winking saucily.

“You’re such a bad influence.” The younger woman groaned, rolling her eyes.

“I do what I can,” was the easy reply, and the hotelier buffed her nails on her vest for effect.

Tilting her head, Natalia sighed in defeat. “Well, I guess we’ll have to go traditional and pick someone in the extended family to honor with the name.”

“Tradition, huh?” Olivia asked, raising an eyebrow; the pregnant woman just shrugged. “Well, I’m out, so moving on... How about *your* side of the family?” she suggested.

Natalia frowned, her expression becoming tense for a moment, before she relaxed again. Flashing her dimples, she shook her head. “Nice try, but this is about connecting her to *you*,” she insisted. “How about a favorite aunt?”

“Nope, none of those. And before you ask, no, we are not naming her after my mother, grandmother, or any of my dogs.”

“Did anyone ever tell you, you are a pain in the butt?” Natalia asked, cheeks puffing up in frustration, mouth twisting in displeasure. Olivia grinned, shrugging.

“It may have been mentioned to me once or twice.”

Both women were quiet for long moments, and Olivia found herself zoning, happy to drop the subject and engage, instead, in one of her favorite activities: Natalia watching. Just as she lost herself in the examination of her lover’s hands, and memories of exactly what they could do to her, Natalia spoke again. “There has to be someone... not your mom or grandma... what about your sister or a cousin.”

Olivia froze, tensing but trying very hard to appear calm, to regulate her breathing; she forced her expression to stay passive, hoping to hide her discomfort. The younger woman noticed anyway, and winced. She didn’t know why her words had caused such a reaction, but it didn’t matter; she had inadvertently upset Olivia with her insistence. “Never mind. This, uh, this was a silly idea. Let’s, um, just forget I brought it up,” she said quickly, moving as if to stand. Olivia’s words stopped her short.

“My sister... she, uh, she died... a long time ago.” Natalia grimaced, sitting back down.

“I... I didn’t know... I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking,” she apologized, clearly distressed.

“No, no, it’s okay,” Olivia reassured her, standing and moving around the desk, taking a seat in the chair next to her partner. “It’s hard to talk about, but... I mean, if you want to ask...”

Natalia reached out, grabbing Olivia’s hand and bringing it to rest on her chest, over her heart. “I love you,” she said simply, other hand moving to the taller woman’s face.

"I... she... Goddamn it, this is hard..." Olivia smiled wanly, sniffing discretely.

"What was her name?" Natalia asked softly, choosing to ignore the curse in favor of progress.

"Marissa. Her name was Marissa. She was... she was murdered," the older woman said, voice soft, almost faint, but surprisingly calm. Green eyes stared, unseeing, at the surface of the desk in front of them.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry!" the younger woman gasped, free hand flying to her mouth in horror. "You don't have to talk about it right now if you don't want to."

Olivia opened her mouth to say it was fine, to go on with the story, but no words came out. Frowning, she tried again, and again, nothing. "I... I don't think I can... right now, anyway..." she admitted, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. Natalia nodded, moving forward and kissing her gently.

"Whenever you're ready to talk, I'll listen. But don't force it, okay?" she whispered, resting their foreheads together. "We have the rest of our lives to learn everything about each other. Okay?"

"Yeah... okay."

Again there was silence, but the businesswoman found it comforting. She took strength from the contact with her lover and, after long moments, drew in a shuddering breath and sighed. "I... I'd like it if, maybe, you would consider Marissa for a middle name," she allowed, rubbing the other woman's rounded stomach absently with her free hand.

"It's a beautiful name," Natalia replied, covering Olivia's hand with her own. "Hmmm, Francesca Marissa Rivera... Spencer-Rivera?"

"Quite the name you've got there, kiddo," the green-eyed woman spoke to the baby, smiling instead, when her hand was kicked. "You're going to be a ball-buster, I can feel it." She choose not to comment on Natalia's addition, preferring instead to once again use humor change the subject, not ready to have *that* conversation.

"Olivia!" Natalia admonished, swatting the taller woman on the shoulder.

"What? It's true! With a name like that, and parents like us, she's either going to be a nun or the CEO of her own company. No offense, but I would like to be put into a decent retirement home, so I am voting for the latter..." Olivia trailed off, shrugging and wearing a *sorry, it's out of my hands* expression.

“You are impossible!”

Olivia’s reply was cut off by the sound of her phone ringing. Grumbling in frustration, she stood up and reached over the desk, perching on the edge as she answered the call. “Olivia Spencer.”

“Ms. Spencer? This is Janet Smith, the principal of your daughter’s school,” said the calm, even voice on the other end of the line. Immediately, Olivia felt her heart leap into her throat.

“Principal Smith... how can I help you?” she asked, swallowing hard, trying to keep a neutral tone so she wouldn’t upset her pregnant lover.

“What’s going on?” Natalia whispered, standing. Olivia held up a finger and mouthed ‘gimme a sec’.

“I need you to come down to the school right away, if you can. There’s been an incident.”

“Is Emma okay?” Olivia demanded, rising to her feet. Natalia reached out and took the older woman’s hand, frowning deeply in worry.

“Emma is fine. Actually, she’s the one that is responsible for the altercation...”

The women exchanged a concerned look. “We’ll be right there.”

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ACT 3

By the time lunchtime came around on Monday, Doris Wolfe had seriously debated just calling it quits and starting a new life. The frustration of her job, coupled with the nosy, tactlessness of the ‘Evil Image Consultant from Hell,’ – Andre’s new, secret name - as well as the fact that she missed her daughter was almost too much for the Mayor. Andre had decided that the best way to serve his client efficiently was to follow her around everywhere she went, save the bathroom. And *that* was only because she’d threatened to do him permanent damage. When he wasn’t critiquing her choice in clothing, he was picking apart her mannerisms; the snide comments about her interpersonal skills and the tssking noises he made as she spoke on the phone were still ringing in her ears.

She had managed to secure the afternoon to herself, however. As soon as he had turned his back she had darted out the door, leaving behind her purse and jacket in favor of freedom. It was only noon, but Doris was sure that forces at work in the universe were conspiring to make her hang herself by the end of the day. Honestly, she hadn't felt this self-conscious and judged since high school.

Walking out of her office, escaping hours early because she had damn well earned it, she stopped short just outside the building when she heard a sound she instantly recognized. There, down the street, head thrown back in seemingly carefree laughter, was Jamanda. Jamanda and another woman; Jamanda and another woman, standing very, *very* close to each other, much closer than would seem socially appropriate for anyone but lovers. The sight made Doris's stomach drop and her chest tighten. "Well, that certainly didn't take her long," she whispered to herself, swallowing hard. If she had wanted to quit and run away at 12:00, she wanted to curl up and die at 12:08.

Fighting the urge to give in to the burning behind her eyes, she straightened up to her full height and marched by the younger woman and her... *friend*. She didn't know where she was going, but she wanted to arrive with what was left of her dignity intact. She thought she heard her name being called, but refused to turn, quickening her pace instead. If Jamanda wanted to talk, they could meet on Doris's terms, when *she* was ready. Certainly not in front of the other woman's new lover, where the possibility of humiliation was that much greater.

Her feet took her to perhaps the last place she would have thought she'd find herself after a day from hell: Company. Instead of questioning it though, she merely shrugged and opened the door. Inside, the usual lunch crowd sat at their normal tables, and they all stopped and stared at her as she stepped inside. With a sigh, the Mayor moved into the restaurant, shuffling over to where Buzz stood wiping down the bar. "Have anything strong enough to erase the last few days?" she asked by way of greeting.

The man smiled kindly. "Not really. But I *do* have something chocolaty enough to take the edge off," he offered, tossing his rag aside and moving towards the kitchen.

"That sounds heavenly," Doris admitted, closing her eyes and laying her head on the cool surface in front of her.

"Be right back," Buzz said, chuckling sympathetically.

"Yup, you do that," she replied, not bothering to move, only raising a hand and waving. "I'll just be here, dying..."

Doris didn't know how long she stayed like that, forehead to counter, wallowing in self-pity. But, after a time, she was jarred from her thoughts by the sharp clack of ceramic hitting wood, and the smell of warm chocolate and cool cream wafting into her nostrils. Moaning in appreciation, she turned her face towards the tempting scents and reached out a hand, drawing the plate closer.

"Ha, yeah, I think that's everyone's reaction to the chocolate pie," a voice, decidedly female and therefore *not* Buzz's, commented.

"Blake?" Doris asked, sitting up straight, trying in vain to control a blush.

"The one and only. You look like you've had a rough day."

"What a polite way to say that I look like shit," the Mayor said dryly, snagging a fork and sinking it into the gooey confection.

Blake barked out a laugh, then covered her mouth quickly, as if she hadn't expected it to come out. Doris smirked around a mouthful of pie, raising her eyebrow.

"I notice you aren't jumping to correct me," she quipped through the chocolate, swallowing and licking the silverware clean.

"Sorry, but you do kinda look like you went a few rounds with a kangaroo."

"What?" Doris frowned in confusion, shaking her head.

"A kangaroo... you know, hoppy legs, big old ears, a pouch..."

"Yes, thank you Blake, I *know* what a kangaroo is! The reference is obviously beyond my current mental state, however."

Laughing at the irritable expression on the other woman's face, Blake mimed punching with her hands. "Oh! You know, they, ah... box... you know what, never mind. It's been a long day for me too." The smaller woman trailed off, snatching the fork away from the Mayor and taking a bite of her dessert.

"Hey!"

"Oh, hush. I need this just as much as you do," the strawberry-blonde replied, rolling her eyes and taking another small bite.

"Get your own pie!"

“This is the last piece...”

“This is definitely par for course for me today,” the blue-eyed woman sighed, nodding to herself. “Fine, but I’m not paying for it.” Blake just smiled winningly, scooping up another bite and offering it to the grumpy woman.

“To you, Mayor Wolfe.”

Soon the pie was gone, and the publisher brought over two cups of coffee as a peace offering. Walking around the bar, she took a seat next to the still brooding woman, half-turning to face her while leaning against the edge of the counter. “So, tell me about your day. What’s so bad that you’re hiding out at Company, drowning your sorrows in sugar?”

“Who says I’m hiding?” Doris countered. She was partially distracted by Blake’s position – not used to interacting with the other woman, let alone being the center of her attention – and her words ended up sounding unconvincing even to her own ears. Was she that obvious?

“You don’t have your purse on you, which means you weren’t on your way out to eat. And you’re missing your, uh, *trademark* blazer – actually, any blazer – which means that you took off from wherever you left it in a hurry...” the strawberry-blonde explained, shrugging as if to say it was obvious. “So, what’s got you on the run?” Doris’ eyebrows shot up her forehead.

“Those are... impressive observations... Since when did you become Nancy Drew?” the taller woman asked with a glare, her voice just this side of condescending.

“Hey! I’m a writer, I have to observe!” Blake exclaimed, choosing to ignore the other woman’s tone. At that Doris glared suspiciously, but the other woman only rolled her eyes, waving her hand in annoyance. “Jeez, off the record, okay?”

Regarding Blake with stern eyes for long moments, Doris finally sighed, gaze dropping to her still steaming mug. She had hoped she could intimidate the publisher into backing down, but now she saw she would either have to tell her directly to mind her own business, or at least partially answer. She didn’t have the energy to be tough anymore, to pretend to be made of stone; the sympathy in Blake’s eyes made the option of talking seem that much more tempting. Still, best not give too much away.

“I spent the morning having my habits and mannerisms torn apart by the man partially responsible for the end of my relationship, all for the sake of improving my public image. And then as I was making my escape I ran into my ex, who apparently took another lover in the three days we’ve been apart...” she said in a rush, panting a little at the end.

Or, she could just blurt everything out and hope for the best.

Doris was horrified at her honesty, and suddenly wished that the ground would open up and swallow her whole. Or, at the very least, that her words were somehow not actually audible.

“Oh honey, I’m so sorry!” Blake cried, moving forward and pulling the brunette into a hug. No such luck. “Here, let’s get a booth so you can tell me all about it!” And before she could say anything to the contrary, Doris found herself hauled to her feet and led over to an occupied table, where the smaller woman used her charm to convince the patrons to move to the counter.

“You are very pushy, you know,” the Mayor grumbled, unable to help the small smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth. Blake just shrugged. “And I suppose now, you want me to tell you all my deep, dark secrets?” she snarked, but it was obvious the smaller woman wasn’t fooled.

Reaching out across the table, Blake took Doris’ hand, her thumb running over the knuckles soothingly. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to,” she said, shrugging again. “We can just sit here quietly if you want. I just figured you could use a friend.”

“And are we friends?” Doris barked harshly, though it came out more desperate than angry. Blake regarded her for a moment before nodding.

“It was recently brought to my attention that life is too short to waste time beating around the bush. If you’d like, I’d be honored to call you a friend.”

Doris snorted, eyes filling with water that she pretended wasn’t there. “I suppose,” she allowed. “It’s not like I have many of those anyway.”

They lapsed into silence again, broken finally by the Mayor removing her hand from the other woman’s and discreetly wiping at her eyes. Her emotions were close to the surface, just waiting for a chance to escape, to embarrass her. “So...” she began, trailing off uncertainly.

“So... friends?” the publisher asked, smiling tentatively. Doris suddenly realized that she wasn’t the only one who was putting herself out there, who could potentially be burned. Returning the smile, she took the initiative and reconnected their hands.

“I... I’d like that, very much.”

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Principal Janet Smith was a tall woman in her early fifties, with gray hair that had once been black, and sharp brown eyes that still managed to be kind. She sat straight in her high backed chair, patiently gazing at the women and child assembled in her office. “Emma, do you understand why I brought you here and called your mothers?” she asked. Right away Olivia felt a grudging respect for her. Acknowledging Natalia was not as casual as the older woman made it seem. Emma nodded but didn’t speak, eyes trained on a spot on the floor in front of her.

“Well, I sure don’t. What happened, exactly?” the businesswoman cut in, pacing back and forth near the door of the office.

“Olivia!” Natalia said sharply, glaring at her lover until she sank into the chair provided for her. “Please continue, Principal Smith,” she added when Olivia was settled, smiling apologetically. The school administrator smiled briefly at their behavior, before clearing her throat and nodding.

“I think it would be best if Emma told us her side of the story before I say anything else. Emma, could you tell us what happened?”

All eyes turned expectantly towards the silent girl, who trembled ever so slightly. She knew what she had done was wrong, but even now she couldn’t help but think that she would do it again. Truth be told, she had stopped herself from *really* letting the boy have it. She could still hear his mocking voice, still see his superior – that was a word she’d learned from her mother recently – smile. It made her eyes burn and her throat tight just to remember. “Don’t want to,” she whispered finally, sniffing. She didn’t want to cry, but couldn’t help the shuddering breaths that escaped her throat. She looked over at Olivia, who crooked her finger in a ‘come here, Jellybean’ motion. Immediately, she moved from her chair into her mother’s lap, cuddling against her.

“Emma, honey, please. We just want to know what happened,” Natalia soothed, getting up and moving to kneel in front of them.

“I-I don’t know...”

“Did he say something mean?” the pregnant woman tried again, reaching out to her daughter’s hair, hesitating briefly when the girl flinched. Emma only shrugged, looking away towards the floor again. “It’s okay, sweetie.”

Sighing, Principal Smith rifled through some papers on her desk. Finding what she was looking for after a few moments, she slipped on a pair of dark-framed glasses and began to skim over the page. “According to Emma’s teacher, Kurt Baker asked Emma about her

family, after which she shoved him to the ground.” Replacing the paper on her desk, she gazed over the rims of her glasses at the other occupants of the room.

“Is that true, Em?” Olivia asked, gently moving her daughter so she could look her in the face.

“He-he kept saying that Rafe wa-wasn’t really my brother, and that the baby wasn’t re-really my sister, ‘cause Natalia isn’t really my mom!” Emma cried, tears slipping from her eyes and down overheated cheeks.

“Oh, honey...”

“But, that’s not true, right?” Turning to look at the kneeling woman, Emma reached out a hand, fingers clutching at her shirt. “You *are* my other mommy, and, and Rafe *is* my brother, right?” Sniffing, Natalia pulled the sobbing girl into her arms, rubbing her back soothingly. Small watery eyes regarded Natalia pleadingly.

“I’m yours, right?”

“Of course, baby, of course you’re mine. And Rafe’s your big brother, and the baby is going to be your little sister,” the dark haired woman assured her. Olivia’s arms wrapped around both of them, so that Emma was cradled safely between their bodies.

They stayed like that for long minutes, letting the physical closeness repair any damage done by the boy’s ignorant words, until the position became too much for Natalia to handle and she pulled back. Slowly, and with a groan, she rose to her feet, moving back to her chair and dropping into it. Emma followed her, managing to crawl into her lap and mold herself against the woman.

“What’s going to happen?” Olivia asked, discreetly wiping away a tear. The Principal sighed again, tiredly scrubbing her face with her hand.

“The boy’s parents are very upset. They are pushing for suspension. Because it’s a first offense, however, despite it being an assault-”

“Assault!? She pushed a kid down in a playground, she didn’t mug him in a dark alley!” the businesswoman exclaimed indignantly. Wincing at the anger in her mother’s voice, Emma hid her face against Natalia.

“Ms. Spencer...”

“Oh, come on!”

“The boy is suffering from a lacerated palm and a posterior hematoma-” the principal began, looking back at what had to be an incident report.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake! So the kid has a cut hand and a bruised ass! That happens; he’s a kid!” Olivia interrupted, beside herself with impatient exasperation.

“Olivia!” Natalia gasped, horrified.

“Mom!” Emma parroted, shock stopping her tears.

“Ms. Spencer, please control yourself!”

“I’m sorry, but I think it’s ridiculous to suspend Emma because she got into a schoolyard scuffle. It’s not like they were cage fighting,” Olivia muttered, rolling her eyes.

“As I started to say, *because* this is a first offense, and because *Emma* has always been an exemplary student, despite the nature of the situation, I am inclined to let it go with a warning. Unless you have a problem with that?” the older woman asked, raising an eyebrow in a way that made Olivia slump down in her chair and have the distinct impression that she had just been schooled. Emma just looked between the women, wide-eyed. “Now, if we could all comport ourselves like adults for a moment?” Natalia kicked Olivia’s chair when the woman muttered something under her breath.

Principal Smith paused, massaging her forehead tiredly for a moment before continuing. “Look, I called you here because I think there is something more going on here than Mr. Baker being annoying and your daughter responding. I have never known Emma to be violent in any way, shape or form. As her parents, I thought it would be best if you looked into it, because she isn’t going to tell anyone here about what is behind this... outburst.” Olivia nodded, looking over at her daughter and her partner, swallowing hard. Principal Smith took a deep breath, her expression becoming grave. “I also called you here to warn you that if this type of behavior continues, I will be forced to call in outside forces to investigate. When a child like Emma begins to act out, it’s usually indicative of a larger problem, and caring for our students is something we take very seriously.”

Silence blanketed the room for long moments as everyone absorbed the implications of her words. Detangling a hand from Natalia’s shirt and wiping her face, Emma looked at around the room at each woman, eyes finally coming to rest on the one behind the desk. She wasn’t sure what the last exchange had meant, but knew that it couldn’t be good. “I didn’t mean to hurt him... I just got really mad,” she whispered.

“I believe you Emma.” The school administrator assured her, smiling encouragingly. “I know that *you* know better than to use violence to solve your disagreements; mistakes happen.

But when you make a mistake, you have to take responsibility. Do you understand?" The girl nodded solemnly, swallowing hard. "Now, as I was explaining to your mothers, I think that, this time, I can let you off with a warning. I want you to go home today and think about what you did. Write Kurt and his parents an apology note, and bring it to school tomorrow."

Emma nodded again, eyes flicking to Olivia's before going back to the Principal's, her face crumpling a bit. "I'm sorry he got hurt, but... I'm kinda not sorry..." she confessed, hanging her head in shame.

"Emma!" Olivia exclaimed, shocked at her daughter's words. Here was Emma, who cried when she had accidentally stepped on a *spider* in the bathroom, admitting she wasn't remorseful at the pain of another person.

"He said we weren't a family, that Natalia isn't my mom!" the child replied, as if that explained everything. Olivia frowned, suddenly feeling very uneasy; this was out of character for her little girl.

Principal Smith stood, walking around her desk and kneeling in front of her charge. "I understand what you mean."

"You... you do?" Emma asked, clearly shocked. The woman nodded gravely.

"When I was about your age, I found out that I was adopted. I was the only one in my whole class who was, and I was teased a lot. I was angry, but then I realized that my classmates were afraid of being different, and that they didn't know any better."

"There's nothing wrong with being different," Emma consoled, reaching out and taking the kneeling woman's hand.

"Of course not." Principal Smith smiled, squeezing the hand in hers gently. "I'd say we're special, even. We were *chosen* by our families; that means they loved us that much more." Emma nodded. "But some people don't understand that yet. Do you know how you can help them understand?"

"How?"

"By coming and telling me who they are, so I can have a chat with them about it. 'Words connect, fists disconnect.' my mother always said."

The girl looked thoughtful for a moment, before nodding sincerely. "Okay."

“Okay, good. Now, why don’t you take off the rest of the day to work on that letter. I’m sure your mothers will help you if you ask,” the woman suggested, standing with a small grunt.

“Note to self: don’t bend down, you’re too old,” she grumbled, moving back around her desk.

Giggling, Emma stood, walking over to her own empty chair and retrieving her bag.

“Thanks Principal Smith.”

“Anytime, my dear,” the woman replied with a smile. “Us special people have to stick together.”

Taking that as their cue, the other two women stood, Natalia moving forward to take the school administrator’s hand, shaking it gratefully.

“Thank you so much for being so understanding.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. Your daughter is one of my best students, Ms. Rivera, a true joy.”

“Still, thanks,” Olivia seconded, running her hand through Emma’s hair as the girl hugged her waist.

“You’re quite welcome. Now kindly clear my office so I can entertain some actual troublemakers. Good day.”

~~*~*

The ride home was quiet, and as soon as the car stopped, Emma was out the like a shot. She hurried into the house and disappeared up the stairs, going straight to her room. “Looks like she’s not ready to talk,” Olivia said, frowning thoughtfully at the sound of the girl’s door shutting.

Smiling gently, Natalia pulled the other woman into a hug. “She’ll come out when she’s ready,” she murmured against the taller woman’s shoulder.

“I just... she’s never done anything like this before... I don’t know if I should punish her, or if the trauma of getting sent to the principal’s office is lesson enough,” Olivia admitted, pulling back to look into her lover’s eyes, utterly lost.

Natalia kissed her lover's chin before resting their foreheads together. "I think she understands what she did was wrong," she reassured. "Let her process a bit, and she'll talk to us when she's a little more ready. I think she's a little overwhelmed with all the craziness lately."

"Yeah... I guess..." Olivia said, still obviously troubled.

"She's a wonderful girl." At that, the green-eyed woman had to smile, obviously pleased.

"Don't know how that happened. Me, I would've kicked the kid when he was down," she quipped, shrugging.

"Oh stop it." Natalia scolded, swatting her lover's shoulder but moving in closer, so she could snuggle into her arms. "You did a good job with her, Mama."

They stood like that for long moments, basking in the warmth of the embrace. Finally though, Natalia pulled back. "Do you want to go back to work? I can hold down the fort alone if you need to."

"No, I think I kinda want to stick around, make sure we're both here in case she wants to talk," Olivia replied, reaching up and tucking a lock of hair behind the shorter woman's ear.

"Okay, good, then you can help me do laundry."

"Nataliiiiiaaaaa."

"Sorry, Charlie, you walked right into that one. If you're gonna take up space, you might as well make yourself useful," she chuckled, kissing Olivia quickly before moving away, towards the living room. "Come on; if you're actually helpful, I'll consider making dessert from scratch tonight."

"Where's that laundry? Lemme at it!"

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ACT 4

Friday found Doris Wolfe standing, determined, outside of the bar hosting Springfield's Ladies' Night. After a week of Andre's criticisms, especially pertaining to her wardrobe, she was ready to unwind. Despite the talking to Olivia had given the man, which had been quite spectacular to witness – she didn't think she had ever heard a grown man hit soprano before – she was quite sure he would heartily disapprove of her associating with her lady-

loving peers in such a setting. Snickering, she congratulated herself on her secret rebellion. Come Monday, she'd have a slew of new memories that would help her bear even the snidest of the insufferable man's remarks.

As she stepped inside, the first thing she noticed was that there was almost double the amount of women. The room was comfortably populated, the ambient noise at the level of a moderate hum. She hadn't really been out since she and Jamanda had started seeing each other regularly, and she would be lying if she said she hadn't missed it. The little thrill of entering a room and knowing that, by the end of the night, she would be leaving with someone on her arm. Smirking and nodding to herself – tonight would definitely prove worth the trip – the Mayor made her way to the bar.

Motioning to the bartender for service as she slid into her seat, the blue-eyed woman turned around, surveying her prospects. There were a lot of new faces, which meant plenty of fresh blood, unaccustomed her to M.O. Things were looking good, and she predicted she would have a bite within the hour.

"What can I get you?" a voice asked from behind her. Opening her mouth to answer, she was struck dumb by the sight of her ex-lover playing pool at the far end of the room.

"I'll... I'll have a..." she trailed off, dread slowly creeping into her suddenly heavy limbs.

"I can come back if you're not thirsty..."

"Shit!" Doris hissed as Jamanda looked up, and she spun around to face the bar, hoping she hadn't been spotted.

"Don't tend to serve that at here," the bartender joked, shrugging at the venomous look shot her way.

"She'll have an Original Sin, Sam," someone murmured directly beside her. The Mayor's breath caught in her throat in fear, even though she didn't recognize the voice, and she froze, unwilling to turn. A pale hand crept into her line of vision, pushing a folded twenty towards the bartender, who snorted in amusement and nodded.

"One Original Sin, comin' right up," Sam acknowledged, winking at the petrified elected official.

Holding her breath in trepidation, the politician slowly turned on her barstool, and the woman beside her smiled lazily, raising a mostly empty bottle of beer. The first thing Doris noticed – as disgustingly cliché as it was – were the eyes. Dark, almost black, and perfectly almond shaped; they twinkled in amusement at her reaction. The rest of the woman was

just as intriguing. At first glance, she was taller than Doris, but a quick flick of her gaze to the woman's feet revealed four-inch-heeled black leather boots. Pale, smooth skin, straight jet-black hair, loose, and perfectly arranged about her shoulders, as if she had individually placed each hair in position to enhance the 'bad girl' image she was obviously going for. A tight slate colored t-shirt, proudly proclaiming 'Chuck Norris counted to infinity... twice,' tucked into dark blue jeans only added to the effect. The bartender set down Doris' drink, interrupting her appraisal.

"So, what, or rather who, are you hiding from?" the standing woman asked, motioning for Sam to bring her a fresh beer. Sighing, Doris resigned herself to the very likely possibility of being caught by her ex, and the ensuing nasty scene. Maybe her new *friend* wouldn't hold it against her.

"You're the second person to ask me that this week, and, amusingly enough, the situation was very similar."

The Asian woman smirked, cocking her head to the side thoughtfully. "Lemme guess; that brunette in the corner, she's your ex, and you didn't know she was here until you sat down at the bar? And now you're too far from the door to make a clean getaway?"

"How remarkably perceptive of you," the politician said dryly, turning to fully face her companion and raising an eyebrow. "You know, you're awfully familiar. You remind me of-"

"If you say Ming Na, I'm leaving right now," the other woman threatened playfully.

"I was going to say someone who should have reported to my office a week ago, but that works too," Doris countered, snorting. The smaller woman had the good grace to blush.

"Sorry I, uh, get that a lot," she said sheepishly.

"Do you routinely not show up to meetings with city officials?" the blue-eyed woman asked, taking a sip of her drink. "Hmm, this is pretty good."

"Do I know you?" the Asian woman asked, and the Mayor chuckled again.

"Don't be coy with me, Detective Li."

They stared at each other for almost a minute, neither willing to budge, until, finally, Li smirked, nodding. "Am I famous or something?"

Doris chuckled again, rolling her eyes. "Hardly, Detective; no offense. Despite the fact that we have never been formally introduced, I make it a point to know the people who answer

to my Chief of Police. I also find it hard to believe that you don't recognize the Mayor of the sleepy little town you've sworn to protect and serve." The policewoman shrugged apologetically.

"I thought I'd pretend to give you some semblance of anonymity," she offered, a rueful grin showing off a set of perfectly straight white teeth.

"Ha, well, thank you, but I've accepted the fact that anywhere I step in this town, someone is going to recognize me."

"Fair enough. What's up with the hat, then?" Doris glared, and the shorter woman laughed, gesturing apologetically. "Not that it's not absolutely fabulous! How about we start again?"

Moving forward, so that there were mere inches between them, the dark-eyed woman slid her arm up between them, offering her hand. With a cocky smirk, she waggled her eyebrows. "Howdy there," she said, voice taking on a comical spaghetti Western lilt. Doris chuckled, and Li winked before continuing, voice going back to a normal, if lower register. "My name's Anna Li; I'm a detective for the Springfield PD, an Aries, and an avid college basketball fan. I've also been told I'm a pretty good dancer, and a decent pool player."

Accepting the hand, shivering ever so slightly as her fingers were caressed, Doris gulped down the rest of her cocktail. "Hello, Detective," she husked, inclining her head flirtatiously. "Quite the resume. I'm the Mayor of this fine city. Fancy meeting you here, and not in my office a week ago." Anna laughed, not releasing the hand in her grasp, instead using it to angle in closer.

"Sorry about that, but my new boss has been riding my ass hard since I got into town."

"That sounds uncomfortable."

"Could be worse, and I could definitely think of a few things that'll make up for it."

"Oh, very subtle; nice," Doris chided, rolling her eyes, but still not pulling away.

"I was gonna say like having such a beautiful Mayor as my employer, but sure, go there," Anna retorted, tongue-in-cheek.

"Can I get either of you anything else?" Sam interrupted, amused by their banter. "How about you, Casanova? Another beer?"

"No thank you. But if you beat it, there's a very attractive tip in it for you."

“Nuff said.” And she was gone, leaving them in the relative privacy of the corner of the bar.

“You know, you are ridiculously bold, and a little presumptuous,” Doris commented, smiling.

“I’m told those are two of my finer qualities,” Anna answered, nodding and grinning winningly, not apologetic in the least.

“Oh yeah? And the others?” the Mayor challenged, free hand coming up to toy with the empty beer bottle.

“Guess you’ll have to wait and find out. I think I will have another...”

Twenty minutes and two drinks later, Doris had almost forgotten about Jamanda. The woman in front of her was the perfect mix of daring and charming, her sharp wit and the alcohol mixing to create a misleading warm blanket of security around the Mayor’s consciousness. It helped that Anna was beautiful, but more so that she was obviously intelligent - an attribute sorely needed among Springfield’s finest - and almost painfully funny.

“Ways to know you did something wrong? You have to sugar-coat it for your police academy classmates. Lesson learned though, so I can only hope that the negatives were disposed of, as per the agreement,” Anna finished another amusing story, knocking back the rest of her PLCKS beer with a shrug.

“Oh my!” Doris giggled, her hand coming to her mouth as if to take the sound back.

“Ah, misspent youth... Whoops! Don’t look now, but your ex is on her way over.” Immediately, Doris froze, body tensing until it was hard to breathe. “How do you wanna play this?” Anna asked.

“Huh?”

“Either I don’t know you, and the two of you have an ugly fight in public by the look on her face,” Anna said, expression sympathetic and knowing. “Or I know you *very* well, and we make a semi-dignified escape... your call.”

“Uh, the latter option?”

“Good, I hoped you’d say that. Follow my lead.” Anna moved forward, into Doris’s space, until their faces were inches apart. “This will only hurt for a second,” she quipped, warm

breath caressing the other woman's cheek. Crossing the last bit of distance, she brought their lips together, free hand moving to tangle in the taller woman's hair.

"Doris? Is that you?" Pulling back and inhaling sharply, the Mayor gasped. "It is!"

"Ja-Jamanda..." she stuttered, eyes wide with panic. She caught sight of her ex standing just behind the detective, hands on her hips, face twisted in confusion and betrayal.

"How... How could you?" the younger woman whispered, eyes shiny with tears.

"Jamanda, I..."

"Ah, you must be her ex. Name's Anna Li," Anna interrupted, turning away from Doris and offering her hand to the shell-shocked third party.

"No one is talking to you," Jamanda hissed, confusion turning to anger as she refocused on the policewoman. She stepped forward, until she was standing directly in front of the mildly amused woman, whose hand was still out. "This is none of your business! Why don't you go wreck another relationship?"

"That's not very nice, especially considering, as I hear it, you two are not currently involved," the dark-haired woman replied, standing slowly, hand going casually to her belt. Something glinted, and Jamanda's eyes widened for a moment. "Now the two of us were just getting to know each other before you so rudely interrupted."

"I just bet you were," the taller woman growled, but stepped back.

"Oh, we definitely were. If you're here to be friendly, that's fine. But unless you have something of value to say, we were just leaving." Anna reached back and took hold of Doris's hand, pulling the other woman to her feet. "Nice to meet you."

Doris opened her mouth, but all that came out was a squeak, and she quickly shut it again. She found herself being pulled towards the door, and followed without resistance. Glancing back, she saw Jamanda shaking her head as she was pulled into a hug by the same woman she had seen her with on Monday.

Glaring, the Mayor turned her gaze forward again and lengthened her stride, so that she was leading. With a firm and determined tug, she directed Anna to her car, hitting the unlock button and waiting. "Um... we going we for a ride?" the other woman asked, clearly amused as she got into the car.

“Of your life,” Doris replied, getting into the driver’s seat. Without another look to the bar, she jammed the key into the ignition and started the car, peeling out of the parking lot.

The drive to the mayoral mansion was short and silent, though surprisingly comfortable. “Nice place,” Anna commented as Doris pulled into the driveway, unbuckling her seat belt. The car shut off with an air of finality, and the blue-eyed woman turned in her seat. She reached forward, jerking the other woman across the divide of their seats and crushing their mouths together.

“Less talking, more kissing,” she grunted, pulling back for a moment before recapturing the other’s woman’s lips.

Somehow they made it into the house and up the stairs without losing contact with each other, hands reaching out blindly to open doors and navigate the potentially hazardous interior. “Which room?” Anna whispered against Doris’ lips, simultaneously unbuttoning the taller woman’s slacks and kicking off her own boots. Instead of answering, Doris reached behind her soon-to-be lover and shoved open a door, hands yanking the t-shirt from Anna’s body and tossing it ahead of them. Backing her in, the taller woman nonchalantly kicked the door closed, ripping off her own top and discarding it.

“I’m not paying you to talk, Detective,” the Mayor growled, swiftly removing her shoes.

“Careful - that sounded positively incriminating.” Anna found herself shoved on the bed for her trouble.

“Shut up and kiss me,” Doris commanded, straddling the shorter woman.

Smiling insolently, the policewoman nodded. “Yes ma’am.”

~~*~*

ACT 5

Olivia paced back and forth in the confined space of the master bathroom, a frown firmly affixed to her face, fidgeting nervously with a wrapped box she clutched in her right hand. It was nine in the morning, way too early for her to be this wound up on a Saturday, but she couldn’t help it. She was fully dressed for the day, which was an odd occurrence in itself, considering it had become her practice to spend weekend mornings in her robe when she could get away with it. But today was special. Well, the day itself wasn’t anything noteworthy, but the night before she had promised herself that today was the day she would stop being such a scaredy-cat.

The box, which was rectangular and thin – she had been very clear that it couldn't be square – had been wrapped for more than a week now, and securely hidden in the drawer of the nightstand on her side of the bed since she had brought it home. It was a simple gift, really, a silver necklace with a butterfly pendant, which had diamond chips along its body. While on the shiny, perhaps even flashy, side, it was not nearly as expensive or extravagant as, oh say, a huge baby shower, or eighty-thousand dollars, or even the amount she had spent tracking down and getting that piece of molding for her, then not-yet lover, for Christmas. And yet, she had been holding onto it, afraid of what Natalia would say.

Taking a deep breath, she gathered her courage and strode purposefully out of the room, almost running smack into the woman she had been about to go find. She let out a little shriek, empty hand flying to her chest and clutching at the space above her heart. “Whoa there, where's the fire?” Natalia teased, giggling at the startled expression on her lover's face.

“Holy crap, I am getting a bell for you!” the startled woman said, wincing at the disapproving look her curse earned her. “Sorry, I, uh, was just coming to find you.”

“Oooo-kay..”

“Here!” Olivia exclaimed, shoving the present into her lover's hand before she had time to chicken out.

“What... what's this?” the shorter woman asked, brow creasing a little. She held the box away from herself, regarding it anxiously, almost as if she thought it would bite her.

Olivia took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. Taking Natalia by the arm, she led her to the bed and motioned for her to sit down. “I... I had this big speech planned out for when I gave you this,” she began, smiling nervously.

“Olivia...”

“No, no, lemme get it out, before I lose my nerve. First off, I want to reassure you that this isn't a marriage proposal.” Seeing the other woman sigh in relief, Olivia felt her own body relax a little. “We haven't talked about that, and while I know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you, I think it's kind of a crazy time, and things need to settle.”

“Okay... so?” Natalia prompted after a moment, motioning to the parcel in her hand.

“Right, well... open it...”

Nodding, the dark-haired woman did as she was told, gasping when the gift inside was revealed. "Oh, Olivia... it's beautiful..."

"Not as beautiful as you... wow, that was corny."

"And unbelievably sweet," Natalia added, reverently touching the diamond-studded pendant. "But much too expensive."

"Ah, ah, ah! Don't, please," Olivia pleaded, kneeling in front of the other woman and taking the necklace from her.

Before she could protest, Natalia found the silver chain being clasped into place around her neck, the metal surprisingly warm against her skin. She couldn't help the delighted smile that shaped her mouth and deepened her dimples. "Look, like I was saying, I had a speech prepared, but... I'll keep it simple. You're more than my lover or my best friend; you are my soul mate. I hate that term, it's so overused, but it's true. I was incomplete without you. You... you gave me wings, kiddo, and I've always wanted to fly." Chuckling ruefully, she rolled her eyes at herself. "There was some other stuff about hatching from my cocoon and metamorphosis and such, but I'll skip it."

"Oh, Olivia!" Natalia whimpered, tears streaming down her face.

"Ssshh, hey, this wasn't supposed to make you cry!" Olivia said frantically, hand cupping the other woman's face.

"Happy tears, I promise."

"Oh... good."

Reaching out, Natalia pulled her lover into her arms, burying her face in the taller woman's shoulder. "I love you so much," she whispered, pressing kisses onto the soft skin left exposed by her tank top.

"Love you too." The older woman replied, sighing happily and with a bit of relief. "So, you like it?"

"Of course I like it, silly! It's gorgeous." Natalia laughed and pulled away, wiping self-consciously at her face.

"Good. In payment, I expect you to put up with my crap for the foreseeable future."

"Language!" Natalia scolded, swatting Olivia's shoulder. "And, I guess I'll keep you around..."

“Gee, thanks.”

“Anytime.”

~~*~*

The sound of someone moving around in her bedroom was what initially pulled Doris from her sleep, but the smell of fresh coffee close by was what kept her from falling back into it. Breathing deeply, she cracked open an eye and spotted two mugs steaming lazily on the nightstand. The thought of caffeine made her groan quietly in pleasure and she stretched fully for long moments, ending with an undignified squeak. Muscles she had forgotten existed twinged in protest, and she couldn't help the smile that spread across her face. Sex with Jamanda had always been energetic and satisfying, but sex with Anna had been... positively *indecent*.

The dark-eyed woman had spent no less than an hour keeping her on the verge of orgasm, without letting her fall over the edge. Phantom sensations of lips on her skin, teeth nipping at her hip bones, a talented tongue dragging its way down her body, and fingers, first gentle then rough, washed over her, causing her to blush. She wasn't entirely sure, and hoped that her memory was failing her, but she vaguely remembered *begging* at some point. She would deny it should it ever be brought up, but at the time she had been beyond herself with need. Her only comfort was that she gave as good as she got, and that the other woman would have a few bruises to remember her by.

Hearing the shower turned off, Doris suddenly became cognizant of the fact that, if she was in bed, she couldn't be in the bathroom, or have made coffee. Quickly shutting her eyes again, she rolled over, back to the opening door. The bed dipped down behind her, and she felt warm droplets of water splash on to her back as her newest detective leaned over and kissed her bare shoulder.

“Don't have a heart attack, I'm not expecting a set of keys or anything.” Anna murmured, tone amused, her damp hand encircling the prone woman's waist as she slid back under the covers. “A ‘good morning’ wouldn't go against your religion, would it?” she added, shivering a little at the cool air. Releasing the breath she had been holding, Doris slowly turned in the smaller woman's arms. “Well hello there.”

“Uh, hi...” the blue-eyed woman whispered, voice rough with sleep.

“I considered pretending that I was one of those crazy, clingy women, but you looked so tense I was afraid you'd burst a blood vessel.” Doris groaned, closing her eyes again. Anna chuckled, bumping their foreheads together lightly. “Hey, relax, Boss. This doesn't have to go beyond today, if you don't want it to.” Smirking, she nipped at the mortified woman's

chin. "I didn't think you'd mind me spending the night, considering I could barely walk after last night, wild woman. Also figured using your shower was kosher, considering we're already past the naked stage."

"Just tell me one thing..." Doris began, after long moments of silence.

"Shoot."

"Did you really flash your badge at Jamanda last night?" the taller woman asked, opening her eyes.

"Ah, noticed that, did you?" Anna chuckled, flipping the sheets up and tangling their legs together. "I had a feeling things could get a little messy. I didn't want to have to arrest the poor girl for assaulting an officer of the law when she didn't know..."

"That was very kind of you."

The dark-eyed woman shrugged, moving forward to kiss her lover's jaw. "What can I say, I'm a stand-up kinda gal."

"You know, for someone who doesn't want to be labeled clingy, you're awfully... close right now," Doris said dryly, raising an eyebrow as Anna wrapped her arms around her waist, lips slowly moving downward.

"Difference between... clingy... and *friendly*..." the police detective corrected between kisses.

"Fair enough," the Mayor agreed, biting her lip to keep from moaning.

The sound of "Secret Agent Man" filled the air, startling both women. "Oh, you are fucking *kidding* me!" Anna grumbled, releasing her hold with a sigh and rolling over, towards the sound. Blindly, she rooted around on the floor, hand snagging her pants and plucking her cell phone from her pocket. "Li," she growled. After listening for a moment, she sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, pinning the phone between her shoulder and ear as she pulled on her jeans and searched for her socks. "Yeah, okay. No problem. Give me half an hour. Yeah, be there, right." Locating her shirt, she yanked that on, not bothering with her bra, which she scooped up and shoved in her back pocket.

With a final grunt, which could have been goodbye, the policewoman snapped the device shut, turning and smiling apologetically. "Sorry Boss, duty calls." Leaning across the expanse of the bed, Anna kissed the stunned woman again briefly. "You know where to find me if you want to do this again. Ciao." And without another word, or a glance back, she was gone.

“Bye...”

~~*~*

“I can’t thank you enough for doing this,” Jonathan said again, and Olivia rolled her eyes, moving to accept the tiny, shy child into her arms. “This meeting came out of nowhere, and Lizzie is caught up in a family thing...”

“It’s a Saturday, and we didn’t have anything planned. Enough already; go to your meeting!”

“I owe you Aunt Liv, really,” he insisted.

“It’s no problem, really. I get to spend time with my favorite grand-niece... ugh, now I feel old.” The adults both chuckled. Shifting the girl higher on her hip with one arm, she reached out and stroked her nephew’s stubbly cheek. If Natalia were watching she would probably catch hell for holding the child, even though she barely weighed a thing. “You know I’d do anything for you, kiddo. This is hardly a burden, all right?” He nodded, relief palpable.

“Hey there, Princess, how are you today? Ready to have a great time with your cousin?” Olivia asked softly, brushing curls away from the girl’s face so she could see her eyes. Her heart clenched for a moment; would this be what Francesca looked like, all big, inquisitive eyes and waves of ink-black hair? Sarah nodded hesitantly, glancing back at her father for reassurance.

He smiled and ruffled her hair before backing away slowly. “Have fun, baby girl; don’t cause trouble.”

The child sighed, but some of the tension slid from her body. “Kay Daddy... come back soon.”

“Won’t even notice I’m gone,” he replied, winking before turning and jogging to his car.

Olivia and Sarah were still for long moments, sizing each other up. Finally, the woman smiled and bounced the girl a little. “How ‘bout we go inside and see if Aunt Natalia is done with lunch, huh, pretty girl?” She got a tentative nod in return.

“Can I have candy?”

“Ha, sure, why not? I think we may have a bit left over from Halloween. I’m sure I can convince your cousin to let you have some of hers...”

“Kay.”

An hour later, Olivia smiled at her partner as she reached out for another dish to dry. “Two bambinos, fed, cleaned, and quietly amusing themselves. See, I told ya, simple as pie. Having two girls around is going to be a cinch...” Natalia rolled her eyes but nodded indulgently.

“I have to admit, it’s a lot quieter than I thought it would be...” she admitted, shrugging and rinsing the soap off the last of the plates. “There, all done. What next?”

“Well,” Olivia drawled, taking the dish and placing it still wet on the counter. “I was thinking, if the girls are busy entertaining themselves, we could...” she trailed off, pulling the bemused woman into her arms and trailing light kisses across her jaw.

“Oh yeah, ya think?” Natalia whispered breathlessly, eyes fluttering closed. “Awful presumptuous of you.”

“Hmmm, but you love me anyway,” Olivia murmured against olive skin.

Suddenly there was a loud crash in the living room, and both women closed their eyes, one wincing in sympathy, the other counting to ten in her head to keep from screaming. They both knew the only thing in the house that could make that particular crunching noise was Olivia’s laptop, which had been left out on the end table next to the couch.

After long moments of dead silence, Olivia opened her eyes. “Okay, that’s it! We’re going outside!” she announced, clenching her jaw in an effort to quell any yelling.

“Sweetie, we should really sit them down and talk to them about-” Green eyes flashed dangerously for a moment, before calming.

“I am way, way too pissed to *talk* right now. I’m just thanking my past self for randomly backing up all the important files on my external drive.”

Taking a deep breath to further encourage herself to keep control, Olivia raised her hand to stall any more arguments. “Better to get everyone outside and away from anything else breakable. Accidents happen, shouldn’t have left that there with a nine-year-old and a four-year-old running around. My mistake, lesson learned.” She spotted the two culprits hovering around the connecting door, looking appropriately apologetic and nervous.

“But-”

“Nope, outside, *everyone*, before I say something I regret,” she insisted, glaring at her daughter and niece and pointing to the door. “Out. *Now*.”

Obediently, the girls shuffled towards the door. “Ah, ah, ah, whoa there!” Natalia called, glaring at Olivia for a moment before moving towards the children.

“Coats first; no getting sick on my watch!” Grabbing the appropriate outerwear, the Latina gave her partner a pointed look. “That means you help. Two little people, two adults,” she added, chucking the smaller of the jackets towards the other woman.

“Right away, commandant!” Olivia mocked, nevertheless moving to do what she was told.

By the time they had the girls suited up, out the door, and happily running around the yard, Olivia had almost forgotten about the pile of metal and plastic that had been her laptop. Watching her daughter giggle in delight as she pretended to be a monster and chase her cousin, who shrieked happily and zipped about the grass, filled her with warmth and peace. “I always wished Emma had a sister closer in age,” she confessed, sitting down on the porch bench and reclining, resting her arm along the back.

“Yeah?” Natalia sat down beside her, looking over at her for a moment and smiling, before turning back and watching the children roll around on the multi-colored leaves which had begun to cover everything.

“Yeah. Someone to play with, y’know? To be a kid with, instead of spending all her time around adults.”

“Hmmm, she does seem to really enjoy being around Sarah. I hope she feels the same way about the baby,” Natalia replied, hand resting lightly on her stomach.

“I’ve been a little worried...”



Moving closer, so that the line of their bodies were in full contact, Olivia rested her chin on Natalia's shoulder, wrapping an arm around the pregnant woman's back and pulling her against her chest. "Hey, it's all going to work out, okay? I know it's been a really stressful few weeks, but she seems absolutely thrilled at the idea of being a big sister."

"Yeah... I guess. I just, I worry..."

Closing her eyes, Olivia nuzzled her cheek against the other woman's, inhaling her scent. "We love each other, and we're a family. Everything else is going to follow from that."

"Promise?" Natalia asked, the tight control she kept over her doubts to slipping for a moment.

"Cross my second heart." Natalia smiled, and Olivia felt it against her cheek.

Reaching up, the Latina covered the hand that was resting lightly against her chest. "You are entirely too good to me, you know that don't you?"

"Yeah, I know," Olivia replied breezily. "Have to show all the boys how it's done." Chuckling, Natalia pulled away, turning so she was able to see her partner.

Cupping the other woman's face, she looked deeply into the eyes she loved so much.

"Thank you."

"For what, being your sugar mama?"

"Nooo, she who thinks she's so clever," Natalia groaned, tapping Olivia's chin with her finger. "Thank you for... for loving me, and giving me, us, another chance even though I-I didn't..." she trailed off, emotion causing a lump to rise in her throat. Instantly, arms pulled her close, cradling her face against a strong shoulder.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," Olivia murmured, hand combing through dark hair, massaging her lover's scalp soothingly. "It's me who should be thanking you. You gave me a second chance at life, at *really* living. How about we call it even and go from there?"

Natalia sniffled against the thin fabric of the taller woman's tank top. "Sounds good," was the muffled reply.

Pulling back, the brown-eyed woman frowned. "How did you manage to get out of the house with no jacket on?"

"My laziness, plus your distractedness?" the businesswoman offered, grinning charmingly.

"Aren't you cold?"

"Well, now that you mention it..." Olivia replied, shivering a little. "How about I go for hot chocolate and overcoat reinforcements, and meet you back here in ten?" Gently, she wiped away the few tears that had managed to escape her partner's eyes.

"Okay. But don't take too long."

"Won't even notice I'm gone."

"Lies," Natalia disagreed, smiling weakly. "Also, use the semi-sweet chocolate, not the Swiss Miss junk. That packaged stuff is bad for you."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..."

Olivia entered the farmhouse, exhaling noisily in relief at the rush of warm air that greeted her. She hadn't noticed how chilly she was until her lover had pointed it out; perhaps jeans and a tank top hadn't been the wisest of choices to brave the autumn afternoon. "First things first," she said to herself. "Hot cocoa, jacket, then... the world!" Walking to the

pantry for the Swiss Miss, she grinned. Natalia wouldn't be able to tell the difference... would she? Sighing in resignation, she pulled out the less sweet, 'healthier' option. "If this didn't take five times as long, it would taste better," she grumbled under her breath, moving to the refrigerator for milk.

Humming to herself and gazing out the window as the milk simmered on the stove, Olivia couldn't help but smile. Sarah and Emma were taking turns leap-frogging over each other, laughing loudly enough for her to hear whenever one of them fell over into a pile of leaves. It was one of the cutest things she had ever seen, and made her heart feel lighter. Her thoughts turned to the future, to autumn weekends with her and Natalia, Emma and Francesca, and maybe even Rafe, and suddenly she found herself excited by the idea.

The sound of her phone ringing brought her out of her musings, and she pulled it from her pocket, answering absently without bothering to look at the caller. "Olivia Spencer."

"Olivia Spencer," the voice on the other end mocked, and instantly she smiled. Shifting the phone onto her shoulder and pinning it with her ear, she turned off the burner, giving the hot cocoa a final stir.

"Sammy? Is that you?" she asked, unable to keep the giddiness from her tone.

"The one and only. How's my favorite Springfield resident?"

"Fabulous, fantastic, and phenomenal, as always. How's my favorite baby brother?" she countered, grabbing two large mugs and carefully pouring in the steaming liquid.

"Not to mention your favorite eldest daughter," another voice added, startling her so that she splashed some of her drink onto her hand.

Wincing, she hastily replaced the saucepan onto the cooling burner. "Ouch!"

"You okay?"

"Ava, sweetie, is that you?" the woman asked around the fingers jammed into her mouth.

"Indeed. Are you okay, Mom?"

"Yup, just clumsy," she said, snorting at herself. Walking over to the sink, she turned on the tap and stuck her hand under the lukewarm water. "Note to self, when chocolate is boiling lava hot, you can't dip your hands in and hope to come out unscathed." Twin laughs echoed over the line.

“So, how did it come to pass that my daughter and brother are in the same place at the same time?” Olivia prompted.

“Guy walks into a bar...” Ava replied, trailing off with a chuckle.

“I got an assignment that posted me in the Bay area for a bit, and decided to look up Miss Thing,” Sam said, and Olivia could almost see him shrug.

“He showed up at the bar I manage and charmed a few drinks from my bartenders,” the younger woman added, snorting.

“That’s my boy,” her mother snickered, rolling her eyes.

“So, tell me, to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?” Olivia asked after a moment. Grabbing her mug and bringing it to her lips, she blew over the rim before taking a sip. The chocolate was still too hot, and she winced as it scalded her tongue.

“We had a question for you, actually,” Sam announced, drawing her attention from her wounded mouth.

“No, you can’t use my bra as a slingshot for your action figures,” she said immediately, smiling when he laughed.

“That was *once*, jeez! Let it go already, woman; you sure do hold a grudge,” he grouched.

“Don’t wanna know,” Ava chimed in.

“Ah, misspent youth,” the man said nostalgically. “I would do it all again...”

“Sam, focus!” Ava chided, sounding like she had spent quite some time corralling his wandering thoughts and was reaching her limit. Olivia chuckled in sympathy.

“Right!” he continued, and again, Olivia could almost see the expression on his face; innocently wide eyed, with a dash of mischief. “So, we were wondering if you had enough room for two more at your Thanksgiving table?”

“Oh, Sammy... are you serious?” she asked, chest tightening with emotion at the thought of being able to see her brother and eldest daughter again.

“As the IRS,” he joked, but she could hear the same emotion reflected in his voice.

“Yes, of course...” she whispered, tears pricking at the backs of her eyes. “I always have room for you; you know that.” She wanted to say more, but didn’t trust herself not to cry.

“So, what’s new with you, sister o’ mine?” Sam asked after long moments of silence, and Olivia could hear him swallowing hard.

“Long story short?” she asked, glancing out the window and wiping her eyes before turning her attention to the second, half-filled mug, and finishing the task of pouring out the rest of the hot chocolate.

“Sure.”

“Moved into Cassie’s old farmhouse with my girlfriend, and we’re expecting a baby in less than a month,” she rattled off, enjoying the stunned silence that followed.

“Natalia’s pregnant?” Ava squealed, sounding completely ecstatic.

“You’re dating *Natalia*?” Sam asked, sounding completely lost. “Doesn’t she hate you?”

“I did say long story *short*.”

“Well, you’ll have to tell us when we get there, because I am getting death glares from your daughter,” Sam whined.

“Sorry Mom, but I have work in a bit, and I have to get ready...” Ava apologized.

“No problem, sweetheart. I’m glad that you guys called, and I can’t wait to see you again!” Olivia replied, setting the empty pot into the sink and wiping up the rest of her mess with a damp dish rag.

“Love ya, Big Sis,” Sam sang, and the woman couldn’t help but laugh.

“Love you too, Little Bro.”

“Love you, Mom! See you soon!”

“Love you, honey. Bye-bye.”

Stepping outside, jacket snugly zipped and carefully balancing two mugs of hot cocoa as she pulled the door closed behind her, Olivia Spencer took a deep breath of the crisp November air.

“Took you long enough,” Natalia teased, reaching out gratefully to accept her drink. “Who was on the phone?”

“How did you know I was on the phone?” the taller woman asked, sitting beside her lover and sipping at her treat.

“Well, I heard you having a conversation. So, either you were having a psychotic episode, or you got a call,” was the amused, but reasonable reply. Nodding, Olivia had to agree with the logic.

“Sam and Ava called.”

“Oh! How nice! What did they say?” Natalia asked, smiling.

“They want to come to Thanksgiving; I told them it was okay.” Olivia paused mid-drink, looking over at her partner. “Is... is it okay that I invited them? I mean, I... I just miss them so much...”

Smiling gently, Natalia set her mug on the ground, taking Olivia’s free hand in her own. “Of course it’s okay,” she assured, free hand coming up to stroke her beloved’s cheek. “This is your home too.”

“I know, I just... I realize it’s going to be crazy, and with the baby coming, you have to rest...” Olivia replied, frowning.

“They’re your family, querida, which means they’re *my* family,” Natalia assured her, leaning forward and kissing the other woman softly, before pulling back and resting their foreheads together. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

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After more than an hour of running around outside, the girls were convinced to come inside, with the promise of a snack, which they consumed like ravenous beasts.

“Auntie O, Natalia? Sarah?” a deep voice called from the living room, startling the women and children as they were contemplating getting up to clean up after themselves.

“In here, Jonathan,” Olivia shouted, wincing at the glare she received from her lover. Heavy footsteps moved toward them, and the man appeared in the doorway.

“Daddy!” Sarah cried, jumping up from her chair and running to him, wrapping her small arms around his leg. Smiling, he knelt and pulled her into his arms.

“Hey there, baby girl. Ready to get going?” he asked, standing and swinging her around.

“Daddy, can Emma sleep over today?” Sarah asked, batting her eyelashes and smiling winningly.

“Oh, I don’t know, baby girl... It’s up to her mommies,” he replied hesitantly, loathe to deny his daughter anything.

Three sets of eyes turned to the women in question, who both just shrugged. “If you don’t mind...” Natalia began, cut off by Emma’s happy squeal. Jumping out of her chair as well, the nine-year-old hugged them both quickly, before dashing off to her room.

“Be right back!” she shouted over her shoulder.

“Jellybean, don’t run in the house,” Olivia called after her, rolling her eyes when the sound of the girl’s footsteps seemed increased in speed.

“So, what time do you want speed racer back tomorrow?” Jonathan asked, sliding into an empty chair and settling his daughter into his lap.

“Um, anytime between ten and two?” Olivia asked, looking over at her lover for confirmation. Natalia nodded, smiling at Sarah, who grinned and stuck her hand out across the table.

The woman reached forward to take it, surprised when the girl pulled it back at the last second, giggling.

“Oh, you got me!” the dark-haired woman lamented, pouting and clutching her chest in mock sadness. “You’re just too quick for me.”

“Be faster!” Sarah commanded, sticking out her tongue playfully.

“Sarah!” Jonathan scolded, shocked.

“Ha, yup, she’s definitely yours,” Olivia teased, winking at the girl, who smiled back smugly.

“Kay, I’m ready!” Emma exclaimed, rushing back into the room, knapsack – stuffed to the brim – on her back.

“Did you pack your entire room?” Olivia asked, eyeing the bulging bag dubiously. She gave it ten minutes before it exploded, taking the surrounding area with it.

“No, Mommy! Just clothes and dolls and my book,” Emma replied, rolling her eyes. “Can we go now?”

“Over-packs and impatient, yup, she’s definitely yours,” Jonathan said, setting Sarah on the floor before standing and moving around the table, kissing the seated women in turn. “I’ll bring her back as intact as possible,” he promised, winking at his aunt.

“I’d worry more about your house than anything else,” the older woman quipped, deciding not to tell him about her computer, which she had tossed sadly into the trash before they had sat down to their snack.

“Bye Mommy, bye Natalia!” Emma said, hugging both women again before moving to the door and grabbing her coat. Slipping it on, she grabbed Sarah’s and held it out for her, helping the younger girl into it.

“Bye Auntie ‘Talia, Auntie ‘Livia,” Sarah said, following Emma’s example and embracing them.

“Bye Bean, bye Princess,” Olivia called after them, throwing up her hands and shaking her head when they zipped out the door without looking back.

“Auntie O, Natalia.” Jonathan chuckled, waving and stepping outside, pulling the door shut behind him. After a moment they heard the car start up and drive away.

Standing up unison and looking at the closed door, the two women turned to each other. They stared into each other’s eyes for long moments, slow smiles spreading across their faces. “You know...” Natalia began, moving forward and insinuating herself into her lover’s arms.

“This is probably the last time... in a *long* time...” Olivia continued, dropping kisses across the shorter woman’s face, starting at her hairline and working her way to lips.

“We’ll be completely alone together...” the Latina finished, grinning.

“You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?”

“First one to the couch gets to pick the movie!” Natalia exclaimed, making a break for the living room with a squeal. “We’re watching something with subtitles!”

“Aw, crap...” Olivia muttered, following at a more sedate, defeated pace.

“Language!” the other woman called from the other room.

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Anna loved few things more than she loved the smell of hot, fresh tea. Despite coming from an island where the hot drink of choice was coffee, it was only since coming to the United States that she had learned to appreciate the taste and effects of the bitter brew. Her household had been one without the influence of the roasted bean, and because of it, the beverage first in her heart would always be tea. The scent conjured memories of quiet nights on the beach and long talks with her father...

Sighing in contentment, she poured the boiling water into her traditional teapot slowly, letting the liquid strain through the leaves and through the mesh, savoring the smell. Almost more than the taste, she enjoyed the act of preparing the drink; it was calming in its precise method, something that reminded her of home, and gave her a sense of control. Through her movements, she directed the course of the tea, allowing her mind to unwind and drift; it was a form of meditation, though she would never admit that out loud, having little patience for that sort of thing otherwise. Placing the kettle on a cool burner, she turned and retrieved the lid to her pot, sliding it on before picking the fragile ceramic up and filling her mug.

Sitting quickly at her table, she raised the cup to her lips, jerking and spilling her drink at the sound of her phone ringing. With a growl, she rolled her eyes and stood, setting down the cup, grabbing the offending object in one hand and a dish cloth in the other. “What can I do for you?” she asked, tone bland, as she wiped at the table.

“How did your meeting with my partner go?” the voice on the other end asked, not bothering with pleasantries either.

“Uneventfully. I didn’t have much to report, and he was distracted.”

“Distracted?”

“Had other obligations he had to return to,” she replied, tossing the soiled cloth into the sink and grabbing the half-full mug, moving to her living room and sitting on the couch. “Don’t fret, *Sir*, we made another appointment to exchange information.”

“Not in public, I hope?” he asked.

She scowled, voice taking on an edge. “I understand that you wish you could be here, taking care of this personally, but that’s no reason to question my ability. I am good at what I do, and I am giving this mission my full attention.”

“Funny, I heard otherwise. How’s the Mayor involved in this?”

Anna froze, dark eyes widening for a moment, before narrowing. How had he been spying on her? Who else did her employer have working this mission?

“She’s close to the family of one of the two targets,” she replied slowly, mind racing.

“Sleeping with a high-ranking political official is *not* keeping a low profile, *Anna*,” he growled. She felt her hackles rising, and had to swallow her first retort.

“You gave me full authority to proceed however I saw fit during this mission. Involving myself with her will allow me to gain social access to the targets, to be trusted more quickly,” she ground out, jaw clenched tight. “You said it yourself more than once, we are running out of time.”

“Make sure that you aren’t getting sloppy in the interest of *time*,” he replied.

“No, *Sir*.”

“I expect a report by Friday of your progress.”

“Yes S-” The line went dead. “ir..”

Fuming for long moments, Anna gazed down into her tea, her reflection distorted as the liquid rippled slowly. Standing with an outwardly calm appearance, she tilted her head, before hurling the mug against the wall. Smiling with a dark satisfaction as the ceramic shattered and the fluid sprayed out, staining the white of the wall paper, she looked to the painting well above the mess. It depicted one of the shorelines of San Cristobel during a hurricane, done in grays, blues, blacks, with some yellows. It was the only thing she had brought with her from home. “Soon,” she whispered, sighing and scrubbing her face tiredly with her hand. “Soon.”

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Glancing around the living room as she walked in from the kitchen carrying two mugs of decaff tea, Olivia tilted her head in confusion. Popcorn: check; warm snuggling blanket: check; movie that she wouldn’t be caught dead watching for anyone but her lover: check. So, where the hell was her lover? “Natalia, honey?” Olivia called up the stairs, plopping

down onto the couch, frowning. Really, how long did it take that woman to pee? Olivia had managed to make a huge bowl of popcorn, two cups of tea, and check her email on her blackberry since the younger woman had gone upstairs.

“Could you come up here for a second?” Natalia’s voice floated down. Alarmed, Olivia stood and hurried up the stairs.

The first thing she noticed was that the hallway was dark, a soft, flickering glow emanating from the open door to the master bedroom. “This is either going to be really good, or really, *really* badly,” she muttered to herself, cautiously making her way towards where she assumed her lover was. The quiet made her edgy, and she attempted humor to steady herself. “Fee, fie, fo, fum, I... oh my...” she trailed off as she entered the room, breath catching. “Definitely good...”

The curtains had been drawn and the main lights had been turned off, replaced by countless strings of Christmas lights. They were everywhere: wrapped around the windowsills, on the bed posts, snaking up the walls like magically illuminated ivy. They softened the sharp edges of reality, making it seem to the hotelier as if she had walked into an enchanted version of her life. And there on the bed, naked as the day she was born, Natalia lay propped against the headboard like a Shakespearean dream, completing the surreal-ness of the moment. Dark eyes twinkling in the muted light, the woman-cum-goddess raised an arm, beckoning the dumbfounded Olivia forward.

Reaching the side of the bed, she stopped, uncharacteristically unsure of the next step. Giggling, Natalia grasped her hand and tugged until she got the message and climbed onto the bed. Gingerly Olivia straddled the reclining woman’s thighs, mindful of her belly. “Hi,” Natalia whispered, pushing herself up with her free arm, bringing them face to face, as close as possible.

“Uh, hi...” Olivia mumbled blinking slowly, not entirely convinced she hadn’t fallen asleep on the couch and that this was all a dream. “Just to, uh, be clear... I’m not unconscious, right? This isn’t some sort of exhaustion induced, hormone driven coma?”

“Would it matter if it was?” Natalia asked, frowning, truly curious.

“Nope!” Olivia replied, shaking her head and gently running her lips along the naked woman’s throat. “I just want to know if I should expect any furniture or appliances to randomly burst into song.”

“You’re very strange,” the younger woman said, lying back again and rolling her eyes.

“Part of my charm,” was the easy reply, muffled as the green-eyed woman braced her arms on either side of her lover and moved in for a kiss.

Pulling back a few inches and grinning, Olivia looked around and chuckled. “How badly would it ruin the mood if I said it was like a Danielle Steele novel in here?” she teased, scrunching her nose a little.

Natalia laughed, hands tangling in her lover’s hair. “I was going for ‘enchanting’ and ‘dreamy,’ but, yeah... kinda pulp romance novel-y, huh?” She paused, frowning a little, suddenly embarrassed. “Too much?”

Olivia shook her head, trailing kisses down Natalia’s throat. “Ignore my cynicism,” she instructed, distracted by the curve of the woman’s collarbone. “Defense mechanism. This is perfect... you’re perfect.”

“Oh... good...” Natalia moaned encouragingly, drawing the other woman closer, breath catching in her throat. “Glad you... approve...”

Instead of answering verbally, Olivia moved down, capturing a hardening nipple gently between her teeth and flicking it with her tongue. Smiling smugly at her lover’s gasp, she shifted her weight to her right arm and brought the left up to cup the other breast. “Have I mentioned lately how painfully beautiful you are?” she whispered, kissing and then swirling her tongue against pebbled flesh.

“Might, oh my, have mentioned it...” Natalia gasped, urging her lover up for another kiss with a gentle tug at her hair.

“You are wearing entirely too many clothes,” she admonished when they came up for air.

“What are you going to do about it?” Olivia challenged, attaching her lips to the column of the dark-haired woman’s throat.

“Either you, yes! Either you take ‘em off... Or I rip ‘em off...” Pulling back a bit, the green-eyed woman chuckled.

“Fair enough.”

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“Well, that was...” Olivia whispered, using the last of her strength to roll away from her lover before collapsing.

“Yeah, it really was...” Natalia agreed, smiling proudly and turning, propping her head up on her right hand. “Not bad for a pregnant lady.”

“Let it *never* be said that I ever doubted your abilities!” the older woman said hoarsely, voice cracking. Natalia giggled at that, reaching out with her free hand and trailing it down her lover’s still quivering abdomen. “No, please, mercy!” the older woman cried feebly.

“Getting too weak to keep up with your pregnant girlfriend, huh? I need to start feeding you more; you need to build up stamina, and you’re getting kinda thin,” the dark-haired woman teased, pinching Olivia’s hip.

“Hey!” the boneless woman protested weakly, turning her head fractionally to glare. “Take that back.”

“Aw, I’m sorry sweetie,” Natalia cooed, completely unapologetic.

“I’ll have you know, I have the stamina of ten women, and the curves of a Greek statue...” Olivia grumbled. She inhaled sharply through her nose as the other woman’s hand wandered to oversensitive, overheated areas.

“Aphrodite in the flesh,” the younger woman hummed in agreement, her expression oh-so-innocent.

Whimpering, Olivia rolled away and got to her feet, backing away from the bed, towards the adjoining bathroom. “I love you, and lust after you like no other, but if you keep touching me I am going to implode,” she groaned, eyes pleading. Natalia pouted, dimples deepening. “Ugh, don’t do that, that’s cheating!”

“Fiiiine, ya big baby.”

“At least lemme take a shower; I’m all sweaty...”

“Go, be clean,” Natalia conceded, waved her arm dismissively. “But hurry back.” With a sigh of relief, the green-eyed woman blew her lover a kiss and escaped to the bathroom.

Starting the shower and stepping in, Olivia moaned quietly in appreciation. Leaning forward, she allowed the steaming, hot water to pour over her head and down her neck and shoulders, easing some of the tension in her muscles. She thanked every god she could think of for the pain in her joints; she had completely earned it, and had enjoyed every second thoroughly. Having a younger, pregnant lover certainly had its perks, but she needed to start stretching more often if tonight was any indication of how things were going to be between them in bed...

“Olivia?” Natalia called softly from the other room, and Olivia realized she had dozed off under the spray. With a wry chuckle, she shut off the water and grabbed a towel, wrapping herself in the soft material and wandering back into the bedroom. Stopping short, she frowned at the sight of her partner fully dressed. Noting the small carry-on bag at her side, the businesswoman stopped breathing.

“You might, uh, want to get dressed...” Natalia whimpered, her free arm wrapped around her stomach. “I think we’re gonna need to go for a drive...”

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To Be Continued in Episode Three...