

Circle of Life

by Geekgrllurking

ACT 1

A late November wind sent a wave of fallen maple leaves tumbling across the yard of the farmhouse as Emma Spencer pressed her nose against the screen door and sighed. Still no telltale plume of dust from her mother's white Nissan coming down the driveway. Disappointed, she closed the inside door and wandered into the kitchen, plopping down onto one of the wooden chairs at the table, bored.

Picking out a colored pencil from the slim box, Emma continued to color her "flags of the world" project for school. Her daddy had dropped her off in the morning with plenty of time to say good bye to Ava and Uncle Sam before her mommy took them to the airport. She had already watched *High School Musical* and played Wii bowling with Uncle Jonathan, beating him easily. She'd finally had no choice but to break out her homework to pass the time.

Emma's mind wandered as she worked. Maybe now Natalia would be home more and want to do stuff together like before. Mommy had said Natalia would be sore for awhile but she knew there would still be lots she could do to help out with her new baby sister. It seemed like forever since she had seen Francesca in the hospital with Natalia, with her little scrunchy face and tiny fingers. She couldn't wait for the little squirmy baby to come home.

"Hey munchkin, still no sign of them?" Jonathan leaned against the doorframe and watched the girl coloring away on the flag for Italy. *'She must be bored if she's doing her homework.'*

"Nope." Another big sigh, before she reached for a green pencil.

"Wanna check out the ducks again?" Jonathan stepped closer to the kitchen table as Emma began to fill in a space on the page.

"Not really."

“Maybe we could watch another movie. I’ve only seen the Hannah Montana movie twice and you know how I love her music, so if you wanted to we could put it on.” Jonathan smiled while cringing inside at the thought of actually having to sit through it yet again.

Movement from outside suddenly caught his eye and Jonathan froze, going on high alert. Jeffrey’s most recent message had said to stay vigilant. He relaxed, however, as he quickly recognized who it was.

“I don’t feel like it right now.” Emma sighed, not noticing the door being quietly opened behind her.

“Then how about giving your baby sister a big welcome home, Jellybean?” Olivia smiled from the door as she ushered in a slow-moving Natalia and her tiny bundle.

“Mom! Natalia!” Emma leapt up from her chair and threw herself at Olivia and then pounced on her other mother and the baby. “I’m so glad you’re all home!”

“Sshh, she’s sleeping, sweetie.” Natalia hushed her and quickly checked to see if the little girl in her arms had woken. Francesca shifted slightly but didn’t wake. She looked back into Emma’s beaming face and grinned. It was good to finally be home again.

“Can I hold her? Can I, please?” Emma practically shook with excitement, but spoke softly. Olivia glanced at Natalia to make sure she was holding up okay and then nodded at her daughter.

“On the couch though, Emma.” Olivia chuckled as the girl took off like a shot into the living room and then gasped as she suddenly found herself wrapped in a big bear hug.

“Congrats, Auntie O, you’re a mommy! Again.” Jonathan’s eyes twinkled with mirth as he squeezed the older woman and lifted her off the ground. Finally letting the laughing woman go, he wisely didn’t comment on the happy tears glittering in her eyes. Turning to the small, sleeping child in Natalia’s arms, he grabbed a tiny hand and gave it a little wiggle.

“What a lucky little lady you are, with all this love around you,” he whispered, trying not to wake the girl. Natalia smiled shyly up at him before slowly making her way into the living room with Francesca, to find Emma.

“Thanks again for looking after Emma for us at the last minute this afternoon. Poor Jane sounded like she was coughing up a lung. I hope it’s not H1N1 or something.” Olivia quickly tugged off her jacket and hung it up on a hook before heading towards the living room to help get Natalia settled.

“No problem. Lizzie had Sarah for most of the long weekend, so I was at loose ends today anyway.” Jonathan stuck his hands deeply into his pockets and followed Olivia into the adjacent room. They paused, watching as Natalia stiffly bent over and slid the baby onto Emma’s waiting lap.

“Now just put one arm around her here, like that so that you keep her close, and put your other hand under here to help support Sweet Pea’s head.” Natalia moved a pillow a little closer to help keep the baby wedged against Emma’s body. Olivia appeared beside her partner and helped her out of her jacket before Natalia gingerly sat down beside Emma. She let out a big sigh of relief and just let herself relax, glad to be home.

“Hi, Sweet Pea.” Emma was thrilled as the baby’s eyes blinked open and stared back at her. “You’re going to love it here. We’ve got ducks and lots of places to explore. And your room is so pretty.”

Francesca stared up, and kicked her feet a little in response. Emma giggled and looked up at her mommy. Natalia reached over and tugged back the pink blanket so the baby could move a bit more easily. A little hand started to push against Emma’s tummy, which made her look back down and giggle again.

Olivia’s heart melted a little at the sight of Emma, Natalia and the newest member of their family snuggled together on the couch. A wave of pure joy washed over her, stealing her breath away.

Was this really her life? Sometimes it still felt like it was all too good to be true, like she didn’t deserve to be this happy. A part of her was waiting for the other shoe to drop and for everything to be taken away from her. Natalia looked up at that moment, as if sensing her doubts, and as their eyes locked, something deep inside Olivia seemed to slide into place. Her family was home.

“Hey, y’know from this angle she kinda looks like Frank...” Jonathan teased, chuckling harder as Olivia smacked his stomach with the back of her hand. It was almost too easy to yank her chain sometimes.

“No she doesn’t. She looks like Natalia.” Emma looked up and pointed at a little dimple on Francesca’s pudgy cheek. “See!”

“She’s beautiful, Bean, just like her mother.” Olivia smiled softly, still staring intensely at the woman sitting beside her daughter. Jonathan coughed discreetly from behind her, breaking the moment, and she turned back to her nephew. “Did you want to stay for supper? Once we get the baby and Natalia settled, there are plenty of Thanksgiving dinner leftovers.”

Olivia mentally ran through what they had in the fridge, thinking about how much was still left over from the huge, interrupted feast.

“No, but thanks though. I’ve got a few errands to run before I head home.” Jonathan could clearly see this little family needed some alone time. He waved to Emma and Natalia and headed into the kitchen to grab his jacket from where he had hung it, Olivia following behind him.

“Wait. At least let me send some food home with you, kiddo.” Olivia pulled open the refrigerator and started pulling out the tightly packed disposable Tupperware containers. “Just hang on a second while I put something together for you.”

Jonathan checked his watch. It was getting late. He leaned over and poked his aunt to get her attention.

“Listen, Auntie O, I’m going to head out.” Jonathan went over and grabbed his jacket from the coat hooks by the back door before tugging it on. “If you two need anything, I’m only a phone call away.”

Olivia turned and started haphazardly tossing various containers into a large plastic bag.

“I’m working from home this week at least, maybe even the next if Natalia seems too wiped out, so I think we’ll be okay. But we may take you up on that offer if things get a bit overwhelming around here.” Olivia knew the next few weeks were going to be a big adjustment for the whole family, but knew in her bones that they would get through it together just fine.

Sliding a third of the leftover cheesecake into a large Ziploc baggie, Olivia added it to the bag of leftovers and shoved it into his arms, not taking no for an answer. They would be eating Thanksgiving leftovers for a good month if she didn’t do something.

“Er ... thanks, Auntie O.” Jonathan flashed his most charming smile, and dropped a quick kiss on her cheek. A squeaky wail started up from the living room as he disappeared out the door. Olivia waved him off, making sure the door was closed, before quickly heading back to rescue Emma.

Tugging his jacket collar up against the cold wind, Jonathan headed past the stork sign stuck in the lawn and dashed to his car, slamming the door behind him. Slipping his cell phone out of his pocket, he dialed a number he knew by heart and waited for the person on the other end to pick up.

“Jeffrey, it’s me.” Jonathan glanced back at the porch of the farmhouse, the warm glow from inside spilling out into the dimming afternoon light, and thought about the little family snuggled together inside.

“We need to talk. There are rumblings of things stirring in Springfield. If they’re true and Edmund’s making a move, none of us are safe.”

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It had been a long day. Olivia made sure the back door was locked and shuffled over to the kitchen counter to unplug the whistling electric kettle. Yawning, she pulled out two mugs from the cupboard overhead. She was definitely ready for an early night; she could only imagine how tired Natalia was. And while she was happy to have her girls home from the hospital, it still shocked her a little at how quickly Cedars released them.

Olivia tossed a teabag into each mug and poured the boiling water from the kettle over them, shaking her head at herself. She would never admit out loud that she had had a hard time falling asleep without her lover by her side. It was funny how quickly she had gotten used to sleeping in the same bed with Natalia. Hell, it had taken months to get used to Bill’s snoring and Phillip’s constant movement in bed. No, she didn’t envy Lizzie or Beth at all.

Tossing out the used teabags, Olivia slowly stirred a bit of honey into Natalia’s mug. Sometimes it amazed her at how easily their lives had meshed together, in so many ways. It was almost scary. If she believed in such things, she’d almost say someone up there had a plan.

“Don’t you even start ...” Olivia mumbled to the small picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall, giving it a stern look as she passed. Switching off the kitchen light, she made her way through the dark living room with her mugs of steaming tea.

Quietly tiptoeing up the stairs, she easily stepped over the squeaky step, the third one from the top of the staircase, and padded down the hallway towards their bedroom. Ducking her head into Emma’s room, she paused to make sure her little girl was okay. Her heart clenched at the sight of her girl snuggled up in the blankets, peaceful. She was growing up so fast; it made Olivia’s heart ache. It seemed like just yesterday she had been rocking her to sleep too.

Olivia turned to go, glancing over at Cornelius, Emma’s battered old fudge teddy sitting in his new place of honor on the bookshelf, watching over the girl at night. Emma said that it was in case he got sad again, she would be in easy hugging distance. Olivia nodded at the bear, knowing Emma was in good hands. Juggling the two mugs of chamomile tea, she

slowly pulled the door almost closed, leaving a few inches for the hall light to fall through into the dark room. Emma still hated it if it was pitch black in her room.

Making her way back to her own room, Olivia nudged the door with her elbow, slowly opening to reveal Natalia and the baby sitting together in the new rocking chair. The bedside lamp bathed them in a warm glow as they gently rocked back and forth.

She silently watched Natalia with her sleeping child. Long, dark hair tucked behind a delicate ear, revealing the long column of her neck, a sweet smile on her full lips and warm, brown eyes staring at the tiny life in her arms. Olivia had never quite seen that look of perfect adoration on the younger woman's face before. A creaking floor board gave away her position and Natalia glanced up as if waking from a trance, smiling sleepily back at her, her beauty never failing to take Olivia's breath away.

"Hey, it's only me," Olivia whispered, finally stepping deeper into the room. Placing the mugs on the nightstand, she turned to Natalia, reaching out to gently trail her fingers across the baby's slightly flushed cheeks.

Olivia felt her heart swell and shook her head in wonder. How could she have ever thought this little darling would never really be *hers* too, *theirs* together? Francesca squeaked and sighed in her sleep, and turned towards the gentle touch.

"Everything is locked up and Emma's sound asleep." Olivia bent to scoop the sleeping infant into her arms and moved away so Natalia could stand.

"You have her lunch ready for school tomorrow?" Natalia gripped the armrests and slowly pushed herself up. God, she was so stiff; she didn't remember being this sore and exhausted after Rafe was born. Then again, she wasn't that same young woman either. Luckily Francesca had been an uncomplicated birth.

Olivia gently placed their daughter down into the crib they had temporarily moved into their room. They would move her into her own room soon, but Natalia couldn't bear the thought of not being near Francesca, at least at first. And if Olivia was honest, neither could she.

"Sleep, *mija*." Natalia breathed, ever so gently stroking the dark downy hair before reluctantly pulling away from the crib and picking up her mug of tea to take a sip. Sighing, she put it back down and slowly moved to the end of the bed.

"Need any help?" Olivia asked softly, worried about Natalia's slow shuffling pace as she continued on past the bed.

“No I’m okay. Other than having a bladder the size of a peanut...” Natalia grumbled as she made her way to the bathroom. Olivia snickered and slid into bed, turning the blankets down for Natalia. She felt drowsy by the time she heard shuffling feet returning and then the mattress dipped as her lover came to bed.

Natalia slowly sank into the soft sheets, letting her body stop and relax. It was so good to be in her own bed, with Olivia by her side. She closed her eyes and couldn’t stop the low groan that slipped from her lips.

“So was it a half-ton or a Mack?”

“What?” Natalia popped an eye open to look over at her lover.

“The size of truck that you feel like you were hit by?” Olivia rolled to her side, her lip twitched into a half-smirk.

Natalia groaned again, this time at the joke, but smiled.

“Definitely a Mack.”

“My poor, sweet girl.” Olivia softly pushed dark strands of hair from Natalia’s forehead, before slowly stroking back through the long locks. “How’s the bleeding; still pretty heavy?”

Natalia sighed and nodded, shifting slightly, trying to relieve the ache in her lower back and legs. “Kind of what I expected. It still burns when I go to the bathroom, but it’s better than it was in the hospital.”

Olivia dropped a tender kiss to Natalia’s forehead.

“We’ll get that sitz bath set up for you tomorrow, okay? That should help,” Olivia whispered softly, nuzzling into the thick, dark hair just breathing in the scent of her lover.

Natalia nodded sleepily, her eyes drooping. Olivia began to make soothing circles as she massaged her scalp. Soon she heard deeper breathing from the younger woman, sleep finally claiming her weary body. She trailed the back of her fingers across her lover’s slightly flushed cheeks, smiling when she sighed in her sleep and turned towards the gentle touch.

“Sleep *mija*.”

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ACT 2

Olivia yawned as she pulled the Nissan up to the front of the school first thing Monday morning and parked. She glanced up at the rearview mirror to find Emma in the back seat, yawning too. She felt bad for her little girl. It had been a long night for everybody, with Francesca crying every three hours or so. And of course it was inevitable that they had all slept in too long, ignoring the snooze buzzer one too many times, causing Emma to miss her bus.

"You got everything, Emma?" Olivia turned in her seat and smiled at the still somewhat grumpy girl. Unbuckling her seatbelt, Emma grabbed her backpack and opened the door to get out, before pausing and turning back to look hard at her mother.

"Mom?"

"Yes, Bean?" Olivia tried hard not to smile at the young girl's serious face.

"Is the baby gonna cry like that every night?" Emma's dramatic sigh said it all.

"I'm afraid so sweetie, at least for a little while." Olivia nodded sympathetically at the girl. The crying at all hours was a big change for all of them. "But it won't last forever, I promise."

Emma raised an eyebrow and stared fiercely at her mother a moment longer, before getting out of the car.

"So that's what the Spencer Glare of Doom looks like..." Olivia murmured, oddly entertained by her daughter's spunk, as she signaled and pulled back out into morning traffic. Her BlackBerry buzzed on the passenger seat beside her, and she grabbed it, navigating to the incoming text message.

Tell me you did not just feed Emma Poptarts this morning – NRivera 9:05am

Olivia stopped at the red light and quickly typed out her response.

Of course not! She had some orange juice with them – OSpencer 9:07am

Hitting send, she could almost see Natalia's disapproving scowl. Chuckling to herself, she turned left into the parking lot behind the mini-mart.

Grabbing a much-needed cup of coffee from the counter, Olivia soon found her way to the feminine hygiene products aisle, only to discover Reva Shayne pushing her son Colin's

stroller, puttering away in the baby food section. Hoping she hadn't been spotted yet, Olivia started to turn down the cookie aisle, but to no avail, as Reva looked up and waved.

"Damn." Olivia muttered under her breath, as she plastered her best fake smile on her face. She really needed to find another, less popular, convenience store in town.

"Olivia!" Reva dropped a few jars of baby food into her basket and waited for the other woman to approach. "How's the little one? Is Natalia settling back in at home okay?"

Olivia took a big slurp of coffee and nodded her head.

"Francesca and Natalia are home safe and sound, thanks for asking." Olivia couldn't stop the huge grin that spread across her face, as she remembered leaving a sleepy Natalia propped up in their bed that morning breastfeeding little Sweet Pea. She hadn't wanted to leave them and even now she couldn't wait to get back home to them.

Reva took a moment to straighten Colin's hat, the movement hiding her knowing smile. Olivia Spencer in love was truly a sight to behold. She was suddenly reminded of Jeffrey, how happy he had been after Colin was born. The sudden pain of the memory overwhelmed her for a moment. Swallowing hard, Reva pushed the thought away, straightened her shoulders and headed the stroller towards the checkout.

"Listen, when Natalia is up for it, I'll give her a call and see if she wants to join me and Marina for our regular park strolls. Us new moms hafta stick together. Besides, it'll be good for the kids to spent time together." Reva paused a moment longer. "Just think, we're watching the next generation of Springfield getting started." She sighed happily and waved before disappearing around the corner.

"Oh, Sweet Pea, you're gonna have those two little boys eating out of your hand in true Spencer style if I have any say in it." Olivia watched the older woman go and just shook her head, already plotting on how to rescue poor Natalia from the other new moms wandering in the park.

'Then again, Natalia might like that.'

The random thought pulled Olivia up short. They hadn't talked much about what Natalia would do when the baby was a little older. Natalia hadn't really been that attached to working at Spaulding and Blake was pretty hit-and-miss with having steady work.

Actually, with Alan gone, Olivia wondered how Phillip was dealing with everything as interim CEO of Spaulding Enterprises. The cutthroat executive in Olivia realized that Spaulding was in a very vulnerable place, at least until Alan's will was executed. She made

a mental note to check on how their stock was doing, and went back to searching for the overnight pads the doctor had recommended for postpartum bleeding. Finally finding them, she grabbed the bag and was moving on to get some milk, when her phone buzzed again.

Can you pick up some milk and don't forget the mail – NRivera 9:30am

“Already on it, sweetheart...” Swinging the glass fridge door open, Olivia tucked the package of pads under her arm and grabbed a gallon of two-percent milk. Stepping back she bumped into a warm, familiar body.

“Whoa there!” Buzz grabbed the bag of pads that slipped out from under Olivia’s arm and steadied her before she spilled what was left of her coffee.

“Jesus, Buzz, you scared me.” Olivia held a hand to her chest, and elbowed the glass door shut behind her.

“Let me give you a hand with that.” Buzz started to turn a lovely shade of red as he realized what was in his hands. Olivia smirked and took pity on him, handing over the jug of milk and snagging the pads back.

They made their way to the checkout, Olivia digging into her bag for a coupon she was sure she had grabbed from the pile on the kitchen table. Finding it, she stifled a yawn as Buzz chuckled at her.

“So, just how much sleep did you get last night?” Buzz put his own items down on the counter as the young woman started ringing up Olivia’s things.

“Not much. Poor Emma woke up a few times too. I think she wants to send Francesca back and get a puppy instead.” They shared a laugh as Olivia handed over the money to the cashier and moved to pick up her bagged items.

“You know Lillian and I are around if you two need anything, right?” Buzz placed his hand over hers and squeezed.

Olivia nodded and smiled, thankful for their friendship and support. It could have turned into such a bad situation between the Cooper clan and her little family. Instead, they had all pulled together. Natalia had pulled them all together.

“Thanks, Buzz,” Olivia said sincerely. Grabbing her plastic bag, she gave the man a lopsided grin and started for the door.

“Anytime.” Buzz watched her go and turned back to the cashier packing his items into a bag. “After all, a Grandpa loves to spoil his little girl. Right?”

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Detective Anna Li shuffled the papers on her desk and tried to look interested in the vandalism report Officer Remy Boudreau had left her. There was so much incompetence in the Springfield Police Department that she didn’t know where to start to fix things. Luckily, the young man seemed to have a good head on his shoulders, and if she could just keep him out of the Chief’s bumbling clutches, he might make a decent cop.

“Anna, can I see you for a minute?” Frank Cooper ducked his head into the squad room and indicated that she should follow him, before he disappeared down the hallway again.

Rolling her eyes, Anna stood and grabbed her grey blazer from the back of her chair, slipping it on before heading to Frank’s office.

Frank sat in his large leather chair, his desk piled with paperwork and several picture frames containing family photos. His computer desktop background wasn’t the usual Springfield PD logo; instead it was a picture taken just days ago in Cedars Hospital, of him holding his baby daughter and his other daughter Marina smiling and hugging him. His girls.

Frank smiled, staring at the screen for a long moment. Despite his heartache and the complicated relationship he had with Natalia, he would never regret Francesca coming into this great big world. He chewed his thumbnail a little, wishing with all his heart that he could see her all the time, even though he knew it was impossible. It was a new kind of torment that Natalia was putting him through and only time would tell if this was the right arrangement for his innocent daughter. He prayed his ex-fiancée knew what the hell she was doing.

Anna tapped on the open door and came into the cluttered office, breaking into his wandering thoughts. Frank looked up and smiled, waiting as she closed the door behind her and sat in one of the chairs in front of his desk before he got back down to business.

“Anna, you’ve read Remy’s report on the vandalism going on at Springfield High School. I wanted you to head up our new Youth Crimes Task Force. I think your experience with the Chicago PD Gang Unit will really be an asset in this situation.” Frank still couldn’t believe the arrests in Li’s file, the number of gang members behind bars because of her tireless work. She was dedicated and tough, and they were extremely lucky to have her in their fair city.

“Sure thing, Chief.” Anna sat straighter in her chair, glad to finally have something of interest to sink her teeth into. This could work to her favor, getting her ear to the underground in Springfield, which could help her with her primary mission. She smiled, barely listening as Frank droned on.

‘Yes, he will be very pleased with this development indeed.’

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Olivia quickly unpacked the few items she had picked up in town. She had stopped off briefly at the health food store that Phillip, of all people, had recommended to her at Thanksgiving. She never figured him for a granola-head, but she knew he had gotten into all kinds of alternative stuff during his illness.

Luckily, the list of herbs for the healing sitz bath recipe Lillian had given them was relatively short. Stuffing the plastic bag into the bag saver under the sink, Olivia grabbed the mail off the counter where she had dropped it and started shuffling through the various envelopes.

“Bills, bills ... oh! A shoe sale at the mall.” Olivia flipped the flyer over to read the details. She glanced up as Natalia came into the kitchen. “Hey you, where’s Sweet Pea?”

“Conked out in the living room.” Natalia leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on Olivia’s still-cool lips. Running her hands along the soft cashmere sweater covering Olivia’s arms, she hummed contentedly and moved to put the jug of milk away in the fridge. “Want some orange juice?”

“Please.” Tearing into an envelope, Olivia dragged her eyes away from the sight of Natalia’s tempting curves, as she bent over and tried to make room for the milk in their stuffed refrigerator, and started reading the official-looking letter.

Natalia grabbed the orange juice and poured out two glasses, smiling to herself at the conundrum that was her girlfriend. On the one hand, Olivia would keep coupons for diapers and then on the other, turn around and drop two hundred bucks for a pair of boots without a second thought. Natalia wasn’t sure she’d ever get used to having that much disposable income or be able to justify spending her money that way. Thriftiness was too ingrained in her, from her time struggling with Rafe on her own, and even before that, when she still lived at home with her parents.

Natalia’s mind skittered away from revisiting those memories. The anger and hurt were too close to the surface, even after all this time. Taking a calming breath, she returned the carton of orange juice to the fridge and focused instead on her new family, on the here and

now. And this family still had plenty to try to figure out together about how to juggle everything.

“A will reading? Seriously?” Olivia mumbled behind her.

“What’s that?” Natalia turned to stare at her lover.

“I’ve been invited to attend the reading of Alan Spaulding’s will. Looks like you got one too.” Olivia raised an eyebrow and tossed over a similar-looking envelope addressed to the younger woman. Tearing it open, Natalia began reading her letter from Alan’s personal lawyers, Wittcombe and Nesbitt.

“A viewing of his videotaped reading of his last will and testament?” Natalia dropped her letter onto the table and stared at Olivia.

“God, Alan always was such a drama queen.” Olivia rolled her eyes and didn’t expect it when Natalia whacked her hard on the arm.

“Ow! What was that for?” Olivia rubbed her elbow.

“Don’t speak ill of the dead.” Natalia frowned at her lover. They both turned as a hiccupping wail started up in the living room. Somebody was awake again. Olivia, still massaging her arm, followed as Natalia moved to go see what was wrong with Francesca.

“Well, I am his ex-wife. It’s a hard habit to break y’know...”

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“So are we still on for tonight, boss lady?” Anna repeatedly clicked her pen open and closed and nervously tapped it on a folder on her desk as she spoke softly into her cell phone. No need for half the squad room to hear her private business.

“Definitely.” Doris Wolfe’s smooth seductive voice seemed to drop an octave hitting Anna low and hard. She shifted in her seat, remembering the last time she’d heard that tone, hot and needy, tickling her ear. Anna savored the image for a moment more and then cleared her throat.

“I was wondering if you’d mind bumping the time up to seven?”

“Sure, that’s fine by me.” Doris smiled into the phone. It seemed she wasn’t the only one looking forward to this evening. “Where are we going anyway?”

Anna just laughed. “Ah, ah, ah, no ruining the surprise. I’ll pick you up at seven then, and dress casual.” Anna looked up and noticed a smirking Remy standing in front of her desk. “Uh-oh, looks like there’s trouble in paradise. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Sounds like someone’s got a hot date,” Remy teased good-naturedly as Anna snapped her cell phone shut and grinned up at him. He handed over their latest assignment.

“What does an old married man like you know?” Anna stood ignoring the grinning man, slipping her cell phone into her blazer’s inner pocket adjusting her shoulder holster so her gun lay comfortably flat.

“What’s his name?” Remy couldn’t help himself, he was curious about the new cop. He really liked the new detective, even if she was a little intimidating and standoffish.

“He’s a she, and I don’t want to talk about it.” Anna nearly broke out laughing at the stunned look on his face. “Pick your jaw up off the floor, Boudreau, there’s a crime scene waiting for us.” Anna headed out of the squad room.

Remy stared after the formidable woman.

“Wow, Cyrus was right. They *are* everywhere ...”

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The warm afternoon sunlight was tracking across the living room floor, when Natalia’s eyes popped open. She had fallen asleep on the couch. Something moved against her foot and she realized that she had stretched out across the length of the couch in her sleep, her feet ending up in Olivia’s lap.

At the other end of the couch Olivia sat reading a document, her recently needed reading glasses low on her nose, with Francesca lying comfortably in the crook of her arm.

“...and the party of the first part...” Olivia looked down at the baby staring up at her. “That’s us, Sweet Pea.” She kept softly reading the document. “...shall be paid on or before the thirtieth day of the month by the party of the second part or said contract will be deemed null and void. And then the party of the second part went ‘wee, wee, wee’ all the way home. Didn’t they? Didn’t they?” Olivia walked her fingers up the baby’s belly to her chin, then tapped her nose with her finger.

Francesca gurgled in agreement and kicked Natalia’s foot again.

Natalia smiled and let her eyes blink back closed, feeling herself drift off to sleep once more. After all, everything was obviously under control at the Beacon home office.

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Emma bounced through the back door, dropped her backpack and jacket on the floor, and dashed past her mother.

“How was school today, Em?” Olivia watched the back of the girl disappear into the other room. “Emma?” Shaking her head, she went back to assembling her turkey, ham and Swiss cheese casserole, turning the oven on to preheat.

Emma looked around the empty living room and then heard the squawking cry of her baby sister coming from upstairs. Dashing up the stairs two at a time, she skidded around the corner and found Natalia and the crying baby in the nursery.

“Is she okay?” Emma walked slowly towards the changing table where Natalia was standing.

“Hey, Jellybean. Is it four o’clock already?” Natalia lifted Francesca’s little legs up and pulled the soiled diaper away, dropping it into the garbage can. “Sweet Pea’s just fine. She just needed a new diaper.” She swiped her bottom clean and dropped the baby wipe into the garbage too before making sure the lid was shut tight.

“Hand me a diaper from out of there, sweetie.”

Emma brought one over to her from the diaper caddy and Natalia started to unfold it.

“Natalia?” Emma turned a hopeful face up to her other mommy.

“Hmm?” Natalia shook on a little baby powder and slid the diaper underneath the little, wiggling body.

“Can I try?”

“Oh, sweetie, you’re not old enough yet.” Natalia quickly secured the diaper in place, making sure it was snug but not too tight.

Emma scrunched up her face sadly, but Natalia didn’t even notice. And she was so busy looking after the baby that she didn’t even realize her other daughter had started to wander out of the room.

“Oh, okay.” Emma leaned against the door frame and watched as Natalia snapped the baby into a clean, white bodysuit and wrapped her in a blanket.

“Do you want to know what Derek did to Sarah today?” Emma asked hopefully as Natalia scooped up Francesca and headed into the master bedroom to sit in the rocking chair for a while.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, not right now. I just want to get Francesca settled down and then you can tell me all about it.” Natalia sank slowly down onto the cushion and started rocking the still-fussing baby.

Emma nodded and headed back downstairs, finding her mother in the kitchen.

“Emma, would you hang your jacket up, please?” Olivia pulled a head of lettuce out of the crisper and shoved the fridge door shut with her hip.

“Ok Mom.” She trudged to the door and grabbed her jacket, hanging it up where it belonged with a big sigh.

Quickly rinsing the head of lettuce, Olivia started to tear the leaves into smaller pieces and drop it into the salad spinner, keeping a concerned eye on her daughter. Emma wandered over and stood beside her, watching her work.

Olivia glanced down at the quiet girl and could tell something wasn’t quite right. This obviously called for the big guns. Reaching up into the cupboard, Olivia pulled out her secret stash of Andes candy, giving a chocolate square to the suddenly smiling girl and keeping one for herself.

“Did something happen at school today, Bean?” Olivia asked, half afraid of a return visit to the principal’s office. Even with both Emma and young Kurt’s written apologies to each other and Janet Smith’s reassurance that there was no tolerance of bullying at the school, Olivia still worried about her daughter.

This was part of their new reality, a consequence of her decisions, their decisions together, that Emma was going to have to deal with. And it pissed Olivia off that there was very little she could do to help her girl, except maybe be there to listen or rip someone a new one after the fact. She ran a soothing hand through the girl’s long hair, giving her time to respond.

“Nope.” Emma seemed like she was going to say something more, but then changed her mind and didn’t. Instead she just looked sad and sighed. “I’m gonna go watch TV for a while, okay?”

Olivia stared at her serious little face a bit longer, unsure whether to push it. Finally, she smiled softly at the girl and nodded, letting the moment pass.

“Okay, baby,” Olivia kissed the top of her head and swatted her bottom as she turned to go. “Just keep the sound low so you don’t wake up Francesca.”

Emma nodded and headed into the other room.

~~*~*

Doris nervously opened her door promptly at seven o’clock and stared at the woman standing on her doorstep. Black bomber jacket, white shirt and faded blue jeans, long black hair pulled back into a ponytail and threaded through the back of a Chicago White Sox baseball cap. She couldn’t pull her eyes away from the exotic beauty.

“Hi.” Doris took a deep calming breath and finally met the other woman’s dark eyes.

“Hi, beautiful.” Anna had taken a moment herself to rake down the curves of the mayor, much to Doris’ secret delight. “Ready to rock and roll?”

“Absolutely. Let me just grab my jacket.” Doris opened the door wider for Anna to come into the small foyer of her home.

“Before we go, I have a present for you.” Anna had something hidden behind her back.

“Really?” Doris was touched by the romantic gesture and then surprised when she saw the petite woman pull out a black and red ball cap. “The Springfield Senators?”

“Well, I know you like hats.” Anna smirked. She couldn’t help tweaking the mayor a little for her Ladies Night disguise. She rolled the stiff brim of the hat between her two hands until she got a nice curve to it and then slid it onto Doris’ head. “Nothing like showing a little team spirit for the local high school girls’ basketball team we’re seeing tonight. It’s an exhibition game with their arch enemies, the Oakdale Tigers. Thank God I found some sort of competitive sporting life in this sleepy burg other than football. What is it with small-town America and football anyway?”

Doris simply stared at the adorably babbling cop and bit her lower lip.

“You did say you liked basketball, didn’t you?” Anna was starting to think she’d made a mistake. She ran back through their various conversations; she was sure Doris had mentioned liking basketball and baseball. The other woman’s soft laughter drew her back into the here and now.

“Yes, I do.” Doris tugged on her own butter-soft brown leather jacket and matching gloves. “Actually, my daughter Ashlee tried out for the Senators team once, but she didn’t make the cut. But how did you find out about them?” Flicking off the hall light she ushered Anna out of her home.

“I’m a detective, Doris. I detect.” Anna smirked, holding the screen door open as Doris locked up. “We better hustle if we want to grab a Buzz burger before tip off.”

Doris followed Anna down the walkway to the black car parked in her driveway, enjoying the sway of the other woman’s hips and the way she filled her well cut jeans. Turning, Anna caught her looking and just waggled her eyebrows at her.

Doris shook her head and laughed. It looked like tonight was going to be even more fun than she’d expected. And with any luck, the Senators wouldn’t be the only ones scoring tonight...

~~*~*

Tuesday morning found Olivia sitting on the couch with her new, top of the line laptop and mountains of paper work spread out across the coffee table, BlackBerry clutched in her hand.

“Keira, did you get that confirmation from the Dunfield Club?” Olivia leaned back and nodded thoughtfully, as her assistant ran through their response. Natalia wandered past and handed her a steaming mug of fresh coffee. Smiling her gratitude, Olivia blew on it and took a quick sip, relaxing a little.

“Ok, then what about the contract they need me to sign?” Olivia scanned her email, growling when she didn’t see it there. “I have a hard copy?” Olivia glanced anxiously down at the scattered papers on the table and the pile on the floor.

Natalia sat on the couch beside her, Francesca nuzzling against her chest. Leaning forward, she pulled out a document with the Dunfield Club logo on the letterhead and handed it over to a relieved Olivia.

“No, it’s ok. I’ve got my hands on it now.” Olivia mouthed a silent ‘thank you’ and smiled at her lover. Damn, she had missed their easy working relationship.

Natalia leaned back into the corner of the couch, unbuttoning her shirt and adjusting herself so Francesca’s tiny mouth could find her breast. Olivia watched mother and daughter settling down together, as her partner grabbed the handy comforter on the back of the couch and pulled it down to tuck in around them.

“Thanks, Keira.” Olivia hung up on her still-chattering assistant. Natalia looked up at that moment and smiled at her. Olivia swallowed hard and put her BlackBerry down onto the coffee table. Her partner had no idea how beautiful she was like this, as a loving new mother.

“Break time?” Natalia asked, shifting the suckling child.

Olivia nodded and leaned back with her mug, sipping her coffee for a moment just letting her mind wander. She had forgotten how much she had come to depend on Natalia’s input at work. How much she valued her opinion, how the other woman tempered and balanced Olivia’s own mercurial command style. And it wasn’t that Keira wasn’t competent as her assistant; she just wasn’t Natalia.

Olivia refused to be selfish though. Natalia had the potential for so much more, and was plenty able to do anything if she put her mind to it. And Olivia wanted the sky to be the limit for her, and if her lover wanted to reach for the stars, she would do anything she could to make it happen. She would help her be and do anything, but first she needed to know what Natalia wanted.

“Have you given any thought to what you want to do, you know, when Francesca is a little older? Stay at home with her or return to work at Spaulding Enterprises again? Or even go back to school?” Olivia began a little awkwardly.

“Well, I – I don’t really know.” Natalia blinked, taken a little by surprise. To be honest, she had been so focused on getting her relationship with Olivia back on track and then having the baby that she hadn’t really thought that far down the road. She glanced down at the child in her arms, a part of her dreading the thought of leaving Francesca. However, she knew herself well enough to know she would eventually want to return to the workforce again. She glanced up at Olivia and wondered where this had suddenly come from.

“It’s just that, working at home with you has reminded me how much I valued your contribution at the Beacon.” Olivia stared down and swirled the cooling coffee in her mug for a moment before looking up and locking eyes with her lover. “I miss your smiling face in the office, I guess, but more than that I miss you calling me out on my questionable decisions, challenging me and making me think. There are not many people out there willing to do that. Or who I trust enough to listen to, for that matter.”

Olivia looked over at her laptop, her email inbox growing before her eyes. She wanted to share all this with someone who understood her world and loved the Beacon as much as she did. She wanted Natalia by her side. Olivia sighed and locked eyes with the younger woman once again.

“What I’m trying to say is that I’d love to have you come back to work with me, but this time as a partner in the Beacon.” Olivia watched the dark eyes go wide with surprise. “I want you with me in all aspects of my life. But I understand if you want to do something else, or go back to school, or stay at home and raise our daughters.”

“Oh, *querida*, thank you!” Natalia was so touched by the gesture, wiping absently at the sudden tears stinging her eyes. “I don’t know what to say though. I – I guess I’m just not sure yet. I haven’t even thought about what we should have for dinner tonight.”

“Turkey.” Olivia smirked, smiling wider when Natalia just shook her head.

“Hey, you know there’s no rush, sweetheart. I just thought we should start talking about it. Okay?” Olivia gave her a lopsided grin and started as her BlackBerry practically vibrated off the coffee table. “No rest for the wicked.” She snatched it up, winking at Natalia.

“Spencer.” Olivia all but growled into the phone. After all, she still had a reputation to uphold.

~~*~*

Wednesday night found the farmhouse dark and quiet at last. Olivia still couldn’t believe the stream of visitors they’d had all day. Who knew so many women from Natalia’s church cookie baking committee could fit into their kitchen, all of them “oohing” and “aahing” over their small daughter.

Olivia had steadfastly ignored the dark looks sent her way by some of the older women. Instead she’d retreated with cookies in hand into the living room to work, letting Natalia and Francesca enjoy the attention. It had made for a long day, however, and they were all ready to settle down early for bed.

Tapping lightly on the bathroom door, Olivia slowly opened it and peered inside. She found Natalia wrapped in her warm terrycloth robe, slowly drying off her legs. The plastic basin was still on the toilet seat waiting for the older woman to dump out the liquid and store for use the next day.

“Feeling a little better?” Olivia came into the small room and wrapped her arms around the tired woman, feeling her relax against her.

“Yeah, the sitz baths seem to be helping.” Natalia sighed. What she really wanted was a good, hot soak in her clawfoot tub to help ease the aches and pains of childbirth, but she would have to wait and mend a little bit more before that. In the meantime, several fifteen

minute soaks in the small sitz bath throughout the day were definitely soothing and healing.

With one last squeeze and a soft kiss to Natalia's neck for good measure, Olivia moved away to start cleaning out the small basin.

"I can do that," Natalia started to protest.

"Hey, that's what I'm here for. Just lean on me for a little while and then you can get back to ruling the world, alright?" Olivia was pleased when the obviously tired woman reluctantly agreed, and watched carefully as she gingerly tugged on her pajama bottoms.

"Are the girls asleep?" Natalia asked, hanging up her damp towels.

"Yeah, Emma went out like a light. And Francesca..." Olivia sighed as a hesitant, squeaky cry started up. Natalia just smiled and ran a hand along her lover's shoulders before disappearing out the bathroom door.

Olivia dumped out and rinsed the small tub, propping it beside the toilet ready for action the next day. Quickly running through her own nightly bedtime routine, she soon dried her hands and flicked off the light before heading to their bedroom.

Natalia was just settling into bed, since Francesca was fed and sound asleep again relatively quickly. She groaned as her body was able to stretch out and her day could finally just stop.

"Roll over."

"What?" Natalia raised her head and looked at the other woman like she was crazy, until she noticed the small jar in her partner's hand.

"I picked this up at that health food place. It's a natural massage cream, good for gently warming and soothing achy muscles." Olivia opened the jar and tentatively sniffed. "It smells good too. Come on, roll over and let me rub some of this in."

Natalia slowly rolled over. It seemed like forever since she had been able to lie on her stomach. She folded her arms under her head, tucking a pillow underneath for support and waited while her lover crawled onto the mattress and straddled her legs.

Olivia scooped up a little of the cool cream with her fingers and rubbed it between her hands, trying to warm it up a bit before touching Natalia. Sliding her slick fingers under the hem of the woman's shirt, she smeared the warmed cream across the lower back muscles,

her fingers pressing and spreading out across the soft skin in small circles. She smiled when Natalia moaned in pure pleasure.

Pushing the soft material of the nightshirt up higher, Olivia exposed most of Natalia's bare back. Scooping up a little more cream, she smeared a trail along the long curving spine, before leaning forward and applying pressure, running her palms along the greasy skin. She began to knead and manipulate the twitching muscles, feeling them relax under her sure touch.

"Oh God..." Natalia sighed, her mumbled voice drifting up, making the older woman smile wider. She continued to stroke and caress the soft skin below her, long fingers following the ribcage around to find the swell of her breasts and more achy muscles along her sides.

Olivia was enjoying the solid warmth of her lover's body underneath her, pressed snug between her legs, causing a delicious friction. She couldn't stop the slow roll of her own hips, as she pushed down with the heel of her palms and massaged the supple flesh of Natalia's back.

Olivia slipped her fingers just under the waistband of her partner's pajama bottoms, her thumbs circling and rubbing. She stared down at the gentle slope of Natalia's back, the steady rise and fall of the woman's breathing doing things to her.

A random desire to yank off her own nightshirt and press her body tight to her lover's seductive form sparked through Olivia's brain. A longing to touch Natalia more intimately pulsed through her, settling low in her belly, the need for more contact almost overwhelming. Unable to resist, she leaned over to sweep dark hair to one side and brush a tender kiss to her lover's shoulder.

A soft snore could clearly be heard.

Dropping her forehead gently against Natalia's shoulder in frustration, Olivia sighed and waited for the rapid beat of her heart to slow.

Olivia sat up slowly and straightened the pajama shirt back down, covering the tempting curves below. Running a gentle hand along the soft material, she smiled ruefully. It wasn't as if they could have done anything much anyway. The last thing she wanted was to go against what the doctor had recommended and end up accidentally hurting her lover. She'd waited for Natalia before; so what in the grand scheme of things was another six weeks?

A stuttering cry from Francesca in the crib finally pulled Olivia's mind away from the sexy brunette beneath her in bed. Natalia started to stir, her head turning towards their daughter's voice.

“Shhh...it’s okay, I’ll look after her. Go back to sleep.” Olivia whispered softly, running a soothing hand along her lover’s back, pleased when the dark head slowly sank back down onto her pillow. She carefully moved off of the sleepy woman, pulling the comforter up higher and tucking it in to keep her partner warm, before padding over to check on their fussing daughter.

“Your timing is impeccable as always, missy.” Olivia easily felt the dampness of the girl’s diaper as she lifted the baby out of the crib. Cuddling the unhappy child closer, she headed to the nursery. “We’ll have to work on that as you get older. Oh, I know you can’t help it, after all, you’re Frank’s child too, aren’t you...”

Francesca just stared up at her other mommy and cried a little harder.

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The sleet and freezing rain Thursday morning did nothing to slow the steady flow of customers at Company. Blake Marler placed a muffin and coffee on the polished wood counter in front of a patiently waiting Matt Reardon, barely noticing Doris Wolfe as she settled herself on one of the stools along the bar.

Finally glancing up at the slightly dripping mayor of Springfield, Blake smiled and grabbed a mug, pouring a cup of Company’s strongest brew and stirring in two spoonfuls of sugar.

“Here you go. Strong and sweet, just like you.” Blake blushed slightly as she realized what she had just said. “I - I mean, just like you like it.”

“Uh, thanks.” Doris’ eyebrows rose at the odd comment, but chalked it up to just Blake being Blake. She chuckled to herself as the other woman quickly busied herself with another customer looking for a refill. Wrapping her fingers around her coffee mug, she enjoyed the warmth that seeped into her cold hands. She looked up as the door to Company opened and Olivia came in, shaking her umbrella closed.

Blake poured out another cup of coffee and slid it over to a grateful Olivia, who was quickly grabbing a seat beside Doris.

“Thanks, Blake.” Olivia smiled and took a tentative sip of the hot liquid.

“What brings you out of the land of diapers and into the real world?” Doris teased.

“Emma forgot her lunch and I needed to drop off some paperwork at the office. I think Keira’s about to have a meltdown, and as entertaining as that might be, I need to talk her down from the ledge and get some contracts squared away with my lawyer.” Olivia smirked

and swirled her coffee in the mug a little. "That reminds me, did you get a letter from Alan's solicitors?"

"Old 'hang 'em high' Wittcombe and his little toady Walter Nesbitt?" Doris snorted. She'd run into the weasely lawyers often enough as the District Attorney. "Yeah, well, Ashlee did, but she can't make it. I called to let them know I'm going in her place as her power of attorney."

"Why does he have Ashlee, of all people, in his will?" Blake asked as she slid fresh coffee grounds into the maker and flicked the switch to start a new pot to drip.

"God, I don't even want to think about what Alan is up to." Doris shook her head, concerned for her daughter. "Still, the man is dead; what can he do from the grave?"

All three women shared a worried look.

"Hey, Matt, check it out, I just had these printed." Frank wandered out from the kitchen, a set of photos in his hand. He handed over the latest pictures of Francesca to his friend and went to find his own cooling mug of coffee over by Blake's.

"Aw, I remember when Maureen was this little, like it was yesterday. Y'know, she looks like you, Frank." Matt flipped through the shots and smiled up at his friend.

"You really think so?" Frank seemed to stand a little taller and prouder. Blake slid her arms around his waist and looked up into his happy face.

"Definitely, honey. You can see it around the eyes, I think." Blake smiled up at him. "She's beautiful, Frank."

Olivia's eyes narrowed and she nearly bit off her tongue, but couldn't help from murmuring under her breath, "I only see Natalia in her personally."

Doris snorted into her coffee and glanced over at her irritated friend, "Down, tiger."

Olivia rolled her eyes. She knew she shouldn't let it get to her, but sometimes it was hard. She took another drink of her coffee and tried to tune out the conversation swirling around her. Her BlackBerry vibrated in her pocket and she smiled, pretty sure she knew who it was. It also reminded her of the mission she had been sent on.

"Um, Frank?" Olivia leaned forward slightly to catch the man's attention for a moment. "I'm actually glad I ran into you here. Natalia and the baby have settled in nicely at home and we wondered if you wanted to come over for dinner tomorrow night and spend some time

with Francesca.” Olivia was pleased she’d run into Frank here; it was much less awkward than calling him up or dropping by the precinct.

“Friday?” Frank fidgeted and glanced over at Blake. “Well, actually we were...”

“That’s okay, Frank. Go spend some time with your daughter.” Blake smiled shyly and wiped at the counter as Frank gave her his best adoring puppy dog eyes. Olivia thought she was going to gag at the cuteness.

“Oh, Blake. I’m sorry, I didn’t think. Of course we’d love for you and Clarissa to come too. The more, the merrier.” Olivia genuinely meant it. Despite everything that had happened with Natalia over the summer, Blake was one of their staunchest supporters and had proven to be a good friend, frustrating as her keeping Natalia’s secret had been.

“Okay.” Blake’s huge smile said it all. Frank slipped his arm around her shoulders and dropped a kiss to the top of her head.

Olivia nodded knowing that Natalia would be pleased. She drained the last of her coffee and glanced back over at Doris, noticing something just peeking out from the mayor’s collar.

“Doris, is that a hickey?”

Doris froze as all eyes turned to her, and then glared at a suddenly smirking Olivia.

“Say, look at the time. Well, Springfield doesn’t run by itself.” Doris stood quickly and headed for the door, umbrella at the ready. “I’ll call you later, Spencer. We’ll do lunch.” The door closed behind the rapidly disappearing politician.

Olivia chuckled to herself and pulled out her BlackBerry to update Natalia.

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Friday night came quickly, with Frank, Blake and her rambunctious daughter Clarissa joining the small family at the farmhouse. Francesca rarely left Frank’s arms, the man obviously smitten with his baby girl. Leaving the other couple with the kids in the living room, Olivia popped her head into the warm kitchen to find Natalia with her arms elbow deep in soapy water.

“Hey, you don’t need to be doing that now. Come on, leave it.” Olivia slipped her arms around the younger woman, nuzzling along her hairline, dropping tiny kisses on her soft

skin along the way. She smiled as Natalia leaned into the embrace, enjoying the closeness of her lover.

“Your turkey tetrazzini was perfect. Leave the plates to soak and I’ll finish them up later, before bed.” Olivia grabbed the tea towel draped over Natalia’s shoulder and snapped it at her lover’s butt playfully.

Natalia gasped and grabbed it back, dried her hands and then tangled their fingers together. Tugging Olivia close, she stole a quick kiss and then led the way from the kitchen into the living room. Emma and Clarissa could be heard thumping around upstairs, no doubt playing with their Barbies in Emma’s bedroom. Frank and Blake were chatting quietly, Frank lifting his daughter up and then cuddling her against his chest.

“Who’s daddy’s little girl?” Frank leaned close, smelling the clean baby powder freshness of the gurgling child. Natalia sank down onto the couch, happy for him, watching father and daughter bonding. Blake made her way over to the fireplace, where Olivia stood to one side.

“Thank you for this, Olivia. I know it’s hard, but look at him. He loves that little girl so much.” Blake glanced over at Frank cooing as he wiggled his daughter’s little feet, making the child stare up at him like he was crazy.

Olivia just sighed and nodded. Buzz had been right really, and when she actually sat and thought about it, her heart went out to Frank. She had been the one standing in the cold not that long ago, on the outside looking in, watching everything she desired slipping away. She’d ended up with everything he thought he was going to have. How could she possibly begrudge him the joy of spending time with his baby girl?

“Uh-oh. Who has a wet diaper?” Frank patted his daughter’s damp bottom and glanced over towards Natalia. Blake stepped forward before he could say or do anything stupid.

“Come on, Daddy. Let’s go take care of that. Diapers are where in the nursery?” Blake ran her hands along Frank’s back as he stood and gently shoved him towards the stairs.

“In the diaper caddy beside the change table,” Natalia helpfully filled in from her perch on the couch. She watched the other couple make their way upstairs with the now loudly crying baby, before dropping her gaze to find Olivia staring intently at her.



The other woman's dark eyes seemed to call to Olivia, as if silently speaking to her very soul. Making her way to the couch, she leaned over and placed a tender kiss on Natalia's head, then trailed butterfly kisses along her eyebrow and cheek, to finally find sweet, smiling lips.

"I love you so much," Natalia whispered against soft lips, fingers grazing her lover's cheek. Smiling Olivia sank down onto the couch beside her, pulling her into a tight hug.

"I love you, too." Olivia sighed, content to have Natalia in her arms again. Upstairs, they could still hear Francesca in full voice, but knew that they didn't have to rush to her. It was comforting to know she was already in the good hands of her father.

"Y'know, it's not so bad having Frankie around for diaper duty. Especially when it gives us extra snuggle time." Olivia could feel Natalia's soft laugh and just held her tighter.

Despite the awkwardness with Frank and the other Coopers, Olivia knew that Natalia had been right all along. They weren't a conventional family but somehow, together, they would make it work.

Everything was going to be just fine.

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ACT 3

Olivia slammed her car door shut and stood for a moment in the crisp Sunday sunshine, gathering her thoughts. She had known this day would come. In fact, it was inevitable, really, despite how well everyone had reacted to them, how happy and genuinely pleased their friends all seemed to be for them, for her. She had expected there to be a backlash, somewhere along the line. At the end of the day, Springfield wasn't perfect. It was just like every place else in the world. Human.

And there it was, scrawled in blood-red spray paint that dripped down across the brick wall of the Beacon, the physical embodiment of her power base. Marked like the scar across her chest, the wound just as deep.

GO HOME DYKE BITCH!

Somewhere in the distance Olivia heard a church bell ringing.

What she didn't expect though was the sudden flood of tears, welling up and flowing down in hot, wet tracks over her cheeks. Rubbing them away with the back of her hand, Olivia pulled her dark aviator sunglasses from her hair and repositioned them over her eyes. She let herself slide into alpha bitch mode, an icy calm settling over her, refusing to let this get to her.

Someone was going to answer for this.

"Where's Detective Li?" Olivia growled at the young officer guarding the perimeter of the scene. He pointed at a petite Chinese woman, who was scribbling notes and talking to Pete Billinghurst, the Beacon's nighttime duty manager.

Olivia stopped short as a shiver of recognition ran down her spine, and she yanked off her sunglasses to squint at the detective. Slim build, long inky black hair, piercing eyes, and an air of command a person could see a mile away. Where the hell had she seen her before?

Olivia lifted the yellow police tape and marched past the junior officer. She noticed a crime scene investigator, hunched over a small puddle of blood, the whine and flash of his digital camera jarring her nerves as she passed the crime scene where her security guard had been assaulted. Looking up Olivia saw Remy Boudreau nudge Detective Li and then nod her way. Their eyes met for a moment and then he looked away.

Anna Li, on the other hand, carefully watched the angry woman approach, long confident strides across the crime scene, hair flowing around her shoulders, green eyes flashing as if ready to kill someone. It had been a long time since she had seen the infamous Olivia Spencer, self-made millionaire and hotelier, and she sure as hell hadn't looked like that. Anna had both longed for and dreaded this moment. She was about to find out if her boss had been right. She prayed he was.

"Who's in charge here?" Olivia stopped and glowered at the smaller woman. Something familiar still niggled at the back of her mind.

"Detective Anna Li." Anna nervously extended her hand and waited. She watched as Olivia seemed to hesitate and then took the offered hand, shaking it firmly.

"How's Miguel doing?" Olivia's focus shifted to her employee.

"Concussion, they took him to Cedars to be checked out. He caught the little hellions who did that red-handed, but they hit him with something and took off." Pete ran a hand through his short, blonde hair. "He's damn lucky he didn't get killed."

Olivia swore.

"We think it was a brick. Our CSI found one over by the garbage dumpster," Remy supplied helpfully, ignoring Anna's glare.

"Local high school thugs, I suspect, Ms. Spencer. Miguel de Santos mentioned that one of them looked like a former busboy that was fired recently."

"Andy Gervais," Pete offered promptly.

Anna added that to her notes and then turned her attention back to Olivia.

"The graffiti says 'go home', Ms. Spencer. 'Go home' where?" Anna already knew the answer to this question very well.

"I'm from San Cristobel originally and only came to Springfield about ten years ago. When I lecture the staff about gold service standards, I constantly compare the Beacon to the

resort hotels I grew up working in back home. If it was a former employee, he'd know I'm not from around here."

Olivia chewed her bottom lip. Had she pushed the staff too hard? When Natalia had left her, she had been surly, to say the least, with her employees. With her buffer gone, there had been no softening of the blows to the staff. Had she caused this to happen?

"And the rest of it, Ms. Spencer?" Anna treaded lightly, curious as to what Olivia would say, while Pete and Remy looked like they wanted to sink into the ground.

"I'm in a relationship with a woman. Natalia is a former employee as well." Olivia locked eyes with the diminutive detective and hoped she wasn't turning too dark a shade of red. But if Anna Li judged her, she didn't see it in the depths of the sharp eyes.

"So this could be a hate crime," Anna flipped her notepad closed and glanced up at Remy. "Or just a case of a disgruntled ex-employee and his friends lashing out at you."

"A man is in the hospital, detective. I don't think it's something to take lightly. It's a crime and I want this followed up with." Olivia all but growled.

"I assure you we will do what we can. But our hands are tied, Ms. Spencer. Aside from giving the punks some community service time for the graffiti there's not much we can do. Springfield doesn't have a hate crimes ordinance. If your night watchman can positively identify who attacked him, well, we can add assault charges have a better chance to fully punish the offender."

Olivia raised an eyebrow. Why the hell was there no ordinance in place? Doris would be getting an earful in the near future. She still had a lot to make up for after the two mommies debacle.

"If we're done here, I have things to attend to." With the detective's tight lipped nod, Olivia headed inside to call her maintenance department. That filth would be off her wall the minute the cops cleared the scene. Her next call would be to Miguel de Santos' family, to see what she could do to help.

It was getting dark by the time Olivia finally got home. She barely remembered the drive, the hateful words scrawled across the wall swirling around in her mind. She wasn't going to be weak in front of Natalia, but she had to tell her the details, even though all she wanted to do was protect her. All she knew was that she needed to get home. She needed her family around her.

She needed Natalia.

Walking into the kitchen, Olivia saw her partner standing at the stove stirring a pot of her homemade chili, the familiar scent filling the house. The next thing Olivia knew, she was crying, sobbing out the whole terrible thing, crumbling in her lover's strong arms.

And Natalia just held her, tears streaming down her own cheeks as she softly whispered a prayer. Together, their love would be stronger than whatever the world could throw at them.

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Monday morning arrived quietly and calmly as the Spencer-Rivera household adjusted to its new morning routine. Emma was fed, dressed, and out the door in time to catch her bus. Natalia was up with the baby, starting their day, as Olivia dressed for work, and gulped down what was left of her own breakfast. A quick kiss and Olivia was outside, sweeping a light dusting of snow off the car windshield and heading down the long driveway. And when she squinted she could just make out Natalia and Francesca waving goodbye from the window.

Olivia didn't want to go to work. She wanted to stay home with her two girls, but the Beacon couldn't run itself. Pulling into her parking spot, she walked down the alley to go in the back service door. The wall of the Beacon had been freshly painted, with no sign of the trouble from the weekend, just business as usual. Nodding her approval, she headed inside to start her work day.

It had taken time to wade through her emails and to sit through her regular senior management meeting that morning, but Olivia was soon back into her work groove. She looked up from the Beacon's November month end financial statement as her BlackBerry vibrated on the top of her desk. She knew it was Natalia before she even read the message.

I think she just smiled! Or maybe it was just gas <3 – NRivera 2:13pm

Olivia smirked and glanced at the latest addition to her desk, a framed picture of Natalia and Francesca taken when they were still in Cedars Hospital. Grabbing the frame, she ran a thumb lovingly along the cool glass, wishing yet again that she could be home with them, too. Checking the time to see how long she had until her next meeting, Olivia put the frame back onto her desk and picked up her BlackBerry.

Watch out for her dimple, it's a killer. Like mother, like daughter after all xoxo – OSpencer 2:17pm

Hitting send, Olivia reluctantly went back to work. She loved the Beacon, but right now her heart was in a certain farmhouse on the outskirts of town, and the rest of her really wanted to join it there.

Shaking her head, Olivia picked up the reports from the hotel Controller and the statistics from her Food and Beverage department. Despite her crazy personal life this summer, and the ongoing effects of the bad economy, the Beacon had been doing exceptionally well.

“Keira, I need the financial statements from the last six months. Could you grab those for me please?” Olivia yelled, knowing that her assistant would hear her with no problem. If she was right about these figures and even close on her conservative financial forecasts, it looked like her dreams for the Beacon might actually be able to take flight.

The meeting with potential investor Jacob Anderson several weeks ago had been heartening to say the least. If one of Decker’s investors was interested, then maybe she could woo a few more. And Anderson was definitely interested.

Olivia spun in her chair, putting her hands behind her neck, and stared happily at the reports on her desk. She’d been periodically watching Larry Decker’s hotel empire flounder in the economic recession for months, gleefully enjoying it as the Barbie doll he hired as her replacement tap-danced around the last three quarters’ diving stock prices. It had been one of the few bright spots for her during those dark summer months when Natalia was gone.

Olivia sat up as the heart-wrenching pain and doubt of it all came crashing down on her, like a bucket of ice water again. Damn it, she wasn’t going to go down that pity path again. Standing, Olivia wandered over to her well-stocked office mini-bar and poured a finger of scotch over a few ice cubes. Leaning against the edge of her desk, she picked up the framed photo again, her thumb rubbing along the glass.

That was then, and this was now. Their relationship had come so far in a short amount of time, really, and this, their family, was her reality now. Olivia took a drink, enjoying the slow burn of the alcohol sliding down into her stomach. She just needed to keep trusting that she wouldn’t screw it up somehow.

The BlackBerry vibrated on her desk top and Olivia smiled, already knowing who it was.

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“You’re getting some. I can tell,” Olivia grumped the next day over lunch.

"A lady doesn't kiss and tell." Doris couldn't help the satisfied grin that spread across her face. And Anna was definitely keeping her very satisfied.

Olivia merely raised an eyebrow and stared at her friend, waiting.

"Oh, all right, if you're going to drag it out of me." Doris smiled gleefully and swirled her glass of pinot grigio. She actually couldn't wait to tell somebody about her new lover.

"Well, do I know her? She doesn't work for me or go to school with Emma or anything, because I don't know if I can do another May-December midlife crisis situation, 'kay?" Olivia glanced over at the new bartender and sighed. She hadn't had a decent martini here since Jamanda had left.

"Are you done?" Doris rolled her eyes and straightened out her napkin across her lap as Olivia just laughed. "She's a new cop in town."

"Tell me it's not Detective Li? That hotshot know-it-all cop from Sunday?" Olivia's eyes widened and she shook her head. It couldn't be. She stared at her friend and Doris just smiled wider. Damn, it was her too.

"Hey! Compared to the rest of those Keystone Cops under Frank's command, Anna's a much needed breath of fresh air around there." Doris sipped at her wine and smiled when Olivia snorted into her martini, and nodded in agreement.

"Touché." Olivia looked across the table at her obviously happy friend. A shadow of doubt crossed her mind. She was sure she had seen the sharp detective before, if she could just figure out where and when. Nothing came to mind and she shook her head to clear her thoughts. It would come to her eventually.

"That reminds me, about the hate crimes ordinance." Olivia leaned forward, ready to argue her point again with the stubborn politician. Just because she was in the closet didn't mean Doris could ignore the issue.

"Already working on it, okay!" Doris shifted in her seat. This was going to cost her votes in the long run, but it was the right thing to do and she knew it. She peered over the rim of her wine glass at the other woman, the issue hitting close to home when her own friend was the victim of a hate crime. Someday it could even be her.

If Doris was honest she was getting tired of the power plays in politics, all of the games, the nasty backroom deals and payoffs. It was time to start doing the right thing, and this would be a first step.

“Okay, so spill it, Wolfe. Tell me how you met.” Olivia watched, amused, as Doris’ eyes lit up as she quietly started talking about Ladies Night. Oh, she had it bad all right.

Olivia sipped her martini and decided it might be wise to keep an eye on Detective Anna Li.

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Natalia wasn’t sure what had woken her that night, but she blinked her eyes open slowly and blearily glanced towards the crib. There was no baby crying, but she did hear something. Stretching her hand out, she discovered Olivia’s side of the bed was warm, but empty.

“Hey, my little Sweet Pea, can’t sleep hmmm?” Olivia paced with the small, grumpy baby before wandering over to the window to look out. “We’ll just let Momma get some rest for a bit, okay? Just us Spencer girls hanging out...”

Rolling slightly, Natalia followed the sound of her lover’s voice, softly murmuring in the dark. Silhouetted against the night sky, she watched Olivia nuzzle into the baby’s hair and sway slightly. And then she heard her start to sing softly, a sweet, haunting melody she didn’t recognize at all.

Francesca settled down in her arms almost instantly, tiny eyes blinking closed with a little sigh and gurgle. Olivia finished the old San Cristobel lullaby and gently put her daughter down into the crib before rubbing small, soothing circles on her tummy.

Natalia felt the bed dip as Olivia slipped back under the covers. Moving closer, she stretched her arms around the surprised woman, spooning her, savoring the warmth of their bodies snuggled together.

“I thought you were sleeping.” Olivia rolled onto her back, barely able to make out her lover’s face in the darkness while enjoying the feel of Natalia’s fingers stroking through her thick hair.

“I was,” Natalia whispered, her eyes growing dark with desire. “But I’m wide awake now, *querida*.”

Natalia heard Olivia gasp as she dipped her head, pressing a gentle kiss to soft lips before pulling away and then moving to claim them again. A swipe of her tongue and she was sinking deeper into the heat of Olivia’s mouth, their tongues dancing and teasing together.

Finally they pulled apart, both breathless. Natalia rolled on top of Olivia, blazing a trail across her strong jaw to find an earlobe, sucking on it gently. She shivered, feeling Olivia moan below her as her roving hands started exploring the tempting skin beneath her nightshirt.

“Natalia...wait...” Olivia finally panted, her body screaming for more, but she knew what she wanted to do.

“God, I want you so badly,” Natalia whispered, but did as she was asked and slowed her movements, fingers trailing along the delicate skin of Olivia’s breast, her thumb stroking lightly over a stiffening nipple. “Let me love you, touch you, be with you.”

Olivia nodded, completely understanding the desire, the need to connect, feeling the familiar pulse throbbing between them like a physical presence. And yet she knew that she wanted to share in Natalia’s experience, to be a part of it all with her.

“I know, sweetheart, and I want to.” Olivia pulled her confused lover down for another sweet kiss. “Believe me, I really, *really*, want to. But I’ve been thinking and...well, I want to wait with you, until you can be with me, too. I know the doctor said it would only be six weeks or so before the danger of hurting you and the bleeding would be over...” She paused as she noticed Natalia’s eyes shimmering with tears.

“Hey, don’t cry.” Olivia wiped a thumb along a flushed cheek before catching a slowly falling tear, afraid she had hurt Natalia’s feelings. That was the last thing she had wanted to do. “I didn’t mean to upset – “

“No, it’s okay, they’re happy tears.” Natalia laughed softly and shook her head. “Every time I think I can’t possibly love you any more, you do something so sweet, so perfect...”

Olivia looked away, suddenly shy. She pulled her lover into her arms once more, tucking the dark head under her chin. She heard Natalia sigh contentedly and they just lay together snuggling, listening to each other’s heartbeat.

It was going to be a very long six weeks.

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A simple brass plate was all that announced the Springfield offices of Wittcombe and Nesbitt, Alan Spaulding’s private attorneys at law. While Spaulding Enterprises had a team of corporate lawyers, Alan had always preferred to keep his own counsel separate from his business ventures. A black limousine pulled up in front of the historical building and parked.

Alexandra Spaulding waited as her driver came around and opened the back door of her limo, offering her his hand to step from the vehicle. Fletcher Reade appeared at her side, as if he had always been there, and she smiled warmly at the man who had come to mean so much to her in the last few months. He was just what she had needed since Alan's death, someone to travel the world with and share new adventures.

Fletcher opened the large oak door, waiting as Alexandra went ahead into the building. About to follow her in, he stopped as Natalia and Olivia dashed up the stairs behind them and continued to hold the door open for them as well.

"Thank you." Natalia smiled warmly and Olivia nodded to the older man, before noticing Alexandra's eyes narrow as she took in the two of them holding hands with an air of distaste. Alan may have mellowed before his death, but Alex obviously still had that old Spaulding fire inside.

"I heard you'd had your baby, Natalia, congratulations." Alex plastered her most smarmy smile on her face. "The Coopers must be so thrilled."

Natalia blinked, a little surprised at the older woman's tone and squeezed Olivia's hand to keep her from saying something that would only make this all the more awkward.

"We're all thrilled that our little family is settling in." Natalia looked over at a brooding but silent Olivia.

"Indeed," Alex sniffed, taking Fletcher's arm and heading down the small hallway to the office reception area. "How is dear sweet Emma taking it all?" She glanced over at her companion and smiled. "I do worry about her so, you know, Fletcher dear."

Olivia opened her mouth, ready to defend herself against the implied criticism but quickly snapped it shut as Natalia beat her to it again.

"Emma just loves her little sister. She and Phillip went shopping the other day and picked up an adorable stuffed teddy bear for her. It's as big as she is." Natalia grinned up at Olivia, who still looked like she wanted to smack Alex upside the head.

"Did I hear my name?" Phillip appeared beside the receptionist's desk and smiled at the new arrivals.

"I'm sorry I'm late, darling. The plane just landed and we came straight here." Alexandra hugged him and kissed his cheek. Phillip shook Fletcher's hand and then leaned over to kiss Olivia and give a quick hug to Natalia.

“You’re not late at all, Aunt Alex. We’re just meeting over here in Walter’s office.” Phillip led the way as the small group headed down a small hallway toward the spacious office of one of the senior partners.

Inside the tastefully decorated office sat a small group of familiar faces. Bill Lewis and his new wife Lizzie sat whispering quietly together. Next to them Beth Raines grumbled quietly to her son James, clearly not pleased with his non-stop cell phone texting. Behind them were Buzz and Lillian, some of the board members from Spaulding Enterprises and Hilda, Alan’s long-time housekeeper. Doris Wolfe sat in a row by herself, impatiently tapping her foot, but perked up as she noticed them enter the office.

Olivia took the opportunity to escape from Alexandra and made a beeline to the empty chairs near Doris, Natalia following behind. On top of the solemn reason for gathering, it was always a bit concerning when so many of her ex’s were in a room together. It was comforting to have reinforcements close by just in case. Olivia smiled at Doris before glancing over at a worried-looking Natalia, who was busy checking that her cell phone was indeed on and working.

“Jane is fine with babies, sweetheart. Relax,” Olivia leaned over, whispering to her lover. Natalia nodded but still triple-checked her phone before slipping it back into her purse.

“Where’s Francesca?” Lillian asked softly as she turned in her chair to smile at the couple.

“We just left her with Jane at the Beacon.” Olivia ran a soothing hand along Natalia’s arm and then finally ended up tangling her fingers with her partner’s, needing the reassuring physical connection herself. “Someone was having a hard time saying goodbye.”

“Well, Natalia pulled you away somehow, thankfully,” Buzz teased from beside Lillian. Natalia smirked, looking up as Olivia merely chuckled and squeezed her hand.

“If everyone could take their seats please, I’d like to start.” Walter Nesbitt Sr. rose from behind his desk as the people still standing made their way to their chairs. He paused as the office door opened and two more guests arrived. Phillip smiled and quickly went to speak with the older woman and shake the other man’s hand before guiding them to some empty chairs. The lawyer pointed his remote control at a bookshelf. A panel slid to one side and revealed a large-screen television.

“Thank you all for coming today,” Walter began as he leaned against the edge of his desk, waiting for the room to fall silent. “Normally I would just send out copies of the will to the beneficiaries to read for themselves, but Alan Spaulding was never one for the ordinary. This summer, he dropped by my office to tape a message to be played in the event of his death. That tape is what we will be seeing in just a moment. I have copies of the will for

everyone here today, which will outline the specific details of Alan's wishes." He hit the play button on the remote control and waited.

A few seconds of blue screen and then Alan Spaulding blinked into view, suntanned and healthy looking. A quiet sob could be heard, as Alexandra reacted to seeing her brother again. Fletcher pulled out his handkerchief and gave it to her, before taking her hand.

"Good afternoon." Alan smiled and leaned back in his chair. The video had obviously been filmed in the very office that the small group sat in, as the bookcase and large ornate desk were unmistakable. "I've asked you all here today to personally discuss certain aspects of my last will and testament. Walter here will see to the details, but I wanted a last chance to speak to you all.

"If you are watching this, then I've obviously left this earth. I imagine my ticker finally gave out or someone finally got lucky stabbing me in the back." Alan smiled slightly at that and then continued, "I just hope it was quick and painless, and that my funeral was as wonderful a send off as I had left instructions for. I always did enjoy a good party, didn't I, Alexandra?"

Alexandra nodded, smiling sadly as she dabbed at her eyes, Fletcher squeezing her hand in silent support. By the end of his life, Alan had changed so much, redeeming himself in so many people's eyes. His request to her for a simple funeral, while in the hospital for the experimental procedure to save Phillip only emphasized that.

"But let's not dwell on that, shall we? Let's get down to business. You may not have known it, but I've recently updated my will. Surprise!" Alan chuckled and leaned back in his chair, clearly enjoying himself.

Olivia exchanged worried glances, first with Natalia and then with Phillip. Alan's surprises were seldom good.

"Family means everything to me, as most of you probably already know. I have been blessed with a loving, caring, and good family." Alan paused, looking down thoughtfully, and then back up at the camera again with a wry smile on his face. "I should probably add conniving and cutthroat but then, who am I to point fingers. So let's get down to the nitty-gritty shall we."

"You'll all get a copy of this as well but I wanted to personally go over it." Alan picked up a document from the desktop and started to flip through the pages.

"To Phillip, my adopted son ..." Alan glanced up at this point and smiled. "Hell, I knew the first time I saw you that you were the son I was meant to have. We've had our ups and

downs and I'm pleased you've recently returned to my life. Our recent family trip to Florida has inspired me to redo my will and I can only hope that we've had a chance to grow closer again since then.

"To you I leave one quarter of my Spaulding Enterprise shares, my estate in Springfield and several overseas properties that Walter will give you the details for. I only hope that you consider taking over as CEO of Spaulding in my place."

Phillip looked down at his hands a moment, watching as Beth slid her hand over his and intertwined their fingers. The Spaulding board members murmured amongst each other before the room settled down as Alan continued.

"More importantly, Phillip, I ask you to watch over my daughter Peyton in my place, to be there for her when I can't be. I've watched you with your own children, my grandchildren, and I know that Peyton couldn't find a better father. As we both know, family is what we make it." Alan smiled slightly before flipping to the next page of his will. When he looked back up he had a much more serious demeanor.

"To my other son, Alan Michael, who, at the making of this recording, is still estranged from me ..." Alan grimaced and looked away from the camera before looking back up again. "Well, I was tempted to leave you a mere penny, but even I am not that heartless. So I leave you a quarter of my shares in Spaulding, to be managed by Phillip until you return to claim them yourself." Alan stared off into the distance for a minute before continuing.

"I regret that we've ended up the way we have, Alan Michael. I love you, son. No matter what has come between us, just know that my love has never, ever changed." Alan cleared his throat and swallowed hard before continuing.

"To Peyton, my darling daughter." A huge smile crossed Alan's face. "I am terribly sad that I will not see you grow up to be the lovely woman I am sure you will become. I've left several tapes and letters for you to have as you grow older so I can be a part of your life, in at least some fashion. You are my heart and I will love you forever. To you I leave one quarter of my Spaulding shares, under your mother Beth's control until you are twenty-one."

Beth felt her hand gently squeezed by Phillip, and she took comfort in his silent strength. Their eyes locked for a moment, a soft smile passing between them before turning back to the television screen.

"To my grandchildren, Lizzie, James, Zach, Raphael, and Emma and to my great-grandchild Sarah, where ever you may be, I leave substantial trust funds that you will have access to immediately, or when you reach your twenty-first birthday."

“Lizzie my dear, I have no doubt you will one day surpass even me in business, if that’s what you put your mind to. While I may question your taste in men,” Alan shifted in his seat and cleared his throat a little, “I have no doubt in your ability to take care of yourself. I can’t wait to see what you do with your life. Remember I’m always right here.” Alan pressed a hand his heart and smiled softly.

Bill hugged Lizzie closer, as tears streamed down her flushed cheeks. Beth handed her a tissue and she dabbed self-consciously at her eyes.

“And James, you remind me of myself at your age, son. My last words of advice to you are simply trust in yourself. You’ll find your own way, I know it. Just try not to give Phillip an aneurism while you’re doing it, okay? I’ll be keeping an eye on you from wherever I’ve ended up boy.” Alan smirked and pointed at the screen to make his point.

James nodded, smiling down at the image on his phone. It was the last one he had of the man, taken in the hospital when he had been trying to show his grandfather how to text from his phone. He would miss the old man. Wiping at a sudden tear, he looked up to find his father watching him. They shared a sad smile.

“No promises about the aneurism, Dad.” James whispered, pleased when his father just chuckled and shook his head.

“To my sisters Alexandra, Amanda and Victoria, I also leave trust funds. Alexandra you have been my most steadfast friend all my life. And while we’ve had our battles, in the end family would always unite us. Our lives together have been nothing if not exciting. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

“To all my friends on the Spaulding Board. It has been an honor and a privilege to work with such a fine team. I have instructed Walter to arrange for a final dinner at the country club, with the best Cuban cigars and the oldest scotch available. I ask only one thing before I go, don’t screw things up now that I’m gone. I’d hate to have to come back and haunt you all.” Alan chuckled to himself.

“He’d do it too...” Buzz murmured to Lillian.

“To my good friend, Buzz Cooper.” Alan smiled fondly. “And I do consider you my friend. You work too hard, buddy, and that damn stove in your kitchen is way too important in your life. So I’ve left you my condo in New York, in the hopes that Lillian can drag you off to the big city every once in awhile for some fun. I hope life in Springfield won’t be too boring for you without me stirring things up. Keep him in line, Lillian.” Alan smirked and flipped to the next page of his will.

“Ah, Hilda, my steadfast housekeeper for all these years. Only you and I know of the secrets that have been kept over the years and where the skeletons have been hidden. For unwavering service and devotion, I leave you a home of your own, with maid service for as long as you live. You made my house a home, and for that I will always be grateful.”

Hilda pulled a tissue out of her pocket and wiped at the tears freely falling down her cheeks.

“To young Ashlee Wolfe, I leave a lifetime membership to the Springfield Shooting Range and Gun Club. Walter also has a token of my affection for you, Ashlee, a little something for you to remember me by.” Alan fingered a velvet ring box and placed it onto the desktop with a mischievous smile.

“That would bring me to my ex-wives; I’ve not forgotten you, any of you. Love me or hate me, you know you’re gonna miss me. I would have been remiss not to say goodbye to you all. There is a bottle of Cristal champagne for each of you. All I ask is that you light some candles and find some quiet time alone to toast to the memory of our good times together.”

Olivia looked away, unexpected tears stinging her eyes, the image of Alan on one knee proposing to her immediately coming to mind. She noticed Beth wiping a tear away as well. Natalia’s warm hand slipped into hers and squeezed, returning her to the here and now. She’d try to remember the good things about Alan.

“I never knew my son Gus as he grew to be a man, in the same way that he never knew his own son Raphael. And yet, here we are, a family. I am responsible for him and his family and I will take care of them in his stead. Therefore, I leave a little something for his widow, Natalia Rivera, so that she will no longer need to work so hard for everything.” Alan smiled mysteriously. “You wouldn’t accept my help in life, Natalia, you can’t refuse me now in death.”

Natalia looked over at Olivia, puzzled by that last comment. Olivia just raised an eyebrow and shook her head. They’d find out more soon enough.

On screen, Alan flipped the will closed and tapped the desktop with a finger, seemingly unsure how to start what he wanted to say. Shifting in his seat a little, he finally looked up again.

“Finally, we come to Mrs. Joanne Pierce and her son Charlie. It is my greatest regret that I was not strong enough or brave enough to honor my tour of duty in Vietnam. It is my greatest shame that Gerald Pierce went in my place and died.”

Surprised at this news, Olivia and Natalia exchanged looks. Phillip turned to look at the duo who had arrived late to the reading. Mrs. Pierce wiped at the tears freely falling while her son sat pensive and unmoving. On screen, Alan continued.

“I accept responsibility for Gerry’s death, so the least I can do is to take care of his family to the best of my ability. I don’t know if I’ll ever have the guts to speak with you face to face, and explain. The least I can do is to leave you one quarter of my shares in Spaulding Enterprises and a lump sum of money to help take care of you both, now that I’m gone.

“So, my friends and family, this is it. I never said it enough in my life, but I love you all. The ride has been interesting, to say the least. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting to get to. No rest for the wicked after all.” Alan smiled and then nodded.

“Goodbye.”

The television screen turned blue and then Walter turned it off completely.

“You know he’s already heading up some committee wherever he’s gone to,” Buzz said quietly as Lillian just shook her head, chuckling and squeezing his hand. “What?”

“If you wouldn’t mind seeing either myself or one of my assistants, we will get you all your copies of the will and have you complete whatever paperwork needs to be done. Thank you all for coming today.”

The small group stood and started milling around. Phillip immediately went to speak to Mrs. Pierce and her son. Olivia watched the quiet discussion with interest, not sure how these new shareholders would affect Phillip and Spaulding Enterprises. Glancing over at the group of board members huddled together by Walter Nesbitt, she didn’t think she was the only one wondering how this would all turn out.

“Well, that was interesting,” Doris noted as she, Olivia and Natalia headed slowly over to one of Nesbitt’s assistants. The man had Doris sign for Ashlee’s items and then handed over the same velvet box from the video. Popping it open, she pulled out a silver bullet.

“It’s engraved.” Doris squinted, trying to make out the wording. “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

Olivia burst out laughing as Doris just shook her head and smiled.

“Tell Ashlee I’ll show her the ropes at the gun club.” Olivia smirked at her friend. “It’s actually a great place to network with the ‘good old boys.’”

"I bet." Doris checked her watch. "I've gotta go. I have to prepare for my press conference this afternoon." She met her friend's eyes, both women knowing it was a big step and made up for a lot of old, unresolved issues between them. Olivia placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. Smiling, Doris just nodded and left them to deal with Nesbitt's waiting assistant.

Signing for her copy of the will first, Olivia waited as Natalia started filling out her paperwork. She flipped through the thick document searching for Natalia's inheritance clause, while her lover busily signed off on the transfer of funds to her account and gave the man her banking information. Olivia stopped abruptly when she finally found the amount listed in the will and smiled, glancing up just in time to see her partner register exactly how much was being deposited into her account.

"Oh, my God!" Natalia stared at the amount in disbelief. "Alan left me one and a half million dollars."

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Later that afternoon at city hall, Doris stood to one side of her desk and adjusted her black pencil skirt. The evil image consultant Andre Graham was hovering somewhere nearby, having stolen her favorite red, black and white blazer right off her back and threatening to burn it.

The idiot might be irritating, but he did have a point. She needed to be very smart about all of this if she wanted to eventually come out of the closet and maintain some sort of political career. And Doris definitely was tired of hiding. Just a little while longer and then she would set herself free. No more secrets.

"Hi sexy," Anna smirked, leaning against Doris' office doorway. She wandered closer to the fidgeting woman. "You look nervous."

"Just a little. It's a bit of a departure from my normal press conference. I look more 'warm and fuzzy' than I'm used to and I'm about to do something my conservative voters will not be that thrilled with." Doris straightened out her pale blue sweater and adjusted the simple strand of pearls around her neck.

"You'll do fine." Anna pressed a soft kiss against a surprised mouth. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks." Doris leaned in for another quick kiss. A sharp tap at her door made her reluctantly pull back, as her image consultant popped his head in.

“Ready for your close up, Ms. Wolfe?” Andre smiled knowingly at the quickly separating duo. Doris grabbed her speech, squeezed Anna’s hand once for good measure and headed for the door.

“Let’s do it, people.”

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ACT 4

Olivia brought in their cups of herbal tea, setting them down onto the coffee table before sinking down onto the couch and pulling Natalia and the baby into her warm arms, snuggling together until the heat in the house kicked in. There was no doubt that winter was on the way.

On the television set was Doris’ live press conference, taking a stand against hate crimes and outlining her plan to fight for Springfield’s diverse future. It was a campaign speech if ever they had heard one.

Olivia smiled at how far Doris had come, pleased for her friend. The woman had stepped up to the plate for them all this time, despite how it could affect her politically. She pressed the off button on the remote and turned her full attention to her quiet partner.

“So, it’s been an eventful day.” Olivia started running her fingers through Natalia’s long hair, soothing her lover. “You doing okay?”

“I will be. I still can’t actually believe he did that. One and a half million dollars. And Rafe getting a trust fund on top that. It’s still just so much to take in.” Natalia’s soft, sad sigh was almost lost in the baby’s gurgles.

“Well, you know I just want you for your money, right?” Olivia smirked and giggled as Natalia poked her stomach.

“That’s a relief, because I totally want you to be my sultry trophy wife,” Natalia teased back, feeling a little better. Olivia always knew how to make her feel better.

“Oh, really?” Olivia arched an eyebrow and dipped her head to place a tender kiss against the soft, dark hair. “I’ll have to buy more shoes then.”

“I just never would have thought that Alan cared so much about my welfare. I did nothing but try to stay at arm’s length from the man and keep him out of Rafe’s life as much as possible. And yet he left us both so much.” Natalia burrowed closer to Olivia’s chest.



“Family is...was really important to him. And with Gus gone, he wanted to take care of his son’s family. Even though Alan didn’t always know the appropriate way to express that, I totally understand how he felt. I’d want that for you and this little one here.” Olivia’s hand slid over to caress the baby’s fine, dark hair as Francesca squeaked and happily gummed her blue pacifier.

They just sat together for a while, listening to the hum of the furnace and happy baby sounds. Finally, Olivia reluctantly broke the silence, knowing it was time to broach the subject.

“Hey, what do you think about moving the crib into the nursery this weekend? Sweet Pea seems to be settling in okay and those baby monitors I got for you at the shower are top of the line.”

Natalia froze for a moment and Olivia cringed, waiting for her to disagree, but she simply nodded. It was a baby step, but a necessary first one, not only for Francesca, but for them as well.

“It’s time, you’re right.” Natalia snuggled a little closer and ran a hand over the baby’s soft hair. “We need alone time and Sweet Pea will be just fine in her own room.” Natalia shifted her hand from Francesca to Olivia’s stomach, feeling her muscles twitch under her fingers. They lapsed into a peaceful silence for a few more minutes.

“I’ve been thinking,” Natalia finally murmured.

“Uh-oh...” Olivia couldn’t help but tease her. She chuckled as Natalia swatted her arm and ignored her.

“Remember when we were talking about what I wanted to do when I grow up.” Natalia shifted a sleeping Francesca a little closer. “This inheritance from Alan has just given me so much more that I can contribute to our family now, and that’s important to me.”

Olivia stayed quiet, listening to the proud woman in her arms.

“I want us to be partners in all aspects of life as well, but I never felt like I would be able to weigh in financially like you have in our relationship.” Olivia started to protest and Natalia simply placed a finger across her lips, effectively silencing her. “I realize that’s not important to you, but it was how I felt. I’ve worked so hard all my life for everything, struggled and fought, and I know you have too, so I couldn’t just take half of the Beacon from you.”

Olivia sighed, but could see her point.

“But now, thanks to Alan, of all people, I feel like I can stand beside you. What I’m trying to say here is that I’d like to come back to the Beacon and work with you again, Olivia. But I don’t want it just given to me. I want to invest, to be a true partner with you there. Franchising the Beacon is a dream that I want to be a part of too.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Olivia stared into the serious eyes before her.

“So I want to set aside some money for the kids’ education, pay off the house, and I know there will be some inheritance tax, too. I’d like to call your accountant again and have him help me with all this. He did a great job working out the income tax on that \$80,000 I got for the house in the spring. And whatever is left over I want to give to you to become a partner in the Beacon, use the money to help launch our franchise.”

“You drive a hard bargain, lady,” Olivia smiled at the determined woman in her arms. “But I gladly agree to your terms.”

“I’d show you just how hard a bargain I can drive, but you’re being adorably stubborn about that.” Natalia smirked and waggled her eyebrows at her lover, laughing outright as Olivia rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically.

“It’s you and me against the world.” Olivia kissed impossibly soft lips, sealing the deal. “For richer or poorer.”

“For always, Olivia,” Natalia murmured against Olivia’s lips, closing the scant distance between them again.

“For always.”

Outside the cozy farmhouse, snow lightly fell in the fading sunlight, the fat flakes blanketing the fields and nearby woods. At the end of their long driveway, a black sedan slowed and carefully pulled off to the side of the quiet country road. With a push of a button, the driver’s side window opened about halfway, leaving the perfect amount of space for a camera lens to rest comfortably on the edge.

Black-gloved hands hit the zoom button, then quickly squeezed off several shots of the peaceful farmhouse, before moving to the open haymow of the barn, the small stand of trees to the right of the house, even the footbridge by the duck pond. When the camera was pulled back in, the window silently closed and the car pulled back onto the road, to disappear once more into the cold night.

The End

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