

Eros

by ladyvictory

ACT 1

The woman watched the scene unfold before her, standing silent and still at the window. She was exhausted, having travelled countless miles and hours along lonely stretches of road, in darkness and through storms, to reach this place – this moment. She had been so sure of her purpose since she had made the decision to return, but now, she found herself hesitating before taking the final step. She knew, without a doubt, that she would not be welcome, at least not at first. This hadn't bothered her on her journey; if there was one thing she could say for herself, it was that she had a knack for turning hostile situations to her favor. She wasn't always known to be the most patient person, but in this she could wait out any bad feelings. And yet, here she was, faltering as she reached the first meaningful checkpoint...

Inside the warm house, Marina Cooper was hefting her son into his high chair, trying to hold back an undignified grunt at the strain. The boy was growing larger and more handsome every day, and she knew that soon she would be hard pressed to carry him around like she enjoyed to do. "All right buddy, time to start dinner," she cooed, clipping the safety-belt and snapping the tray down into place. Henry, who Shayne had taken to occasionally calling Hank, nodded excitedly and laughed. No one would ever charge him with being a bad eater, that was for sure.

Turning, Marina started as she caught sight of someone looking into the window. A knife was in her hand almost before she considered picking one up, and she moved forward, placing herself between the intruder's line of sight and her son. Henry whimpered, startled by his mother's sudden movement. "It's all right buddy, it's okay," she assured him, looking back briefly before cautiously advancing.

Reaching the curtains and throwing them back with her free hand, she got her second surprise of the evening. "Mom?" she asked, squinting in confusion. The older woman sighed, breath fogging up the glass, and nodded, pointing towards the front door. Frowning now, Marina inclined her head in agreement and moved towards the front of the house. "This had better be good."

Opening the door, Marina resisted the urge to shiver at the cold air that immediately blew into the house. The two women stared at each other silently for long moments, sizing each other up, until, finally, Eleni looked away. "Aren't you going to invite your mother in?" The younger woman snorted, raising an eyebrow.

"And just why in the world would I do that?" she asked, all but sneering. Taken aback, her mother blinked slowly.

"I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, but, the last time I was here we... weren't exactly on the worst of terms..." she said, hesitating.

"Not exactly on the best either," Marina shot back, crossing her arms over her chest, mindful of the sharp edge of the knife.

Now it was Eleni's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Are you going to stab your own mother, Marina?" she chuckled, shaking her head. The younger woman glared, just barely holding back a pout.

"When it comes to Henry, there aren't many people I can trust."

Eleni cocked her head, smiling genuinely. "Is that my grandson's name?" she asked, pleased. "It's a good, strong name."

"He's a good, strong boy," Marina allowed, unable to stop the pride from filling her voice and expression. "No thanks to his grandmother," she added with another glare.

"Can't I see him?" the older woman asked, her gaze shifting from her daughter to the inside of the cozy house longingly. "I don't want to impose, b-"

"And yet, here you are," the younger woman sniffed. Eleni scowled, jaw clenching in annoyance.

"He's my grandson Marina, I have a right-"

"You have no rights here. If, and that is a big if, you get to see him, it's because I decide to let you."

Nodding, the wind gone from her sails, the former Mrs. Frank Cooper Jr. swallowed hard. Shouldering a previously hidden duffle bag, she reached out with her free hand and cupped her daughter's cheek. "I had hoped," she murmured, slightly encouraged when Marina didn't pull away. "That you would understand, now that you are a mother. I love you, sweetheart,

no matter what happened before. And I love my grandson, even though we have never met.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Marina grumbled, trembling from the cold.

“So stubborn; you definitely get that from me. I’ll be in town for a while... if you decide you want to talk...”

Jerking her head back, out of her mother’s hold, Marina shrugged, posture sagging a bit now that she was sure there was no danger of a confrontation. “Don’t hold your breath.” Nodding again, Eleni turned on her heel and walked away.

Sagging against the door in relief, Marina stared into the distance long after her mother had gotten into her car and driven away; she shook slightly with both the cold and the loss of adrenaline. Henry’s crying broke her stupor, and she blinked rapidly, shutting the door and entering the kitchen once again. She would find out what her mother was after later; right now, it was time to take care of the most important person in her life.

“Hey buddy, are you okay? Oh, you’re freezing! Mommy’s sorry, little man!” Removing the boy from his high chair and lifting him in her arms, she moved into the living room. Sitting on the couch, she grabbed the throw and wrapped it around them both, reaching for the phone once they were cocooned. She dialed quickly, fingers accustomed to the familiar pattern of numbers. She got an answer on the third ring. “Yeah, hi Shayne. Do you want to come over for some pizza take out...have a movie night with me and the little guy?” she asked, trying not to sound too hopeful. Pausing a moment, she smiled, holding Henry closer. “Excellent, I’ll see you in half an hour.” Hanging up the phone, she kissed her son on the forehead. “Hear that buddy, your daddy’s coming over for a family night. Let’s not let mean old grandma ruin a perfectly good evening.” Tomorrow...tomorrow she would find out what the woman wanted. Tonight, she would lose herself in two of her favorite men, and try to pretend that they really were a small happy family.

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Act 2

Olivia Spencer yawned widely, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she stumbled over the hem of her favorite robe on the way into the kitchen. It was Sunday, which meant that there would be coffee, but no Natalia waiting for her there; a sad second best, but one that she appreciated all the same. The smell of frying turkey bacon didn’t register until she was fully in the room. “What in the who now?” she sputtered, shock burning away the last of the cobwebs in her brain. Natalia smiled over her shoulder from her position at the stove, still

in her pajamas – plus a protective apron, of course – and Emma just raised an eyebrow as she sipped her orange juice. “Did I sleep through Sunday?”

“Nope,” Natalia chuckled, turning back to her sizzling skillet.

“Am I... in the Twilight Zone?” Olivia glared in suspicion, checking to make sure that Rod Sterling wasn’t hiding in a corner. Now Emma giggled, rolling her eyes.

“Mo-om! It’s a special Sunday.”

Pursing her lips in the universal ‘fair enough’ expression, Olivia nodded and all but skipped up behind her lover, wrapping her arms around the smaller woman’s waist and burying her face in soft hair. “Did you bribe the priest to write you name in the attendance book?” she asked cheekily, burrowing until she found smooth skin and laying a kiss there.

The shorter woman snorted, sighing in equal parts contentment and exasperation. “The tree that does not bend, breaks; it’s a special day, even I can bend.”

“Oh-kay, Confucius,” Olivia teased pulling back.

Kissing the back of Natalia’s head, she wandered over to the table, sitting beside her daughter. “Next, she’ll want to know the answer to the riddle of the sphinx...” she stage whispered, wagging her eyebrows. Emma nodded solemnly, not understanding the reference, but wanting to go along with the joke. Natalia turned and glared playfully.

“Tell ya what, smart aleck, you don’t get coffee until you answer.”

Olivia affected an innocent, wide eyed expression for all of four seconds, before smiling a bit smugly. “The answer is 42... oh wait, wrong question. The answer is Man.”

Rolling her eyes, Natalia all but threw her hands up in surrender. “How can you be such a pain in the butt first thing in the morning?” she grumbled, lowering the heat on the stove before moving to get her lover coffee.

“Just happy to see you,” Olivia replied honestly, reaching for the mug and craning her neck for a kiss, which was gladly bestowed.

“Uh huh, sweet talker,” Natalia accused, utterly charmed. “Why don’t you enjoy that before the baby wakes up; you’re on feeding duty.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Olivia smarted, raising the drink to her lips.

Just as the hot liquid touched her tongue, an indignant cry sounded from the second floor, making her freeze. “Sigh,” she said, putting down the mug sadly. Emma nodded her agreement, patting her mother’s hand in sympathy.

“Oh, honey,” Natalia cooed, sympathetically. “I’ll get her if you want to finish breakfast and drink your coffee.”

“No, no, I got it. My turn and all that,” the older woman insisted, nodding in resignation. With another longing look at her caffeine, she turned and walked from the room.

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The shrill ringing of the phone startled Doris Wolfe out of a pleasant dream. Disorientated and grumpy, she reached for the offending machine, hitting the ‘Talk’ button and laying the receiver on her face in an effort to expend as little energy as possible. “Mayor Wolfe,” she muttered, voice gravelly from sleep.

“Hey you,” a cheery voice greeted, and Doris couldn’t help the smile that immediately sprang to her lips.

“Hey you yourself,” she replied, sitting up slowly and stretching. Looking over at the bedside clock, she nodded to herself, mentally planning out her day. She had plenty of time before she had to get up and begin preparations for her romantic surprise, but it never hurt to start early. “When am I seeing you today?”

“That’s, uh... kinda what I called about...” On the other end of the phone, the other woman was suddenly hesitant, and the Mayor’s heart skipped a beat.

“Anna...”

“I’m sorry Dor, but I have to cancel. I got orders to report to some sort of training seminar in Chicago...”

“I *am* the Mayor, you know... I could pull some strings...”

Anna chuckled ruefully. “And how would *that* look? Mayor Wolfe using her clout to give a certain detective special privileges...”

With a sigh, Doris slumped against the headboard. “But it’s not fair... it’s Valentine’s Day, and Chinese New Year to boot...” she almost whined as she picked invisible lint from her comforter, the pout clear in her voice.

"I know, babe, and I'm sorry. Listen, I have to go; if I don't leave soon I won't make sign in time. I'll make it up to you when I get back in town, okay?"

"All right," Doris allowed, sighing.

"Okay; talk to you later. Ciao bella, mwah."

"Bye. Happy-" the phone went dead. "Valentine's..."

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"Hey Sweet Pea," Olivia soothed as she stepped into the nursery, smiling when sharp cries turned to sniffles and whimpers. Peering over the rail of her daughter's crib, she was struck again by how beautiful the infant was, all dark hair and large eyes. "What's a matter, cutie pie? Is it time for food already?" Francesca frowned impatiently. Chuckling, Olivia reached down and gently picked the tiny child up, lifting her so they looked eye to eye for a moment, before laying a kiss on her smooth forehead. "All righty then baby girl, let's go get you fed so I can drink my coffee."

As she walked into the kitchen, a bottle was immediately thrust in her direction. It seemed to be halfway gone within seconds of reaching the squirming baby's mouth. "Slow down there, vacuum!" Emma giggled into her plate of food.

"She makes piggy noises when she eats," the older girl noted, delighted at the snuffling sounds her sister was making.

"She eats like she never tasted food before," Olivia added, shrugging and sliding into her chair. Smiling at her family, Natalia brought over plates for the adults and took her seat.

"I like to think she is just passionate about food; maybe she'll grow up to be a chef," the dark haired woman suggested, picking up her fork and stabbing some of her lover's eggs.

"Hey!"

"Oh ye of little faith," the Latina admonished, raising the loaded utensil to the hotelier's mouth.

"I shall never doubt again," Olivia said. Moaning as she chewed, the green eyed woman nodded. "Oh my God, that's real sharp cheddar cheese, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's real cheddar cheese. Special treat for my favorite lady on a special day."

"I love you with all of both of my hearts."

"Me, or the cheese?"

Olivia paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Can I have time to decide?" Emma giggled as Natalia glared.

"Thin ice," she threatened playfully, poking her lover's shoulder.

The sound of air being sucked through a bottle brought their attention to Francesca, who whined. "Please sir, can I have some more," Olivia teased, taking away the bottle and placing it on the table. Lifting the girl to her shoulder, she added and she began to burp her, "If you think *that's* good kiddo, wait until you try cheese."

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Blake Marler stared incredulously at her boyfriend from her seat on the bed, blinking slowly, as if closing her eyes would somehow erase the last two minutes. "You're kidding me, right?" Frank Cooper winced and rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably, almost displacing the tie that lay half undone at his collar.

"Blakey, honey, I have no choice," he all but pleaded, throwing up his hands in the universal 'out of my control' gesture.

"You're the Chief of Police, Frank, of course you have a choice," she countered, snorting in disgust. "They couldn't pick another day? Had to be Valentine's Day?"

"I know, I know, terrible planning. But there's nothing I can do about it now."

"When will you be back?"

"Tomorrow, in the early afternoon," he replied, smiling sheepishly. "See, I won't be gone long."

"Fra-ank!" the small woman whined, pout in full force, arms crossed over her chest. And to think, she had worn her best blouse today. "This is our first Valentine's Day together."

He shrugged helplessly again, turning back to the mirror to finish with his tie. He was sorry that he wouldn't get to spend the day with his girlfriend, but secretly, a small part of him was relieved. Frank hated Valentine's. All that pressure more often than not spelled death for a relationship, especially with a woman like Blake Marler, who might be hearing

wedding bells in her ears. Better to be apart for a while, keep things balanced. Slow but steady, that was how Frank liked it now; no surprises, not like last time.

“Were you even going to tell me that you were going away?” Blake asked, pale eyes suddenly shrewd and narrow.

“Huh?” Frank asked dumbly, caught off guard.

“You’re leaving; you were getting ready when I showed up to surprise you... were you even going to call and say you would be gone?” she asked again, standing and walking around to face him. “Or was I going to have to wonder why my boyfriend hadn’t contacted me on Valentine’s Day?”

Frank froze, like a deer caught in headlights. He knew instinctively that he had to tread carefully here, but didn’t know how exactly to proceed. “Of-of course I was going to call you, sweetheart. I was just running a little bit late, that’s all,” he assured her, offering a lopsided smile that he hoped was charming.

“Uh huh,” was the unimpressed response.

“I swear,” he insisted, leaning down and pecking her lips, trying to play it cool. “Look, I’ll make it up to you when I come back, all right?”

“You had damn well better,” Blake said evenly, turning and walking out of the room.

Frank let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding at the sound of his front door closing forcefully. “Dodged a bullet there, Frankie-boy,” he muttered, finishing with his tie.

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ACT 3

The sound of her phone going off pulled Olivia back from the trancelike state she had found herself floating in. After washing up and changing, Natalia and Emma had left the farmhouse in Natalia’s car, off to have a girl’s day out, leaving the older woman alone with the newest member of the family. As soon as the car had disappeared down the road, the child had decided that it was her duty to exercise her freedom of expression by throwing back her tiny, dark haired head, and wailing unceasingly. After about fifteen minutes of freaking out, Olivia realized the girl was just in a cranky mood, and the rhythmic sounds of her attitude had lulled her mother into a mental limbo. She had no idea how long she had sat on the couch, gently rocking the baby in her arms.

“Spencer’s House of Pain.”

“Jesus, Olivia, what are you doing to my niece?” Doris Wolfe quipped.

The hotelier snorted and rolled her eyes. “We’ve decided to learn a new game today, called make Mama Olivia go deaf before sundown.” Wincing, she shifted the infant higher, pleading the little one with her eyes to quiet down. Francesca glared, her volume increasing in defiance.

“Put her on the phone, let’s see if I can help,” the Mayor offered.

“You gonna bore the kid to sleep with politics?”

“Shut up and put the darling little banshee on.” Sighing, Olivia shrugged and did as requested.

Within seconds, the crying had slowed to shuddering breathes and occasional whimpers, and Olivia’s eyes slid closed in equal parts gratitude and irritation. “What are you, the baby whisperer?” she grumbled into the phone, rearranging Francesca so the infant lay against her chest, ear resting above her heart.

Doris chuckled, and Olivia could almost see the smug look on her face. “What can I say, I have a talent.”

“Uh huh, so happy for you,” the green eyed woman grumbled.

“Now, now Olivia, no need to be grumpy. I call bearing an offer you can’t refuse.”

“I’m not going to wake up with a horse’s head in my bed... am I?” she asked wearily. Now Doris laughed loudly, and Olivia couldn’t help but smile.

To an outsider, their exchanges might appear mean spirited or antagonistic, but her friendship with the Mayor was something that she hadn’t known she was missing until it was there. Part of the fun was not really knowing where their banter was going to take them, what would come out of her own mouth, let alone the other woman’s. For those that did know them, it made for an entertaining floor show.

“So Madam Mayor, what, exactly, can you do for me? And what’ll it cost me?” Olivia asked, mind half preoccupied with deciding whether or not she should change the baby now, or before they were ready to leave the house. They would have to hit the road soon if her plans for the day were to come to sweet fruition. Doris sighed now, and something in the sound caught Olivia’s attention immediately. “Are you all right?”

“You wouldn’t happen to want a babysitter for your first Valentine’s Day with your disgustingly adorable soulmate, would you?” Doris asked, instead of answering. Olivia frowned in confusion and not a little concern.

“What, Anna suddenly get bit by the maternal bug?” she asked, already suspecting the truth.

“She got called away for some sort of training,” the politician allowed, trying for nonchalant.

The hotelier winced in sympathy. “Oh Doris...”

“Which means that I have an open slot in my schedule, and you, Spencer, have a willing babysitter,” the blue eyed woman interrupted, her voice a little too cheerful. The sound of it was almost painful to hear.

“I... I don’t know...” Olivia hesitated, sadness overtaking her for a second. “You can join us for Valentine’s, if you like?”

Even as she asked, Olivia wanted to take the offer back. She loved her friend, but she had special plans that were, at minimum, an immediate family affair. Why hadn’t she just accepted the offer for a babysitter?

“Uh, as charming an offer as that is, I think I will pass on watching you and Natalia be disgustingly cute and loving while my own lover is out of town on the official couple’s holiday. But thank you, really, you are *too* kind.”

Olivia let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding, and could only hope it didn’t reflect her relief too much. “Right then.”

“Don’t sound so crushed,” Doris quipped, chuckling genuinely. “Offer still stands, Spencer. Let me take the rug rats off your hands for the night. They can have a sleepover and everything.”

The offer was very, very tempting... Still, Olivia hesitated.

“Look, I have a back stock of fun Valentine’s Day activities from when Ashlee was a child. Honestly, I don’t want to spend the day alone, but the thought of going out is too depressing, and intruding on your day, as sweet as the offer is, isn’t my idea of a good time. I know you have something planned, Spencer, and while you are prepared to work it around your children, this presents a solution to both our situations.”

“Dirty tricks, Wolfe,” Olivia conceded finally, grinning.

“Ha! I speak only the truth. What time should I pick them up?”

“Tell you what, Natalia and Emma are having a ‘Girl’s Day’ at the mall, and Sassy here is scheduled to get her ears pierced in a bit, so how about we drop them off to you, say, around six-ish?”

“Natalia wanted it done, but couldn’t stand being there to watch, eh?”

“Yeah; I always have to do the dirty work,” the green eyed woman groused.

“Welcome to married life, my friend,” Doris teased. Olivia’s heart skipped a beat, and she swallowed hard, hoping the sound wasn’t audible over the line. “All right, sounds like a plan. See you at six.”

“See you at six. Thanks, Doris.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You owe me your vote in the next election,” the Mayor returned, only half serious.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Bye bye.”

“Bye.”

Olivia blew out a breath, dropping the phone beside her on the couch and regarding her youngest daughter. Francesca stared back, dark eyes still red rimmed from crying. “Well, looks like you and your sister are spending the evening with Auntie Doris, and your mommies have a proper date.” The baby seemed to nod her agreement, suddenly smiling and flailing her arms. “Come on, let’s get you fed and changed so we can go poke holes in your head.”

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“So,” Natalia said as soon as she pulled onto the road. “What do you want to do first?” Emma practically vibrated with excitement in the back seat, and the Latina smiled at her through the rearview mirror.

“Can we get our nails done?” the girl asked, eyes hopeful and smile wide. The dark haired woman chuckled, nodding.

“Of course we can, sweetie. It’s our Girl’s Day; we can do whatever you want.” Glancing into the mirror again and seeing the expression on her daughter’s face, Natalia amended her statement. “Within reason, we can do whatever you want within reason.” Emma pouted for a moment.

“Can we get ice cream?”

“With all the fixings,” the woman assured, checking her blind spot and changing lanes.

“Cool! Can we go to the toy store, and can I have something?”

“Sure, honey.” Natalia frowned, wondering when Olivia would reach the mall, not wanting to run into the other woman, knowing it would ruin her surprise.

If one thing was true, it was that Natalia was horrible at keeping secrets. Considering, then, the magnitude of the surprise she had planned for her lover tonight, it was a wonder she hadn’t already tipped her hand. But she was determined that this be a Valentine’s Day that neither of them forgot, and so had managed to keep it together. Worrying about Francesca’s appointment today had helped, giving her an excuse to be anxious without raising alarm. It helped that she *was* nervous, as any mother would be, but not nearly as much as Olivia believed. It was a good way to suggest they separate so she could implement her little plan...

Noticing Natalia’s attention was elsewhere, Emma frowned, annoyed. It was *her* day today, they had promised her. She hardly ever got even a second with one of her mothers alone anymore, and had been looking forward to this all month. That in mind, a little distraction wasn’t always a bad thing... “Will you buy me a pony?” she asked, half serious.

“When you graduate from college, sneaky miss,” Natalia replied, snorting. “But I will let you help me with my super secret plan for your mommy.”

“Ooo, secret plan? Yay! We get to be Spies?”

“Super Spies! And, there may be a special reward in it for you...”

“Count me in!” the girl exclaimed, bouncing in place. “Drive faster!”

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Looking around the nursery, Francesca in hand, Olivia ticked off items on her mental checklist. Baby bag, check; wallet, purse, keys, check; cell phone, check. "All right, we got everything kiddo?" she asked, cradling the girl close. Francesca slowly opened her eyes, blinking once, twice, three times, before dismissing the question as random noise and falling back to sleep. "Right, well, good. It's good that you aren't cognizant of the fact that

we are about to shoot bolts of metal into your head; no fear that way,” the woman babbled, anxiety levels rising. “Okay, off we go...”

It took a surprisingly short amount of time to reach the mall, and Olivia felt a bit like a man walking down death row to his execution. She had readily agreed when Natalia had asked her to take their youngest to get her ears pierced, wanting to spare the woman having to watch the baby go through that pain. She was used to having to be strong, and for some reason, she had thought watching her child go through *that* would affect her less... she had been wrong...

Stepping into the shopping center, Olivia froze, regretting her promise to do this alone. “How about we go shopping first, and then Mommy can start giving you reasons for hating her for the rest of your life?” she suggested to the infant, who had woken up when she had been removed from her car seat. Francesca cooed, looking up at the auburn haired woman with complete innocence and trust. “Great, good, excellent. There is a special hel- uh, heck, waiting for me. In the mean time, to the jeweler’s!”

They spent the next two hours doing everything feasible that Olivia could think of to delay the inevitable, including spending over thirty minutes in the arcade, watching children play skee-ball and trying ‘their’ hand at a few slot-machine like video games. But soon, she could find no more excuses to keep from doing the dirty deed, knowing Natalia would be disappointed if Francesca didn’t come home wearing the gold, coral studded earrings she had left with her lover that morning – a family heirloom and tradition.

With a sigh, the green eyed woman approached the small, cheerful looking storefront, forcing herself to ignore the queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. A young blonde woman stood behind the counter of the shop, flipping through a magazine. Clearing her throat, Olivia made her presence known. “Hi, my name is Olivia Spencer; I called earlier.”

With a smile, the woman – girl really – came around the counter, hand outstretched. “Hello, Mrs. Spencer, my name is Nina.” Olivia’s eye twitched, and she bit back a sigh. She couldn’t remember the number of times people had called her Mrs. Spencer in the last two hours.

“That’s *Ms.* Spencer, not Mrs.”

Blushing faintly, the blonde nodded. “Of course, I apologize Ms. Spencer.”

“Not a problem.”

Blue eyes focusing on the baby in Olivia’s hands, Nina cooed, reaching out with a finger and gently stroking the bridge of Francesca’s nose. “And who do we have here?”

“This is Francesca; she’s going to be your victim this afternoon,” Olivia quipped, trying to hide her unease.

Chuckling, Nina focused back on the woman in front of her, nodding sympathetically. “You’d be surprised how often I hear that sentence.”

“I could believe a high number.”

“I’ll take good care of Francesca, I promise. If you want to sign the paper work, you can be out of here in less than ten minutes.”

Signing the necessary forms, Olivia handed over her daughter. “This must be what Judas felt like,” she murmured to herself, startled when Nina laughed.

“Good one. Honestly though, she’ll cry for a few minutes, but by tomorrow it’ll be just an ache for her. She probably won’t lose sleep over it,” the piercer promised, placing the baby in a seat that looked similar to a high-chair, but allowed less mobility.

“I will,” the older woman shot back, stress causing her to be short. Nina nodded and shrugged.

“Good,” she said. “I would hope a mother would. But, I guarantee that Francesca here won’t even remember this.”

“Here’s to hoping it doesn’t scar her for life.” Olivia sighed, swallowing the lump in her throat.

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“Okay,” Natalia began, smiling down at her daughter as they exited the nail salon. “Made ourselves pretty?”

“Check!” Emma exclaimed, admiring her nails.

Rifling through their shopping bags, Natalia nodded. “Bought gifts for Auntie Doris and Auntie Blake?”

“Check!”

Adjusting her purse and packages carefully, so as not to ruin the last twenty minutes’ work on her nails, the woman held out her hand. “So, we have one more stop.” Emma grabbed hold of her eagerly and skipped beside her as they began to move.

“Is this the super secret spy part?”

Chuckling, the dark haired woman nodded, tapping the girl on the nose gently with her finger. “Yes, baby girl, this is the super secret spy part. You ready?”

“Yeah, yeah! Where are we going?”

“We are going to the jewelry store, to buy your Mommy a very special present...”

Emma stopped, pulling Natalia’s arm, light eyes suddenly very wide. “Are you gonna buy her a ring?” Nervously, the woman nodded, her smile small and a little unsure.

“Is... is that okay?” she asked. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Course not! You’re already my other mommy... ‘bout time!” Emma grinned, excitement and amusement causing her to practically float. Letting out a breath, Natalia nodded, bending down and covering the girl’s face with kisses.

“Why thank you, my wonderful, beautiful, sweet girl!” Giggling, Emma pushed her away, grabbing her other hand and yanking the Latina in the direction of the jeweler’s.

“Come on, let’s go!”

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Sighing dejectedly to herself, Blake Marler wandered up and down the aisles of the Springfield gas station-slash-convenience store. Every fourth step or so, she lifted a box of not yet paid for chocolates, selecting one at random and popping it into her mouth, sparing only a moment to contemplate the flavors. “Mmm, truffle,” or “Ugh, toothpaste flavored,” commentary was mumbled in the same glum tone.

Rounding a bend to begin her circuit of the establishment, for what must have been the eighth time in fifteen minutes, Blake didn’t see Doris until it was almost too late. “Gah!” she exclaimed, jumping back at the last moment, managing through some miracle to keep her mostly eaten box of chocolates from spilling.

“There’s this little concept called watching where you’re going,” the Mayor quipped, not unkindly. “You might want to look into it.” Blake glared, mouth opening and closing a few times, as if she were going to reply. Doris just raised an eyebrow, expression lightly bemused.

“I, you, I...”

“Ye-es?”

As Doris watched, with not a small bit of terror, big, fat tears welled in Blake’s eyes, trembling suspended in the lashes for a moment, before rolling determinedly down her cheeks. Panic was quick to set in, and Doris found herself sputtering, trying to figure out what she could have possibly done to elicit such a response from the usually feisty gossip. “Blake, uh, I, I’m sorry...” the brunette stammered, looking around frantically for help. She never knew what to do with a crying woman; they made her anxious and guilty.

“It’s... it’s not your fault,” the smaller woman cried, covering her mouth with her free hand, as if it would make the sobs fighting their way out of her chest stop. “It... Frank, he...”

“Oh dear God,” Doris sad with rising horror. “He didn’t break up with you, did he?” She was in no way ready to console a jilted lover, ever, but especially not today...

Thinking quickly, Doris jammed her hand into her purse and pulled out a wad of tissues. “Here, take these!” The desperation in the public official’s voice halted the crying, replacing it with thick giggles.

“Geez, you should see the look on your face!” Blake said, sniffing, and accepting the tissue. Wiping at her nose, she took a deep, calming breath. “Sorry, I just... Frank got called away on business today, and I... he just seemed almost relieved to get out of spending the day with me.”

Doris tsked in sympathy. “I’m sorry Blake. I’m sure he wasn’t happy about it; perhaps he was just trying not to upset you by being too...”

“What, expressive of regret? Yeah, no, I don’t think so. He’s just so...”

Realizing that she was about to spill her guts to someone in public, the shorter woman swallowed the rest of her words. Though she was certainly not distrustful of the Mayor, Springfield’s walls – or aisle in this case – had very good ears. Anything one said, innocent or not, could easily be taken and twisted for someone’s selfish, often vindictive, purposes.

“What are you doing here?”

Sighing, Doris shrugged. “You’re not the only one whose other half was required elsewhere today.”

“Oh no! I’m so sorry,” the smaller woman said, sympathetically. Smiling wanly, she offered her friend a chocolate from the box, knowing better than to pry for details. “Drown your

sorrows in a girl's second best friend?" Snorting, Doris accepted, grabbing the first candy she could and popping it into her mouth.

"Mmm, strawberry."

"So, all these odds and ends are for..." Blake asked after a few moments of silence.

"I am so very generously baby-sitting for Springfield's most sickeningly adorable couple tonight, so they can have a proper first Valentine's together.

"Ah, Natalia and Olivia, huh?"

"Oh yes. I have some ideas for a few projects to keep Emma busy for the evening, and I was just stocking up on supplies," the taller woman allowed, self consciously rearranging some of the contents of her basket. Glitter and construction paper were shoved under sugar cookie dough and frosting.

"So it's going to be you and two children?"

Doris glared, not liking the tone of the question.

"I *am* a mother, you know. I am perfectly capable of caring for children for an evening."

Eyes wide, Blake shook her head, hand shooting out to rest on the Mayor's arm. "That's not at all what I meant! I just, you know... two young kids, one adult... sounds kinda... rough..." she trailed off, blushing.

Doris shrugged. "If you're that concerned, you could always help out," she said off-handedly.

Blake appeared thoughtful for a moment, and immediately Doris regretted her suggestion. "That's a great idea! I can bring Clarissa over, and we can all eat junk food and have a girl's night!"

The politician had not been serious at all, did not in any way want to spend the evening babysitting both the Spencer-Rivera brood, and the Marler clan. "Now, Blake..."

"It'll be fun! Okay, I'll go get Clarissa and some things, and meet you at your place. Say, five-ish?" Doris' mouth opened and closed soundlessly a few times, brain unable to form an excuse. "Excellent! See you in a few!" And then Blake was gone, leaving the taller woman with the distinct impression that she had just signed her own death warrant. Because, surely, someone would end up murdered by the end of the evening.

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“Shit!” Olivia growled, shoving her finger into her mouth and glaring down at the butcher knife, now spotted lightly with her blood. She was reluctant to move it, because the throbbing pain in her digit almost convinced her that she had sliced off her finger at the second knuckle, and seeing a severed piece of herself under cold, not-so-stainless steel was something she could definitely live without. “Somabish,” she muttered around the injured flesh.

Natalia had left not twenty minutes before with the girls – it was surprisingly easy to get her to agree to the plan – leaving Olivia free to implement her super secret surprise. She would have had just enough time to set everything up, but now she had to recalculate the rest of her preparations to compensate for her blunder. Working it through in her mind, the green eyed woman realized that there was no way she would have everything set up by the time Natalia got back. There was only one thing to do...

Slowly sliding her left ring finger out of her mouth, the hotelier was relieved to see it attached, if sliced. “Ooo, not good,” she said to herself, grabbing the phone with her undamaged hand and dialing. The line was picked up on the third ring.

“Yell-o,” a deep, slightly scratchy voice greeted, and Olivia couldn’t help the smile that sprung to her lips. She would always have a soft spot for *this* particular Cooper.

“Hi, Buzz, it’s Olivia.”

“Well hello there, pretty lady. What can I do for you?”

“I have a favor to ask,” she said, hesitating a moment. Given their history together, what she wanted from the man could definitely be considered insensitive, if not downright selfish. “Actually, you know what, never mind.”

“Don’t you never mind me, woman! Come on, what’s up?”

“I... I kind of need help setting up a romantic dinner for Natalia, ASAP. I managed to cut my hand nicely, and I don’t think I can get everything done in the next,” she paused, looking at the clock that hung on the wall. “Forty-five minutes.”

“Say no more, darlin’. Anything for you, you know that.”

Grabbing a dish towel and wrapping her sluggishly bleeding injury, the woman sighed with relief. She felt a bit guilty, but the desperation to achieve perfection for her lover outweighed it. “Thanks Buzz, you’re the best...”

“That’s the word on the street. So, what’s the plan?”

“Well...”

~~*~*

ACT 4

Blake had shown up, youngest child in tow as promised, no later than five forty-five. Opening the door, Doris was struck by how content both the females standing on her stoop appeared: the girl bundled up in a bright red parka, clutching a large bag of what Doris could only assume was ‘junk food’, and the woman in her white snow jacket, holding out a brown paper bag shaped suspiciously like a bottle of wine.

“Hi!” the older Marler exclaimed, smiling softly, cheeks tinged pink with cold. “Sorry we’re late. But, we come bearing gifts!” Moving back and allowing them to pass, Doris repressed a sigh. There was no use being ill-tempered about the turn of events now; she would just have to resign herself to the fact that she was going to spend the evening in the company of a woman other than her lover, and deal with it.

For a moment, Doris felt annoyance rising in her at Anna. It was completely irrational; it wasn’t Anna’s fault she had been called away. Still, it seemed to her that the other woman didn’t take them nearly as seriously as she should. She hadn’t even *sounded* disappointed at being away from the Mayor on the romantic holiday...

Shaking her head to clear it, Doris closed the door and moved in, following behind the Marlers, who walked in as if they owned the house. “I called Natalia, let her know that Clarissa and I would be keeping you company,” Blake informed her.

“Did you?” the other woman asked, amused, coming to stand behind the publisher, who had stopped in the kitchen to unload her booty onto the table.

“Yup! Emma is very excited. I figured the girl’s could keep each other company, and we could bemoan the circumstances of our lonely little holiday.”

Rolling her eyes, Doris snorted. “You’re so very thoughtful,” she deadpanned, moving forward to help Clarissa with her bag. “Frank is a lucky man; whatever would he do without you?” It was meant to be playful and a little mocking, but it came out matter-of-fact, and Doris was a little shocked to realize she was sincere in her sentiment.

“Hah! That’s what I keep saying,” the strawberry-blonde agreed, turning and grinning. “Glad *someone* sees it! You’ll be the person I call if he doesn’t realize what he’s got!”

Doris was saved from saying something she might have regretted by the doorbell ringing. “Well, that’ll be them,” she stated unnecessarily, spinning on her heel. Reaching the door and throwing it open, she couldn’t help but smile at Natalia, who looked a little frazzled as she juggled an infant, baby bag, and large purse. “Hello, come on in,” the taller woman greeted, reaching out and taking the sleeping baby.

“Hi! Thanks.”

~~*~*

“There,” Olivia exclaimed, putting the finishing touches on the elaborate meal, looking up to catch Buzz’s eye and smile. “Perfect.”

“Have to say, didn’t think we were going to pull this off,” he admitted, nodding, impressed. Walking to the door, he pulled on his coat, using the motion to hide the look of nostalgia from his friend. He loved his wife dearly, but he had once loved Olivia Spencer just as fiercely. He, of course, wasn’t the only man in the town that could claim the same, but...

“We make a good team, don’t we?” the green eyed woman asked, smiling softly at the man.

“Absolutely, Kato,” he quipped, winking.

“Ha! As if I am the side-kick. Try again, Robin,” she retorted playfully, moving to stand beside him and hugging him in gratitude. “Seriously, though... thanks. This means a lot to me...”

“I know, kiddo, I know. Just, remember, no more using your hands as a sharpening block!”

“So, very, funny,” she dead-panned, shoving him.

Relenting at the mock-wounded look he gave her, she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “Wish me luck, huh?”

“You’ll do great,” he assured her, voice soft but sincere. “You look beautiful, there is no way she can resist you.”

“That *was* the plan.”

“Achieved then. Now, I have to get going, before my wife sends out a search party.” He moved, exiting the house, turning just outside the door. “Congratulations Olivia. If anyone deserves happiness, it’s you.”

Olivia looked at her feet, swallowing the lump in her throat. She didn't feel worthy of all her good fortune of late, but she in no way was going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Calloused fingers lifted her chin, and she looked up into kind, knowing eyes. "Thank you."

"Anytime. Now, I am going to make like a banana and split. Go get 'er tiger!" And then he was gone.

Looking around her, suddenly very nervous, Olivia took a deep breath. "Yes sir, confidence, can I have it please..."

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"Do you have enough milk?"

"Jesus, Natalia; I think there's enough milk here to feed Octo-Mom's brood," Doris said dryly, rolling her eyes. Natalia huffed, frowning slightly, and Blake took pity.

"Natalia," she began, wrapping an arm around the other woman's shoulder in comfort. "Everything will be fine, really. Worst comes to worst, you and Olivia have a very romantic evening, and then freak out and pick the girls up later."

"Oh, oh no, I mean, I wasn't..."

"Yes, you were," Doris interrupted, not looking away from the baby in her arms, who she was entertaining with silly faces. "Between Blake and I, we have nearly a half dozen little people's worth of experience," she reminded her, pausing at how oddly the phrase struck her. Shaking it off, she finally looked at the worried woman. "Both single mothers for long stretches as well, remember?"

"That's right, sweetie," Blake chimed in, squeezing her friend's shoulder. "Together, we're unstoppable. You can trust us."

"I do trust you, both of you!" Natalia exclaimed, a little horrified that she might have implied otherwise.

"Whoa there, it's okay," Doris assured, smiling in amusement. "Being away from a new baby can be hard on a mother, it's understandable. Blake's right, they are welcome to stay the night, but if you need to pick them up and take them home, that's perfectly understandable."

"I... I probably won't," Natalia said after a moment, looking embarrassed.

“But having the option takes a lot of the stress off leaving them here, huh?” Blake asked in sympathy. The Latina nodded, smiling gratefully. “Good, tonight is supposed to be romantic, completely stress free.”

“Right... stress free...”

Sighing, Doris walked to the two women, knowing that if something wasn’t done immediately, this would end with Natalia going back to the farmhouse still encumbered by the children. Handing Blake the baby, the Mayor straightened to her full height and gently, but firmly, took Natalia’s arm and began leading her to the door. “Everything is going to be fine, all right? Now, say ‘see you later’ to the girls, and get back to your girlfriend.”

“Bye!” Emma exclaimed, running up and hugging her other mother, before skipping back to Clarissa, who handed her a chocolate she had swiped from her own mother’s stash.

“Bye, honey,” Natalia said, eyes flickering over to Blake, who brought a dozing Francesca over.

Kissing the infant on her forehead, the Latina resisted the urge to call the evening off, instead turning and fleeing out the door, tears filling her eyes. She knew it was just for the night, and that the surprise she had for Olivia was better presented between just the two of them, but leaving her children was so very difficult. Not giving herself a chance to think, she opened the car and jumped in, quickly snapping her seatbelt in place and throwing the vehicle in reverse. With a final look to the house, she hit the gas, and drove away.

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Olivia glanced at the clock for what seemed like the hundredth time in five minutes, anxiety levels climbing by the second. Natalia should have been back by now; what was taking her so long? Maybe she had changed her mind about a romantic evening; maybe she had lost track of time; maybe something had happened to her! Lights appeared at the end of the drive, and the hotelier released a breath she hadn’t known she was holding, her heart beating almost arrhythmically in her chest.

The black velvet box was suddenly very heavy in her pocket, and warm, as if it were on fire. Olivia had no idea how she was going to last through dinner without having a heart attack. Watching her lover climb out of the car, she felt her breath catch again. It never ceased to surprise her, the other woman’s beauty. Dark eyes found hers, crinkling at the corners as her lover smiled, and she couldn’t help but grin in return. She loved Natalia more than she could articulate in any language, and any plans tonight would never be enough to express the depth of that emotion. She would just have to spend the rest of her life showing the smaller woman...

Smiling almost shyly as her lover approached the porch, Olivia ducked her head, gazing up through her eye lashes. "Hey."

Smiling deeply, dimples on full display, Natalia stopped just in front of her. "Hi. You look... beautiful." Olivia plucked at her navy blouse a bit self-consciously.

"I do my best," the taller woman quipped.

Looking down, Natalia noticed an awkward bandage encircling one of Olivia's fingers. "Oh no, what happened?" she cried, reaching down and pulling the wounded hand to her chest, dark eyes filling instantly with worried tears.

Olivia considered teasing the smaller woman, but the sudden moisture in her eyes made her decide against it. There was no need to cause her any more distress than she was causing herself. "Ah, that. I nicked myself when I was cooking. No big deal, I promise." Reaching out and drawing Natalia to her, pulling her into a tight embrace. "I love you," she whispered, kissing the delicate shell of the other woman's ear. "With all my heart."

"Ah, so, you've decided then?" the dark haired woman said, choosing to allow her focus to be shifted.

"Huh?" Olivia asked, pulling back and frowning in confusion.

Grinning mischievously, Natalia pecked the older woman on the lips. "Between me and the cheese?"

"Ha, ah, right! Well, after a long mental debate, it looks like you've come out on top."

Pulling back, the dark haired woman winked. "Not yet; maybe after dinner," she teased, her voice a husky whisper. Olivia felt her entire body tighten at the words.

"Naughty thing," she mock-scolded, waggling her eyebrows.

"Aren't you lucky?"

~~*~*

"I can't do it..." Emma Spencer pouted, squinting at what was supposed to be her art project. Clarissa Marler looked up from her own creation, a much less ambitious one, and shrugged, glad she had chosen the simple version.

“Of course you can honey, you just have to take it slow, and make sure you follow all the steps,” Blake replied, rising from her seat and coming around the table to squat next to the girl’s chair.

“This one is hard, though.” Now the girl was pouting. Doris chuckled as she re-entered the room, perfectly warmed bottle of milk in her hand.

“That’s the one you wanted to do, kiddo,” the woman reminded, shrugging. “The harder the project, the more satisfying the end product.”

“Is that really true?” the nine year old asked, doubtful. The Mayor nodded as she passed, ruffling the girl’s hair.

“Look at it again, follow the steps. You’re a smart girl, you’ll get it.”

Emma glared at the bright pieces of construction paper in front of her, willing them to reveal the secrets of their compliance. How was she supposed to get them to form the ‘end product’? Tilting her head, it suddenly became clear, and she attacked the project again with renewed vigor.

Smiling, Blake stood and wandered towards the doorway that separated the dining room from the living room. Pausing, she leaned against the frame, filled with a rush of warmth and fondness, and a sad sort of longing, as she observed the scene in the other room. Doris was standing, cradling Francesca in her arms, humming softly to the infant as she drank greedily. The look on the taller woman’s face was completely unguarded, full of honest affection and joy. Seeing the softer side of the prickly woman was rare and, because of that, precious.

Blake felt something inside her shift, but ignored it, uninterested in self-examination right now. Life was complicated enough. There were so many things balanced on various houses of cards that even a wrong breath could send them toppling down. There was no reason to court disaster when it seemed to find one easily enough on its own. What disaster exactly was not really clear, but the feeling in the strawberry-blonde woman’s chest promised unrest if pursued. And so, she turned and headed back into the kitchen, resolutely shutting the door on the train of thought.

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Dinner was a surprisingly quiet affair between the lovers. They gazed meaningfully into each other’s eyes over the three light courses – Olivia had plans for after that would be better served by not having a heavy meal – and touched hands on occasion. With no young children around, they were free to engage in adult conversation, but it seemed

unnecessary, and so they communicated with tilts of the head and twitches of the lips. It was easy and comfortable, the way things were when they were at their most honest, and both women reveled in it.

Soon, however, the food was eaten, and the dishes done, and Olivia found herself suddenly anxious again. Natalia, noting the tension slowly creeping into her lover's body, dried her hands and insinuated herself into the taller woman's arms, snuggling against her chest and forcing her to lean against the counter. "Is it sad that I find doing chores together romantic?"

Laughing, Olivia kissed the dark head cradled against her. "It's part of your charm," she assured.

Taking a few deep breathes, the older woman gathered her courage around her, pulling back slightly so that she could catch Natalia's eyes. "Natalia, I..."

"What is it, querida?"

Sighing in frustration, Olivia tried again. "Listen, I have something I want to say..."

"What is it, sweetie? Are you all right?" Fear entered dark eyes, and Natalia pulled away suddenly, hand shooting to her mouth. "Is it your heart? Is there something wrong with your heart?"

"What? No, no! God no, the old ticker 2.0 is doing just fine!" Olivia said, bewildered by the reaction.

"Oh, thank goodness!" the shorter woman breathed, clutching her own chest. Frowning, she swatted at her lover's arm. "Don't do that!"

"Hey! I didn't make you jump to crazy conclusions!"

"Well, don't be so mysterious!"

Sighing, Olivia covered her eyes with her hands, groaning in frustration. Mostly with herself, and her sudden utter lack of suave-ness, but a little for her lover, who was not making it easy to be cooler. Suddenly struck with inspiration, the taller woman nodded to herself, uncovering her face and gently taking Natalia's hand. "How about we move this outside and try this again?"

Grinning, the smaller woman nodded. "Okay, take two, under the moon light."

“Right, good, let’s go then.”

“Perfect,” Natalia said, taking the lead and tugging the other woman through the kitchen. “Because I have something I want to tell you, too, but I kind of wanted the setting to be a little more romantic than the kitchen.”

“Well ex-cah-use me!” Olivia grumped, rolling her eyes.

“All is forgiven,” was the cheeky reply.

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Buzz Cooper sat back in his chair, idly contemplating the contents of his almost full wine glass. Right about now, Olivia would probably be finishing up her romantic dinner and moving on to the next phase of her ‘master plan.’ To an outsider who didn’t know him, it would appear that he was brooding, in a dark mood, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth. It was his deeply held belief that everyone deserved happiness, no matter how many times they got it wrong. After, knowing the woman for as long as he had, it became very clear to him that this could be considered even more true for her. Never in his life had he met someone so desperately in need of love than Olivia Spencer. And now it looked like she would finally get what she wanted.

He couldn’t have been more happy for them both, really. It seemed to him that, finally, everything was shifting to be as it should. Natalia had found someone who respected and cherished her; Olivia had found someone who understood her and loved her completely; and together, both women had forged a beautiful, stable family for themselves and their children. It was a good thing too, because worrying about his favorite girls – excluding Lillian of course – was going to give the man ulcers.

“What are you thinking so intently about?” His wife’s voice floated into his consciousness, shaking him from his thoughts. Smiling and searching for her, he found himself gazing into slightly concerned eyes.

“Just how glad I am things turned out like they did. Here I am, the luckiest man on earth; I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Charmer,” she accused, grinning happily and moving to sit on his lap. With a chuckle, he pulled her into a kiss with his free hand, contemplation forgotten in favor of seizing the moment and enjoying the holiday with his wife.

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"I forgot there was no moon tonight," Olivia said, her voice betraying her nerves.

Natalia smiled. "Starlight will do just as well," she replied.

Olivia was frozen in place, trying desperately to regain the nerve to move forward. This was it, this was her moment; she had to do it right... But, how exactly did a woman, used to being pursued, go about pursuing? Now that the shoe was on the other foot, she had no idea how to proceed. There were so many ways this could go wrong, so many horrible scenarios to balance against the one that was good... How did men do this?

It hit her then, like a lightning bolt. Her lover was nothing if not a traditional woman, and there *was* a precedent for the general, if not overly specific, situation. With the finesse of a fifteen year old boy, Olivia turned, spinning her lover to face her. "What the?" Natalia began, but was quickly silenced by her shock as Olivia fell to one knee.

"I... I had this whole speech planned... because, you know, you deserve a good, meaningful speech but... Damn it, this is hard, so I am just going to say what is in my heart."

"Olivia..."

"No, wait, let me get this out, all right?" Taking the smaller woman's hand, Olivia laced their fingers together, and took a deep breath. "Natalia, I love you... I have loved you since... it seems like, literally forever. The way I feel about you must be divinely inspired, because honestly, I couldn't love you more if God showed up and ordered me to."

Reaching into her pocket, the kneeling woman pulled out the small box that had been waiting there since she had returned from the mall. Natalia gasped, her free hand flying to her mouth. "I'm not very good at explaining what you mean to me, but... I want to spend the rest of my life showing you that you are my everything." Opening the box, Olivia released Natalia's hand so she could pull the ring out. "You are my lover, and my best friend; you're the mother of my children, my conscience, and more often than not, my common sense. I don't know how I survived before you, and I know that I couldn't possibly survive without you..."

This was it, the moment of truth. Olivia felt her insides trembling with excitement. Logically, she knew that there was very little chance of rejection. She loved Natalia, and Natalia loved her. They shared children, finances, a home, a life. But, that knowledge did nothing to calm the humming of her nerves.

"Natalia Rivera; will you marry me?" Natalia was speechless, tears rolling down her cheeks as she gazed down at the love of her life. Then, she did something that Olivia hadn't even considered an option; Natalia threw back her head and laughed.

Olivia stared up at the dark haired woman, mouth hanging open in disbelief. Even in her worst case scenarios, she hadn't thought she would be laughed at. She didn't know whether to be heartbroken or offended. Her face must have been leaning towards the latter, because Natalia wiped her face and eased down onto her knees beside the older woman. "Oh, honey, no I... I'm not laughing at you."

"Huh, really? Cuz it kinda sounds like ya are."

Fighting off the giggles still bubbling up, Natalia reached into her own pocket, producing a small box, popping it open with a flourish. Inside sat a simple, elegant ring of gold.

"Oh, no way!" Olivia exclaimed, green eyes wide.

"Yes way, my love."

"This is so not fair! I was gonna be all smooth and ask you to marry me!"

"And, what... I was supposed to swoon girlishly into your arms and be swept away? This *is* 2010, Olivia." The older woman gaped at her, and she chuckled, gently stroking her lover's cheek. "Maybe I wanted to do the sweeping, huh? Ever think of that?"



The words were sincere, but kind, and it was Olivia's turn to feel tears filling her eyes. "I love you with all my heart, Olivia Spencer. You evoke a completeness in me, a wholeness that I didn't know was possible to feel until I met you. You are already my wife, in body and soul, and I know God is smiling on our union. I could have been happy with that, but I realized that you need the symbol as much as I do. You're sneaky, trying to pretend like it doesn't bother you, but I know it does. I want to honor what we have, because it is the most precious thing in the world."

"And what... do we have?" Olivia whispered. Natalia smiled softly, leaning forward and kissing her lover slowly, with all her emotion.

"That's simple," she replied as they pulled apart, sighing happily. "We have each other; we have a family. You, and Emma, and Rafe, and Ava, and Francesca are all I could ever want from life. So, the question is really: Olivia Spencer, will *you* marry *me*?"

Closing her eyes as her tears finally began to fall, Olivia nodded. "Yes," she whispered, voice thick. "God, yes!"

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Later, they would wonder how they got into the house and the bedroom, emotion and passion carrying away presence of mind and common sense. When those returned, they lay together, basking in the afterglow, both admiring their rings, slipping them on and off – Olivia's on her right index finger, to compensate for the injury on the left – reading and rereading the inscriptions. "What does 'Erotas' mean, exactly?" Natalia asked.

"Love: passionate and all consuming love," Olivia replied, quite proud of herself. Drawing her lover to her chest, she ran her fingers idly over the woman's back. "From the Greek, Eros, the little bugger that's floating around causing trouble."

"Are you implying that our love is trouble?"

"Of the best kind," was the reply.

"Don't you want to know what yours means?" Natalia asked, after long moments of easy silence.

"In Amore Familia? Familial love, right? Love of one's family."

Pulling back a bit, so she could gaze into her lover's – her wife's – eyes, Natalia smiled knowingly. "In Amore Familia; Family *in* Love. Remember just after you moved back in, when Emma was upset because that boy had told her that I wasn't her mother, and

Francesca wasn't her sister, because we weren't blood related?" Olivia nodded, frowning. "We told her that we were a family of love, and that *that* was more special than anything that had to do with blood. I meant that; you are my family and I am yours, because we love each other, completely."

Olivia could only nod, leaning forward and kissing the smaller woman, conveying all her emotions. "In amore familia; nothing more need be said." When she pulled back she was smiling. "Sooo," she said, and there was a new sort of excitement in her voice now, "how do you feel about a little honeymoon...say on San Cristobel?"

Natalia smiled slowly. "San Cristobel? You mean-"

"Where I grew up, exactly," Olivia finished for her, pushing a lock of hair behind her lover's ear.

Natalia's eyes shone with excitement. "Oh my God," she exclaimed. "How? *When*?"

Olivia's heart seemed to expand at the joy in the smaller woman's voice. "Well, the *how* is that the Xiaos – you remember them sweetie, right?" Natalia nodded, so Olivia went on. "Well, the Xiaos contacted me a few days ago because they wanted to give me the opportunity to buy one of their resort hotels on the island. They remembered I was from there, can you believe that?"

Natalia's smile grew soft. "You're unforgettable," she murmured. A slight blush tinged Olivia's cheeks.

"Anyway," the older woman continued swiftly, "that's the how. As for the when...how does two weeks from now grab you?"

For a moment Natalia was speechless. "Wow," she said at last.

Olivia laughed. "Best Valentine's Day ever?" she asked, grinning.

"Best Valentine's Day ever," Natalia agreed.

The End