

# *Here Beneath My Skin*

*by geekgrillurking*

## ACT 1

Olivia Spencer ran a hand through her thick, honey-blonde hair and gladly stepped out of the stuffy confines of the airplane into the warm, welcoming sunshine of San Cristobel. She paused at the top of the passenger boarding stairs, inhaling deeply, breathing in the familiar salty air of the tiny tropical nation.

Home.

“Thank you for flying San Cristobel Airways, please watch your step as you leave the plane.” An overly perky flight attendant waved behind her. “Buh-bye!”

Olivia was ready to smack the blonde woman, hard, after being subjected to her chipper attitude for over four hours on the flight. She felt the soothing hand of her lover run along the curve of her spine, and smiled, the simple touch calming the urge to slap the stewardess silly.

“Oh, *querida*, it’s beautiful!” Natalia Rivera gasped, staring at the surrounding area. The view from the top of the boarding stairs was stunning. A cloudless, blue sky was surpassed only by the vibrant azure of the Atlantic Ocean, crashing steadily against the bright white beach. Palm trees swayed in the slight breeze and sea gulls flew overhead, as the heavy afternoon heat hit her like a wall.

“It is gorgeous, isn’t it?” Olivia grinned and pulled out her sunglasses, pushing them along the bridge of her nose into place as she lead the way down the stairs to the hot pavement below.

“How could you possibly leave all this, to come to snowy, freezing Springfield?” Natalia extended the handle on her carry on luggage and pulled it along behind her, tiny wheels squeaking as they walked across the tarmac to the white stucco airport buildings.

Olivia peered over the rim of her sunglasses, raking her eyes down sweet curves and tight denim jeans before heading back up the petite form again. Finally meeting her partner's dark eyes, she levelled a heated, intense stare at the younger woman, moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue, before slowly raising a single eyebrow. She smiled as Natalia swallowed hard.

"Oh, there are some pretty hot things about Springfield, too, sweetheart." Olivia's voice dropped to its most seductive register. She simply chuckled softly as Natalia flushed ever so slightly and a naughty smirk formed on her lover's delectable lips. A shiver slid down Olivia's back in reaction to those damn dimples. Dragging her eyes away from her lover, Olivia pulled out her Blackberry and powered it on, scanning quickly for any messages from Frank or Phillip

"Any emergencies?" Natalia slowed her pace towards the small building so Olivia could focus on the small device. She knew they were only going to be gone for essentially a long weekend, but still, it was a long time away from her sweet baby girl and Jellybean. Apparently for both of them, as she watched Olivia sigh with relief and smile back at her.

"Nope. Just an e-card from Josh wishing me an early happy birthday." Olivia's smile widened as she read his message. "He said he wishes he was here to tell me in person."

"Aw, he is so sweet," Natalia said. She glanced away, staring at the other passengers walking past them as she felt a momentary pang of irrational jealousy. Of all her partner's ex-husbands, Josh was the one she worried the most about sweeping back into Olivia's life and stealing her away.

A bright glimmer caught her eye and she glanced down at the ring on her finger, and then at the matching one on Olivia. Natalia turned into the slight breeze blowing across the airfield and let out a long breath. She couldn't help the smile that broke out every time she thought about being engaged to Olivia. Or for that matter, the heat that flushed her body from the knowledge that Olivia Spencer was hers and that she equally belonged to her. Maybe the reason for all of Olivia's ex-husbands was that what she had really needed all along was a wife.

Natalia smirked to herself and turned her attention back to her lover, as Olivia chuckled mischievously and her thumbs typed away a response to Josh's text message. God, she was like a little kid sometimes. "What are you saying to him?"

"I just told him I'm celebrating it somewhere hot and sunny with a scantily clad Natalia. I bet he wishes he was here." Olivia waggled her eyebrows and hit send, slowly leaning in for a quick kiss before swinging open the door to the airport building. The cold air-conditioning felt good against their skin and they made their way inside.

They stood in a long winding line up, Natalia ready with their passports in hand, Olivia flipping through the resort brochure and package that she'd asked for from the Xiao's people in San Cristobel. Their invitation to discuss letting go of one of their many smaller resort locations had been a bit of a surprise, but a welcome one. Franchising the Beacon was definitely still her and Natalia's goal.

Olivia looked closer at some of the pictures. There was a swimming pool, an executive nine-hole golf course, top of the line fitness facilities and several clay tennis courts. There was a good stretch of beachfront, a five star restaurant and an outdoor patio. It wasn't a hotel so much as a resort facility. It would be an awfully big first expansion for the Beacon. And if she was honest, she wasn't sure it was a good fit for them right now, especially with world economics still shaky.

Olivia also wasn't sure this was the best idea for her personally. San Cristobel held so many hard memories, things she still needed to work through. She glanced over at Natalia who smiled sweetly and then shuffled forward again in the slowly moving line. So many things she still had to tell Natalia.

Chewing her bottom lip, Olivia sighed softly and tried hard not to think about that. Turning back to the package, she knew the Xiaos had put forward a very sweet deal. This weekend away together to check out the resort was perfect timing and a good opportunity to see if this could work as a Beacon franchise or not. Olivia could only assume that the Xiao's hotel chain must be hemorrhaging more money than she imagined.

A small part of her danced with glee, thinking of Decker and the new Barbie doll he placed in her old position, suffering in the still turbulent economic climate. However the Xiaos themselves were very nice people and she didn't want to see them in dire straits. Olivia glanced up and shuffled forward as their turn with the custom officers and airport security came up.

Finally making their way through the body scanners and answering all their questions, they quickly found the rest of their luggage and made their way through the busy terminal to find a taxi to take them to the resort. An older man was standing by the revolving door, holding a Galaxy Hotels sign with the name Spencer written on it.

"It looks like the Galaxy San Cristobel team have thought of everything," Olivia murmured, impressed. Their driver tipped his hat and grabbed their luggage, leading them to the waiting limo. Natalia slipped her arm through Olivia's and smiled up at her, sliding her dark sunglasses into place as she stepped out into the tropical sunshine.

"I've already got everything I need, right here." Natalia tangled her fingers with Olivia's and smiled contentedly as the driver opened the back door and they both slid across the soft leather seat and into the air-conditioned luxury of the limo.

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Francesca Rivera stared up into her father's smiling face and burst into tears.

"Hey, hey, now." Frank Cooper bent down and scooped his baby girl from the baby carrier and into his arms. "Shhh... Daddy's here." He paced in his small office, rocking his daughter and cuddling her close. He glanced over at the young woman smiling encouragingly from the door. Despite his good intentions, he knew police headquarters was no place for a baby, but Frank had been delayed and Jane had said it would be no problem to swing by. Still, he felt bad bringing Francesca's sweet innocence into his world.

"Ms. Spencer left specific instructions about looking after Francesca, Chief Cooper." Jane chewed at her thumbnail and quickly checked her watch. Her boyfriend would be waiting for her by now, but she knew that Ms. Spencer would kill her if she just left the baby here unattended with the Chief.

"I know Jane, but it's the first time I've really had her all to myself and I'd just like to spend a little time with her," Frank shifted the crying child onto his shoulder and sank down into his leather chair, bouncing her a little to try to distract her. Francesca just wailed louder.

Jane rolled her eyes and stepped over to the small carrier, pulling out Francesca's wubby, the soft pink blanket the child seemed to be lost without. Handing it over to the clueless man, Jane sighed and nodded. There was only so much she could do where the Chief was concerned. Ms. Spencer may be paying her to look after Francesca during the day while the Chief was at work, but Natalia had pulled her aside and told her to let Frank decide how much time he wanted with the baby. The extra hundred bucks she had slipped her definitely made her point. Jane smiled softly. She did enjoy working for Ms. Rivera; she was so much less scary than Ms. Spencer.

"Okay then, I'm just going to touch base with my boyfriend and I'll head out then when you're ready to leave for home." Jane pulled her phone from her purse and wandered out of the Chief's office.

"Finally, just you and me, little Sweet Pea." Frank smiled as the little bundle seemed to settle down into her blanket and her crying diminished into little unhappy squeaks. Her eyes slowly blinked shut and she was asleep. Frank stared down at her and felt his heart swell with love.

“Chief,” Anna Li stuck her head into his office and took in the adorable sight of father and child. Smiling softly, she lowered her voice so as not to disturb the baby. “You’re needed down in the lab. Desilva is going off the deep end again, ranting on the other investigators.”

Frank rolled his eyes and stood with his daughter asleep in his arms. He really needed to find a more professional supervisor for the forensic department. The man might be a good crime scene investigator but his management skills were certainly lacking. Frank looked up to find Jane standing beside Detective Li, chewing her thumbnail.

“I’m sorry, Jane. Can you wait a little longer while I put out this fire?” Frank asked quietly. Jane sighed and nodded, taking the sleeping baby from him and tucking her back down into her carrier. She watched as the Chief disappeared into the pandemonium of his squad room. She knew meeting him at the police station had been a bad idea. At this rate, she wouldn’t even see her boyfriend at all tonight.

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The long black limo pulled up outside Spaulding Enterprises and eased into the reserved parking spot out front. Before the driver could unbuckle his seat belt to let his young charge out of the vehicle, the back door popped open and Emma Spencer leaped out of the car.

“Thanks, Jake. See ya later!” Emma waved at her daddy’s driver and slammed the car door quickly shut behind her. Slipping her backpack onto her shoulders, she yanked on the thick glass door and walked inside the imposing building, stopping at main reception.

“Hi, Virginia!” Emma smiled up at the young woman manning the desk. The receptionist turned and returned her smile warmly.

“Hi, Emma. You’re right on time.” Virginia hit a button on her telephone switchboard, sending all calls to the automatic attendant. She had learned the hard way that you don’t ever take your eyes off of the boss’ daughter. She picked up the handset and dialed an extension she knew by heart. “Emma’s here from school, sir.” She nodded as she received her instructions, watching carefully as the girl bounced and resettled her backpack. “I’ll let her know.”

“So is James coming down or Lizzie?” Emma asked, as she came around to peek behind the reception desk. She loved watching all the television sets mounted into the desk that Virginia sat behind. You could see so much stuff happening in her daddy’s building.

“Your brother will be down shortly. Your father also said to tell you to not wander off.” Virginia tried to keep her smile hidden as the rambunctious girl just rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically.

“I can't do anything. Besides, they were able to fix the photocopier no problem...” Emma grumbled, but was quickly distracted by seeing her Daddy on one of the monitors. He looked like he was arguing with two really old men who were pointing at a folder in their hands. “Hey, isn't that my dad?”

Virginia turned to the monitor that Emma pointed at and nodded. “He's talking with two of the senior board members.” Virginia just shook her head sadly. It didn't look like it was going well with Mr. Hamilton or old man Weckworth. Ever since Alan Spaulding had died, those two were circling like vultures and making trouble. She didn't know how Phillip Spaulding put up with them.

“They don't look like nice men,” Emma stated, her little brow furrowing.

Virginia nodded and didn't say much, although she agreed totally with the girl. Best not to say too much, you never knew what might get repeated. And with the office politics flying around Spaulding Enterprises these days, she wasn't about to take any chances with her job.

“That's because they aren't nice men at all, Emma.” They both turned as a familiar deep voice spoke up from behind them.

“James!” Emma's face lit up at the sight of her big brother and she leaped towards him for a hug.

“Hey, Squirt.” James grabbed Emma's backpack by one of its many handles and dangled the girl a few inches from the floor before she could reach him.

“Lemme down!” Emma giggled as she spun a little in his strong grip, feet spinning in the air.

“I didn't hear the magic word...” James laughed as Emma squealed happily.

“James!”

Say it,” James teased a little longer. Emma growled and finally gave in.

“Okay, okay! Pleeeeeease, James, my smartest and bestest big brother. Now put me down!” Emma finally squeaked out and was promptly dropped back down to her feet, with James chuckling at her.

“See, was that so hard?” James ruffled her hair and turned back to the security desk attendant.

“Thanks Virginia, I’ve got her from here.” James smiled at the attractive receptionist. She just nodded at him and started answering her phone lines again, various red buttons blinking steadily from the switchboard. He led the way over to the bank of elevators and hit the up button. “Dad’s meeting with the Board of Directors is running late.”

“Why did those men look so mad at Daddy?” Emma asked as the elevator doors slid shut and James hit the button for the top floor. He looked at her and tried to figure out how much of the bullshit politics she would actually understand. Nodding slightly, he decided that she was a smart kid and should know the truth.

“Because they don’t want Dad and Lizzie to run Spaulding. They think that they could do a better job themselves.”

“But Granddad said it was Daddy’s.” Emma scratched her nose, trying to figure out why anyone wouldn’t listen to what Granddad said.

“I know. Crazy, huh?” James smirked as the elevator dinged and the doors opened to the ninth floor. “I think Auntie Alex might have said something to get the Board all upset.”

Emma grimaced. She didn’t really like Aunt Alexandra very much. She always hugged her too tight and wore too much perfume. Mommy didn’t seem very happy when she was around either. And Mommy always knew when someone was trouble. Besides, Natalia always says to trust your feelings, and in this case Emma knew she felt the same way her Mommy did.

James pushed open the big oak door to their father’s office as Emma followed him in. His cell phone chimed and he pulled it from his pants pocket to see who had texted him.

“Say hi to Daisy for me,” Emma chirped as she dropped her backpack and hopped into the leather chair behind the desk. James just shook his head, his thumbs already flying across the keypad.

“Did you get her that necklace for Valentine’s Day that we looked at?” Emma spun the chair a little and looked up at her brother, who simply glanced over at her and smiled softly. “See, I told you she’d love it.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks, Squirt.” James hit the send button and slipped his phone back into his pocket.

“Is James behaving, Emma?” Lizzie popped her blonde head into the room and grinned at her little sister. “You know what he’s like. You can’t leave him alone for a minute without him wandering off and getting himself into some sort of trouble.” Lizzie came into the office and stood beside her brother, elbowing him lightly in the stomach. He snorted and chuckled along with the girls.

“What’s all this giggling in my office?” Phillip grumped from the door of his office, but he couldn’t keep the frown in place, breaking into a huge grin, as his children all laughed a little harder at him. It warmed his heart to see them all together in his father’s old office, now his office. Alan had been right about one thing, family was everything. It occurred to him that the future of Spaulding Enterprises looked pretty damn comfortable sitting in her rightful throne. Someday, it would be the three of them against the world. And he couldn’t wait to be there to see it.

“Emma’s plotting a hostile take-over and James and I are doing rock, paper, scissors for who gets to run the overseas operation for her,” Lizzie teased and ran a hand over her softly swelling belly.

“But I want to be a marine biologist and swim with the dolphins...” Emma said, a little worried all of a sudden. She didn’t want to have to sit inside all day with grumpy old men yelling at her.

“You can be anything you want to be, pumpkin.” Phillip dropped a kiss to Emma’s soft hair and scooted her out of his chair. Slipping on his reading glasses, he settled back at his desk and brought up his email. “Swimming with dolphins would be a fantastic job.”

“So, does that mean I can drop out of school and race cars?” James teased, yanking his father’s chain a little. Didn’t want the old man to get too comfortable after all. Phillip just looked up at him over the rim of his glasses and shook his head.

“Nice try,” Lizzie murmured and elbowed her brother again. She handed a file over to their father. “Did you tell Weckworth and Hamilton where to stick it?”

Phillip grimaced and pulled Emma onto his lap, very aware of tiny ears listening to their conversation. He ran a hand through his short hair and sighed.

“They’re going to continue to be trouble, unless you can neutralize Alexandra,” Lizzie warned, sitting on the edge of her father’s desk. The man always wanted to believe in the



good of everyone. Alexandra, however, needed to be watched very carefully. She was old school Spaulding, and that was nothing to take lightly.

"I know." Phillip hugged Emma closer as she started doodling a dolphin on some of his papers. There were days that he wished he were nine again. "But it's Friday night and I'm not going to worry about it right now, besides I've got a date with my littlest girl." Emma smiled up at him and nodded.

"Bill's picking me up in half an hour. Ever since he jumped in to help out with Josh gone, he's been working such late hours." Lizzie sighed and absently rubbed at her growing belly.

"I'm sure he just wants to get everything settled at Lewis so he can concentrate on you and the baby when the time comes." Phillip pushed his reading glasses further up along the bridge of his nose and quickly glanced through the file Lizzie had handed him.

"I'm meeting some guys from school. I'll see you at home later, Dad." James headed towards the door, it was starting to get late and he still needed to change.

"Not too late tonight, okay, James? We need to go look at tuxedos tomorrow, remember." Phillip glanced towards the door as James nodded, waving at Emma before disappearing into the hallway.

"Bye, James!" Emma waved back and turned to look up at her Dad. "Are you really going to dress up like monkeys, Daddy?" She watched as Lizzie and Phillip exchanged a confused look and turned back to stare at her. She blinked back in all innocence.

"Cuz James said he hated wearing monkey suits..."

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Natalia swiped the card key through the lock and opened the door to the Xiao's private penthouse suite. Pushing it open, she took in her elegant surroundings. The suite was meant for royalty and special guests, or for the Xiaos whenever they were visiting the resort. And the Galaxy San Cristobel had obviously spared no expense.

"Oh, my heavens," Natalia whispered as she stepped deeper into the suite, her feet sinking into the thick plush of the carpet. There seemed to be picture windows everywhere, with amazing views from all angles, a huge sunken living room with a small kitchen attached, and a balcony overlooking the sea.

"Hello? Some help for the heart patient please..." Olivia grumbled from the doorway, struggling with their bags. Behind her was a bellhop with the rest of their luggage.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry!” Natalia went over and grabbed the door, holding it open for both of them. “Let me get the door.”

Olivia sighed and shook her head, dropping their bags to the right of the door.

“Come on, kid, you can bring those in the main bedroom, over here.” Olivia found her way to the master suite. Glancing around she could see why Natalia had been so impressed. The entire suite was tastefully designed and elegant, yet homey. She picked up a framed picture of the Xiaos from the bookshelf.

“From our family to yours, welcome to the Galaxy San Cristobel Hotel. Your home away from home,” Olivia read, nodding her head. “Nice.”

“Hey, that was your idea, wasn’t it?” Natalia peered over her shoulder. It was a cute photo, with Mr. and Mrs. Xiao, along with their three older children in a lush backyard garden setting.

“Yeah, apparently Decker and my replacement continued with some of my suggestions.” Olivia set the photo down, a part of her imagining what it would be like with her family’s photo in the frame. She snorted at the thought. Not exactly the same “family values” that Galaxy was promoting. A light tap on the door caught her attention.

“Ms. Spencer, welcome to Galaxy San Cristobel.” A balding, dapper man in his mid-fifties stood at the door, a genuinely friendly smile gracing his face.

“Mr. Riker, so nice to finally meet you in person. And it’s Olivia.” Olivia grinned back, turning on her considerable charm. The hotel general manager had an excellent reputation in the industry and she had enjoyed the few initial conversations they’d had while planning their stay. She ushered the man in and shut the door behind them.

“In that case, call me Doug,” He turned and smiled at Natalia. “And this must be Ms. Rivera. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

“Natalia, please. I can’t wait to see the facilities.” Natalia smiled, pleased with his strong handshake. “The package you sent us was wonderful.”

“I have your itinerary all planned, as we talked about last week.” Doug smiled warmly, confident in his hotel staff to stand up well under their scrutiny.

“Good. I can’t wait to tour the kitchen. I wonder if your executive chef will remember me.” Olivia leaned back against the sofa. It had been a long time since her days working in the kitchen at the royal palace. She had started there the summer before—

Olivia shifted suddenly and turned her thoughts abruptly back to the here and now. She glanced up to find the dark eyes of her lover and was more than happy to lose herself there for a moment or two as Doug chuckled softly and continued.

“Ah yes. He definitely remembers you Olivia.” Doug smiled mischievously. He would never reveal the stories his executive chef had regaled him with about their potential new employer.

“Oh, no. Do I need to worry?” Olivia glanced at Natalia and then back to the older man as he just shook his head. She liked him already, and if she read her lover’s body language right, she did too.

“Massimo is quite the character, and very temperamental,” Doug tried to explain, “but he makes the best—”

“You name it, he makes the best version of it found on the island. So you just put up with all his quirks. I know.” Olivia chuckled, turning to Natalia. “Massimo never was very shy about how fantastic his cooking is, and with good reason. You’re going to love it.”

“So if you will excuse me, I’ll let you get settled in. We’ve made reservations for you tonight at 7pm at the Chef’s Table, with samples of all our signature dishes.” Doug opened the door and stepped into the hallway, Olivia moving to follow him to the door.

“Tell the big guy I can’t wait.” Olivia waved him off and shut the door quietly behind him. Turning she leaned against the door and sighed, happy to just finally stop.

“He seems nice.” Natalia grabbed her largest bag and headed towards the bedroom to start unpacking. She needed to get out of her jeans and into something a little cooler.

“Doug? Yeah, he does, and he’s done a good job of running this location.” The older woman paused and watched her lover head into the bedroom. “I’m just worried it might be more than we can chew, y’know?” Olivia grabbed another piece of luggage and followed behind.

“Well, let’s give it a chance, okay? Having a sunny Beacon destination isn’t such a bad thing either.” Natalia dropped her luggage and popped the small black bag open, hunting for her shorts. Pulling them out, she started to unzip her jeans when she felt strong hands slide along her arms, leaving a trail of goose bumps behind. Warm hands started to help peel her jeans off, thumbs hooking into the elastic waistband of her panties underneath, slowly easing them down over her hips as a cold nose nuzzled along her neck.

“H-how long do we have until dinner?” Natalia gasped, shivering as Olivia sucked and nipped at a tender earlobe.

“Long enough...”

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## ACT 2

Blake Marler entered the hustle and bustle of the Springfield Police Department with familiar ease. The energy was palpable, especially on a Friday night when all the crazies were out and about and she never knew what good gossip she could glean just from wandering down the narrow halls. She checked her watch and made her way to Frank's office. His text message earlier had asked her to drop by the station, saying that he had a surprise for her. She picked up her pace, not wanting to wait to see what it was.

Tapping the door lightly, she stepped into Frank's office with a flourish and stopped dead in her tracks, surprised to see Jane and Francesca sitting there.

“Jane. Where's Frank?” Blake quietly closed the office door, so the noise from outside wouldn't wake the napping baby. She stepped closer to peer down into the carrier at the child, Francesca's little hand snuggling the pink blanket close in her sleep.

“Oh, Ms. Marler, I'm so glad you're here.” Jane smiled brightly at the older woman, sensing an opportunity to still salvage her evening. “Chief Cooper was supposed to take Francesca but was called away...”

Blake looked down at the sweet baby and waited for the inevitable shoe to drop.

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Phillip leaned against the doorway to the library and watched his lover working away, law books piled high as Beth chewed on the end of a pen, reading. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she had a small furrow between her eyebrows as she sighed softly and then scribbled something onto her notepad. To Phillip it had seemed as if he had flashed back in time, back to simpler days, when all they had to worry about was what to wear to school the next day.

God, he felt old.

Phillip shook his head at his wayward thoughts and quietly stepped into the room. He loved the library, always had. With the old oak wood everywhere, the smell of the books, memories of standing on the ladder as a child, his dad pushing him along the brass rail to the next set of shelves. Philip glanced up along the bookshelf and ran his fingers along a

row of his old childhood favorites, sliding Moby Dick a little further back in line with the other books around it.

"You know, I'll never get my Juris Doctorate if you keep lurking around looking all sexy like that while I'm studying," Beth breathed in his ear. He felt her warm curves suddenly pressed along his back and he smiled, turning to wrap her in his arms.

"Oh, really?" Phillip murmured against her soft skin, breathing in her faint perfume. He dipped his head and nibbled along the delicate shell of her ear. "Was I lurking?"

"Most definitely..." Beth gasped, running her hands into his short blonde hair, pulling him closer. Her lips were soon captured, both getting lost in the familiar heat shimmering between them.

"I love dating a hot college student. It does wonders for my reputation." Philip waggled his eyebrows and squeezed Beth's toned butt as they slowly pulled apart.

"You are not helping, mister," Beth laughed, swatting him playfully before moving reluctantly away. "Once I get this report done, I can come down and watch a movie with you and the girls." Beth stared at the nearly completed document on her laptop. She just needed to tweak it a little bit more and then she could settle down for the weekend with her family. She slid back into the comfy leather chair and pulled the black laptop a little closer, her mind drifting back to her report.

"Any more thoughts on where you'd like to article after graduation?" Phillip followed, standing behind her and running his hand along the woman's shoulder, massaging the tense muscles he found there. He knew this was starting to bother her more and more. The stress of their impending wedding plus the push to finish her final year of law school was getting to her.

"I'm still not sure," Beth sighed and leaned back into his calming touch. "Alan's lawyers, Wittcombe and Nesbitt, seem interested, but..." Beth hesitated. She didn't know what it was about that law firm that she just didn't like. Maybe it was because they had a lot of questionable clients like Alan. Beth shrugged and looked back up at her tall lover. He would support her decisions, no matter what, and she knew it. She wasn't becoming a lawyer because of the money, but because she wanted to help people. Now she just needed to find a law firm that shared those ideals, too.

"Anyway, first things first, I still need to graduate law school this spring. And if I don't get this report finished, I'll never get out of here to go dress shopping tomorrow." Beth tapped her jaw with the end of her ballpoint pen as her mind started to spin with all she had to

do. There was so much to still get ready for their wedding. She couldn't dwell on that now though. She felt a soft kiss dropped on her head and she smiled.

"Ok, sweetheart. I'll round up Peyton and Emma, make some popcorn and we'll meet you in front of the big screen in half an hour?" Phillip moved away and headed for the library door. Beth was already starting to tap away at the computer, filling in details from her notes.

"Make it forty five minutes and you have a date." Beth glanced up as Phillip smiled softly and headed off to find his little girls.

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"I couldn't eat another bite." Natalia leaned back and smiled at her lover over the rim of her wineglass. Tonight had been wonderful. The food had been superb, with several different samplings from the hotel's menu. However, the woman sitting across from her had been the best part of the evening. As much as she loved their home life with the kids, it was always a pleasure to sit and just talk with her partner.

"I warned you that Massimo was brilliant." Olivia grinned, leaning back herself and observing the filled to capacity restaurant. This part of the business was definitely booming, undoubtedly in no small part to her old friend's cuisine.

"About time someone around here appreciated me," boomed a large man dressed in a white chef's jacket and black pants who had appeared beside their table. His handlebar moustache and above average height made the man stand out in a crowd. "Bella! It's been too long."

"Massimo!" Olivia quickly stood and was swallowed up in a big bear hug. Kissing her on both cheeks, the large man stepped back and smiled down at the other woman seated at the table. "This is Chef Massimo Silvestri. Massimo this is my..."

Olivia paused a moment and then slowly smiled, levelling a heated stare at her lover. She had been dying to say this for weeks.

"This is my fiancée, Natalia Rivera."

Natalia's eyes widened and she flushed slightly, a huge grin spreading across her face. She would never tire of hearing Olivia call her that.

Massimo glanced back and forth between the women and nodded, a little surprised but happy for his old friend.

“My pleasure to meet you,” Massimo took Natalia’s hand and gently kissed the knuckles, bowing ever so slightly as she blushed at his Old World charm. He sat down and waited as the maitre d’ arrived with another bottle of wine, pouring a small sample into the glass for the executive chef. Swirling the dark red, he tasted it and nodded to the man to pour.

“I had heard that the ‘Dragon Lady’ had arrived. I cannot tell you the number of people who have asked me about you, Olivia. The staff is quivering in fright. Your reputation precedes you, my dear.” The big man swirled his wine and leaned back.

Olivia merely raised an eyebrow, and lifted her wineglass to be refilled.

“Please, you were a terror at the palace in your Prince Richard days, don’t bother denying it.” Massimo leaned over closer to the beautiful brunette beside him. “She started out being in the right place at the right time, stepping in for a sous chef who quit in a huff in the middle of a huge royal reception at the palace. I grabbed her from the line of servers working that night and took her under my wing. Best thing I ever did.” He glanced over fondly at the elegant woman across the table. He did have an eye for quality, in food and with people. It was a gift.

“Six months later, she was snatched out of my kitchen and working her way up the food chain in the palace. Ambitious little thing, hard working, then she caught Richard’s eye and well...” The large man shrugged and winked.

Natalia grinned warmly, easily believing that her lover could have charmed the prince. She was enjoying these tales of Olivia’s past, making her realize just how little she knew of Olivia’s time in San Cristobel. She made a mental note to fix that, and soon.

“Hey, I still found time to come by and tell you all the good gossip, didn’t I?” Olivia huffed, swirling her wine a little in her glass.

“Harass me, she means.” Massimo chuckled as Olivia rolled her eyes and grinned.

“So, you trained Olivia as a chef?” Natalia stared hard, narrowing her eyes at her sneaky girlfriend. “Someone is definitely going to be cooking more around the house.” Olivia whistled innocently and took another sip of her wine.

“Well,” Massimo waved his hands, looking for the right words. “She certainly knows her way around the kitchen. And I’ve shown her a trick or two over the years.”

“Tell me more about the bad old days, Massimo.” Natalia locked eyes with the older woman, dancing with amusement. Apparently, there were a lot of things she still needed to learn about her lover and Massimo was just the man to help her out.

"Oh no..." Olivia groaned and covered her eyes with her hand. The Chef just laughed louder and shifted his chair closer to Natalia.

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"Jesus, Frank. There had better have been a murder or something for you to be gone so long." Blake checked her watch one more time and rolled her eyes. It was getting much too late for this little one to be out. Francesca should be somewhere quiet and warm. Decision made, she packed up the baby bag and zipped it tight.

"Come on, honey," Blake smiled at the child. "Let's write your daddy a note and blow this joint." Blake grabbed a pen and started scribbling quickly. Sliding the note onto the keyboard of her lover's computer, she turned and tugged on her coat. Winding her way back through the precinct, she waved at Remy Boudreau, who waved back while talking on the telephone. Leaning on his desk was his partner, Anna Li, who looked up from her file, smirked and nodded.

Something about that woman always made Blake nervous. Picking up her pace, Blake yanked open the door, and stepped outside into the blustery cold, not watching where she was going.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Blake nearly collided with a woman standing by front door of the police station. She felt strong hands grab her arms and keep her upright, the small baby carrier held fast and kept safe. Blake looked up into a familiar face. "Doris?"

"Are you okay?" Doris Wolfe breathed before stepping back and smiling sheepishly at the red head.

"I'm fine." Blake glanced down and saw that the baby hadn't even moved. The smell of cigarette smoke wafted past drew her attention.

"Doris!" Blake scolded as she realized that it was coming from Doris. She hadn't been aware that the other woman smoked.

"What?" Doris asked, looking around frantically to see what the issue was.

The baby is right here." Blake stared at the cigarette between Doris' lips and then down at the sleeping child. Doris followed her glance down and then looked back up at her frowning friend.

"Oh for Pete's sake," Doris rolled her eyes. "Ashlee grew up in a cloud of smoke and she turned out just fine."



Blake just narrowed her eyes and stared hard at her. The mayor sighed and stubbed out her cigarette.

"Y'know, you've got that disappointed, pissed off mom look down pat," Doris grumbled good naturedly.

"Oh, I don't know. It didn't seem to work so well with my boys." Blake looked off into the distance, watching fat snowflakes lazily floating past the streetlight. Her heart ached, it had been so long since the boys had called her.

"I forgot you had the two boys as well." Doris smiled softly, wanting to take that pained look from her friend's face. She hadn't meant to upset her.

"Yeah, I miss them so much sometimes. I was so torn up with Ross's death and then my mom talked me into sending them off to boarding school in Europe." Blake teared up a little. "Sometimes I think I should have kept my family closer together. I'm not a very good mother really."

"Hey now, you are great with Clarissa," Doris said, earning a warm smile from the other woman. Doris placed a gloved hand on the other woman's arm and squeezed it through the heavy jacket Blake was wearing. "And let's face it, none of your kids have shot anyone. Have they?" Doris double checked, after all this was Springfield a subdivision of the Twilight Zone. Blake just smiled at her and shook her head no. "Right. So really, compared to some of us other upstanding Springfield parents, I think you're doing just fine."

Blake snorted and stared at the smirking woman. Doris did have a point. Their eyes caught and held as the snow quietly fell around them. The mayor shifted a little under her scrutiny and looked down at the baby carrier as Francesca made a small squeaking sound from under her pink blanket.

"So where are you off to with the little miss?"

"Frank is tied up with work, so I'm taking her home until he can pick her up." Blake tried to mask the disappointment in her voice by tugging frantically at her scarf to block the wind from her collar. Francesca started to fuss a little louder. "I should probably get her into the car and head out."

"Yeah, I should..." Doris tilted her head and nodded towards the station. She moved to tug at the front door, watching as Blake waved and turned towards the parking lot. Sighing, she made her way into the warmth of the Springfield Police department

Massimo leaned across the small table and poured more wine into Natalia's glass, completely ignoring Olivia's pointed looks.

"This one, she was such a perfectionist. She drove the other high school kids working there a little crazy. But she was popular. So many boys chasing her, and a few of the girls, not that she ever noticed..." Massimo waved the small pastry before popping it into his mouth and smirked as Olivia looked up at that comment.

"Really?" Olivia cocked her head at her old friend. "I don't remember that at all." The older man just nodded, smiling softly at her as she took a small sip of her drink.

"Of course not, my dear. You were always so focused on the older boys, you didn't even realize the kids your own age falling at your feet. There was one girl, she was crazy for you, Bella."

Massimo turned conspiratorially to the younger woman beside him

"Olivia was very charming when she wanted to be and such a flirt! *Dio mio*, she went through the boys like they were dirty shirts. And then after her mother died she became so serious, working so hard to look after her sister and brother. She was like a demon possessed, working her way up, and tormenting her co-workers. I was worried about her..." Massimo's voice grew soft, remembering that poor girl from so long ago with the haunted eyes.

The confident professional woman before him looked so much more relaxed and happy than he ever recalled her being before. A lot of time had passed and Olivia seemed at peace with herself at long last. He watched as she stared over at the beauty next to him. Obviously this little thing had a lot to do with that. Nodding to himself, he leaned a little closer.

"And so, I don't know how you've tamed the savage beast, my dear, but well done." He tapped his glass with Natalia's as she smiled up at him, her eyes twinkling with amusement. Massimo blinked and turned back to the older woman. "Oh my, it must have been those dimples that did it."

Olivia rolled her eyes, but denied nothing. Massimo laughed and raised his hand, as another waiter arrived with delectable desserts.

"Does anything get past you, Chef?" Natalia grinned, stretching to pick out a tempting morsel and popping it into her mouth, moaning a little as it melted in her mouth.

"As my dear mother used to say," Massimo swirled his wine and glanced at the woman over the rim of his glass. "If you can't say anything nice, come sit down beside me."

Olivia groaned and snagged a decadent chocolate square. It was going to be a long evening.

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"Who the hell did that asshole Desilva sleep with to get his job?" Frank grumbled to himself as he shoved open his office door and made his way into the room. He really needed to look into getting a new forensic supervisor to replace the incompetent investigator currently running the lab. His phone started to ring the moment he came around to his leather chair and dropped down into it, exhausted. Reaching to grab it, his arm knocked a loose piece of paper off of his computer keyboard, fluttering to the floor behind his chair.

"Not now Sarge," Frank all but growled into the receiver, pinching the bridge of his nose tiredly. "I don't care if the president himself is walking through the front door. I am not in." He dropped the handset down onto the cradle and leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes with a sigh.

Peace and quiet at last.

Frank's eyes shot open.

"Oh my God... Francesca!" Sitting up abruptly he grabbed the phone and dialled the Sargent on duty back again.

"Sarge, have you seen a young woman and my daughter wandering the station anywhere?" Frank asked, starting to get really worried. Why didn't the girl just stay here like he'd asked. "Nothing? Not even in the staff kitchen or anything?" Frank listened closely and then sighed. Not a sign of them anywhere. "Thanks Sarge, if you see her call me right away."

Frank dropped the handset back onto the phone.

"God, this day is going from bad to worse..." He groaned and tried to think. Where would the flighty caregiver have disappeared to with his daughter? He chewed his bottom lip and tried not to panic. He snapped his fingers as it suddenly came to him. "Oh, she had a date with her boyfriend. Maybe she took the baby with her..."

Digging frantically down into his pockets, Frank found his cell phone and flicked down through the address book, finding Jane's cell phone number that Natalia had given him before she'd left for San Cristobel. Hitting the send button, he started to fidget in his chair.

"Come on, pick up...pick up...where are you?" Frank grumbled, tapping his fingers nervously on the desk top.

"The customer you have dialled is not available. Please try your call again later," an automated voice droned at him. *Who actually turns off their cell phone these days?* Frank flipped his cell phone shut and sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. Maybe something bad had happened to Jane and his daughter. A million scenarios ran through his mind, none of them ending happily. This was not good, and to top it all off he was so late already for meeting up with...

"Blake! Oh, my God, she was supposed to meet me." Frank started dialling the woman's phone number. "I am so dead."

"Hi, it's Blake. Leave a message at the beep." Blake's warm tones drifted back at him from his phone. The message tone beeped at him as he snapped his phone shut and groaned.

"What the hell are you doing, Frank?" Doris Wolfe shoved his office door open and stormed into the tiny office.

"Huh?" Frank just looked up at her and blinked. Great, just what he needed.

Doris rolled her eyes at the bumbling fool and stepped deeper into the Chief's office.

"I just ran into the duty Sargent, trying to find your daughter and her nanny. How can you call yourself a good cop when you don't even know where your own child is?" Doris sighed as Frank flushed a deep shade of red and stood, sputtering at her.

"I-I was dealing with issues in our crime lab, if you must know..." He came out from behind his desk to confront her. She didn't scare him. Much.

"I'm well aware of the problems here and I'm already working on that one, Frank. We haven't forgotten that whole corruption investigation and missing evidence that Harley brought forward. It cast a poor light on the Springfield police department and there has been continued incompetence from the forensic crime lab. Don't even get me started on the murder of Edmund Winslow and the shoddy investigation there. Death by baby stroller? Really?" Doris rolled her eyes. It was almost too ludicrous to imagine.

"And then you let Dinah, the alleged murderer, disappear into thin air. No, it's time to get back on track around here. No more covering stuff up, it's time to step up and clean house." Doris knew she could finally make a difference, if she just stood up and did the right thing. She pinned Frank with a hard stare and continued.

"The City Council doesn't trust the department to make a good hire from within Frank. We're not blaming you, this was well underway before you came in as Chief. The Council hired a consultant and we took matters into our own hands, putting feelers out in several cities to try to bring in fresh blood in many areas key areas. Meanwhile Detective Desilva and several others are under independent investigation. You need to worry about bringing this place back up to speed, Frank."

Frank sighed and stared at his feet. Why did he want this job again? He ran a hand through his hair and looked back up at the mayor, nodding. The woman had a point after all. Doris sighed softly and offered up a lopsided grin to the chastised man.

"And Blake has Francesca," Doris took pity on the man, the tensed muscles around his eyes relaxing a little and he sighed in relief. "I ran into her on my way in. Didn't she leave you a note or something?"

"I didn't see one..." Frank turned and looked around his desk, a white piece of paper on the floor behind his chair catching his eye. Grabbing it he quickly realized Doris was right. Blake had left him a note saying that she took the baby home where she would be warm and quiet. He looked up at the mayor and waved the note sheepishly. "Found it."

Doris nodded, knowing her friend wouldn't have taken the girl without giving Frank a heads up. What the hell Blake saw in the man, she would never know. She glanced at her watch and scowled. Anna was going to kill her.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have the last half of a basketball game to get to..." Doris shook her head at the relieved man, quietly shutting the office door behind her.

Frank crumpled the note up into a ball and tossed it into his garbage can. God, he felt like an idiot.

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"Do you think Beth will let me pick a pink dress, Daddy?" Emma yawned as Phillip smoothed the blanket down and ran his long fingers through her soft hair.

"Well, you should wait and see all the dresses first and then decide." Phillip was almost afraid of what horrible shade of Barbie pink material his daughter could find.

"Okay, but I hope it's pink." Emma smiled up at her father. He looked so happy these days, always hugging everyone, laughing and playing like a big kid, kissing Beth all the time. "Daddy?"

"Yes pumpkin?"

"So, you're gonna marry Beth and Peyton will be like my sister, too, right?"

"Yes."

"So I'm going to have three mommies and another sister. Our family just keeps getting bigger and bigger. Cool." Emma giggled as her father smiled and leaned over to hug her. "What do you think I should call Beth?"

Phillip blinked. It was a good question.

"Whatever you feel comfortable with, sweetie."

"Well, I call Mommy, 'Mommy' and Natalia is just 'Natalia'..." Emma tugged at the blanket and glanced up at her father. "Can I tell you a secret, Daddy?"

"You can tell me anything, baby." Phillip moved in closer, wondering where this was going.

"I'd like to call Natalia 'Ma', like Rafe does. Do you think Natalia would let me?" Emma squirmed a little. "I don't want her to get mad and leave again."

Phillip closed his eyes, guilt washing over him. Olivia had mentioned that Emma had taken Natalia's disappearing harder than they all thought. He looked down at her little worried face. The girl had been abandoned so many times by the people she loved, by the people Olivia loved. He wished he could take that fear from her heart. He couldn't change the past; all he could do now was to make sure he never left her again and to reassure her, as often as she needed to be.

"Hey, you know Natalia wasn't mad at you, Emma. She loves you and your mom. She just needed some time to figure some things out, okay?" Phillip smiled sadly and tweaked the little girl's nose, making her giggle again. "And I think Natalia would love it if you called her 'Ma'."

"Do you think Mommy would be mad?" Emma asked tugging at the bottom of her shirt.

"Are you kidding, I think your mommy would really love it." Phillip tucked the blanket up tight to Emma's chin and leaned close to kiss her goodnight. "Good night, Jellybean."

"Night, Daddy. I love you." Emma's eyes started to blink slower and slower.

"I love you, too." Phillip switched off the bedside light and sat for a moment, watching the girl fall asleep before his eyes. He had missed so much time with her, and then almost lost it all with his illness. He treasured every moment spent together as a blessing.

A creak from the doorway caught his attention. There stood Beth, the light from the hallway glowing behind her like a halo, smiling. Phillip stood and made his way to the door, their fingers sliding and tangling together as his lover turned and headed for their bedroom, quietly shutting the door behind them.

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Olivia wandered out of their hotel room and onto the balcony, quietly shutting the sliding doors. Natalia stood by the rail, staring out at the ocean, full moon shining down giving everything a silvery glow. A warm breeze blew, making her lover's dark hair sway slightly. Her heart nearly stopped when Natalia turned and stared at her, smiling and reaching a hand out to pull her close.

Olivia came to stand behind her lover, wrapping her arms around the soft curves and pressing a soft kiss to the dark hair, sighing. Natalia leaned back, turning slightly so she could look at her.

"The kids are fine. Phillip and Frank both sent a text, checking in." Olivia murmured, squeezing Natalia a little tighter, taking comfort in their closeness. They both were missing the kids.

"Good. I'm glad." As much fun as she had tonight, a part of Natalia had still been wondering about the children. They watched the tide crashing against the shoreline for a while, lost in their own thoughts and the peaceful easy feeling of being with each other, until the brunette finally stirred.

"I loved being called your fiancée tonight." Natalia stared up at her partner's strong profile, not able to stop her huge grin. Olivia's eyes locked with hers, the emotions reflected there taking her breath away.

"I loved saying it." Olivia smiled gently and dipped her head to capture the soft lips parted before her.

"I feel like I can't keep it inside, I want to tell everyone, shout it from the rooftops, take out an ad in the Springfield Journal. I'm so excited about it all." Natalia snuggled closer and sighed happily.

Olivia glanced out over the rolling restless waves. She desperately wanted this relationship to work out. Her marriage track record however gave her pause.

“Sixth time’s the charm?” Olivia stared at her gold band reflecting the moonlight until Natalia’s delicate fingers slid over and covered it, pulling her hand up and pressing it to her chest.

“Oh, querida. You just needed some time to get ready for me.” Natalia shifted and cupped soft cheeks with her hands, gently bumping their foreheads together affectionately. Olivia closed her eyes and leaned into the smaller woman. “And now that I’ve got you, I’m never letting go.”

“Promise?” Olivia whispered. Everyone left her eventually. Even Natalia had, not that long ago. She refused to slide back into that old black hole of hurt. She opened her eyes and stared into the serious dark ones in front of her, overwhelmed at the love reflected back at her.

“I promise.”

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Doris stared up at the ceiling, lazily stroking her fingers through the long silky hair of her lover snuggled tight against her, enjoying just being able to talk with the woman.

“...And he had absolutely no clue where his daughter was.” Doris continued. “God, how did that man bed Olivia, Natalia, and now Blake? They’re all smart women, what were they thinking?”

“I try not to...” Anna snorted and nuzzled along Doris’ cheek, leaving a trail of butterfly kisses in her wake. “Maybe he’s good in the sack.”

“Ugh! Eye wash stations...eye wash stations!” Doris mimed splashing her eyes with water and then they broke into giggles together. Anna rolled and sat up slightly, staring down intensely, her eyes growing even darker.

“Now, are we gonna talk about the Chief and his sex life, or are we gonna work on our own?”

Doris just smiled, gasping as Anna dipped her head and started licking and nipping her way down her body.

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The morning sun shone bright behind them as Olivia and Natalia jogged along the boardwalk, the salty spray from the ocean hanging in the air. Natalia slowed her pace, before stopping to tie her shoe, taking the opportunity to watch the sway of Olivia's butt as she jogged ahead.

"Don't think I don't see you checking me out, Missy." Olivia smirked as she turned and ran in place waiting for her girlfriend to lace up. Natalia flushed slightly but didn't deny it. Olivia just chuckled and they started running again.

"You know, I like it when you check me out. Makes me think I've still got it." Olivia teased as they fell into a leisurely pace together.

"Oh, honey, you never lost it," Natalia stated frankly. Olivia's bark of laughter made her smile too.

They ran in silence for a few minutes admiring the ocean scenery and the morning. Olivia swerved just in time to miss being hit by a nicely muscled man running straight at them. She turned to watch his tight butt jogging away from them, and then looked up into Natalia's smiling face.

"What?" Olivia grinned sheepishly, a little concerned that Natalia would be annoyed at her.

"Nothing." Natalia smirked knowingly. "Although you might want to check out what's headed this way though..."

Olivia looked up in time to see two pretty young things bouncing towards them, iPods blaring, blonde hair swaying around their tank tops. The tanned, toned women, bodies glistening in the sunshine, ran past, smiling warmly at the older women.



"I see what you mean..." Olivia grinned back at her lover, who simply nodded and smiled. They ran on for a little bit more.

"You know, I'm glad we can do that," Natalia said as they made their way towards the hotel again. Olivia glanced over, waiting for her to elaborate. "That we can admire other people around us and share it with each other and not worry about it."

"I know what you mean." Olivia slowed her pace a little, taking it down to a walk as they came up to the tiki huts of their hotel's beach area. "I'm still getting used to finding myself looking at other women, in that way. I mean... I think I did it a little bit before, but I always told myself I was checking out their outfit or hair. Now I know that there is more there that I'm admiring." Olivia glanced down, a little embarrassed.

"Me, too!" Natalia grabbed her lover's hand and squeezed it. "It's different isn't it? I mean I still find men kind of cute, but now it's as if there's a whole new world that's opened up. My horizons have expanded and it's fun that I can share it with you, too."

"Yes, I particularly liked your obsession with the Olympic ski team and that desktop image you put on your laptop, whew!" Olivia teased her as they made their way past the hotel's outdoor patio, the morning crowd starting to fill in for the buffet breakfast.

“Hey, those girls are amazing athletes.” Natalia tried to look innocent, but her eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Riiiiight. You stick with that story, sweetheart.” Olivia smirked and tugged on the side door to enter the hotel, holding it open for her chuckling partner before they both disappeared inside.

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“No Dad, it’s not cool,” Marina Cooper whined from her side of the booth. “It’s not right that Mom can just blow into town unannounced and then expect me to just drop everything to hang out with her after all this time.”

Frank snuggled Francesca closer to his chest, the baby wiggling excitedly in his arms, a pudgy hand whacking him in the face. What was with his feisty girls today?

“I just think it’s nice that Eleni thought to stop in while she was passing by.” He tried to explain, glancing over at Buzz for some help. Buzz wisely just shrugged and wiggled Francesca’s little hand, trying to distract her.

“You just don’t get it. She just takes off to Greece or California or wherever the hell she feels like and leaves her family behind. Doesn’t she understand you do anything for your family? Well, this mother will make sure her son comes first...” grumbled Marina, sliding out of the booth and putting Henry into his stroller.

“Aw, honey, don’t be like that. Eleni did the best she could.” Frank tried to reason with her. Marina rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Listen, I’ve got to meet up with Shayne, I’ll call you later, Dad.” Leaning over she kissed Frank on the cheek and then placed her hand on the soft hair of her baby sister, who looked up at her with big curious eyes. “See you later, little munchkin.”

Nodding to Buzz, she pushed the baby stroller and waved to Blake, who was working away behind the counter pouring coffee for the morning crowd. Marina wheeled her son out of Company and into the freezing cold outside. Frank shook his head and watched her go.

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The hot afternoon sun beat down relentlessly on the throng of tourists milling in the packed marketplace. Olivia inhaled deeply, taking in the scents and sounds of the busy tourist area. She loved coming down here when she was a teen, wandering into the used

book stores and bargain shops, trying to find something cheap yet trendy to help spice up her mom's boring taste in clothing.

Olivia smiled as she watched Natalia haggle with one of the vendors. The woman was in her element. The silk pashmina shawl was stunning and well made and Natalia knew it. But there was a little bit of Chicago street still in the stubborn woman and the vendor didn't stand a chance, especially if she pulled out the big guns. She stood back and waited as her lover flashed those killer dimples.

"That's my girl," she murmured, sliding her sunglasses higher and shaking her head, grinning at her pleased girlfriend. Natalia smiled widely and shook the vendors hand to seal the deal.

A shiver ran down Olivia's back, a sudden creepy feeling that she couldn't shake. She glanced to her right, as something familiar caught her eye. There by the wall, an Asian man, large and lumbering, somewhat menacing even at his age. He was muscular and strong, with piercing black eyes. Eyes that were staring right back at her.

Olivia looked away, feeling self conscious. Where did she know that man from? It was on the tip of her tongue. She went to tap Natalia on the shoulder to point him out to her, but when she glanced back, the man was gone.

"Damn," Olivia cursed under her breath.

"What's that, honey?" Natalia tangled their fingers together, distracting her even more.

"Nothing, just someone I thought I knew..." Olivia looked back over her shoulder as they moved along the stalls and past the tiny stores. She glanced around one last time, unable to shake the feeling they were being watched.

Dark eyes followed their path through the crowd, before sinking once more back into the shadows.

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"Beth, honey, look at this one," Lillian called from the far side of the small bridal boutique, waving at her daughter to come over. She loved looking for dresses with all her girls. She saw Beth glance over to make sure Emma, Peyton and Sarah were all behaving, and smiled as she saw all of them sitting to one side, watching as Lizzie tried on yet another bridesmaid dress.

Lillian pulled out the sweetest pale pink dress and held it up as Beth made her way over to the older woman. She smiled widely and nodded as she saw it. It was perfect.

“Emma, could you come here, sweetie?”

Emma was off the padded seat in a flash, running around several racks of dresses before winding her way over to the two older Raines women.

“What do you think?” Beth held her breath. A huge smile broke out on the girl's face and she looked up, thrilled.

“It's pink!” Emma bounced a little in excitement.

“Yes, it is.” Lillian smiled. “Do you want to try it on? I think I have your size right here.” She handed the dress over to the girl and she bolted for the dressing room.

“Thank God we found something we all like.” Beth smiled gratefully at her mom. “Now if Lizzie would just be as cooperative...”

Lizzie tugged at the material around her hips, trying to get the material to fall differently. Short of putting a huge ugly bow on the front or by carrying a huge basket bouquet of flowers, there was no way to hide the fact that she was pregnant and growing. She glanced over at her mom and grandmother, who both just smiled encouragingly at her. She looked back into the mirror and sighed. At least the dress was a nice pink.

Emma hopped out beside her suddenly, standing next to her to look at the dress she was trying on. Lizzie stared at the reflection of the two of them. The dresses complimented each other well.

“You look beautiful, Lizzie.” Emma said smiling up at her big sister. Lizzie wiped at a sudden tear and smiled back.

“So do you, Emma,” Lizzie bent over to straighten out Emma's collar. “Us big sisters have to stick together. You sure you can show Peyton and Sarah the ropes? It's a big job being a flower girl.”

“I know. But with this dress on, I can do anything.” Emma grinned and spun around, enjoying how the full skirt billowed out around her. “Besides, I had practice when Natalia just about married Frank.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that...” Lizzie nodded.

“Well? What's the verdict girls?” Beth and Lillian came forward and stood with them, their fingers crossed.

“We love them!” Lizzie and Emma said together, before breaking into giggles.

“See, sweetheart. I told you it would all work out okay,” Lillian murmured softly, putting her hand on Beth's shoulder and ran soothing circles on her back. Beth smiled and hugged her mom. Today had been a good day.

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Natalia stared up at the thick oak beams arching high into the vaulted ceiling of St. Michael's Catholic Church. The afternoon sun slanted through the stained glass windows of the sanctuary, bathing the gold crosses and marble statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in warm light. Even the well worn patina of the pews called to a part of Natalia that she found difficult to explain.

As one of the oldest Catholic churches on San Cristobel, St Michael's was a beautiful place of worship. Natalia admired the history and architecture of a time long past that could easily be seen in the brick and mortar of the building. And to her, it seemed very fitting that St. Michael, the patron saint of warriors, was the name of the church where Olivia had gone to with her family. Watching over the girl who had to fight for everything good in her life it seemed.

Natalia crossed herself and stood up from the pew, moving towards the small candles, lighting several of them. She loved the smell of the candles and wax melting. It was comforting and felt like home.

“Who are you lighting these all for?” Olivia spoke quietly, appearing at her elbow. Natalia smiled at her lover and continued to light them.

“Well, one for Rafe, of course. These two are for your parents, and this last one is for your sister.” Olivia grunted and pretended not to be touched. Natalia wasn't fooled, and stretched out her hand to squeeze her hand. She knew it was hard for Olivia to come back to some of her old haunts, especially one so intertwined with her mother. Natalia leaned closer and looked up into soft green eyes before turning the long match back to the row of candles.

“And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people and thy God my God.” Natalia softly quoted and touched the flame to the wick, flaring it to life. “This one is for us, querida.”

“That was so beautiful,” Olivia smiled softly, tears welling slightly.

“Book of Ruth, it’s one of my favorite passages.” Natalia blew out the match and slid her hand down to tangle their fingers together before drawing the older woman along with her to leave the church and head outside.

They followed a well-worn pathway into the attached cemetery. Olivia brought their entwined hands together and kissed her lover’s knuckles, then pulled away to wander alone through the weathered headstones, looking for her parent’s gravesite.

Natalia sighed, feeling for her lover, as Olivia stopped and knelt by a grave, Gregory and Rebecca Spencer carved on the face of the granite headstone. Olivia stood for a while and then moved on, to the left and down a row was the newer headstone for her sister Marissa, still shiny and black. Olivia ran her hand along the rough surface of the top of the stone.

Natalia couldn’t take it anymore, needing to be there for her partner. She stepped deeper into the cemetery, making her way to her lover who was now just staring off into the distance, looking so lost and alone.

Olivia stared ahead, not really seeing anything but memories of her family flashing before her. There had always been so much drama, so much pain. The gaping hole in her heart was still there, but as she watched Natalia wandering between the headstones, the slight breeze flowing through her long dark hair, her light skirt billowing around her legs, she felt the warmth of her love for the woman who was slowly making her whole again.

Olivia knew her mother wouldn’t have understood their love; hell, she didn’t understand it herself. She knew better than to question it anymore, she only knew that being with Natalia felt right. And that was all that mattered. To love and be loved in return. What more could anyone want?

Olivia watched as Natalia walked up and smiled at her, once more squeezing their hands together. This was her family now, and that was all that mattered.

“I love you.” Olivia felt the words slip from her lips, coming straight from her healing heart.

“What is it with you and cemeteries and declarations of love, sweetheart?” Natalia smirked and leaned in to gently kiss her. “I love you, too.”

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Frank looked down at his sleeping daughter, passed out in her little carrier. She was so tiny and peaceful when she slept. His heart seemed too small to hold the love he felt for this

little girl. The day together had been wonderful, and once Blake was done with work, they would spend a quiet night together. He sighed sadly.

“What’s wrong, Frank?” Buzz slid into the booth beside his son, dropping a cup of coffee in front of him.

“Nothing really.” Frank looked away, his eyes finding Blake just finishing up her shift by wiping down the counter and coffee machines. “It’s just all this talk with Marina lately about Eleni has got me thinking, y’know?”

Buzz nodded, taking a sip of his own coffee and waited for him to continue.

“And then yesterday, I-I...” Frank sighed sadly. It was hard to admit this part. “I was so preoccupied with work that I lost track of Francesca. And I never want to feel that stupid or that scared again. I’m such a bad father...”

“Now, stop that right now. You are a fine father. Look at Marina, at how well she turned out. You’ve been there for your family Frank and that’s what counts. Francesca is a lucky little girl and you will be there for her, too.” Buzz looked down into his mug for a minute, swirling the dark liquid as if looking for answers there. “I wish I had been half the father you are.”

Frank sighed. He hadn’t meant to make Buzz feel bad about their past. Buzz looked up and their eyes locked.

“You are, Dad.” Frank meant every word.

Buzz nodded, not exactly believing it, and they smiled at each other.

“Then relax already, Frank.” Buzz thumped his son on the back and tried to lighten the mood. “You can make it up to Francesca by buying her a car when she turns sixteen if it’ll make you feel better...”

Frank shook his head and chuckled, feeling like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

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“So how did it go?” Beth asked, looking up from the law book she was reading. Phillip rolled his eyes and plopped down on the sofa beside her, feeling a little better as Beth gave him a quick kiss. “That good, huh?”



“We have the tuxes taken care of and we didn’t kill each other. So yes, a success.” He smirked and leaned his head against his lover’s shoulder. Emma and Peyton ran into the living room, yelling at full volume.

“Daddy, we found the best dresses today!” Emma bounced onto his lap and Peyton scrambled over towards Beth.

“Really?” Phillip snuggled her closer and glanced up at Beth. She smiled widely and nodded. “That’s fantastic, Jellybean.”

“And guess what. It’s pink!” The girl practically quivered with joy.

Phillip looked back at Beth, concerned this was a problem, but she just smiled and nodded again.

“It’s a lovely pale pink that matches Lizzie’s dress wonderfully.” Beth dropped her book to the floor and pulled Peyton up onto her lap.

“I can’t wait for the wedding.” Emma rolled a little closer and tickled Peyton’s tummy, giggling together. Then she stretched out and gave Beth a big hug. “And I love my dress.”

Phillip watched his daughter and Beth snuggling together with Peyton wiggling in between and smiled, his heart filled with love for them all. Beth looked over at him, their eyes locking and she mouthed a silent ‘I love you.’ Phillip smiled, feeling tears starting to well.

He was so glad to be alive.

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A flash of lightning split the midnight air and crashing thunder rumbled but Olivia didn’t even notice it. Her heart was racing, like she had run for miles, and she was exhausted but afraid to go back to sleep. Afraid to move.

Just afraid.

Olivia pulled her legs to her chest and hugged them close, trying to get her breathing under control. It had been years since she’d had one this bad. She shook her head trying to dismiss the memories threatening to overwhelm her. The bottle of whiskey sat on the coffee table in front of her, open and calling her name, sweet oblivion beckoning.

“Olivia?” Natalia yawned and sank down onto the couch and stared at her agitated lover. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

She knew Olivia had nightmares. How could she miss the frantic movements in bed, as if fighting some inner demons that would sometimes torment her lover. There were nights the woman was in perpetual motion, and yet she would never discuss it in the mornings. Natalia knew she had played a part in Olivia's nightmares, when she had left, but this was different. She didn't know what this was.

“What's going on, baby?” Natalia was starting to get scared.

“What does it look like?” Olivia tore her eyes away from the bottle and stared at her lover with cold eyes. Natalia moved slowly, as if approaching a wild animal, not wanting to spook her and reached a hand out to gently touch her arm.

“I thought we talked about this. That you could come to me, instead of turning to a bottle,” Natalia whispered into the night, feeling her lover shivering under her hand.

“I don't think you can help me this time.” Olivia's lip trembled. She was only hanging on by a thread. Natalia brought her hand up to cup her cheek it was almost too much.

“Hey, we agreed. No more running, Olivia. Tell me what is going on with you.”

“I don't want to talk about it, Natalia,” Olivia growled and unfolded herself from the couch, grabbing the bottle and bringing it to her lips. Stopping suddenly, she panted in the darkness, trying to get herself under control. Stuff down the emotions, don't feel anything, don't remember him holding you down...

“Damn it! I just want to forget.” Olivia squeezed her eyes shut and threw the bottle across the room, smashing into a million pieces against the wall, as the amber liquid ran down the wall like blood.

Natalia stubbornly set her jaw. This conversation was far from over, but her lover was nowhere near the head space needed for it. Olivia stood panting, her eyes wild, almost panicked. She needed to reach her somehow, and she could only pray that Olivia would let her in.

“Will you help me to forget, Natalia?” Olivia's eyes softened slightly as she took a tentative step forward and then another.

If Natalia couldn't reach Olivia by talking to her right now, then maybe she could by showing her just how much she loved the woman, even the dark side, when she was tormented like this. She nodded silently, letting Olivia know she wasn't going anywhere.

Natalia didn't move as Olivia stopped in front of her and nuzzled along her temple, breathing her in, slowly calming down. Olivia pulled her lover's thin night robe down her back, Natalia's arms tangling in the silky material. Spinning them both, she pressed her partner up against the wall, sliding a leg between strong thighs and tucking tight against her.

Snapping teeth descended, nipping a trail across the sensitive skin of Natalia's neck, followed by the lick of a soothing tongue. She squirmed, trying to reach out to Olivia's tempting body only to be held in place still wrapped up in the arms of her robe.

"Mine..." Olivia murmured, her voice laced with need and something more.

"Yes, always yours," Natalia gasped. "Take what's yours, querida."

Natalia's teeth nipped at a tender earlobe, almost daring her lover to make the next move, smiling as Olivia growled, flashing green eyes darkening with desire. It was the last coherent thought she had as she succumbed to her lover's touch.

Olivia stroked her fingers roughly through the thick dark tresses, Natalia seeming to cling even closer. She pulled back slightly before brushing along the brunette's lips, pressing nearer for a tender kiss, quickly melting into the moist heat of her mouth. Pulling away finally to catch her breath, Olivia caressed Natalia's flushed cheek .

"God, I love you so much."

"I know." Natalia smirked and wiggled closer, her movements still restricted by the sleeves of her robe.

"And don't you forget it." Olivia trailed long fingers down her lover's tempting curves, cupping a tender breast and squeezing, thrilling to the moan that caused. "You are wearing too much clothing."

Olivia tugged the offending robe from her lover's body, before moving her hands slowly down to the hem of Natalia's tank top.

"How are you feeling?" Natalia murmured, still worried about her partner as she felt her top being lifted and stripped from her body. She gasped as Olivia peeled off her own night shirt next and pressed their overheating bodies together, flushed and damp with sweat.

“Hot and bothered about covers it.” Olivia tried to focus on Natalia’s words, but slowly undressing the sexy brunette was distracting. So was the thought of seeing more of her toned body. “Come here.”

“So impatient!” Natalia teased, as Olivia slid her hands around her waist, fingers dipping into the waistband of her sleep shorts, starting to push them from her hips. She watched enthralled as the honey blonde head kissed a searing trail down her body, nuzzling her bellybutton as sure hands removed the shorts from her.

Standing, Olivia moved in for a deeper kiss, tongues sliding and tangling together. Picking her lover up almost effortlessly, she groaned as she felt strong legs wrap around her, moist heat pressed tight to her, grinding slowly against her taut stomach.

Natalia moaned as she felt the wall suddenly behind her, the plaster rough on her back. She locked her legs around Olivia, who seemed to be easily supporting her, holding her slight weight.

Natalia arched her back as Olivia started moving down her throat, her wandering hand once more squeezing her breast, running the pad of her thumb over the tightening nipple, teasing it to become harder still. Natalia groaned, wantonly thrusting against Olivia, craving a harder, firmer touch.

Olivia tore her eyes away from the flushed skin and met Natalia’s gaze, her own body throbbing with desire, its demands becoming very clear. Want, take, have. Natalia understood her perfectly in this moment. Panting, desperately needing her, Natalia couldn’t seem to form words.

Sliding down Olivia’s quivering body to stand, Natalia leaned in for another smouldering kiss. Caught off-guard and off-balance, Natalia was surprised to find herself pushed back roughly once more against the wall. Olivia pressed tightly against her body, trapping Natalia’s wrists against the wall, while nipping and kissing her way to a sensitive earlobe.

“Please, Olivia...” Natalia moaned into Olivia’s ear, unable to take much more, her body on fire. Pushing weakly on Olivia’s shoulder, she could hear a soft chuckle as the blonde sank to her knees. Strong hands traced along lush hips, then Olivia kissed a return trail up the inside of a smooth thigh, stopping as she reached damp dark curls.

Olivia smiled as Natalia couldn’t help thrusting forward, silently asking for her touch. Guiding a graceful leg over her shoulder, she opened Natalia further, breathing her scent in before dipping her tongue into wet folds, lazily circling the stiff clit she found there.

“Oh, God.” Throwing her head back and rocking against Olivia’s insistent mouth, Natalia was quickly losing control. She couldn’t seem to get close enough, her left hand tangled in blonde hair pulling her nearer. Olivia teased her with quick faint flicks of her tongue, before starting to build a steady rhythm. Natalia felt Olivia’s arm wrapping around her waist, as finger tips tickled along her most sensitive flesh, parting her, and then suddenly taking her completely.

Natalia gasped and thrust against the strong hand stretching and filling her, still wanting more. Olivia built the tempo steadily, pulling out slightly before thrusting into her again and again, taking her closer to the edge with each stroke. Natalia moaned, begging for release as she felt every nerve end jumping, her body twitching in anticipation as she raced to her approaching orgasm.

“Please...” Natalia panted, bucking hard against her lover, who had slowed their pace.  
“Please don’t stop!”

Olivia just smiled, needing to be in control tonight almost as much as the release her body was aching for. She stilled all movement as Natalia just growled with frustration.

“Wait for it...” Olivia glanced up over the gentle swell of Natalia’s belly, placing tender butterfly kisses there, before their eyes locked and held. Her thumb pressing and swirling, she watched the dark eyes flickering with love and desire as she once more started to thrust, her fingers curling to find the one spot she knew Natalia could not resist. Panting, needing the intense connection, they stared at each other, Natalia unable to hold on much longer.

“Now...” Olivia murmured against the sweat damp skin. “Come for me now.” Natalia tensed, so close to the edge, and then with a simple flick of Olivia’s tongue she felt herself shatter, come together and shatter again.

Slowly Natalia returned to herself, aftershocks and waves of pleasure still flowing through her, as she calmed, trying to catch her breath. Sliding back up her body, Olivia caught and held her close, instinctively knowing she needed the strength and safety of her arms.

“I need you so much,” Olivia murmured against her cheek, a tear falling. She just needed to get lost for awhile in her lover.

“I’ve got you, baby...” Natalia husked, brushing damp tendrils from Olivia’s forehead, feeling her energy returning. “I’m right here and I am going to make you forget everything but my touch,” Natalia slowly leaned forward, tasting herself on Olivia’s lips as she kissed her softly. “And my love...”

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### ACT 3

The storm had finally blown itself out, and the breeze blowing through the hotel room was fresh and clean. Olivia lay sprawled across the large bed on her stomach, Natalia draped across her back snuggled close. She slowly stroked long fingers through the honeyed hair of her sleeping lover, listening to the steady breathing as she watched the moon slowly sinking into the ocean. She thought of grabbing the bed sheets that lay in a heap at the foot of the bed to cover them, but then she'd actually have to move, and at the moment she was too exhausted to budge.

Natalia's mind drifted lazily back over the night's events, knowing that they would still need to talk. Something was bothering her partner, and had been since they arrived here. She was determined to get to the bottom of it. And Olivia's need to control their lovemaking earlier had been new. Not a bad thing, she smirked, just different.

Olivia groaned and stirred, her eyes blinking open enjoying her partner's touch.

"Hey you," Natalia dropped a tender kiss to her lover's bare shoulder. "How are you feeling, hmmm?"

"Stiff." Olivia ran a hand through her hair as memories came crashing back, as she looked around the room. Was there a surface they hadn't christened?

"I bet," Natalia chuckled and shifted so her lover could reposition herself more comfortably.

Rolling over with another groan, Olivia settled on her back and pulled the younger woman close again, tucking the dark head under her chin. She closed her eyes and just soaked up Natalia's warm and solid strength for a moment. Her lover had such faith in her, it was almost scary.

It had been a long time since she'd had a flashback to that night. And it was the first time Olivia hadn't drunk herself into oblivion after it happened. She knew it was because of Natalia's strength and love and for that she would be grateful.

"Tell me." Natalia murmured against Olivia's tender skin. She needed to know what was going on in that beautiful mind.

"How do you do that?" Olivia whispered, more to herself than to Natalia, as she absently traced the delicate shell of her lover's ear with a finger tip. "You always seem to know what to say at exactly the right time."

"I have many skills, sweetie. You hired me for more than just my pretty face and above average cooking abilities you know." Natalia offered a teasing lopsided grin. Growing serious, she dropped a soft kiss onto the blonde head, enjoying the close contact. "Hey, you know you can tell me anything. I am not going anywhere."

Olivia closed her eyes and soaked up the solid strength for a moment longer. The time had come and she knew it.

"There is something I need to tell you, about myself." Olivia felt Natalia grow still beside her. Concerned, she sat up slightly and looked into sympathetic, dark eyes. The love reflecting back at her gave her the courage to continue.

Olivia's eyes seemed to dull, and Natalia could hear the older woman's heart beating faster. She ran her fingers into her partner's tousled hair, wanting to ease the pain she saw lurking just beneath the surface.

"Coming back to San Cristobel has stirred up a lot of old wounds and feelings. I've been back visiting here before, but coming with you has, I don't know, made me realize I've never really dealt fully with all of it. I've made some peace, but mostly I've just run away or drowned it in a bottle..." Olivia pulled away and sat up, hugging her knees to her chest. She didn't know if she could do this.

"Don't." Natalia moved to sit next to her, putting her chin on Olivia's shoulder and wrapping her arms around the suddenly tense woman, knowing instantly this was going to be bad. Very bad. "Don't let anything stand between us."

Olivia pulled away and turned to stare at her lover. She drew in a long deep breath and let it out slowly, getting her nerve up for what was to follow. She didn't want to talk about this, hell she didn't even want to think about it. If she didn't think about it, it wasn't real. She'd made peace with it, for Ava's sake. Why then did she still have the nightmares and the flashbacks?

Olivia sighed and covered her eyes, frustrated with herself. It wasn't fair! None of it was fair, but Natalia felt like the other half of her soul. If anyone should know, if she needed to share this misery with anyone, it was Natalia. It was just so damn hard to put into words, to relive it again. She felt Natalia curve her hands to her smooth shoulders and pull her close again.

"Tell me." Natalia commanded softly, knowing it couldn't continue to remain only Olivia's burden any longer. She sent up a silent prayer for strength and waited. "Don't let your past haunt you. It will always be with you, a part of you. Believe me I know."

Natalia's mind automatically flashed to her own sad relationship with her family. She shook her head to clear it of the memories. That would be a story for her to share fully another day, right now Olivia needed to clear the air. She gently pressed against the older woman, causing her to turn and face her.

"Whatever you say, it's not going to make me run away...or think any less of you. I love you no matter what and I need you to have faith in that. You need to know that there is nothing, *nothing* that could change that."

Olivia was quiet for a long moment, letting that sink in and taking comfort in it. Preparing to lay herself bare to the one person she wanted to share her true self with. And just when Natalia started to fear that she wasn't going to say anything, the words finally came, her voice flat and dead.

"It's always the same nightmare. It's not even a nightmare, it's more like a flashback. He's there and I-I can't make it stop and..." Olivia trailed off for a long moment, the memories becoming too much, tormenting her again, making her feel helpless. God, when would it ever end?

"Olivia," Natalia stilled as she started to put it together. She thought she was going to be sick. "Did someone hurt you, baby?" Olivia seemed to shrink into herself, into a tiny ball of pain not wanting to talk. She turned in Natalia's arms and burrowed closer, nodding against the soft skin as they lay back down on the bed together and held each other.

"*Hijo de puta...*" Natalia growled under her breath as Olivia's hot tears fell on her skin. A fury had never felt before almost overwhelmed her, followed by a pain just as great. Tears of her own welled and she held on a little tighter to Olivia, waiting for her to go on.

"Mercifully, I don't remember much." Olivia wiped at her eyes before sliding her hand along Natalia's chest, feeling the thundering of her lover's heart beneath her palm. She swallowed hard and continued, whispering into the darkness, relieved in a way to finally be confessing, praying that Natalia's love could burn away the numbing pain.

"My mother always warned me, telling me not to grow up too fast, but I knew better. I was so desperate to feel grown up and be free of her and that crappy life. I was always so sure she was trying to keep me trapped here, and I just wanted to feel alive, and on my own." Olivia's eyes seemed to darken a little, remembering.

"I developed faster than the other girls and when I was in high school all the older boys paid attention to me. And I liked it. I liked feeling important and the college boys seemed so much more interesting than the boys my age. My mom would have never let me go out, so there were nights where I would sneak out and go to a party or out on a date."



"So Emma gets that from you, does she?" Natalia teased, the humor helping to ease the tension in both of them. She ran a soothing hand through her lover's hair and pleased to see Olivia's answering soft smile. She shifted to grab a blanket from the floor and tuck it around them, snuggling close again.

"One night I was working in the kitchen at the palace, and some of the other kids were talking about a party at one of the embassies. The ambassador's son was hosting it and some of them would be working it for some extra cash. I wanted to go so I got dressed up and I snuck out and went. It was amazing, Natalia." Olivia's eyes shined at the memory.

"It was so elegant and grand. The music was good and the dancing was out of this world and then, there was this punch. It was a really hot night, and I just kept drinking and dancing. And drinking some more. It was so sweet..." Olivia drifted off in her memories a moment and turned to cuddle closer to her partner, relaxing as strong fingers stroked through her hair, soothing her, calming her frazzled nerves. "The booze hit me all at once, and I had been dancing with this guy. He seemed really nice..."

"Oh..." Natalia's stomach dropped, as she bit off what she wanted to say. How she wanted to warn that sweet innocent girl to stay away from the nice man. Instead she dropped a soft kiss to Olivia's hair and waited for her to continue, dreading what she was sure she was about to hear.

"He was sweet. Fun, not like the other guys at the party, and all of a sudden I felt woozy, like I was going to pass out. I said that I wanted to lie down and he said there were some bedrooms upstairs. So he took my hand and led me upstairs to this room at the end of a really long hallway. I got on the bed and he lay down next to me and stroked my hair, and told me that everything was going to okay, that I'd feel better soon. And then he started to kiss me. And I liked it." Olivia grew silent for a moment, taking comfort in Natalia's silent strength. "I liked it..."

Olivia's voice faltered as she started to remember it all again, reliving it.

*The plush comforter underneath her, soft moans and gentle kisses. The room started to spin, as his kisses grew more demanding. She pushed weakly against his strong shoulders, the weight of his body suddenly on top of her, pressing her into the mattress, trapping her there. Her stomach churning, panic starting to rise as she tried to move, to get away, shaking her head no, her dress ripping, sound starting to disappear and then the room was fading to black...*

"Hey, come back to me," Natalia murmured, tugging the sheet tighter against them, holding her close and wiping away the slowly falling tears. "I've got you. You're safe now."

Olivia sighed and nodded against Natalia's chest, needing a moment to just get back under control.

"H-he started to touch me and I knew he was going too far. I couldn't make him stop. I didn't want it, I told him no, but I passed out. Thankfully, I don't remember any of it. I think I might have blocked it. Anyway, when I woke up, I was in the same bed, alone with a blanket tucked around me keeping me warm, but I knew. I knew what had happened."

"Then out of nowhere there was some guy in a suit, throwing my purse in my face. I guess they realized I had crashed the party and was only sixteen, I don't know how they found me really. Anyway they let me leave through the back door, and drove me home, practically shoving me out of the car still in motion, they couldn't wait to get rid of me." Olivia's voice grew bitter and angry.

"What did you do? Did you tell your mother?" Natalia dragged her fingers along Olivia's bare back, trying to soothe her with the hypnotic movement across her soft skin.

"God, no!" Olivia shifted against her, not really wanting to remember the rest either. "At least, not right away. I was too ashamed. I shouldn't have been drinking, I shouldn't have been at that party. Hell, I shouldn't have left the house. I was sixteen and scared. I didn't even know the name of the guy at the party. And then, I realized that I was pregnant..."

"Wait a minute..." Natalia grew very still. *Pregnant?* Her mind swirled as tears filled her eyes and things started falling into place. Ava was conceived... Ava was the child of Olivia's rape? Pain rushed through her as this new information hit home and then the burn of fury washed over her again. She struggled to keep it hidden from her fragile lover, not wanting to upset her more than she already was. Natalia took a deep breath and then another. "It was Jeffrey? He raped you?"

Olivia nuzzled closer to Natalia's strong shoulder, breathing in the scent of her lover, bringing her comfort, soothing the ache of the thoughts that she could normally just ignore or stuff deep down inside, or drink away. She nodded silently into the soft skin at Natalia's throat. Natalia tenderly stroked the hair out of her eyes and off her forehead, the movement soothing her raw emotions, calming them both down.

"I'm so sorry, baby." Natalia whispered into the darkness, her heart breaking for the girl Olivia had once been. Green eyes slid closed and Olivia took another deep breath before she continued.

The thought of telling my mother was overwhelming and terrifying. So I pulled myself together and got angry. I went back to the Embassy because I wanted to tell them there was no way I was going to face this situation alone."

“What happened?” Natalia was almost afraid to ask.

“I spoke to a very nice receptionist at the front desk, who called someone else and then the guy in the suit came back. He seemed very nice and sincere and so I told him the whole story, everything that had happened to me at the party and that I needed to see the guest list so I could see who had done this to me, I needed them to stand by me when I went to the police. He listened and looked very concerned and then he left.” Olivia paused, remembering how proud she was of herself, that she wouldn’t be treated like that. She sighed softly at her naiveté.

“When he came back, he had an envelope full of cash. And he told me that no one would ever believe my story and that I should take the money and get out of there. There was no way they were going to stand by me. He told me never to come back. So that’s what I did. I took the money and left.” Tears welled again. Bought and sold like a common whore. And she had let it happen.

“So I went home and I finally got the nerve up to tell my mother. I figured, she’s my mother, she would help me and protect me, defend me. Instead all she could say was ‘I told you! I warned you!’ I was so hurt...”

“Oh, sweetheart...” Natalia ran a soothing hand through her partner’s hair. She remembered similar words thrown at her, and how they had felt like a physical blow.

“I told her I wanted an abortion but she said ‘No, no, no! You will carry this child to term and you will give it away, there will be no debate.’” Olivia started to shiver, the memories overwhelming her again.

*Her mother stood looming in front of her, her arms waving in anger as she ranted and raved. The tears burning down her cheeks as her mother paced back and forth, pulling the bible from the drawer and throwing it on to the couch beside her, spewing scripture, calling her a slut, that abortion was murder. The fury burning as she screamed I hate you at the top of her lungs at her mother, confusion as the older woman suddenly stumbled, her words became slurred, garbled, her eyes blinking quickly as her hands flew to her head, and she crumpled in a heap at her feet...*

“And this was when she had her stroke,” Natalia closed her eyes, the weight of it all hitting her like a ton of bricks.

Suddenly everything made sense to Natalia, why Olivia was the way she was, did the things she did. Why Olivia needed to be in charge, putting her own spin on everything while appearing so strong, never needing anyone or anything, self made and independent. Sex was a commodity, a means to an end, power. It was all a façade, a carefully constructed

shield. Olivia never truly trusted anyone or anything, she never let anyone in to see the real her.

At least, until she came along and slipped past the walls.

Natalia knew that hidden just beneath Olivia's skin, was this damaged, scared sixteen year old, alone in the dark, just wanting someone to protect and love her. Her heart ached for Olivia. And her soul also burned with shame, as she fully realized just how deeply her own disappearance would have crushed her lover. Olivia had finally let someone in, to see the real woman inside and she had left her.

Never again. Natalia opened her eyes and looked down at the fragile beauty lying in her arms. She would never let anyone hurt her again. She would protect her with everything she had, body mind and soul.

"The stroke hit her while we argued. Do you know what it's like, when one minute you're yelling at someone and the next minute, they're dead because of you?" Olivia hissed, wracked with guilt, revealing everything to the woman she loved.

"Olivia, no..." Natalia rocked her lover gently, soothing her. "Your mother's stroke, her death, it's not your fault. She could have had it stuck in traffic or cooking dinner..." Olivia just sighed sadly, not really believing her.

"I just don't really remember much after that. I lay in my room and got through the days, someone had to look after Marissa and Sammy. Eventually when I snapped out of it, it was too late. I had to carry my baby full term, the whole time hating her. Hating Jeffrey." A single tear fell as Olivia's eyes blinked open and she bared her soul.

"Hating myself." Olivia rolled and buried her head against Natalia's neck, finally breaking down completely in the safety of her arms. "God, I'm so fucked up, Natalia..."

"Oh, my sweet baby." Natalia pulled her into an even tighter embrace "It wasn't your fault. None of it was your fault." She rocked Olivia who was choking back thick sobs of regret and grief, holding her close, just being there and letting her cry. Soon they were wrapped together, a tangle of arms and legs, weeping together.

"Nothing you do can ever change it or bring your mother back." Natalia whispered after a while. "But the life you're leading, the family you're building with me and our children, that's what's important. And I'm still right here, by your side and I'm not going anywhere." Natalia whispered, placing a soft kiss on a flushed cheek tasting salty tears. "Together we can work through this. I promise..."

A long moment passed before Olivia slowly nodded.

“I’ll try, Natalia.”

Natalia pulled her close and held her tightly. Another wave of fury at Jeffrey washed over her. How had Olivia ever been able to forgive her rapist, to become friends with him even? She didn’t understand it, and didn’t know if she could have forgiven him for hurting her lover so deeply. It seemed to her that Jeffrey had gotten off a lot more lightly than he deserved. A dark part of her was suddenly very glad the man was dead.

“Sleep now, querida,” Natalia murmured against soft skin, smiling as the older woman snuggled closer and sighed softly, exhausted both physically and emotionally. She closed her eyes and listened to Olivia’s breathing deepen, feeling her slowly fall asleep in her arms.

The first rays of dawn began to lighten the sky as Natalia swore she would never let anyone hurt her family again.

“Please God, give me strength...”

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Church bells peeled in the distance as the Sunday morning breakfast crowd made their way to Company for brunch. Marina ran from table to table, filling empty cups of coffee and chatting with some of the regulars. Frank and Buzz sat at the counter, watching her work happily away. She looked up and smiled at them, waving happily as she dashed into the kitchen to place an order with the cook.

“What is up with her?” Frank murmured. “She was ready to kill someone yesterday.”

Buzz snorted into his coffee.

“Well she’s been hanging around with Shayne a lot more. Maybe there’s something going on that we don’t know about yet.” Buzz stood and went around behind the counter to refill his mug. He brought the carafe over to top up Frank’s.

Frank looked towards the ladies washroom, making sure that Blake, Clarissa and the baby weren’t out yet.

“I’ve heard from Eleni, a few months ago actually. We’ve been texting back and forth a little. She wants to see Henry. I don’t know if Marina is going to let it happen.” Frank looked

away as Buzz just sighed. Just when he thought Frank was settling down with Blake, a new wrinkle develops. Nothing was ever easy around here.

"Well, if the woman wants to have some sort of relationship with Marina and Henry, then we have to give her a chance." Buzz mumbled.

Frank just nodded, smiling as Blake and the girls made their way back out from the washroom. If he could work on being a better father, then Eleni deserved that chance just as much. One way or another, he would get Marina to come around. Frank let the worrisome thoughts drift away as he reached to take a wiggling Francesca from Blake and cuddle her into his arms, wrapping her pink wubby tight around her as she giggled and squeaked.

Both of his daughters were happy. Frank couldn't ask for anything more.

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Natalia worried this might not have been a good idea, but Olivia had seemed determined. She stepped through the threshold of the tiny house and felt like she was stepping back in time. The jingle of Olivia sliding her keys into her pocket broke her out of her thoughts and they walked into the silent house.

"When I was here in 2006 the old place was for sale. There was a lot of Marissa's stuff in storage here on the island and she had a lot of our things from when we were growing up. So I thought I'd buy it and move it all back here for safe keeping. I have a property manager check in regularly. I kept meaning to come back and sort through stuff but life got a little crazy." Olivia touched her chest, right where her surgery scar peeked out of her shirt. Natalia grabbed her hand and squeezed before wandering deeper into the house.

Natalia stepped through into the small kitchen and looked around. The avocado colored appliances dated the room, but otherwise it was spotless. She could just picture a young Olivia yanking the fridge door open and grabbing a soda before running back into the living room to play with her sister and brother.

"Mom would stand by the sink, washing dishes and staring out the window, watching us tear around in the backyard. Or we'd sit at the kitchen table and finish our homework while she worked away cooking dinner." Olivia murmured quietly beside her. "Kind of like how you do with Emma at home." Olivia grew silent, smiling softly as, for the first time in a long time, she had a good memory of her mother.

Actually, Natalia reminded her of Rebecca Spencer a lot, if she really thought about it. Both had strong moral beliefs, were devout, hard working women, and not afraid to call her on

her crap. However, where her mother had used her religion to scare and discipline, Natalia instead drew an inner strength and love from her faith.

"We should visit here again. Bring the kids. Emma should see where you and Sam grew up, don't you think?" Natalia ran a hand along Olivia's shoulders. "We could make some new family memories here."

Olivia smiled past the lump in her throat and nodded.

They moved back out into the living room, where several boxes were piled by the wall. Curious, Olivia popped one open marked 'Mom's room', unfolding the box flaps to find old clothing inside. She pulled out a blazer of her mother's and pressed it to her nose.

"You can still smell her perfume..." Olivia murmured into the material.

Natalia glanced over, a little concerned this was too much for her partner, but stayed silent. She opened a box too and dug down into it. It looked like a lot of letters and bills. She opened a shoebox, finding a treasure trove of report cards and saved artwork. She pulled one out and unfolded it, Olivia's name scribbled in green crayon at the bottom.

"Oh, this is so cute." Natalia turned the drawing around so Olivia could see it. Olivia had slipped her mother's blazer on, and was pulling her hair out from under the collar, when she looked up and smiled at the drawing.

"That was supposed to be Mom and me and our dog...God, what was his name..." Olivia wandered closer, tapping her lip. "Buster! He was this little black mutt that followed me everywhere." She took the drawing from her smiling girlfriend. "I must have been four or five when we had him." She looked down into the box Natalia was exploring.

"She kept all this stuff?" Olivia was a little surprised and touched. Sure she kept all of Emma's artwork, but she never realized her mom had done it too. There were three shoeboxes, marked Olivia, Marissa and Sam. She made a mental note to make sure Sam got his box.

"When Mom had...died, a few of her friends from church came over and packed up her room and a lot of her things for us. I-I barely remember it even happening, I was so..." Olivia swallowed hard. Natalia put a gentle hand over her lover's, her thumb caressing the soft skin.

"Well, now we can open a few of these boxes and find what treasures your mom left behind for us to find..." Natalia smiled as Olivia sniffed and nodded, before turning to look

closer at the things in the shoebox with her name on it. Natalia moved to give her a little space to explore it all at her own speed.

There were report cards and her immunization record card neatly wrapped up with an old disintegrating red elastic around it. Various hand-made Valentine's Day cards and birthday cards, a Get Well Soon drawing and several hand paintings and fridge door artwork. And tucked at the very bottom of the box was a cross she'd made out of Popsicle sticks and macaroni. Olivia smiled remembering how her mother had loved it, putting it on the kitchen cupboard with tape where it stayed for months.

"Oh, my God, Olivia!" Natalia gasped, as she dug around in a third box she had just opened. She pulled out little knitted baby boots in one hand and a delicate white lace outfit, wrapped carefully in tissue paper. "It's your baptismal gown."

"What?" Olivia stepped forward to touch the soft material, taking the tiny gown as Natalia pulled out a faded letter and started to read out loud.



"Dear Becca, I wish I could be there in person for Olivia's baptism but funds are still too tight for us to visit from Ireland. I've sent you the gown that you were baptised in, so that the family tradition can continue. Your Da and I love you so much and miss you and Greg so much. Send us pictures of the baby soon. Love, Mam" Natalia looked up and smiled. "This is definitely coming home with us, Olivia, for Francesca's baptism."



Olivia brought a hand to her heart, moved beyond words that Natalia wanted to continue this tradition with their little girl. She nodded and wiped at her eyes. She turned, moving to turn on a side lamp to look closer at the fragile gown. Natalia appeared behind her, her gentle hands curling around Olivia's shoulders as she leaned back into the embrace.

"It's too hard for me to be in San Cristobel. Everything here is still so raw and painful." Olivia whispered, the admission difficult for her to make.

"I know, baby." Natalia husked placing a soft kiss to her lover's temple. "We have a lot of things to deal with, but together we can work through it. However, I don't think now is the time for us to set up a Beacon franchise here."

Olivia nodded. She didn't like being this fragile and vulnerable. She turned and felt herself wrapped in Natalia's strong arms, pulling her into a comforting embrace and holding on tight, the scent of her mother's perfume wafting around them. She closed her eyes and for a moment it was as if her mother was with her, holding her one last time.

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#### **ACT 4**

A light breeze blew in from the ocean, causing the candles to flicker on the small table set up on the balcony. High above them a million stars twinkled, easily visible in the dark sky, and a huge full moon hung low on the horizon as it started to rise. The crashing waves could just be heard in the distance and soft jazz music drifted up from the patio bar not far below them.

Natalia sipped her glass of wine, and stared out across the ocean. The night was so calm and serene, just her and Olivia alone together. It was the perfect way to spend their last night in this tropical paradise. However, they were both ready to get back home to their little girls and their normal lives again.

After spending the afternoon going through a few more boxes, putting sentimental things aside to have Olivia's property manager ship back to the States for them, they had returned to the hotel and sought out the General Manager. Doug Riker had been disappointed when they told him they were not planning on purchasing the Galaxy San Cristobel, but they thanked him for all the hospitality he and his staff had shown them. Olivia's personal call to the Xiaos had gone just as smoothly. Natalia swirled her wine, pleased that Olivia had made it clear that it wasn't the facilities or the staff that had been at fault. With Beacon business taken care of, they were both more than ready to get back home to their little girls and some semblance of their normal lives again.

Natalia glanced across the table at her lover, who was happily finishing up her meal, specially prepared by Massimo and delivered to their suite personally. It was only after promising to drag Olivia back for another visit soon, that the big man kissed them on both cheeks in farewell and return once more to his frantic kitchen.

"I am stuffed." Olivia leaned back and grabbed her glass of wine, sipping it and staring at her partner over the rim. "That piece of birthday cake just about did me in." She stood and took Natalia's hand, pulling her to the balcony railing where they could snuggle together.

"Do you remember your birthday last year?" Natalia whispered softly, nuzzling along Olivia's strong jaw, not wanting to ruin the peace of the evening.

"Absolutely. It was a Saturday night so we could stay up late and watch movies together. I couldn't believe you made a steak dinner. Hmm, I don't think I've had one since, actually." Olivia admired the silver moonlight highlighting Natalia's dark hair and started to drift back in time, smiling at the memories.

"You had made a chocolate birthday cake, and Emma helped me blow out all the candles. You asked me if I'd made a wish and I said of course but I couldn't tell you what it was or it wouldn't come true..." Olivia grew quiet, remembering it all, the exquisite torture she had been in that whole spring.

"I couldn't tell you then, but this, right here, right now, a future with you in my arms," Olivia cupped Natalia's soft cheek. "That is what I wished for." She leaned forward, stopping a hairs breadth apart, and then shifting ever so slightly to claim the smiling lips waiting for her. Slowly pulling apart, they cuddled a little, their foreheads resting together as their fingers entwined and stroked along soft skin.

"I thought I was going to drown in your eyes that night," Olivia murmured. "And then I asked Emma to go find the DVD of my favorite Disney cartoon, Beauty and the Beast, as we cleared up the dishes. I wanted to touch you so badly, run my fingers along your arms, through your thick hair..."

Olivia paused, letting the old feelings wash through her, the fear and longing, all the angst filled moments in time, never to be forgotten. Natalia laced their fingers together and smiled up at her.

"And then we all snuggled under the blanket on the couch and watched the movie. Well, Emma watched the movie, and I watched you." Olivia glanced down at their hands and smiled. "It hadn't taken ten minutes and you had nodded off, leaning against me and Em. And I could just watch you sleep. It was the best present I had that night. God, I was so in love with you, even then..."

Natalia nodded and shifted a little. She remembered that night as well, bittersweet and perfect.

“I was so afraid,” Natalia admitted. “God, I was so afraid of what I was feeling for you, Olivia...” Natalia admitted. “We just kept getting closer and that terrified part of me needed to prove to myself that I wasn’t falling for you, that I was just confused. And I hurt you so badly being with Frank like that. I just wanted to hold you and instead I felt like I had betrayed you. I just made everything so much worse for both of us. You don’t know how sorry...” Natalia looked away, watching the waves crash against the beach, tears glimmering in her dark eyes.

“Hey, hey, stop that.” Olivia’s thumbs wiped at the moisture gathered there, catching a tear falling slowly down the flushed cheek. “It was a tough road for both of us, I know, but I will never regret Francesca and the joy that she has brought to our lives. Okay?”

Natalia wiped away more tears and nodded.

“Good.” Olivia leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss to the tip of her nose, breaking some of the tension and making the brunette giggle a little. Olivia let a few moments pass in silence, both women taking comfort in the arms of each other, swaying slightly to the soft strains of music.

“Dance with me?” Natalia murmured against Olivia’s shoulder.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Olivia moved them away from the rail, into the middle of the balcony, her hands wrapping around Natalia’s trim waist. It was hard to believe this gorgeous woman in her arms had ever been pregnant.

Natalia ran her hands up and over Olivia’s strong shoulders to clasp around her neck, fingers playing with the long hair. One song, turned into two and they got lost in each others movements, the familiar sway of the other’s body, pressed tightly together. Olivia hummed softly to the music before sighing softly.

“Some honeymoon getaway celebration of our engagement. I’m sorry this weekend has been hard...” She began only to be silenced by a finger landing on her lips.

“Shh...don’t apologize. I wouldn’t want it any other way, querida.” Natalia smiled up at her lover, meaning every word. They could lie on the beach anywhere, any time. Olivia had truly opened her heart and soul to her this weekend and she loved the fragile, complicated woman even more. She hadn’t thought that was even possible.

"I was afraid you...I don't know," Olivia looked away, out over the restless ocean. "I guess I was afraid you'd look at me differently, if you knew about my past. That you would pity me, and I don't want anyone's pity."

"I would never pity you." Natalia's eyes glittered dangerously, as a fresh wave of anger washed over her, her thoughts turning once more to Jeffrey. She understood it was because of Ava, but she still didn't know how Olivia could bear to be in the same room with the man, let alone be friends? She would need to pray and think about this more. "You are so much stronger than I ever imagined."

Olivia looked down and smiled softly. She placed a kiss on Natalia's sweet lips and they swayed to the music a little more.

"I should say thank you." Olivia murmured after awhile.

"For what?" Natalia grinned back a little surprised.

"You gave me a wonderful birthday present today. You helped me reclaim my past, to find my mother again. Together we were able to make her into someone I can relate to, instead of the one-dimensional tyrant that I had turned her into in my grief and anger and then fixated on all these years." Olivia snuggled closer and stared up into the night sky. Home wasn't a location any more. Home was right here in her arms. "Thank you for that, sweetheart."

"That has been my pleasure," Natalia pressed a kiss to her partner's cheek. "And we will keep working on that. The girls should know about your side of the family. We'll come back here again, with all of them."

"I love you." She whispered into the dark hair breathing in the younger woman's scent. "This has been my best birthday yet."

"And the night is still young..." Natalia smiled up at her lover, delighting at the raised eyebrow her comment caused. A knock at the suite door caused them to pull reluctantly apart and Natalia went to answer it.

A small Asian woman entered the room and took away the dishes, clearing their small table and leaving a bottle of champagne, compliments of the Xiaos. Olivia stared hard at the server, the cut of her hair and her dark curious stare, the quirk of her lips as she smiled and left the room. Something very familiar tickled at the edge of her mind. Another time and another place, the girl that Massimo had said was crazy about her. Asian, long dark hair, black eyes that seemed to see inside her soul, so serious all the time.

Olivia gasped and leaned against the balcony rail as it all suddenly came back to her...

*Jeffrey stood, zipping up his pants and smiling. He wandered towards the door struggling to do up the buttons of his shirt. She was so tired, couldn't move, didn't want to, her body aching, the smell of sex and blood thick in the air. He opened the suite door and stumbled out and down the hallway. The relief was overwhelming and then she saw her, standing there. She was Asian, in a similar uniform, her dark eyes staring at her, tears welling. The girl saw her lying there, tousled and abused and she just stood there. Olivia tried to call out for help, but the room swirled and the darkness claimed her again...*

"Oh my God. She was there..." Olivia visibly paled as the old memory fell back into place. Her stomach churned a little. She knew she had seen her before.

"Who was where?" Natalia looked back at her lover, perplexed.

"Anna Li. She was there that night at the embassy party. I knew her from school, and working in the palace kitchen. Only we didn't call her Anna, we all called her Xing Lung." Olivia turned to face a shocked Natalia. "Her father, I'm sure that was the man in the market. He was with the same man who threatened me to forget about being raped, who drove me home and told me that no one would believe me. Xing Lung was the daughter of the head of security of the royal family and the palace. For Richard," Olivia's eyes grew larger. "And Edmund

"We have to warn Doris." Natalia whispered. "Anna Li could be a very, very dangerous woman."

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Doris sank onto the couch beside her lover, grabbed the remote and turned the DVD movie off. Anna was asleep, having drifted off after the first half-hour of the show. She glanced down at the sleeping woman in her arms, stroking long fingers through the silky straight black hair.

Doris sighed and looked around her living room. She stared at her built in bookcases, the family photos of her and Ashlee scattered there. The Dancing Daisy she still couldn't believe Anna had actually found when she was training in Chicago and brought back as a late Valentine's gift. Doris smiled, remembering how fantastic New Year's Eve had been this year. Maybe it was time to add some new faces to her shelves. Blake had emailed her some shots from the day they all helped Olivia move back to the farmhouse, and Beth had sent some from the New Year's Eve party.

She looked down at the woman who was beginning to infiltrate all areas of her life. And strangely it didn't worry her at all. Doris merely wanted to shout it from the rooftops, but she couldn't. And that hurt more than she thought it possibly could. She had been waiting for the one who would be worth throwing it all away for. Maybe she had finally arrived.

"I think I'm falling in love with you..." Doris whispered, dropping a soft kiss to the other woman's head. She sighed happily and watched Anna sleep.

**The End**

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