

# Felix Culpa

By Wonko

## ACT 1

Olivia sometimes joked that she would know at once if Natalia ever died suddenly in the night – because she would be warmer to the touch.

This was brought home to her once again when Natalia slipped into bed at two am that night, her hands and feet icy cold, the scent of happy, fed baby clinging to her skin.

“Mmph,” Olivia groaned, still asleep and instinctively moving away from her girlfriend’s frozen limbs. Natalia didn’t let her get away so easily.

“Oh, no you don’t, missy,” she mumbled, wrapping her arms around Olivia and pressing the soles of her feet against suddenly flinching calves. Olivia shivered.

“Evil,” Olivia grumbled, but pulled her lover close nonetheless, allowing the combined warmth of their bed and her body to slowly seep back into Natalia.

Natalia moaned in appreciation as she nestled into Olivia’s side. “You’re so good to me,” she breathed against her neck, and this time Olivia’s shiver was nothing to do with the cold.

“Is Sweet Pea asleep?” she asked casually.

“Mmm hmm,” came the soft reply. Natalia tilted her head up and dropped a soft, sleepy kiss under her girlfriend’s chin.

“And Emma?” Olivia continued. Her hand began to dip lower on Natalia’s back in long, soft strokes.

Natalia smiled, her dimples invisible in the dark of the room. “Are you propositioning me, Ms. Spencer?” Her voice was throaty with interrupted sleep, but rich and mellifluous to Olivia’s ears.

“I didn’t know I had to proposition you, Ms. Rivera,” Olivia said, rolling over so that she half covered Natalia while her hand slipped under her shirt and caressed the soft skin of her stomach.

Natalia wrapped her arms around her lover's neck, gazing up at her with a vaguely pensive look on her face. "Do you know what day it is?" she asked softly.

Olivia frowned, and had to think for a moment. "Thursday," she said at last, after a glance at the digital alarm clock blinking away on the bedside table.

"And, uhm..." Natalia seemed to hesitate. "The date?"

Olivia frowned, and then groaned, dropping her face into Natalia's neck briefly. "April first," she said. "Oh hell, I'm pretty sure Emma has something in store for us at breakfast."

Natalia laughed - or rather sort of laughed - a tight, unnatural sound. Olivia looked up quickly, her eyes seeking Natalia's in the dark. "Why?" she said.

For a moment Natalia seemed to be deep in thought, as if considering something very important. Finally, she shook her head. "Nothing," she said. "I love you. Kiss me."

It was a well-known fact that Olivia Spencer didn't like taking orders. But this one instruction, from this one woman, she would always be happy to follow.

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As it turned out, the two women got through the day with little more than a quick sugar-salt swap at the breakfast table. Natalia used Olivia's coughing fit as an excuse to lecture her about her sugar intake, much to Olivia's annoyance, while Emma merely giggled her head off in harmony with Francesca, who seemed to be finding the whole thing very funny. So, Olivia had needed to go back upstairs to clean her teeth and rinse her mouth out another dozen or so times, and had been running late. She missed the faraway look on Natalia's face as she kissed her goodbye, and by the time she got home that night Jane was with the kids and Natalia was already at church.

"Mommy!" Emma squealed as Jane smiled and made her escape. "You're so late!"

"Sorry, baby," Olivia replied, rubbing the back of her neck. She was stiff and tired, having worked a little later than she'd meant. "Have you done your homework?"

Emma nodded. "Mommy, how come Nata- Ma's at church? It's not even Sunday."

Olivia flopped down onto the couch, feeling her heart swell with the same love and intense gratitude that she'd felt the first time Emma had claimed Natalia as her 'Ma.' "It's a special day for her," she explained. "Tonight's when the people at church remember the last supper, and some people get their feet washed by the priest up on the altar."

Emma's nose wrinkled. "Eww!" she exclaimed. "Feet!"

Olivia laughed. "Yeah," she said, reaching out and grabbing the little girl's toes and tickling them briefly. "Feet are gross, huh?"

"Totally gross."

Olivia sighed happily, leaning back on the couch and wrapping her arm round Emma's shoulders. She knew that Natalia had left dinner for her warming in the oven - that much had been communicated by text earlier in the day - but she wasn't hungry. Her mind drifted back to the odd look on Natalia's face in the early hours of that morning, to the strange hesitation before the rather more urgent than usual lovemaking. She frowned. She would have to talk to Natalia about that, she thought. When she got home. As soon as...she got home...

Instead, cradled by the comfort of the couch and the warmth of her daughter beside her, she fell asleep. When Natalia came home a little later, all smiles, with kisses for everyone, her worries slipped entirely from her mind.

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The church was full, as it always was the night before Easter. Natalia looked around as she entered, clutching her candle and hymnbook. She met the eyes of a woman she vaguely knew from one of the church committees - Mrs. Elliot? Mrs. Ellis? - and smiled. The woman, whatever her name was, did not smile back. Natalia's face dropped briefly, and then hardened.

"Some people are so rude, huh?" a voice whispered in her ear.

Natalia spun round, and smiled when she met the twinkling blue eyes of Sister Anne. "Hello, Sister."

"How many times have I asked you to call me Anne?" asked the nun, gesturing for Natalia to proceed to a pew ahead of her. Natalia felt the eyes following her as she walked down the central aisle to a free seat, but then Sister Anne sat down beside her and settled in, removing her scarf and getting out her missal and generally making it clear to all onlookers that she was going to be in that seat for the duration.

"Are you sure you want to be seen with me?" Natalia murmured.

The nun's lips twitched. "Do I want to be seen with one of my best volunteers?" she said. "With the kindest woman I know?" She pretended, briefly, to consider the idea. "I think I'll chance it."

Natalia smiled, a gentle flush appearing on her cheeks. "You know what I mean," she insisted, inclining her head in the general direction of Mrs. Whatever, who was still glancing at her occasionally.

Sister Anne looked up. "Hello Mrs. Elliot!" she called. "Have you thought any more about volunteering at St. Elizabeth's?"

The woman had the grace to blush at having been caught staring. "Oh, uhm, I'm still thinking about how I can fit it into my schedule," she blustered.

Sister Anne's eyes twinkled with almost sadistic pleasure. "Oh you'll find it doesn't take up much of your time at all," she said. "Natalia here comes in twice a week, and she has a young baby to think of. I'm sure you could manage an afternoon or two."

Mrs. Elliot coughed and mumbled something that might have been: "I'll drop by next week."

The nun grinned, then turned back to Natalia. "I do hate hypocrites," she whispered. "And yes, I know hatred's a sin, but what can I say? I'm only human."

Natalia suppressed a laugh, with effort. Olivia had said a few times over the previous weeks that she liked Sister Anne very much. Natalia knew exactly why.

For a few minutes Natalia busied herself looking up the hymns that had been chosen for the night and checking that she knew them. Before long it was time to go outside for the blessing of the Easter fire. She and Sister Anne processed out with the rest of the congregation to where Father Ray was standing.

The heat from the flames was particularly welcome, as the night was chilly. A little shiver raced down Natalia's spine as the priest held up the Easter candle. She had always loved the Easter Vigil - not just because it was a particularly beautiful service, but because there was something of the mystical about it.

The congregation returned to the church behind Father Ray and the altar servers and sat quietly while the boys and girls lit all their small candles from the new Easter candle. The church, which had been dark, slowly became lighter and lighter, as each tiny candle was illuminated like the spark of a new star in the heavens.

With a sigh of the deepest peace and contentment, Natalia forgot about Mrs. Elliot and her unsmiling eyes. She breathed in the scent of her childhood - incense, and candle-wax, and

the polish used on the pews - and lifted her eyes to the altar where a cantor had appeared to sing the annual Easter Proclamation.

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It was late - after midnight - when the parishioners finally streamed out of the church. For some reason Father Ray had decided to use all seven possible readings, and there had been three adults being received into the church. Natalia caught Sister Anne yawning out of the corner of her eye, and had to try hard to avoid joining her.

Just ahead she spotted a couple of young boys munching on the chocolate eggs they'd been given at the end of Mass and she smiled, thinking of Rafe at that age. "The first year my son came to church with me at the Easter Vigil, he was so sad he couldn't have chocolate with all the other children," she said to Sister Anne. "So my priest asked him what was wrong, and the next year he bought an egg made from special diabetic chocolate, just for him." She smiled thoughtfully at the memory, wondering wistfully if they celebrated Easter particularly in the army.

"Sounds like a pretty great priest," Sister Anne said, then caught sight of Father Ray just ahead, and rolled her eyes. "If only we had one of those here," she muttered under her breath.

"What was that Sister?" Father Ray said with a smile glued to his face. A similar smile appeared on the nun's face as she caught his eye.

"Oh, nothing at all, Father," she said. "Happy Easter."

"Happy Easter to you too," he said, leaning forward to kiss her cheek. He turned his attention to Natalia, and his smile seemed a little more genuine this time. "Happy Easter, Natalia."

He grasped her by the upper arms and kissed her cheek. His lips were a tad moist and left a little wet spot that she had to resist the immediate urge to wipe at with her sleeve. Here lies the last shred of my heterosexuality, she thought, then felt a little bad for being so unkind.

"Mrs. Gonzalez tells me you haven't been going to the fundraising committee much lately," he said. The same smile was still fixed to his face, but there was a question in his eyes. She remembered him asking not so long ago if she'd turned her back on the church. Were church committees and the church itself interchangeable to him, she wondered.

"I've been spending a lot of time at St. Elizabeth's," she said, nodding towards Sister Anne.

The nun grinned almost wickedly. "Yes, Natalia's another convert to our little fold," she said. "Speaking of the mission, Father, I was wondering if we could talk a little more about something you suggested the last time we spoke." She raised her eyebrows at his blank look. "About a collection," she added helpfully.

"Oh...yes," he replied. "Uhm...come by the parish house one day next week and we can talk about it."

"Great," she said, then effected a yawn. "Well, it's late. I think it's about time I headed home. I'll definitely see you next week, Father."

"Looking forward to it, Sister," the priest said, but his face said something else.

Natalia quickly made her escape before Father Ray could engage her in any further conversation. She had a family at home, and tomorrow was going to be a big day for its littlest member.

## **ACT 2**

The farmhouse was dark when Natalia finally pulled up outside. Above her the moon gazed down through the frigid air - no longer full, but bright and clear nonetheless. It was forecast to be hot the following day, but tonight it was cold. The lawn looked gray in the silvery light, topped with pretty white frost that crunched loudly in the preternatural silence as Natalia made her way to the front door.

Once inside, she hung up her coat and kicked off her shoes. The house was hot - a quick glance showed her that Olivia had left the heating switched on. Natalia turned it off on her way into the kitchen. She left Emma's egg from church on the counter before opening the fridge and taking a quick glug of orange juice.

Francesca was gurgling softly as she passed the nursery, so she ducked in to check on her. Turning off the baby monitor so as not to disturb Olivia, she picked up her daughter and cradled her against her chest.

"Hey there, Sweet Pea," she murmured softly. "What's up? You hungry? Wet? Just wanting some attention?" She smiled. "All three?"

In lieu of a reply, Francesca grabbed a handful of long, dark hair and shoved it in her mouth, cooing in delight when her mother laughed.

"Hungry it is, I guess," she said as she settled herself into her rocking chair and arranged herself in a comfortable position for feeding. The baby suckled with her eyes closed, as if

deep in concentration. “You really remind me of your momma sometimes,” she murmured, then blushed hard as she realised what she’d said. “How glad am I that you don’t understand what I’m saying?”

When the baby had had her fill, Natalia changed her and burped her, and finally set her down again and sang to her a little until she fell asleep. She turned the monitor back on as she left, ducked her head into Emma’s room to check she was soundly asleep, and then continued into her own bedroom.

Olivia was sleeping, a book resting on her chest, her reading glasses lolling on the bridge of her nose. Natalia couldn’t help but smile at the sight. Gently, Natalia took the book away, slipped a bookmark between its pages and set it down. The glasses came off just as softly and then, quietly, Natalia turned out the light.

Olivia’s somewhat excessive use of the heating meant the room was still warm, so Natalia dressed in shorts and a tank-top for bed. She tried to slip between the sheets without disturbing her slumbering lover, but Olivia seemed to be hard-wired to react to Natalia, whether sleeping or wakeful.

“Mmm,” she murmured, her body angling towards Natalia’s on instinct. “Sweetheart?”

Natalia’s heart swelled with a familiar yet exhilarating love. “I’m here,” she whispered.

She leaned over, planting her left hand on the right side of Olivia’s head while her right tangled itself in her hair. A breath of air was expelled from between Olivia’s slightly parted lips as her own fingers slid up to comb through her lover’s soft, dark tresses.

“Hi,” Olivia whispered, and then leaned up to claim Natalia’s lips in a gentle, almost chaste kiss that Natalia felt all the way down to her toes.

“How do you do that?” Natalia murmured when the kiss broke.

“Do what?” Olivia whispered against her neck, dropping soft, playful kisses there, and grinning when her girlfriend’s breath caught.

“Make me feel...so much,” Natalia replied.

Olivia leaned back to stare, blinkingly, up into her lover’s dark, fathomless eyes. “Because I love you,” she said simply.

Natalia smiled. “I love you, too,” she said. “So much, Olivia. So much.”

They kissed again, and settled their bodies comfortably together. Their legs intertwined as they each found a relaxed position. "How can you still have such cold feet?" Olivia grumbled. "I left the heating on all night so your feet would warm up when you came home."

Natalia laughed. "Oh, so that was your game," she said, digging her fingers briefly into Olivia's sides.

"You've got me," Olivia admitted, with a throaty laugh.

"Yes I do, don't I?" Natalia replied. "Forever."

"Oh yeah," Olivia said. "Kiss me."

Natalia's eyes glinted. "Yes, ma'am."

For long moments the bedroom was filled with nothing but the sounds of rustling bedclothes and languorous kisses, their lips and arms and legs twining together in patterns unique to them.

"What time is it?" Olivia asked when they separated, guiding Natalia's head onto her shoulder.

"A little after one," Natalia replied, yawning slightly.

Olivia grunted. "Father Ray sure knows how to ramble on," she said, and Natalia managed a small chuckle.

"Yeah, I think he's been writing his sermon for weeks," she said, and then looked up at the clock on the bedside table. "Have you set the alarm?"

Olivia nodded, and yawned. "Yup - eight o'clock." She glanced at the clock herself. "Uh, Francesca probably needs to be fed soon," she grumbled.

Natalia shook her head. "Already taken care of," she replied, smiling.

"You are an angel," Olivia replied, dropping a soft kiss onto Natalia's forehead.

The two women lapsed into silence. Natalia lay with her head against Olivia's shoulder, rising and falling with each of her lover's breaths, and listened to the occasional creaks and groans of the old house, the wind in the trees, the faint sighs floating in from Francesca's nursery through the baby monitor. "Olivia?" she said softly.



“Hmm?”

Her girlfriend's voice sounded weak and hazy, like she'd been dragged from the very edge of sleep. Briefly Natalia considered just kissing her and saying nothing. But then, there were some words that had been dancing on the tip of her tongue for days, and she knew they had to come out sometime.

“Do you actually know what an angel is?” she said at last.

Olivia's eyes blinked open. “Huh?” She shook her head slightly. “An angel?”

Natalia nodded. “An angel,” she confirmed.

Olivia cleared her throat. “Well...white guys, blond, dressed in white, white wings.” She grinned mischievously. “You know, Aryan types.” The smile slid from her lips when Natalia didn't laugh. She glanced down, but Natalia's eyes were hooded. “Honey? What is it?”

For a moment Natalia didn't speak, and Olivia almost believed that she'd fallen asleep in the warm dark. But then she cleared her throat. “Angels are messengers from God,” she said. “I met one once, you know.”

Olivia's eyebrows shot into her hairline. “Uhm...okay.”

“Mmm hmm,” Natalia continued, as if she'd just said something completely normal and rational. “Her name was Emma.”

Olivia grinned and relaxed. “Oh, I see,” she said, sliding her hand up and into Natalia's hair.

Natalia curled her arm round Olivia's waist. “My angel came to me on the worst day of my life,” she said quietly. “A day when I lost a man I loved. A day when I had a choice to save a woman I thought I hated...or to let her die.”

Olivia swallowed hard, unexpected tears springing to her eyes. “Gus,” she whispered, and suddenly remembered the early hours of Thursday, when Natalia had seemed so pensive and distant, and her kisses had been charged with a kind of urgency she didn't recognize. “April first,” she realized at last. “Oh my God, Natalia...”

“Sssh,” Natalia hushed her, leaning up to kiss her softly. “It's all right. I love you.”

Olivia couldn't speak. Her throat was tight and her eyes were glistening, but she nodded.

Natalia smiled. “I was trying to tell you about my angel,” she said. Slowly and deliberately, she slid her hand under Olivia's tank top, stopping just at the base of the life-saving scar

that bisected Olivia's chest. She stared into Olivia's eyes as she spoke. "I've never told you this," she murmured. "But I...I was going to say no. I'd decided I couldn't do it. It was too much to ask; to give a piece of him away, and to you of all people."

"I understand," Olivia said, but again Natalia quieted her with a kiss.

"When I think of it now," Natalia whispered. "God, when I think of it now." She screwed her eyes shut, allowing the full reality of what that decision would have meant to wash over her. "You're the love of my life," she said at last, her voice thick with emotion. Blindly she pulled at Olivia's top, tugging it over her head so she could press her lips against the thud of her lover's heartbeat.

Olivia threaded her fingers through Natalia's hair, a tear escaping from her burning eyes. "It was meant to be," she murmured. Natalia nodded.

"I know," she said. She pulled back and leaned up on her side, resting her hand on her palm. With her free hand she trailed the pads of her fingers down from Olivia's collarbone to her bellybutton. "Because of Emma." She blinked a few stray tears away. "I met her that day, and she was so sweet. So kind. She'd come to the hospital to see you, and she gave me one of the flowers she'd brought." She nodded towards a vase full of Gerber daisies that she'd placed on her dresser a few days before. "One of those. And I knew then...I knew that I had to save you. For her."

Olivia blinked hard, attempting to smile but not quite managing it. "Thank-you," she murmured. Natalia shook her head.

"Don't thank me," she said. "Because I realize now...I was saving you for her, but for me, too. You were meant for me, Olivia. I just didn't know it then." She traced the outline of the scar one more time. "I look back at all the things that have happened to us over the last few years...Gus, and this house, and your illness, and Francesca...and I can't help but think that everything has worked out...the way it was meant to. Exactly the way it should."

Olivia smiled tremulously. "Exactly as it should," she agreed, and leaned up kiss her. It began sweet and chaste, and slightly sad, but before long a familiar heat fanned between them. Natalia pulled away just long enough to pull off her own top and toss it aside, and then their lips crashed together again. A moan rose up from deep in Olivia's throat as Natalia's warm, silky skin moved against hers in the dark secret warmth of their bed.

"I love you," Natalia whispered, pressing kisses against Olivia's throat, trailing down to her chest. "No more sadness. This is the night when sorrow becomes joy."

Olivia nodded. "Yes," she whispered, both in agreement and pleasure. Natalia's hands and breath and lips seemed to be everywhere at once. "Oh, I love you..."

"I love you, too," Natalia replied softly, and buried her face in her girlfriend's neck, kissing and nipping behind her ear where any marks wouldn't be seen.

With a supreme force of will, Olivia pushed on Natalia's shoulders and rolled her over onto her back. Her hair fell down on either side of her girlfriend's face, creating a warm, intimate shadow.

"You are so beautiful," she whispered, staring down into the dark eyes she so adored. Natalia blushed, but Olivia pressed on. "I'm going to make you so happy," she said. "Every day for the rest of my life. I'm going to make you smile. I'm going to make you laugh." Heat flashed in her eyes. "And I'm going to make you moan...loud, and often, and for my ears only." She leaned down and stole a kiss.

"And I'm going to start right now..."

### **ACT 3**

Olivia woke before the alarm the next morning, warm and contented, and pleasantly sore in all the right places. Natalia was wrapped around her, her breath tickling her chest as she exhaled through her nose. Olivia smiled, joy bubbling up inside her like a boiling kettle. For the first time in her life she really felt like she was where she was supposed to be. It was an amazing feeling to know that - like Natalia had said - everything had worked out just the way it was supposed to.

A soft cry sounded from the baby monitor. Natalia stirred, but Olivia dropped a kiss onto her forehead as she gently extricated herself from her arms. "I'll go," she whispered. "You sleep now."

Olivia watched her lover as she nestled back into the warm spot she'd left in the bed, and smiled. Pulling her tank-top and shorts back on, she padded through to the nursery and lifted her daughter into her arms. Francesca let out another plaintive little wail as Olivia bounced her on her hip. "Sssh," Olivia whispered. "Don't wake your mama."

As quietly as she could, she readied a bottle and settled into the rocking chair to feed the whimpering child. She found herself humming a tune as she did so - an old nursery rhyme that had been passed down in San Cristobel since the days of the Armada and treasure and pirates.

"You used to sing that to me, too, mommy," Emma said as she wandered in, yawning and rubbing her eyes. Olivia smiled.

"I know, baby," she said, gesturing for her daughter to snuggle up with them on the rocking chair. Emma squashed herself in by her mother's side and began to play with the baby's toes as she fed. Francesca let out a little squeal and kicked her legs out.

"I think Francesca thinks feet are icky, too," Emma suggested, still attempting to play little piggies with her little sister's toes. "I think she looks like you, mommy."

Olivia did a slight double-take. "Uhm...in what way, sweetie?"

Emma shrugged. "She's got your nose."

Tears threatened once again - she'd cried far too much for her tastes in the last twelve hours or so - and she shook her head. "Oh, baby," Olivia sighed. "You know that she can't have my nose, right?"

Emma looked up. "You're her mommy, aren't you?"

Olivia opened her mouth to speak, but a voice from the doorway got there first.

"Yes, she's her mommy."

Olivia looked up to find Natalia watching them with a look of the fiercest love on her face. She walked over to join her family and placed kisses on each of their cheeks, lingering on Olivia's. "I think she's got your nose, too," she whispered in her ear.

Olivia looked down at her baby girl with shining eyes. It was certainly true that there seemed to be very little of Frank in their little girl - a fact for which she was eternally, although quietly, grateful. "Your eyes, and your dimples," she whispered.

"But definitely your sense of humor," Natalia finished, giggling a little as Francesca managed to whack Emma lightly on the cheek with a well-timed kick and then squealed with laughter.

"I guess you're done eating then," Olivia said, pulling the bottle away and injecting a harsh note into her tone. Francesca immediately quieted, a frown appearing between the dark eyes that were twins of her mother's. "Oh, don't give me that look," Olivia continued. "It doesn't work on me."

"Yes, it does," Natalia interjected, and was rewarded with a scowl and a quick flash of pink tongue as Olivia stuck it out into the air.

"Well it sure won't next time!" the older woman huffed, rolling her eyes.

Natalia laughed, leading Emma away to help her pick out her best clothes for church. "Yes, it will!"

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Francesca looked particularly beautiful in white. She didn't wear it often because of how dirty she could get, even when seeming to be doing nothing, but it really was her color. Olivia reflected on that as she looked down into the crib, watching her napping daughter wearing the very same Irish lace that she herself had been baptized in. Olivia, Marissa, Sam...and Rebecca before them.

"Penny for them," Natalia whispered, coming up behind her and wrapping her arms round her waist. Olivia smiled softly as she turned her head.

"Just thinking about family, I guess," she admitted, nodding back to the baby in her baptismal gown. "That's our own little family heirloom. I'm so glad you found it on San Cristobel."

Natalia nodded. "Rafe never had anything like that," she said. "He has nothing to connect him to his past. Nothing but me." A frown darkened her face, before quickly clearing. "Our baby's so different," she said. "Sometimes I think she has the biggest family any child's ever had. Like, the whole town. She's going to grow up calling everyone auntie and uncle."

Olivia laughed. "Like Emma," she replied.

Natalia nodded. "If Francesca grows up half as wonderful as Emma I'll be more than happy." She tightened her hold on her lover's waist. "You did such a great job with her."

"We're doing a great job with her," Olivia gently corrected her.

Natalia shrugged. "Emma was perfect long before I showed up," she said. "That's all you, mommy."

Olivia slid her hands up to cover Natalia's. "I always had one rule for parenting - think about what my mother would do...then do the opposite." A faraway, wistful look appeared on her face. "And now...I wish..."

She trailed off. Natalia didn't push. Instead, she just waited for her lover to be ready to say what was on her mind.

Olivia blinked back tears. "I wish she was here," she admitted at last. "I wish she could see her grand-daughters. I wish she could watch our little girl being baptized today in her old robe."

Natalia moved forward a little, pressing her side against Olivia's and turning her face up towards her. "She is," she said gently, her voice full of faith. "She can."

Olivia pressed her lips together, afraid to speak in case she ruined her carefully applied make-up. Finally, she nodded.

Natalia smiled. "Hold her," she instructed, nodding towards the baby. "I want a picture to put in Rafe's frame."

Olivia frowned. "Don't you want a group one later?" she asked.

Natalia nodded. "Yes," she said. "But I want one with just you and her for this frame."

Olivia nodded. "Okay," she said, and managed to lift Francesca up without waking her. Her eyes bright, her heart swelling with love for woman and child alike, Natalia took the photograph. Before it was even printed, she knew it would be one to treasure.

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The Mass that morning was almost as crowded as the Vigil had been the night before. Natalia was glad that their party had reserved seats at the front, otherwise they would have been standing the whole time. Emma ran on ahead of them to find their pew, while she and Olivia greeted Frank, Blake and Buzz. Frank and Buzz were in matching suits. Natalia had a feeling that Frank's was what he'd worn to their sham of a wedding ceremony - in this very church. The thought made her a little queasy. She wondered what Blake thought of it.

"Oh, she's adorable," Blake cooed, seeming to be ambivalent about her boyfriend's dress sense as she gazed down into the stroller. Francesca was awake now, but not crying. She was sitting up, regarding her surroundings with interest. "That's a beautiful gown," Blake continued. "Is it Irish lace?"

Natalia nodded proudly. "It's Olivia's baptismal gown," she said, and out of the corner of her eye saw Frank flinch slightly.

"Oh," he said. "I, uh...I guess I thought you'd be using Rafe's."

Natalia shook her head. "When we found this on San Cristobel I just knew it was right," she said, smiling up at her lover. Olivia smiled back.

"Yeah," Olivia said. "It was like it was...meant to be. Right, Natalia?"

“Right.” Their eyes locked and a silent conversation passed between them which, for all it was being conducted in public, was so obviously intimate that Frank had to cough and rub the back of his neck with his hand.

Natalia finally turned her attention back to him. “I’m using Rafe’s shawl, for the part when she’s clothed in a new garment,” she explained. “It’s not exactly a family heirloom, but I made it myself.”

“And it’s beautiful,” Olivia added, winning a small smile from her girlfriend.

The church bells began to ring, signaling to all those still milling around outside or in the porch that it was time to find their seats.

“Olivia!” a voice called. They all turned to see a rather out of breath Doris Wolfe appear, as if from nowhere. “Did I miss it?”

Olivia grinned and opened her arms for a hug. “No, you’re right on time,” she said, kissing her friend on the cheek. “Thanks for coming.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she said, moving on to kiss Natalia on the cheek too, and then Blake. After that it seemed a little silly not to include Buzz and Frank in the greeting, although it was clear even to the most inobservant of onlookers that her heart wasn’t particularly in it. Finally she leaned down and smiled at the baby, who smiled back. “Hey, little heartbreaker,” she murmured. “Off to get indoctrinated, huh?”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Shut up, Doris,” she said. “Come on. It’s time to find our seats.”

There were four babies being baptized that day - quite a number for such a small town. Natalia assumed that most of them, like her, had waited specifically for Easter Sunday. It was such a symbolic time for the church, and somehow she just felt it was right.

She settled in next to Olivia and Emma, with Blake beside her on her right and Frank and Buzz, in turn, to the right of her. Francesca was still wide awake and very interested in this new environment. She stared unblinkingly for a few minutes at a woman behind them who was wearing an interesting hat. Eventually Natalia turned round and smiled at her, as if to apologize, or at least to acknowledge that she’d grabbed her daughter’s attention.

The woman didn’t smile back. Natalia recognized her at once - it was Mrs. Prentice, a friend of Mrs. Elliot’s. Natalia’s heart sank, and she began to fidget in her seat. Quickly, she turned round and face the altar again, flushed and off-balance.

Blake leaned over and began to tickle Francesca under the chin. "You're no different from anyone else here," she whispered. "You're a sweet little baby with parents and friends who love you very, very much. Anyone who can't see that is obviously an idiot."

She said the last part just loud enough to be heard in the pew behind them. Mrs. Prentice sat up a little straighter, and Natalia had to suppress a laugh.

"Mrs. Prentice!" a familiar voice called from across the church. "Mrs. Elliot thinks she'll be able to fit in an afternoon down at the mission. What about you?"

Natalia glanced over at Sister Anne just in time to see her wink. This time she couldn't help herself, and a little chuckle escaped her lips. It seemed like someone was looking out for her today.

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Francesca was very good, right up until the moment it was time to perform the ceremony itself. Something about the priest seemed to frighten her, and she fussed a little in Natalia's arms. "It's his eyebrows," Olivia muttered, sotto voce, requiring yet another Herculean effort from Natalia to avoid bursting into very inappropriate laughter.

Father Ray posed questions to each of the parents and godparents in turn. Olivia muttered the responses to each of them, although when asked if she believed in "the holy Catholic Church," she mouthed the words of the reply without actually saying them out loud. Father Ray didn't seem to notice.

"Is it your will that Francesca Marissa be baptized in the faith of the Church, which we have all professed with you?" he said, looking to Natalia and Frank.

"It is," they replied together. The priest nodded, and gestured to Natalia to hold the child over the font.

He poured a little of the holy water over her forehead. "Francesca Marissa," he said. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The church was very quiet. Olivia could see Doris smiling a little too brightly out of the corner of her eye, and Emma bouncing excitedly in the pew.

The priest continued. "God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as members of his body, sharing everlasting life."



He drew a cross on Francesca's head with oil as Natalia rocked her. Her eyes were wide, but she didn't seem scared anymore. Olivia handed Natalia Rafe's shawl and helped her to wrap it round their daughter's shoulders.

"Francesca Marissa, you have become a new creation," the priest said, "and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven."

Olivia knew it was probably paranoia, but she was sure Father Ray kept glancing at her when he used words like "dignity." She was certain he believed she didn't have much of that left these days, what with getting married and divorced five times, and corrupting good Christian women onto a path of lesbian debauchery and really good sex. *Really* good sex. Not that Father Ray, a "male celibate," to borrow a phrase from Sister Anne, would ever know anything about that.

The last part of the baptismal rite involved lighting Francesca's baptismal candle from the new Easter candle that had been lit the night before. Olivia did that while Frank looked on, his hands in his pockets and a blank expression on his face. He hadn't shown up to the practice - catching bad guys, he'd said - so Olivia had needed to take on this task which would traditionally have been his. Olivia was just glad he didn't seem to know that she was taking away all his jobs in this little service.

"Parents and Godparents," Father Ray said. "This light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. She is to walk always as a child of the light. May she keep the flame of faith alive in her heart. When the Lord comes, may she go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom."

"Amen," Olivia said, holding the flickering candle in her hand like it was made of glass. Natalia looked over at her with shining eyes. "Amen," she repeated softly.

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## ACT 4

"Daddy!"

Olivia and Natalia watched their daughter with twin smiles as she raced ahead onto the lawn at the Spaulding Mansion and threw herself into her father's arms.

"I'm so glad you're here!" Phillip said, twirling her around before kissing her forehead. He looked up at the two smiling women, and then down at the stroller. Francesca was dressed in a pale green dress and matching hat now, having been brought home to change after

the baptism. Olivia and Natalia had taken the opportunity to change too, not wanting to go to an Easter egg hunt in heels and skirts.

"We're glad to be here," Natalia said, accepting a kiss from her girlfriend's ex with a warm smile.

Hey, Emma, why don't you run up to the house and get yourself a basket. I think Sarah's there," Phillip said. Emma raced off, her happy laughter bubbling up and infecting everyone who heard it with a smile.

"She's been looking forward to this for weeks," Olivia said. "She's desperate to be the one who finds the most eggs."

Phillip grinned. "You know, I think she might be finding eggs in this garden until she's ready for college," he admitted. "I don't even remember where they all are."

"College?" Olivia said. "Uh uh. Didn't I tell you? Emma's going to stay here forever."

Phillip laughed. "If only," he replied. "It seems like just yesterday that James was a little boy, running around in shorts and climbing trees and skinning his knees..." He sighed. "Kids seem to grow up real fast in this town."

Olivia and Natalia glanced at each other, recognizing the truth of it. "That's why you have to make every moment count," Natalia said softly, a gentle smile gracing her lips as she gazed at Olivia. She leaned forward and stole a quick kiss.

"I couldn't agree more," Phillip said.

Just then Natalia noticed Frank and Blake a few hundred yards away on the lawn. It had been decided that the Easter egg hunt would act as a sort of informal party for Francesca's baptism too, so it seemed like almost the whole town was there. Blake waved her over.

"I'll be right behind you," Olivia called as Natalia made her way over to exchange pleasantries with the couple. She smiled as she watched her go, allowing her eyes to wander from head to foot as a memory of the previous night danced across her skin.

"You look happy," Phillip observed, smiling.

"Oh, I'm happy," Olivia replied, turning to him with shining eyes. "I never knew that there was a kind of happiness that was this...consuming." She glanced over at Natalia. "She's just... everything, Phillip."

Phillip looked across the lawn and caught sight of Beth mingling among the guests, smiling and laughing, with her hair moving gently in the warm spring breeze. "I know exactly what you mean," he murmured.

Olivia followed the path of his gaze and smiled. "Who would have thought that you and I of all people would be standing here today...friends, talking about how happy we are with our wives."

Phillip barked out a laugh. "Don't get ahead of yourself," he said. "The word is fiancée."

Olivia shrugged, slipping an arm round his shoulder as they began to walk over to where Natalia was standing with Frank, Buzz and Blake.

"Just a matter of time, Phillip," she said happily. "Just a matter of time..."

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The conversation she was stuck in was, to Blake's mind, incredibly dull. She was standing next to Frank, listening listlessly as he talked about the Cubs with a few of the guys, sipping beer and laughing raucously every few minutes. It was all she could do to suppress a yawn, and she began glancing around for a reason to escape.

Just then, she spotted a bright blue blazer out of the corner of her eye. Doris was standing by a table full of drinks, nursing a glass of wine and watching the happy guests, with a sad little smile on her face.

"I'll be right back," Blake said to Frank, who favored her with a glance and what sounded suspiciously like a grunt before he raised his beer to his lips again and turned back to the conversation he was having with Bill, Matt and Billy.

Shaking her head, Blake headed over to Doris, who greeted her with a quick smile. "That looks good," Blake said, gesturing towards the wine glass. "I think I'll have me one of them."

"Knock yourself out," the Mayor replied, and Blake realized that the drink she was holding was probably not her first. Hesitantly, she played for neutral ground.

"It was a nice service, huh?"

Doris shrugged. "You see one baby being half drowned you've seen 'em all," she said, then her expression grew pensive. "I never had Ashlee baptized." She took a sip of her drink. "I didn't really think the Church would want much to do with a gay single mother who got herself knocked up with a turkey baster." She shook her head. "I don't know what Natalia sees in it, I really don't..."

Blake smiled, taking a sip of her wine. "It's just...Natalia," she offered. "Natalia's a Catholic. It's like saying she's a woman, or she has brown eyes. She just...is."

Doris downed the rest of her drink. "Yeah, I guess we've all got to be who we are," she muttered. "Like me. I'm...well, what am I exactly?"

Blake placed her hand on her arm. "You're my friend," she said gently.

Doris looked down at the hand resting on her wrist. She thought of the New Years' party at this very house, remembered raising that hand to her lips and pressing a soft, almost seductive kiss onto yielding skin. A hint of a blush rose up on her cheeks.

Before she could respond, both women's attention was drawn to the crack of a twig a little behind them in the trees. Doris's head spun round, just in time to see a dark head pulling back, trying to get out of sight.

"Oh, hell no," she said, heading towards the tree line with quick, long strides. Blake had to trot a little to catch up with her. She was almost right on top of them when she suddenly realized who'd been watching them.

Anna.

"You're spying on me now?" Doris hissed.

Anna winced and shrunk back a little from the accusation in her ex's voice. "No," she insisted. "I didn't know you'd be...I just needed to make sure everything was okay here."

Doris gestured around her. "What, your secret big bad that's so awful you had to lie to me about it is going to show up at an Easter egg hunt at the home of the richest guy in town?"

Anna shrugged. "Maybe," she said.

Doris's lips curled into a sneer. "For God's sake," she snapped. "It's over, Anna. Leave me the hell alone."

Anna opened her mouth to speak again, but Blake cut her off, coming up behind Doris to place a comforting hand on her lower back. The Mayor's muscles stiffened slightly at her touch. "You heard her," Blake said, her mouth a thin line of dislike and disapproval.

Anna's eyes glinted. Slowly and deliberately, she turned back to Doris. "I know you don't trust me," she said. "I know you don't have any reason to believe this. But all I'm doing is trying to protect you." Tears collected in her eyes. "I love you, Doris. And I'm sorry."

She held the Mayor's gaze for a moment longer, then turned and disappeared into the woods. Doris held it together for roughly five seconds, then let out a choked sob, her hand flying to her mouth.

Immediately, Blake wrapped her in a warm hug. "It's okay," she whispered, rubbing her friend's trembling back. "It's okay.."

Doris accepted the comfort she was offering, but she knew that what she was saying was a lie. It wasn't okay. In fact, it was far from okay. Very, very far indeed.

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Olivia left Francesca with Frank so she could stroll unencumbered around the grounds. She hadn't seen Natalia for a little while, and was idly keeping an eye out for her while making a mental note of the locations of various chocolate eggs so she could direct Emma towards them when she saw her.

"Hey, Auntie O," a laughing male voice called.

Olivia turned to face her nephew, Jonathan, grinning as she enveloped him in a hug. "Hey trouble," she said, squeezing him hard. "Where have you been? I feel like I haven't seen you in forever."

He shrugged. "Oh, I've been here and there," he said noncommittally. "So hey, you got your kid baptized today, right?"

Olivia nodded, but her smile seemed a couple of watts less bright than before. Jonathan noticed instantly.

"What's wrong?"

Olivia shrugged. "Well," she admitted. "You know what Francesca's middle name is, right?" Jonathan shook his head. Olivia's voice gentled. "It's Marissa."

The man's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. "Mom," he said, and suddenly he sounded very young indeed.

A sadness washed over Olivia's face. "I miss her," she said, and wiped a tear from her eye. "Especially now I'm starting to know what it's like to have a real family...to love and be loved and...well, I wish she was here. That's all."

Jonathan nodded. "I wish she was here, too," he said, then his eyes narrowed. "But that's not all."

Neither of them noticed Natalia walking over to them across the lawn. Olivia shrugged again. "It was the baptism, I guess," she said. Natalia stopped a few feet away, frowning. Olivia went on. "Just...standing up there, me and Buzz and Blake, and Natalia and Frank, it was like...I don't know. I felt almost like...an optional extra? Does that make sense?" She shook her head. "I don't think I was really needed there. Not much room in the old Catholic rite for mommy's girlfriend, you know?"

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah, I get that." He frowned. "So why did you even do it?"

Olivia looked up at him sharply. "I didn't have a choice," she said. "I can't ask Natalia to change who she is, or what she believes. I'll never do that."

Natalia had heard enough. She took a step forward. "Hey, can I steal your aunt?" she asked playfully, reaching for Olivia's hand as if she had heard nothing.

Jonathan held up his hands. "All yours," he said, and smiled as Natalia led Olivia away.

They walked together in contented silence for a few minutes, just enjoying the sunshine and the sounds of happy children and chatting people that were drifting to them on the breeze. Eventually they reached a conveniently placed bench and sat down together, Olivia wrapping one arm round Natalia's shoulders.

"What were you talking to Jonathan about?" Natalia asked softly, closing her eyes and leaning against her lover.

Olivia reached up and stroked her hand through Natalia's hair. "My sister," she said quietly, deciding to omit the last few minutes of the conversation. "Family."

Natalia snuggled more comfortably against Olivia. She was quiet for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision. "I want you to do something for me when we go home," she said.

Olivia smiled playfully. "Like the things I did for you last night?" she said.

Natalia blushed. "No," she said, then stopped to think about it. "Well, maybe later."

"Raar," Olivia mock growled, waggling her eyebrows. Natalia laughed. "So okay, what do you want me to do?" Olivia asked when her girlfriend's giggles faded.

Natalia pursed her lips. "A family tradition," she said at last.

Olivia waited for more information and frowned when she didn't get it. "What kind of tradition?"

Natalia shook her head. "You'll see," she said, and wouldn't be drawn any further on what she meant.

Emma waved at them from across the lawn and held up a basket full to the brim with chocolate eggs. They smiled indulgently as they waved back, content for the moment to sit together in peace, listening to birdsong, and happiness, and the easy silence of each other.

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They got home just after five o'clock. Emma had gorged herself on chocolate in the car and now had a tummy-ache and a very messy face. Olivia sent her straight upstairs to wash, and Natalia took advantage of the absence of little eyes and little ears to give her girlfriend a kiss that she'd been saving up all day.

"Thank you for today," she said softly, combing her fingers through her lover's hair.

Olivia smiled. "There's no need to thank me," she replied. "I didn't do anything today I didn't want to do. It's been a great day, honey. A great day."

Natalia held her bottom lip between her teeth as she nodded. "I want you to know something," she said. "When I was a baby my parents had me baptized in church. But there was something else, too - a home baptism you might call it. A lot of Puerto Rican families do it. The baby is welcomed into the home and family by...the family matriarch, I guess you'd say. For me, that was my abuela."

Olivia blinked. It was so rare to hear Natalia talk about her family, or any traditions that didn't come from the Vatican.

Natalia moved from Olivia's embrace and retrieved Francesca's baptismal candle from the bag they'd brought it home in. She placed it in a holder and lit it before returning to stand in front of her lover.

"I want you to know," she said, in a soft, throaty voice. "You are her mother. My church won't acknowledge that. But I do." She looked up. "And God does." She swallowed hard. "What I believe is not restricted to what the Church teaches," she said. "And who I am...is yours, Olivia."

Olivia opened her mouth to speak, but no sounds came out. Natalia took her hand and laid it, along with her own, on Francesca's forehead.

“Dear Lord,” she said. “We, the parents of this child, Francesca Marissa, thank you for the blessing of her life. We promise to love her, and cherish her, and guide her towards you as she grows.” She looked up at Olivia. “God, thank-you for sending me this woman to share my life with. She is my light and my joy - my best friend, my love, the mother of my children. Thank-you for showing me your love every day, through her.”

Tears were flowing freely down Olivia’s face now, but she managed a tremulous smile. “I’m not much for praying,” she said. “In fact, in the past I’ve doubted that there was even anyone up there.” She took a deep breath. “But...I look back on my life, all the bad decisions, and wasted opportunities, and loves lost...and I can see how every moment was leading me here. To you. To our children.” She looked up. “So for that, whoever you are...thank-you.”

Natalia reached up and wiped Olivia’s tears away, and sealed their prayers with a kiss. Francesca, unaware that there was anything momentous happening at all, slept peacefully on.

The End

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