

The Walking Shadow

by Calliopes Muse

ACT 1

Stepping into the kitchen, after leaving the spare room off the living room, Olivia smiled as she watched Natalia put the finishing touches on Emma's French toast – a light sprinkle of powdered sugar and a drizzle of syrup. A large glass of orange juice completed the meal. Emma dug into the food with gusto, kicking her feet excitedly under the table. In between bites, she rattled on endlessly about Natalia's sister, Leyla, being so cool. Olivia walked over to her partner and giving her a tender kiss on the cheek. A shy and flirty smile flashed back at her as Natalia handed her a hot cup of coffee.

"Leyla's not nearly as cool as you are though." Olivia gave the younger woman a saucy wink then turned her attention to her daughter. "Slow down, Jellybean. Jane won't be here for a few more minutes."

Olivia leaned over to give Francesca a kiss on the head as the little girl worked diligently to finish off her morning bottle. Then she ran a gentle hand over Emma's braid as she passed her and went around the table to sit next to her.

"But I have to get my bag packed for Daddy's!"

Natalia turned to place a plate in front of Olivia and refresh her coffee in one smooth move, the action coming second nature after her years as a waitress. "It's already taken care of, Emma."

"Really?" Olivia looked at her, incredulous. They hadn't really had a break in the month since they had returned from Chicago, and Olivia didn't even recall unpacking her own bag, especially with all the commotion over the vandalism at the house. All she knew was that one day she came home from work and everything was back in order.

A momentary feeling of darkness blanketed her mind as she thought of the violation from the vandalism, and her hands itched to hold her gun. Natalia's laughter cut through the anger taking over her mind, reminding her of what was truly important.

"Yeah, really." Natalia blushed as she looked at Olivia. "I never completely unpacked her bag."

Olivia gave a mock gasp. "That's cheating!"

The younger woman shrugged. "Well, we have been kind of busy since we got back."

Olivia nodded knowingly. They hadn't even been back home a couple of weeks when Leyla called Natalia asking if they'd mind if she came for a visit. Natalia was surprised, but excited, to say the least. She told her little sister to get busy packing, and that it would be perfect for her to come the beginning of June after Emma was out of school. The same day that Leyla called they started clearing out the small unused office space off the living room, which had become more storage than anything.

Little had been done around the farmhouse that didn't revolve around that task. Boxes had been taken to the attic and some unneeded furniture was taken to Sister Anne as a donation. Natalia had cleaned out all of the knick knacks and miscellaneous items, and now it was Olivia's turn to paint. Leyla wasn't expected for several more days, but it was the perfect time to get Emma out of the house for a little while to finish work on the room. The little girl was beyond excited to have her "cool" aunt come stay with them. She couldn't seem to talk about anything else.

Olivia laughed as she watched Emma gobble down the last of her French toast and take off up the stairs to get her bag when she heard the knock at the back door off the kitchen, alerting them to Jane's arrival. Natalia had just sat down to eat her own breakfast but started to stand back up when she heard the knock to go let Jane in.

Olivia put a hand on her shoulder. "Sit. I've got it."

Francesca started to fuss now that she was finished with her bottle. The brunette sighed and set her fork down to get her daughter out of the high chair. They had just started using it and already Natalia could see it wouldn't last long. They were lucky if they could get the little girl through a feeding before she fussed to get out. Sweet Pea seemed to prefer to be held by her mommies instead. Natalia settled Francesca on her shoulder, and after a couple of well-placed pats on the back, a burp came up and the little girl sighed contentedly.

She turned the child to set her in the crook of her arm and kissed her on the forehead. "Is that better now?"

Francesca gurgled and smiled. Picking up her fork again, Natalia took a bite of toast as her partner pressed the correct buttons on the alarm and turned the deadbolt to let Jane into the house. She heard Emma bounding down the steps before barreling into the kitchen.

"Hey, Jane! Are you ready?"

The young woman laughed at the little girl as Olivia turned with her hands on her hips. "Not so fast, young lady. We get hugs and kisses before you go, and you need a jacket."

"Sorry, Mom." Emma walked the short distance to the kitchen table to give Natalia and Francesca kisses and hugs. "Love you, Ma. Love you, Sweet Pea."

Olivia knelt down with Emma's light jacket to help her slip it on then gave her a big hug. "Be good for Daddy, okay?"

"Okay, Mom. Love you." Emma picked up the bag Natalia had packed for her.

"And no petting strange dogs at the park," Natalia added, standing to see Emma off. Puppies were Emma's new obsession since she saw a very sweet Golden Retriever at the park in Chicago.

Emma sighed and rolled her eyes, jokingly. "Oh, okay!"

Olivia opened the door again, bracing herself for the chilly, morning wind. Ever since being in sunny San Cristobel, she'd been ready for warmer weather to reach Springfield. Emma and Jane left with a quick wave, leaving the older women in a suddenly quiet house. Olivia relocked the door as soon as it was closed and unconsciously reset the alarm.

She turned to Natalia who was standing behind her and saw she was shivering. She ran her hands over the goose-bumped arms. The brunette relaxed into the warm caress, cradling Francesca between them. "What's up with this chilly weather? It's nearly June."

Olivia shrugged and pulled Natalia a little closer. "We can always blame it on Iceland."

Natalia chuckled against her partner's strong shoulder. "Poor Iceland. Nothing good could ever come from being named that."

The blonde pulled back, smiling, with a twinkle in her eye, and she clapped her hands together. "Well, back to work!"

Before Olivia could get away, she was pulled back and kissed thoroughly by Natalia, making her go weak in the knees as she whimpered into the kiss. The younger woman pulled away with a satisfied smirk.

"Not so fast, Spencer. We have plenty of time to finish the room, and someone's fast asleep again." She looked down at the sleeping child in her arms. "And if we didn't have to stay inside to hear the monitor, I would so drag you back out to that Jacuzzi Doris had installed."

Olivia definitely owed Doris big time for that gift! Memories of them christening the new hot tub were wonderfully fresh in her mind. She lifted a mischievous eyebrow and gestured up the stairs with a tilt of her head. "I guess I'll just meet you in the bedroom in five minutes then?"

Natalia's heart raced at the thought of what was to come, literally, for the next couple of hours. She took a steadying breath to calm down. "With bells on, and nothing else."

She kissed Olivia again with delicious intent before breaking away and walking up the stairs.

Olivia followed her with her eyes. "Oh, yeah!"

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Emma flew down the slide as fast as possible, giggling as she went. She raced up the steps again and slid down again, hoping to go faster with each round.

Jane smiled at her as she texted her boyfriend about their plans for later that evening. The young woman shivered at the chill in the air. She shook her head at being crazy enough to bring Emma out in the cold, but she was killing some time since Mr. Spaulding had a meeting this morning. No one else was at the park so they obviously had the common sense to stay home. When Olivia had mentioned needing to get Emma out from under foot so they could finish the room for Leyla, she jumped at the chance to help out. Besides, she could always use a few extra bucks and what else was she going to do since her boyfriend was putting in more hours at the Beacon to pay for his new car? She liked the car. It was perfect for making out in down by the lighthouse, so she wasn't going to complain.

A squeal from across the playground startled her, and she frantically searched for her young charge. Seeing the young girl wrapped up in the arms of a scruffy looking man, she took off in a run.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

The young man spun around at the angry voice behind him and adjusted Emma in his arms.

Jane stopped in her tracks, feeling rather foolish. "Jonathan? Sorry, I couldn't tell it was you from way over there."

The handsome man smiled at her, and she could have sworn she swooned a little. Having been Emma's babysitter for so long, she had seen many pictures of Jonathan, but hadn't met him personally.

He offered his hand in greeting, and Jane took it, blushing the whole time. At the moment, she really hated having a boyfriend that she actually liked.

“You must be Jane. I’ve heard a lot about you from my aunt and the pipsqueak here.” He poked at Emma’s side, making her squeal. He reached around, finding the shy little girl hiding behind him and coaxing her forward. “This is my daughter, Sarah.” Jane squatted down to the little girl’s eye level. “Well, you’re a beautiful little girl, Sarah. My name’s Jane.” When Jane reached out her hand, Sarah shyly took it and thanked her.

A sudden ringing made both Jane and Jonathan look for their phones. Eventually, Jonathan realized it was his and he set Emma down on the ground. He looked up from the caller ID nervously.

“Um, I hate to impose, but are you going to be here for a minute? I really need to take this.”

Jane quickly nodded. “Sure.”

He looked down at his daughter. “Do what she says, Sarah. Okay?”

When his daughter nodded, her long dark curls bobbing with the motion, he walked away, going around the other side of a set of buildings.

Jane watched until he was out of eyesight and then glanced down at Emma and Sarah. “Okay, ladies, what do we do now?”

Emma smiled mischievously as she took Jane and Sarah’s hands, and the young woman was suddenly very worried about the plans Emma had for them.

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The long drive back into town had given Frank the time he had needed to clear his head. Over the last couple of weeks, he had taken to going on these drives when he couldn’t sleep. They were becoming more and more frequent, but he somehow found himself more centered when he returned. Ever since he had gotten the text from Eleni back in November, he had grown increasingly agitated and distracted. He wanted to know what right she thought she had swinging back through town, after all that had happened, upsetting Marina and assuming she had a right to see her grandson? He had politely returned emails and texts, telling himself it was for Marina and Henry’s sake in case Marina ever got over her hurt, but the mere thought of her being anywhere nearby stirred feelings in him that he’d rather not think about.

He turned off the radio. If he heard one more sappy love song, he was going to scream. Blake had left him a message earlier about dinner; she wanted to have a romantic night out. He scrubbed a hand roughly across his face, scratching at the stubble on his chin. In all honesty, he really just wanted to go back to his apartment and have a beer, maybe watch the Cubs game coming on this afternoon. What the hell was his problem? Blake was a nice, charming woman, and certainly someone he had found attractive enough to sleep with years ago. Actually, she was still perfectly attractive, and he wasn't complaining about having a regular bed partner. He couldn't fool himself though; he knew something was missing from the relationship. He'd done the denial thing far too recently and it hadn't turned out so well; he didn't want to go through that again.

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Jane had eventually convinced Emma that she needed to get off the merry-go-round or else she'd puke all over the little girl. Standing by the monkey bars, she looked up from her phone and her latest text when she heard a rustle in the bushes. Shrugging it off as a squirrel, she glanced back down at the display, a deep blush spreading across her face at her boyfriend's audacity. With her fingers flying across the pad, she hit send and then turned off her phone.

"Asshole. No, I'm not into threesomes," she grumbled to herself. Looking up, Jane noticed that Emma and Sarah weren't there.

This time she didn't let herself panic. Instead, she felt annoyed. Emma knew better than to leave her sight, but the little girl did have a tendency to disappear right from under a person's nose. She called their names and headed toward the closed refreshment stand.

"You two better just be getting a drink of wa..."

When she rounded the corner, she saw the back of a man. He seemed to sway a little and then she saw why. Struggling in his arms was Sarah, a gun at her head and a hand over her mouth.

A few feet away, Emma stood paralyzed as her cousin was lifted off the ground. She remembered what her mom had said once: if someone tries to hurt you, look at their face, stare at their face and memorize it. Then scream as loud as you can. She tried. She was panting hard and wanted to open her mouth to scream. But it was like one of those bad dreams she had once where no matter how hard she tried she couldn't run or scream or do anything. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement and wanted to run to whoever it was, but her feet wouldn't move. All she knew was that she was scared and wanted her Mom and Natalia.

Jane edged closer, her heart pounding. She thought momentarily about the phone in her pocket, but she had turned it off earlier. If she turned it on now, she'd alert the man to her presence. She swallowed hard and tried to catch Emma's eye. She could feel the panic rolling off her young charge and a brief flicker of green eyes in her direction was all Jane needed. Emma had become like the little sister she'd never had, and she'd be damned if she let anyone hurt her.

Only a few feet away, Jane gritted her teeth and sprinted towards the back of the stranger. In panic and fear at her own possible insanity, she screamed mere seconds before hitting him in the back, knocking him to the ground.

The shock of being suddenly hit made him let Sarah go, and the younger girl scrambled to Emma. The two girls watched in horror as the man jumped up and kicked Jane so hard in the ribs that it lifted her off the ground, and she landed with a thud on her back. Emma finally found her voice and let out a blood-curdling scream.

Far away, Jonathan heard the scream and his blood ran cold. He raced back to the playground, berating himself when he realized how far away he was. When he had gotten the call, he had started walking down the road and hadn't bothered to stop and turn back.

The man turned on Emma and pointed the gun at her.

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Olivia shivered at the chill that ran over her body when the warmth of an exhausted Natalia moved off of her to cuddle at her side. She sighed deeply and contentedly as she stretched muscles she didn't realize she had anymore. Natalia curled into her, her lithe fingers caressing the soft skin on Olivia's stomach.

"That was so good," the younger woman mumbled against Olivia's shoulder.

"Oh, just good?"

Natalia chuckled and looked up into the bright green eyes of her lover. "Okay, great. Better than great. The best ever!"

Olivia smirked. "Much better. I do have a reputation after all."

A naughty, playful rush overtook Natalia. It was like she couldn't get enough of Olivia. "I know; that's why I fell for you in the first place."

"Oh really?" Olivia lifted her eyebrow.

Natalia began sucking softly on the other woman's neck. A low moan and the feel of an arm tightening around her back was all the encouragement Natalia needed to continue her explorations; the ebbing embers began to flame white-hot again.

"Really. I think I have a thing for bad girls." Natalia whispered hotly into her lover's ear.

Olivia found the small inkling of control she still had and flipped Natalia over onto her back. "I guess I need to give you what you want then."

She kissed Natalia with fervor reminiscent of their first time. She loved kissing Natalia like this – deep, slow, and hungry – because it always got the same predictable and wonderful response. Olivia never tired of the feel of her lover's legs wrapping around her, pulling her in close, as blunt nails slid down her back and dug in at the base of her spine.

Olivia arched her back with a hiss, her hips grinding into Natalia. She leaned back in to kiss the younger woman again, when she was pushed back slightly.

"What? What's wrong?"

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Jane struggled to her feet as blood ran down her chin. She found it hard to breathe and feared the attacker had broken some ribs, maybe even punctured a lung. With the little bit of strength she had left, she lunged again at the man to distract him, hitting him weakly. When he turned on her, she rasped out in a harsh voice, "Emma, take Sarah and run. Run as fast as you can."

The man backhanded Jane, sending her back to the ground in a heap. He grabbed her by her blood-stained blouse, lifted her, and slammed her back against the wall of the building behind her.

The jarring blow stunned her but also got her adrenaline going. With one hand, she grabbed at the wrist of his gun hand, while the other went for his face, hidden under the hood of the sweatshirt. She groaned in agony as he pushed her against the wall again, his weight adding pressure on her broken ribs as blood splattered from her mouth. Over his shoulder, she could still see Emma and Sarah.

She cried in frustration, frantically reaching for any bare skin she could find. She knew the situation was bad. All she could hope for was to distract him long enough for the girls to get away. She found purchase on his neck and dug in. He howled in pain and stumbled backwards.

Falling to her knees, she screamed one last time at Emma. “Goddamn it, Emma, run! RUNNNN!”

The scream jarred Emma into action. She grabbed Sarah’s hand and pulled her away.

Jane shakily got to her feet and looked at the man with a bloody smile. “I know you, and I won’t let you get ‘em.” She swayed on her feet and glared at him.

“You fucking bitch!” He sneered at her then shrugged. “I guess you’ll have to do then.”

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When Jonathan was less than a hundred feet from where he’d last seen Sarah and Emma, a gunshot rang out. With tears running down his face, he raced the remaining distance, his lungs burning with the effort. A second shot sounded close. As he came around the refreshment stand, a figure disappeared into the bushes. Twenty feet away, he watched as a bloodied and beaten Jane crumpled to the ground.

“Oh my God!” He looked around desperately but didn’t see Sarah or Emma anywhere. He called out to them, but heard nothing. Running up to Jane, he fell beside her on his knees. All he needed was a few seconds, just a little time to find out where his little girl was and who had done this. When he rolled her over though, her eyes were open...vacant. Even though he knew what it meant, he checked for a pulse anyway. Nothing.

He slammed his hand against the ground. “Shit!” Looking around again, he gave one last frantic call. “Sarah!”

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Frank slowed down as he passed the church where he and Natalia had almost married last year. A sad sigh escaped his lips as he thought back on that time. He’d been hurt at first, and then he was just simply angry. He’d taken every opportunity to blame the situation on Olivia because she was an easy target, one that had been in his sights for years. The businesswoman had certainly earned the ire of most people in town, so his anger at her was understandable to most. Deep inside though, he’d known. He hadn’t let himself see what was right in front of him, which was that Natalia didn’t light up when he was near. Hell, he hadn’t either in her presence. He’d just tried to make love happen when it wasn’t there. It had been nice to have someone there – a nice, pretty woman to say was his own. He had been lonely for companionship and sad over Coop. It had been a poor reason to cling to Natalia.

A sick feeling hit him in the pit of his stomach as he realized, sadly, that what he had been doing the last few months with Blake wasn’t so different from what had happened

between him and Natalia. Blake had been his consolation prize when Natalia hadn't worked out, much like he had been for his ex-fiancé when Olivia hadn't worked out for her. He could pretend to have deeper feelings than he did, just like he'd asked of Natalia, but that wouldn't be fair to anyone. Blake deserved better and so did he. Just as he summoned the courage to pull up Blake's number on his cell to tell her they needed to talk, it rang.

"I guess it'll have to wait now." With a sigh, he answered the call. "Yeah, what's up?"

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Natalia pushed back from Olivia and scrunched her dark eyebrows together. "Do you hear that?"

Olivia shook her head. "I didn't hear Francesca."

Then they both heard it loud and clear - a hard, steady banging at the front door. Olivia sighed and pushed off of Natalia. "You know, I'm really glad we got into the habit of locking doors, but this is kind of annoying."

"Imagine what would have happened if someone had just walked in here." They both stood and grabbed their robes from the back of the door.

Olivia smirked at her partner. "We'd be on You Tube before the day was over?"

Natalia gave Olivia a light smack on the arm, but laughed, nonetheless, at the naughty woman. She led the way out of the bedroom as Olivia made a short detour to check on the baby. Natalia tightened her black silk robe as she got to the bottom of the staircase. She peeked through the curtain before disarming the alarm and opening the door with concern.

"Frank?"

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For a few seconds, Jonathan was completely still as he listened for any sound that may have been his daughter, but silence greeted him instead. Then he heard a muffled sound and realized he still had his phone in his hand.

Shakily, he lifted the phone. "Anna, he's escalating. He's killed someone."

Anna started to answer back but was drowned out by screams in the background.

Tears fell from his eyes as he recognized the sound. "Is that...please tell me that's Sarah... that she made it to the police station?"

"It is...and Emma."

Jonathan could hear Anna on the other end of the line issuing orders to Remy. Then he heard Anna talking to them softly, getting them to calm down.

After a long minute, she came back on the line. "They're okay, Jonathan. Neither are hurt. They were there alone?"

"Yeah. I mean, no." He stumbled. "They were with Emma's sitter, Jane, and um, Jane was shot."

"And you?" The subtle accusation laced her voice.

He rubbed at his forehead. "I was nearby."

"Not near enough. You got damn lucky."

"Yeah, I know." He mumbled, guiltily. He could hear talking in the background before she came back on the line.

"Frank's calling out all the stops. Be ready."

Jonathan sighed and flipped his phone closed, hearing the sirens in the distance grow closer. He looked down at Jane, wanting to close the lids of her eyes, but knowing he'd be stupid to touch her any more than he already had. All he could do was look at her sadly and pray for this nightmare to end soon, before anything worse happened.

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When the door swung open, Frank was surprised to see Natalia still in her robe. He glanced at the clock on the wall knowing she'd normally be up well before then.

"Hey, Natalia, I'm sorry to wake you." His voice was hesitant and a bit nervous.

A blush flared across her face when she heard the door to Francesca's room close and the familiar tread of Olivia's feet as she descended the steps. She saw Frank glance over her shoulder, toward the staircase.

"You didn't wake me."

Frank cleared his throat, watching Olivia descend the steps in a red silk robe and bare feet. He fought to push the mental image of what he had interrupted out of his mind.

“Oh, um, good,” He stammered.

“Mornin’, Frankie.” Olivia came up behind her partner and ran her hands over the slender shoulders.

“Morning,” he mumbled back.

Natalia suddenly remembered that she had forgotten her manners. She still hadn’t quite made the mental adjustment to having doors bolted and alarms set, so she wasn’t used to actually having to invite anyone in. “I’m sorry, Frank. Do you want to come in, have some coffee?”

“Um, no, actually. Thanks though. This isn’t a pleasure call.” He looked down uncertainly and shifted on his feet.

Olivia was suddenly worried by his tone. “Why, what’s up?”

“You two should come down to the station.” Frank hated this part of his job.

Anger flared in Olivia. “No, Frank, you need to tell us what’s going on. Right now!”

Natalia gripped at Olivia’s hand to calm her, as much as to calm herself. “What happened?”

He swallowed. “It’s Jane. She’s been shot.” When the two women stared at him in stunned silence, he answered the obvious question. “She’s dead.”

Natalia grabbed at the chair next to her to hold herself up as Olivia pulled her close. Terrified brown eyes turned to Olivia, then to Frank. “Emma. What about Emma?”

He reached for both of them reassuringly, squeezing their shoulders reassuringly, all of their past issues floating away in their moment of shared worry. “She’s fine. She’s not hurt. Scared, but not hurt.”

Olivia let out the breath she didn’t know she had been holding. She grasped at Natalia’s hand for support and looked at Frank, “Jesus, Frank! You scare us like that ever again, and I swear...”

Natalia pulled back from Olivia’s embrace and wiped at the tears on her face, she looked at Frank with new determination. “We need to see her.”

Not understanding what she really meant, Frank nodded. "Of course. She's safe at the station. Anna and Remy are at the scene, but we have an officer with her."

"I'm not talking about Emma." Natalia looked at him hard. "I need to see Jane. I need to see her body."

Olivia and Frank exchanged concerned looks as the younger woman headed up the stairs to change.

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ACT 2

Jonathan climbed off the swing as he saw Anna pull up. She had obviously left quickly to make sure she was the first to arrive on the scene. With determined steps, he approached her, his usual good cheer replaced by anger and worry.

"Is Sarah really okay?"

Anna nodded, but still surveyed her surroundings, examining the scene. "Yeah, she's at the station with an officer."

He moved to walk away. "I need to go to her."

She stopped him with a hand to his chest. "You can't. You called it in so you have to stay and answer questions." She noticed Jonathan tighten his jaw, making the muscles visibly twitch. Anna sighed, "It's the rules, okay? As soon as we get your version of things, you can see Sarah."

He rolled his eyes and ran a hand through his hair. "He's getting too close, Anna. That..." he pointed in the direction of Jane's body, "came too close. We can't do this alone. He's too good."

When Anna didn't answer, he closed his eyes, willing himself to stay calm. "You need to tell Doris what's going on."

"No." Anna shook her head resolutely.

"She's the freakin' mayor, Anna. She can get the FBI involved!" Jonathan was practically pleading with her.

She crossed her arms, determination in her face. "That was expressly forbidden by the boss, and you know it."

“Screw our boss!”

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In the eerily silent ride to the park, Olivia watched her partner out of the corner of her eye, while keeping note of Frank’s car ahead of them. While a casual observer would probably not even notice the actual meaning in Natalia’s subtle non-verbal cues, Olivia knew something was different. A slight increase in her breathing meant she was nervous or excited. When she bit the inside of her cheek, she was not only nervous but also pondering something difficult or troubling. But, what she saw when she looked across the seat at her partner was new, even to her, and shook Olivia to her core – the younger woman’s knuckles were white as she fiercely gripped the steering wheel, her nostrils flared with the rush of adrenaline, and her eyes were focused and clear.

Natalia was in fight mode. Gone was the flirty, joking woman of this morning and in her place was a woman ready to defend and protect those she loved.

Olivia couldn’t stand to see Natalia like this. She reached over and ran a gentle hand through Natalia’s long, dark hair. Olivia noticed the younger woman’s eyelids briefly flutter shut as Natalia took a deep breath and a slender hand released its stranglehold on the steering wheel. Olivia relaxed a little when Natalia reached for her hand and entwined their fingers, squeezing her hand solidly and assuredly.

As the park came into view, Natalia pulled her car over behind Frank’s. She drew Olivia’s hand up and kissed it. Turning her eyes to Olivia, feeling tears well up, she forced a sad smile. “Thank you.”

“For?”

Natalia shook her head, fighting to calm the turbulent emotions racing through her. “Everything.”

Olivia reached over and brushed an errant tear away with her thumb, then kissed her softly. “Anytime. Are you ready?”

Natalia took a deep breath and nodded, and they got out of the car. Olivia carefully got Francesca’s carrier out of the backseat, thankful that she was once again sound asleep, and walked around the front of the car to Natalia. A small crowd had already gathered and the area had been marked off with police tape. Even the news crew from the local station had arrived but they were being kept a good distance away from the scene by police officers.



Frank ducked under the tape and held it for the two women to follow. A small group of people were gathered at the edge of the playground. As they approached the scene, Olivia noticed Anna, Jonathan and Remy talking by the swings, and a short distance away she spotted Doris talking on the phone, her back slightly turned to them.

Getting closer to Jonathan, a sickening feeling enveloped Olivia as she noticed his shaking fingers rake through stringy hair. She quickened her steps and as she passed Frank, she handed the baby carrier off to him.

Her eyes focused intently on Anna as she spoke, “What the hell’s going on here?” When the other woman didn’t answer right away, Olivia looked to her nephew. “Jonathan, what’s going on? Why are you here?”

Before he had a chance to respond, Olivia interrupted, assuming the worst. “Oh my God! They think you had something to do with this!”

She turned on Anna furiously. “I swear, you just can’t stop yourself, can you?” Olivia questioned her derisively. “Everything and everyone you come in contact with ends up destroyed or damaged. It wasn’t enough that your family ruined my childhood, you had to show up here in Springfield and cause more trouble. You broke my friend’s heart, and now

you want to blame my nephew for murder?” Olivia stepped closer into Anna’s personal space and noticed the mixture of awe and terror in the other woman’s eyes as she stared back. Narrowing her eyes at Anna, she pressed on. “I swear to God, if you lay one finger on my nephew, I’ll...”

Jonathan finally stood up, having heard enough. He pulled at Olivia’s arm to get her attention. “That’s not it, Auntie O. I was here with Sarah.”

The blonde felt the world tilt a little at his words and at the sudden realization that the beautiful little girl wasn’t around. She reached with one hand for Jonathan’s hand and covered her mouth with the other. “Oh my God, she’s not...”

He shook his head. “She’s fine. She ran away with Emma. They’re safe.”

“Thank God.” Olivia dropped her head and released a heavy sigh of relief.

The last few moments came rushing back to Olivia as the adrenaline faded, and she remembered what she had said to Anna. Feeling a little chagrined, but not wanting to admit blame, she avoided looking at the other woman and instead focused on Remy, who was nearby.

“So, what happened?”

Remy stepped up and looked at his notes. “Piecing together what Emma and Sarah have told us and the cursory evidence so far, I’d say that Jane interrupted a potential kidnapping and ended up in a struggle with someone bigger and stronger than her and obviously lost.”

Olivia wanted to come back with a typical sarcastic quip, but she couldn’t get it out around the lump in her throat. The mental image of Jane fighting and struggling against her attacker was too much for her.

Anna picked up the details from there. “Emma said that she and Sarah were playing over by the slides. She turned her back to climb the slide again and when she came down, Sarah was gone. She went looking for her and found her struggling with a man behind the concession stand. Emma doesn’t remember much after that, except that Jane seemed to come out of nowhere and jumped the guy. They fought and he was beating her up pretty badly. Jane yelled at her to run and she did, dragging Sarah with her. She heard a loud banging sound, what she assumed was a gun, and just ran faster.”

Frank finally made his way to the group, hearing the last pieces of information. He still held Francesca’s carrier in one hand and was trying to dial a number on his cell phone with the other. When he got the same message he’d gotten the last two times, he flipped his phone shut in frustration.

“Where the hell is the CSI team? I’ve been trying to reach Desilva for the last hour, but there’s a message saying his number’s disconnected. We need to get this scene cleared.”

Doris had just ended her conversation and piped up. “Desilva won’t be here.”

“Why not?” Frank asked, visibly frustrated.

“I fired him this morning,” she said nonchalantly.

Frank’s mouth fell open. “What? Why?”

The mayor shook her head at the man before her, incredulous at his short-term memory problems. “Because he’s an incompetent, lazy bastard. You even said that yourself, and coming from you, that’s huge.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Frank suspected he was supposed to be insulted, but wasn’t really sure why.

Doris waved a hand in the air in dismissal. “Never mind.”

“Fine. But what are we supposed to do without a CSI director?”

A knowing smirk crossed Doris’s face as she peered over his shoulder at the approaching figure. “Don’t worry your manly mind with such matters, Frank. I’ve taken care of everything.”

“Hi, Frank.”

Everyone spun around at the voice behind them, and Frank nearly fell over with the shock. All the text messages and emails in the world hadn’t prepared him for seeing Eleni again face-to-face. She was still beautiful, with her brilliant green eyes twinkling as she smiled, the crinkles around her eyes highlighting a maturity she wore well, and dark hair cascading in ringlets over her shoulders.

“Eleni? What...what are you doing here?” Frank sputtered.
Doris leaned forward, pleased with herself. “Meet your new CSI director.”

“What?” Frank spun on Doris then looked back at his ex-wife. “This is a sick joke, right? You’ve got to be pulling my leg.”

Eleni raised her crime scene kit, and then it struck Frank what she was wearing, a royal blue crime scene jacket. “Nope, no joke.”

"I thought..." he fought down the remembered pain. "I thought you ran off with Alan Michael."

"And I left him, came back to the States, got my training, and have been working in Los Angeles for the last several years." She smiled and Frank felt a rush of panic at the feelings that it brought up. He swallowed hard and pushed them away. He refused to get sucked into her trap again.

"In that case, I guess you should get to work."

Everyone looked over to where Jane's body was stretched out on the ground. Natalia stood at the dead woman's feet, hugging herself tightly, as if trying to keep from falling to pieces.

Olivia looked to Frank. "Do you need me for anything?"

He shook his head. "Nothing I can't get later." She nodded her appreciation and turned to approach her partner.

She didn't want to startle Natalia, so when she was close enough to be heard, Olivia whispered, "Hey." She brushed a hand over her shoulder. "You okay?"

Natalia shook her head and turned to collapse into Olivia's arms, burying her tear-stained face against the older woman's shoulder.

They stood there for a long moment, holding each other tight. As Natalia's tears subsided, Olivia leaned back and brushed away the drops still on her partner's face, and then the younger woman reached a hand up between them to wipe at her runny nose.

Natalia squeezed her eyes shut, struggling to say the words without losing control of her tears again. "Emma could have gotten hurt...or worse." Her bottom lip trembled and the mere thought of seeing Emma lying out on the ground instead of Jane shook her with fear. "It could have been one of you."

Olivia pulled further back and took Natalia's face in her hands. She fought down the tears that threatened to fall, but she couldn't hide the quiver in her voice. She tried to sound more confident than she felt. "But it wasn't. And it never will be if I have anything to do with it. We're okay." She nodded her head, willing Natalia to believe her. "Okay?"

The brunette nodded and leaned into Olivia's embrace again, seeking solace in the warmth and solidity. After a few moments, Natalia spoke up, "I need to go see Emma now. If you need to stay here..." Natalia started.

As the younger woman pulled away, Olivia reached for her arm. “Nuh, uh. There’s a nut out there with a gun. We’re not going anywhere alone. Come on, we’ll go together. There’s nothing we can do here anyway.”

Natalia nodded and slipped her hand into Olivia’s. On the way out of the park, they got Francesca and headed to the station.

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When Olivia and Natalia arrived at the police station, the place was buzzing with news of the crime. They went to the front desk and asked to see Emma, and were told an officer would be with them shortly. Unable to sit and relax in the uncomfortable chairs while they waited to see their daughter, Olivia paced the small foyer like a caged animal. Natalia was in no better state as she stood nervously, switching her weight from one foot to the other and chewed at a fingernail. An eternity seemed to pass in those few minutes until a young officer came out to get them.

The young man immediately put his hands up at Olivia’s rapid approach, and spoke quickly to try and assuage her fears. “She’s fine, ladies. A little shaken, but she and the other little girl are watching SpongeBob now in the break room. She’s even laughing. She’s a tough one.”

While she was thankful that he’d looked after her daughter, Olivia wasn’t the most patient person and at the moment she wanted nothing more than for him to shut up and get out of the way. “That’s great. Can I see her now?”

“Yeah, sure.” He moved aside so Olivia could go through the door to the main office.

Natalia paused on her way through and touched his hand. “Thanks. We really appreciate it.”

He smiled genuinely. “Anytime.”

In the back corner of the station, past all of the cubicles and desks, was the break room. Olivia hesitated for a moment, as she watched Emma through the glass window laughing at some antics of SpongeBob. Natalia came to her side and took a hold of her hand. With a light squeeze and a quick glance at each other, they opened the door.

When Emma saw her mommies, she jumped from her chair and ran over, hugging them both tightly as they went to their knees. Sarah was curled up in the chair that had been next to Emma’s. Olivia watched as the little girl’s head dropped, her bottom lip starting to quiver. Her heart broke for her niece.

Olivia's voice was thick with emotion, and she had to clear her throat to speak. "Sarah?" When the little girl tentatively looked up, tears threatening to fall, Olivia let go of Natalia to reach out for the little girl. "Come here, baby." She waited as Sarah hesitated a moment, then she slowly unfurled her legs and walked over. Olivia pulled her into a tight hug. She felt the little girl's body crumple with exhaustion, and her soft sniffles turned to loud sobs.

Olivia pulled her closer. "Everything's okay now. We've got you. You're safe. And your daddy will be here soon, okay?"

Sarah sniffled and nodded.

Natalia watched the exchange over Emma's back where she was huddled between her mothers. She whispered quietly in Emma's ear. "Sarah's a little upset, huh?" She felt Emma nod against her shoulder. "I know you are, too, and I promise we'll talk about it, okay? But I bet you know what would make her feel better, right?"

She could almost sense the little girl smiling into her shoulder before she whispered back. "Ice cream with extra sprinkles?"

"I think that's a brilliant idea." Natalia lifted her head up to look at the other two. "Emma came up with a wonderful idea to help us all feel better." Sarah glanced at her curiously. "Do you know what it is, Sarah?" The little girl shook her head, and Natalia smiled, speaking slowly to emphasize the wonder of each word. "Ice cream with extra sprinkles."

Despite the sadness and tension of the morning's events, Olivia felt such gratitude towards her partner. With a big smile, she looked at the girls as she spoke. "Oh wow, that sounds awesome! What do you say, Sarah? You want to go to Company and get the best ice cream with extra sprinkles in the world?"

As if by magic, the little girl smiled happily and started tugging Emma by the hand. "Come on, Emma!"

The two women laughed when Emma nearly tumbled out the door of the break room as Sarah enthusiastically pulled her forward.

~~*~*

Emma and Sarah sat in a booth in the back of Company, happily eating their ice cream and making a mess of their clothes. Only once did Natalia look at Emma and think about how much work it was going to be to get the sticky sugar off of her. Considering all that had happened and could have happened to her family, she would deal with some chocolate ice cream on her daughter's clothes over the other possibility any day. She was pretty sure she'd willingly let Emma bathe in ice cream if it would just keep her safe. She looked down

at Francesca in her carrier, and once again felt the force of the emotions she'd had at the park. Consciously, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath to stay calm.

Olivia was finishing up relating the morning's events to a shocked Blake; she conveniently left out the part about Eleni showing up. Honestly, she wasn't sure how to approach it and eventually convinced herself that it wasn't her business anyway.

"They're sure it's murder?" The redhead still hadn't quite gotten over the shock of the news.

"Two bullets to the body would say so." Olivia winced at her own sarcasm. She really just wanted to get a moment alone with Natalia so she could let her defenses down.

Blake didn't seem to notice Olivia's inappropriate snarky comment. She just shook her head. "Wow!"

The bell above the door chimed and they turned to see Doris walk in and make a beeline for the bar. Blake eyed the mayor as she plunked down, undignified, on the stool next to Olivia. Blake noticed the exhausted and frustrated way Doris rubbed her hand over her forehead and covered her eyes. Without a word, she retrieved a bottle of Buzz's best whiskey from beneath the counter and a tumbler from the shelf. She poured two fingers of the dark amber liquid into the glass and set it in front of her friend. Blake noticed Doris's grateful smile before the woman tossed back the drink. The redhead didn't hesitate in giving her a refill.

Doris put a hand on Blake's before she could move away. "Maybe you should just leave the bottle. It's been that kind of day."

The redhead leaned against the bar, smiling a sad half smile. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Maybe later?"

Blake smiled at the inflection that turned the statement into a question. "Absolutely. I'll call you. Hit ya again?" She motioned with the bottle at Doris's glass and Doris nodded.

When the door chimed again, Doris groaned at seeing Frank and Eleni enter. It seemed that the battle of wills she had been witness to out at the park had followed her and now the two exes stood in the middle of Company, making the stress-induced headache she already had start thundering behind her eyes.

Doris's frustration was replaced by shock when she felt the sleeve of her jacket suddenly soaked. She looked up to see Blake overflowing her glass with whiskey. She grabbed her hand, lifting the bottle. "Whoa, Blake, watch out!"

Blake started, finally realizing the mess she had made. "Oh God, Doris. I'm so sorry!" She noticed her friend was trying to dry her clothes off so she raced around with her bar rag. "Here, let me help." Blake took Doris's hand and wiped the sleeve of her jacket, which was already dripping onto her lap. When Blake went to dab the moisture away from her lap, Doris jumped a little.

"Thanks, but I got it." She took the rag from Blake and continued drying off.

"There you go, Blake, getting Doris all wet again." Olivia mumbled quietly, earning her a death glare from Doris and a nudge on the arm from Natalia.

Seeming to remember why she spilled the liquor in the first place, Blake spun around to Frank and Eleni still arguing.

Eleni wasn't in Frank's face, but she crossed her arms with defiant self-assurance. Frank's face had turned an abnormal shade of red because of the nerve of his ex-wife.

Calmly and very matter-of-factly, Eleni clarified once again, "I told you. I took extra samples from the scene to ensure they were collected and handled properly."

"But my men had already done that." Frank was doing his best to keep his composure in front of family and friends, but she was getting under his skin.

She sighed. "And they're not CSI agents either. Besides, I lived in Springfield long enough to know the police department isn't exactly top notch."

Olivia snickered, overhearing the comment, and Natalia nudged her again.

"Yeah? Well, you haven't been around in a long time, Eleni. A lot has changed around here." The clear shift from professional to personal was evident to everyone and a silence fell over the group. Eleni glared at Frank and opened her mouth to respond.

A commotion in the kitchen drew everyone's attention to the swinging kitchen doors. Marina barreled through with her arms full of huge pickle jars. "Hey, Blake, I found these..." She stopped mid-sentence when she saw Eleni.

"What are you doing here?" Marina's voice held no indication of honest inquiry. She had hoped her mother had given up trying to see her or Henry.

"I work here." The dark-haired woman regarded her daughter sadly. This wasn't exactly how she'd wanted everyone to hear about it.

“How here?” Marina asked with a trace of panic in her voice.

Frank piped up, clearly agitated, “She’s the new CSI director. Mayor Wolfe fired Desilva this morning.”

“What?” Marina gasped. Blake moved fast to catch the pickle jar that slipped from the young woman’s hands.

Eleni looked incredulously at Frank then at their daughter. “Yeah, I am. And Frank, I can speak for myself, okay?”

Olivia and Natalia exchanged a look, trying hard to not chuckle at Frank being put in his place by his ex. Olivia’s phone buzzed and she reached into her pocket to fish it out. She looked at it with confusion then glanced at her partner.

“It’s Ava. I’d better take this.” Natalia nodded and Olivia moved to find a quiet spot in the back of the restaurant.

Eleni turned to leave, but said, “This conversation isn’t over, Frank.” She excused herself so she could get back to the crime scene to gather more evidence. Then, she knew she’d need to go by the coroner’s office to talk to him before he started the autopsy.

Frank moved over to the bar and got a beer, then set it down before going to pick up Francesca. Taking some time to play with his daughter seemed a lot more appealing than thinking about the mess his life was in at the moment.

Marina wasn’t having it. She was tired of her father being walked on by every woman in Springfield. She stepped closer to him. “Why aren’t you doing anything?”

Frank sighed. “There’s nothing to do, except deal with it.”

The young woman turned to Doris, who had sipped down her overfilled glass until there was almost nothing left. Marina glared at the mayor with her hands on her hips. “What the hell were you thinking? She can’t work in this town.”

Doris raised an eyebrow and looked Marina up and down for a moment before calmly replying, “She was qualified and we needed to replace Desilva. The timing was perfect.”

“I’ve worked with Desilva. He does a great job.” Marina’s voice rose with anger.

“He was mediocre at best, Marina.” Doris’s words slurred together. “But I’m surprised you’d know the difference anyway.”

Natalia saw the look of rage on Marina's face and thought fast. "Hey, Marina?" The other woman turned to look at her. "Can you do me a huge favor? We raced out of the house without any milk for Francesca. Would you mind getting some from the kitchen?"

Marina softened at the mention of her half-sister. "Sure."

When she left, Natalia leaned over to Doris. "This might be a good time to leave."

"The hell I will! And certainly not for the likes of Marina Cooper." Doris threw back probably her fourth or fifth shot. She'd lost count and the headache was making her testier than usual.

Frank looked at the mayor. He knew his daughter was out of line, but he also knew that if anything bad happened, it wouldn't be entirely her fault. "Doris, you're drunk, and it's not even noon. You need to go home."

"Don't tell me what to do, Frank. You have a habit of that, don't you? Telling women what to do."

Blake's eyes widened, and quickly she stepped forward. "You know what, Doris. My shift is over, and you owe me lunch. How about we go to your place and make some sandwiches or something?"

Doris looked at her confused. "I owe you lunch?"

"Yeah, don't you remember?"

"No." Doris pouted a little and Blake had to suppress a smile.

"That's alright. Just trust me." Doris shrugged and slid off the stool.

Blake grabbed the mayor's arm and guided her to the door. On the way out, she turned her head slightly to give Natalia a wink and a nod.

When Marina got back, she almost looked disappointed to see that Doris was gone. She handed over the slightly warm milk to Natalia and went back to the kitchen. Olivia had since gotten off the phone and walked over to Emma and Sarah's table. She cleaned them up as best she could and brought them over to where everyone was standing.

Natalia saw her walk up. "How's Ava?"

Olivia scratched at her ear. "Um...good. Sort of."

The younger woman tilted her head a little. "Sort of?"

"She...um...kind of lost her job and wants to stay here for a little while." Olivia bit her bottom lip, worriedly.

Natalia raised her eyebrows. "And that's a problem? Well, aside from the job thing. That stinks. But she's family, Olivia, of course she can stay here."

Olivia swallowed, nervously. "That's good. I'm glad you said that because she's here...now...like, at the airport, now."

The brunette's smiling face fell slightly before she started giggling. She shook her head. "You Spencer women sure know how to make an entrance!"

Olivia and Natalia left with Francesca and the two little girls. After a quick call to Jonathan, Olivia made plans for him to meet them at the airport so he could pick up Sarah. Though he'd said the police were almost finished questioning him, she didn't want to take Sarah or Emma anywhere near the park for a while.

In less than ten minutes, they arrived at the small airport. Ava was standing near the parking lot looking for them.

Emma had overheard her mom tell Natalia that Ava was in town, and during the short drive to the airport, she had talked non-stop about her big sister. In the back seat, the little girl bounced excitedly as the car pulled to the curb and she saw Ava waving at them.

Olivia got out and helped Ava get her bags in the trunk. She took her daughter into her arms and held her for a long moment.

Ava pulled back, surprised at the intense hug and sniffle from her mom. "Are you okay?"

Olivia wiped at her eyes. "You won't believe the morning we've had. Murder, mayhem, all kinds of craziness."

The younger woman smiled slightly. "Sounds pretty typical for Springfield."

Olivia barked out a laugh. "You have no idea!"

A dark car pulled up beside them, and Olivia turned, tensing before she realized it was Anna.

Jonathan opened the passenger door. The back door of Natalia's car opened and Sarah ran with all her might into her father's arms. He hugged her tight, closing his eyes at the

reassuring feel of having her in his arms again. He wiped a tear from his face and then waved to Ava and made a quick gesture to Olivia indicating that he'd call her.

She nodded, and she and Ava climbed into the car to head back to the farmhouse.

Natalia turned to look at her partner. "Have you noticed how wherever Jonathan is, Anna's not far away?"

Olivia looked at her for a moment clearly in deep thought. She didn't answer Natalia, but the brunette could tell the older woman was pondering the question.

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Act 3

Stumbling ungracefully through the front doors, Blake had a hard time guiding an intoxicated Doris to the couch so she could dump the other woman in the middle of it. Puffing out a breath to get her hair out of her eyes, the redhead shook her head at the well-dressed heap before her. Doris subconsciously scooted to the corner and lifted her feet, curling up in a ball.

Blake turned to head into the kitchen intent on retrieving a couple glasses of water and a bottle of aspirin, but turned back when she heard a moan from the other woman. Smirking, she responded, "Oh, it lives."

"Funny...um...are you leaving?" Her normally commanding voice sounded unsure and small.

"Do you want me to?" Blake's uncertainty seemed to match Doris's own.

Doris started to shake her head and then quickly thought better of it. "No. Besides, you're a waitress and you know how to make a mean pot of coffee. I think I could use some."

Blake smiled at the new, hopeful tone in Doris's voice. "Just this once, Doris. I don't make coffee for just anyone when I'm not working."

Doris smiled. "That's because you like me."

Blake blushed slightly and looked down at the floor. She raised her hand up, holding her thumb and forefinger close together. "Maybe a little, but don't let it go to your head, Wolfe. I can withdraw my coffee-making skills like that." She snapped her fingers.

"Tough love...I like that." Blake rolled her eyes at the quip and headed to the kitchen.

Doris, though definitely drunk, sighed in appreciation as she watched Blake walk away. She rolled over, closing her eyes, and mumbling to herself, “Don’t even go there, Doris.”

Thirty minutes later, Blake came back with steaming hot coffee, two mugs, a pitcher of cream and a bowl of sugar on a tray, along with a glass of water and two aspirin. She set it on the table and tilted her head at the sight of Doris spread out on the couch, her mouth hanging open and one skirt-clad leg hanging off the side. She poured a mug of the coffee and made it exactly the way Doris liked it. She sat down on the edge of the couch next to her, and holding the mug in one hand, she shook Doris’s arm.

The other woman mumbled and stirred a little. “Mmmm, baybeeee, youf insafibul.”

Blake snickered a little and wondered for a brief moment what else she could prompt Doris to say while drunk, but then she shook her head and decided against it. The more time she spent with Doris, the more she found her quirky and charming, even likeable and sweet; no one would ever believe it if she told them. She couldn’t torture the woman who was quickly becoming her friend.

Instead, Blake poked her gently in the side. “Come on, Doris. Wake up!”

The other woman stirred slightly but didn’t crack her eyes open, so she tried again. She gave Doris another poke to the ribs. “Come on, Doris, get up.”

Doris squirmed but still didn’t open her eyes. Blake narrowed her eyes, thinking, and when the idea came to her, the redhead smirked evilly. She set the mug down on the table and leaned over, whispering in Doris’s ear. “I’m completely and totally naked.”

Doris scrambled to a sitting position. “Really?”

“No, of course not,” Blake smiled. “But I had to get you up somehow.”

Doris grabbed at her throbbing head. “Oh, damn! That hurts.” With a sigh of gratitude, she accepted the water and aspirin from Blake. After she swallowed the pills, Blake handed her the mug of coffee.

Blake bit her lip. She was dying to know what was going on with Doris; she had a pretty good idea, but she also knew how protective her friend was of her image. Doris wanted everyone to think she was a hard-hearted bitch, but Blake had seen her softer side and knew better. It was that side of her that the redhead hoped wouldn’t take offense to the question.

After taking a hearty sip of her coffee, Doris looked up to see Blake smiling as the other woman picked up her own mug. With a shy glance at her friend, she spoke, "Mmmm, this is absolutely perfect, Blake. Thank you."

Blake tucked some stray hair behind her ear before responding. "You're welcome. So, what has you drinking so early in the morning?"

"Well, my best friend's babysitter was just shot to death. Sounds like a good enough reason to me," Doris quipped. But she could see that Blake wasn't buying it, since the redhead just lifted an eyebrow and waited. Doris got exasperated with the silence. "What? Marina was acting like an ass."

"Oh, please! As if you would ever let someone like Marina Cooper get to you." Blake waited while Doris stared down into her mug. "What's really bothering you, Doris?"

Doris rubbed her forehead. Normally with any type of personal question, she'd just snap the inquisitive person's head off. She had spent so long blocking personal inquiries that it had become second nature. But she looked at Blake's open expression and couldn't do it. She knew the other woman was a horrible gossip but for some reason she felt compelled to talk to her.

"Can I simply say everything is getting to me? It's the easiest answer."

Blake smiled. "I don't need easy. I can handle complicated, so try me."

Doris looked at the other woman curiously, and then decided to let the immediate thought in her head pass. Instead, she took a long swallow of the lukewarm coffee and let her head fall back to the couch behind her. "I've wasted a lot of time worrying about and trying to plan out every step of my life. I'm tired of planning, thinking, and worrying all...the...time. I'm tired of the politics and the games and the constant maneuvering. I'm tired of not being able to just be me."

Blake nodded in sympathetic understanding. "I remember some the frustrations Ross had when he was Mayor; the politicking, and all the societal expectations to be something or someone he really wasn't. And you know me; I don't hold my tongue very well, so when he was frustrated, I let everyone know."

Doris smiled at that. "Very true."

The redhead shrugged and set her empty coffee cup on the table. "Needless to say, I get it. So, what are you going to do about it?"

Doris blew out a frustrated breath. "I'm not really sure yet. I just know that one day I'd like to feel free, you know? To do what I want, with anyone I want, whenever and wherever I want." She sat up and put her finished coffee on the table as well.

Blake had a feeling that last part of the other woman's remarks had to do with Anna, or at least love in general. She knew Doris was probably still hurting over their breakup, but from studying her friend's body language, she wasn't going to offer any further insight.

Blake gave her a reassuring smile. "You will, Doris. You deserve to be happy too."

Not exactly sure what to do with her friend's open sincerity, Doris stood, feeling like she wanted to bolt; it took her a moment to realize she was in her own home. She sighed, shifting uncomfortably. "Thanks...for the coffee and...um..."

Feeling sympathy for her friend, Blake stood and moved towards Doris, and placed a hand on Doris's forearm. "Look, Doris, I'm going to go now. If you need anything, you let me know."

Doris nodded and answered. "Yeah, I'm okay. Thanks." Blake headed to the door and Doris remembered the tragic events from earlier in the day and that a gunman was still on the loose. "Hey, Blake?"

Hearing the concern in Doris's voice, Blake turned around as she opened the door. "Yeah?"

Anxiously, Doris shifted on her heels. "Can you, um, call me when you get home?" Blake gave her an odd look, and she fumbled for the right words. "I mean, there is a killer out there and you're kind of a friend so...I just want to make sure you're home safe."

A big grin broke out on Blake's face and she felt quite pleased that Doris cared about her safety. "I can do that."

Doris came up behind her and held the door open. "Great! Be careful."

"You too. I'll talk to you later." Blake turned to go to her car and was surprised to find that she was humming a little as she walked away.

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The road through town was unusually congested. While stopped at a light, Phillip checked his phone one more time to see if Olivia or Natalia had called. Many possibilities ran through his mind. Maybe they forgot Emma was supposed to stay with him this weekend. He discounted that quickly. Emma would never let them forget. Maybe Emma wasn't feeling well. In that case, a phone call would have been nice. Speaking of which...he found

Olivia's number in his phone's directory and tried calling one more time. When the voice mail picked up again, he flipped it closed and threw it on the passenger seat.

The light changed and he slowly drove forward down Main Street, and as he approached the lake at a crawl, blue and red flashing lights caught his eye. Yellow tape marked off a small area, and from a distance, he could make out the figures of Frank Cooper and Remy Boudreaux.

"So, this is what had everyone poking along." He shook his head at how morbidly curious people could be.

The traffic slowed enough that he was almost at a standstill when he came alongside the crime scene. Rolling down his window, he called to Frank.

The police chief turned, surprised, but when he noticed who it was, he jogged over to the car. "Hey, Phillip."

"What happened?" Phillip asked, jerking his head in the direction of the yellow tape.

Under normal circumstances, Frank wouldn't have told him anything about an active investigation, especially as the police had yet to iron out enough details to call a press conference. However, considering that the victim was Phillip's daughter's sitter, he didn't want Phillip to find out from someone else.

"Well, someone got shot." Frank hesitated at providing more information, scratching at the back of his neck.

Phillip cringed. "Was it anyone we know?"

"Um, it was Jane." Frank didn't know what else to say, but he became worried as Phillip's steel blue eyes turned cold. The look served as a good reminder to never piss off a Spaulding.

Phillip saw Frank's mouth moving, but didn't hear anything he said. He saw his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, but didn't feel the ache. Everything was blocked out, except for one small thought.

"Emma."

"She's with Olivia."

Wheels squealed as Phillip took advantage of a gap between him and the car in front of him. He jumped the curb and turned right down a side street. A left at the next block and

he was flying past the small shops of downtown Springfield. In less than a minute, he turned right at the highway heading out of town.

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No longer hearing Emma's animated laughter, Olivia looked into the living room. She smiled seeing Emma curled up in the corner of the couch, while Dora the Explorer still played in the background. The morning drama had zapped Emma of her usual energy. Olivia covered her with a blanket and shuffled back to the kitchen where Natalia and Ava sat at the table. A bottle of whiskey sat in the middle. The glass that had been poured for her was sitting in her spot. Ava took a long swallow from her glass, while Natalia rolled her glass in her hands, staring down into its contents.

Olivia sat down and resisted the urge to toss back the entire shot. Instead slowly, she raised the glass and took a small sip. While they all needed it to take the tense edge off, she wanted to make sure she kept her wits about her. Glancing at the back door to make sure the alarm was set, she finally let herself relax.

Natalia looked up then, taking a small swallow. Reaching across the table, she took Olivia's hand. "Are you okay?"

"I'd be a hell of a lot better if I knew who did this, so I could kill them." Olivia was serious; if she'd had her gun in the presence of anyone who threatened her family, she wouldn't hesitate to kill them.

Natalia squeezed her partner's hand, empathizing with the anger Olivia felt. "I know, baby."

"I just worry about Emma." Ava sighed and finished off her glass. "She's been through a lot."

Olivia ran her free hand over Ava's thick, short hair. "So have you."

Ava tilted her head a little, the calming touch putting a smile on her face. "I'm a grown woman though. I can handle loss a little better. She's just a kid."

"With Leyla coming, maybe that'll help." Natalia shrugged. "Emma likes her so much."

Olivia nodded and hoped she was right.

Not knowing who Natalia was talking about, Ava looked between the two women, confused. "I missed something, I think. Who's Leyla?"

Natalia perked up and smiled. "Oh, that's my younger sister."

“You have a sister?” Ava asked, surprised at the revelation.

Natalia nodded. “A brother, too. He’s older though. I’m not that close to him.”

Ava was genuinely intrigued. It seemed like she was always learning something new about Natalia. “And she’s coming here?”

Olivia had been smiling at the exchange but had a sudden realization. She cringed slightly when she spoke. “Uh, yeah, and she’s staying here too. You can share Emma’s room with her though.”

Ava shook her head and raised her hands, letting her mom know not to worry about the lack of room. “No, it’s okay. I know I surprised you. I can stay at the Beacon.”

As Olivia and Natalia exchanged a worried look, a decision was immediately reached; turning to her daughter, Olivia assuredly spoke, “No, you’re definitely not staying at the Beacon.

“Why not?”

Olivia threw up her hands in exasperation. “Because there’s a killer out there, that’s why.”

“Mom, the guy was probably some crackhead looking for a few bucks, and it went wrong. I doubt he’ll do anything else until the cops find him.” Ava watched as her mom stood and began to pace the small expanse of the kitchen.

“I don’t like it.” Olivia shook her head. “There’s been some crazy stuff going on in this town for the last several months.”

“And this is different from any other time? You don’t have to treat me like a child. I can handle myself.” Ava’s jaw clenched a little in defiance.

With a wry grin, Natalia watched the battle of wills between mother and daughter. When Ava straightened up in her chair, shoulders rolled in an all-too-familiar manner, Natalia realized the younger woman was gearing up for a verbal war. It wasn’t often that her partner lost an argument, but when she glanced at Olivia, she knew that the older woman wasn’t up to a blow out with her daughter.

Olivia sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “Fine! You can stay at the Beacon.”

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A knock at the door made all three women jump. Since Olivia was closest, she stood and checked through the curtain.

“Damn it!” She cursed her forgetfulness.

“What?” Natalia stood, worried.

Disengaging the alarm and unlocking the deadbolt, Olivia opened the door to allow Phillip in. Chagrined, she quickly turned to Natalia and then back to her ex. “Sorry, we forgot to call; we had our phones off.”

Phillip looked worried and frantic. “Is Emma okay?”

Olivia ran her hand again through her hair. “She’s fine, Phillip. She’s shaken and exhausted from all the commotion, but fine.” She was about to tell her ex-husband that their daughter was napping, but before she could get it out, Emma came running into the kitchen.

“Daddy!” She leaped into his arms, wrapping them around his neck.

“Oh, baby, hey! Are you okay?” He stroked the soft hair on her head and held her close as she nuzzled into his neck.

The little girl leaned back and nodded. “But Jane got hurt.”

He brushed away a tear that fell on her cheek, his heart hurting for her pain. “I heard.”

“She was protecting me and Sarah.”

He looked at Olivia. “Sarah?”

Olivia closed the door and secured the lock again. “Yeah, Jonathan was there and left Sarah in Jane’s care.” She looked down, clearly discomfited, and when she looked back at him, her voice was lowered. “The attacker tried to kidnap Sarah and...um...he pulled a gun on the girls.”

Phillip closed his eyes tight as first fear and then fury washed over him. He pulled Emma close again. He never wanted to let her go. He just wanted to hold on forever. If he had his way, nobody who wasn’t family would get within fifty feet of Emma ever again. Then he had an idea.

“Come stay with me.” When he noticed that Olivia looked ready to disagree, he turned to Natalia. “Just for a couple of days while they look for the guy who did this. I have the best

security in the state. I have tougher background checks than the FBI. And while you're safe at the mansion, I'll get some for here, too. Round-the-clock watches and cameras."

"I don't know, Phillip." Olivia resisted the idea of anyone looking out for her family other than her. But when she saw the pleading look in her ex's eyes, his face haunted by the fear of his daughter being threatened – a fear she knew all too well – she gave in. "Okay. Just for a couple of days though."

"That's all I ask." Smiling, he set his now happy daughter down.

Natalia thought she should give Olivia and Phillip a moment to talk, so she stepped forward to run her hand over Emma's hair. "Hey, Em, why don't you come help me pack a bag for your mommy and Francesca? At least your bag's still in the car."

Glad that all of her family would be together, Emma happily ran ahead of Natalia and went up the stairs.

Ava looked at Phillip. "Do you mind dropping me off at the Beacon?"

He started to answer but Olivia interrupted him. "You can come with us. There's plenty of room at the mansion."

"You should." Phillip tried to help his ex out a little.

Ava tilted her head at the tall man. "Don't encourage her. Really, I'll be fine, Mom. Besides, no one, except the people in this house, even knows I'm in town."

Olivia threw up her hands. "Okay, okay. I'll stop."

While they waited for Natalia and Emma, Phillip talked to Olivia about how he could set up surveillance around the farmhouse and have his guards do passes of the house periodically. In spite of her changed relationship with Phillip, a small part of her hesitated at the idea of allowing the man who had kidnapped their daughter to have the ability to watch them day and night. She had to remind herself to have a little faith in him. He had been nothing but supportive of her and Natalia. He hadn't done anything to jeopardize Emma, and it didn't seem like he had any ill intentions now. All she could do was trust him.

After a few minutes, Natalia and Emma came down with their bags – one big one with her and Olivia's clothes and another a little smaller with all of Francesca's clothes and necessities.

Natalia looked at them. "I think we're ready."

Olivia went and got Francesca, who seemed happily oblivious to the madness around her. Her attention was totally focused on the little dangling toys on the bar over her carrier. The little dolphin seemed to particularly intrigue her. The little girl giggled and batted at it as her mom carried her to the car. Ava rode with Phillip so she could easily jump out and get her bag out of the back when they got to the Beacon. The rest of the family rode in Olivia's car.

By the time they came back through town, the scene at the park had been mostly cleared and the traffic had decreased significantly. The yellow tape and the police officer standing guard to keep the area from being trampled and contaminated were the only evidence that anything had happened. Natalia quickly distracted a curious Emma by pointing to a strange cloud formation in the sky and asking her if she knew what it looked like.

Emma smiled. "A puppy."

Olivia grumbled from the front seat. "Everything looks like a puppy right now!"

When they pulled up to the Beacon, Olivia gave detailed instructions to Ava to be vigilant of anything suspicious. She handed her a key to her oldest daughter. "In case you need it, this is a key for one of the Beacon SUVs. I'd prefer it though if you didn't leave the room."

Ava smiled and hugged her mother. "I'll be fine, and I'll call if anything weird happens."

Olivia climbed back in the car and reluctantly left Ava in front of the hotel.

~~*~*

As soon as the large double doors opened onto the foyer of the Spaulding mansion, Emma took off up the stairs on a familiar track to her bedroom. Seeing that her partner was trying to juggle a squirming infant and the baby bag, Olivia dumped their luggage near the bottom of the staircase and gestured to Natalia to hand Francesca over to her. With a pat on the bottom, Olivia determined that the infant's diaper was still okay; she figured that her daughter was probably hungry after waking from her nap. She looked up just as Natalia handed her one of Francesca's bottles.

Beth came out from the library to greet them. She immediately walked up to her husband and gave him a quick kiss.

Natalia smiled at the newlywed bliss that still clung to the blonde like a comfortable blanket. Even in the midst of the kiss, Beth managed to smile and giggle. Natalia knew that feeling and wondered if she looked that enamored when she kissed Olivia.

She looked at the woman on her mind, watching as Olivia rocked their daughter in her arms and fed her. Green eyes glanced up at her, and she felt her heart beat in double time. Yeah, she was pretty sure that she looked just as giddy and in love as Beth.

The blonde broke from Phillip and went up to Olivia and Francesca. She cooed and made funny faces at the baby, who had the Spencer perfect timing of burping in her face. Olivia bit her lip to keep from laughing, and Phillip didn't even try to hide his laughter.

"Funny, little lady. I guess that's my cue to get back to work." Beth turned to Phillip. "John's waiting in your office. How do you all feel about homemade pizza?"

"Pizza?" Emma picked up the most important element of the conversation from the top of the stairs.

"Yep, pepperoni and triple cheese. Does that sound good to you?" Beth smiled up at her.

The little girl rolled her eyes. "As if you even have to ask!" The adults all giggled at the precocious girl.

When all the adults stopped laughing, she asked, "Can Peyton and I help?"

"You bet," Beth called back. "I'll come get you when I'm finished with my work in a little while."

"Okay!" Emma ran back down the hall behind her, presumably to tell Peyton they were going to help with dinner.

Beth gave Francesca's foot a quick tickle, making the baby smile, and then went over to Phillip. "I'd better get back to work. If you need anything, let me know." She turned back to Olivia and Natalia, remembering Phillip's earlier explanation when he called en route from the farmhouse. "I'm really glad all of you are okay. Stay here as long as you want."

"Thanks." The two women answered in unison.

Beth gave Phillip one last kiss and headed back in the direction of the library.

He looked at Olivia as she settled the baby back in her carrier, then angled his head towards the hallway across the foyer. "Let's go talk to John and get everything set up."

"Sounds good." Olivia followed behind him holding Francesca's carrier with Natalia on her other side.

At the end of the hallway, a large door opened to a spacious, but modestly appointed office. Similar in size to the library on the other side of the foyer, this room boasted floor to ceiling single-pane windows along one wall overlooking the massive grounds expanding behind the mansion. Rather than books, flat-screen televisions lined the walls; each panel displaying different channels from CNN, to foreign stock exchange feeds, and camera footage of the grounds.

Propped on a window sill just to the left of and behind the large desk in the middle of the room was a burly and handsome man who appeared to be only a few years older than Rafe. Stepping forward and acknowledging his head of security, Phillip extended his hand to the man. "Thanks for coming, John. I know it was last minute."

"Not a problem, Mr. Spaulding. What can I do for you?"

Phillip turned a little and gestured to the women behind him. "You probably saw these ladies at my New Year's party, but this is Olivia, my ex-wife and Emma's mom, and her partner, Natalia, and their daughter, Francesca. They have had a very unfortunate day. It seems that Emma's babysitter was attacked and killed at the park earlier, and Emma was a witness."

"Did they catch who did it?" The muscled man crossed his arms - his sheer size threatening to unravel the navy suit he wore.

"That's kind of the problem and why they're here. The attacker got away." Phillip answered.

John raised a dark eyebrow, his jaw instinctively clenching in sympathetic anger. "I'll help in any way I can. What do you need?"

"The works," Phillip supplied. "I want no expense spared to make their home secure. I believe an alarm system has already been installed and probably cameras. You may want to coordinate with their security company to avoid duplicity. Drive-bys every half hour, whether they're home or not. Escorts whenever they want or need it."

John nodded confidently at his boss. "Will do, Mr. Spaulding. I'll make some calls this evening and get started first thing in the morning." He reached over to the desk for a pad of paper and a pen. He scribbled something down and handed it to Natalia. "This is my cell number and pager number. Call me. Anytime, day or night."

The gesture made Natalia's eyes tear up. She finally let out the breath she had been holding. "Thank you. Both of you, so much."

Olivia wrapped her free arm around Natalia's shoulder and kissed her on the top of her head.

Phillip smiled at the two women then shrugged. "What else could I do? You're family."

~~*~*

As Olivia descended the stairs, having put Francesca to bed for the night, she couldn't help but smile as laughter bubbled up from the den. Hearing her family so happy and safe, at least for a little while, had her fighting back tears. Poking her head through the doorway of the room, she simply watched the scene for a moment. Natalia and Emma were curled up under a blanket. A pile of pizza crusts and empty glasses sat on the coffee table in front of them. They giggled at Hammy from *Over the Hedge* as he chased after the elusive cookie of dreams. Looking around the room, she saw Phillip, Beth, and Peyton were curled up on the adjacent couch. Actually, Beth was sound asleep, her head resting on Phillip's shoulder.

Olivia pushed off the door frame and quietly slipped into the space beside her partner. She stretched her arm across the back of the couch, tickled at Emma's neck, and then leaned over to place a lingering kiss on Natalia's cheek.

"I love you."

With eyes full of love, Natalia turned to her, raising her hand and gliding the back of her fingers over Olivia's cheek, a part of her feeling that rush of wonder at being able to love this beautiful woman. She leaned over and kissed Olivia softly on the lips. "I love you, too."



They shared a long look that went beyond words. Natalia shook from the shiver that ran up her spine. It wasn't the usual heated rush that came from the smoldering look of her partner, but another feeling that gripped her heart – tender and protective. Setting the feeling aside with a brief smile, she refocused her attention on the innocence and humor of the movie they were watching.

Thirty minutes later, all but Olivia and Natalia were asleep. SnORES filled the room, and they turned to smile at each other.

On the other couch, Phillip was stretched out with both arms over the back of the couch. If his eyes weren't closed and his mouth wasn't hanging open, with a thin line of drool dripping from his chin, he would have looked awake.

Olivia nudged the brunette and pointed at Phillip. "I wish I could reach my phone without waking everyone. I'd so take a picture right now."

Natalia slapped her playfully on the leg. "Come on; let's get these sleepy heads to bed." She slid her arms under Emma's legs and shoulders and then pulled her over into her lap. The little girl barely stirred, so Natalia got a good grip and managed to stand, with the help of a little push from her partner. Quietly, she started to climb the stairs to the second floor.

Olivia stood and for a few brief seconds debated whether or not she could get away with taking a picture of her ex in his current predicament. Deciding it was worth the risk, she quickly dismissed the debate in her head and went to her purse. Walking up close to her ex-husband, she held the camera on her phone as close to him as possible and ensured she got a glimmer of light off the drool before snapping the picture. When Phillip jerked awake, she quickly dropped the phone into her pocket.

"Wha...?" He mumbled and rubbed at his eyes.

"Wakey, wakey, sunshine!" Olivia enthusiastically whispered.

"What? What did you do, Olivia?" He glared at her but with little effect.

She pouted and acted offended. "Nothing. See if I wake you again to prevent you from getting a nasty kink in your neck. Besides, you snore. It was really annoying."

The blonde man groaned and tapped his wife on the shoulder. When she stirred, he scooped Peyton up in his arms and carted her off to her room.

Olivia followed her ex up the stairs, while Beth turned off the television and the lights. At the top of the stairs, she wished them a good night and headed down the long corridor to the room she and Natalia were sharing.

Emma and Francesca's room was across the hall from theirs, and when she got closer, the door opened and Natalia came out.

The brunette walked across the hall and met her partner next to their door. "Em's out like a light."

Olivia tilted her head. "She's had a rough day. We all have." Olivia watched as Natalia's mood immediately became serious.

The other woman took Olivia's hand in her own. "Yes, it has, and right now, I just want to wash off the ugliness of this day."

The blonde nodded at her and opened the door to their room – one of several master suites. Within minutes, a hot bath was waiting and pajamas were set out on the bed. They brushed their teeth, side-by-side, and Olivia turned to go out so Natalia could take her bath first. This time, though, she stopped in the doorway when she felt Natalia's small but strong hand reach out to grab her and stop her from leaving.

Natalia moved closer to her partner and closed her eyes as she nuzzled into Olivia's soft, fragrant hair. She loved the exotic, sweet scent of the older woman. The fragrance reflected the nature of the woman in her arms – wild and tender, strong and fragile. Tonight, she needed the strength and solidity of Olivia Spencer; her confidence and power, her courage and determination. The significance of what could have happened today weighed on Natalia, and she needed to feel the power of their bond.

Turning Olivia around, she tried to convey every thought that had just been in her head with a single look. Capturing her partner's lips, she kissed her solidly and boldly then pulled back to whisper her tongue softly, reverently, over Olivia's lips. She quivered as strong arms wrapped around her waist. With a slight push, she guided Olivia to the wall. Slowly, she kissed her way along the older woman's jaw, eliciting a soft moan from her when she nibbled, then licked, the tender skin under her jaw just in front of her right ear. Olivia's knees went weak as the kisses eased down her neck into the shadow of cleavage on her chest. She rolled her head back against the wall and let the wondrous sensations take over her body. She loved this. Loved feeling this way with Natalia. She tangled her hands in the brunette's thick hair, guiding her lower. She felt Natalia push the hem of her blouse up; the younger woman's finely boned fingers tracing feather-light circles along her ribcage and kissing along her stomach. She moved her hands to Natalia's shoulders to brace herself up.

The quivering of Natalia's shoulders under her hands worried her. Gently, she pulled the younger woman to her feet and saw the tracks of tears down her face. She wiped at the wetness with her thumbs. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

Natalia suddenly broke out sobbing, and she collapsed into Olivia's arms. The dark head shook furiously against her shoulder, her voice determined. "I could have lost you today, querida. I'll never lose you. Do you understand? Never."

Olivia pulled her in closer, rubbing soothing circles on her back with one hand and holding her head close with the other, letting her lips spread kisses over her hair and down her cheek to her mouth. "You never have to worry about that. I'll always be here."

As they broke the kiss, the fear and desperation Natalia felt a moment ago was gone, and was instead replaced with a different kind of fire. She kissed Olivia passionately again, nibbling at her lower lip, then going back in for a hard kiss. Her words came out as a husky plea. "Show me, Olivia. I need to feel it. I need you."

Olivia didn't need to hear anymore. She captured her lover's mouth with her own and guided her back to the vanity, pressing against her to encourage her to sit on top of it. She leaned back and teased her hand down the opening of Natalia's robe, undoing the tie. She never ceased to be amazed by how Natalia took her breath away. She didn't pray often, but at moments like this she couldn't help but be thankful for someone seeing fit to give her her own personal angel.

Slipping the soft cotton robe off Natalia's tan shoulders, she leaned in and kissed the younger woman reverently. "Whatever you want, Natalia. I'm yours."

Dark eyes glittered with unshed tears, evoking a sadness so deep it nearly ripped the breath from Olivia's lungs to see it on her angel's face.

Natalia whispered, "Make love to me, Olivia, as if you'll never get another chance."

The pain her partner was in cut through Olivia's soul, and before the crying that was building inside her could escape, she descended on Natalia's mouth, reaching out with her body and soul. As their kisses deepened, their tears allowed free reign, coating their faces and cleansing their grief. In the dance of passion, their pain was pushed aside as Olivia pulled Natalia's naked body against her own.

Olivia continued to languidly kiss Natalia, letting her mind slow and absorb the sensation. She focused on the small details – how her skin tingled where Natalia touched her, the perfect symphony of love and desire filling the room, the warm press of skin, the exotic flavor of her lover's tan shoulder as Olivia's lips glided across it. She memorized the sound of Natalia's soft whimper as she kissed the hollow between her collarbone and neck and her moan of need as the back of Olivia's fingers teased her nipples.

Everything about the two of them and about this love was perfect. It made her want to love this woman perfectly, give her all that she ever dreamed of and wished for. Nothing she had ever felt or experienced before could explain the aching need she had to be able to provide the younger woman with everything her heart desired.

Kissing across Natalia's chest and up the other side of her neck, Olivia teased the sensitive spot below her partner's ear with her tongue before pulling back to look at her. If she was going to make love to Natalia as if she'd never have another chance, as her lover had asked, then Olivia wanted to remember the look on Natalia's face as she surrendered to her need.

Never breaking eye contact, Olivia grazed Natalia's hardened nipples with the palms of her hands, relishing in the ticklish feel against her skin. She took each one between her fingers and gently squeezed, rolling them a little, giving just enough pressure to send a tiny jolt of electricity through her lover's body.

Natalia bit her lip and a small moan escaped. "Mmmmm, Olivia."

Moving her hands to Natalia's sides, Olivia skimmed the soft skin of her partner's stomach and then back to the side to grasp her hips. She felt Natalia's legs wrap around her waist, their wetness meeting as they came together. A shudder ran through Olivia, and she couldn't resist pushing her pelvis against Natalia, seeking a little relief from the building desire. The motion seemed to spark a corresponding need in her partner as Olivia felt Natalia's hips buck forward.

That was Olivia's undoing. She wanted to touch her, feel the evidence of their love. As the younger woman leaned back, Olivia wrapped an arm around her waist to hold her up. When Natalia's head fell back, her eyes closing, Olivia felt the loss. "Please look at me."

Dark eyes full of love and passion met hers as Olivia slid her hand between their bodies. She fought her own urge to instinctively close her eyes when her fingers found the slick wetness between Natalia's legs. Her lover's body shook a little as three fingers entered her. They both closed their eyes for a moment, a little overwhelmed by the emotions surrounding them.

Slowly, Olivia built their rhythm, her hips increasing the force and pressure of her fingers inside Natalia.

Natalia tightened her thighs around her partner's waist, bucking her hips forward as she tried to pull Olivia in deeper. "Oh God...Olivia."

Olivia felt her partner's muscles tighten around her fingers, and knowing Natalia was close, she kissed her quickly to get her attention. "Look at me."

Natalia's eyes flew open, and with two more hard thrusts, her body went rigid and she groaned out her release.

Olivia felt the soft fluttering give way to strong pulsations. They stayed like that for a moment, gently kissing and simply enjoying the afterglow.

An hour later, the water in the tub had grown cold, even if Olivia's body hadn't. She was still trying to recover from what Natalia had just done to her. She relaxed into the soft curves of the woman behind her. Raising the errant hand of her partner from between her legs, she kissed the knuckles one at a time.

"I swear, you do have a little devil in you, Natalia Rivera."

A moment of silence was followed by a chuckle. "I did earlier and her name's Olivia Spencer."

Olivia laughed at the joke and she turned a little in the tub to look back at Natalia. "Are you okay now?"

Natalia brushed some loose hair behind Olivia's ear, running a finger along her cheek. "I'm much better than I was."

Olivia noticed that Natalia didn't really answer the question, but decided to let it go for now. "Good." She pulled her down into a kiss. It wasn't intended to ignite the simmering flame that always seemed to burn between them, but simply solidify a truth. "I love you."

Natalia returned the kiss with equal intensity, reverently whispering, "I love you too."

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Act 4

Eleni took her glasses off and rubbed at her tired eyes. When she slipped them back on, she glanced over at the clock on the wall to see that it was five o'clock...in the morning. It was a good thing she loved her work because she was a bit obsessive about it. She'd rather spend all night in the lab examining skin samples and stomach contents than anything else. In fact, it had been almost a year since she'd even been on a date. With round-the-clock crime and her compulsion for finding answers, she didn't find a lot of time to do anything else outside of work. She was hungry and tired but believed she was close to finding something - she could feel it.

Taking a deep breath to refocus on her work, she looked back through the microscope and examined the fibers again. One of her assistants had compiled trace evidence off the

victim's clothes. Anything that didn't appear to come from the victim's outfit was analyzed in hopes of finding a unique fiber. Eleni let out a frustrated breath. This fiber definitely didn't come from the victim, but it wasn't unique either; it could have come off any dark sweatshirt, anywhere in the world.

With the clothing thoroughly examined and the scene of the crime itself reviewed with a fine tooth comb, there was really only one other place to look for evidence – the victim's body. Earlier that day, actually Eleni realized it was the day before now, when she spoke with the coroner, and he had confirmed that the victim's primary cause of death was from gunshot wounds – one to the chest and one to the abdomen. Though the shot to the chest was the second wound site, it was the fatal one since it ripped through her aorta causing her to bleed out within seconds. She also had several broken ribs, a punctured lung, and numerous contusions on her face and body. As Eleni scanned through her notes from the coroner, she determined that the attacker must have worn gloves because there were no fingerprints on her, except those from Jonathan Randall, Sarah Randall, and Emma Spaulding.

Eleni had one last piece to examine. If she didn't find anything this time, she wasn't sure she'd ever find it, and that was completely unacceptable in her mind. During the past several years in Los Angeles, her investigative clearance level was perfect; she wasn't about to have her success rate change since she'd returned to Springfield.

With determination, she pulled the vial containing evidence from under the victim's nails. She took the coroner's samples, as well as a couple of additional samples she'd taken for good measure. Following the proper protocol, she applied the chemicals to the vial and set it in the machine. Tapping out a few keys on the computer, she set the machine to begin extracting the materials found in the sample. Most of the time, the procedure took fifteen to thirty minutes for results to come back, so she walked over to the coffee machine and started a fresh pot.

As the computer analyzed the information, she nervously paced and reviewed all of the work she had done during the night to make sure she hadn't missed any steps. When the coffee finished brewing, she filled a mug and sat down in front of the computer; her foot tapping on the floor as she waited. She glanced at the clock again. Twenty minutes had passed. Something should be coming back...

Almost as soon as the thought crossed her mind, several charts and graphs popped up on her screen. A slow smile spread across her face as she set the mug down and stared at the screen. The results showed the usual suspects like dirt but also came back with human blood and tissue.

“Yes! Now you better be in the database, you son of a bitch.” Clicking a few keys on the computer, she instructed the program to separate the blood and tissue from the sample and examine each independently.

Within minutes, the program had a DNA map from each and they matched. Excitedly, as if she was chasing down the attacker in her mind, she quickly entered the DNA data into the local and FBI files. Within seconds, file numbers and images of some of the most heinous criminals flashed on her screen as the computer ran through the data at lightning speed.

She raised her mug and cringed at the shock of the now cold coffee. She walked over to refresh her cup but almost dropped it when the computer started beeping; the sound letting her know it had found a match, so she raced over to see.

Her smile instantly faded at the image and message flashing on her screen: “Edmund Winslow. Deceased.”

“What the hell?”

~~*~*

Frank leaned over his desk. Spread out before him were photographs from the crime scene. Every once in a while, he’d shift an image, lift it, stare at it closely, then put it back down. He took a long sip from his coffee cup and sighed. There was nothing unusual about the crime scene, and he strained to find something he hadn’t seen before. If it was a typical drug addict or homeless person, they usually made mistakes – dropped something or left a clue behind – but the clean nature of this attack led Frank to believe that whoever it was, knew what he was doing and was doing it deliberately. There was pre-meditation to the attack; footprints were clearly seen coming out of the bushes so the attacker sat and waited for the right moment. Whoever it was meant to try and kidnap Sarah and maybe even Emma.

The thought sent a wave of anger through him. It was bad enough that a young woman with a long future before her was killed, but to think that someone out there was purposefully trying to hurt an innocent child set his blood to boiling.

His anger turned to frustration at himself as he continued to stare at the pictures. He kept asking himself, who would want to hurt Sarah and who would plan it so well as to leave no evidence?

“Edmund Winslow.”

Frank jerked his head up at Eleni standing in his doorway, gasping for air as if she'd just run a fast mile. He shook his head, her comment still not quite registering with him.
"What?"

She stepped into his office, her eyes shining bright with this new knowledge. "I got a match on some skin and blood samples found under the vic's nails. It was strange that our local database didn't pick him up though, but he was in the FBI database and it came back with Edmund Winslow."

He came around his desk, shaking his head. "That's impossible. He's dead." He stopped when she smiled at him, and the look of joy and happiness on her face made his knees temporarily weak.

"Computers don't lie, Frank. It's him."

Realizing that this was no time for him to get lost in his memories, he turned his gaze from her smiling face and looked for his phone among the mess of photos and files that covered his desk. "If that's the case, then we have bigger problems than I thought."

Dialing a number he knew by heart, he waited for the line to be picked up, but when it went direct to voicemail, he tried another number. After several rings, he let out a relieved breath.

"Natalia, it's Frank."

~~*~*

A ringing phone wasn't exactly Natalia's ideal way of waking up. The warm body curled up behind her would have been much more preferable. Lifting her head and glancing at the clock, she knew that even for her, it was early. She groaned and reached for her phone. Without looking she flipped it open.

"Hello?"

Olivia stirred behind her. Warm hands pulled her closer and she struggled to stop the moan in her throat.

"Hey, Frank. What's up?" Her voice was still hoarse from sleep as she spoke.

At the mention of the name, Olivia stopped the movement of her hand and propped herself up on her elbow.

Natalia rolled over, looking up into concerned green eyes.

Olivia felt her stomach drop at the shocked and fearful look in Natalia's eyes. "What...what is it?"

Natalia sat all the way up in bed and Olivia followed her. "But...that's impossible, Frank. Isn't he dead?"

"Who?" Olivia was feeling panicked.

Natalia looked at her, shaking her head still a little in shock. "Edmund."

"What?" Olivia nearly screamed.

Natalia put a hand on her shoulder to calm her. She turned her cell phone against her chest to block the sound as she spoke to Olivia. "Frank wants us to come down to the station."

"For what? No!" Olivia grabbed the phone and jumped out of bed. She searched frantically for some clothes to put on. "Frank, we're at Phillip's. If you need to talk to us, come here, but I'm not letting my family leave here until I know it's safe." She paused, listening to Frank on the other end. "Okay, we'll see you in a little bit."

Natalia climbed out of bed and walked over to her partner, who was cursing under her breath as she looked for a shirt in her bag. She stepped up behind Olivia and ran her hands over the shoulders in front of her. Almost instantly, she felt the fight leave Olivia, her muscles softening under her touch. She turned Olivia around and cupped her face.

"Calm down, querida. Just take a deep breath."

Olivia followed the gentle instructions and Natalia smiled. She knew better than to say everything would be okay, because she wasn't sure if it was or not. All she knew was that their little girls were across the hall, and they had to keep it together for them. When Natalia saw that Olivia had calmed down, she went to the bag and found Olivia's favorite t-shirt. It was comfortable and soft and exactly what her frantic partner needed right now.

Silently, they finished getting dressed. Natalia pulled her hair back in a ponytail and regarded Olivia as she brushed her hair. The other woman looked back at her. "Thanks." Olivia offered with a small smile.

Natalia shrugged and winked. "It's what I do. Come on; let's get everyone up before Frank gets here."

"Okay."

Out in the hall, there wasn't a sound to be heard. They could tell that everyone was still asleep. Olivia gestured to their daughter's room. "Should we wake them?"

Natalia shook her head. "No, they don't need to know all that's happening. Let them sleep."

Olivia agreed. "I tell you what. Why don't you go make some coffee? I think we're all going to need it. I'll get Phillip and Beth up and let them know what's going on. I better put a call in to Doris too."

"Okay." Natalia reached for her hand and squeezed it, then leaned up and kissed her before heading down the stairs to the kitchen.

A few minutes later, the adults were gathered in Phillip's office waiting for Frank. Each of them had agreed that it would be smart to have all of their family and anyone affected by Edmund to gather in one place. Natalia and Beth watched as Phillip and Olivia paced the office space with their phones trying to convince their children to come out to the mansion. They didn't tell them why so they wouldn't panic, but they knew it would be better to have everyone there where they could keep an eye on them than out there somewhere.

Phillip had no problem convincing Bill and Lizzie to come out once he told them about what happened to Sarah. Olivia had a harder time with Ava who was stubbornly insisting that she was fine at the Beacon.

"Ava! Damn it, I'm still your mother. Just do this for me, just this once. Please!" The pleading tone finally broke Ava down and she agreed to come out.

Olivia flopped down on the couch behind her and looked at Natalia, holding the phone up. "Does Ava really get her stubborn streak from me?" When Natalia smirked and nodded at her, Olivia shook her head. "I'll apologize in advance then because I really feel sorry for you putting up with me."

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On the way out of the station, Frank grabbed Anna to ride with him. The look on his face suggested she not argue with him so she grabbed her service weapon and phone and followed him out the door. She hesitated to open the conversation afraid of where it might go, but her curiosity had the best of her.

"So, what's happening, Boss?" She started nonchalantly.

He tapped his thumb on the steering wheel and looked over at her. "Maybe you should tell me."

She swallowed nervously. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"We'll see." He took the left turn at the light and headed out of town.

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Slowing to stop at the four-way stop, Leyla motioned the car to her right to take her turn. She bumped the GPS system in the rental car and cursed its slowness. It hadn't caused her any problems in the city, but now that she was out of Chicago, it seemed to like to move as fast as the people in these small towns, which wasn't fast at all. Fortunately, it was a slow morning in Springfield, so there was no traffic behind her. She blew a stray dark hair out of her eyes and waited for it to catch up. After a few more seconds, the pin jumped and blinked showing her at the intersection where she'd stopped. The directions told her to go straight ahead. She drove through the intersection noticing the police station and courthouse on her right and a little restaurant called Company down the street.

A few minutes down the road and to her left a surprisingly large park came into view. Near the entrance was a playground and she slowed when something yellow caught her eye – crime scene tape. Having grown up in Chicago, she'd know it anywhere.

"I guess Natalia and Olivia weren't joking about this being a crazy little town. Hmmm, I think I just might like it here." She smiled to herself and turned up the radio as she followed the road out to her sister's house.

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Ava was still fuming a little bit as she pulled up to the farmhouse. She was a grown woman and certainly she'd be safer at the Beacon, with a guard and pass keys, than wandering around town with a gunman on the loose.

In spite of her mother's insistence that she come straight out to the Spaulding's, she defiantly decided to go by the farmhouse first. Okay, it wasn't completely out of defiance. She wasn't twelve after all, but she did forget and leave her case of music CD's out there yesterday. She always fell asleep to music, so she had a terrible time trying to get to sleep last night; she absolutely had to have her music.

She pulled into the driveway and jumped out of the Beacon's loaner SUV, not even bothering to close the door because she knew she wouldn't be long. Running to the door, she pulled out the code to the alarm and unlocked the door. Even though she couldn't hear it, she knew it was going off somewhere. She punched in the numbers to turn off the alarm

and walked into the living room. There on the coffee table was the shiny black case. She grabbed it and headed back to the door. After activating the alarm again, she opened the door and turned to close it.

When she reached the edge of the sidewalk, she pulled out her phone and looked down to see if she had any messages. When she looked back up, all she saw was a board flying at her face. With blinding pain, her world went black.

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Leyla eased the car into the driveway and let out a whistle - the large house and huge yard impressing her. In a world made up of apartments and parallel parking, this looked like a mansion to Leyla's young eyes.

"Wow, sis. You sure know how to marry up! Damn!" She pulled behind the dark SUV in the driveway with its door open and got out.

Assuming someone was home, she bounded up the steps. She couldn't wait to see Natalia's face when her sister realized she'd shown up a day early. Of course, that would mean explaining why she left early too. The fight she had with her parents wasn't something she really wanted to think about at the moment. Right now, she just wanted to spend some time with her sister, her sister's beautiful girlfriend, and little Emma.

She knocked on the door and waited. When no one answered, she rang the doorbell. "Hmmm, I would've sworn someone was home." She looked in the window, but it was dark. She stepped to the edge of the porch and looked at the vehicle with the open door again. "That's strange."

She got her phone out and decided she'd just have to forgo the surprise. She found Natalia's number and started to hit call when she heard a noise around back. She threw up her hands. "No wonder no one heard me."

She walked around back and stopped short when she saw a hooded man lifting a slender dark-haired woman by her shirt. Leyla looked around frantically. She needed something to use as a weapon. The entire area was immaculate. There was nothing loose like a shovel or board. She cursed when she couldn't find anything, and then she realized what she was hiding behind - an old metal garbage can.

It had been years since she and Marco had played Frisbee, but she sent up a quick prayer that she wasn't too rusty. Before the attacker had a chance to react, she jumped up and jerked the metal lid off the can. The rattle of the can drew the attacker's attention away, and as soon as he looked up, it hit him in the forehead. The blow wasn't enough to knock

him out, but it did shock him, causing him to stumble back a little. When Leyla saw him raise his hand, she saw the glint of the gun and dove to the ground.

“Jesus Christ!”

For a moment, everything was eerily silent, except the pounding rush of her heartbeat. There were no footsteps, no movement of any kind. Then she heard a low moan. She swallowed nervously and peeked around the garbage can.

The man was gone, but the injured woman was still there.

Leyla ran over to the woman and spoke to her, “Hey! Hey, are you okay?” She saw the bloody gash over the woman’s left eye and decided to let her come around on her own instead of move her.

The other woman’s head rocked side-to-side and she let out a low moan. Slowly, she opened her eyes and saw a dark-haired woman hovering over her. For a moment, she thought it was Natalia.

“Natalia?” Ava mumbled. When Ava’s eyes focused, she could tell it wasn’t her mother’s partner, but she reminded her of the other woman a lot.

“No, I’m not Natalia. I’m her sister, Leyla. Are you okay? Can you get up?” Leyla moved back to give the woman room to sit up.

Ava put her hand to her head, feeling the bloody spot over her eye. “Ow! Yeah, I think so.” She got up to her knees. “Did you say you’re Natalia’s sister?”

“Yeah, who are you? And who the hell was that guy?” Leyla stood up and offered Ava her hand.

“Um, Ava...I’m Olivia’s daughter. And I think I know that guy.” She took the offered hand and stood to her feet. She wobbled slightly as her head spun from the blow. She grabbed at Leyla’s shoulder and the younger woman reached for her arm to hold her up.

Leyla guided her to a chair. “Here, sit down. Rest a minute.”

Ava started to sit then stopped. “No, we need to get out of here in case he comes back.”

“Where are we going to go?” Leyla followed the taller woman as she walked around the front of the house.

Ava stumbled and Leyla grabbed her around the waist to hold her up. "We need to get to the Spaulding's."

"Get where?"

"Just trust me." Ava struggled to stay coherent. Her head was spinning, and she felt nauseous. She probably had a concussion from the blow.

Leyla struggled to get them to her car. She leaned Ava against the side of the car and clicked the door open. She helped Ava inside and then she leaned down. "Is that your SUV?"

"Yeah." She handed the keys to Leyla. "Here, get my bag out of the back and lock up."

She watched as the petite brunette did as she was told. She came back and threw Ava's bag on the back seat and handed her keys back. Sliding into the driver's seat, Leyla looked over at her, smiling. Ava couldn't help but smile a little too when she noticed a pair of dimples appear that looked very much like Natalia's.

Leyla started up the car. "Well, if you have directions, I have GPS. Sorta. It's pretty much worth shit, but we can try."

Ava smiled. "Don't worry. I know where to go. Just head back towards town." She watched as the younger woman put on her seat belt and put her car in reverse. When the car reached the end of the driveway and Leyla looked her way to check for traffic, Ava couldn't stop herself. "And thanks."

Another dimpled smile. "You're welcome."

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Anna wasn't sure what the cryptic message of Frank's meant, but he wasn't offering up any other details. He definitely seemed pissed off. She fought off the wave of panic that surrounded her. She felt like she was walking into a trap, and she didn't like it one bit.

The Spaulding mansion loomed intimidating before them as Frank pulled his car into the large circular driveway. He rolled his window down and showed his badge to the security guard. "Mr. Spaulding is expecting us."

The young guard looked down into the car. "I need to see your identification, ma'am. Mr. Spaulding's orders."

Anna produced her badge and license. He looked both over and then compared the picture to the woman in the passenger seat. He handed them back and waved them through the gate.

When Frank parked and they got out of the car, Anna couldn't stand it any longer. "Are you going to give me any idea what's going on?"

"You'll find out soon enough, Li." He rang the doorbell, and in a matter of moments, the huge doors opened onto an expansive foyer with two arching stairways on each side that led up to the second floor.

A pretty blonde invited them in. She re-introduced herself to Anna, having remembered her from the New Year's Eve party, and led them down a hallway off the foyer. At the end of the hallway, there were a set of wooden double doors. Beth opened the doors and Anna suddenly felt like she was on display. This was not good!

Aside from Phillip and Beth, Anna only recognized three people: Olivia, Natalia, and Doris. She looked at Frank. "Why is Doris here?"

"The mayor should know that Edmund Winslow is alive, don't you think?" Frank crossed his arms and looked at Anna as if he was waiting for an explanation.

Anna nodded and shrugged, trying to play along with whatever was happening. "Of course."

Doris stood then. "Then why didn't you ever tell me, Anna?"

Anna stuck her hands in her pockets and forced a smile. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, cut the bullshit!" Olivia, who had been sitting on the arm of the couch next to Natalia, stood as well. "Just tell us the truth. You've been working for Edmund, and you've known all along he was alive."

"No, I'm not. I swear it!" Anna looked at Doris and felt her heart break at the look of disgust and complete disappointment on her ex-lover's face.

As she stepped into Anna's personal space, Olivia's green eyes burned with barely repressed rage. "Prove it...or so help me."

Anna looked at the woman she loved so long ago and shook her head, whispering. "Don't do this, Olivia."

"Don't test me." Olivia growled.

Anna dropped her head. "Call Jonathan."

Olivia was confused. "What? Why?"

"Just call him." Anna closed her eyes and sighed.

Olivia hesitated a moment, trying to read Anna's expression. All she picked up on was sorrow and remorse. "I've been trying all morning. He won't answer."

Reaching into her pocket, Anna pulled out her phone and handed it to Olivia. "Send him a text and put in the message: pawn shop."

She took the phone from Anna and repeated the words, "Pawn shop?"

Anna smiled slightly. "Yeah. When I first met Jonathan, there was a commercial that always played on TV for a pawn shop called Crazy Eddie's. Get it, Crazy Eddie's...Edmund."

Olivia shook her head not wanting to believe that Jonathan had anything to do with this, but she couldn't stop herself from sending the message. She found his name in the list of contacts and sent the message to him. In less than ten seconds, Anna's phone rang in her hand and Jonathan's name appeared on the screen. She flipped it open and held it up to her ear.

Everyone in the room waited to see what was going to happen.

Olivia waited, knowing the silence would be too much for Jonathan. He never could stand it when she used that tactic to force him to talk, especially when he was a teenager. "Anna?" The familiar voice cut through Olivia and she closed her eyes. She swallowed down the hurt in her voice.

"It's Olivia, Jonathan. You need to come out to Phillip's...right now. No argument."

He didn't answer her. The line just went dead. She flipped the phone closed and tossed it back to Anna.

Olivia moved to sit down next to Natalia again when a loud pounding came from the front door. Beth stood to get the door but Phillip stopped her. Something in the urgency of the banging worried him. He motioned his head to a guard standing nearby to follow him to the door. The guard stood to one side of the door while Phillip opened it.

He jumped back surprised. Standing in the doorway, struggling to stand up was a young dark-haired woman with another woman clearly passed out and barely hanging on to her.

“Is this the Spaulding residence?” The young woman asked.

“Yeah?”

“Leyla Rivera. Nice to meet you. I would shake your hand but they’re kind of occupied right now.” The words spurred Phillip and the guard into action, and they reached for the other woman she was holding up. Phillip turned the woman over and brushed her hair out of her face. “I think you know Ava.”

Phillip felt the panic rise up. “Olivia!”

Everyone ran into the foyer; Olivia and Natalia came up first. Olivia fell to her knees. “Oh my God! Ava!”

Natalia was shocked to see her sister there. “Leyla?”

The younger sister ran to Natalia and hugged her. “Hey! I’m a little early, but I think it worked out for the best.”

Natalia pushed her hair back and grabbed her face. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Leyla reached for her hands, smiling. “I’m fine, really. Wrong place, right time, I guess.”

Olivia looked to Phillip. “We need to get her to the hospital.”

Phillip stood. “Wait, I have an idea.” He took his phone out of his pocket and dialed a number. “Rick, buddy! Hey, I have a huge favor to ask. I know...I’m sorry to interrupt your breakfast date with Mindy, but we have a problem. Olivia’s daughter, Ava, has been attacked and she needs to be looked at.”

He paced the foyer, listening to Rick give him the third degree about the importance of an injured person being at a hospital where she could get proper care. Phillip finally had listened enough. “Rick...Rick...I know, okay? We can’t have anyone leave the house right now. It’s a long story, and I’ll tell you everything when you get here, but please...I’m begging you, help me out here.”

Another moment passed and Phillip let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you. I owe you, buddy.”

Olivia hovered over Ava, and Natalia had knelt down beside her partner. Olivia held her hand and gently stroked her face. “Come on, baby. Wake up, okay? Don’t worry me like this. Come on, Ava...wake up!”

Olivia started to shake with panic and worry, so Natalia pulled her into a hug.

In the back of the group, Anna stood and worriedly bit on her thumb nail. Doris came to stand beside her. "For your sake, you better hope nothing happens to Ava."

At that moment, Ava suddenly jerked and stirred as if she was pulled quickly from a nightmare. Her terrified eyes found Olivia over her, and she sat up too fast and hugged her mother. She grabbed at her throbbing head and tried to stand up. "Augh, oh...God!"

Olivia stopped her from getting up too fast. "Whoa, baby. Wait. Just calm down. You're okay. Let's get you to the couch and get you some water."

By the time they all moved back to Phillip's office and got settled, Beth came in with a wet washcloth and a glass of water, and then left again. Olivia asked the question everyone wanted to know. "What happened?"

"Edmund happened." Ava winced as her mother dabbed at the gash over her eye, which was now swelling and turning a nice purple-blue color.

Olivia gave her daughter a "don't joke" look. "And how did you two manage to run into each other?" She gestured between Ava and Leyla.

Ava was unable to look her mother in the eye. "I went to the farmhouse first."

"Damn it, Ava! I told you to come right here."

"I know, okay?" She braced her pounding head again. "Ow!"

Natalia reached for Olivia's hand to calm her. "There will be plenty of time to deal with this later." She turned to her little sister. "Besides I want to know what you're doing here so early."

Beth came back into the room. "Olivia, Natalia? I wanted to let you know that Emma and Francesca are up. If you want, I can take them to the kitchen with Peyton and get them breakfast so they won't get scared by all the commotion."

Natalia looked at her gratefully. "Thanks, Beth. I'll be there in a minute to feed Francesca."

Beth smiled at her. "No problem." She looked at Phillip. "I'll have some more coffee made, too."

As Beth left to get the girls from upstairs, the doorbell rang again. Olivia leaned back against the couch and sighed as she watched Phillip walk to the door. "Two guesses who that is. And if it's another unwanted surprise, someone's going to get hurt."

Everyone, including Olivia, breathed a sigh of relief when they saw Rick and Mindy come in the room. He knelt down in front of Ava and did a quick exam of her reactions and reflexes. Except for being a little sore from being banged up, she kept up pretty well. He examined the cut over her eye and decided it wouldn't hurt to put a couple of stitches in. He prepped the area and applied a couple of butterfly sutures.

Rick put away his stethoscope and stood up. "Odds are good that she may have a concussion. I'd be more surprised if she didn't with the knot and bruising coming up on the side of her face. Of course, without a scan, I can't guarantee there isn't something worse going on. As soon as you can, you really need to get a scan, just to be sure."

Olivia smiled gratefully at Rick. "We'll work that out, Rick. Thanks for coming out. It looks like you had a lot more fun things to be doing than coming here." She smirked at Rick's blush as he looked back at Mindy.

"Yeah, well...I should probably be going." Rick looked down at Ava. "Hospital. Scan. Soon."

She gave him a mock salute. "Yes, sir!"

As Phillip walked him and Mindy out to the foyer, the doorbell rang again. Natalia came back into the room and sat down next to Olivia. She glanced at Olivia and ran a calming hand down her back. "Beth has the kids out back playing with the dogs."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Great! More puppy talk." The blonde smiled at her partner, but it quickly fell as Jonathan and Sarah came in the room.

Leyla sensed the overwhelming tension in the room, but she also realized that the little girl at the man's side was almost shaking. She leaned over the couch to Natalia. "Did you say Emma's outside?" Natalia nodded. "I can take her out back and let her play."

Natalia leaned forward. "Hey, Sarah. How would you like to play with Emma and some puppies out back?" The little girl's face lit up, and she glanced up at her father. When he told her it was fine, she looked back to Natalia expectantly. "Follow my sister, Leyla. She'll take you outside."

Everyone watched as the two left, hand-in-hand. When the coast was clear, Olivia stood up and looked at Anna and Jonathan. "Alright...start talking."

"It's a long story, Olivia." Anna started.

"Well, we've been waiting all morning to hear this. You might as well entertain us." Olivia sarcastically retorted.

“Fine, we’ll tell you. We’ll tell you everything.” Jonathan offered. “But someone else really should be here to hear this...Reva.”

Olivia threw up her hands. “Sure, what’s a little more waiting?”

“She’s not that far away. She brought Colin to the library for story time.” He looked at his watch. “They probably just finished up.”

“Fine.” Olivia sat back down while Jonathan dialed the number. It took some convincing but eventually Jonathan was able to talk her into coming out.

He flipped his phone closed and set it on the side table by the door. “She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Natalia watched her partner - her head resting back on the couch and her eyes closed; every once in a while, her jaw would flex as she tensed the muscles. The younger woman could tell the waiting was driving Olivia crazy. She wanted answers, and she wanted them now. Olivia never did patience very well.

Anna had walked forward to stand in front of everyone and next to Jonathan. Natalia watched them for a moment and had a sudden urge to ask a question. “Why?” Everyone looked at her. She shrugged. “Can you tell us that at least? Why did you keep this from all of us? If this town was in danger, if we...and our children were in danger, why did you not tell anyone? Didn’t you think we deserved to know, so we could protect our families?”

Anna closed her eyes. “Natalia, I know it’s hard to understand why we couldn’t say anything. Believe me, I hope once we tell you everything that you’ll understand better, but I have to warn you, especially you, Olivia, if we tell you all of this, it’s going to mean knowing everything. What has happened here isn’t something that popped up out of the blue. It’s been brewing for years.” She looked at Olivia, making sure to send her a message. “Since you and I were kids on San Cristobel.”

Olivia immediately knew what Anna was referring to, and she was surrounded in a room full of exes, family, and friends who were all going to hear about her past on the island. Natalia squeezed her hand, and in one glance, she knew that Natalia understood what this meant.

Natalia leaned close, whispering, “If you can’t do this...”

“No.” Olivia shook her head. “No more secrets.”

Olivia looked back to Anna, who was waiting to see just how deep this story was going to go. Olivia sat up straight. "Do what you have to do, Anna. But whatever you do, it better be the God's honest truth."

Anna opened her mouth to respond when the front doors opened and Reva walked in, making herself at home.

The stout blonde could see the group gathered back in Phillip's office so she headed back there. She pushed Colin's stroller ahead of her as he chewed on a teething ring and kicked his feet in glee. When she entered the room, she immediately found Jonathan and gave him a hug. "Hey, darlin', where's the fire?"

She leaned against the door frame separating the foyer from the office and glanced around semi-interested in the motley crew assembled. Colin strained against his restraints to get out of the stroller so she leaned over and unbuckled him. "Okay, okay...hang on, big man."

The toddler hopped out and reached his hands up to Jonathan, indicating he wanted to be picked up by his big brother. In spite of everything, Jonathan couldn't help but smile and pulled the little boy into his arms, kissing him on the cheek.

Letting out a big sigh, finally feeling free momentarily of toddler demands, Reva looked at the group. "Well?"

Jonathan shifted Colin to his right hip so he could face Reva. This news would probably be best coming from him. "Something has happened and it involves all of us, especially our children. Yesterday, Sarah and Emma were at the park. I was nearby but didn't see it happen. Emma's babysitter, Jane, was watching the kids. Anyway, Sarah was nearly kidnapped. Jane jumped in and ended up getting shot and killed."

Tears sprang to Reva's eyes as she worried the worst had happened to Sarah. "Oh my God!" She raised a hand to her mouth. "Are they...please tell me the girls are okay."

He continued, taking Reva's hand in his free one. "They're both fine. They got away. But that's not the really big issue right now."

Reva looked at him like he was crazy. "What could be bigger than that?"

He sighed. "Well, Jane struggled and managed to scratch her attacker. The crime scene investigators analyzed it and found a match."

Reva looked around at everyone. The looks on their faces told her they knew the answer already. The thought aggravated and unnerved her, but she wasn't really sure why just yet. She looked back to Jonathan. "Who is it?"

He paused a moment before speaking. "Edmund."

She stared at the young man. She vaguely realized that Colin struggled in his arms to get down, but she really didn't notice anything, except the one thought running through her head. "No. That's not possible."

Jonathan set Colin down and he went right to his mother to wrap his arms around her leg. Jonathan looked back up at Reva. "It is."

She shook her head. "No! That bastard is supposed to be dead! He killed Jeffrey. He's supposed to be dead. He NEEDS to be dead!" Colin buried his face against her leg and started to cry.

The room silently watched Reva's frantic plea unaware there was more shocking news to come. At that moment, the phone sitting on the side table between Jonathan and Reva started to vibrate. In a split second, both of them noticed the name that flashed on the screen. They reached for the phone at the same time, but Reva got to it first. She stared at the name flashing on the screen in disbelief.

"Jeffrey."

To Be Continued

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