

Lingering Ghosts

by Ocean Gazer

ACT 1

"It's July. Why is it so cold in here?"

Natalia moved from the kitchen counter to the table, fighting the urge to roll her eyes at Olivia yet again. "I already told you. I turned up the air conditioning because otherwise we'll roast once I start baking."

"I shouldn't need long sleeves in July. And you're wearing a sweater, for heaven's sake."

While Olivia's grumbling could occasionally be endearing, this was not one of those occasions. Natalia could tell her partner was truly annoyed. She just didn't know why.

She was almost positive it had nothing to do with the actual topic of conversation, since they'd discussed it the night before. She knew for certain that it had nothing to do with the preparations for the Bauer barbecue, since she'd already told Olivia she didn't have to do any of the work. Leyla was back in Chicago for the holiday weekend to visit friends, so it had nothing to do with her. And Ava was on board with the idea of looking after Emma, Francesca, and Colin while Reva was visiting, so...

She leaned over the back of her partner's chair. "Why did you invite Reva to come over if it's making you testy?"

Olivia's sigh seemed to echo. "It's not spending time with Reva that's the problem. I mean, hello, we just had 'Road Trip 2010' together and didn't kill each other. It's what she wants to talk about. She's got a little over two months before she's supposed to make the decision about whether or not to meet Josh at the lighthouse, and she doesn't quite know how she feels about Jeffrey at this point, let alone what to do about Josh."

Natalia shook her head. "Why is she trying to make this decision now? She's still got time to mull it over – to figure out what to do."

Looking down, she finally caught a glint of amusement in green eyes. "Yes, but that would be entirely too easy. In case you haven't figured it out by now, Reva can be a bit of a drama queen."

Olivia paused for a moment and Natalia saw the hint of amusement fade entirely. Her partner's tone was as thoughtful as her expression. "I don't know if we're friends,

exactly, but we're something, and I want to help her out. I just...my own history with Jeffrey and Josh doesn't exactly make me the most impartial judge. And I don't want to give her advice that might backfire and come back to bite me in the ass later."

Natalia frowned a bit, feeling like there was something very obvious she was missing. After a moment of thought, she said tentatively, "Well, maybe she doesn't really need you as a judge. Maybe she just needs someone to listen while she talks. You don't have to offer any advice, just ask questions and make her come up with the answers."

She didn't think she'd said anything particularly profound, but the way Olivia's face lightened at the words suggested otherwise. When her partner smiled at her, she couldn't help but smile back.

"What would I do without you, Natalia? Seriously, I hadn't even thought about it that way."

Blushing slightly at the praise, Natalia looked at her partner, even as she felt Olivia lean back in her chair, the dark blonde head coming to rest against her shoulder. It was a gesture that spoke of trust and comfort and, in contrast to the other woman's grouchy mood all morning, she very much welcomed it. She reached up and placed her hand against Olivia's shoulder, rubbing gently, basking in the peace and simplicity of the moment. Their lives had been so hectic lately, and while they'd had time together, moments like this seemed to be few and far between.



Even as she revelled in the sensation, she knew it wouldn't last. Emma or Ava would come bounding in soon enough, or Francesca would start to cry, or Reva would show up. Then there was the matter of the baking she needed to do for tomorrow's barbecue. Natalia glanced down at the table top, seeing all the recipes she'd spread out there and contemplating them, even while her partner continued to lean against her. She dropped her hand away from Olivia's shoulder, bringing it down to rest against the woman's forearm, still caressing gently.

She felt a momentary flash of guilt for thinking about other things at that moment, instead of just being focused on the two of them, until Olivia said in an oddly dreamy tone, "I hope Emma has a good day tomorrow. Things have been so rough for her lately, and I just want her to have a good time and be a kid again for a day, without a care in the world."

Natalia squeezed her partner's arm. "We'll do everything we can to make it a good day for her."

She looked up from the table top then and met Olivia's eyes. Just as she was about to lean in from the side and kiss her partner to seal the promise, the doorbell rang.

"That's Reva; perfect timing as always." Olivia's eye roll said as much as her actual words.

Natalia chuckled as her partner got up from the chair, and then smiled as Olivia gave her a quick kiss on the forehead before heading out to the living room. Back to the merry-go-round that was their life. Shaking her head at the sounds of the ensuing snark-fest in the living room, she swept up the recipes from the table and moved herself over to the counter. It was time to focus on Rice Krispies treats and vanilla cupcakes and chocolate chip cookies. Maybe some peanut butter cookies too. And possibly banana bread.

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Blake hummed under her breath as she changed her clothes, getting ready for her afternoon with Doris. She was determined that nothing, not even Frank's confused indifference about her watching a softball game and then going out to dinner, would bring down her mood. It felt sometimes like all she did was work and then sit around hoping that her boyfriend wouldn't have to work late or that something wouldn't come up for him. She knew it was par for the course for any police officer. But she also knew a little something about how the Springfield PD operated, and the other cops all seemed to have plenty of downtime.

She understood that part of the problem was that Frank, as the chief of police, was trying to establish clear boundaries with his ex-wife, who was in charge of the crime scene investigators. In addition to hammering out their respective roles, they were also bickering over paperwork. Apparently he'd signed off on some things that Eleni was

questioning, and so they had to sift through the details. He'd complained for hours on end about how difficult it was to work with his ex-wife, how uncomfortable he was with having to be around her, how upset Marina was with Doris for hiring her, and how annoyed he was with the mayor for going behind his back to bring her on board.

All Blake knew was that for all Frank's protestations, he spent a lot of his non-work time thinking about and talking about the woman who supposedly drove him crazy.

She couldn't even remember the last time she and Frank had just gone out and done something on the spur of the moment. At most, they'd order takeout from somewhere and watch a movie before spending the night together. They hadn't had a real date in weeks.

He'd been distant lately, almost as if he was pulling back from her. She'd tried to talk to him about it, but he'd said that everything was fine. Then, a few times, he'd approached her and said he wanted to talk, but something else always seemed to come up. She didn't think he was having an affair, and she was certain he was past his fear of being burned after what had happened with Natalia. She'd even asked him point blank if he was bothered that she was friends with Doris, his nemesis, and he'd laughed out loud at the idea.

If he wasn't interested in dating her anymore, she didn't know why he wouldn't just come right out and say it. Their friendship was certainly strong enough to weather that, even though it would be sad. Although she'd grown more and more irritated with the way he seemed to take her for granted, she did care an awful lot about him. Besides, of all the men she knew in Springfield, he was the only one she had the slightest interest in who wasn't already involved with someone.

She'd been lonely for a long time and it was nice to have an actual boyfriend. Maybe it wasn't a love like Olivia and Natalia had, but it was enough for her.

Her cell phone rang, startling her, and she picked it up without looking at the display, assuming it was Doris calling to see if she was ready yet or still fiddling around with her fashion choices. Just as she was ready to follow her "Hello" with a sarcastic remark, she heard Frank's voice. Swallowing the comment on the tip of her tongue, she listened to his babbled greeting, followed by his "I was just thinking...well...not just thinking...I've been thinking about it for a while...anyway, you get the idea...oh, wait, hang on a minute."

In the background, she could hear his home phone ring and heard his crisp, professional tone. The words were garbled, but she had a hunch it was a work-related call; she'd gotten good at tuning those out in the past several months.

Indeed, when he came back on the line, he was apologetic. "I'm sorry, Blake. I wanted to talk to you for a bit, but duty calls. Anna's trying to make out Mallet's notes on some

old files and his handwriting is apparently impossible to read. I need to go. But I'll try again in a couple hours."

Blake raised an eyebrow. "I'll be at a softball game later, Frank. Remember? We just talked about this an hour ago."

If she hadn't known he was a grown man, she would have sworn he was pouting. "Oh, right. Guess you're just too busy to have time for me today."

Never mind the fact that he was the one who was always running off and coming home late and cancelling their plans. Somehow, this was all her fault. Her patience running thin, Blake nevertheless managed to keep her tone mild. "We'll be at the barbecue together tomorrow. We'll have plenty of time for each other."

Frank didn't sound convinced, even though he agreed with what she'd said, and then he reminded her that he needed to get back to work. She stared at the phone in her hand for a long moment after the call disconnected, bewildered by his odd manner and abruptness. Before she could puzzle over it too long, she heard the doorbell. Shoving the phone into her pocket, she picked up her baseball cap and ran out to the living room to greet her friend.

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Beth hummed under her breath as she walked into the library. While it wasn't really her office, she was starting to think of it that way since she'd spent so much time there in recent months, studying. It seemed like all she'd done lately was hole up in the library and study.

For what purpose, she had no idea. Well, not entirely true, she mentally amended. She wanted to be a lawyer, to have a career that really meant something. That was the reason for all her hard work. But since she hadn't heard anything after her first sitting for the bar, she just wasn't sure her hard work was actually going to pay off. Sure, she'd heard all the stories about how many times people had to take the bar exam before they finally passed it. She just didn't know if she could handle going through such a nerve-racking process over and over again.

She froze momentarily when she got to the desk and saw a great big envelope from the Illinois Board of Admissions to the Bar. Swallowing hard, she reached out a hand to pick it up, and then froze again in mid-reach. One part of her wanted to snatch up the envelope and find out her fate. The other part just knew it was bad news and couldn't stand the thought of her dreams being dashed. For a long moment, she just stood there, playing mental tug-of-war with herself.

Finally, she realized how ridiculous she was being. Not seeing the rejection wouldn't make it any less real. And, melodramatic and soap-opera-divaish thoughts aside, it was

far from being the end of the world. She could get Doris or Mel to help her study next time; she could get tips from them on how to remember all those arcane details.

She was proud of the fact that her hand only trembled a little when she finally picked up the envelope and slid her finger along the sealed edge to open it.

Unfolding the letter hastily, she scanned over it, looking for the confirmation that she'd failed. The wording was so formal that she had to read it twice to make sure she wasn't imagining things. Dropping the paper as if it burned, she ran out of the library and made a mad dash up the stairs, heading toward her and Phillip's master suite.

She burst in the door and jumped on the bed, heedless of the fact that her husband had been, up until that precise moment, napping. Quite peacefully too, from the sound of his snoring. She pounced on him and laughed as he blinked rapidly, his words slow and sleepy. "What's happening? Are you ok? Or have you suddenly gone insane?"

Leaning down, she kissed his cheek. "I'm better than ok. I passed, Phillip!" Seeing the confusion in his eyes, she elaborated, "The bar. I passed the bar!"

The smile she got in response looked like it would literally split his face in half. She was pretty sure hers was just as wide.

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"I still can't believe he did that to me. Honestly, I don't know whether to kiss him or kill him."

Olivia wanted to laugh at the exaggerated, whining note in Reva's voice. The woman sitting across the kitchen table from her was in full-on melodrama mode today. While Reva had proven in the past that she could be quite practical and down-to-earth at times, the inner diva still liked to pop her head out now and again. Probably to keep everyone in town on their toes, she mused.

The only thing, frankly, that kept Olivia from laughing was the fact that she knew exactly how the other woman felt. She'd been there herself with Natalia – wondering how the woman she loved could just leave her without a word.

Ok, so their situations weren't exactly the same. She'd at least known Natalia was alive, and if she'd really pressed, she could have coerced information out of either Father Eyebrows or blabbermouth Blake. Reva had truly thought that Jeffrey was dead and hadn't had a clue about the magnitude of the secret her son was keeping from her. But still, even if the situations weren't identical, she knew what it felt like to be left behind, to be left with more questions than answers, to have trust broken. She felt for the other woman.

Even so, she wasn't about to let down her usual defenses quite that easily. "Maybe you could do both. Get in one last kiss and then strike him down."

She didn't have to glance over at Natalia to know her partner was glaring at her. But she ignored it, focusing instead on Reva, who merely raised an eyebrow before saying dryly, "That's a thought. Without Mallet around to finally piece everything together, they'll never figure out it was me. And I can always use an excuse to buy Colin a new stroller."

Olivia nearly spit out a mouthful of coffee at that. As it was, she barely managed to swallow before bursting into laughter, Reva joining her. The memories of last year's ridiculous – and, in retrospect, completely pointless – murder investigation flooded her mind. If it wasn't so serious a situation now, with Edmund alive and on the loose somewhere, planning to wreak havoc on his perceived enemies, it would be funny. Seriously, how the Springfield PD had ever managed to solve any case at all still mystified her. She felt a sudden surge of sympathy for Anna Li; the woman was clearly competent and having to put up with the usual town clowns must be like fingernails on a chalkboard for her.

When Natalia moved closer to the table, Olivia half-expected a gentle rebuke of some kind for joking around when Jane was dead and their children's lives were in danger. But her partner apparently sensed that they needed the comic outlet, because she simply set out a plate of warm cookies and refilled their coffee cups without a word.

She didn't miss the sardonic quirk of Reva's lips at the charming little domestic scene, and turned a patented Spencer glare on the older woman, just daring her to say something. But her occasional nemesis simply offered up a simpering smile and stayed quiet, instead reaching out for a cookie and concentrating harder than seemed necessary on chewing it.

Olivia looked over at Natalia, who'd returned to the counter, her hands busy with a wooden spoon and a bowl. There were little dabs of flour on her cheeks and forehead; her dark hair was bound up in a messy ponytail with stray strands sticking up like they'd been gelled; her face was set in a frown as she bent over a recipe book. Olivia thought she was absolutely beautiful. Not because of how she looked, but because of how she was – the way she made this space warm and welcoming, even without being part of the conversation. Ava and the kids and the puppy were in the living room, so she and Reva had ended up in the kitchen by default. Even though Reva had fewer domestic tendencies than she did, she thought the older woman seemed as comfortable in the homey space as she was.

Her musings were interrupted when Reva spoke through a mouthful of cookie. "Seriously, though. For months, I hoped and prayed that there'd been some miracle and that Jeffrey was still alive, just stuck in some remote place where he couldn't make contact. But now that I have Jeffrey back and know that he is alive and safe, all I feel is numb."

Reva's next words were quiet, but Olivia could hear the pain in them. "I still love him, but I can't understand how he could just walk away like that. He says he did it to keep me safe, but Colin and I were in danger anyhow, we just didn't know it. How do I move past that? Should I move past it?"

Olivia swallowed hard, suddenly all-too-aware of Natalia's presence across the kitchen. But this was her truth to speak and so she leaned forward slightly. "Reva, I can't tell you what to do about Jeffrey. It really comes down to two basic questions. One, whether the reason he left is one you can understand and accept; and two, whether you think you can trust him not to do the same thing again."

She paused for a moment, watching Reva mull over her words, before getting to the heart of the dilemma. "Ultimately, only you can decide what level of uncertainty you can live with...and whether your love for him is stronger than the hurt you feel because of him."

Sitting back in her chair, Olivia took a drink of coffee, not because she was thirsty, but to cover her discomfort with this turn in the conversation. Unable to help herself, she glanced over at Natalia, only relaxing when she saw the compassion in chocolate eyes and the slight nod that told her she had permission to say whatever she needed to say. Not that she needed permission from anyone else, since it was her life and her story. But it helped regardless. Not that she intended to go much deeper into detail with Reva; no matter how good a footing they were on now, she knew that could turn around on a dime.

Reva leaned forward, her elbows on the table, and Olivia was struck by the pensive look on her face. The older woman's tone was sharp. "If Jeffrey had only been gone a few months, then that would be one thing. But he's lived this lie for nearly a year and I only found out by accident. It's not like he came back to town and said, 'I know how this looks, honey, but I can explain.'"

Olivia chuckled at the phrasing, but nodded. She could definitely see that an intentional homecoming was a lot easier to understand than the "oops, I'll confess all because I'm busted" approach.

"Given everything I've found out about him in the past few months, I feel like I don't really even know the man I married." Reva paused there, and Olivia swallowed hard at the intense anger blazing in blue eyes. "I had no idea what he did to you, Olivia. The thought that he was capable of raping you...it makes me sick."

Olivia sat very still in her chair, tension flooding through her. After her disclosure at the Spaulding mansion, she'd braced herself for people prying into her past – whether showing friendly concern or looking for gossip fodder. Doris had alluded to it in one of their conversations, but Olivia had side-stepped it and her friend had let the subject drop. She knew better than to think that was the end of the matter – the mayor was almost as stubborn as any Spencer, after all. But no one else had said anything about it.

She'd finally come to the conclusion that everyone there at the time had been too focused on the Edmund part of the story to register the other details. That piece of her life wasn't something she really wanted to talk about anyway, so she'd been somewhat relieved by the lack of attention.

Feeling unnerved by Reva's scrutiny, Olivia took a deep breath to calm herself, then turned her head slightly, her eyes drifting to the window. Her words were measured. "It was a long time ago. He's not the same man now that he was then. And you heard what Anna said, that he felt guilty and showed remorse for what he'd done."

"Don't you think it's time you stopped making excuses for him?"

Snapping her head back around, Olivia stared at Reva in shock, her mouth dropping open. If the same words had come from Natalia, she wouldn't even have blinked. But to hear Reva say that about her own husband...

"Olivia, I'm only going to say this once, and if you – or Natalia – tell anyone that I said it, I'll deny it. I'm sorry about what happened to you. No one deserves to be treated like that. You can forgive Jeffrey and be his friend all you want...just don't make excuses for what he did. He still hurt you, no matter how much he had to drink or how sorry he felt afterwards."

Olivia swallowed hard again, not at all comfortable having this conversation, but touched more than she'd expected by the words. When Reva began fidgeting, however, she knew she wasn't the only one who was uncomfortable, and decided to put them both out of their misery.

"Thanks, Reva. Don't worry, I won't tell a soul what you said. It's just...don't judge him too harshly based on something that happened over twenty years ago."

Olivia leaned back slightly in her chair, trying to relax her tensed shoulders, and saw Reva's eyes narrow. There was no mistaking the hard edge in the other woman's voice. "Oh, don't worry. I've got plenty of other reasons to judge him harshly right now. It's not just that he lied to me and left his family behind. He also put my son in danger without blinking an eye. Even though it was Jonathan's choice to take on the assignment, you don't mess with my children and expect me to be your friend."

There was a deep scowl on Reva's face and it was one Olivia understood all too well. She had her own Mama Bear tendencies. She took another sip of coffee, letting the woman finish thinking out loud.

"And I know this is all stuff I have to decide on my own. I get it. It's just so damn complicated because there's Josh to consider as well. I have to choose and I don't know what to do. I'm tempted to clone myself on purpose so I can have one man and clone!Reva can have the other."

Olivia heard Natalia's surprised gasp, but was too busy spitting out coffee to pay much attention. She grabbed a stack of napkins, dabbing at her face and shirt. She didn't know the details, but had heard bits and pieces from various people about Reva having a clone who'd caused all sorts of problems. As if anyone with the woman's DNA could avoid being a troublemaker.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or annoyed that Reva just sat there cackling like a hen while she tried to wipe up the coffee she'd splattered everywhere. Luckily, she'd managed to miss the plate of cookies. When she looked up and saw the amused smile on the woman's face, she decided to be relieved. But she kept her tone gruff as she said, "The absolute last thing this town needs is two of you."

Olivia smiled up at Natalia, who'd appeared with a wet dishtowel to help clean up the mess. It was clear her lover was confused, but had decided against asking. Which was fine; she'd fill her in later with what little she knew.

Reva drawled, "Oh c'mon, honey. Two of me would just keep this town lively since you've gotten soft and boring."

Olivia narrowed her eyes, even knowing that the other woman was teasing. She was saved from having to come up with a suitable reply when Natalia said softly, "The last thing Springfield needs right now is more excitement, what with Edmund still being alive."

That managed to sober Reva up more than any of Olivia's snarky comebacks could have. She shot a grateful look at her lover, who patted her on the shoulder before heading back to the sink. Then, Olivia focused her attention on the woman across from her, noting the way the blonde seemed to have come to a sudden decision. The way Reva pushed her chair back and got to her feet only reinforced that idea.

"Natalia's right. Instead of worrying about whether to take Jeffrey back or set my sights on Josh, I need to focus on keeping Colin, Sarah, and Jonathan safe until that psycho is caught. That's way more important than my country-western-song love life. But thanks for listening to me think out loud...and for the coffee and cookies." Reva's voice practically dripped with syrup. "It was...quaint."

Olivia raised an eyebrow as Reva promptly flounced out of the kitchen, presumably to grab Colin and head home. She looked over to see confusion and amusement warring on Natalia's face as dark eyes trailed after their departing guest.

Pushing her own chair back, Olivia stood. She should go see the woman out, she supposed. But first, she walked over to her lover and gave her a kiss on the cheek, carefully avoiding the spots covered in flour. "Don't worry; that's just Reva. You'll get used to her. Eventually."

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“How can you not understand what just happened?”

Blake stared at Doris, whose eyes were still fixed on the baseball field, watching, well, whatever was going on in this softball game. Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, an urge the mayor brought out in her all too often, she shrugged and answered, “Because I’ve had better things to do with my time than learn all the ridiculous rules of various sports.”

She leaned forward on the bleachers, an elbow propped against her knee, cradling her chin in her hand, and looked out on to the field, trying to figure out what was going on. Not that she cared all that much, honestly, but because it seemed appropriate.

Expecting another sarcastic response, she was surprised by the patience in Doris’s tone. “The batter had two strikes against her and hit a foul ball, so that makes it an out. That was the third out for that team in this inning, so now it’s time for the teams to switch places.”

“Okay.”

Blake knew she probably should have said more than that, but “thank you” seemed a little weird and she wasn’t about to ask for more information when she really didn’t care all that much. She felt the weight of Doris’s gaze on her and turned her head slightly, to find blue eyes studying her carefully.

“Why did you agree to come to the game with me when you don’t really like sports?”

There was no hint of mockery in the mayor’s voice, just honest confusion, and Blake smiled softly. Frank had asked her a similar question earlier, when she’d told him about her plans for the afternoon. Her answer to him had been fairly pointed, along the lines of how Doris, at least, was interested in spending time with her. Sadly, he’d seemed to entirely miss her irritation with him and his lack of attention, only rolling his eyes and saying women’s softball couldn’t begin to compare to baseball.

“Because I know you like sports and you’re my friend, Doris.” Blake didn’t miss the hint of a blush that graced the woman’s features, and took pity on the I-hate-sentimentality mayor. “Besides, you’re buying me dinner afterwards. That’s reason enough to sit through a game.”

She chuckled when Doris rolled her eyes and looked away, but knew the woman well enough to not be at all offended by the pretense of irritation. Turning her head again, Blake stared out at the field, watching the pitcher lob softballs over the plate and the batter not bothering to swing at them. She was sure there was some strategy to it all that she didn’t understand, but she didn’t bother trying at that point, just took it in visually while her mind was busy elsewhere.

Blake reveled in the feel of the summer sun against her bare arms and legs. She took in the blue of the cloudless sky and the green of the grassy field. She listened to the cheers of the crowd when their players did something they liked and to the murmurs of conversation around her. She glanced over at Doris, seeing the other woman relaxed and smiling in a way that had been all-too-infrequent in recent months after what had happened with Anna.

Taking stock of herself, Blake realized how content she was in that moment, and how happy she was just hanging out with Doris.

Too bad she didn't feel this comfortable when she spent time with Frank.

The sudden awareness made her frown. He had been so charming when they first started dating, and they'd known each other for years, so it had been easy. But in recent months, she'd started feeling like more of a prop than a girlfriend. He was a good man, but clueless.

She sighed softly as she realized just how much he took things for granted – assumed that she'd want what he wanted, assumed that her work schedule and her activities were less important than his own. And she couldn't even blame him for it; she'd noticed the same thing when he dated Natalia. He'd grown passive in recent years, and she'd known that before she started dating him. He needed a different kind of woman than either of them was – someone who would alternately challenge him and comfort him, who would bring out his feisty side, who knew when to take him down a notch and when to soothe his ego.

Blake could do some of that, had been doing it for nearly a year, but it was starting to feel like a game – one that she didn't really want to keep playing. She wanted to be able to be herself, not fit into whatever role he needed on a given day.

"Penny for your thoughts."

She started slightly at the unexpected sound of Doris's voice, and then chuckled. "Trust me – my thoughts aren't all that interesting."

Feeling a hand on her arm, Blake looked over at Doris and saw the concern in blue eyes. She covered the woman's hand with her own and shook her head. "It's nothing to worry about, honestly. But I appreciate the concern."

She could tell the other woman didn't entirely believe her, but apparently was satisfied enough with her answer not to push. Blake wanted to talk to her about all her confused feelings where Frank was concerned. But not here. Not now. Not when Doris was still broken-hearted over the loss of Anna. She couldn't do that to her friend.

Instead, she refocused on the immediate moment. "So why did that runner have to go off the field?"

She didn't miss the slight exasperation as Doris started in on an explanation.

The familiarity of it made her smile.

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ACT 2

Phillip smiled as he turned and ran across Rick's well-tended lawn to chase after the Frisbee. James had sent it flying well over his head and he suspected it had been done it on purpose. That suspicion was confirmed when he stretched to his limit, trying – and failing – to catch it; he tripped over his own feet and heard his son laughing uproariously.

He sprawled ungracefully on the ground, rolling over onto his back to shoot a mock glare across the grass. But he couldn't keep up his pretended outrage for long and joined in the laughter.

He remembered all too well that at this time last year, James would barely even speak to him, let alone play games at the barbecue with him. Phillip had been to the point of nearly giving up, knowing that as much as he wanted a relationship with his son, he couldn't take much more of the cold shoulder treatment. But then, slowly, things had started to shift. Between his illness and Alan's death, James seemed to have suddenly matured. He'd grown up amazingly fast anyhow, leaving Phillip almost dizzy at the transition between little boy and young man. But simply growing in years didn't always mean growing in maturity, and James had been – plainly put – a spoiled brat, still acting like he was seven years old.

One of the greatest joys of Phillip's life was that his son was growing out of that stage and that James actually wanted to spend time with his old man these days. Family was so important and he knew he was damn lucky that he was alive to have this time with his son, with Lizzie, with Beth, with Emma, with Olivia and Natalia, and with all the other people he loved.

He pushed to his feet with a smile, then turned to retrieve the Frisbee. Life was so good and so precious that he didn't plan to waste a moment of it.

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Olivia sat back in her chair at the kitchen table and rolled her shoulders, stretching. She yawned, then leaned forward to reach for her all-important mug of coffee. Taking a healthy sip, she could practically feel the caffeine coursing through her veins. Well, not really, but she enjoyed the illusion. She didn't know why she was so tired this morning. Amazingly, both Emma and Francesca had slept later than usual. And while she

suspected Natalia had gotten up at the crack of dawn to finish the treats for the barbecue, she had been able to sleep until a little after nine.

But here she sat, at nearly ten-thirty, on her third cup of coffee, trying to wake up. Maybe it was because the house was quiet. Francesca was content in her playpen with her toys, Emma was doing something or other with construction paper and crayons, and Natalia had just left for church. It was unusual for things to be so serene all at once – and with Leyla staying with them for an undetermined period of time and Ava dropping in and out randomly, things had only gotten more chaotic. So maybe she was just reacting to the unexpected calm in the midst of the storm.

Even as she came up with the thought, she knew that wasn't it. She wasn't normally the most introspective of creatures, preferring to act instead of think. But there was no way she could ignore the fact that at this time last year, her heart had been broken.

Despite everything that had happened since then, despite the fact that she finally felt secure enough to believe that Natalia wasn't going to run off again without a word, the anniversary of that event wasn't something she could just ignore. It had been too big in her life and caused her too much pain. And there was that little pessimist sitting on her shoulder, reminding her that what had happened once could happen again.

Old patterns were hard to break, as she knew better than anyone from her pre-Natalia train wreck of a romantic life.

No wonder she felt exhausted, even though she'd barely done anything since getting out of bed.

She lifted her coffee mug and drained the contents in one long swallow. Consciously, she made herself focus on the positive. Natalia had come back to her and had spent the better part of the past eleven months convincing her she was in it for the long haul. There was no reason to believe that would change. They were raising two beautiful daughters; the hotel was doing well, despite the lingering economic downturn; they'd faced aspects of their individual pasts together and come out stronger.

She wouldn't say their life together was perfect – but it was better than she'd had with anyone else before. And she knew – because she'd heard it more than once – that her partner felt the same way.

Shaking her head to clear it, she pushed up from her chair and took her mug over to the sink to rinse it out. She didn't have time to sit here wallowing in thoughts of the past. There were two little girls to get ready and a barbecue to attend. Despite Emma's current calm, she knew that her daughter would start bouncing off the walls the minute she realized they were getting ready to leave. Then there was the matter of getting Sweet Pea dressed in an outdoorsy sort of outfit and packing up all her supplies. Olivia was just thankful Natalia was coming back for the food so she didn't have to try and

keep track of that on top of their daughters. It wouldn't have been a Mission Impossible – but it would have been difficult. Especially in her still somewhat foggy mental state.

As she walked out of the kitchen, one random thought related to the previous year's barbecue flashed into her head and made her smile.

At least this year, she knew there was no way in hell Natalia could be pregnant.

~~*~*

Blake set the bag down on the picnic table near the barbecue grill with more of a thud than she'd intended. Wincing, she peered inside the paper sack, relieved when she saw that this one just held large boxes of plastic utensils. At least it wasn't anything breakable. She looked over at Phillip, who wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention to her, and then at Doris, who, predictably, had a smirk on her face. She just rolled her eyes in response, remembering that her friend had come close to dropping several bags of potato chips. Not that they probably would have been damaged, given that the bags held almost as much air as food, but it was the principle of the thing.

"That's the last of the bags, Rick," she said to the man hovering over the grill.

She watched as his eyes darted between her, the various things that had been unloaded on to the table, and the grill. "Where are the hamburger buns?"

She glanced over at Doris, who gave a one-shouldered shrug in response. Blake knew there was nothing left in the Bauer kitchen; she'd double-checked before carrying the last bag out here. "I didn't see anything else on the counter. Did you put them somewhere else when you got home from the store?"

Rick's face fell. "Y'know, I don't remember buying any. And I think I forgot about ketchup and mustard too. Blake, can you run into town and pick some up?"

Used to the man's notoriously forgetful nature, she simply sighed in resignation. "Yeah, that's fine. Where's your wallet?"

She wasn't surprised in the slightest when Rick coughed and fidgeted, at least having the good grace to blush when she pinned him with her stare. "I...uh...am a little short on cash right now."

Hadn't he done this to her last year? She looked towards Phillip, who was already reaching into his pocket. He peeled off a few bills and handed them to her. "Thanks," she said simply. Slipping the money into her own pocket, Blake turned to Doris. "Come on."

She caught the mayor's raised eyebrow and spoke quickly to head off the inevitable sardonic comment. "Until more people show up, do you really want to stand around and

listen to these guys talk about grilling and baseball and how much better the fireworks will be this year?"

"I'll get my purse."

Blake couldn't help but smile as she watched Doris walk back to the house. While she could have run the errand on her own, it was more fun to have company. And it was nice that Doris didn't even bother to put on a show of reluctance in front of the other two. Not that either of them were paying any attention, their focus now entirely on the coals and discussing the relative placement of hotdogs and hamburgers. But still, it was nice to know that the other woman wasn't putting on her "must keep everyone at arm's length" persona with regard to them being friends.

Trailing after the other woman, she shook her head. A year ago, she never would have predicted that she would actually enjoy spending time with the prickly mayor. Funny how things had changed so much.

~~*~*

Natalia pasted on her best sweet smile when Father Ray approached her after Mass, Mrs. Elliot trailing close behind him. She couldn't imagine what the two of them wanted, only knew it probably wasn't good for her self-esteem. While her interactions with Father Ray were usually fine when it was just the two of them, the older woman definitely had it out for Natalia and had a knack for getting the priest all riled up over nothing.

"Ah, Natalia. It's so good to see you here this morning."

Natalia gritted her teeth at the subtle insinuation in the priest's tone. Especially since she knew full well that she wasn't the only parishioner who didn't make it to Sunday morning Mass every week. She was pretty sure he didn't go around checking on the rest of the flock in such a manner. Refusing to rise to the bait, she said simply, "Good morning, Father Ray, Mrs. Elliot."

"I've been concerned about you. Is everything ok, Natalia?"

She stared at the man for a long moment, trying to decide if he was serious. Well, she knew his concern for her was genuine; he'd always been far more interested in her and her life than any other priest she'd had. What she couldn't figure out was whether he seriously thought she'd stand right there, out in public, with an openly hostile woman as an audience, and tell him if something was bothering her.

Keeping her manner as mild as possible, she said, "I didn't realize missing two Sundays in the past month and a half was cause for such concern. But to answer your question, yes, everything is fine. Life has just been busy."

Father Ray at least managed to look somewhat contrite at her words and his tone was apologetic. "I just know it's been a hard year for you and I couldn't help but think about what happened last July..."

He trailed off there, though Natalia didn't know if it was because of the sharp look she gave him or because the greedy curiosity on Mrs. Elliot's face reminded him that he had come dangerously close to violating her confidentiality. She didn't bother to hide behind pleasantries any longer. "I appreciate your concern, Father, but as I said, everything is fine. I know you're just trying to help, but there's nothing in my life right now that I need your help with."

She felt bad for her harsh words, but she was just speaking the truth. Last year, she'd run to her priest instead of her partner, turning to the person she'd been trained since childhood to trust implicitly. And while she freely admitted that she'd made the disastrous choices that followed that conversation, and that she was to blame for the hurt those choices had caused, she also knew that if he had advised her differently at that moment, she might have taken another path. Ever since she came back from her retreat with as much clarity as any imperfect being could have in the absence of Divine wisdom, she'd realized just how much the advice he kept offering was in a not-so-subtle attempt to get her back under...not his control, exactly, but his influence, certainly.

It bothered her, now that she was thinking about it, that he still didn't seem to understand that she had found her own path, made her own peace with God, and that her life was finally what she wanted it to be. He wasn't her confidante any more, no matter how much respect she had for his vocation and the work he did for his flock.

To his credit, Father Ray simply nodded, not seeming to be as offended as she thought perhaps he should be. "I just worry about you, Natalia. You've taken a difficult road and..."

Natalia held up her hand to stop the flow of words. "As I said, Father, my life is not something I need your help with. Unless, of course, you have a few minutes to talk about the charity work I'm doing down at the Mission."

She watched as the priest's face paled slightly, his smile slowly dropping away as she continued talking. "It's been hard finding time to balance that with taking care of the kids and working. Perhaps one or both of you could help me find more volunteers to cover the things I haven't had time to do." She glanced at the older woman, seeing her wide eyes and horrified expression, and pressed the point. "I'd love to hear Mrs. Elliot's thoughts on that as well."

When they both made hasty excuses and retreated, Natalia fought the urge to giggle. While she doubted the older woman had a single charitable bone in her body, she was a little mystified as to why Father Ray seemed so hostile towards the Mission. But it worked in her favor these days, so she wasn't going to look the gift horse in the mouth.

“Hey, Natalia.”

She turned to greet Sister Anne, who had a big grin on her face. Before she could ask about it, the woman said, “I suppose I should be offended that the mere mention of doing work at my humble little Mission makes Father Ray run away like he got spooked by a ghost or something.”

Natalia couldn't help it; she laughed at that. “So I've noticed.” She quickly grew serious. “I hope you understand that things have just been really busy lately, which is why I haven't been around as much.”

There was no mistaking the look of sympathy on Sister Anne's face. “Don't even worry about it. I know you've got a lot going on. But maybe you could give me a hand with something right now. I've got several boxes in the back of my car, but still have a few more that won't fit. Do you have some time to load them up in your car and bring them to the Mission? If not, it's fine. Just thought I'd ask.”

Natalia glanced down at her watch. “I'm supposed to meet Olivia at the Bauer barbecue soon, and I still have to go by the farmhouse to pick up the food.” Looking up at Sister Anne, she caught the question in the woman's eyes. “Ava's got brunch plans and didn't think she'd be at the barbecue until later in the afternoon, and Leyla's out of town. Since Olivia had her hands full with Emma and Francesca, I didn't want her to have to deal with that as well. But it's fine; I can make time for this.”

It was a matter of several minutes work to get the boxes loaded up in the trunk of Natalia's car. She told Sister Anne she'd meet her at the Mission, and then fished her cell phone out of her purse. Frowning in concentration as she stared at the keypad, she texted Olivia to let her know that she would be a bit later than she'd expected, as well as the reason why.

She opened the car door and slid in to the driver's seat, but didn't immediately start the engine. Her patience was rewarded with the ring of an incoming message.

Just don't take too long. Emma's bragging about all the treats you made and the natives may get restless if they have to wait too much longer. <3

Natalia shook her head, chuckling, as she started the car and fastened her seat belt. Easing out into the thin traffic, she mumbled, “Don't worry, Olivia; I'll be there before you know it.”

~~*~*

“I could have sworn I had more cheese slices than that. And I thought I had relish around here somewhere.”

Phillip raised an eyebrow at Rick's perturbed tone as he looked over the items spread across the table. It didn't surprise him in the slightest that his friend was missing things; how the man could expect to have enough supplies for his barbecue when he didn't bother to make a list of what he needed was beyond his comprehension. He was simply thankful that the man's forgetfulness was only a hallmark of his personal life, not his professional one.

He managed to keep from chuckling when Rick turned a beseeching gaze on Blake, who was holding her hands up in an apparent attempt at either deflection or self-defense. It wasn't entirely clear. But when Doris stepped in and said, "No, we are not running back to town for some other little thing you forgot; we've been twice; if we go a third time, we'll practically be on a first name basis with the clerk," Phillip couldn't keep from laughing.

The mayor raised an eyebrow at him, and he shook his head in response, still laughing. At one point in his life, he would have gotten angry at her dry tone or sarcastic comments about his friend. He hadn't been a very nice person for more years than he liked to admit. But having a second chance at life, having people around who loved him – faults and all – made him a lot more relaxed, a lot happier with the world and his place in it. He had Beth back in his arms, had a great relationship with Emma, and had a new extended family with Olivia and Natalia. Life was a gift that he would never again take for granted.

He was suddenly aware that he had gotten lost in his own thoughts when he looked up to find three curious gazes fixed on him – Rick's with a tinge of anxiety, Doris's with a tinge of impatience, Blake's with a tinge of concern.

Phillip smiled broadly, knowing that if he were to say what was in his head, he'd probably embarrass all three of them by being too mushy. Instead, he focused on the immediate issue at hand. "Don't worry about it, Rick. I'll run into town and pick up more supplies."

~~*~*

Lillian sighed in exasperation as Frank and Buzz argued, looking past them at the various people roaming the grounds of the Bauer estate. She knew it was just a mock argument, neither man seeming all that serious about his respective point-of-view, but neither willing to back down. She didn't even know what they were bickering about – something to do with baseball and time at work and, well, she'd tuned it out at about that point.

Normally, she was as tolerant as the day was long. But today, her husband and stepson had long since worn out her patience. Well, that wasn't quite true; Buzz had only stepped on her nerves when he didn't give up the argument. Frank, on the other hand, had been sullen and moody all day. He'd been griping at her and his father since they met up for brunch, had alternated between forced cheer and pensiveness whenever

Blake came near, had been sarcastic whenever he crossed paths with Eleni, and had practically yelled at Marina earlier.

Actually, she had to admit the last bit wasn't entirely fair to Frank. His daughter had started the whole thing by nagging at him because he'd said "hello" to Eleni, as if the chief of police and the head of the crime scene unit were somehow supposed to work together without speaking. At one point, the young woman had been almost beside herself with anger, which was when Frank had finally snapped at her. Lillian had to give his behavior a pass on that front. Whether Marina liked her mother or not, it wasn't any of her business what relationship her father had with the woman.

She shook her head at the thought. No wonder she was annoyed – she'd spent the day surrounded by spoiled brats.

"Come on."

She almost laughed when Buzz and Frank both jumped at her sudden intrusion into their argument. On the plus side, it shocked them into silence. She grabbed her husband's hand and led him off towards the bushes.

Despite his sputtered protest, she was relatively sure he wasn't all that upset with her. She didn't bother to look back to see Frank's reaction.

~~*~*

"This is unbelievable."

Natalia was too frustrated to even care that she was talking out loud when there was no one else in the car with her. The trip down to the Mission had gone smoothly enough and the boxes were quickly unloaded by the handful of volunteers. Her trip from there to the farmhouse had held only minor, and expected, traffic delays. But her trip towards the Bauer estate seemed to have been cursed from the beginning.

First had been the series of streets closed for multiple Fourth of July celebrations – block parties and various neighborhood parades. Which was all well and good – except for the minor fact that they'd forgotten to put up detour signs. Confused motorists had made ill-advised wrong-way turns and u-turns and generally made traffic into a huge headache. She'd nearly been sideswiped enough times that she'd actually lost count.

She'd finally cleared that tangled mess, only to run into her second obstacle – an accident that completely blocked the street she'd been on. Everything slowed to a crawl as drivers alternated between getting out of their cars to gawk and inching towards any side street they could turn on to. She'd said a quick prayer for the people involved in the crash, then had joined in the ranks of those trying to inch their way off that street.

At long last, she'd succeeded. And then, she'd come across her third and current obstacle – a road construction project. On a Sunday. On the Fourth of July. She couldn't go forward, because there was a cement truck blocking the one open lane. She couldn't go to the side, because there were no side streets on this stretch of road. She couldn't go back because more trucks involved in the construction work were behind her, blocking her in.

Un-freaking-believable.

She fumbled for her purse and grabbed for her phone. She needed to tell Olivia about this latest delay. The typing took longer than normal, as she was keeping one eye on her phone and one eye on the road, knowing that with her luck at the moment, the lane would be cleared and the flagger would motion her forward when she wasn't paying attention.

Just as she went to hit send, her phone screen flashed the "low battery" warning. Right as her finger pressed down on the button, the screen went blank.

She shook her head. She hadn't even checked her battery, since she thought she'd plugged her phone into the charger last night. Either she was starting her "senior moments" early, or the charger hadn't worked. Or something.

Before she had time to start fretting about it, traffic began to inch forward as the cement truck slowly moved out of the lane. All she could do was concentrate on the road and hope that the message had actually gotten through.

~~*~*

Mindy stood under a tree, looking out over the lawn and the people milling around. Rick and Phillip were busy telling tall tales around the grill. Beth had gone off to talk to Mel about passing the bar and life as a lawyer. She was excited for her friend's success, but she knew she'd be a third wheel in that conversation.

So she'd decided to just spend a little time alone and take in the sight of people enjoying themselves in this annual ritual. At the worst of times in Springfield, people were divided, pitted against each other in battles both literal and figurative. But at the best of times, they came together like this and managed to put aside their differences. Well, most of them, anyhow.

Looking out over the expanse of grass, she let her eyes flit around, taking in some of the people there. Bill was hovering over Lizzie, treating her like a princess, their devotion to each other undeniable. Billy and Vanessa were sitting nearby, holding hands and watching the kids run around. Shayne was bent over Marina and his son, making faces at little Henry. Reva was sitting on the grass, watching as Colin toddled around on a square of blanket, periodically toppling over. A gaggle of little girls would occasionally

run over and help him get back up whenever he fell. Danny and Michelle were strolling around, hand in hand.

It felt like home to be here, to be watching family and friends enjoy themselves. She was very glad she'd come back to Springfield. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed the place, not to mention all the wacky people who lived there.

She was especially glad that she'd been spending so much time with Rick. She'd missed him more than she'd ever imagined, and dating him was making her feel like a schoolgirl with a crush again.

Mindy smiled to herself. It had been a very good year.

~~*~*

Olivia glanced at her phone for the tenth time in as many minutes. Even though she had the ringer set to maximum and had it set to vibrate, she was still convinced she must have missed a message or a call. It had been nearly an hour and a half since Natalia's text message, telling her that she was helping out Sister Anne. Olivia had done the mental math of distances and routes and time needed to cart food around, and knew that even if her partner was moving at a turtle's pace and had taken the longest possible path from point A to point B to point C to point D, it still should only have taken an hour.

At the very least, Natalia could have sent another message to let her know if she'd gotten delayed again.

She stood under a tree, a bit off to the side of all the various groups of people, anxiety rushing through her as she remembered being in the same position last year. Waiting for Natalia to show up – a wait that had proven to be in vain. Everyone else had been laughing and happy, except for her.

Well, at least that was one difference between this year and last. She might be tense and a bit upset right now, but she wasn't the only one. As she'd glanced around earlier, she'd taken note of how stressed people appeared to be. Frank seemed to be grinding his teeth in an effort to keep a smile on his face, Blake alternated between looking happy and looking pensive, Marina and Eleni snapped at each other every time they passed within ten feet of each other, Lillian seemed exasperated with Buzz, Reva and Jonathan were avoiding each other, and so on and so forth.

Olivia couldn't help but smile a little at the reminder that she definitely wasn't alone in the whole "this isn't quite turning out the way I'd planned it" category. And, God willing, her situation was temporary. Still, she was annoyed that Natalia hadn't even bothered to text.

Pulling out her phone again, she glanced at the display. There were no new messages and no record of any missed calls. She fought the urge to send a message, telling

herself that the burden was on Natalia to keep in touch, to explain what was going on. It wasn't on her. But even as she told herself that, she couldn't restrain herself.

Where are you? Any idea when you'll be here? Just let me know what's going on.

She held the phone for a few minutes, waiting for an answer. She looked over to where Frank now had Francesca balanced on his lap. As irritated as he seemed to be with this whole day, she had to admit that he'd brightened up when she asked if he wanted to hang out with his daughter for a while. While she and Frank would probably always butt heads, having too much history, usually entailing them being at odds, she was just glad that he seemed to have made his peace with her being Natalia's partner instead of him.

Switching her focus, she watched Emma running around with Sarah, Peyton, and Clarissa. She was glad to see that both Emma and Sarah seemed to be having a great time, able to just be in the moment the way kids should be. She had been worried about that in the aftermath of Jane's murder. Her daughter had been through so much already; how much more could any kid, no matter how well adjusted, actually take? But seeing her like this, happy with her friends, warmed Olivia's heart. Jellybean had had her moments of being sad and withdrawn and nervous. But the girl seemed to be bouncing back with her usual spunk, just needing a bit more attention than normal from her two mommies.

At that mental reminder of her partner, Olivia looked down at her phone. Damn it. Still no message. What the hell?

Resolutely, she shoved her phone into her pocket, mood shifting from somewhat anxious to downright angry. She wasn't going to spend the next hour or two staring at her phone, waiting for it to ring. She'd hear it or feel it if Natalia called or texted. She damn well wasn't going to make any more first moves.

At this rate, Natalia would be lucky if she didn't end up sleeping on the couch.

~~*~*

Act 3

Natalia shook her head as she pulled into a parking space at the mini-mart. After all the delays – traffic and otherwise – she still couldn't quite believe that she had to make yet another stop. She'd somehow forgotten to grab the little flags she had planned to stick in the cupcakes as decorations, even though they were right next to all the other things she'd taken off the kitchen counter. On the one hand, she knew it didn't really matter. People might "ooh" and "aww" over them for all of two seconds, but the real interest was in eating the cupcakes, not admiring them. On the other hand, she wanted to do something to commemorate the holiday. Those kinds of little touches were important to her.

Walking in to the convenience store, she quickly headed to the aisle she wanted, thinking that she clearly spent way too much time here since she even knew what shelf to look on. Bending down, she grabbed up the last package of the decorations. Then, she jumped slightly in shock when she stood and found herself face-to-face with Christina.

“I’m sorry, Natalia. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Natalia waved off the apology. “I should have been paying more attention. I didn’t even see you.” She looked down at the woman’s bulging belly. “Do you need help reaching anything, or is Remy here with you?”

Christina’s laugh sounded a bit forced. “No, he had to work the day shift today. Detective Li offered to cover for him, but Chief Cooper didn’t allow it for some reason. He’s meeting me at the barbecue later. I just needed to pick up some candles for the cake I made.”

Natalia bent over again, almost before Christina had finished speaking, and grabbed a package of red, white, and blue candles. When she straightened up and handed the package over to Christina, she was surprised to hear, “Oh, no...”

She frowned and glanced between Christina and the shelf, wondering what was wrong with the candles she’d picked out. After all, they were in the “seasonal” aisle and there were no regular candles anywhere in sight. Just as she was about to ask, she heard a slightly longer “Oooohhh” and abruptly knew what was happening. Looking down at the floor of the aisle confirmed her suspicions; Christina’s water had just broken.

There was a look of mild panic on the woman’s face and Natalia’s mothering instincts kicked in. “It’s ok,” she murmured, placing her arm gently around Christina’s back and slowly guiding her towards the checkout stand. “We’ll get you to the hospital in just a minute.”

Still supporting Christina, she cleared her throat to get the attention of the store clerk. The college-age kid behind the counter didn’t so much as turn his head; his entire focus seemed to be on his phone call – not using his cell phone, but using the store phone. For all the notice the young man took of them, they could have robbed the place and made a clean getaway.

She could hear short, labored breaths that told her Christina’s contractions were coming close together, and the strained, fearful look on the younger woman’s face confirmed it. Natalia had a vague memory of her own fear when she went into labor with Rafe, having no real idea what to expect or how bad the pain would be.

Natalia murmured something in a soothing tone, though she had no idea what she’d actually said, and slowly walked the other woman over to a table near the coffee

counter, settling her into a chair. She told Christina to call Remy and tell him to meet them at the hospital, and that she'd take care of the rest.

Returning to the checkout stand, she didn't waste time trying to get the clerk's attention, simply walked around behind the counter and tapped him on the shoulder. He'd clearly been oblivious to her presence, because he jumped as if he'd sat on a hot coal. She wasn't surprised when he resorted to rudeness to try and cover his reaction. "Hey, lady, are you stupid? You're not supposed to be back here. And can't you see I'm on the phone?"

Natalia crossed her arms over her chest and raised a challenging eyebrow. Using the same lecture voice she'd used on Rafe, she said, "One of your customers just went into labor and is going to have a baby. I need to use the phone to call her doctor."

The clerk's eyes nearly bulged out of his head and he literally dropped the phone. Thankfully, it wasn't cordless. "Oh my God, dude. She's like having a baby right now? Like, what am I supposed to do? They didn't cover this in my training."

While a small part of her wanted to channel Olivia and offer a suitably sarcastic answer, she took pity on him, since he seemed on the verge of genuine panic. Speaking calmly to the young man, she told him to go sit with Christina and keep her company, to try and keep her mind off the pain. To his credit, he rallied himself enough to follow her instructions.

She hung up on the aggravated voice shouting "Dude!" over the phone, then dialed Olivia's cell number, mainly because it was the only one she knew off the top of her head. But it would also kill two birds with one stone – she'd be able to let her partner know that she'd had yet another delay and she'd be able to have Olivia go tell Rick that he was needed at the hospital. She'd long ago stopped questioning why the man seemed to specialize in every kind of medicine practiced at Cedars.

After a handful of rings, she heard a disembodied voice say, "We're sorry. The subscriber you're trying to reach is out of service. Please hang up and try your call again."

In disbelief, Natalia stared down at the phone in her hand. She disconnected the call and tried again, getting the same results. Un-freaking-believable.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she concentrated on remembering Blake's number. Dialing it, she could only cross her fingers and hope that this call would connect.

~~*~*

Jonathan winced as his mother flounced past him on her way to the grill and the picnic table full of food, not even glancing at him. He knew she was still pissed at him for not telling her that Jeffrey was alive, and for running off to Mexico on his own. Still, he'd

thought she was a little beyond the silent treatment at this point in her life. Apparently not.

He felt a presence behind him and turned to see Shayne standing there. Jonathan tensed instinctively, since he and his half-brother weren't always on the best of terms. But the look on the other man's face was pensive as he stared at the retreating form of their mother. "You know what she's like, Jonathan. She can hold a grudge with the best of them, but she'll eventually understand that you were trying to do what was best for everyone."

Jonathan sighed softly, wishing he could believe it would be that easy. His answer was a simple, "There's always a price to be paid for hiding the truth."

He winced as soon as the words were out of his mouth, remembering the stories he'd heard of all the secrets Shayne had kept, particularly about his son. He didn't want to hit a nerve or anything, but thankfully his half-brother didn't seem upset when he turned away from watching Reva, his gaze landing on Jonathan. "And sometimes there's a higher price when you don't."

Well, he couldn't exactly argue with that, now could he?

Casting about for something to say, wanting to shift the conversation onto happier ground since it was, after all, supposed to be a festive time, Jonathan finally settled on, "You and Marina and Henry seem pretty happy together."

And with that, Shayne was off and running, a smile on his face as he sang the praises of their lives. Jonathan didn't particularly care all that much, but he was grateful for the distraction from his own life and his own problems. At least someone in this crazy town was happy, even with the threat hanging over their heads.

~~*~*

Standing under a tree, next to his girlfriend, Frank cleared his throat for what was probably the tenth time. He'd finally screwed up the courage again to talk to Blake about his realization – that she was his consolation prize, that he didn't think he really loved her like a boyfriend should, and that they both deserved better than to settle for each other. But having the resolve to do it hadn't exactly given him any idea how to go about it.

Having her stare at him like he'd lost his mind wasn't helping matters either.

"Frank, you seem nervous about something."

Well now, wasn't that the understatement of the century? Clearing his throat again, he stared at Blake, wondering why it was so hard to do the right thing and break this off with her. It might have had something to do with the fact that they'd known each other

for a long time and he didn't want to lose her as a friend. It might have had something to do with the fact that he did genuinely like her and didn't want to hurt her. It might also have had something to do with the fact that she was darned cute in her flowery sundress, her hair sweeping across her shoulders, her eyes soft and kind, her slim figure curved in all the right places...

Wait. No. He could put that aside. He could do this.

"I kinda need to talk to you, Blake. I've been doing some thinking and..."

A loud chirp interrupted him. Reflexively, he reached for his cell phone to see if the call was for him. A moment later, he saw that Blake had done the same with her phone. She mouthed "Natalia" at him and he waved a hand at her, telling her to take the call.

He wondered briefly why his ex-fiancee was calling Blake instead of him or Olivia, then decided he didn't really care all that much. Not because he begrudged Natalia her happiness. At one point, he had, but not any more. It was just that now that he was in the same position she'd been in last year, he understood that it hadn't been a walk in the park for her to find a way to break things off with him. He was having a hard enough time just bringing the subject up with Blake and he kept second-guessing his decision.

And that was without the added complication of the break-up being for a same-sex relationship. Not that he'd ever be in that position, but still.

He shook himself out of his wandering thoughts in time to see Blake end the call and look at him apologetically. "I'm sorry, Frank. But Natalia's at the mini-mart with Christina, who just went into labor, and I need to get that message to Rick. They've already called Remy and he's on his way to Cedars, so you'll need to find someone to cover the rest of his shift."

"Don't worry about it. Do what you need to do and I'll make some calls."

He pulled out his phone and mustered up a smile as she kissed his cheek quickly before practically running off. Scrolling through his contacts, he found the number he needed and dialed. While he waited for the call to connect, it occurred to him that every single time he tried to talk to Blake about their relationship, something interrupted and kept him from breaking it off.

It had to be a sign.

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Rick smiled down at the grill, loaded with hotdogs and hamburgers, as he listened to his friends talking. Phillip, Beth, and Mindy were there with him – the Four Musketeers, together again. Danny and Michelle had been, but had wandered off to chat with other people. He turned slightly, glancing at the expanse of lawn behind him, his smile

growing wider at the sight of so many people having a good time. This was what life was really about – friends and family and tradition.

He chuckled as Beth smacked Phillip on the arm in response to some inane thing he'd said. It was especially funny because he knew the other man did stuff like that on purpose to get a rise out of his wife. Rick was so happy that Phillip was back in town and had settled into the life of Springfield. He'd missed his friend.

It'd had been a hard few years. He frowned slightly as his mind replayed everything that had happened, turning back towards the grill and focusing on it harder than strictly necessary, to keep the others from noticing his sudden fit of melancholy. But things were getting better. Phillip hadn't died, Olivia was going strong now that she was taking care of her new heart, and he and Mindy were spending a lot more time together these days.

That last thought warmed him. Someday soon, he'd have the kind of happiness that Phillip and Beth had, once again, found with each other. Well, assuming he didn't lose his nerve before the end of the day.

Pulling his scattered thoughts back together, he turned a row of hotdogs and laughed as Phillip finished some wildly embellished tale of their younger years. Hearing the sputters of laughter from the women, Rick turned his head and said emphatically, "He's exaggerating. We didn't actually tip any cows over. We tried...but the one we were pushing on woke up and wandered off. It was all very sad."

He rolled his eyes at the way Phillip clutched at his breast as though gravely wounded. "Oh, Rick. Why did you betray our secret?" The man's tone shifted from faux-hurt to faux-accusing. "Besides, you're the one who spread the story of our cow-tipping adventure all over town in the first place."

Rick shook his head, but couldn't keep from smiling at his friend, and saw that Beth and Mindy both wore matching grins. He pointed the grill tongs at Phillip. "Yes, but I stopped telling the story about twenty years ago. You, on the other hand...What the...?"

He was vaguely conscious of the fact that the other three were gaping at him as though he'd lost his mind, but the sight of Blake running towards them, a worried look on her face, was all he could focus on. He couldn't imagine what had gone wrong at the barbecue to cause that expression, and he hoped it was nothing serious. They all needed a nice, quiet, happy holiday. Of course, it being Springfield, the chances of that actually happening were slim to none, but he'd had high hopes anyhow.

The redhead skidded to a stop in the middle of the group, panting to catch her breath. Rick took a step towards her. "Blake, what's wrong? Is someone hurt?"

She shook her head, leaving him more puzzled than before. “No,” she gasped in between breaths. “Nothing like that. Christina’s water broke. She’s gone into labor. Natalia’s taking her to the hospital right now. You need to go.”

And so much for his nice, relaxed holiday. Not that he should have expected anything different; he was a doctor, after all, and emergencies seldom happened when it was convenient.

Even as that thought formed in his head, he had handed the grill tongs to Phillip and was shrugging out of his apron, tossing it to Beth. He shot a series of questions at Blake about Christina’s condition, stopping only when he felt someone whap him gently on the back of the neck. Turning his head, he saw it was Mindy. She jerked her chin in Blake’s direction and he realized the redhead looked flustered and annoyed. Her words only confirmed that. “Honestly, Rick, I have no idea. Natalia was in a hurry to get Christina to the hospital, so she only had time to tell me the basics.”

He swallowed his pride and said, “I’m sorry, Blake. I didn’t mean to badger you.”

She smiled at him, and he saw her normal good humor reflected in her eyes. “I understand. It did kind of come out of left field.” He raised an eyebrow at her baseball reference, but she seemed oblivious as she waved her hand back towards the way she’d come. “I do need to deliver one more message...if you’ll excuse me?” He nodded and watched her take off at a brisk walk.

He glanced at Phillip. “Buddy, I’ve got to go. Can you take over for me?”

“Of course. Beth and I have it covered.”

Rick smiled, even though he’d known that was what his friend would say. It was good to have people he could count on.

He turned and started to walk off, mind half on the happiness of the impending birth, half on the sadness of having to leave without the grand gesture he’d psyched himself up for, the hope he’d had for a fairytale ending to a beautiful day...

Abruptly, he spun on his heels. “Mindy, I...well, I had this all planned out...and this isn’t how I planned for it to go.” He stared into her uncomprehending eyes and blurted out, “I love you and I bought a ring and I want to ask if you’ll marry me and make me the happiest man in the world.”

He held his breath and watched her closely, seeing emotions cross her face in rapid succession – confusion, understanding, shock, awe. Finally, he saw tears in her eyes even though her face was split in the widest, most joyful smile he’d ever seen. “Oh, Rick. Of course I’ll marry you.”

He walked back to her and swept her up into a hug, relishing the feel of her arms around him. For a long moment, nothing else existed for him except Mindy and the happiness she brought to his life. Then he heard two stage whispers at once, from Phillip and Beth.

“Aren’t you supposed to be delivering a baby?”

“You should give her the ring now.”

Right, and right. He pulled back from his...fiancée for a moment, torn between his duty to his patient and his desire to stay here and bask in this moment with her.

Mindy still had tears in her eyes, but her tone was amused. “Why don’t I ride to the hospital with you? I can see the ring on the way, and we can talk about a date and all that. Then I can just come back here while you deliver the baby.”

Rick knew then just how lucky he was – he was going to marry the most thoughtful and practical woman in the world.

He swept her up into another big hug, not missing the way both Phillip and Beth were smirking at him. He knew he probably looked like a doofus, but he didn’t care. It might not have been the ideal, picture-perfect marriage proposal, but it didn’t need to be. He wasn’t exactly a picture-perfect kind of guy anyhow. Somehow, proposing in the midst of a mad rush to work seemed wholly fitting.

Releasing Mindy from his embrace, he grabbed hold of her hand and led her towards the house, to where his car was parked. He didn’t bother to look back, knowing Phillip would keep things going in his absence, his whole focus on moving forward, the woman he loved at his side.

He thought it was safe to say this was his best Fourth of July ever.

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Emma sat down on the ground next to Clarissa, watching Sarah and Peyton climb on to the bench next to Marina to play with Henry. He was ok for a tal...toddler, she guessed, but Colin was more fun because his mommy actually let him get down from her lap and do stuff. Still, she thought Sweet Pea was way cuter and more fun than both of the boys.

She stretched out her legs on the grass, giggling when Clarissa lay back with a big sigh, like she was tired. Maybe she was. They had been running around for...well...a long time.

Emma looked around, wondering where her mommy was. Ma was supposed to be here, but she wasn’t, and Mommy seemed both mad and sad at the same time. She didn’t

know why. And she was afraid to go over and ask. Grown-ups wanted kids to tell them everything, but they didn't tell kids everything. They didn't even tell each other everything.

Maybe her mommy was just worried because of what had happened to Jane. Maybe she was afraid it would happen to Natalia too. Emma shivered a little, even sitting in the sun, when she thought about that. It was scary to remember the man with the gun and to remember him holding Sarah. And it was sad to think about Jane. Even though Jane always left Emma alone when she wasn't supposed to and made her keep secrets about her boyfriend, she was nice.

Emma knew her mommies were worried about her. They'd talked to her a lot about what had happened. And she still got sad and scared sometimes. But she didn't want to think about it. She tried to forget it. She didn't want her mommies to think about it either. Not when it made them get all quiet and talk in whispers and follow her around.

She just wanted everything to be ok again. Ava and Leyla lived here now and they could take care of her just like Jane had. And they were nicer. Her daddy had guards for the house so no one could hurt them any more. She had Shadow to protect her and she could tell the puppy secrets – tell her all about the things that made her feel scared or sad and she always felt better when she did. Emma just wanted to run around and play like she had when she was a little girl. Well, Ma still called her a little girl, but she wasn't. She was a big girl now.

Kids at school always talked about wanting to be bigger, wanting to be adults so they could do what they wanted. Emma didn't understand that. Well, she did want to do whatever she wanted, like adults did. But she knew what it felt like to have grown-up problems, and she didn't like it at all.

She was glad that today she could hang out with her friends. That she could have fun. People needed to have more fun and not worry so much. She decided that when she took over the world, like her mommy always said she would, she wouldn't forget how to have fun. There would always be problems and hard things, but there were still good things like ice cream sundaes and playing in the grass and picking daisies.

Too bad adults didn't seem to remember that.

~~*~*

Olivia fought the urge to pace. Instead, she rooted herself to a spot next to a tree – out of the way of the people milling around and playing games, but where she could still keep a weather eye on Emma and her friends. Granted, Marina was also watching the four little girls, as they kept coming over to kiss and cuddle Henry. But she didn't exactly trust the younger woman's judgment or child-rearing abilities, so she was unwilling to turn her back. Even knowing that Phillip's security team was lurking about didn't help ease her worry about the kids. Ava was keeping an eye on Francesca now; Olivia was

still disturbed by the fact that her oldest daughter, who'd planned to be late, had arrived before her partner, who hadn't.

She knew she should just say the hell with it and go mingle with people, grab some food, and try to take her mind off her worries. And by now, they were worries again, not anger. She'd spent roughly the last half an hour being angry, going over what had happened last year in the wake of the barbecue and Natalia's disappearance. She remembered all the second-guessing she'd done for months afterwards, all the walking on eggshells she'd done in taking Natalia back and coping with the unexpected pregnancy, all the doubts and fears that still flared up at the oddest times.

Then she'd looked down at the ring on her finger and she'd remembered all the other things – all the things her partner had said and done in the past several months to prove her love and devotion to Olivia and to their daughters. She remembered the other times when Natalia could have run away and didn't – when she got the news about her grandmother, when the graffiti appeared on the hotel and exposed their lives even more than they already were, when Olivia's drinking came between them, when Alan's will was read and Natalia ended up with the burden of more money than she ever could have imagined.

Hell, even Olivia's road trip with Reva could easily have triggered her partner's flight instincts. She'd left Natalia alone with two little kids and the burden of running the Beacon. Under normal circumstances, that wouldn't have been too big a deal, especially with Leyla around to baby-sit as needed. But considering that the farmhouse had been vandalized and their daughter had witnessed a near-kidnapping and their nanny had been murdered and Edmund Winslow was alive and on the loose...well, that added a whole new level of stress to the situation.

And yet Natalia had stayed through all of that.

Unlike last year, there was nothing troubling her partner's mind. She could see now that she'd been oblivious last summer, tuning out all the clues that Natalia had been deeply worried about something. Olivia had been so caught up in her own vision of them being together that she hadn't seen what was right under her nose. To her shame, she even remembered the other woman trying to talk to her and her blowing it off.

But nothing like that had happened in recent days. There were no storm clouds on the horizon, no crises of faith looming, and no reason in the world for Natalia to stand her up again.

So now Olivia was left with nothing but worry – with the fear that whatever had delayed her partner without a word was not something of the woman's own choosing. What if Edmund's goons had slipped through their security and surprised her at the farmhouse? What if she'd been in a car accident? What if...Well, the possibilities were endless. She was making herself crazy with them. Maybe she just needed to hop in the car and head

out to look for Natalia. At least then she'd be doing something instead of just standing around waiting for a call that never came.

Just as she took a few steps, ready to go tell Ava her plan and ask her to watch over Francesca and Emma, she saw Blake headed her way at a brisk walk.

Her heart started beating faster.

Blake came to a halt in front of her, breathing hard. "Olivia, I'm so glad I found you. There's something I need to tell you."

All Olivia could think was that she'd been in the exact same position last year. Worry faded, anger shining through in its stead. She'd be damned if she was just going to stand here and let this happen twice. Her words were cold. "Where the hell is she, Blake? Don't even pretend you don't know. She's going to talk to me herself this time."

She almost smiled at the look of fear on the redhead's face. Blake held out a hand, as if to stop her from charging or something. "No, Olivia, it's not like that. Natalia tried to call you, but your phone was out of service."

Olivia reached into her pocket and pulled out the device. Pressing a button experimentally, she was met with only a blank screen. She pressed the button to power it on, waited a few moments for it to connect, and was greeted by the "low battery" warning before the phone abruptly turned itself back off. No wonder she hadn't gotten any messages from her partner. In an instant, the anger drained out of her, leaving her feel almost like a wrung-out dishrag. She was getting too old for this kind of drama...

Blake must have sensed the shift in her mood, because she stepped closer and put a hand on Olivia's arm. "Natalia ran into Christina at the mini-mart. Christina's water broke and she went into labor and Natalia is taking her to the hospital as we speak. She tried to call you, but when she couldn't get through, she called me so I could let you and Rick know what was going on."

Olivia caught Blake's brief headshake and heard a note of bemusement in the woman's voice as she continued, "Before that, she was stuck in road construction and traffic jams, and when she tried to text you to tell you about it, her phone battery died. It's almost like Murphy's Law is working overtime today."

Taking a deep breath, Olivia exhaled slowly, running her fingers through her hair. It was amazing how a few awkward sentences were enough to make everything right with the world again. Normally it didn't work that way, but in this case, it did. Just knowing that Natalia had tried to reach her and let her know what was happening made a huge difference to her mental state. Well, knowing her partner was physically ok helped a great deal as well, given all the madness of recent months; but that had less bearing on Olivia's mood than the reassurance that this wasn't a repeat of last year.

Suddenly noticing that Blake was still standing there, she managed to flash a smile and say, “Thanks for letting me know. Sorry if I...” She trailed off there, not really sure what, exactly, she was apologizing for.

Thankfully, Blake seemed to understand, and patted Olivia’s arm again. “I probably would have reacted the same way if I were you. Don’t worry about it.”

Blake smiled at her and then wandered off without another word. Olivia took a few moments to breathe deeply, releasing the worries and doubts that had dogged her since the morning. They were only natural, all things considered; she knew that. But holding on to them now wouldn’t do her any good. Or be fair to Natalia.

Especially since, as she pondered the case of the mysterious failing batteries, she realized the predicament was partly her own fault. She’d unplugged both phone chargers from their usual outlet in order to plug in her ancient boom box and play some cassette tapes. And while she’d left the chargers draped over the table in their usual spot, she didn’t remember plugging them back in to the wall. So when they’d charged their phones last night, they’d done absolutely nothing. Oops.

Shaking her head, Olivia could finally chuckle at the absurdity of the situation. Heart light, she stepped out of the tree line and headed over towards the grill. Suddenly, she was starving.

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Act 4

“It’s such a beautiful day!”

Doris rolled her eyes, not for the first time. “You said that already.”

It didn’t surprise her in the least when Blake’s only response was a swat on the arm and a smile. They were strolling side-by-side around the lush Bauer estate. Why, she had no idea. Oh, she supposed it was pretty enough, but she wasn’t exactly a “back to nature” type. Come to think of it, neither was the redhead.

She supposed the walk made sense, though. Every time Blake had gone off to spend time with Frank, she came back looking tense and unsettled, like she needed to burn off nervous energy. Doris didn’t want to pry, but she did want to go whap the man over the head with a tennis racquet. Not from any sense of personal animosity – while the two of them clashed frequently, he was a bumbling adversary at best, not an actual enemy. But she didn’t like the sense that he was jerking her friend around, and had resolved to do her best to keep Blake company during the barbecue.

She’d actually hoped to spend some time with her daughter today, but Ashlee had decided to stay home with Daisy – saying something about her friend having a spat with

James and needing support. Not that Doris could complain too much, since she and Ashlee had spent quite a bit of time together already – more than she'd expected, honestly.

Doris had to admit, that even if admiring scenery wasn't quite her thing, she always enjoyed spending time with Blake, even when they were doing nothing at all. Honestly, with Olivia being up to her eyeballs in her own dramas, Doris wasn't sure how she would have gotten through everything with Anna without Blake to lean on.

The thought of her ex-girlfriend made her sad. Even though it had become apparent that Anna really was one of the good guys after all, she couldn't quite bring herself to trust her. She trusted her with her life and with the lives of the people in danger from Edmund – that wasn't in question. But trusting her with her heart again felt like too big a risk to take.

Doris sighed and came to a stop. She felt a hand grasp her forearm, stroking gently, and heard a soft, "Are you ok?"

She mustered up a smile. "I'm as ok as I can be right now."

Doris saw understanding mixed with concern in the other woman's eyes; they'd talked only briefly about the mess with Anna, but she knew her friend had picked up on some of what she hadn't said. Before Blake could ask any more questions, she said quietly, "Thanks for asking, but I will be ok."

She reached up and patted Blake's hand before moving slightly away and resuming the walk. She smiled when the redhead fell back into step beside her. While this hadn't been the best year of her life, by any stretch of the imagination, Doris still felt as though she'd started taking baby steps towards a future that would be better than her past. She didn't know exactly what that would look like – whether she'd still be in politics, whether she'd have another girlfriend – but she knew that at least this time, she'd be living life more on her own terms than she ever had before.

It was both exhilarating and terrifying to contemplate. But to paraphrase one of the great sages of the world, she'd get by with a little help from her friends.

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Rick jumped out of the car in his haste to get to his patient's side. The trip to Cedars had been a nightmare of detours and construction and it had taken three times longer than it should have to get here. The only bright spot in the length of the trip was that it had given him and Mindy a chance to talk.

Mindy!

He spun on his heel, belatedly remembering that he hadn't said anything to her since he navigated the doctor's parking lot and pulled into an open space. He had an apology on his lips, but the smirk on her face kept him from speaking. He walked back over to her, not missing the fact that she was rolling her eyes at him.

But her voice was warm as she said, "I know your work is always going to be a priority and that you can be a little scatter-brained about other things when a patient needs you. I understand all that. It's part of what makes you who you are, and part of why I love you so much."

He gave a mock sigh of relief before bending down to kiss her, his arms wrapping her in a warm embrace. For a long moment, nothing else existed except the love he felt for her and the softness of her lips whispering against his and the warmth of her body pressed against him. It was as close to heaven as anything he could possibly imagine and he said a quick prayer of thanksgiving that she was here with him again. Like many others in Springfield, they had a long history together – of good times and bad, of being together and being apart, of calm and storm. No matter what happened in their lives, though, they always seemed to find their way back to each other. Just like Phillip and Beth did. All he knew was that he was the luckiest man in the world to have such a wonderful, understanding woman to be his bride.

The distant wail of a siren brought Rick's thoughts back to where he was and why he was here, and with reluctance he pulled back from his fiancée. As he turned to go, she held out her hand and he stopped and stared at her, puzzled.

Mindy's voice was full of amusement. "Car keys. I need them to get back to the barbecue, since there's no reason for me to be here. If nothing else, I have to show Phillip and Beth the ring."

Right. He knew that. He fished them out of his pocket and handed them to her. She smiled up at him and his heart melted again at the sight. She lifted her hand and waved at him and he waved back, almost certain that he had the sappiest smile in the world on his face. But before he had time to worry about what an idiot he looked like, she turned away and walked towards the driver's side of the car.

He turned as well, heading for the hospital's sliding doors. The two of them would have plenty of time to celebrate their engagement later. Right now, he had a new life to bring into the world.

~~*~*

If Olivia and Natalia were the stars of a romantic movie, this would have been the scene with them running towards each other across a field of tall grass and flowers, each step perfectly placed. The camera would have shown how, in perfectly timed motion, they stopped just short of colliding, the taller one sweeping the shorter one off her feet into an embrace, capped with them twirling round and round in a circle of joy.

But, Natalia thought to herself as she nearly lost her footing and slipped yet again, they were not stars and their life was not a movie. Yes, she was running across Rick's lawn towards her partner, and yes, Olivia was running towards her. That was pretty much where the resemblance ended. They collided with a solid thud instead of slowing to a dignified halt. There was a joyful and enthusiastic hug, but no one was swept off her feet.

All in all, she liked this better. It was real, not staged perfection. And no camera could possibly capture the way she felt with Olivia's arms wrapped around her.

"Querida, I'm so sorry. I must not have charged my phone and I was stuck in traffic and couldn't get a hold of you and I know you must have been so worried after what I did last year..."

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry. I forgot to plug in the chargers and I didn't even realize it, and I was thinking the worst about what might have happened..."

Natalia pulled back from the embrace long enough to look up into her lover's face, chuckling a little at the way their words rushed over each other. She caught sight of the slightly abashed answering grin on Olivia's face, before hugging her tight again, laying her head against the taller woman's shoulder.

If she lived to be one hundred, she would never find enough ways to make up for the suffering she'd put Olivia through. All she could do was take every opportunity to remind her lover that she was here for the long haul and that she wasn't going anywhere. Whatever happened in life, they'd face it together.

She didn't realize she'd said any of that aloud, but she must have, since she heard Olivia's whispered, "We'll definitely face everything together. It's you and me against the world, sweetheart."

Despite the serious content of the sentences, Natalia couldn't help but chuckle at the melodramatic tone in which the words were said. Of course, it made perfect sense for Olivia Spencer. The woman could only do sweet and sappy for so long before some trace of humor snuck in.

It was one of the reasons Natalia loved her so much – that trait balanced out her own tendency to take everything too seriously. Or to look for deeper meanings in even the most innocuous of things...

She squeezed her lover tightly, and then released her grip slightly, pulling back and tilting her head up to kiss Olivia. The press of lips was soft and sweet and she reveled in the feel of it – in the way this woman felt like home. She'd never truly understood what that phrase meant before meeting Olivia. As much as she'd loved Nicky, there was never a sense of being completely understood, completely accepted. And she'd

certainly never had that with her own family. As much as she adored her little sister, there was still a divide there, partly from the years spent apart, partly from not really knowing each other that well just yet.

With Olivia and their children, she finally knew what it meant to have a home that wasn't just a house.

After long moments, she pulled back from the kiss, slightly breathless, and looked up to see sparkling green eyes fixed on her. She heard Olivia whisper, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Natalia felt like she should say more than that, maybe apologize again for being so late, for not finding a way to get word to her lover. But before she could come up with anything, her stomach growled. Loudly. It sounded like the growl of a monster in a horror movie and she felt her cheeks grow hot. But Olivia only laughed mildly and said, "C'mon. Time to get you fed. There's lots of food and you've had a rough day so far."

She couldn't argue with that, and as Olivia pulled out of the embrace, draping an arm over her shoulder and steering her towards the laden picnic table, Natalia followed willingly. She'd already deposited her own treats there, but hadn't taken the time to stop and eat anything, because she was so anxious to see her partner. But the food had smelled delicious and she was looking forward to sitting on the grass with a loaded plate, her lover beside her, their daughters nearby, and their friends wandering around.

This was what she'd missed out on last year; she was determined not to miss out again.

~~*~*

"Mommy? Ma?"

Natalia jumped slightly when she heard the unexpected voice right next to her elbow. She turned her head to look down at Emma, and frowned when she saw the worried look on the girl's face. Glancing over at Olivia, she saw the sudden concern in green eyes.

Certain that their daughter needed some reassurance about why she'd been late to the barbecue, Natalia knelt down next to the girl. Her voice was soft. "What is it, Jellybean?"

She watched with growing unease as Emma shifted from foot to foot before edging closer to her. Reaching out an arm, she pulled the girl into a hug and felt a slight sense of relief when Emma melted into the embrace, leaning against her. The child's voice was small, muffled against her shoulder.

“I thought I saw a shadow moving. In the trees over by the driveway. I couldn’t see it very good and Clarissa didn’t see it at all, even though she was looking over there too. But it made me a little scared.”

That was the last thing Natalia had expected to hear. Instinctively, she looked across the lawn to the driveway, but she couldn’t see anything distinct at such a distance. Holding Emma tightly, she glanced up at her partner, watching as Olivia stared across the lawn herself, trying to see what had spooked the girl.

Under normal circumstances, Natalia might have explained it away as a trick of the light or just assumed it was someone from the barbecue heading towards a car or something. But things were far from normal, with the vandalism at the farmhouse and in town, and with Edmund on the loose. There was no way in the world she would ignore what Emma said. Better to check ten times and find only imaginary monsters under the bed than to miss checking the one time the monster was real.

She ran her hand soothingly over the girl’s hair and opened her mouth to speak, but Olivia beat her to it. “You did the right thing by telling us, Jellybean. You can always tell us when something worries you or scares you. That way we can take care of it.”

Natalia felt Emma pull away from the hug to look first at Olivia and then at her. She heard the girl’s faint sniff and saw the doubtful look on the little face. “But what if I’m wrong and there’s nothing there?”

Her heart broke a little when she heard those words and a quick glance at Olivia showed that her partner was equally bothered by them. She spoke quickly, throwing out the first idea that came to mind. “Do you remember the day that Shadow was barking and we found the little bird that fell out of the nest?”

Emma nodded, her eyes wide and shining at the memory. Natalia smiled encouragingly and said, “But most of the time when she barks, we don’t know for sure what she’s looking at, right?” The little girl nodded again. “Well, that little bird would have died if we hadn’t gone to look. It’s better to say something and have it turn out to be nothing, than not say anything at all.”

It was not one of her better comparisons, she knew. But it seemed to have struck a chord with Emma, because the girl’s face brightened. “So I’m being brave and helping like Shadow.”

Natalia smiled. She looked up when Olivia chuckled, and then watched as her partner dropped gracefully down to her knees beside them, pulling both her and Emma into a hug. She could hear the note of pride in Olivia’s voice. “That’s right, kiddo. You’re being very brave and helpful.”

They stayed that way for a moment before she felt Olivia pull away. Natalia looked over at her partner, seeing the determination shining in green eyes. Nodding in

understanding, she said gently, “C’mon, Emma. Let’s go talk to Uncle Frank. He’s a police officer and he can go check to make sure everything’s ok.”

~~*~*

Frank groaned as he bent down, peering under the rented dumpster next to Rick’s driveway. He was the police chief, not a patrol officer; he shouldn’t have to do this kind of stuff any more. But Emma thought she’d seen someone sneaking around in the woods over here and hadn’t believed him when he’d said he was sure it was nothing. Not that he could blame her, he supposed. After all, her nanny had just been killed recently. Besides, everyone had been jumping at shadows since they’d learned Edmund Winslow was still alive.

Some days, it seemed like he was the only one who wasn’t convinced that Edmund was still in Springfield. By now, the man had to know that they were looking for him and he wasn’t the typical dumb criminal who’d hang around, expecting that he’d never get caught. Frank was certain that Winslow had skipped town and was holed up in Mexico somewhere with his henchmen. Still, it was no wonder the poor kid was a little frightened.

But that didn’t make wading through the overflowing mess of used napkins, soda cans, and food-stained paper plates any less disgusting. Straightening up, he headed away from the dumpster and into the L-shaped copse of trees that ran as a buffer between the road and the lawn, before merging with the deeper woods that ringed the Bauer estate. He shook his leg vigorously to get rid of a napkin stuck to the bottom of his shoe, and sighed. Maybe he should have taken Olivia up on her offer of “I’ll go check it out if you won’t.” But no matter how much he liked pushing his ex-girlfriend’s buttons, he didn’t want to get into a pissing match with her in front of Emma; or in front of Natalia, for that matter. And with Blake staring at him all bright-eyed, like she expected him to play the knight in shining armor, he hadn’t really had a choice.

Shaking his head to banish his annoyance, he stepped carefully over a pile of...well, he didn’t know what and didn’t really want to guess. It was darker back here in the trees than he’d expected and his eyes were still trying to adjust. He didn’t see anything except mottled leaves and branches in front of him, hints of grey from the road off to one side, and hints of green from the lawn off to the other. There were no signs of movement and no hint of any intruder. Just a torn cardboard box and an old pile of rags heaped next to the box.

Wait. Was the pile of rags moving?

He took a step forward, squinting, and then another. At that point, all doubt was removed as what looked like a pile shifted and formed the silhouette of a man. The man glanced in his direction and then took off running – not towards the road as Frank had expected, but straight ahead through the trees.

Cursing under his breath, Frank took off after him. He nearly tripped more than once, his feet stumbling over plant roots and fallen branches and miscellaneous rocks, and then came close to knocking himself out on a low-hanging tree limb. The other man was at a full out run by then, sprinting through the copse of trees, almost to the deeper cover of the dense woods beyond.

Putting on a burst of speed, Frank raced after him, trying to catch up. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure facing his direction in the tree line at the very edge of the woods and the lane – a woman with long dark hair and oriental features. “Li!” he bellowed. “To your right!”

Even at a dead run, Frank noticed that the man suddenly changed directions, still aiming for the woods, but heading away from where Anna was skulking around in the bushes. He pushed himself harder, trying to catch up, crashing through the now-thick undergrowth. After a moment, he had no choice but to slow down or risk breaking an ankle.

About that time, he realized he could no longer see the mystery man through the brush and shadows of trees. He stopped running and bent over slightly, hands on his knees, panting for breath.

“Where did he go?”

Recognizing Anna’s voice, he managed not to jump at the completely unexpected sound of it. He straightened up and drew in a deep breath, trying to look as dignified as possible under the circumstances. “I don’t know. The trees are too thick in here; I couldn’t see which way he went.” He gulped in more air, before adding, “What were you doing out here anyhow?”

He saw a flash of annoyance in her eyes, but her voice was perfectly calm. “Given everything that’s happened lately, I thought a little extra security for the big barbecue might be a good idea. I know Mr. Spaulding has a security team here and that you’ve got a couple uniformed officers wandering around, but it never hurts to cover other angles as well.”

Frank rolled his eyes. Oh sure, he appreciated her enthusiasm for her job. But still, this was Springfield, not a big city like Chicago, and they did things a little differently here. “Look, I know everyone’s on edge with all the vandalism and Jane’s murder and all, but there’s no need to go overboard.”

He didn’t miss her pointed look and felt his irritation rise. His words were clipped. “The guy’s probably just homeless. I mean, did you get a look at him? He looked like a walking pile of rags. You can’t seriously think that’s the big, bad, scary Edmund Winslow.”

“And what if it was and we missed the chance of capturing him because you gave away my position?”

He stared incredulously at the woman, who stood in front of him with her hands clenched and jaw tight. What right did she have to lecture him? He mimicked her posture and snapped, “First of all, Detective, you weren’t assigned to be here today, so there was no position to give away. Second of all, I’ve lived in this town a long time. I know the people; I know their habits. Edmund is too smart to hang around where he might actually get himself caught. At best, that was our vandal or one of Winslow’s goons. But it was most likely just some old bum looking for a free meal.”

Pausing for emphasis, he said, “If that was Edmund, then I’m Kermit the Frog.”

Watching her carefully, he could tell she wanted to push the point. Her breathing was harsh and her eyes flashed with anger. A part of him wanted her to, in the mood for a good verbal sparring match. He was ready to take out some of his frustration with this whole damn day spent watching everyone else frolic, while he tried to pretend he was happy. Instead of granting his wish, she took a deep breath and unclenched her hands. Her words were quiet. “Fine. I’m going home now, Chief. If you decide you actually need me for anything, you know where to find me.”

Without another word, she turned and left, picking her way back through the woods, heading towards the road. He watched her go, wondering why he felt like he’d lost even though she’d given in. After a moment, he decided not to worry about it. He knew he was right and that was what mattered. He turned and headed in the direction of the lawn, ready to get out of the trees. At least he’d done his good deed and could tell Emma there wasn’t anything to worry about.

A squelching sound caught his attention as he stepped out of the woods and into the grass and he looked down to see his shoe planted firmly in the middle of a dog pile. Disgusted, he wiped his shoe on a tuft of longer grass and shook his head. It figures. That’s what you get for being such a good guy, Cooper.

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Phillip clanked the grill tongs against the side of an empty wine bottle. He smiled as a relative hush fell on the group assembled on the lawn in front of him. Not all the attendees of this shindig were there, of course; trying to round up such a disparate group was like trying to herd cats. But at least he had the attention of the majority.

“I’m sorry our host couldn’t be here for this, but as many of you know, he got called to Cedars to deliver Christina and Remy’s baby.”

His eyes fell on Lizzie, standing next to Bill, who had an arm protectively around her shoulders. He watched as his daughter rubbed her swollen stomach and he felt his

heart overflow at the thought of this other new life that would be entering the world in a matter of weeks.

Self-consciously clearing his throat, Phillip continued, "As many of you don't yet know, he also proposed to Mindy today as he was running off to the hospital. She said 'yes', and while they haven't set a definite date yet, they're talking about sometime in September."

His eyes sought Beth's, seeing the pleasure that gleamed in her eyes at the thought of two of their dearest friends getting married. He felt the same way – unable to believe his luck that not only were the Four Musketeers together again, but that they would all be intertwined in marriage. He glanced around at the rest of the crowd, seeing Lillian nudge Buzz in the ribs and Billy tighten his arm around Vanessa. Those two couples had held the last big wedding ceremony in Springfield several months ago and it was refreshing to see how in love they still were.

His gaze strayed to Olivia and Natalia, their hands clasped together tightly as they stood side by side. While he knew they couldn't yet marry in Illinois, he secretly hoped they'd be the next couple to announce a ceremony. Legal or not, their devotion to each other deserved to be recognized and celebrated. And he'd be more than happy to throw them a huge bash.

Glancing over, he saw Mindy blushing at the attention of the crowd. But her voice carried a definite note of amusement. "I'm going to try and finally make an honest man out of Rick Bauer. It'll be hard work and I may need a lot of help in the process, but it's a challenge I'm willing to take on."

As Phillip expected, there were numerous chuckles from the gathered group – many of whom had known Rick nearly as long as he had. They all knew he was a good man, his absent-minded professor tendencies aside.

Before anyone could get too carried away with razzing her, Phillip took control again. "As you know, the town's fireworks display is set for ten pm. The lawn is a perfect place to get a good view of them and you're all welcome to stay as late as you like. If your kids are getting sleepy and you want to put them down for a nap, Ava has agreed to keep an eye on them in the living room."

He noted the proud look on Olivia's face at the mention of her daughter. The two of them were so much alike. So many people just saw their strong and stubborn personalities, completely missing the softness underneath. Not that he'd ever expose that little secret to anyone who hadn't already figured it out. In a town as prone to drama as Springfield, having a reputation that scared people a little was generally not a bad thing. Still, he was grateful, not for the first time, that he and his ex-wife had managed to become friends. Given everything he'd put her through, he'd have completely understood if she never wanted to speak to him again.

Mindful of his role as de facto host, Phillip shook his head briefly to clear his thoughts, and then once again addressed the crowd. "I've shut down the grill for the night, but there are hotdogs and hamburgers staying warm in the oven in the kitchen. There's still plenty of food out and ready to eat...so eat, drink, and be merry!"

He stepped back into the lengthening shadows for a moment, watching the crowd disperse. Danny and Michelle marched up to Mindy, talking a mile a minute, oohing and aahing over her engagement ring. Frank put his arm around Marina's shoulders, escorting her and little Henry to the house. Eleni stalked off towards the driveway, apparently tired of the festivities and her former family. Doris went over and said something to Blake before they both meandered across the lawn and plopped down in the grass. Buzz and Lillian wandered off towards the woods. Billy and Vanessa went over to talk to Bill and Lizzie. Shayne headed over towards the food table, as did James and Matt. Reva hoisted Colin up into her arms, then paused to say a brief word to Jonathan before walking to the house.

Phillip smiled as he watched Sarah, Emma, Clarissa, and Peyton run towards Jonathan. Moments later, Beth appeared at the young man's side as well. Between the two adults, they got the four little girls settled on a blanket in the grass to watch the fireworks – assuming they managed to stay awake. Two security guards took up an unobtrusive position behind the kids, just as two security guards had gone into the house with Ava to ensure everyone's safety. Olivia and Natalia held hands as they strolled over to check in with Emma, Francesca already safely in Ava's care.

Phillip shifted his gaze to the horizon, filled with the colors of the sunset – oranges, pinks, deep blues, and reds all painting the darkening sky. It was a breathtaking sight.

Another year, another successful Bauer barbecue. He hoped that trend would continue for a long, long time.

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"Push! Come on, just a few more pushes! We're almost there!"

Rick's voice seemed to echo in Remy's ears as he held Christina's hand tightly. Or, more accurately, as she held his hand in a vice grip that left him feeling like his fingers were being mangled. Not that he could complain about that – compared to the pain she was going through, his was minor.

He leaned over and wiped sweaty hair off his wife's forehead with his free hand, murmuring softly, "You're doing great, honey."

Somehow, through her grunts of effort and cries of pain, she managed to smile up at him. He smiled back and kissed her forehead, doing what little he could to encourage her. She already had a doctor and a nurse telling her what to do; he figured she just needed a little moral support.

He moved his hand off her forehead and let that arm slide around her back, helping to prop her up as she arched forward with another push. Remy didn't concentrate too hard on the specifics of what was happening at the other end of the bed, just kept murmuring softly to his wife. Within minutes, she gripped his hand even harder, if such a thing were possible, and he felt her body strain hard and then slump back against his supporting arm as Rick offered a cry of triumph. "You did it, Christina!"

Within moments, another cry was heard in the room – their baby's first cry.

After all the horror stories he and Christina had heard in their childbirth classes about women being in labor for hours on end, about first pregnancies being the worst, about all the complications, he was relieved that their experience was the exception to the rule. He'd never figured out why people wanted to scare the bejeezus out of expectant moms. Wasn't the prospect of bringing a new life into the world scary enough on its own?

He was distracted from his thoughts when Rick handed the infant off to a nurse. The doctor told Christina she'd feel more pressure while delivering the placenta, and Remy stood uncomfortably by the bed. He wasn't sure whether to be there for his wife during this part or whether to go over to the nurse and make sure she checked the baby out thoroughly. Memories of what had happened to Max still haunted him and he didn't think he could bear losing another child – especially not to an unexpected infection. A soft, tired groan from Christina decided the issue for him and he leaned over her again, brushing her hair off her forehead.

Soon, the birthing process was finished and a nurse came over to clean Christina up a bit, while Rick stood and went over to check on the baby. Remy stared across the room for a minute or two, looking for any sign that there was a problem with the newborn. Then, as the second nurse moved away from the bed, he refocused his attention on his wife. He eased his arm from behind Christina's back, and when the grip on his hand was released, he fussed over her, helping her get settled more comfortably in the bed, straightening her hospital gown.

Sooner than he'd expected, Rick walked over with a tiny bundle in his arms. "Christina, Remy – meet your son. He's got a good set of lungs, all his fingers and toes, and looks perfectly healthy."

Remy couldn't help himself. "Doc, are you sure he's ok? I mean, you just gave him a quick once-over."

He saw understanding in Rick's eyes. The two of them had had a heart-to-heart talk a few months ago, where Remy confessed his fears about having another child and talked about how devastating Max's death had been for both him and Ava. It hadn't been an easy conversation, since the hurt still hadn't entirely healed, but Remy felt

better just for getting some of his feelings out in the open. He could only hope Ava had found someone she could talk to for support.

The doctor's words were kind. "We wanted to give you some time to bond with him. We'll take him in a little while and do a thorough set of tests on him, to make sure that everything is fine. But for now, just enjoy spending some time with the little man."

Christina reached out for their son and Remy forgot his fears and found himself awed by the blissful smile on her face. She sagged in exhaustion and he wouldn't soon forget how much effort she'd gone through to have this baby, but she looked happy and content. Watching her with their child, he couldn't imagine a more perfect moment than this.

He perched next to her on the narrow bed, looking down into the tiny, scrunched-up face. Cautiously, he ran a fingertip over their son's cheek, feeling the softness of his skin, amazed that this beautiful boy was his. Christina looked equally amazed as she cooed sweet nothings and ran her hand over the baby's head.

A throat was cleared beside him, and Remy looked up to see Rick there, looking vaguely sheepish. "I don't want to interrupt, but I wanted to get the paperwork started. Did you decide on a name for your son?"

It should have been an easy question to answer, but Remy blinked anyhow, because they hadn't exactly settled on one. They'd narrowed it down to two, but hadn't been able to decide. He wanted to name his son after his father, but she was unsure about having two people in the same family with the same name. She wanted to name their child after one of her heroes, but he didn't much like the name Martin and Luther was too easily misinterpreted as being for the singer. Mel and Cyrus had taken to teasing them about how the kid would probably be five or six years old before they finally named him. So he was a little startled to hear Christina's voice, strong and decisive. "Clayton. Clayton King Boudreau."

He glanced at his wife and saw the calm certainty on her face. That was it – she'd nailed it. He felt like his face would split in half, he was smiling so widely. It was perfect.

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Seated in the grass, Natalia smiled up at her partner, who stood next to her. She laughed as Olivia winked saucily at her before sauntering back towards the Bauer house. The fireworks hadn't yet started and the other woman had decided she wanted a glass of champagne to toast to the occasion. Not in the mood for a drink, Natalia was content to stay where she was, enjoying the feel of the cooler night air, listening to the soft murmurs of conversation around her, basking in the peace of her surroundings.

She suspected Olivia mostly just wanted an excuse to go inside and check on Ava, to make sure her daughter was enjoying herself with the babies and toddlers. Not to

mention making sure that both the young woman and their infant daughter were safe. Phillip might have the best security money could buy, but there was no stronger reassurance than seeing with one's own two eyes that everything was fine, given the threat hanging over their heads.

Reflexively, she glanced to the side, checking on Emma where she sat with her friends. Phillip, Beth, and Jonathan were sitting with the four little girls. As she'd half-expected, Emma and Clarissa were still wide-awake. But the younger girls were both asleep – Sarah curled up next to her dad, Peyton draped over her mom's lap. Natalia smiled at the precious sight before turning her attention back to the sky.

All her earlier frustrations had melted away once she'd made it to the barbecue and finally saw her partner. She'd tried not to worry too much, given that she'd done the best she could to let Olivia know where she was and what was happening. But the ghost of Fourth of July past had haunted her and she'd been afraid of what would be going through the other woman's head when she didn't show up as promised – again. As much as her lover had tried to hide it, she'd seen the sharp look of relief in green eyes once she arrived.

While she was ashamed to admit it, even to herself, she'd wondered for a moment how long it would be before she didn't have to worry about that every time something came up or she was late. She'd brushed that selfish thought aside as quickly as it had come to her, though, knowing that it was her bad choices that had left Olivia with such doubts. Soothing them for as long as it took was the only penance she could make for what she'd done.

Still, she couldn't complain about it. Compared to most of the rest of their friends, their lives were going well, lingering issues aside. Their relationship was solid, solid enough that they'd exchanged rings on Valentine's Day. Their kids were happy and healthy. Business at the hotel was booming and they were still looking into franchise options. Other than the specter of the not-actually-dead Edmund, things were as close to perfect as could be.

She just hoped that between the efforts of Anna and Jonathan, of the Springfield PD and Spaulding security, they'd catch Edmund soon. While she was determined to do anything and everything in her power to keep her family safe, the knowledge that Olivia hadn't put her gun back into storage after her little adventure with Reva unnerved Natalia to no end. It wasn't any distrust of her partner – going in with guns blazing was more Rambo Shayne's delightfully unbalanced style. But the idea that Olivia might actually pull the trigger in a confrontation and then have to deal with the consequences...that was more than she could bear to think about. She couldn't imagine what kind of a burden that would be on her lover's soul.

She shook her head, laughing slightly to herself. Leave it to her to ruin a festive celebration by worrying about things she couldn't control. She said a quick prayer to

keep her family safe, and then concentrated on the mantra “let go and let God.” She had friends and family around her, food and drink, beautiful scenery to look at.

It was definitely time to show her appreciation to God by enjoying the things He’d given her.

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Olivia smiled down at her lover as she offered a hand to help the dark-haired woman to her feet. While the fireworks display was truly spectacular, her butt was sore from sitting. She could enjoy the sight just as well if she was standing. She draped an arm over Natalia’s shoulders as they walked down to the slightly lower ground near the swimming pool, so they wouldn’t be in anyone else’s way.

Finding a spot she liked, she stopped, her arm still around Natalia, smiling as the shorter woman rested her head against her shoulder. It was so good to be here with her lover, to feel her nestled close. It gave Olivia a sense of peace she hadn’t had for a couple of days – where between her talk with Reva and her own memories, her mind had been focused on the past. What she really wanted was to think about the future.

Hearing a soft gasp beside her, presumably at a particularly vibrant burst of color, made her smile again. It still surprised Olivia sometimes how much she loved this woman. For all her experience with sex and marriage and husbands, love was still new. She’d felt degrees of it with her past lovers, definitely felt it for her daughters, but this was a wholly different experience and the strength of it sometimes took her breath away. It was more than she’d ever expected to find in her lifetime; that was for sure. She’d be damned if she let anything or anyone get in the way of it...ever. Not Natalia’s demons, not her own.

She watched the sky explode in colors, taking in the sight on one level but her mind elsewhere. She found herself, oddly, thinking of Rick – grateful for his nagging and his skill as a doctor, which was a big reason why she was alive and kicking today. Even though she’d barely seen him before he raced off to the hospital, he’d looked happy. And Mindy was positively glowing.

Olivia glanced to the side, to the dark head nestled against her, and visually traced the line of the arm she had around Natalia’s slender form down to her hand, seeing the soft glint of the ring on her finger. They’d bought each other rings for Valentine’s Day as a sign of their commitment. Even though she’d felt comfortable with that step, she’d had cold feet at the thought of taking the next logical step – that of having some kind of ceremony. Despite knowing her doubts were normal after everything that had happened, she realized now that she didn’t want to wait any longer. Well, ok, maybe a little longer. After all, she didn’t want to step on Rick and Mindy’s toes. Or upstage them.

“We should get married.”

Olivia heard a soft choking noise beside her at those words and couldn't help but laugh as Natalia pulled away from her so that they could see eye to eye. Answering the question she was sure was on the tip of her lover's tongue, she said quickly, "Yes, I know it wouldn't be a legal marriage. No, I'm not crazy. It's just, well, we've got these rings and we're clearly a family and we're still together – which in the history of Springfield is a remarkable feat – and...oh...maybe you're not ready...I'm sorry..."

She added the last part when she saw sudden tears in brown eyes, and swallowed hard as she realized she'd let her flair for spontaneity make her partner uncomfortable. Olivia knew better than anyone that Natalia's decision-making process was best described as glacial. As frustrating as it could be sometimes, she still respected that about the other woman, and...

Her self-recriminations stopped when she felt a soft hand against her cheek and heard Natalia's gentle words. "No, querida, that's not it. You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm just...it's overwhelming, that's all. With what happened today, with the reminders of last year, I didn't expect this."

Olivia leaned into the loving touch, her arms sliding around Natalia's body. "Well, you know me. Carpe Diem Spencer." She smiled at the laugh that greeted those words. "I don't mean we have to do anything right away. I just...I know you were ready to take this step before and I wasn't. But now I am."

The smile that lit her lover's face was the brightest thing in the night sky. Olivia pulled Natalia closer, looking fondly into the beloved face, listening to the woman's soft words.

"It means so much to me that you want this. But we don't need to rush into it. We can take our time to plan a ceremony that has meaning for both of us. And you know Emma will want to be involved. I'm not trying to back out of it or anything...I just want to make sure we do this right. I want this to be something that's truly symbolic of our love and our lives together."

Olivia leaned forward, pressing her forehead against Natalia's, the gesture comfortable and familiar and oddly intimate. "We could do something around New Year's Day. That gives us almost six months to think about things and to plan what we want. And it's pretty symbolic, what with starting a new year and making resolutions for a fresh start."

Natalia's arms circled her, wrapping her in a tight hug. "That's a wonderful idea! I love it."

Olivia couldn't help but smile at the enthusiasm in her lover's voice. It was, actually, a brilliant plan, if she did say so herself. She pulled back slightly, and then leaned in for a kiss.

The fireworks in the night sky were nothing compared to the fireworks she felt as she kissed her lover. There was nothing else in that moment except the soft body pressed

against hers, the strong arms holding her close, and the warmth of the lips moving against hers. All her senses were consumed with the kiss, with Natalia.



A sudden sound of cheering finally broke through her dazed thoughts, and from the way Natalia pulled slightly away from her, she suspected the other woman had heard it too. Glancing around for the source, she noticed that the people gathered on the upper part of the lawn were looking at the sky. As she followed their line of sight, she gasped in awe herself at the marvelous explosion of colors against the dark canvas of night. The fireworks were now going off simultaneously, dazzling and bright and beautiful.

She glanced briefly at her partner, noticing that Natalia seemed equally awed. But even the beauty of the sight couldn't keep their eyes away from each other for too long.

"I love you, Olivia."

Her heart melted, just a little, at those words, and she whispered, "I love you too."

As she gazed deeply into her partner's eyes, Olivia was struck by the sense that being there, in that exact moment, was perfect. All the doubts of earlier in the day, all the frustrations of the past year had been worth it, because Natalia was here with her now.

The End

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