

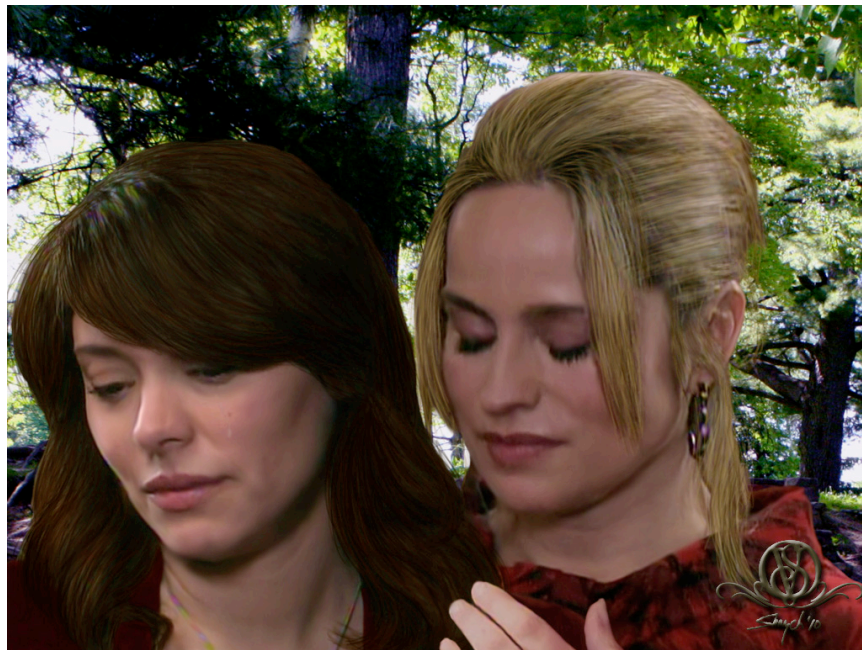
The Beginning Of The End

by calliopes_muse

ACT 1

The cacophony of screams and sirens barely penetrated Natalia's mind. All she really registered was movement. A man ran past her then slid to his knees next to a woman face-down in the dirt only a few feet in front of her. Then she saw it – the gun, still raised, the glint of sunlight off the metal reflecting brightness and beauty no longer evident in this day.

Her hand shook as another hand slowly lifted towards it from the side. The touch was familiar and gentle, and she saw it shaking as well as it reached for her. Fingers wrapping around her wrist, her chilled skin was enveloped in a warmth that could only belong to one person. Her whole body quivered as realization closed in on her, and she collapsed into comforting arms and understanding green eyes.



“Oh God, Olivia. Oh God! I shot...I shot someone.” The words stuttered out of her mouth; her voice was unrecognizable to her own ears.

The scene played back as she huddled against Olivia's body, the weapon forgotten and abandoned on the ground by their knees. Edmund Winslow had ranted at the crowd, people had been crying and screaming in pain and loss, while Anna and Jeffrey approached Edmund from different sides demanding he surrender. Then a horrifying sound – Francesca's cry, loud and resounding over all the other noises. Edmund's reaction was instantaneous and Natalia saw the cold, desperate glint in his eyes as he turned towards her crying child. She imagined that was the last image Jane must have seen before he took her life while she fought to protect Emma.

She didn't recall thinking anything, but she felt everything - the raging fear and livid anger of a mother desperate to protect her young. It was primal and instinctive. Without regard for herself or anyone around her, she reached into her purse and found Olivia's forgotten gun. As she raised the gun, the crying and injured people faded to the background. She caught a glimpse of Olivia reaching for her and begging her to stop, and of Emma clawing at Leyla to get away and get to her. But when she stepped from her safe hiding place with the weapon drawn, the rest of the world disappeared. The only thing she could see was Edmund's cruel glare and the only thing she could hear were Francesca's cries.

She stood between Edmund's gun and her daughter, and that was all that mattered.

Time seemed to stand still. What probably happened in a few seconds felt like it took a lifetime.

Even when she pulled the trigger, there was no noise and for a moment, she wondered if the gun even went off. She only knew that something had happened when she saw Edmund's head snap back and a splash of red spray into the air.

But here, now, her face buried against Olivia's chest, the noise was too much. She heard every word, every plaintive sob, and every movement except the one she really needed. There was one sound missing – their baby's cry. Fear gripped her and she fought to get away from Olivia.

"Francesca! Where is she? Where's Francesca?" She pushed against Olivia, who was desperately trying to hold her and calm her.

She saw Olivia's mouth moving, but couldn't hear the words, so she continued to struggle, assuming the worst. She screamed in panic. "Where's our baby, Olivia?"

Suddenly Rafe appeared at her side, his eyes red and his hands shaking as he handed his sister over. Natalia sobbed and quickly took Francesca, rocking the small child in her arms and burying her face against the soft skin of the baby's neck.

"No one will ever hurt you," she murmured over and over into Francesca's ear while Olivia held both of them in her arms.

Remy had covered Christina and Clayton with his arms and body as soon as he realized what was happening. He fought to hide his shaken nerves and glanced down at his sobbing wife and frightened son.

He stroked Christina's hair. "Are you okay?" She nodded quickly, but remained silent. "Hey, little man, how about you?" He ran his hands over his son's tiny form and let out a deep sigh of relief when he didn't see so much as a scratch on him.

When a few moments of silence passed, he got to his feet. Looking around he saw that the scene had descended into chaos. It looked like a miniature war zone. Chairs and tables were flipped over and broken. Flowers were scattered haphazardly around the grounds. The smell of panic and gun smoke still lingered in the air. All around him, small groups of people were huddled together crying. Several people were holding bloody, lifeless bodies in their arms. One looked like a nurse he had seen at the hospital, but there was so much blood on her face that it was hard to be sure. He didn't recognize any of the dead as close friends.

Slowly, people begin to stand and move. He helped Christina and CK up then found his cell phone. He took care of urgent matters first and called 911 for help.

Reaching under the back of his jacket, he found his service weapon. He had no idea if the shooter was still around or had gotten away. Lifting his pants leg, he pulled a smaller gun from a holster and handed it to Christina. Her frightened eyes stared back at him and she shook her head refusing to take the weapon.

"Please, baby. I have to check the injured," he begged her. Squeezing her eyes shut tight to hold back the tears, she nodded her head. Leaning over, he kissed the top of her head before running to a huddled group to check for injuries, all the while keeping a lookout for the shooter. In the distance, he could hear the sirens of ambulances and police cars drawing closer.

Nearing the stage, he saw a body sprawled out on the stage. Anna ran up to him from the left, holding her shoulder as a small trickle of blood oozed out between her fingers.

"You've been shot." He reached for her.

Anna waved him off as her eyes searched the crowd. "I'm fine. It's just a nick. Have you seen Doris?"

Remy looked around; the faces and images were like a blur in front of him. "Um, no, I haven't seen her."

She pulled a set of handcuffs from her belt. "Do me a favor. Help me with this so I can go look for her."

"And what is this?" He followed Anna as she jumped to the stage. She held her weapon out in one hand, pointing to the body on the stage, while she clutched the cuffs in her other hand.

Anna saw Edmund's gun, inches from his hand, and kicked it out of the way. Kneeling and keeping her gun trained on the figure, she felt for a pulse. "This is Edmund Winslow. Our shooter, and he's still alive. Here, put those on his ankles." She tossed the cuffs to Remy, who promptly attached them to Edmund's ankles.

Remy moved to Edmund's other side, looking for the injury that had him down. When he saw no wounds on Edmund's torso, he lifted him slightly.

A small puddle of blood under the man's head made Remy draw back. "Oh boy."

"Is he dead?" Both Anna and Remy glanced up at the pained voice as Jeffrey collapsed next to them holding his leg, blood gushing out around his hand.

"Jesus!" From the amount of blood, Remy was pretty sure a bullet had hit his femoral artery and Jeffrey could bleed out in minutes. He pulled off his jacket and ripped his shirt off. He made a tourniquet out of it and tied it off tightly around Jeffrey's thigh.

Remy heard the squealing of tires and looked up with relief as several ambulances pulled to the curb of the park. Like an army of ants, medical personnel climbed from the vehicles and ran towards the injured. Right behind them, police cruisers bumped the curb, officers pouring out of the cars and racing towards the scene.

"Hey, you got this?" Anna's voice pulled his attention back to her.

He nodded. "Yeah, got it."

She stood and tucked her gun in the back of her jeans. "Good. I'm going to find Doris."

Frank looked up at Marina when he heard what sounded like the entire police station blaring past Company with their sirens going. He pushed off from his spot on the floor of

the kitchen where he had been playing with Henry and ran out through the front door of the restaurant.

Cruisers, ambulances, and even a fire truck flew down Main Street. He looked back at Marina as she exited Company with Henry in her arms. "What the hell's going on?"

Marina shrugged and shifted Henry in her arms as the little boy squealed at the noisy sirens and tried to jump from her grasp in all of the excitement. "I have no idea."

Frank reached for his phone to call the police department when it started ringing. Seeing the station number, he flipped it open to answer. "Yeah."

Marina watched her father as a frightened look came over his face. She stepped closer to him to ask a question, but he raised his hand to ask her to wait while he listened to the person on the other end of the line. He ran his hand through his hair and finally said with a shaky voice, "Do...do we know who was killed yet?"

The answer on the other end wasn't what he wanted to hear, and he shook his head, closing his eyes. "I'm on my way." He flipped the phone closed and turned to his daughter,

"There's been a shooting at the park, right in the middle of the wedding...Francesca...I...I have to go."

The frightened look sent a cold chill through Marina, and she put a hand up over her mouth. "A shooting? Oh my God. Is she okay?"

Frank shook his head as he backed away from her to head across the street to his car. "I don't know. I have to go."

She watched as he raced to his car, placed the siren on the roof, and sped away. She pulled her son closer, kissing his soft hair, muttering softly to reassure herself more than Henry.

"I'm sure Daddy is fine. Don't worry. Come on, let's go find my phone, and we'll give him a call."

Rick and Phillip took turns doing CPR on Billy. His lips were turning blue and his skin was growing ashen. Vanessa held tightly to his hand, leaning down and whispering to him. She told him all of the things she'd never had the chance to say over the years. She apologized for all of the opportunities that had slipped them by and all of the things she'd done to hurt him over the years. Mindy sat at her side trying to offer a small bit of comfort even as she cried from fear and worry.

“One...two...three.” Rick counted out the rhythm and pumped Billy’s chest as Phillip administered mouth-to-mouth. “Come on, where are the damn ambulances? One...two...three. You can’t do this now, Billy. One...two...three. You have to give Mindy away. One...two...three. It’s not your time yet.”

Over and over, Rick and Phillip kept the rhythm, hoping to maintain an oxygen flow to keep Billy’s brain alive and the blood moving. Sirens were heard in the distance. Bill jumped up from where he was holding Lizzie and ran toward the edge of the park, waving his hands to get the attention of the approaching ambulances.

Blake slowly became aware that the noise and gunfire around them had stopped. She still had her head down, tucked safely into the crook of Doris’s shoulder. She felt the other woman beneath her move; it wasn’t normal movement, but a shaking.

She pulled back slightly to get a look at Doris. Her friend’s eyes were shut tight and Blake could see a line of wet tears running down toward her hairline. Doris’s bottom lip quivered and she was mumbling to herself.

Blake gently put a hand to her friend’s face. “Hey, are you okay?” When Doris didn’t respond, she spoke louder, but still tried not to startle her. “Doris! Talk to me.”

Green eye suddenly flew open and captured Blake’s. “I’m alive?”

Blake laughed in relief. “Yeah, I think so.”

Doris’s frightened look turned quickly to worry as she propped herself up on shaky arms. “And you’re okay?”

Blake nodded and moved off of her friend. “Yeah.”

“Good.” Doris let out a relieved sigh. For a moment, they didn’t move and simply looked at each other, until the moment became awkward. Doris stood on wobbly legs. She reached down for Blake to take her hand so she could help her up.

They stood and looked around at the chaos they’d just lived through. Blake shook her head and ran her hands through her hair. “Wow!”

“Thanks,” Doris said out of the blue.

Blake looked at her and felt a little shiver course through her. It definitely wasn't left-over adrenaline, and she couldn't help but smile. "You're welcome. You know, I was going to see if you wanted to get coffee after the wedding, but seeing as I saved your life, I think that calls for at least dinner...with a nice bottle of wine."

Doris flinched a little. "Maybe we should check on our friends first."

"Oh, of course." Blake wasn't ignoring the significance of the event they'd just experienced, but it was because of that experience that she didn't want to let the chance to spend time with Doris pass her by.

When Doris saw the hurt look in Blake's eyes, she quickly smiled and added, "But I'd love to do that."

"It's a date then." Blake realized how the words sounded, but didn't regret them a bit.

"Yeah, a...a date," Doris stuttered at the thought and quickly covered by gesturing to the madness around them. "I, um...better check on what's happening, assess the damage, talk to the reporters, and all that other mayor-type stuff." She fussed with her hair and attempted to get the leaves and dirt off her suit. "How do I look?"

Blake smiled. "Beautiful, as always." She was enchanted by the light blush that came over Doris's face.

The mayor swallowed hard as her heart raced at the compliment. "Thanks. So, I'll talk to you later."

The redhead nodded. "I'll call you."

Blake watched as Doris walked away, and shook her head at her own behavior. She couldn't believe she was actually flirting with her best friend in the middle of what looked like a shooting spree. She muttered to herself, "Boy, Blake, you really need to work on your timing."

Doris saw Olivia and her family huddled over by a large oak tree. Before she could reach them, though, she was intercepted by Anna.

"Oh, thank God, you're okay." Anna looked Doris over, surprised she didn't even seem to have a scratch. "Are you sure you didn't get hurt? I tried to get to him before he took a shot. I really did."

In spite of her reservations over Anna's deception, Doris couldn't stand to see her ex upset. She calmed her down by taking her hand. "I'm fine, really."

Anna stuttered, "But...I...I saw him come up the path and you were right there, and I was running, but I couldn't get there fast enough, and..."

"Hey, calm down. It's okay. I'm not hurt." Doris put her free hand on Anna's shoulder and felt an unexpected wetness. She pulled her hand away and saw blood. "I can't say the same for you though. Anna, you need to get this looked at."

Anna shook her head. "It's just a scratch. Don't worry about it."

Doris stood up straight then, her eyes burrowing into Anna's. "Oh, so you get to worry about me, but I don't have the right to worry about you. Is that how this works?"

"Hey, I didn't mean it that way. It's just the way I am, okay? I worry about everyone else first and think of myself last." Anna paused, frustrated that her meaning wasn't coming across right. "I'm not used to anyone worrying about me, so I'm not good at accepting it. But, thank you. I'm fine."

Doris felt her belated frustrations with her ex deflate quickly at the repentant look in the younger woman's dark eyes. She rubbed her forehead, trying to forestall the pounding headache that was fast approaching. Looking into Anna's eyes, she really wished she could let her anger and hesitance go, but she needed trust and Anna had blown all of that away with her lies. No matter how much she wanted to go back sometimes, to that time and place of having a wonderful woman to share her life with, she just didn't think she could.

She took a deep breath and moved into safer territory. "So, what do we have here?"

Frank had never driven so frantically and dangerously in his life. He took every shortcut he knew, ran red lights, and even drove on the sidewalk for a short stretch just to get to the park as quickly as possible. No one could tell him who was killed or injured, or even how many victims there were yet. He was panicked to think of so many people he knew and loved being at risk, but most of all, he thought of Francesca - her sweet innocent face and trusting eyes. He pressed the accelerator a little harder. Jumping the curb, he drove into the park and skidded to a halt outside the scene.

Raised in a close-knit Greek family, there was one thing that Frank understood: family. Nobody hurt his family and got away with it. He may not have the best family in the world and like so many others they were as dysfunctional as the day was long, but they stuck

together and stood by each other. And they always, always fought for and protected each other.

So, when he ran from his car and found Natalia and Olivia underneath a large oak tree, he didn't think about their tangled past. He just ran to them – his extended family - and kissed his daughter as tears fell from his eyes.

Doris and Anna saw Frank come up, but gave him a moment alone with his family. Quietly, they approached and Doris rested a gentle hand on Olivia's back.

"Is everyone okay?" Doris reached out and ran the back of her fingers over Francesca's cheek. The little girl smiled and Doris was thankful that she was too young to remember any of this. Unfortunately, looking at Emma clinging tightly to her mother's waist, still visibly shaking, she couldn't say the same thing for the other Spencer child.

Natalia leaned against Olivia, saying nothing, but nodding. Olivia tried to smile at her friend, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Nobody's hurt here. How about you?"

Doris shrugged. "Just some scrapes."

Olivia saw Anna standing to the side, whispering to Frank; the dark stain on Anna's sleeve making her injury apparent. "I see not all of our little group came out unscathed."

Anna turned at Olivia's voice, ready to answer, when Remy jogged up with an EMT bag over his shoulder. "What's the status?"

He caught Ava's eyes, "Are you okay?" She nodded and he tilted his head at her in concern, not entirely convinced she was telling the truth. He wasn't looking forward to telling her the news.

Everyone turned to Remy and froze at the look on his face. He glanced at Olivia and then focused again on Ava, swallowing hard. "Jeffrey's been hurt...really bad. A bullet hit him in the femoral artery and he's lost a lot of blood."

Ava leaned heavily on Rafe who was beside her. "Is he...?" She couldn't finish her thought. Her ex shook his head. "I don't know. I...he just left in an ambulance for Cedars. You should get there."

Rafe took Ava's hand. "Come on, let's go." He looked at the rest of his shocked family. He tugged on Ava's hand. "Give me the keys; I'll drive you and Leyla. Olivia, can you drive Ma and Emma over?"

Olivia nodded at the confident young man, who suddenly seemed far too mature for his age. "Yeah, I got it."

Doris watched the shaken family gather together purses and other personal items. When she looked up, she noticed Remy still looked uncomfortable. "There's more, isn't there?" He looked away and she leaned her head to catch his dark eyes with her own. "How bad?"

He fought to keep his bottom lip from quivering. Realizing just how bad it was and how fortunate he was that Christina and CK weren't hurt, the shock was finally settling on him.

"Ten are dead, another eight wounded. Three are critical. Jeffrey O'Neill is one of the critical. The shooter, Edmund Winslow, is another. It appears he was shot in the head but he's, surprisingly, still alive."

He paused and looked at Olivia and the others as they waited for him to continue. "And there was one that wasn't directly injured by a gunshot, but is still in grave danger. Billy Lewis had a heart attack. Rick and Phillip were doing CPR, but weren't able to revive him before the medics got here and took over."

"Dear God." Olivia ran her hands through her hair. "Has anyone called Josh?"

Remy shook his head. "I don't know. The ambulance left for Cedars already, so they should be there by now. You may want to check with Vanessa."

She nodded. "Thanks." Guiding the rest of her family from the park, they followed Rafe, Ava, and Leyla towards the parking lot and the cars.

Frank caught Anna's eye and raised a finger asking for one minute. He jogged after Olivia and Natalia and caught up with them at their car. "Hey, if you want, I can take Francesca...at least for tonight, so you don't have to worry about her."

Natalia instinctively pulled her daughter closer, kissing her dark hair. "Thank you, Frank, but...I don't know if I can let her go tonight."

He nodded noticing how she wrapped her arms more possessively around the child. "No, it's...is everything okay, Natalia?"

Olivia opened the back door to help Emma into the car. She waited to see how Natalia was going to respond, ready to jump in and take the blame if needed.

"I shot him." The words were out of Natalia's mouth before Olivia could interject. There was no hesitation on Natalia's part. "I shot Edmund Winslow and I'd do it again. He was aiming a gun at my baby. Nobody hurts my family."

Frank took a deep breath and looked around. It was only the three of them and the two girls. If he had to, he'd help Natalia out of any trouble she might get into. Though truth be told, the town would probably honor her as a hero if Edmund didn't make it.

He squeezed her hand and looked at Olivia. A shared look of understanding and protectiveness passed between them. "Don't worry about that, Natalia. We'll figure it out. It'll be okay."

He helped her get Francesca into her car seat, taking an extra moment to kiss his daughter. Standing up, he barely had a chance to respond before Olivia hugged him. "Thank you."

Stepping back, he watched as they climbed into the white car and it followed the SUV out of the parking lot.

Walking back towards the scene of the crime, he flipped his phone open. "Hey, Eleni, it's me. I need you at the park. Bring your entire team and everything you've got. Yeah...it's bad."

ACT 2

The scene in the emergency room lobby looked like something out of a war movie. Hospital personnel hustled in the injured and tried to calm their frightened and worried family members. Olivia, with Rafe's help, guided their group through the chaos until they were out of the way in a secluded corner.

She looked at the dark-haired man. "Rafe, stay here with them. I'm going to see if I can find out Jeffrey's condition."

"Okay." He reached down to pick up Emma, who had come over to him. She curled up against him and sighed deeply.

Ava broke away from the group and followed her mother. "I'm going with you."

The rest of the small family stood and watched as what seemed like an endless stream of gurneys came in, with people attached to breathing machines and all kinds of monitors. Blood streaked the floor and maintenance teams worked fast to clean up the mess before unaware bystanders could get into it.

After a few minutes, the noise in the lobby quieted down to a dull roar. Rafe, seeing a few empty seats near the doors, urged everyone to follow him. Slipping down into the hard plastic chair with Emma still in his arms, he finally let himself relax a little. Nobody in his family was hurt and that was all that mattered. Based on his recent life experiences, it wasn't that bad of a day. But he knew though that his family wasn't used to the complete lack of control and uncertainty that came with this kind of violence.

He adjusted Emma in his lap and looked down at her. The usually happy child was almost non-responsive; her normally joy-filled green eyes were resigned and sad. He felt his heart lurch in his chest. She was far too young to lose her light now.

"Hey, Munchkin, I heard that the cafeteria has this really awesome new sundae called 'The Mega Chocolate Brain Freeze Express'. It's supposed to have like double everything on it. Wanna go get one?"

He smiled when she looked up at him, contemplating the possibility. He teasingly narrowed his eyes, laying down the challenge. "In fact, I double dog dare you to eat the whole thing by yourself. I don't think you can do it."

Emma narrowed her eyes at her big brother. Smiling with determination, she jumped off his lap. "You're on!"

Rafe was pulled to his feet by Emma. He glanced back at his mom and saw a small smile on her face. Chuckling, he followed behind the little girl, thinking, *Well, we've gotta start somewhere.*

Francesca squirmed in her mom's arms, wanting to get down and follow her siblings. Natalia chuckled quietly. "Hey, where do you think you're going?"

The baby fussed at being held against her will. Leyla, who was sitting next to Natalia, saw the weariness on Natalia's face. "Here, let me take her for a bit. We'll play right around here." Leyla motioned to an open area between the chairs.

Natalia handed the baby over and watched as Leyla sat Francesca down in the chair on the row in front of her. Leyla got down on her knees and peeked through a hole in the back of the plastic chair. Francesca turned around and peeked back, giggling at her aunt as they played peek-a-boo over, around, and through the chairs.

Natalia smiled at them and after a minute, she rested her head back against the wall behind her. Closing her eyes, she was quickly in a light slumber.

Olivia tapped her blunt nails on the counter of the nurse's station, waiting for the young woman to return with news on Jeffrey. She pursed her lips and looked around impatiently. Ava squeezed her arm hoping to calm her, sensing that her mom was close to losing her cool.

As soon as Olivia reached in her pocket for her cell to call someone – though she wasn't sure who, because Rick was probably in surgery right now – the young nurse came back. The petite blonde nurse looked across the desk at the two women and smiled at them.

When they didn't smile back, she cleared her throat and said, "Mr. O'Neill did come in about an hour ago and he's currently in surgery. As soon as the doctors know something, you'll be informed. Do we have your contact information on file?"

Catching movement at the end of the hall, Olivia looked over Ava's shoulder and saw a familiar blonde head. She looked back at the nurse. Motioning to Ava, she stepped away from the desk. "She's his daughter. Make sure you get her information. I'll be right back, baby."

She jogged down the hall to Phillip, who was getting off the phone. She touched his shoulder and he turned around. "Olivia. Hey, how is your family?"

She shrugged and tried to smile. "I was going to ask you the same thing. Emma's fine except for being scared by all of it. We're all fine. I heard about Billy."

Phillip nodded. "Yeah, it was bad. Thank God we were all in the same place. Rick and I were able to do CPR."

Olivia ran a hand through her hair. She knew the fear and panic that Billy must have felt – to feel your body revolt against you. As she knew all too well, it was a terrifying feeling.

He watched Olivia's reaction as her emotions played across her face. He felt bad for her and the way this reminded her of a difficult time in her life. "Anyway, Rick's in surgery with him now."

Olivia felt a hand come to rest on her shoulder and turned her head to see Ava behind her. She reached up and covered her daughter's hand with her own, before looking back at her ex-husband. "We're waiting on news about Jeffrey. When you hear about Billy, can you let me know?"

"You bet. I'll come down and see Emma in a little bit. I need to get back and check with Vanessa and Mindy to see if they've heard anything." He then reached for Ava's hand. "I'm sure Jeffrey's going to be fine."

“Auntie O!” Olivia spun in surprise just in time to be taken into Jonathan’s arms. He held onto her tight, “I didn’t stay at the wedding. When I heard the news, I was so scared that...”

She pulled back and wiped at her teary eyes. “We’re all okay.”

He pushed back his long dark hair and nodded, smiling. “Yeah, I saw Natalia when I came in, and the kids. She told me about Billy and Jeffrey. What about the rest?”

Phillip stepped up then. “Everyone else is fine. Billy had a heart attack.”

Jonathan rolled his head back and then shook it. “Is he...?”

“Surgery. We should know soon.” Phillip added.

Jonathan glanced at Olivia. “And Jeffrey?”

“He was shot and he’s in surgery too.” Olivia looked at her daughter and shook her head. “We’re not sure what’s going to happen. It was kind of bad.”

Jonathan took her hand and leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek. “I’ll check on you all later after I go see everyone.”

She nodded and urged him down the hall. “Go.” She took Ava’s hand and turned to head back to their family.

Jonathan started walking in the other direction, leaving Phillip watching the two Spencer women until they turned the corner. Phillip rolled his eyes skyward. “Just a small break would be nice, you know?”

There was little for Vanessa to do except wait. She had paced the seating area until she had counted all of the tiles at least ten times. She knew by now that the small room was, if her math skills were correct, probably about six hundred square feet and held ten tan chairs, five blue ones, and one black one.

She definitely needed to get out of that room.

The walk down to the chapel helped her shake off the worst of the wait-induced numbness, and when she entered the room, tears that she had thought were cried out returned. Kneeling in a pew, she said a soft prayer and waited a moment to let her emotions settle again.

She wasn't sure how long she had been there, but when her knees began to ache, she rose from the pew and exited through the non-descript wooden door to stand in the hallway. She needed to get back, but she had one last task to do and she couldn't do it in front of everyone else.

Leaning against the wall, she pulled her phone from her purse. She scrolled through her contacts and found the D's. Carefully, she typed out a message: *FYI, EW is alive. He attacked everyone at R&M's wedding. Ten killed. Billy had a heart attack...in surgery now. Will tell more later. Luv, V.*

She slipped her phone back into her purse and pushed off the wall. Rubbing her fingers over her tired eyes, Vanessa headed back down the hall to the waiting area, hoping she hadn't missed Rick giving an update.

By now, halfway around the world, Dinah should have gotten her message. Vanessa didn't want to worry her, but she deserved to know that Edmund was in custody. *Maybe that'll be enough to get her back now.*

Shadowed by the raised towers with their menacing gargoyles that loomed over the entryways surrounding the square, Dinah and Mallet sat in wrought iron chairs at an open-air coffee shop. The locals of the small German village had recommended the quaint shop as having the best coffee in town.

Taking a deep breath, Dinah leaned her head back, the golden rays of the early morning sun warming her face. She rolled her head to the side to glance at Mallet. "This is incredible. Everything we've seen and done has been amazing. I don't think I've ever felt so happy."

Mallet lifted his dark sunglasses onto the top of his head and smiled at the blonde. "In spite of the reasons for doing this, it has been great. We deserved a fresh start."

Reaching to take his hand, Dinah nodded and looked out over the square. A buzzing in her pocket surprised her. It wasn't often that she had anyone contact her and it had been several weeks since she'd last heard from Vanessa. Her mother had mentioned Rick and Mindy's upcoming wedding and had told her bits and pieces about the other happenings in Springfield, like Shayne's team winning the championships. He was so good with Henry and was going to be a great father to him. She felt a wave of sadness pass over her at that last thought, but she kept it to herself.

Glancing down at the phone in her hand, she saw she had a text from Vanessa. She read it several times before she realized that Mallet had leaned over and was looking at her.

He squeezed her hand. "Hey, are you okay?"

He watched as Dinah flipped her phone closed and raised her head to look out over the crowds milling around the square. She never looked at him, but he could see the muscles in her jaw working as they tensed, then relaxed, then tensed again.

When she finally spoke, her voice was raw with emotion, and it was then that he saw the tears slipping down her face. "Edmund's back, and he attacked Springfield."

The uncomfortable chairs in the waiting room did nothing to help Olivia's mood. She had contorted into just about every conceivable position to try and get comfortable. She had even considered settling on the hard linoleum floor with Rafe, Leyla, and Emma as they played Go Fish with a set of cards Rafe and Emma had bought in the hospital gift store. But that would be a worse situation than the one she was currently in.

At least sitting here, bent over with her head in her hands, she had the added benefit of Natalia lovingly rubbing a hand up and down her aching spine.

It had been a little over an hour since she and Ava had come back with the news that Billy and Jeffrey were in surgery. She glanced over at her oldest daughter, who was slumped down in her chair with her head resting back against the seat. Olivia felt bad for her. Ava was so much like her. She put up walls when she hurt and would strike out when attacked, or even preemptively attack before anyone could hurt her. Since losing Max, it seemed like Ava had thrown herself into any endeavor possible just to keep from feeling the pain. Olivia understood that far too well. She had done it so many times in her own life, even recently with Natalia.

Feeling a hand gently squeeze her shoulder, she leaned back in her chair and looked into the tender brown eyes of her partner.

Natalia glanced down at Rafe, Leyla, and Emma just in time to see their youngest yawn loudly. "It's been a long day. Maybe we should get them home."

Olivia looked out a nearby window and saw that it was later than she'd realized, since the sun was on the verge of setting. She nodded at Natalia. "You could take them to The Beacon. I could stay here with Ava until she hears about Jeffrey. At least at the hotel, we'll be close if needed."

Natalia reached out and squeezed Olivia's hand. "Tell you what, let's give it another hour. If we still haven't heard anything by then, I'll take them there for the night."

“Sounds good.” Olivia rubbed her thumb over the back of Natalia’s hand.

Natalia smiled at the soothing touch. “If it’s okay, I think I’ll take a short walk. My butt’s asleep.”

Olivia couldn’t help it. The bait was too easy to take. She smiled lasciviously. “I could just rub it until it wakes back up again.”

Natalia shook her head and leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek. “You’re incorrigible, but I love you so much for it.”

Olivia smiled and raised an eyebrow. “Lucky me.”

Natalia stood and stretched. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Olivia watched as the younger woman walked away. Natalia was very good at keeping her emotions hidden, but if this last year had taught her anything, it was how to read her non-demonstrative partner. There was no way that the shooting hadn’t affected Natalia. In those moments following the horrific event, where the other woman had broken down and mumbled protectively over Francesca, she had known this was going to be a tough ordeal for the whole family, but mostly for Natalia.

Eventually, Frank would come around with questions about the shooting, and if he didn’t behave himself, she’d seriously have to consider having Natalia tie her to the bed to keep her from killing him.

Natalia brushed her hand over the lacquered wood of the pew, kneeling out of habit on the rest in front of her. Since walking in the door, she hadn’t been able to look up at the heavy wooden crucifix hanging at the front of the room. Due to the time she’d spent here, first when Gus died and then during Olivia’s illness, she knew the hospital chapel by heart. She could see the altar of candles even with her eyes closed and smell the incense permeating the wood and cushions around her. It was quiet and calming on so many occasions, but not today.

Unlike the space around her, her thoughts were a whirlwind of chaos. Her mind replayed the scenes like a movie loop. She had played out hundreds of scenarios, imagining numerous different paths. But only one kept her family safe. Only one had been an option.

It was the one path she had taken.

The only words that echoed in her head were “*forgive me.*” It was the only prayer she had left.

Standing at the back of the chapel, Olivia watched her partner with watery eyes. If she hadn’t taken the gun to the service and if she had told Natalia her fears, Natalia might never have pulled the trigger. *And what if she hadn’t?* She wanted to consider that scenario even less. Edmund had been pointing the gun at their youngest daughter. His intent had been as clear as the madness in his cold eyes. There had been no other option.

Quietly, she pushed off the frame of the door and walked down the carpeted aisle to stand just behind and to the left of Natalia. She choked up as Natalia reached back for her without looking. She took the offered hand and settled down in the pew. Natalia got up to join her.

“How did you know it was me?” Olivia whispered.

Natalia finally glanced up at the crucifix on the wall, feeling a soft smile playing at the corner of her lips. “I sensed you.”

Olivia squeezed her hand. “The kids are ready to go to The Beacon. Poor Emma’s about to drop from exhaustion. Are you ready?”

With a nod, Natalia stood, and they left.

The small local barbeque joint was noisy, but a long pull on his beer and a smile from Reva made Josh forget all about it. He’d actually dreamed of moments like this with Reva, simply being together and being happy. He smiled at Colin who was sitting next to his mom and spending more time playing with his food than actually eating it. Watching as Reva laughed at something funny Colin said, Josh felt truly content and happy.

A flash caught his eye and he glanced to the side, towards his mostly forgotten phone, to see the screen lighting up. Seeing the name on the display, he raised it to his ear.

“Hey, Mindy. I would think you’d have better things to do on your honeymoon than call your uncle.” His laughter died as he listened to her. “What? Billy?...You’ll let me know when you hear something?...And Shayne?...Thank God. Anyone else?” He breathed a sigh of relief to hear that no one else in their immediate family was hurt, but he stopped short and looked at Reva when Mindy told him about Jeffrey.

He ended the call and rubbed the suddenly aching space between his eyes. He was lost in his own head for a moment until Reva spoke up, “What in the world was that all about?”

Glancing into Reva's beautiful blue eyes, filled with worry, he couldn't hold out on telling her. Part of him wanted to wait until they got back to the hotel and put Colin down for bed. Somehow, though, he knew she'd never let him get away with not telling her for that long.

He scrubbed at his goatee and took a deep breath before speaking. "Rick and Mindy never got married. Edmund Winslow showed up and opened fire on the crowd."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh dear God! Shayne?"

Josh reached for her hand. "He's fine."

The tears fell from her eyes then, but they were tears of relief. "Oh thank God!"

"There's more." He hesitated, dreading upsetting her with the news. "Billy had a heart attack. He's in surgery. Mindy will tell me more when he comes out."

"Oh Josh, honey. I'm sure he's going to be fine." She squeezed his hand and watched as Josh looked down, unable to make eye contact. She knew there was more. "There's more, isn't there?"

"Jeffrey was shot."

She tried not to show it, but it felt like she had been kicked in the gut. The air rushed from her lungs, and she felt the world tip upside down for a moment. As angry as she was at Jeffrey, she never wanted him to die. Looking at her son, she was drawn from her thoughts when she realized that Colin had knocked his drink over.

Josh kept talking as he tried to clean up the mess. "He's in surgery too. The bullet hit a major artery so they're not sure of his chances."

Once the spill was cleaned up and Josh was settling back down in his seat, she made eye contact with him, her tone brooking no argument. "We're going back."

The bright lights outside the hospital blinded Doris for a moment and she shielded her eyes with her hand to help her sight adjust before she stepped up on the podium. With Blake's help, she had touched up her makeup and brushed her hair back into some semblance of order before heading over to the press conference she had called. The news of the shooting had spread quickly to the surrounding counties and several news crews,

even one from Chicago, had converged at the hospital and were now pointing microphones in her direction.

Doris glanced over her shoulder and smiled when Blake gave her a thumbs-up for encouragement. Clearing her throat, she glanced down at her notes. "Today, the quiet town of Springfield was rocked by tragedy. While details are still coming in, I am happy to report that the attacker was shot and apprehended on sight. His condition is currently critical. It appears he also acted alone. Most recent reports indicate that ten people are dead and eight are wounded. Most of the wounded have already been released with minor injuries. Be assured that I, along with the Springfield Police Department, are working diligently to gather all of the facts and continue to ensure the safety of Springfield. That is all for now. Thank you for your time."

Doris stepped quickly from the podium as questions were lobbed at her. Needing a moment of respite, she caught Blake's eyes, looking for her help.

With a hand on Doris's back, Blake guided her through the hospital doors, closing them quickly before the persistent reporters could follow. She watched Doris walking down the hall, her shoulders slumped with the weight of the day.

Blake looked at the burly security guard a few feet away. "Excuse me."

"Ma'am?" He stepped up to her.

"Don't let any of these vultures in, okay?" She nodded towards the throng of people on the other side of the glass doors. He rocked back on his heels and Blake could tell he was uncertain. She adjusted her tactic. "By order of the mayor."

That got his attention and he gave her a courteous nod. "Yes, ma'am!"

Feeling confident the matter was handled, Blake jogged down the corridor to catch up with Doris, turning where she had seen Doris disappear. Leaning up against the wall, near a water fountain, was her friend.

Walking up, she gave Doris a gentle smile. "You did a great job out there."

Doris looked down and nodded a little, her voice soft when she finally answered, "Thanks."

There was something off in Doris's tone and Blake wasn't sure what it was until her friend's shoulders began to shake – Doris was crying. Blake didn't stop to think about what she did next. She did what felt right; she reached out and wrapped Doris in a hug.

Blake held her as she cried – the sobs coming hard. She pulled Doris closer, whispering softly in her ear. “It’s okay. I’ve got you. It’s okay.”

After a couple of minutes, the crying subsided into a few sniffles. Blake pulled back and reached out a hand to brush stray strands of hair out of Doris’s face. “Better?”

Doris nodded and wiped at what she was sure were the worst raccoon eyes in history. “I’m pathetic.”

Blake smiled at her and shook her head. She reached up to brush away a tear dangling precariously from her friend’s jaw. “No, you’re human. I know you try to pretend you’re not, but you are.”

Doris rolled her eyes, taking Blake’s joking comment as a way out of the seriousness of the moment. “Please! I’m a cast-iron bitch.”

“Even iron can melt from enough heat.” Blake’s voice had dropped a little.

The effect was immediate on Doris. Wondering if Blake was flirting with her, she felt oddly disappointed a second later when Blake patted her arm and quipped, “And you’ve certainly been under a lot of pressure lately. No one would expect you to be unaffected.”

Doris cleared her throat and stood up straight. She moved to the water fountain. “Wow, I sure am thirsty.” Taking a moment to gather her wits about her, she leaned over for a quick, cooling drink.

Straightening back up, she turned to Blake. “I need to go over to The Beacon to check on Olivia and Natalia, and...”

The sentence died on her lips when she saw the serious look on the redhead’s face. “Come back to my place with me.”

“Excuse me?” Doris was sure she didn’t hear her right.

Blake shrugged. “This has been a really crazy and frightening day. Come back to my place. You can spend the night in the guest room. We can hang out and drink wine and try to forget what happened today.”

Doris smirked at Blake. “A sleepover? You do realize that we’re not 13 anymore.”

Blake put her hands on her hips. “Tell me the truth, Doris Wolfe; do you really want to go back to your big ol’ house and be there all by yourself after today’s events? Or would you rather spend some time with a friend, have a drink, eat some bad junk food, and watch movies?”

The mayor smiled at her friend, pretending to consider her options. She tapped a finger against her chin. "Will there be popcorn?"

"Movie theatre style." Blake smiled back.

"That did it. I'm in." For the first time that day, they laughed.

Blake motioned down the hall. "Come on; let's go check on the Spencer-Rivera clan and then we'll swing by your place for your jammies."

After pushing the room service cart out into the hallway, Olivia made her way over to the sofa where Natalia was sitting, holding Francesca. She settled down next to her partner and pulled her close.

It had been a hell of a day, and her and Natalia wanted to maintain some sense of normalcy in spite of it – dinner, movies, and spending some quality time together seemed a perfect solution.

The idea hadn't worked for all of them though. Ava had been unusually quiet and didn't eat very much. Olivia assumed it was because she was worried about Jeffrey, so when her eldest turned down a chance to sit with the family and watch a movie, she didn't push it. But it didn't stop her from feeling concerned for her child as she watched her leave to go to her own suite.

Leyla and Rafe stretched out on the floor with a bowl of popcorn between them as they settled in for the movie. From the bathroom, Emma exited, already dressed in her pajamas and ready for bed.

Olivia opened her arms and Emma ran into them, cuddling with her mom a moment before situating herself between her mommies. A few minutes into the movie, Olivia heard soft snoring from her daughter. She caught Natalia's eye, and they smiled at each other over Emma's head. Natalia tilted her head towards the floor and Olivia saw that Leyla was also out and Rafe was struggling to keep his eyes open.

Natalia reached out a foot to tap her son's heel. When he looked back at her with tired eyes, she gestured with her head at Emma and indicated that maybe they should get her to bed. He shook Leyla awake and then stood up to pick Emma up to get her to the bedroom. When Rafe came over and reached down to pick up his little sister, Emma started kicking and thrashing. Her head swung from side to side and in a scared little voice, she whimpered, "No. Stop."

“Emma?” Olivia asked worriedly and started to forcibly hold her daughter still.

Rafe reached out a hand and stopped her. “No, not like that. Just talk to her softly; call her name, but not like you’re upset or scared, and tell her she’s okay and that she’s safe.”

All three women looked at him with curiosity and a little concern. He shrugged and shook his head. “It happens to the guys in the field sometimes. That’s how we handle it.”

There wasn’t time to inquire further; Emma’s movements were becoming more erratic and her whimpering was turning to panicked screams. Olivia stroked her face soothingly as Natalia squeezed her hand. Olivia spoke softly. “Wake up, Emma. It’s okay. We’re right here. You’re okay.” Over and over she whispered the words, with Natalia joining in at times.

Gradually, the little girl calmed down. Her eyes remained closed, and when her breathing evened out, Rafe nodded and reached down to scoop her up in his arms. Olivia and Natalia followed him into the bedroom and tucked Emma into bed.

Coming back out to the living area, Rafe turned to them and yawned. “I think that’s my sign. I’m hitting the hay.” He leaned over and gave Natalia a kiss on the cheek. “Love you, Ma.”

She lovingly caressed his stubbled jaw. “Love you too, baby.”

He winked at Olivia as he turned, trying to be subtle. “Night, Olivia.”

She rolled her eyes and smirked at him. “Night, John Boy.”

When the dividing door to Rafe’s room closed, Natalia turned back with a sigh to Olivia, who was turning off the TV. “Time to clean up.”

Olivia good-naturedly raised a hand to stop her. After the day they’d all had, especially Natalia, the younger woman deserved a chance to sit and do nothing. “It’s okay. I’ve got this.”

“No.” Natalia’s voice was sharper than she intended and she saw Olivia look at her with concern. “Really, it’s okay. I...need to clean right now. You know it helps me think.”

Realization dawned on Olivia and she smiled sadly at her partner. She stepped back, raising a hand, trying to joke to lighten the moment. “Hey, go for it. Who am I to tell you not to clean? Please...clean.”

Natalia smile was genuine and Olivia felt her heart soar. She started to move over to her computer when she noticed Leyla hunched down behind the monitor. The young woman had been so quiet and intent lately that it was easy to forget she was even there sometimes.

Leyla glanced up when Olivia sidled up to her. "I'm sorry. I hope you don't mind that I used your computer for a moment."

Olivia shook her head. "Not at all. You've been really focused lately. Are you working on something?"

The young brunette who looked so much like Natalia, shrugged and smiled, showing off her own set of dimples. "Sort of. But, until I get more information, I'd like to keep it to myself. I promise to tell you and Natalia, though."

"Sure. No pressure." Olivia tried for nonchalance, but couldn't resist the opportunity. "But, you know, if you ever need anything, like advice or help, I might know a thing or two."

Leyla thanked her and Olivia smiled, before moving away from the desk and announcing that she was going to get her shower. There was only one thing she wanted more than to curl up in bed with Natalia wrapped around her, and that was to wash this horrible day off of her.

Looking at the heavy wooden door, Doris hesitated. She glanced down at her watch and then over at Blake, who motioned her head at the door and raised an eyebrow. After the day they'd all had, it was highly likely they were asleep and Doris hated to wake them. She looked at Blake. "I should have called first."

"Since when have you ever been considerate of Olivia?" Blake was tired and wanted nothing more than to get home, take a hot shower, and put on some clean clothes. If Doris didn't knock soon, Blake was going to do it for her.

"I do know how to have friends, you know." Doris gritted her teeth a little. When Blake raised her hand as if she was going to knock, Doris grabbed it in her own. "I'll do it! Jeez!" She was so tired and really just wanted this day to be over. She raised her hand and tapped softly, but solidly, on the door.

When the lock clicked and the door opened a crack, the two women could see Olivia on the other side rubbing tired eyes and yawning. "Hey, what are you two doing here?"

Doris looked at Blake accusatorily. "I knew we should have called. I'm sorry."

“What?” Blake stared at her friend, incredulous. “Excuse me? Don’t act like this was my doing. You said you wanted to check on them. I said okay.”

Olivia opened the door all the way and watched the banter like a tennis match. Eventually, she waved her hands in front of her. “Stop. Time out.” When they stopped bickering and looked at her, she stepped out of the doorway. “Would you like to come in and fight like an old married couple in here and not in the hallway of my hotel?”

With matching chagrined, but stubborn looks, Doris and Blake entered the room.

Natalia was sitting in the corner with a book in her lap. Setting it aside, she looked up and waved before standing. Walking over, the brunette gave Blake a hug. “What are you two doing here?”

When the hug ended, Blake pulled back and smiled at her. “Seeing how everyone’s holding up. You okay?”

Natalia nodded and leaned into Olivia, who automatically wrapped an arm around her.

Doris took in Olivia’s worried look, and tilted her head to the side, studying her friend. “And the kids?”

Olivia bit the corner of her bottom lip in what Doris realized was an effort to hold back tears. “Emma had a nightmare earlier, and Ava’s worried about Jeffrey. Other than that, they seem okay.”

Natalia leaned more into Olivia’s embrace and then looked at their friends. “I’m sorry. Do you two want a drink?”

Blake shook her head. “No, we don’t want to intrude. We were heading back to my place and thought we’d stop by and check on you all.”

“Your place, Blake?” Olivia tried to hide her smirk from Doris, but by the evil look her friend gave her, she’d failed miserably. She felt Natalia bump her with her hip; clearly her partner had caught that, too.

Blake waved her hand and went on as if she didn’t catch the innuendo. “After today, no one should be alone. I couldn’t stand the thought of Doris in that big house all by herself, so...”

“Well, that sounds...nice,” Olivia commented, quirked an eyebrow at Doris, whose only response was to roll her eyes.

Ready for the conversation to be over before Blake caught on to Olivia's expression, Doris took the redhead by the elbow and urged her out the door under the guise of giving Olivia and Natalia some quality alone time.

Olivia moved away from her partner to lock the door once their friends had left. Turning around and leaning against the door, Olivia chuckled. "Doris will never admit it, but she does like Blake."

Natalia smiled at her partner. Stepping close, she leaned into Olivia's soft curves and warm arms. "And after all of a year, you know the ways of lesbian romance?"

Olivia brushed the back of her fingers over the younger woman's cheek, smiling at the dimples that emerged under her touch. "Love is love."

Natalia sighed and leaned into the hand caressing her face. For the moment, all of the events of the day drifted away. "Maybe. But I've never known anything quite like this."

Turning her head, Natalia kissed the inside of Olivia's wrist and felt fingers tug gently at her hair. Pressing closer to the familiar body against her, Natalia let her senses get lost in loving Olivia. All that existed were the soft moans coming from her partner. The world could end right then and there, and she'd be perfectly content. Reaching up, Natalia pulled Olivia into a lingering kiss. Slowly and deliberately, she made love to her mouth, conveying every emotion into that small connection.

Olivia felt her lover's emotions, each one coming across with unmistakable clarity as she tilted her head and deepened the kiss. She intended to take all night if needed to get to each layer of the message being sent to her. For now, though, she knew Natalia needed this and could feel the desire to connect on the most basic level. She gave it freely, letting Natalia set the pace and tell her what she needed.

ACT 3

Blake's townhouse was exactly as Doris imagined it would be. Dark, rich wood graced the entryway and vases of elegant flowers sat atop tables. A classic Oriental runner extended from the doorway to the stairs on the other side of the foyer. The walls of the foyer were decorated in a variety of family pictures. Like the woman herself, the space exuded warmth and home.

Blake paid Clarissa's babysitter, a teenage girl who never took her earbuds out during their brief conversation. The girl only said enough to let her know that Clarissa was already asleep. After Blake closed the door behind the sitter, she turned back with a smile and

took Doris's purse and overnight bag setting them aside before guiding her to the den to the right of the foyer.

"Have a seat." Blake motioned to the sofa and walked through the archway in the back of the room. "Would you like a drink?"

"God, yes! That sounds like a piece of heaven right now." Doris sank into the lush cushions of the overstuffed sofa and pulled a maroon throw pillow to herself. With a deep sigh of exhaustion, she kicked off her heels.

When Blake returned carrying two snifters of scotch, she stopped short in the doorway. Stretched out on the couch with her head lolled back and her bare feet resting on the carpet, Blake spied one very tired Doris Wolfe. She had to hold back the snicker that threatened to come up when Doris snored softly.

Instead, she approached quietly and carefully set the glasses down on the coffee table. She moved to the sound system in the corner and turned on some soft jazz. She hoped the smooth and silky sounds would pull Doris from her sleep without startling or embarrassing her. If she knew anything about the normally strident woman it was that Doris had a lot of pride. She hated to be seen as weak, but Blake knew she wasn't as tough as she appeared. She had seen the strong and fierce leader of their community break down in the hospital. She had held her as she cried. Doris was an enigma and Blake couldn't help but find her utterly fascinating.

Doris slowly stirred from sleep. It took her a second to realize where she was, and then she remembered the events of the day. Looking around, she saw Blake in the corner behind her, adjusting the sound system. "Hey, sorry for passing out on you."

Blake shrugged as she turned around. "No one can blame you after the day we've had." Coming back over to the couch, she picked up one of the glasses of amber liquid and handed it to her friend, then sat down on the opposite corner of the couch with her own drink. She watched as Doris stared down into the glass in her hand as she rolled the liquor around. "You can tell me anything, you know."

Quirking her eyebrow as she looked up, Doris smiled, hoping to lighten the dark mood she was falling into. "Yeah, if I want to tell the rest of the town. I know your reputation, Marler." Doris tilted the glass at Blake then brought it back to her own lips to take a healthy swallow, enjoying the burn.

Blake propped her elbow on the back of the couch and rested her head against the palm of her hand. "Maybe that's true with others, Doris, but not when it comes to you. I wouldn't do that to you."

Doris flinched at the words, feeling chastised for thinking such a thing. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be catty."

"I understand why you'd say that. But I did keep Natalia's secret about her leaving from Olivia, so it is possible. But I just needed to let you know that I wouldn't do that to you. I care about you." Even if she'd wanted to, which she didn't, Blake couldn't stop the way her voice dropped on that last sentence. She knew she was trying to convey something more than friendship to Doris. It thrilled her and scared her, but more than anything...it excited her.

Doris leaned forward and set her glass on the coffee table, breaking the tenuous connection. It felt almost like Blake was flirting with her, but she wasn't ready for that. In the midst of everything else, she couldn't deal with that too. There was so much going on lately – the shooting, the pressure of her job, and most of all, her barely healed broken heart from Anna. Deep in her heart, Doris really wanted to move on, yet she wasn't ready to risk getting hurt again either. She wanted to return the sentiment to Blake, but she feared encouraging it, so she deflected.

Shrugging, she looked back at Blake. "I'll probably need all the friends I can get before everything's over."

Blake was confused. "What do you mean?"

Doris let out a sad sigh. "Well, I knowingly let a madman run around this town and didn't insist on better police coverage for events like this wedding. I knew Edmund was out there." She shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair, "I should have done more. All of those people hurt and killed...they're on me, Blake."

Doris looked up to see that Blake was already shaking her head in protest. She continued her thought before Blake could speak. "Okay, maybe not literally, I didn't pull the trigger after all, but that won't stop a lot of the families of innocent people from wanting to point a finger at me. Somebody has to be blamed."

"Maybe they should start with Edmund Winslow." Blake's angry tone surprised Doris. She sat back on the couch and shrugged. "I can't blame them, though. If Ashlee had been there and if she had been caught in the crossfire, you can damn well bet I'd make sure someone would pay for it. You'd do the same thing."

Blake knew it was true. She looked down at her hand, wrapped around the glass in her lap, and knew without a doubt that if it was Clarissa or her boys who had been killed, she'd do the same thing. It was in that split second of thought that she understood Natalia pulling the trigger. She set her glass down and scooted closer to Doris, who eyed her curiously.

Blake simply slipped one of her hands between Doris's arm and side, giving her enough room to pull her friend into a hug.

There was a moment of stiffness and hesitation, but slowly, as Blake stroked a hand along Doris's back, she felt her friend relax. Eventually, she sensed Doris letting go, going so far as to turn her head to the side and rest it on her shoulder. They stayed like that for a while, letting the day fade away and giving them a brief respite from the chaos of the day.

After a while, Blake sighed and pulled back. She waited until Doris looked at her. "It's been a tough day. I know I mentioned junk food and movies, but a good night's sleep may be the best medicine."

Doris started to yawn practically on cue and nodded, smiling a little. "That sounds good, actually."

Blake stood up and stretched. "I think I'm going to go check on Clarissa and maybe call the boys at school. The spare bedroom is set up. I'll show you where it is."

Doris nodded and stood to follow Blake into the foyer where she gathered her bags. After Blake got her settled into the room and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek goodnight, Doris looked around the room and suddenly felt more alone than ever. Looking into her purse, she found her phone. When Ashlee answered, she couldn't stop the tears from coming when she heard her voice.

In the early morning hours, as Doris awoke from a nightmare - the feel of warm blood was still sticky on her skin - she fought the urge to race to Blake's room and check on her. It took a long time for her to close her eyes again. Each time she attempted it, she saw the empty look in Blake's eyes staring back at her and the warm blood on her hands.

Once Shayne had flipped his phone closed after talking to his mom, the night at the hospital seemed endless. He rubbed at his tired eyes and glanced around at the sleepy members of his family and their friends in the waiting area. He smiled as Mindy leaned her head on Phillip's shoulder while continuing to hold on tightly to Beth's hand. The couple hadn't left Mindy's side since the shooting. Shayne shook his head, thinking about how horrible it would be to have your wedding day turn into a massacre. As hard as Dinah dumping him had been, at least she hadn't ruined their wedding, and had only left because she was a murder suspect. At least he'd been able to free himself from that situation by filing an annulment.

Shayne stood and stretched. Exiting the waiting area, he saw a familiar red head holding a young child and talking to a nurse. He tried to say her name without being too loud and disturbing anyone. "Marina."

Looking his way, a smile spread across her face and she walked as fast as she could while trying to carry Henry. When the child bucked in her arms to get down and get to his daddy faster, she put him on his feet. The little boy took off and leapt into Shayne's arms. Marina was close behind him.

She hugged Shayne and gave him a quick kiss. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner to make sure you were okay, but Dad was dealing with the crime scene and without Buzz there—"

He cupped her face in one of his hands and kissed her to stop her rambling. Pulling back, he smiled at her. "It's okay. Really."

Marina took a deep breath to calm her nerves. "Is there any news on Billy yet?"

Shayne ran a hand over his face. "Not yet."

He guided her over to a set of chairs so they could talk. Henry reached his arms out to his mom, so Shayne handed him over. He watched as his son rubbed his eyes and leaned against his mom. "You should get him home. Everything's okay now."

"Oh, yeah, about that. What happened with Edmund?" Marina rummaged in her purse for Henry's sippy cup as she asked the question.

Shayne shrugged. "He was shot in the head, but, evidently, it didn't kill him. He's in surgery. That was the last I heard."

He watched her as she raised two thin eyebrows and handed the cup over to her son. "Really? Who shot him?"

"Believe it or not, it looks like it was Natalia." He smirked a little at the remembered image of the petite woman glaring down Edmund Winslow. It was like something out of a Western with a shootout at high noon. "The woman was badass."

"Whatever it takes to free this town of Edmund Winslow is fine by me." She shook her head and then chuckled. "I just didn't think Miss Goody Two Shoes had it in her, though. Too bad she didn't kill him outright, you know?" The little boy in her arms yawned loudly and began to fidget. "Oh, it's definitely past somebody's bedtime. I'd better get him home. Call me when you hear something about Billy, okay?"

He nodded and gave her another kiss before sending her on her way. After another good stretch, he walked back to the waiting area and settled in again.

Shayne realized he must have fallen asleep in his chair because he was being rudely jostled awake and had a horrible crick in his neck. He rubbed at the sore muscles and sat up straight. The jostling had come from Bill sitting next to him, who pointed at the doorway where Rick was standing.

Rick eventually walked over and knelt in front of Mindy, taking her hand, as everyone else listened. She started to break down, fearing the worst from Rick's behavior, but he reached a hand up to cup her cheek and smiled. "Your father's going to be fine."

Mindy finally let out the breath she had been holding and tears of relief came along with it. She wrapped her arms gratefully around her fiancé's neck and held onto him for a long minute, not wanting to let him go. Life seemed so fleeting all of a sudden, and every second wasted was one she'd never get back. It really put things into perspective.

Rick waited until she pulled herself together a little before he spoke to the rest of the family. "Billy's heart had about an 85% blockage. We had to do a triple bypass, but with exercise and a heart-conscious diet, he should have many more years ahead of him."

"When can we see him?" Vanessa asked as she wiped away the last of her tears.

"Give us a couple of hours to get him out of recovery and settled into his room. I'll come out and get you when he's ready." He smiled as Vanessa came over to hug him.

Turning back to his bride-to-be, sighing at the thought that they still weren't married, he watched as Phillip and Beth hugged Mindy.

Phillip looked over and nodded at his best friend. "Good job, buddy. You seem to have a good streak going these days."

Rick rolled his eyes. "Don't jinx me!"

All of the friends laughed at the inside joke. Phillip looked at Mindy. "I think we need to head home and get Peyton to bed. Are you going to be okay?"

Mindy dabbed at her still watery eyes. "Are you kidding? I'm great now! You all go on home, and thanks for everything."

Rick and Mindy watched as their best friends gathered up Peyton and headed out. They were followed by Shayne, and Bill told them that he was going to take Lizzie home then come back. Rick turned back to Mindy and gestured behind him. "I guess I better get –"

Without warning, Mindy grabbed Rick by his green surgical scrubs and kissed him solidly. The emotion behind it, after all they had been through that day, drew a whimper from him, and it took everything he had not to let his knees buckle under the force. Mindy broke the kiss. "I love you, and I'm not leaving this hospital until you marry me."

Rick was so shocked that his voice squeaked. "What?"

"You heard me. I love you. I've loved you for what seems like my whole life, and we're getting married. I'm not wasting any more time." She kissed him again before he could protest. "Say 'yes.'" All he could do was nod in response, and Mindy smiled. "I'll take that as a 'yes.' I'll find someone who can marry us, and when Dad is awake, we'll do it right there in his room."

"Um, okay." Rick finally found his voice, and as quickly as it had happened, it was over.

"Now, get back to work and check on my dad." She patted his chest and turned to Vanessa to talk about their options for a last-minute ceremony.

Rick was so lost in a daze after her determined kisses and whirlwind planning that when he turned around he didn't see the chair behind him and stumbled into it. He quickly recovered and tried to act nonchalant as he headed back through the swinging doors of the surgical wing.

Being focused on the snickers of his family and friends, he didn't notice his phone had rung until he felt the buzz indicating a voice mail. Pulling the phone from his pocket, he saw it was from his father. He knew the call was a congratulatory call from him and Holly, and he dreaded having to tell them what had happened. As long time friends of the Lewises, he knew it would be tough to hear. He'd call back in a few minutes. Right now, he needed to check on Billy, if for no other reason than to reassure himself.

Somewhere in the deep haze of sleep, Olivia could hear a voice calling her, but she couldn't force her tired eyes open. Her mind refused to catch up to the events that had made her so exhausted in the first place, but it was with startling clarity that she jerked up in bed at the words "go to the hospital."

She blinked hard to clear her vision as Natalia shifted next to her. Her eyes landed on Ava's face, hovering close in the darkness of their room in the suite.

Olivia heard a soft moan as her sudden movements in bed jostled her partner, and kept her voice to a whisper, hoping not to wake her. "Ava, what's wrong?"

Ava sniffled softly and whispered back. "It's okay. Dad's out of surgery. I was leaving so I can be there when he wakes up. I just didn't want you to worry when I wasn't here when you woke up."

Olivia started to push back the covers to get up. "I'll come with you. Just give me a minute."

The younger woman gently pushed her back down on the bed. "No, it's fine. Get some sleep. I'll call if I need anything."

"Are you sure?" Olivia reached for her daughter's hand in the darkness and squeezed it.

Ava squeezed back. "I've got this...sleep."

Olivia carefully slid back under the covers to avoid waking Natalia and watched as Ava found her purse by the door and eased out, barely making a sound. Natalia moved in closer to her, and she instinctively smiled and wrapped her partner up in her arms.

In spite of the madness of the previous day, Frank realized that life in Springfield was already getting back to normal, if the early morning traffic outside Company was any indication. Appetites were certainly in high gear, since it looked like every table was taken.

Lynn was hustling from table to table delivering orders and Marina followed behind, filling coffee cups and taking requests for everything from new bottles of ketchup to extra butter for biscuits. Frank went around the bar to get a to-go cup and filled it with coffee.

Marina forced a smile as she blew a strand of hair out of her eyes and found a clean set of silverware for someone who'd dropped theirs earlier. "Hey, Dad. Did you get some sleep?"

He took a sip of coffee and nodded. "Yep. You?"

Marina set a tray on the counter, and talked as she filled cups with juice, coffee, and soda. "Much better once Shayne came home."

Frank stopped his cup in mid-sip. "How's Billy?"

"If a triple bypass can be considered good, then good. He'll probably be in the hospital for a couple of weeks recovering, but the good news is that Rick and Mindy are still going to get

married.” She smiled and shrugged. “Romantic, huh? They’re not letting anything get in the way.”

He nodded and stared down into his coffee cup. “Yep.”

She hoisted a tray of food and drinks onto her shoulder. “Do you mind getting some coffee for that guy at the end of the bar? I’ll be right back.”

A few moments later, Frank had refreshed the customer’s cup, as well as his own, and watched as Marina weaved around Lynn to get behind the bar.

Marina sighed when she leaned against the counter, finally able to stop moving for a minute. “I haven’t seen it this busy in a long time...at least not at breakfast time.” She brushed her hands off on a towel at her waist before speaking again. “So what’s on the agenda today?”

He lifted the cup up and smiled. “Oh, just getting my battery charged before heading over to the park.” He grimaced before saying the next part because he knew it would set Marina off. “I questioned Anna yesterday and she told me that both she and Jeffrey had fired their guns, so I have Eleni down there with the forensics team, seeing what evidence they can find. If it wasn’t Natalia who shot Edmund, I want to know who did.”

She didn’t look at Frank at the mention of her mother’s name, but instead found her own coffee cup beside the register and focused her attention on it, wincing at it when she took a sip. She always hated cold coffee. Reaching for the pot, she poured some fresh into it in order to make it bearable. “It all seems pretty cut and dried to me. It’s obvious that Edmund went nuts and opened fire. Case closed.”

“True, but you know as well as anyone that we have to cover all our bases. There was more than one gun fired yesterday and a lot of people were caught in the crossfire. We need to piece together what happened as thoroughly as we can.” He pushed off the counter and started to leave. On the way out from behind the bar, he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

Marina pulled him in for a hug and then looked up at him. “By the way, have you heard anything about Edmund’s condition? Did he pull through?”

He pulled his cell from his pocket to double-check that he hadn’t missed a message. “No, nothing yet. I’d better get going.”

She wiped down the bar in front of her and waved as he left. “Okay, let me know if you hear anything and good luck.”

Frank was barely to the street corner when his phone rang. He squinted at the reflection of the bright sunlight on his phone, cursing that he had left his sunglasses at home. Raising the phone to his ear, he spoke into it. "Cooper here."

Remy's voice answered, the words hurried. "Hey, Frank. I wanted to let you know that we got word that Edmund's out of surgery. He made it through, but he's not conscious yet. There's more bad news. They weren't able to remove the bullet. They kept trying for it, but his blood pressure kept dropping."

Frank sighed, not bothering to hide his lackluster response to Remy's news. "Great." He knew that without a bullet, Eleni's job would be harder. Even though no one really cared if Edmund lived or died, they did need all of the details covered, including knowing whose bullet was lodged in the man's brain.

Frank crossed the street before he instructed Remy on what to do next. "I'm heading to the park to tell Eleni the news. Do me a favor and organize a security detail around Edmund's room. Also, post security at all the entrances and exits, including loading docks and stairwells to the roof. I don't want to take any chances with that sneaky son of a bitch."

"You got it, boss. I'll call if there's any other news."

"Thanks." Frank ended the call and jogged the rest of the way to the park.

The dark, heavy fog of the anesthesia made Jeffrey feel like a baby elephant was sitting on his head. He groaned as a wave of nausea hit him. Rolling a little to his side, he vomited over the edge of the bed. Pain at the sudden movement ripped through him and he groaned again. Within seconds, a nurse entered the room. He could hear the muttering of voices, but he was so groggy from the anesthesia that he couldn't make anything out as he passed out completely.

He wasn't sure how long he was unconscious. It could have been seconds or hours, but when he woke this time, he didn't puke. He did feel a stabbing pain all over his body though. With a deep breath, he cleared his mind and refocused on his senses. Someone else was in the room. He could hear the soft, even breathing and smell the faint scent of perfume.

Struggling to open his eyes, it took him a moment before he could focus on the blurry image seated next to his bed, though he couldn't tell who it was. When the image leaned forward, he could make out short dark hair, and when his hand was taken in a soft, gentle grasp, he knew. "Ava."

Jeffrey rolled his head back and closed his eyes, grateful to see his daughter's face and know she wasn't hurt by Edmund.

For her part, Ava was worried at her father's reaction. "Hey. How do you feel?"

"Like reheated shit." He chuckled. When he looked back at her, his vision was better and he could make out her smiling face.

"You look like it, too," she joked.

"Thanks," he grunted back. "So, what happened?" He didn't remember much that had happened after he rushed the stage, except the agonizing pain flaring up one of his legs.

Ava scooted the chair forward so she could lean back, but continue holding his hand. "You were shot."

He chuckled again. "I remember that part."

"In the femoral artery." She paused and swallowed around the lump in her throat. "You almost didn't make it. The bullet came in at an angle, so it hit your femur and cracked it. That's why the surgery took so long. The orthopedic surgeon said it should heal pretty quickly though, since it was just a crack. But you will have to wear a leg brace for a while."

He tried to lighten his daughter's spirits. "It takes more than a bullet to kill your old man."

"Apparently, since I thought you were already dead." Ava mentally kicked herself the moment the words were out of her mouth. She hadn't talked to him yet for this very reason. She was Olivia's daughter and holding her feelings in was not her strong suit.

He sighed and looked up at the dull white ceiling. "I'm sorry, Ava. I..."

"You should have told me. I came here for your funeral. I mourned you. If you should have trusted anyone, you should have trusted me." There...she had said it. She voiced the feelings that had been eating at her ever since she had found out he was still alive.

Jeffrey knew he didn't have an excuse. There was nothing he could say to change what had happened. He'd thought by disappearing to chase his nemesis he was doing the right thing and keeping all of his family safe. Little had he known that Edmund had been here in Springfield, right under their noses, the whole time. "I know, baby. You're right. All of the saying 'I'm sorry' in the world won't take away your hurt."

Ava bowed her head. There was more she wanted to say, but now wasn't the time. She looked up at her father and saw his eyes slowly blinking and knew a release of pain

medication was probably kicking in. “Don’t worry about it now. Get some sleep. We’ll talk more later.”

She moved to stand up and leave the room, but a firm grip on her hand held her still. The words were faint, but she still heard them. “Stay with me.”

A single tear slipped down her cheek as she sank back into the hard plastic chair. She held his hand and waited with him. When she heard him snoring, she leaned over to kiss him on the cheek before leaving.

“I found another one over here, Doc!”

Eleni glanced up from her camera where she’d been flipping through images to ensure she had covered the scene. Tim, a sandy-haired young man, stood on a ladder that was partially hidden by the low-hanging limbs of an oak tree.

She crossed the small staging area where the wedding would have taken place, careful not to step in the marked evidence and blood spatters, to make her way over to Tim and several other members of her team who were looking for evidence in the small grove of trees behind the stage.

Frank had informed her that there was a possibility that several guns had been fired that day, so Eleni had set her team on a mission to find any and all embedded bullets and casings they could. So far, nearly twenty casings had been found, but barely a third as many bullets. Apparently, Edmund had been a good shot because most bullets seemed to have ended up in victims.

“Let me see.” Eleni motioned for Tim to step down. She climbed the ladder, checked the angle of the bullet lodged in the tree, and followed the line of sight back out over the grounds. “HMMMMM. Tim, have Lacey bring me some marker string – a different color than we’ve used so far.”

She waited as the eager young man ran off to find the tech, and looked out over the sea of colored string, flags, and other markers. The only way she’d be sure where this bullet came from would be to mark it off with the string and follow the line of sight back to the grounds. Her gut instinct told her that it wasn’t from the expected directions of Edmund, Anna, or Jeffrey, but she wanted to be absolutely sure first.

A few minutes later, she was on the ground with the string in hand. Looking around, there was only one conclusion she could come to. “Definitely not from the expected locations.”

Glancing over at Tim, she smiled. "We have something different here. Dig it out and bag it."

He nodded and grabbed his supplies. "Yes, ma'am!"

Eleni found a chair that had been left behind from the wedding and sat down with her notepad to jot down her thoughts and findings so far. Later tonight, she'd spend time in the lab and put it all in order. On the phone, Frank had expressed that his biggest concern was to figure out who shot Edmund.

"Hey!" The familiar voice came from behind her. She turned slightly to see Frank watching her, squinting slightly in the morning sun.

She smiled up at him. "Hey, yourself. I would say 'good morning' but this isn't exactly a great way to start the day."

"Very true." He stepped a little to the side of her to stand in the shade, and looked at the scene. "I hope you can find some good news for me in all of this."

She glanced back up at him after jotting something down in her notebook. "The good news is that we've recovered quite a few casings and a handful of bullets. That should give us a good idea of who all was shooting - and at whom."

"That's really good news, Eleni. With a civilian firing a gun, we have to be sure where she was in all of this." He rubbed at his furrowed brow, thinking about Natalia's face after the shooting. She had seemed so resolute, but kind of lost, too. The thought of it hurt.

She tilted her head and regarded him closely. "You mean your friend, Natalia?"

He sighed at the use of the word "friend," but he wasn't ready to correct his ex-wife. Though there was really no correcting to be done, just some history that Eleni didn't know about. He and Natalia really were friends. "Yeah. She's a good person. The thought of her shooting someone...anyone...even someone as horrible as Edmund Winslow, just...I can't imagine it."

She reached for his hand, remembering the familiar comfort of it. "I hope I have something good to tell you soon. In fact, I'll work on this tonight, okay?"

Frank ran his thumb across the back of her hand. He had always loved holding her hand. "You work too hard."

She shrugged. "It's what I do now."

He knelt down next to her, letting her hand go and draping his arm across the back of the chair. "I'll tell you what. If you let me bring you dinner tonight, I won't nag you about working too late."

Eleni couldn't help but smile. He had always been so thoughtful of her, and she hadn't exactly been a good steward of his kindness over the years. Maybe it was time to try to make up for that. "Deal."

With Ava getting the good news about Jeffrey, Olivia and Natalia had packed up the few belongings they had at The Beacon and had gotten ready to head back out to the farmhouse, while Rafe and Leyla took the girls downstairs for some ice cream in the restaurant. Ava had taken a short nap, and now was having lunch with her mom and Natalia in their hotel room, telling them about Jeffrey's injuries.

"He's recovering quickly, so he may be released soon." She looked down, contemplating something and unsure if she wanted to bring it up. Eventually, she just said it because her mom always knew when she wasn't completely honest. "When he gets out, I think I want to go help him for a while."

Ava watched her mom's reaction. Olivia nodded sympathetically. "Of course, honey; I don't blame you."

Natalia, on the other hand, twitched in her seat. Ava could see how uncomfortable the other woman was with the idea, no doubt because of what she'd learned about Olivia and Jeffrey's history. But that didn't change the fact that he was still her father. There was just something unbreakable about a parent/child bond. No matter what they did or where they went, they always felt bound to each other. Certainly, Natalia could understand that and couldn't fault her for wanting Jeffrey in her life.

She watched as Natalia closed her eyes tight before standing and gathering their empty plates together to return to the service cart.

Ava sighed and stood. "Thanks for lunch, Mom."

Olivia followed her oldest daughter to the door and hugged her. "Drop by for dinner?"

Ava rolled her eyes and tried to lighten the mood. "It's not like I'm moving back to San Francisco." She spoke in a lower tone, keeping it just between the two of them. "He's alone. No one should be alone."

Olivia nodded and closed the door as Ava smiled and walked off. Turning, she looked at Natalia who was again seated at the table. The dark eyes weren't really focused on anything, and she could tell that her partner was in a world all her own.

She walked up behind Natalia and squeezed her shoulders. Almost immediately, Natalia relaxed into the touch, a soft moan escaping. Olivia smiled at the response. "What's on your mind?"

"Family," Natalia quietly muttered.

Olivia ran her hands down Natalia's upper arms and leaned over, letting her chin rest gently on her partner's head. Natalia lifted her hands until their fingers twined together. Olivia squeezed the fingers held between her own. "When is your mind not on family? I think it's a bit of an obsession for you." Both chuckled because they knew it was true. There was little more important to Natalia than that. "So, what about family?"

Natalia sighed. "I wish Jeffrey wasn't a part of it."

The conviction of the statement brought Olivia up short. She knew she needed to respond to it somehow, but she couldn't seem to find the words.

Sensing Olivia's concern, Natalia continued, "I know that's terrible of me. He's Ava's father, but...he hurt you, Olivia. I've dealt with a lot of things in my life, but I think after yesterday I learned something new about myself."

Olivia was almost afraid to ask. "What's that?"

"No one hurts someone I love." A long moment of silence passed before Natalia continued,

"I don't feel guilty about what I did. I'd do it again...a hundred times over."

The implications of Natalia's words momentarily shocked Olivia. It seemed from the moment they had met nearly two years ago that she could see something in the other woman, carefully hidden below the surface. There was a fire and passion, layered in eternal optimism and genuine faith, that Olivia admired so much.

She slipped her arms around Natalia's neck and softly brushed her lips along Natalia's ear, lightly kissing her on the neck. "I know, and I understand. Why do you think that gun was in my purse to begin with? Why do you think you had to stop me from shooting Phillip that time? Because this is our family. These are our children." She reached around to coax Natalia's chin towards her so they were eye to eye. "And you're mine. No one will ever separate us or hurt us."

Tears sprang to Natalia's eyes. She turned in her chair to face Olivia and wrapped a hand possessively in Olivia's hair, pulling her down into a passionate kiss meant to claim her partner and show their love for each other. It was an agreement, a pact.

For a quiet moment, they held each other close, foreheads resting together intimately, light kisses brushing lips. Finally, Olivia pulled back and took Natalia's hand. "Come on, let's take our family home."

ACT 4

Anna flashed her badge at Johnson, the rookie officer on duty outside of Edmund's room. An announcement had finally been made on the local news once Rick had informed Doris that Edmund Winslow was in a coma, and they were unsure of when, or if, he'd ever regain consciousness. But that news didn't stop Frank from insisting on a security detail remaining at the hospital, indefinitely if necessary.

When the rookie nodded at her, she pushed open the door to Edmund's room. The beeping of monitors and the over-sanitized smell of the room didn't detract from the sense of menace Edmund projected, still smirking even as he drifted in his mystery limbo.

That expression evoked a primal urge from Anna; the urge to punch, hit, and kick him until he experienced payback for all the pain he had inflicted on others was so strong that it made her dizzy. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply to center herself again. A calm settled over her and she opened her eyes.

A crooked smile curled her mouth. "We got you, you sick bastard. You can't hurt anyone else anymore."

Purposefully, she turned and left the room. She knew the nightmare wouldn't truly be over until he was dead or locked up. For now, though, she would content herself with the knowledge that he wasn't going anywhere.

Billy's hospital room was tight and cramped, filled with the Lewises and even some Spauldings, too. After some begging by Rick, some funding promises for the new pediatric wing by Phillip, and lots of glad-handing and agreements by Doris, the hospital director had reluctantly agreed to allow that many people into one small room after visiting hours.

Doris took her place near the door to the room, with Rick and Mindy in front of her. The rest of the group gathered around Billy's bed to witness the culmination of the event that had been harshly interrupted a couple of days ago.

Over the bed, Shayne caught Bill's eye and mouthed, "Where's Josh?"

Bill shrugged and held up his cell phone, then shook his head, trying to indicate that he hadn't heard from Josh either.

As soon as Doris started, though, a knock was heard on the other side of the door. The knob turned, the door opening a crack, allowing Josh to poke his head into the room. "Hi!" he announced in his usually cheery tone. "Did we miss the good stuff yet?"

The ceremony was delayed while everyone hugged Josh and Reva after they entered the room fully. Billy piped up in a rough bellow, "What the hell took you so long? A man could die of a heart attack around here before you show up."

Vanessa swatted him. "That's not funny!"

If it wasn't for the pain that it caused, he would have laughed. Instead, all he could do was smile. "Oh, it is a little bit, sugar." He puckered up for a kiss from his wife, who could only roll her eyes and indulge him.

Josh came closer to the side of the bed, acting a bit anxious. He scrubbed at the stubble on his chin. "Actually, we would have been here sooner, but there was a little bit of trouble with the truck."

If he could have, Billy would have pushed himself up in the bed. At best, all he could do is glare at Josh. "What did you do to my truck?"

Backing up with a laugh, Josh raised his hands. "Oh no, it wasn't me. It seems *somebody* forgot to put the oil cap back on after getting it all ready for me to drive off into the sunset with my girl. So, we had to walk about two miles to the nearest gas station and get a tow."

Billy eyed Josh cautiously. "She's okay then?"

The younger Lewis rocked back on his heels. "Oh, she's fine. I'll just have to remember to check behind you, old man, since you seem to be losing your memory."

He scoffed at Josh. "Eh, at least I'm not losing my good looks, like you."

The joke made everyone in the room laugh uproariously, and after a careful, but heartfelt hug between the brothers, everyone settled down for the ceremony.

While there were many wonderful things about living with Natalia, one of those for Olivia had to be Natalia's ability to maintain a routine. Olivia rolled out of bed and immediately smelled coffee and bacon, and she smiled at the feeling of happiness it gave her. The sense of home and peace seemed to follow Natalia no matter where she was or what she was doing.

In spite of the madness of the last couple of days, life had gone on for the Spencer-Rivera family. Olivia slipped on some comfortable clothes and thought about her family. There were moments where she still found it hard to believe that she had gone from it being just her and Emma against the world to having this big family, with a loving partner and new daughter. It was almost overwhelming, but she wouldn't trade it for anything. The shooting had given her a new perspective. She always knew she'd die inside if something happened to her kids or to Natalia, but she felt the potential reality of it at the park the other day.

And one thing she was certain of now, she had been right all along. She wouldn't survive losing any of them.

Brushing her teeth, she looked at her reflection in the mirror. "You'll just have to make sure that never happens, Spencer."

Downstairs, Natalia stood over the stove as she moved bacon around the pan. On another burner she had pancakes cooking, and on a third, some scrambled eggs. Nineteen years as a single mother had made her adept at multitasking, so caring for her partner and their suddenly large family was second nature. She stirred the eggs, flipped the pancakes, and removed the bacon without really thinking about the details.

Natalia glanced over her shoulder to make sure her girls were fine. Emma sat quietly at the table, drawing and picking up Francesca's bottle whenever she dropped it. The little girl, like the rest of them, had been unusually quiet. After coming home from The Beacon, Emma had played on the Wii with Rafe and Leyla for a little while, only half-heartedly joining in the fun; it hadn't taken long for her to crash. Shadow had followed her around, seeming to sense that something was wrong. For the first time, they had allowed the puppy to stay in Emma's room, thinking it would be good for both of them. Natalia was thankful the little girl had slept through the night soundly and hadn't experienced another nightmare. She hoped it was a one-time thing, and that with time and distance, along with plenty of love and support, that Emma wouldn't be so affected.

She couldn't say the same for herself. She had awoken in the wee hours of the morning and hadn't been able to go back to sleep. Images of the look on Edmund's face and the metallic glint of the gun in her hand kept playing through her mind.

A knock at the kitchen door broke her out of her thoughts. Wiping her hands on a towel, she went to the door and looked through the curtain.

With a sigh, she turned off the alarm and opened the door. "Morning, Father Ray."

The priest tilted his head down slightly in a show of humility, but a smirk remained. "Natalia, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Father. Thank you for your concern." She knew proper protocol was to invite him in; however, she really wasn't up for the potential confrontation. She and her family had just returned home. They needed time alone to get back to a normal routine and ensure a sense of safety. So, she stood there defending the entrance to her home by blocking the doorway. She didn't intend to be rude, but she did want to send a message.

"That's good, Natalia. I'm glad. I heard about what happened at Rick and Mindy's wedding." He seemed to pause, as if thinking of other matters. "Such a shame to have a holy union ripped apart by selfish grandstanding and violence."

The comment crawled under Natalia's skin. She wasn't sure if he meant it the way it sounded, but she didn't care to humor him either. "Is there something I can help you with, Father?"

"Considering what's happened, several of us are going around offering our counseling services to those affected by the shooting," he answered with a smile.

"Us?" Natalia inquired.

"Yes, I believe you know Dr. Felicia Boudreau and..." he hesitated, "of course, Sister Anne."

The addition of Sr. Anne seemed like an afterthought to Natalia, and that bothered her. "I appreciate your concern, Father Ray. I'll let you know if I need anything."

"I would be happy to offer a listening ear to you, Natalia, during this trying time." He pushed a little.

She tilted her head to the side. "To me and my family, or just to me?"

He swayed back seemingly caught by surprise at the question, and when he couldn't respond right away, she forced a smile and continued, "Again, thank you for your concern. Olivia and I will contact Sister Anne if our family needs counseling of a spiritual nature. Good day, Father."

When he stiffly nodded his head and stepped back to leave, she closed the door and turned to lean against it, closing her eyes briefly. When she opened her eyes, Olivia was standing in the pass through between the kitchen and living room, a sad but proud smile on her face. Olivia stepped forward, tilting her head to the side. "Are you okay?"

"You heard?" Natalia watched as a freshly bathed Olivia walked closer, her hair still damp.

Olivia nodded. "If you need to talk to him, I understand."

When Olivia was close enough to touch, Natalia put her hands on her partner's shoulders. She ran her hands over them, feeling the strength from Olivia flow into her. "I know you understand, and I love you for it. But, no, I don't need to talk to him. What I need right now is a kiss."

Gently and reverently, Olivia complied. Pulling back she looked into dark eyes. "Now that's a much better way to start the day."

Natalia hummed from the feel of the kiss. "Mmmmm, absolutely."

Moving back to the neglected stove, Natalia rescued the food, catching the pancakes just in time before they got too dark. Within a few minutes, the kitchen was bustling as Rafe had woken up and was making his presence known.

He sat down at the kitchen table and dug into his food with abandon. "This is so good, Ma!"

Olivia saw the proud smile that came over Natalia's face and couldn't help but smile herself. "Better than Army rations, I take it."

"You have no idea!" He talked around a mouthful of food.

"Rafe, don't talk with your mouth full," Emma admonished.

He swallowed before speaking again. "Sorry, Munchkin."

Leyla entered the kitchen and everyone stopped short when they saw her dressed in a nice pair of pumps, slacks, and crisp salmon-colored button down. She noted the silence, but it didn't stop her from pouring herself a cup of coffee. Finally, she turned to her family, laughing at having caught them off guard. "What?"

Natalia waved a hand in her direction. "Why are you so dressed up?"

The younger Rivera woman leaned against the kitchen counter, sipping her coffee. She shrugged nonchalantly. "I need to head into town to take care of something. In fact, when

I'm done, I may do a little shopping. What do you say, Emma? Would you like to go with me?"

Emma spun around in her seat and perked up. "Really?"

Leyla smiled at Emma, then looked over at Natalia and seeing her surprised look, she winked at her sister. "Sure. A girl's day out. It'll be fun."

Natalia hesitated, not sure if she was ready to let Emma out of her sight. "Ummm..."

Leyla leaned closer, pretending she was snagging a piece of bacon, so she could whisper to Natalia. "It'll take her mind off things."

Natalia looked at Olivia and shrugged a little, looking for a sign that would tell her whether to acquiesce or not.

Olivia got the message loud and clear. "That sounds like a wonderful idea!" She jokingly poked at Emma's ribs.

"Mom!!!" Emma complained about being picked on, but couldn't stop giggling from being tickled.

Olivia stopped the poking to smile at her daughter. "That reminds me. Your Ma and I have some important planning to do for our wedding, like picking out dresses and stuff. Do you want to help?"

Emma's face lit up like it was Christmas morning. "Really?"

Natalia smiled and nodded as Emma looked between her two mommies. "Yep! And I'd say that's a big step up from flower girl, too."

"Cool! When do we get to go?" Emma asked excitedly.

Olivia looked seriously at her daughter. "I'll tell you what, if you go with Leyla and be good all day, maybe we can go this afternoon. I can leave work early."

Emma enthusiastically agreed. She quickly finished her breakfast and put some food in Shadow's bowl, before scooting upstairs to brush her teeth. In a few minutes, she and Leyla were gone. Olivia helped Natalia wash up the pots and pans from breakfast while Rafe finished eating. He was absorbed in a second helping of pancakes, but he couldn't ignore the hushed conversation and sly looks that passed between his mom and Olivia.

He smiled when he saw his mom lean into Olivia and say something that made the older woman laugh. He didn't need to know what she had said, nor did he really care. All that mattered was that his mom was genuinely happy.

Natalia looked over her shoulder at her son, who appeared to be amused by whatever he was thinking about. "And what are you smirking about, young man?"

Getting up from the table, he picked up his empty plate and took it to the sink where his mom and Olivia stood. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. "Nothing, Ma. Just happy to see you happy."

He pulled away and headed for the backdoor. Natalia turned, following him. "Hey, where are you going?" She had thought that the two of them could have some time alone together since Olivia would be going into work for a little while and his friends were in California.

Rafe found his sunglasses and looked back at her, shrugging. "I thought I'd spend some time with Dad. I think he'd like to hear what I'm doing."

Tears sprang to Natalia's eyes and she was grateful when Olivia reached out and grabbed her hand. "Of course, baby. I'm sorry."

He smiled at her and then went to hug her. Pulling her close, he made her a promise. "Tomorrow. Anything you want to do. What do you say?"

Natalia pulled back and regarded her grown son. It didn't matter how much she reminded herself that he was all grown up, when she looked at him, she still saw a four-year-old who was crying over a skinned knee. She put a hand against his cheek. "It's a date."

After Rafe left, the house was suddenly, eerily quiet, except for Francesca's occasional jabbering. The feeling was strangely unsettling.

It seemed like their lives kept spinning out of their control, swinging between these maddening highs and lows. Olivia felt a wave of guilt come over her at the thought of the latest low. She had wanted so much to protect Natalia. The gun should have been in her hand, and she should have pulled the trigger, not Natalia. She could almost see the weight of the action holding her partner down, and it gripped at her heart.

Moving in behind Natalia, she wrapped her arms around the narrow waist. "I think I'll stay home today."

Natalia leaned to the side and looked back over her shoulder. "No, you need to go into work and get back to a routine. We all do. You don't have to hover over me."

Olivia gasped and pretended to be shocked, raising her hands defensively and took a half-step back. "I do not hover."

Natalia turned and smiled. "Okay, how about sweetly protect?"

Olivia leaned back in and wrapped her arms back around Natalia's waist. "Much better."

Natalia leaned up and kissed her gently. "I love your protectiveness. I really do, but I'm okay." Olivia quirked an eyebrow, and Natalia nodded her head. "Really."

Olivia narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, not sure if she should believe her or not. She knew her partner though. Sometimes she needed space to clear her head. "Okay, fine. I'll take you at your word."

Natalia kissed her again. They were both relaxing into the kiss when a loud clatter made them jump apart. Looking back at the table over Olivia's shoulder, Natalia saw the huge mess Francesca had made with her applesauce. When the baby realized that her favorite food was on the floor, she began to cry in earnest, ending the tender moment. Sighing, Olivia grabbed some paper towels and began to clean up after her daughter.

The morning rush at Company was over. Frank sat quietly at a table, looking over some paperwork to fill out on the shooting. He yawned, feeling his age creep up on him. Hanging out on the job all night wasn't like it used to be. There was still a thrill that kept the adrenaline pumping, but now when the rush wore off, he crashed harder than he remembered from his younger days.

Of course, he'd had good reason to be up late last night. Spending time with Eleni had been like old times, if he'd been able to forget that they were in a forensics lab anyway. He'd certainly never thought he'd be looking at his ex-wife from across the room as she set up a mock-up of the scene at the park.

He had joked with her about it being easier with the computer simulation, but she'd given him a cool stare. She'd explained that she enjoyed the manual data analysis and didn't trust programs to not screw up. She knew she could trust her eyes, but she wasn't so sure about a computer chip.

When he hadn't been running through numbers with her and helping her with the mock-up, they'd sat around her desk eating barely warm burgers and greasy French fries. He hadn't been able to help looking at her last night with a sense of awe. She looked so much the same as when they were married, but she was more self-assured and confident. She wore it well, and he admitted to admiring her tenacity.

“What’s that strange look for?” Marina’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he looked up in time to see her pour him another cup of coffee.

“Strange, how?” He shook his head.

The redhead shrugged. “It wasn’t really a smile, but it kind of was. Dare I say, wistful?”

He picked up his mug and leaned back in his chair. “I don’t do wistful.”

She shrugged again. Teasing him a little, she had a feeling something more was up, but clearly her father wasn’t about to divulge it yet. “If you say so.” She slid down into the chair across from him. “So, any more news on Edmund?”

Frank put his mug down and ran his hands through his hair. “No, nothing new. He’s still in a coma. No one knows how long it’ll last or if he’ll ever recover. I had a security detail put around the hospital so no one will get in or out of his wing without us knowing. I’m not taking any chances.”

She nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

The bell over the door rang and both Frank and Marina looked over. Anna entered and headed their way. “Hey, boss!”

Frank smiled up at her. “Well, look what the cat dragged in. How’s the shoulder?”

The comment caused Anna to rub at it and then wince at the tenderness still there. “That bullet may have barely gotten me, but it sure did leave a mark. I’m just glad it wasn’t worse.”

He nodded at her. “That’s good. So, what has you here at this time of the morning?”

Anna smiled at Marina then looked at Frank. “Aside from the fabulous coffee, I actually came to find you, Frank. I was just down in the lab and Eleni said she needs to see you ASAP.”

He quickly stuffed his files into a folder and gathered everything together. “Well, that sounds promising.” Marina had taken his coffee and put it in a to-go cup. He waved to her as he left. “Thanks, kiddo.”

Eleni leaned over her notepad and rechecked her figures. She was almost one hundred percent positive that she was correct, but that didn't stop her from running the numbers again. A little while ago she'd even had Anna, who had just dropped by, check behind her. She had always relied on her own gut instincts, but for the final analysis, she confirmed her findings on the computer. She tapped away on her keyboard, entering in the formulas, and running it all a final time.

"This has to be right." She clapped her hands together and smiled. If she'd had some music on, she'd dance around the room.

Swinging the doors to the lab open and running down the hall, she smiled brightly when she saw Frank coming from the other end.

He saw the ecstatic look on her face. "I take it you have some good news for me."

"Wonderful news, Frank." She pulled him back into the lab and dragged a chair over for him, sitting it next to her, so he could see the computer screen simulations. "Check it out."

With the press of a button, a series of animated images moved across the screen and data scrolled down both sides. She smiled and paused the play back. "See, right there? This is Edmund. These lines are his bullets."

Frame-by-frame, Frank watched as the events of the shooting unfolded. The display clearly showed that every bullet that had hit a civilian had been fired by Edmund. That was good news because it meant that no innocent bystanders had been hurt by friendly fire. As the simulation played through, a bullet from the crowd and two bullets from either side of

Edmund on the stage appeared to fire practically simultaneously.

Frank pointed at the screen. "Is that Natalia?"

Eleni nodded and then pointed to two different spots on the screen. "And this one is Jeffrey O'Neill and the other one's Anna."

Eleni rewound the images by mere seconds, and adjusted the angle so the image showed it as if Frank was in the crowd standing in Natalia's place. A line in bright red moved off to the left and above Edmund's head.

He sat there with his mouth open and a smile on his face. "She didn't shoot him."

Eleni shook her head. "Nope."

"Who did?" Frank looked at her.

Eleni adjusted the image again so Frank could see for himself. “I got a hold of Edmund’s head scans and studied the trajectory. The bullet came from his left side and entered his head at a distinct angle. There’s no way it could have been from Anna either; the angle was all wrong. The only possibility is that Jeffrey shot him.”

“And Edmund got a shot off at Jeffrey. That’s how he got wounded.” Frank shook his head in amazement.

Eleni smiled at him. “Yep!”

He laughed and looked at her. “That’s great work, Eleni. You did it all so fast, too. Very impressive.”

Tilting her head to the side, she looked at him sweetly and it wasn’t lost on him. “I had great help.” Leaning over in her chair, she kissed him quickly, almost shyly. “Thank you.”

Leyla stepped back from her niece, tilting her head to one side and then the next, regarding her handiwork.

Emma was about to jump out of her skin with excitement. Sitting in the chair at the store, she felt all grown up. All around her were brightly colored tubes and containers of makeup. On the counter in front of her, a bunch of them were set out.

Aunt Leyla refused to let her look in the mirror just yet, not until she was finished. The waiting was making Emma giggly and antsy. She hadn’t had this much fun in a long time. “Come on, when can I look?” Emma whined.

Leyla picked up a tube of lipstick, put it down, and then picked up another one. “I’m almost finished. Here, do your lips like this.” She puckered her lips to show Emma how, then put some lipstick on the girl.

A couple of college boys passed behind Leyla, staring at her; one of them turned and walked backwards like he didn’t want to lose sight of the pretty girl. “Nice...very nice,” he called.

Leyla rolled her eyes and it made Emma giggle. “Boys!”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Emma couldn’t help but ask.

“I have boys who are friends, yes, but no boyfriend,” Leyla deflected and looked at her eye shadow options. Picking one up, she told Emma to close her eyes.

Emma kicked her feet nervously. She wanted to ask an important question, but she was afraid. Her stomach knotted up and she let out a deep breath. She was glad her eyes were closed because if Aunt Leyla got mad at her for asking, she didn’t want to see it. “Have you ever kissed a boy?”

After a long silence, Emma dared to open her eyes. Leyla was half-smiling at her. “Aren’t you a little young to be thinking about things like that?”

Emma quirked a defiant eyebrow that made her look like the spitting image of her mother. “I am wearing makeup, so I’m not that young. Besides, I’m ten years old. I’m not a child anymore.”

The little girl’s tough exterior suddenly crumbled into a pout and Leyla couldn’t help but feel her heart go out to her. After all she’d been through lately, Emma needed to regain some strength and confidence. If a little makeup did the trick, then so be it.

She hugged Emma to her. “Of course you’re not a child anymore. But...you don’t have to be a child to love chocolate ice cream. What do you say?”

Emma nodded enthusiastically and jumped off the stool. Leyla bought a tube of lip gloss for Emma, and gave the cashier a little extra money for the makeup she’d used. The lip gloss would be a good starter for the girl. As they were about to leave, Emma grabbed her hand and stopped her. “Wait! I didn’t get to see what I look like.”

Going back to the mirror, Leyla picked it up and handed it to her niece. Emma’s eyes got huge when she saw her face. “Whoa!”

Rafe ran his fingers over the engraved letters on his father’s plaque before making the Sign of the Cross and sitting on the step to the side of the grave. He bowed his head and thought about the past year.

In boot camp, he had thrown himself into the routine, pushing his body hard to forget the life he had left behind. Those last few months in Springfield had been a tough time, dealing with the changes of getting out of prison and trying to acclimate to a normal life, then all the fighting with his mom. The average person would have assumed it was exciting to get out of jail, but Rafe had heard the horror stories about how many ended up back in prison after having a chance at freedom. The outside world wasn’t exactly conducive to enabling people to get back on their feet. To pay bills or have a place of your

own, you had to have money. To have money, you had to have a job. To have a job, you had to have a clean record. It was a vicious cycle he feared falling into.

The Army really had been his only choice, or at least the only choice that his pride could accept. To escape the statistics, he'd had to go. Now, he had a good record in the military. He had achieved some of the best scores among his peers, and he was on track to having a long career.

He sighed and looked at the stone with his father's name. *If I last that long*, he thought worriedly.

One tour, and he had already seen more than he'd wanted. He'd signed up during a war, though, and he'd known the risk he was taking. If he managed to make it out physically unscathed, he knew there would be other scars that couldn't be seen. When the gunfire had started at the wedding, he had realized that cold, hard fact. His experience in the military was going to remain with him whether or not he stayed to make a career out of it. At least if he stayed, he finally had a chance to change the direction of his life and he had honor. He had earned his father's name and made up for all his bad choices.

A honking car horn caught his attention and he looked toward the church parking lot. He smiled when he saw Frank step out of his car and wave. He stood and brushed off his jeans before jogging over to him.

Frank gave the young man a quick hug and a pat on the shoulder. "Hey, buddy. How's it going?"

Rafe shrugged. "Considering everything, it's good." He motioned over his shoulder at the graveyard. "I thought I'd come visit for a bit."

Frank nodded knowingly, hearing a little sadness in his voice. He decided to lift Rafe's spirits by telling him the good news first. "Well, I have some good news. I was actually headed out to the farmhouse to tell you all, but I saw you over here and thought I'd stop.

Look, I know your mom was worried because she thought she shot Edmund. Anyway, I just came from the forensics office, and it looks like her bullet didn't damage anything except an oak tree."

"Really?" Rafe felt the relief immediately. He knew his mom would be happy to hear that.

Frank nodded at him, smiling. "Yep!"

Rafe ran a hand through his thick hair. "That's great news, man! I'd better go tell her. That is, unless you want to do the honors."

Frank shook his head, genuinely happy for Rafe's family. "No, that's fine. Go ahead."

He watched as Rafe took off at a jog, taking a shortcut through the woods. Smiling and feeling the need to celebrate the small victories, he climbed back in his car and called Eleni.

Natalia tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with one hand as she adjusted her hold on her squirming daughter with the other one. She tickled Francesca's belly, making the baby giggle, before slipping a clean diaper under her and closing it.

Sitting Francesca up on the table, she slipped the flowery pink dress over her baby's head and struggled to make the flailing arms go through the sleeves. Blowing some hair out of her face, Natalia shook her head. "Did Mommy Liv slip you some of her coffee today, because you are a squirmy mess?"

The little girl made a spitty face at her mother and giggled when she tried to act mad about it. She was pleased to see her mommy smile, so she did it again.

After putting a pair of nice shoes on Francesca's stubby feet, Natalia stood her up and smiled, nuzzling her nose against her daughter's. "You're just the most adorable baby in the whole wide world. Do you know that?"

"Well, she does have the most adorable mother ever! Apples don't fall far from their trees, you know." Natalia turned at the rich and warm sound of her partner's voice. Olivia leaned against the door frame with her arms crossed, smiling as Natalia propped their daughter on her hip.

Walking over, Natalia gave Olivia a quick kiss. Francesca flung her arms out towards Olivia. "Mama!"

Olivia instantly melted at the word and took her baby in her arms. Kissing Francesca on the head, she nuzzled into her daughter's cheek, savoring the sweet, clean baby scent. "Hey, my Sweet Pea. Have you been good for your mother?"

Natalia quirked the side of her mouth up in a half-smile and rolled her eyes. "She's definitely yours because she has been a handful today!"

"Ah, but you love us like that." Olivia playfully arched an eyebrow at her partner.

Natalia opened her mouth to respond when she heard the door open downstairs.

“Hey, Ma, are you here?”

“We’re up here!” Natalia called out to her son.

In a few seconds, he was outside the door, slightly out of breath, but obviously happy. “Ma, I just saw Frank and he told me some great news.”

Natalia looked at Olivia then back at her son, gesturing expectantly with her hands. “Well?”

He got right to the point. “You didn’t shoot Edmund. It seems the bullet from your gun was found in a tree, so you didn’t do it.”

Olivia smiled in relief, fighting back tears. With her free arm, she pulled Natalia into a hug and kissed the top of her head.

The younger woman leaned into her, the news registering but not really hitting home right away. “I didn’t do it?”

Rafe shook his head. He knew if she had shot Edmund and he did die, it would be a tough pill for her to swallow. He was thrilled that she could start to put this behind her. “No, you didn’t.”

Before Natalia had a chance to respond further, she heard more noise in the house. She pulled back from her partner and smiled a little as Olivia reached over and brushed away a tear from her cheek. Until that moment, Natalia hadn’t even realized she had been crying.

She dabbed at her eyes and moved towards the door. “That must be Leyla and Emma. We probably should get going if we want to get to the bridal store and still have time to look around.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Sweetie, we know Monica on a first name basis by now. I think we’ll be fine.”

They all made their way downstairs and into the kitchen, where Leyla was getting herself and Emma some juice. She spun around from the refrigerator and closed the door. “There you all are. Sorry that we’re a little later than we expected. We got caught up in the fun.”

Olivia stopped dead in her tracks when she saw her daughter sitting at the table. “I see. Emma, what is on your face?”

The icy tone in her mother’s voice was always a warning sign to Emma and she stopped in mid-sip of her juice. She bit her lip and looked down. “Makeup.”

Olivia handed Francesca over to Natalia without looking at her. Instead, she trained her eyes on her target across the kitchen. "What is my daughter doing wearing makeup? She's only ten years old."

Leyla tried not to let her panic show, but she felt the press of the counter against the small of her back and sweat broke out on her forehead. There was nowhere to escape to, so she had to stand her ground. "It was just for fun, Olivia."

"She's too young to wear makeup," Olivia growled at her. She turned back to Emma and pointed in the general direction of the stairs. "Go to the bathroom right now and take that off."

Rafe decided it was time to leave. He motioned to his mom to hand over Francesca. When she did, he tilted his head towards the doorway. "Come on, Munchkin, I'll help you get cleaned up."

When the three women were the only ones left in the kitchen, Natalia stepped forward and put a hand on Olivia's arm. She could feel the tension in the tight muscles under her fingers. "Olivia, I'm sure she wasn't trying to do anything wrong."

Leyla shook her head. "I wasn't! After what's happened, I thought she needed some fun so she could stop thinking about it. It was my idea anyway. Don't get upset with Emma."

Olivia was in her face. "That's not your decision to make. We're her parents. She's too young. She's just a kid. Now she looks like...she looks...too old!"

Natalia saw the sudden quiver of Olivia's lips and frowned in concern. There was more to her reaction than meets the eye. Natalia slid her hand down Olivia's arm and squeezed her hand. She saw the scared and haunted look in Olivia's green eyes. "Leyla, will you give us a minute?"

Leyla nodded at her sister and went into the living room while they talked.

Natalia waited until she was out of hearing range and gently coaxed Olivia's chin to make eye contact with her. "What's going on, querida?"

Olivia dropped her head back and gazed at the ceiling before taking in a shaky breath. When she spoke, her voice was tinged with sadness. "Emma's just a kid. I don't want her to be in a rush to grow up."

Natalia took in the entire body language of her partner – the clenched jaw, closed eyes, and shoulders hunching together. Olivia was shutting herself off. Natalia recognized the

behavior; it was the way Olivia always reacted to fear and pain. The last time Olivia had acted this way was when they vacationed in San Cristobel. With a gasp, realization struck Natalia. "Like you did?"

All of those years ago, Olivia was set on a different path because she was determined to grow up too fast. Olivia fought the sudden lump in her throat as the words brought her memories to the surface. She'd been determined to grow up faster than all the kids around her and she'd set on her own path very early in life. She wanted to break free and have adventures. She hadn't known that it all came with a cost - until it was too late.

Closing her eyes again to fight against the remembered pain and overcome the urge to protect Emma against experiencing it herself, she nodded and crumbled into Natalia's arms. A wave of fear and worry for her daughter overwhelmed her and she buried her face in her partner's neck. Her body shook as she cried.

When Olivia finally pulled out of the embrace, Natalia turned toward the sink and wet a paper towel. Facing Olivia again, she wiped at her mate's tear-streaked cheeks.

After a moment, Olivia took a deep breath and calmed some more. Looking guiltily at Natalia, she sniffled. "I'm sorry for acting like that."

Natalia caressed her face. "You don't need to apologize for the tears or even the anger, at least not to me, but I think you frightened about ten years off of Leyla's life."

Olivia couldn't help but chuckle. "Well, I have to make sure to stay in practice."

Natalia smiled back at Olivia, letting her hands fall to rest on the curves of Olivia's hips. "I don't think you ever have to worry about that. I agree, though, that Emma doesn't need to be wearing makeup yet, but I don't think Leyla meant any harm in it either."

"I know." She grimaced more for effect and humor than for actual meaning. "I'll apologize to her."

When they went into the living room, Leyla was sitting on the couch, nervously biting a nail. She watched Olivia warily as the older woman sat down next to her. She had a sudden urge to grab a pillow and put it between them. Any kind of barrier was better than nothing at all.

Olivia looked up at Natalia, who was sitting on the arm of the couch, before turning back to Leyla. She scratched at the back of her neck before jumping in. "I'm sorry. I know you didn't mean any harm, and I shouldn't have yelled at you, especially not in front of Emma. She's my baby. Well, one of them, and I..."

Leyla was so relieved that she didn't even wait for Olivia to finish. "It's okay. I shouldn't have done it. I just...she needed to forget, and I was trying to help. I kind of have a soft spot for kids, so..."

Natalia smiled and touched Leyla's arm. "We know and that was really sweet of you, but from now on, with anything big like that, pass it by us first."

Leyla smirked at her sister. "So I guess a tattoo is out of the question."

When Olivia's smile fell, Leyla raised her hands. "Just kidding."

Rafe poked his head out of the bathroom, calling downstairs. "Is it safe to come out now?"

"Yes, I'm still alive," Leyla joked back.

In a couple of minutes, Rafe came down with Francesca and a freshly scrubbed Emma, who looked sheepishly at her mommies.

Olivia held her arms out to Emma. "Come here, Bean."

The little girl ran over to her mom and wrapped her arms around her neck. "Are you still mad at me?"

Olivia kissed her head and leaned back to look at her daughter. "Oh, baby, I was never mad at you. I know it seems exciting to grow up and get to do all sorts of new things...but there's plenty of time for that later. Take your time and enjoy the things you can do; don't be in such a rush."

Emma nodded, but with the way she bit her lip, Olivia knew a question was coming. "So, when can I start to wear makeup?"

Natalia sighed at the repeat of the question Emma had posed to her before the wedding. With all the craziness going on, she hadn't had a chance to bring it up to Olivia. "Your mom and I need to talk about that, Emma."

"That's what you said the other day," Emma pouted, her frustration at being kept waiting showing through.

"Emma! Don't take that tone with her," Olivia chastised. She could tell that her daughter was upset because her cheeks flamed red.

Just as quickly, the anger was gone and Emma's bottom lip started to quiver. "I'm sorry, Mom."

“Wrong person.” She pointed up to Natalia.

Emma hung her head. “I’m sorry, Ma.”

Natalia reached out and pulled Emma into a hug. “It’s okay, baby. Do you still want to go dress shopping with us? We could really use your expert opinion.” Emma smiled and nodded against Natalia’s side. “Let’s get going then.”

The freshly washed clothes were stacked neatly on the chair next to the couch where Rafe had been sleeping the last few days. After dinner last night, his mom had busied herself with washing his clothes so he’d be ready to pack up this morning. He hated to go, but his leave was over and he had to get back to the base. His plane headed out at 18:00 and he had been instructed to arrive at the base a little early. That gave him enough time to have a good breakfast and go to church with his mom.

Stretching out on the couch, he finally sat up and rubbed his eyes, yawning. Through the open curtains, pale swaths of yellows and reds let him know that the sun was starting to rise. A new day had begun. Life always went on. It had no regard for individual chaos or death. The sun rising every morning was a certainty, even when nothing else was.

Standing, he found his duffel bag next to the couch and set it on the cushions where he had slept. Carefully, he took his civilian clothes and began to roll them tightly and placed them in his bag. Aside from his dress uniform, which he’d worn to the wedding, everything he’d brought was civilian. Even if just for a little while, he’d been able to forget about shipping out again.

A soft creak on the stairs above him drew his attention up. Emma stood there, already dressed in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. He motioned for her to be quiet by putting a finger to his lips and then waved her to come down the stairs.

Smiling, she took the last few steps and came around the couch to give him a hug.

He pulled her close and then acted like he was going to tickle her, making her jump back and giggle softly. “What are you doing up so early, Munchkin?”

Emma shrugged. “Couldn’t sleep.”

Rafe tilted his head. “Are you still having those bad dreams?”

She shrugged again, not looking at him but paying a lot of attention to one of the shiny brass buttons of his dress uniform, which was draped across the back of the chair. He didn't push her. Instead, he waited for her to be ready to say it. Eventually, a slight nod answered his question.

Sighing, he tossed the pair of shorts in his hand back down on the pile and sat on the couch. He opened his arms to her. "Come here."

Emma went over and slumped down next to him on the couch, curling against his side. "Do you have bad dreams, Rafe?"

He wrapped his arm around her. "Yes, I do."

"What about?" She looked up at him, surprised that he had bad dreams. He was so brave that she didn't think anything could scare him.

He looked down into Emma's unabashedly curious gaze. "The bad things that I've seen in Iraq."

"Like what?" Emma was practically whispering, as if she and Rafe were in the middle of the most important and secretive conversation ever.

"Well, kiddo, it's hard to explain. I mean, it's war and people get shot and hurt. There's a lot of sadness." He looked down, concerned how much he should tell her. But after all she's been through, certainly she could handle a little truth.

She tucked her head back against his shoulder, listening to his steady heartbeat for a moment and realizing that it made her feel safe to hear the strong, true beat. "Then why do you do it?"

The question rocked him for a moment. It wasn't as easy to answer as he thought it would be. The immediate response he wanted to give was because it was the right thing to do - that he wanted to help people who needed it or to bring freedom to those who didn't have it. But he also knew Emma was smart and would probably see through a canned response.

He decided that with a kid like Emma it was always better to go with the truth. "Honestly, I wanted you and my mom to be proud of me. I wanted to be a good son and brother and make Grandpa Alan proud."

Emma looked up at him. "But I am proud of you and you're the best brother ever."

He smiled and hugged her tightly. "And you're the best Munchkin ever!"

She giggled as he poked at her sides and tickled her. Emma wriggled around and grabbed at him, but stopped when she saw his dog tags fall out of his shirt. She reached out her hand to get a closer look. Next to the tags was the coin that matched the one she wore on a chain around her neck.

Rafe watched as she rubbed her small thumb over it. He swallowed down the lump in his throat and put his hand over hers. "You're not alone, Emma."

A long moment passed between them as she gently rubbed the pendant. His heart ached and he almost started to cry when Emma's bottom lip started to quiver. Then she curled up in his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck where he could feel the wetness of her tears against his neck. Slowly he rocked her, letting his own tears finally come.

Rafe felt an almost instant calm settle over him as he entered the sanctuary of the church.

All around, he heard the soft, respectful murmurs of parishioners praying or talking quietly amongst themselves. Looking up at the large crucifix in the front of the church, he was overwhelmed all over again. The emotions of his morning with Emma came back full force. Kneeling, just inside the doorway of the sanctuary, in the aisle, he made the Sign of the Cross. Next to him, his mom did the same and then they rose together and found a pew.

When he'd told her that he wanted to go to church this morning and she'd asked if she could go with him, he'd admitted to being surprised. Not so much that she'd go in general, but that she'd want to attend one of Father Ray's services. In her emails to him, she had told him more details about the priest's disapproval of her life and his constant attempts to exert his influence on her in the months before Olivia moved back into the farmhouse.

Gradually, he'd put together a picture of the doubts and fears his mother had gone through during that time. At the time, he'd been too self-absorbed to notice her struggle, but he was beginning to understand her in a whole new way. He'd also begun to understand her distinction between religion and faith.

On the drive to church this morning, Rafe had asked her why she'd want to come to one of Father Ray's services. A mischievous smile had ghosted across her face even though she hadn't taken her eyes off the road. "You did notice that I wasn't in a rush this morning."

He'd nodded. "Yeah, I did actually."

Her smile had grown larger. "That's because Father Ray has the early Mass."

For a moment, he hadn't believed that his own mother could be so amused by her actions. Then he'd leaned his head against the head rest and laughed.

The mass was standard fare, so after about an hour it was over and they filed out of the church, greeting the priest on their way outside. Natalia sauntered towards the car, not in a hurry to end her time with her son. Besides, they still had plenty of time to get to the bus station. She glanced over at her Rafe. "Are you hungry?"

"Always!" he joked and grabbed at his grumbling belly.

She tilted her head to the side. "Then let's go get something."

He touched her arm as she started to walk away. "Okay, as long as it's not Company."

"Why not? I thought you liked Company's food." She was confused because he always seemed to like spending time with the Coopers. She was about to ask that very question when Rafe explained.

"I do like Company...a lot. But I want to spend time with you, not share you with the Coopers." He shrugged and scratched at his chin.

Understanding what Rafe meant by the comment, and knowing all too well how intrusive and overbearing the Coopers could be, she smiled. "No need to explain. I'll tell you what, let's swing by Towers and get something to go. We can sit in the park and eat."

"Now that's the perfect way to spend my last day." He smiled and climbed in the car.

Natalia fought down the lump in her throat at the words "last day." She knew he didn't mean it in the literal sense, just that it was his last day in Springfield, but it still hit her hard. She sent up a quick prayer hoping that he had many, many more days ahead of him.

Within half an hour, they were seated on a bench under a tree, making the warm summer day almost bearable. Natalia found Rafe's sandwich and chips in the bag and handed them over to him, then opened her own container of salad.

For a few minutes, they silently ate their food and watched people walking by. As she looked around, Natalia realized the folly of thinking the park would be a place to relax. Had it only been a few days since Edmund had opened fire on everyone? At least the scene of the shooting was on the other side of the park so she didn't have to be reminded of it. It was odd though. Since finding out that she hadn't shot Edmund, it was like everything changed. Knowing that Edmund was incapacitated and in custody put her mind at ease, and she felt like she could finally relax a little.

At least for her, things had changed. She was still concerned about Emma. She was too young to have experienced something so traumatic. Remembering the terrified look on her daughter's face when she was soothed during her nightmare sent a shiver through Natalia. It was like Emma hadn't even been herself. Like she wasn't even there.

She watched as Rafe tried to drain every last drop of soda from the cup in his hand and wondered what they would have done if he hadn't been there. He'd known exactly what to do.

"I'm so proud of you." The words were out of her mouth before she realized it. Rafe looked up at her, surprised to be told that out of the blue, but then he just smiled and balled up the empty wrapper his sandwich had been in.

She set her salad down and turned to face him. "I'm proud of everything you're doing, the man you're becoming. You're brave and confident and so handsome, just like your father."

He blushed at the compliments and nervously digging the toe of his shoe in the dirt. "Ma, come on."

She shook her head. "No, I'm serious. The other night when Emma had that nightmare, you knew exactly what to do."

Rafe swallowed and looked down. Shrugging, he tried to blow it off. "It was nothing, Ma."

Natalia reached for his hand. "It wasn't nothing." She felt tears well up in her eyes and she couldn't stop them from falling as she imagined what he'd seen overseas that made him so aware of how to deal with nightmares. "If it's too much, you don't have to stay in, you know. You can come home. I'm sure Olivia would give you a job at The Beacon."

He tilted his head to the side. "Don't cry, okay? I'm fine...really. I knew what I was getting into when I signed up. This is what I'm meant to do. I feel right doing this."

Taking a deep breath, she blew it out and brushed the tears away from her cheeks, trying to pull herself together. "I know. That's why I'm so proud of you."

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "What's right isn't always what's easy."

She laughed and put her hands on each side of his face, squeezing it like she had when he was a toddler. "Oh, handsome and smart!"

Leaning back, he scrubbed a hand nervously through his hair and looked out over the park. "Do you mind if I give you a little unsolicited advice?"

She draped her arm over the back of the bench and watched him as he seemed to wrestle with finding the right words.

He bit at his bottom lip before bending over and resting his elbows on his knees. He looked over at her. "I think you and Olivia should get Emma some counseling. It might not be a bad idea for all of you, actually."

"Funny, I was thinking of talking to Olivia about getting Emma some help. And, ironically enough, Father Ray came by yesterday morning, letting me know that he'd counsel me." She shrugged and continued, "I guess considering since it appeared that I'd shot a man and put him in a coma that it was the logical thing to do."

Rafe sat back, glad that she hadn't rejected his idea outright. "Are you guys going to see him?"

She grimaced. "Well, see, you have to pay attention to the way I phrased that statement. Father Ray said he'd counsel me, not the rest of my family or us as a family."

"Oh, I see." She could see the muscles working in Rafe's jaw. He obviously wasn't happy about the priest's restrictions.

She waved her hand in the air. "It doesn't matter though. There are others doing the grief counseling, even Sister Anne, so I have options. There are always options."

Reva had told herself to not do this; that this wasn't necessary. She had tried to escape the madness of this past year with a semblance of a life and of sanity. She had made the decision to leave with Josh, to start over, and to break free of the tortured past she'd had with Jeffrey. Not that she hadn't had a tortured past with Josh, but this...thing, with Jeffrey was different. But here she stood at Jeffrey's door with her hand rising and falling as she started to knock and then stopped. Over and over again, like so many other times in her life, she fluctuated between passion, love, and fate.

She had made her choice in Josh; he'd seen her at her worst more often than not, but still believed in her, and in them, and never gave up. It was her turn now to believe in them. This had to stop. She had to draw a line in the sand and not look back. The chaos that never seemed to stop chasing her, nipping at her heels, had always been present with Jeffrey in her life. The last few days with Josh had been the first bits of calm and peace she had experienced in a very long time. She wanted to have a lifetime of that. She deserved it and so did Colin.

Taking a deep breath, she tapped sharply on the door of Jeffrey's apartment. She heard movement on the other side, along with, muffled curses. Against her will, her hands started to shake, and when the door opened and she finally saw him, she hated herself for feeling a hint of remorse over what she had to do.

"We need to talk." She got right to the point so she could end this as quickly as possible.

Jeffrey hobbled backwards on his crutches to make room for her to enter. "Come in."

Reva shook her head. "No, there's no need. What I have to say is simple." He looked at her expectantly, and she closed her eyes against the tide of emotions merely being in his presence caused – a rush of memories and intimate moments that took her breath away. Looking at him again, she steeled herself to speak. "Leave, Jeffrey. Your lies and secrets have caused me and this town too much pain. What you kept from me is unforgivable...so many lies. I could never trust you again and I don't want to."

He shook his head and tried to move forward to take her hand. "Reva..."

She pulled back from him, tears beginning to trek down her face, against her will. She had sworn she wouldn't cry. This might be hard, but she knew it was the right thing to do. She had to make him understand that she was serious. "No! You don't get to say anything here. Leave this town. Get out of our lives so we can stop living in the past. I don't want you here."

As she turned to walk back down the steps to the parking lot, Jeffrey hobbled out, just past the door. He knew with the crutches and the pain there was no way he could catch her. All he could do was lean over the banister and call out, "I'm sorry, Reva!" She didn't look back up as she climbed in her car and slammed the door. He stared mournfully after her. "I still love you."

Rolling to her side when she heard Natalia exit the bathroom, Olivia stretched like a cat and admired her partner, who was running her fingers through slightly damp hair. Her sleep shorts and white tank top clung invitingly to gentle curves. Olivia flipped back the covers so Natalia could crawl under the inviting warmth of the sheets and blue blanket.

With a long sigh, Natalia slid down into a comfortable position spooning against Olivia's stomach. She relaxed into Olivia's arms before gentle fingers came up to tuck some of her hair behind her ear. The motion tickled Natalia and she couldn't help but smile.

"That's good to see," Olivia murmured.

“Mmmm, it feels good to do.” Natalia sighed softly in contentment as sleep was already beginning to take her. “It feels like it’s been so long since we’ve had a quiet, calm moment.”



Olivia brushed her fingers over Natalia’s cheek, knowing her partner was close to falling asleep. “It is calm right now, but I don’t think the chaos is over yet. I have a feeling this is just the beginning.” Natalia drew her eyebrows together in confusion, so she continued, “I’m worried about Emma. I know she only had one nightmare but...maybe it wouldn’t hurt for her, and all of us, to talk to someone. I heard Father Ray make the offer...”

Natalia reached up and stilled the hand on her cheek, rolling over to look into worried green eyes. “He won’t see us as a family.” She noted the angry expression that flitted across Olivia’s face and felt a surge of protectiveness towards her partner. “And I wouldn’t want us to see him even if he would.”

Olivia squeezed the hand holding hers and moved in closer. She loved Natalia so completely that it was almost frightening. The emotion was so strong that all she could do was lean forward and kiss the warm and inviting lips so close to her.

Natalia melted into the caress and suddenly didn’t feel sleepy at all anymore. Breaking the kiss, she looked steadily into Olivia’s eyes. “We’ll do whatever we need to for Emma. I promise.”

Olivia rested her forehead against Natalia’s, feeling the depth of their bond. “I love you.”

In the waning darkness of the early morning, a man walked slowly up the path leading to the small two-story wood building. It might serve as an apartment, but it looked decrepit to him. It was certainly well below the acceptable standards he had become accustomed to over his lifetime.

His last steps were deliberate and measured as he savored his proximity to the woman inside. With satisfaction, he had watched as unsuspecting community leaders and police details eased back to a normal routine in recent days.

He smiled as he placed the small rectangular box wrapped in plain, light brown paper in front of the door. Lifting his hand, he knocked hard on the door.

Anna was jerked awake from a dream by a dull, thudding sound. The last image she remembered from the dream was running through the woods with a bear hot on her heels. Blinking hard, the sense of fear still flooding through her veins, she struggled to wake up enough to make sense of the noise.

After a final knock on the door, the man turned and walked slowly away, slipping back into the cover of the pre-dawn darkness. "This is far from over, my beautiful dragon."

The End

Healing Revelations

by Ceridwyn

ACT 1

After a late night spent pouring through police report files that she'd brought home, the early sound of the door ringing was a rude awakening.

"Hang on!" Anna called aloud even though there was no way anyone would have heard her from her bedroom. Rolling out of the bed, her foot caught in some sheets and she nearly tripped. The jarring motion of righting herself as she grabbed the edge of the dresser resulted in a perfunctory curse; her shoulder was still healing from the bullet wound. It had only been two weeks since the shooting, and her shoulder still ached terribly at times. The detective shook her head, hoping her day would improve, though having thought that, she

was bound to have jinxed it. Throwing a sweater over the undershirt she slept in, she made her way to the front entrance and looked through the peephole in the door. Not seeing anyone there, she grabbed the nearby softball bat, hefting it as she opened the door and peered around. Shaking her head still at who would have just rang a bell once and left, she started to turn to head back inside when she noticed a bag hanging from the door handle, weighted down inside. She peered around the edging of the bag, trying to ascertain if it held anything hazardous. Not finding anything out of the ordinary, she picked it up, brought it inside and placed it on the center island in the kitchen.

Rummaging around in one of the cupboards, she pulled down a bottle of anti-inflammatory medication the doctor had prescribed her, shook out two of them and popped them into her mouth. She grabbed a glass, running it under the faucet and got enough water to swallow them. Before she even thought about doing anything this morning, including trying to figure out what was in the package, she needed caffeine, and so acting almost on auto-pilot she filled the pot with water and coffee grounds and waited for it to percolate. The scent of her favorite coffee brewing was like manna from the heavens as far as Anna was concerned, as she moved to the sorted folders on her kitchen table, and filed them into her laptop case. When the machine stopped, she pulled a mug from the cabinet and fixed her coffee with two sugars, stirring it with a spoon, and then moved over to the island. From a drawer, she grabbed a pair of gloves and then tentatively she pulled out the brown-paper wrapped small package. There was no note attached or anything to indicate where it might have come from, or from whom. With the sharp knife she pulled from the block on the counter, she slid it through the tape and opened the box. Through the layers of wrap, her breathing froze as she examined the contents. A simple set of hand strengthening grips would probably not have been noteworthy to most people; an odd item to send someone without context, but for Anna, she felt the blood drain from her face. It was a message meant specifically for her, from her father, as a threat or a warning: back off.

Hung Feng Li was a domineering personality, and quite lethal when required. But he didn't require a weapon to fight with; his strength and his skills with his hands were weapon enough.

Her father had been working with the Winslow family her entire life. With his martial arts training, he'd worked his way through the Winslow's security detail as a young man, gaining respect and seniority by his attention to detail and his ability to contain problems before they came to the attention of the family. Sometimes that just meant a threat to another person's liberty and security, and if necessary, physical application of that threat. As the years passed, he'd worked his way up to the head of the Royal Guard and chief of security for the Winslow family. It was a position he'd been in for more than twenty years.

It had been a long time since she'd deliberately gone against her father's wishes and left San Cristobel. Her attempt to help Olivia try to find justice after having been raped had resulted in her own beating by her father, for trying to find justice for Olivia. This little 'gift'

that had been left on her door this morning was a warning to lay off investigating the Edmund Winslow case. Despite the heat of the coffee entering her system as she took a sip, Anna shivered at the potential implications of the threat.

Refusing to bow to her father's intimidation, Anna replaced the wrap around the grips. Going over to one of the cabinet drawers, she grabbed a packing tape gun, sealed the box, and placed it back in the bag. While she was quite sure it was delivered from one of her father's messengers and as such there would likely be no obtainable prints, she knew she had to make the rest of her team aware of the threat. After all, she was not the only one investigating Edmund Winslow, and she felt personally responsible if anyone of the officers on her task force were injured or killed because of information of which they had no knowledge.

Quickly, she jotted down a few notes onto a sheet of paper, before placing it in her case, and then she headed to the bathroom for a shower.

Natalia was getting Emma's lunch ready as Olivia was trying to feed Francesca breakfast, when they heard Emma running down the stairs and they shook their heads. Some things didn't really change. When Emma reached the kitchen, her backpack was slung over her shoulder.

"Woah, Jellybean, where's the fire?" Olivia asked her daughter with a grin.

"Mommy, do you know where my notebooks are?"

Natalia packed the sandwich and fruit into Emma's lunch bag, and then she smiled at her daughter, "Where did you last have them?"

Emma bit at her lower lip as she thought where she had left her notebooks. Her face lit up as she remembered. "In the living room." She quickly headed into the other room and grabbed her things and put them in her bag before returning.

"Hey, Emma," Natalia started, as she pulled the girl in for a hug, "how about when we finish your homework tonight, we put all your stuff in your backpack? That way, you'll know where everything is in the morning."

"Okay." The school bus horn blew and Emma pulled back. "Gotta go!"

"Bean, how about a hug for your old mother?" Olivia chuckled and then got a quick hug from her daughter before the girl resettled the pack on her shoulder and headed out the

door. With an amused pout, Olivia turned her glance over to her partner. "I notice she didn't correct me on the 'old' part." She finished feeding the baby and put the empty cereal bowl into the sink.

"You are just fine to me," Natalia said, her voice husky as she moved close to Olivia and grabbed hold of her partner's robe, turning her around. As her eyes slowly scanned down Olivia's body and back up to meet the other woman's face she smiled deeply, "Just fine, indeed."

Olivia's eyebrows rose in playful teasing. "My, my, Natalia, are you flirting with me?"

"Is it working?" Natalia giggled.

"Oh, yeah." She leaned in for a kiss and was rewarded with one that made her toes curl.

"Momma!" Francesca's voice called out, breaking the moment.

The two women moved apart and laughed at the interruption from their youngest daughter. Natalia turned to face Francesca who was holding her hands up in the air.

"I'll take that as my cue to go up and get dressed. I've got a meeting with Greg and two potential new vendors at ten."

Releasing the high chair tray and placing it up on the counter to clean afterwards, Natalia unclipped the seat straps and lifted her daughter up against her chest; the little girl grabbed locks of her hair. "Okay, once I drop Francesca off with Leyla, I'll be in. I've got to meet with accounting and with the kitchen staff. I got an email from Donello about a new menu item he wants to try out. He asked me to come down and check it out."

"Any hints?" Curiosity was getting the better of her.

"He just said 'sweet and decadent.'"

"Oh, that's not fair! How come you get to do all the fun stuff?" Olivia pouted. "I'm gonna be stuck in a dull, boring meeting with a bunch of vendors vying for attention and sucking up for all their worth. Greg's got most of the details, so he's sitting in on the meeting as well." Olivia sighed.

"I'll make it worth your while?" Natalia grinned, saucily. "Meet me for lunch in your office?"

Grinning, Olivia moved closer to her partner, cuddling up behind her. "You say the sweetest things."

Francesca's attention switched to Olivia and stretched out a hand to her other mother, and Olivia raised a finger for her daughter to grab hold.

Turning her head to face Olivia, Natalia asked, "When were we going to be meeting with Josh?"

"This evening. He's going to come over after he and Jonathan finish working on the school project."

"I'll take some extra ground beef out to make some spaghetti."

"Okay, see you in a bit. I'm going to get ready or I'll be late for my boring meeting." Olivia leaned in to give Natalia a kiss before she headed upstairs.

"Hey, Sweet Pea. You and Mommy are going to get this kitchen tidied and then we'll go up and get you cleaned up and dressed." Natalia gave her daughter a big kiss, and then placed her down in her playpen before moving to start washing the breakfast dishes.

The police department was relatively quiet as Anna entered the building and headed towards her office. She settled her coffee cup on the desk and laid down her briefcase, pulling out the documents she'd worked on at home, along with her laptop. Taking a sip of the hot beverage, she put it down and logged in to the SPD computer to check for messages and to review the night's police log. Nothing in particular had been red-flagged as a major incident, for which she was grateful.

They'd questioned everybody who was at the wedding about anything they might have seen to give the police department clues about the particular motivation for Edmund opening fire on the crowd. She had been mildly frustrated with Olivia's protection of Natalia, though she could understand it; the other woman's family had long been a target of Edmund's family, and she could empathize with the need to protect one's family as much as you could.

Having developed a pattern to Edmund's activities with Eleni a few weeks before, Anna decided the crime scene investigator was a good source of information and could help review past cases, looking through cold case reports, misplaced or lost evidence, trying to clean up some backlog. The other woman was becoming a friend, and she realized that she had too few of those. She'd burned personal bridges when she came to Springfield, ones that she wasn't sure she'd be able to repair.

The early morning rush at Company had settled to a trickle of customers as Blake sat in one corner of the bar, looking intently at her laptop. She'd been nearly run off her feet with the breakfast run, since Lynn wasn't due in until eleven am. Now that Daisy was no longer in town, and she was focusing some more on her publishing, she had talked with Buzz about hiring a new waitress to take up some of her shifts. She'd noticed Marina had needed some more time to be with Henry so Blake had been picking up extra shifts to cover.

Since her amicable split with Frank, Marina had been not quite abrasive with her, but not exactly overtly pleasant either. Blake wondered if that had still had to do with the younger woman's father still working with and being friends with her mother, or if it was something different all together, but to put it bluntly, the younger woman's passive aggressive stance was growing annoying. Blake tended to give people the benefit of the doubt as more than once she'd been on the end of judgmental attitudes of others.

Looking up, she caught the eye of one of the customers who held up his mug. Picking up the carafe she wandered over and refilled his coffee and checked with the only two other customers to see if there was anything they needed. She returned to the bar and browsed through an email. So concentrating on the screen she didn't noticed Doris Wolfe come up to sit beside her, and when the other woman spoke, it startled her so strongly, she almost fell off the stool. She felt a set of strong arms come up behind her to balance her, and Blake relaxed once she realized whose hands they were.

"Sorry," Blake commented out of reflex.

"No need. I was the one who spooked you," Doris said with a smile. "I should be the one to apologize. Sorry. How are you?"

Pressing a hand against her chest to calm herself, Blake smiled. "Let me get my heart rate under control and I'll tell you." Truthfully, Blake wasn't sure if her rapid heart rate was still from the surprise that Doris gave her when she sat next to her without her awareness, or from the fact that Doris still had a hand on her back; the warmth transferred through clothes against her skin. She looked over at the other woman. "I'm okay now, thank you."

When Doris's hand moved from her back up to the bar, Blake felt its loss and she sighed. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she then turned to Doris and asked her if she needed anything.

"Caffeine. And plenty of it. I have a stack of reports to go through and a meeting with the city manager and the police chief later this morning."

"How are things going with the aftermath of the shootings?" Blake was curious. She grabbed the carafe from the table behind her and moved to fill a mug for Doris.

“From a professional level, I can’t say anything just yet. But from a personal standpoint, I feel sorry for Olivia and Natalia. As much as I would have loved to pull the trigger to shoot Edmund, I find it hard to believe Natalia even tried. Their family has been through so much. I know that I would do anything to protect Ashlee. I know that Natalia was trying to do the same for her family, but it’s hurting them, and I don’t like to see my friends hurting.” Doris flexed her hands on either side of her mug, glancing down into the dark liquid as if it could provide some answers for her. Looking over at the petite woman, she worried about her. “How are you? Still sore?”

“From tackling you to the ground, you mean?” Blake grinned. Despite the gravity of the situation, it still amused her that she had done that. Taking in Doris’s wry grin, she added, “My elbow’s still a little bit sore from hitting the dais but I’ll live.”

“Good to know.” Doris looked with curiosity at Blake’s laptop screen. “Whatcha working on?”

“Remember that author I mentioned – the one with the lesbian mystery story to be published. I’m going to do it. It’s really good.” Pensively, she looked at Doris. “I kind of wish Ashlee was here. She did such a good job of working with me on Coop’s book. I could use her assistance. And since Natalia’s returned to managing the day-to-day stuff at the Beacon, I’m left without a copy editor.”

Despite Doris’s oft times strained relationship with Ashlee, she was exceptionally proud of her daughter, and she appreciated that Blake thought highly of the young woman. “I’m sure you’ve had other copy editors before. What about using one of those?”

“I want to do this right. I’ve got a couple of people in mind.”

Tentatively, Doris placed a hand on Blake’s arm. “I’m sure you will. Let me know how it goes.”

“Thanks.” When Doris moved to top up her coffee mug, Blake lifted her head; she didn’t want to end their conversation but she knew the other woman had to get back to work. “Hey, Doris?”

“Yes?”

“Do you want to get together for supper?” Blake paused curiously, waiting for the other woman’s answer. When Doris hadn’t taken long to respond in the affirmative, she grinned. “My place at 7? Clarissa will be there. She probably thinks I’m crazy and controlling. But after the shootings, I really just want to make sure she’s safe.”

“Children are much more adaptable than adults. We need to be there for them and let them know that it’s okay for them to talk to us.” Flashing a grin before she moved to leave, Doris added, “I’ll bring the wine.”

The continuous infant’s crying had been keeping Remy awake for most of the night, and he couldn’t figure out what the problem was. He’d checked his son’s diaper, bottle fed him, burped him, and the baby still hadn’t settled. He and Christina had been taking turns getting up with CK, and Remy was at the point of wanting to take the baby into Cedars. Little Clayton had been rubbing his hands at his ears. But there was no sign of redness that he could see. With all the crying, the baby’s sinuses were blocking and Remy thought he could hear some wheezing. Maybe it was some instinct left from his days as an EMT and the memories of his first son’s illness, that his sensitivity to CK being sick was niggling at his brain.

In the dimmed light of the baby’s room, Christina entered, rubbing at her tired eyes. She turned to her husband. “Hey, Remy, it’s going to be a long night still. Go get a few hours. I can call Frank in the morning.”

“No, that’s all right. I don’t think I could sleep now anyway. I think we should bring him to the hospital. He sounds wheezy, and he’s been rubbing his ear.”

“I’ll bring him to the doctor in the morning. Really, Remy, I think this is just a cold.”

“But, what if it’s more?”

“Remy, they’re probably not going to do anything more tonight that they can’t do in the morning. We’ll make sure he gets checked out well.” Christina sighed. “I know this is worrying you. But, I think we just need to wait and see what the doctor says, okay?”

“Sure.” Remy was still hesitant, and it showed in his movements when he moved to stand and transfer the crying infant over to his wife before shuffling back to the bedroom and lay on the bed. It took a while, but he finally managed to get to sleep.

Olivia was sorting through her mail when she had a knock on her office door and she called to whomever to enter. Soon standing before her was Leyla Rivera shifting nervously from one foot to the other, as she pushed Francesca in the stroller. Olivia smiled at her youngest daughter, who was squirming to get out of her confines. She kneeled down and unfastened Francesca before lifting her up, and smiled at her as the young girl moved to

grab a lock of hair. Remembering Natalia's sister was still standing there, Olivia looked up at her and raised an eyebrow. "Can I help you with something?"

Taking a deep breath and gathering her courage, Leyla spoke with conviction. She knew the older woman respected truth and assuredness. "I was thinking about something Natalia had said a little while ago about the possibility of opening up a daycare at the Beacon. I'd been temping in offices in Chicago for jobs when my grandmother got sicker and I had to stop for a while, but my college diploma was in early childhood education. I've also applied to the Department of Child & Family Services to write the state licensing board exam, which will be in a few weeks. When I went back to Chicago this past summer, I decided that this was something I could do, and do well, so I started preparations." Leyla bit down on her lip slightly before she continued. "I was wondering if I could make a business of doing that here. Make the daycare available to both the children of staff and guests." Leyla paused.

Having a daycare at the Beacon hadn't been something Olivia thought about much; they had outsourced a service for providing activities for children of guests several years ago. It hadn't been that long ago that she was representing Galaxy Hotels, and she was reminded of how much she and Natalia had touted the importance of keeping families in mind when promoting the hotel chain. Part of that, Olivia conceded was due to her poor health at the time and concealing the nature of that from Decker, using her need to be close to her family and thus be in Springfield and not gallivant around the globe. But as she thought further on it, and on Natalia's previous arguments for including a daycare service within the hotel, perhaps it was time.

"How much do you know about running a business?" Olivia asked her.

"I did some office managing as part of my temp jobs. I know it's not the same, but I'm a fast learner."

Despite Leyla being Natalia's sister, Olivia really didn't know her well, and how she was as a person could differ greatly from how she could run a business. Olivia had a few conditions to be met before she would agree to this center to be started and run.

Taking a notepad from her desk drawer, Olivia then looked over at her sister-in-law with a serious expression. "That's a great plan, but there are some things I need to review first before we can even get started on a business plan. I need your college transcripts and references, as well as employment references from the temp agencies you worked for. Have you thought about drawing up a business plan for this?"

Leyla had been prepared for most of that. From a folder that she had tucked away in Francesca's stroller, she pulled the necessary documents from the college and her references, and then handed them over to Olivia. "I haven't done an official business plan

since I was in college. I do have some ideas that I've worked out for what I would like to see done for a Beacon daycare, though. In the past few weeks, I've spoken with a few of the local daycare businesses to get an idea of what's required, and I've done some research on that. I've also spoken with the owners and managers and some of the employees to get a sense of what I saw working and what I would like to do to change things. I figure we can start out small, just with the children of employees, word of mouth and we can build from there."

Olivia was impressed with the work that Leyla had already done in preparation, and though the younger woman was nervous when she had entered the room earlier, she was much more self-assured now.

"Okay, I need to find out the legal spatial requirements from the licensing board, and find enough space in the hotel. Gather all the information you've compiled and we can go over that later. We'll work on the official business plan. I'll need to run it past my investors but it shouldn't be a problem."

"Thanks, Olivia." Leyla nodded. "See you back at the farmhouse later?"

"I'll be there." Olivia smiled. She placed her daughter back in her stroller and kissed the girl's head.

Although she loved her daughters, a home with her family was one thing she never thought she could have and hold for a long time to come. Olivia looked at her clock. She was expecting Natalia after her meeting with the kitchen staff, and she was looking forward to their lunch.

The busy weekend passenger traffic of Amsterdam's Albert Cuypmarkt open-air market was enough to get lost in, which is exactly what Dinah Marler had been banking on. For the last couple weeks, she'd had the feeling that she and Mallet had been followed. When they had inquired about a hotel room the night before, they had heard the couple asking about looking for two people and giving their descriptions; it had been vague enough at the beginning, until she heard their names mentioned. Up until now, she and Mallett had avoided using their real names. While she was curious to find out why they were being sought out, she wasn't innocent enough to believe that it was for anything good. They ducked out of that hotel and moved to a new hotel; one that most people would not expect her to stay in. Come to think of it, Dinah realized, it was remarkably unremarkable, kind of like the hotel room she and Mallet had stayed in while they were in Bosnia.

She winded her way through the stalls, the aromatic scents of food being cooked wafted through the air, blending into a cacophony, and since she hadn't eaten since the early morning coffee and croissants, she could hear her stomach growling. Picking out some fresh fruit, she paid the vendor before moving on and purchasing some lunch.

Turning to leave the market she was stopped still by a voice she could easily recognize.

"Dinah! Oh my heavens, darling, it is you!" Alexandra Spaulding called out to her from a stall about eight feet behind her.

Dinah turned around and smiled tightly. "Alex! Wow. I never expected to see you here." Dinah brought her hand up to play with the pendant on her necklace.

"Apparently so." Alex beamed at seeing a familiar face. "What has you half way around the world?"

"Oh, a bit of this and that," Dinah said, avoiding any details. "Some shopping and sightseeing. You?"

"The grand tour of Europe and the world. Fletcher and I left shortly after Alan died. I needed to get out of Springfield for a while. But apparently life has been just as chaotic as usual in our dear town, as ever."

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Dinah knew a little of the details since her mother had sent her a text message. Mallet had been in occasional contact with Jeffrey regarding Edmund and his dealings, but there had been nothing in the past few weeks.

"Did you know Rick and Mindy were getting married?" Alex asked.

"I knew they were engaged." One less person to hit on her and every other single female in town, Dinah smiled.

"Apparently Edmund showed up at the wedding with guns and opened fire. I don't know the full story; I got some details from Phillip. But Edmund was also shot and is in a coma."

"Is it safe to go back?" Dinah asked. She knew there was probably still an outstanding arrest warrant out for her, which is why she and Mallet didn't generally stay anywhere for any given length of time.

"I'm assuming so. But I'll talk with Phillip tonight. Is there anyway to get hold of you? A cell phone number?" Alex asked her.

Not wanting to give out any contact information, Dinah simply said, “How about you find out from Phillip and meet me here tomorrow, same time.” Plus, Dinah wanted to have Mallet in the general vicinity in case something went wrong; and from her experience, something always went wrong when she least expected it. Karma finding its way back to bite her in the ass.

“That sounds so clandestine. I love it! It’s like being in the movies.” Alex laughed.

“Tomorrow then.” Dinah smiled, gathered her food packages and headed in the opposite direction, occasionally checking over her shoulder. Although she knew the older woman was well-intentioned, she also knew the older woman was a busybody, and loved her gossip as much as the next person, and seeing someone she knew half-way across the world was bound to be gossip-worthy information.

ACT 2

A knock on the small apartment’s door alerted Jeffrey to a visitor, and he sighed. Since his release from the hospital, there hadn’t been many visitors these days other than Frank, Anna, Jonathan or Ava. Actually, he thought, that wasn’t entirely true. He recalled a memorable visit from Doris Wolfe, wherein she pretty much reamed him a new one for getting himself shot, for Natalia picking up a gun, for hurting Olivia, and generally anything under the sun that she could think of. And Reva; that conversation was hard. He hadn’t been around for Ava growing up, for many reasons, and now, his mistakes, well-intentioned or not, would result in not being around much for Colin. Intellectually, he knew that Reva and Colin needed a stable presence in their lives, and for the foreseeable future, Jeffrey couldn’t guarantee that. However, knowing that didn’t make it hurt any less.

“Come in,” Jeffrey called out. Grabbing his crutches, he attempted to stand, and when he did, the pain from the shooting lanced through his leg. Almost dropping back to the couch, he managed to stabilize himself in time to see Detective Li enter the apartment.

Laying her laptop bag down on a nearby chair, she maneuvered him back to the couch, the movement causing her to wince slightly. “Hey boss, anything I can get you?”

“A new leg would be nice.”

“None handy at the moment. Coffee? Tea? Scotch?”

“I should be asking you that,” Jeffrey spoke, with a half grin. “There’s some coffee in a carafe on the counter. Help yourself. And while you’re doing that, you can top me up.” Jeffrey

shifted on the couch, trying to find a comfortable spot, and resigned himself to the fact that there wasn't much comfort to be found. *Fitting*, he thought. "How's the case going?"

Knowing where the mugs were kept, she grabbed one and filled it with coffee, before heading back into the living room. "Your weapon is definitely the one that shot Edmund. Eleni's team collected all the shell casings from all the weapons fired, and had pictures taken from the scene to get the trajectories. Some of the witness statements are vague once the shooting started. Formally, there'll be a charge of attempted murder placed on you, but given the circumstances, self-defense and protection of unarmed civilians, there will be no jail time."

"Any news on Edmund?"

"Still in a coma. No word on when he might come out of it, if at all. Still, we have a twenty-four hour police guard posted outside his room. All visitors have to register with the officer before they can enter the room." Anna refilled his coffee mug and returned the carafe to the counter.

Jeffrey thought about the others that were shot, and one who wasn't but was still in the hospital. "How's Billy Lewis?"

"You haven't heard?" Anna asked, curiously. She was surprised that Reva hadn't told him.

Worrying slightly, and fearing the worst, Jeffrey asked, "No, what?"

"Bill said it was touch and go for a while after the surgery, but he should make a good recovery." She could see Jeffrey relax. "He had a pretty bad heart attack. He's lucky."

Jeffrey nodded, but he could see that Anna had something else to tell him by the way she shifted uneasily. "What?"

Anna stalled for a moment. She knew she had to bring up the news about the package delivered to her and the threat it represented. "I got something this morning. It was dropped off on my door handle." Anna stopped and pulled the box from her case and handed it over to him.

"What's this?" Grabbing his army knife from his pocket, he sliced open the package and carefully poked around the wrapping to see the item. Not understanding the significance of the item, he asked, "Any note?"

Shaking her head solemnly, Anna responded. "Didn't need to be. It's from my father. It's a warning."

Jeffrey raised an eyebrow.

“Back off investigating Edmund and the Winslow family.”

“Have you tried contacting your father?” Jeffrey asked her, as he peered around the edges of the box and again examined the contents.

“To what end?” Anna was frustrated. She needed more information about Edmund and his motives.

Jeffrey shook his head, equally aggravated; Edmund was in a coma, and yet he was still causing trouble, or in this instance, he had someone making trouble for him. “What exactly is your father protecting? Surely, he has to understand that Edmund was unbalanced.”

Anna snorted. “That’s one word for it. I choose to believe ‘homicidal maniac’ fits the bill better.”

“Yes, I would agree on that. And a few other words.” At that, Jeffrey smiled up at Anna. Turning serious for another moment, he looked away and then back at her. “Have you shown this to Frank or Remy yet?”

Anna shook her head.

“Good.”

“What?” Anna was surprised. It had been her intention to inform her team of her father’s threat.

“Think about it for a second. What would your father expect you to do?”

“I don’t know what he expects from me these days. Probably keep it silent, at least for now, under the assumption that his threats still hold a lot of weight.

“Let him assume that. The more people know, the more information can be leaked. I would hazard a guess that he’s probably got eyes present locally, especially with Edmund being in a coma. Don’t take anything for granted.”

The first thing Christina heard as she entered the busy pediatrician’s office was the sound of a television playing children’s programming, followed by an occasional child calling out character names. A few parents had children on their laps, reading stories or playing with

toys. Pushing Clayton's stroller through the door, she greeted a couple of other parents as she went and signed in at the receptionist's desk.

As she and the baby waited to be called in, Clayton had begun to stir and cry, so she quietly turned and breastfed him then settled him against her shoulder; the occasional sneeze or hiccup breaking up his regular breathing pattern. A while later a nurse led her into the inside offices for Clayton to be weighed and to have his measurements taken. She asked her about his sleeping, eating patterns and general health information to find out if anything had changed from his first visit.

As the nurse looking after them was different from their first visit, Christina relayed the information about CK's cold symptoms and mentioned how worried Remy has been. The nurse asked her if Clayton was their first child, and she let her know it was a first child for her. Christina paused a moment and then continued, informing the other woman that Remy had a son, Max, that had been born prematurely, had gotten sick, and died. The nurse reassured her that Clayton's symptoms were normal enough, but let her know that if he developed a fever or if the symptoms continued to bring him right in again. She also let Christina know that the doctor would be checking him over when he'd finished with his last patient.

"Thank you," Christina said as she gathered Clayton's things.

"We're also going to give him some vaccinations today, but we'll do that near the end of the visit. Sometimes they have slight reactions that include some redness and a slightly elevated temperature. Give them some infant acetaminophen and if there's still a reaction, or if he's still exhibiting cold symptoms let us know right away. Generally it subsides within twenty-four hours or so." The nurse guided Christina and Clayton into an exam room. "Dr. Munroe will be in to see you shortly."

"Thank you." Christina sat and waited quietly until the doctor appeared.

Most of the morning had been one meeting after the other for Olivia, though perhaps the longest was her meeting with Greg and reviewing the upcoming conferences that had been booked. In the midst of sorting out specific details, Olivia's stomach growled, which resulted in an amused grin from Greg and a glower from Olivia in his direction.

Almost as if on cue, a knock on her door sounded and a familiar head poked around it, causing Olivia's mood to brighten significantly. Greg grinned broadly, using Natalia's entrance as the perfect excuse to make his exit.

“I’ll email you all the details when I finalize them this afternoon, Ms. Spencer.”

Sending him a pointed look, she replied, “You do that, Greg,” and she watched him quickly shuffle out the door.

“Scaring poor Greg again?”

“Nah, I don’t think it works with him anymore. Maybe I should work on that.” Olivia grinned, raising an eyebrow at her partner. “We were just sorting out the Beacon’s conference schedule.” Olivia looked down and for the first time, she noticed a picnic basket in Natalia’s hand. Looking from the basket and then up to Natalia, Olivia raised an eyebrow. “Whatcha got?”

“Lunch.”

“Yes! Right on time.” Olivia went to take the basket from her partner, but Natalia held back. “What?”

“It’s a surprise,” Natalia teased.

Olivia mock pouted. “Oh, that’s no fun.”

“Uh huh,” Natalia said, not buying any of it, knowing Olivia loved her surprises, especially culinary ones.

“So, what did our illustrious chef let you get away with making this time?”

“You’ll see.” Natalia moved over to the table and pulled out a couple containers of food and some plates, and started dishing out some food for both of them. The heavenly scents of lemon and rosemary permeated the room and sent Olivia’s stomach growling even louder. Natalia giggled, and then kept on preparing their lunch setting. From the mini-bar, Natalia pulled a couple bottles of water, and placed them next to the glasses she procured from the small desk. “¡Buen provecho!”

The salmon and rice dish she had prepared was cooked to perfection and Natalia delighted in seeing the admiration on her partner’s face as she ate. In fact, it wasn’t until Olivia pointed at her with her fork that Natalia even attended to her own meal. Natalia blushed slightly at being caught staring at Olivia, and then dug into her own food as they spoke about their mornings.

“Has Leyla told you of her plans?” Olivia asked after finishing a bite.

“About her daycare center plans? A little.”

“She’s done a lot of work on that. Impressed me actually.” Olivia smiled. “Did you know she was going to be taking her state licensing exam?”

Natalia fidgeted slightly and then grinned. “She wanted it to be a surprise. She’d been studying for a while. When I asked her what for, she asked me not to say anything until she was ready.”

“You’ve been keeping something from me?” Olivia asked, smiling as she teased her partner.

“Sorry.” Natalia returned a smile. “Leyla said she wanted to have as much of her preparation work done before she went to you. I think she’s a bit intimidated by you.”

“Just a bit?” Olivia smirked. “I’m going to have to work on that. People need to be a lot intimidated by me. I am a business *mongrel* after all.”

Looking over at her partner, Natalia giggled. “So what do you think? About her wanting to open the day care here?”

“She’s young and ambitious. I admire that. I told her we’d work on the business plan tonight.” Wanting to talk about something else, Olivia remembered Natalia was going to talk with the chef about some positively sinful dessert that he wanted to add to their menu, and *that* was something that was right up her alley.

Putting their dishes aside to be taken back to the kitchen later, Olivia then moved to assist Natalia into a standing position, and she drew her close. “That was delightful. But I do remember you teasing me this morning about some dessert?” Olivia pressed kisses along Natalia’s jaw.

“Olivia.” Natalia all but moaned her response, as she elongated her neck to one side allowing the other woman to continue her rain of kisses. She pulled Olivia tighter to her and ran her hands up her partner’s back, and then moved back just far enough to capture Olivia’s lips with her own.

They continued trading kisses for sometime before Olivia pulled away, her eyes still in a haze of passion. They glinted as she smiled. “Dessert?”

Natalia swatted her partner’s arm and laughed.

With the music turned up in the living room so she could hear it over preparing supper, Blake hadn't heard the doorbell ring. It wasn't until Doris plunked down a bottle of wine on the kitchen counter, that she was aware of the other woman's presence.

"Ahhh!" Blake jumped back; the paring knife still in her hand.

Doris smiled but her immediate response was to quickly move back as well. "Whoa! Put the knife down. We don't need a hospital visit tonight."

"Sorry," Blake said as she put the knife back on the counter. Taking a deep breath, she looked back over at Doris. "Don't scare me like that again."

"No problem." Doris tried looking around the other woman to see what she'd been working on. "Can I help you get supper ready?"

"Nope," Blake said, smiling, before heading to the cupboard to pull down two wine glasses. "I'm almost done with the prep." She reached into the drawer for a corkscrew and handed it to Doris to open the wine bottle, and then she went back to chopping some of the bell peppers.

When Doris was quiet for a couple of minutes, Blake looked over at her curiously. "How did your meetings go this morning?"

"Dull and duller. More proposals and bylaws to review. And I've got another meeting with the governor on Friday." Doris looked down pensively and sighed. Quietly, she spoke. "I've been thinking of resigning as Mayor."

Startled by the other woman's quiet proclamation, Blake stopped cutting and turned towards Doris. "What? How?"

"I'm tired of the politics, of all the bullshit." Doris played absently with the stem of her glass, the red wine swirling slightly.

"Not to be blunt, but you were so gung-ho when you ran for mayor a few years ago."

"Things have changed. I've changed." Doris stood up and moved around the kitchen, pacing slightly. "I don't want to be that person anymore. I lost so many friends – people I thought I should be friends with, anyway. And I've hurt people and pushed so many away in the past few years...really for more years than I can count, because I was afraid of letting anyone get too close."

“And now?” Blake asked as she stopped the other woman, putting a hand on Doris’s forearm.

“Now, I’ve realized that I have friends, good friends that I care about, friends that I hurt. Remember that televised speech I gave last year about Emma’s ‘My Two Mommies’ presentation? I may not have said who it was, but it was inferred enough, and it hurt two people who’ve become very dear to me.”

Blake nodded. “Olivia and Natalia.” Looking up her friend, she sighed and drew her lower lip in with her teeth. “This isn’t like you though, to give up now; especially when things are so crazy after the shootings. I haven’t ever known you to be a quitter.”

“I’m not. This whole shooting has got me all out of sorts and I’m not used to feeling that. I keep thinking what-ifs and it’s got me going around in circles.”

“That’s perfectly understandable.” Blake drew Doris into a hug. “And trust me, I’ve done my share of ‘what-ifs,’ and it never ends in anything good.”

Taking a deep breath, Doris exhaled and relaxed into the hug for several moments. Stepping back she rubbed a hand over her face and then ruffled her fingers through her hair. “I know. I just need to get myself together.”

“Why not focus on what you can do? The police have been working non-stop on investigating Edmund’s case, right? So let them focus on that. Maybe you could work with the hospital to create a memorial scholarship in honor of those that died or work on creating something positive for the town. People won’t soon forget the tragedy, but people will remember it a little better if something good came out of it.”

“You know, you’re good at this,” Doris smiled as she looked at Blake.

Blake shrugged a little shyly.

“No, you are. I was ready to give up, and as you so rightly put it, that’s not me.” Doris stopped for a moment, tilting her head to the side as she thought about something. “You know, you’ve been doing that a lot lately.”

“What?”

“Helping me.” Doris wasn’t completely sure what was developing in their relationship, but she knew that having a friend push you down out of the line of fire to keep you safe generally wasn’t part of any friendship she’d ever been involved with before. *There’ve been people wanting to push me into the line of fire sometimes.* The other woman seemed to be

blatantly flirting with her sometimes and then other times she wasn't sure what was going on. Having recently come out of a relationship that started quickly with Anna and then burned out almost as quickly, she was reticent about starting another relationship. And yet, the kiss that Blake had given her during the ball game a couple months ago still frequently came to mind.

"Thanks." In an attempt to change the subject, Blake picked up her glass of wine and took a long drink. "Now that that's settled, since being mayor isn't a full time job, what else have you been thinking of doing?"

"I'd like to focus on my legal career."

"In the district attorney's office?" Blake asked curiously.

"God, no. I think I might actually like to win for a change," Doris said laughingly. "It's rather embarrassing, but I lost more cases than I ever won."

Recalling newspaper reports of the various cases that got a mistrial or hung jury over the years, Blake nodded. "That's true."

"Hey, it's not my fault the police sent cases my way that were incomplete or had technicalities because evidence was compromised, incomplete or lost." Doris smiled wryly. "I'm good. But I'm not a miracle worker."

Blake chuckled as she turned and picked up Doris's glass and handed it over to her. She took a sip of her own, before placing it back on the counter as she turned to finish preparing supper. She didn't cook very much; there were benefits to working in a restaurant, but on special occasions she enjoyed cooking for friends. Tossing the vegetables onto the skillet she lightly sautéed them, seasoning them as she went. She turned slightly, leaning her hip against the oven.

"What kind of law do you like to work with?"

"I like being in the courtroom. It kind of feeds my ego at times. Ideally, I'd like to be able to choose the clients I will work for."

"Do you want your own practice or would you rather work in a partnership?"

"With the right people, I could work in a partnership. It takes the pressure off a single individual to bring in all the cases and to have an investigative team working for us." Doris paused, thinking it over in her head, mulling over possibilities. "I've got an idea. I need to speak to the individuals in question and see if it would work."

“Any clues?” Blake asked curiously, and she turned back, stirring the vegetables around, so they wouldn’t burn.

Doris grinned. “Not yet. I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Please?”

“Uh huh.” Doris wasn’t giving an inch.

“Remember I am cooking for you,” Blake teased.

“And I brought the wine,” Doris grinned as she held up her glass. She noted Blake’s pout and shook her head. “I promise I’ll tell you first after I’ve talked with potential partners.”

Realizing she wasn’t going to get any further information out of the other woman, Blake turned her attention back to the stove. “Fine then.” She added the already cooked chicken to the skillet and mixed it in with the vegetables for a few moments before checking the steamed rice on the back burner. Satisfied that all was cooked, she asked Doris to get down a couple plates from the cabinet and then served their meals. She called Clarissa down from her room to join them for supper, and they chatted for a while about what the girl was doing in school and about her friends.

It wasn’t until Clarissa mentioned that she thought Emma was finding it hard to concentrate in class, and that she’d been keeping more to herself, that Doris’s attention was piqued. She knew that Olivia’s daughter was more adaptable than a lot of children, with all she’d had to go through in the past few years, and particularly over the past few months. For the girl to be so withdrawn was setting off alarm bells in Doris’s head. The shootings at the wedding had affected each person differently; she had occasionally woken up with nightmares of being shot and injured and wondering what she would tell Ashlee. It was one thing when you hear about shootings in the news or paper that happen to someone else, but this happened in Springfield, and to people she cared about. She was determined that at her next meeting with the Governor she was to going to push for harder sentences for weapons-related offenses.

Shaking her head out of her mental meanderings, she looked over at Blake and with an unspoken agreement between the two she promised she would look in on their friends. After supper, Clarissa left to return to her room to finish her homework. For the rest of the evening they talked about a myriad of things, and enjoyed each other’s company.

Company was still busy after the supper rush. The Indian summer temperatures lingered, and folks had gathered for a late meal and dessert. So when the remaining customers had mostly trickled out of the restaurant, Buzz, Frank and Lynn had finally breathed out a sigh of relief. Frank was busy drying glasses at the bar and replacing them when the chime above the door rang and Lillian entered.

Lillian headed over to give Buzz a kiss and then sat down on one of the stools at the bar. "You look as tired as I feel," she said to Buzz.

"Busy evening. How was work?"

"Long. Nothing out of the ordinary for most of the shift. But there was a memorial service in the hospital chapel this afternoon for those killed at Rick's wedding." Lillian sighed as she remembered some of her friends that had died, and some from the hospital board. She'd missed the wedding as she hadn't been feeling well, and now she had mixed feelings; she would have liked to have been there for their friends, but she knew it could well have been her or Buzz that had been injured or worse.

When she'd learned that Holly and Ed hadn't been able to make his son's wedding, she breathed a sigh of relief; not that she wanted them to miss out on the otherwise happy occasion, but they also could have been injured or killed during the shooting spree. Ed had been a long time close friend, and at one point, much more. She hated the fact that his wife and her friend, Maureen, had died shortly after her affair with Ed, and she'd blamed herself for that for so many years. Although last year she'd made peace with herself while visiting Maureen's grave, she knew she would have a much harder time adjusting to losing Ed after all these years. She made a note to herself to send a message to Ed when she got home.

Noting his wife's sorrowful expression, Buzz came around the bar and pulled Lillian into a comforting hug.

The rest of the evening passed quietly as they tidied up the restaurant and prepared it for the morning's rush, and then they each left for home, Frank locking up behind everyone.

The mostly darkened storage room for cold case file boxes was illuminated by a single light down one aisle, as Eleni stood on a rolling ladder retrieving a particular box. A name had come up in one of the files she and Anna had been checking out earlier, and she'd jotted down the name. As she'd been waiting for a report to finish compiling on her computer, she'd decided to come down to get the files. So engrossed in her task, she hadn't heard the intruder in the room until it was almost too late.

ACT 3

“Na par i eychi!” Eleni yelled, barely holding on with one hand on the box and the other white knuckle grasping the side of the ladder.

“I don’t know what that meant, but it didn’t sound very good,” Anna responded sheepishly. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Can I help?”

Eleni quickly handed her the case file box and climbed down the ladder. “What are you doing down here anyway?” she asked curiously.

“Looking for you. Remy said he saw you come down here. I got to thinking about what we were talking about earlier. I took a look through the computer for cases that had similar links, if the same names popped up, connections with the detectives involved.”

“Make any headway?” Eleni asked as she turned and retrieved the box from the detective’s arms. They headed out of the storage room and back up to the squad room.

“I’m not sure, but Detective Gus Aitoro’s name comes up a few times. The name doesn’t ring a bell. Also Harley and Marina Cooper’s names, and an A.C. Mallet.” She stopped for a minute and realized the relationship Eleni had to two of those she mentioned. “Sorry, this must be hard for you.”

“I guess. I haven’t been here for many years, and my relationship with Marina was strained even before I left. I thought she had only gone into police work just to please Frank. And Harley’s Harley, she kind of did her own thing.” Eleni recalled not particularly liking her sister-in-law and at one point set it up to look like the other woman had stolen money from Buzz. “Mallet was married to my daughter for a while.”

From the other woman’s flat tone, Anna tried to determine what Eleni’s perspective on that was. She shook her head. “Wow. Nepotism at its best.”

Eleni dropped the box on the large table in the conference room and began digging file folders out, before she sorted them. Picking one of the folders up, and she flipped through it searching for some information.

“What are you looking for?”

“I ran a search this morning after we talked. Something didn’t seem right. Mostly it’s just small time drug stuff, not usually sufficient to stick out. The police raids recovered

packages of drugs that were smaller than typically used to traffic, but yet still more than one might have for recreational use. The amounts of drugs noted in the police reports differ from what's actually accounted for in evidence logs."

"So, someone within the department was helping themselves to some of the drugs." Anna picked up a file and sifted through it. "Do you think it might have been Desilva?"

"It seems almost too obvious, but it's a place to start. Something tells me it goes beyond that." Eleni put down the folder onto the desk suddenly, and smiled. "If we're going to be working on this all evening, I need some caffeine. And some food. Interested?"

"I had something to eat a little while ago, but I'm good for a caffeine boost," Anna said. The two women walked into the squad room. "Wish we could just speak with the detectives involved."

"Who do you need to talk with?" Remy asked them, having picked up on the last of their conversation.

Anna looked up at the question. "A.C. Mallet and Gus Aitoro."

"Last I heard, Mallet was in Europe on Agency business." He looked down. "As for Detective Aitoro, that won't be possible. He died a few years ago."

"What happened?" Anna asked, as she finished filling her mug from the coffee pot.

"He was trying to get to the hospital to help Olivia when she was sick, and he was hit by a car. He died not long after."

It took a few minutes and Anna's head quickly turned around. "Wait a minute. This was the same Gus whose heart ended up saving Olivia's life? Natalia Rivera's husband that Olivia was going after?" She'd gotten a little bit of information on some of Olivia's recent romantic entanglements from Doris when they were dating, and some other tidbits from Jeffrey, but embarrassingly – at least for herself – she hadn't put the two together.

"The one and the same." Remy nodded, and then curiously looked at the two women. "Why did you want to talk with him, if I might ask?"

"His name had come up on some things we were checking out," Eleni responded.

Thinking for a moment, the crime scene investigator mentally noted that none of the detectives who'd filed the original reports were currently with the department and she sighed. That could make things much easier in some respects, in that their investigations

didn't need to be clandestine. However, there was an inherent wariness when cops were investigating other cops. The fact that one of the people they wanted to talk with was dead, two more were out of the country, and one was the estranged daughter of one of the investigators, meant that getting the answers they needed was going to be a challenge.

"Can I help with anything?" the younger man asked eagerly.

Anna paused a moment, wondering how much she should involve others at the moment. At the moment it was her project. Or rather, it was a joint investigation between herself and Eleni, after they started uncovering police reports surrounding the Edmund Winslow case when he had reappeared in Springfield more than a year and a half ago that had been misfiled, incomplete, or lacking sufficient evidence. It had raised red flags for both of them, and Anna was surprised it hadn't done so for Frank Cooper. That said, it would be helpful to have someone she had started to trust, and someone who had a better local knowledge of the community. The younger man had impressed her when they were investigating Edmund and in retrieving Jeffrey, Jonathan, Olivia and Reva from capture.

"I'll get back to you on that. Thank you," Anna told him.

When Josh Lewis arrived at the farmhouse, he knocked on the kitchen door, and when there was no response, he knocked harder. The lights were on and he knew they were expecting him, so he pulled out his cell and quickly typed out a message.

JLewis 6:30pm: Hope you're doing something fun that has kept you from answering the door.

It only took a moment to get a response, but it wasn't in the form of a text message. Instead the door opened to Olivia's amused grin. "I was. You interrupted."

When Josh looked at his ex, and on the scene in the kitchen, he laughed. On her shirt and neck was a splattering of squished green vegetables that from its placement and dispersion could have only come from the messy, outstretched hand of the growing infant in her highchair. Once he regained his composure, he spoke. "Oh, I remember those days."

"Yeah, Sweet Pea seems to think her broccoli looks better on me than in her." Olivia shook her head and moved so Josh could enter. She looked over at the sink where Natalia was standing. She could tell from the expression on the other woman's face that Natalia was trying to hide a smirk at the situation as she worked at making the Caesar salad for their supper.

"Hi, Natalia. How are you?"

“Not bad.” And that was true, at least on the surface. Underneath, she was still fighting the guilt. Not the guilt that she figured most people thought she should have – shooting at another person, even if she didn’t take a life, but the guilt for not feeling as bad as she thought she should. Natalia was protecting her family. Normally she abhorred violence of any kind; she tried to protect Emma from violence in television, movies and video games as much as she could. She also recalled talking Olivia down from wanting to go after Phillip with that same gun when he returned to Springfield the previous year, so it surprised no one more than herself that she had picked up Olivia’s gun during the rampage at Rick and Mindy’s wedding and wanted to kill Edmund if it meant keeping her family safe. That she hadn’t actually hit him was something she’d been warring with herself; what did it all mean?

Picking up on the tension in her partner’s posture and expression, Olivia positioned herself beside her and placed a hand on Natalia’s lower back, rubbing slow circles onto the skin. Feeling some of the tension ease, she looked over at Josh, who’d been looking at them. In an effort to change the direction of the mood of the room, she turned and retrieved some glasses from the cupboard. “Can I offer you some wine or something else to drink?”

“Some red wine would be nice,” Josh said with a smile. He realized that if the two women needed someone to talk to, they’d let him know, but for now, he’d let them take the lead.

“Great.” Olivia poured them each a glass of red wine, and a glass of white wine for Natalia, knowing her partner’s preference, then she picked out the plates and cutlery for their supper. After making those preparations, she moved over to Natalia again. “I’m going to head upstairs for a minute to change shirts and clean up from Francesca’s mess. I’ll get Emma to come down.” Pressing a kiss to Natalia’s temple she moved out of the kitchen.

Natalia watched her go, and then moved to clean her youngest daughter’s hands and face, and then she unfastened the tray from the baby’s chair. Unclipping the straps, she picked Francesca up in her arms and smilingly kissed her. Turning to face Josh, she spoke up. “Olivia tells me the school project is going very well.”

“We’re ahead of schedule, so it’s looking promising. With Jonathan and Shayne taking on more responsibility since Billy’s heart attack, it’s working out very well. Bill has also taken on more of the contract management.” Josh smiled at her holding her daughter. “How are the girls?”

“Growing like crazy. Francesca sometimes seems to be growing an inch almost every other day.” Natalia smiled wistfully. “I missed so much of this with Rafe – just enjoying being with family – because when I wasn’t working so hard, I was so exhausted. I did my best for him, as much as I could as a teenager. I’m so happy to have Olivia and Emma with me this time. I dreamed of this kind of family when I was younger.” At Josh’s raised eyebrow, Natalia smiled

and added, "Okay, so maybe not specifically this kind of family, but I can't imagine now what I would do without them." Shaking her head, and then keeping it bowed, Natalia continued softly. "I almost did lose them forever."

Thinking she was referring to the time she'd spent away last year, he placed a finger under her chin, raising her face to meet his. Josh looked directly at the younger woman. "Natalia, she's here. She's the happiest I've ever seen her, and that's saying a lot. Once upon a time I thought I could have done that, but what we had can never be truly compared to what you two have."

Lost in her own thoughts, she flatly spoke. "He started shooting at people. I saw people drop, blood. Everyone was running." She pulled Francesca tighter against her chest, not taking notice as the baby squirmed. "I saw her gun on the grass and I grabbed it."

Olivia stopped as she neared the kitchen entrance. She heard her partner's voice and she felt her heart breaking. They'd been talking a little about what had happened at the wedding, particularly as they'd both been hit with nightmares.

"All I wanted to do was protect my family," Natalia continued. "If it meant shooting him, then that's what I had to do." The tears were falling down her face. "Does that make me a bad person?"



Stepping into the kitchen and easing her partner's arms from around Francesca, Olivia lifted the young girl out of Natalia's arms and placed her in Josh's arms. Then she wrapped her arms around Natalia. "No, querida. That does not make you a bad person. It makes you human." Olivia placed a kiss on her partner's hair and then rested her head against Natalia's, tears rolling down her own cheeks.

Neither of them noticed when Josh moved into the living room, allowing the two women some privacy. Moving over to the couch, he grabbed one of Francesca's soft books and began to read to her, his low tone of voice lulling her into a state of drowsiness. He had just laid her into her playpen when Emma started to come down the stairs. Looking up at her quickly, he placed a finger to his mouth, indicating to the older girl to be quiet coming down the rest of the way.

Emma smiled as she noticed the visitor. With a lowered exclamation, she called out, "Uncle Josh!" Running over, she gave the man a hug, and then she paused, looking at him curiously then looked around the room. "Where's Mom and Ma?"

"In the kitchen." As the girl moved to head in that direction, Josh stopped her. "Em, give them a minute or two." He smiled at Emma. "Tell me what you're doing in school. What grade are you in now?" He looked over at Francesca, seeing her quietly batting at stuffed toys, and then back up at Emma.

"Grade five!" Emma grinned. "We're learning about the stars in science class. Did you know that there're new planets being found?" Emma asked him excitedly. "We got to see pictures from the telescopes."

Josh smiled at her exuberance. "You know, I think I might have a telescope in storage that I used to have when Shayne was young." He'd check with Reva to see if it was in storage out at the house. "Without all the lights out here, I bet it would be great to see the stars at night."

"Really?"

"I'll let your moms know when I find it and then I can arrange to drop it off."

"That's so cool!" Emma was positively bouncing, wanting to go in and tell her mothers the news.

Josh looked over Emma's shoulder to see Olivia appear around the door frame from the kitchen and saw the grateful expression on her face. Leaning towards Emma, he grinned conspiratorially and whispered into her ear. "I think you can go tell them now."

Emma was up in a flash and darted towards the kitchen, running into her mother in the process.

“Whoa, Jellybean. What’s the rush?” Olivia smiled down at her daughter.

“Uncle Josh says he has a telescope that Shayne played with, and now he said he’s going to bring it out for me to use.”

At Emma’s quickly spoken sentence, Olivia laughed gently, as she gave her a hug. Looking up at her ex, Olivia briefly closed her eyes, and mouthed the words, “Thank you.” She pulled back from the hug and looked at her daughter. “Hey, Bean? Supper’s ready. Why don’t you go wash your hands and then see if Natalia needs any help?”

“Okay, Mom,” Emma said, still very excited by the possibility of getting to see some stars closer. She quickly disappeared up the steps to the bathroom.

Josh stood from his seated position in one of the chairs and nodded. “You’re welcome. Anything I can do to help.”

“Anything?” Olivia asked with a smirk.

“Why do I get the feeling that this is something I’m going to regret?”

“Would I do that?” Olivia responded coyly. “Okay, yes, I would. Or at least I have done.” She pursed her lips together. “I have a favor to ask of you. Actually, two, but one I’ll ask now and one Natalia and I want to ask you about.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“I hope so. You remember Natalia’s sister, Leyla?”

“Yes, she came from Chicago not long after you returned from Natalia’s grandmother’s funeral.”

Olivia nodded her head. “Well, she’s got an idea to open a day care center at the Beacon. She gave me some idea of what she’s hoping to do, and we’re going to be talking about it more this evening when she comes back. What I’d like you to do is convert one of the old board rooms into a space for the center. Once I get some more details on her requirements, I’ll let you know.”

“Sure, I can do that. Right now we’re ahead with the school building project, so I can get Shayne to take a look at the space.”

“Thanks, a lot.” An amused, teasing grin crossed her face. “Speaking of Shayne, and Henry, how’s it being a grandfather?”

“Just fine, Ms. Spencer,” he responded, matching her grin. “With Henry and Colin being so close in age, it’s great, in that they’re playing together. It’s kind of odd, but what’s life in Springfield without a bit of oddness?” Though he and Reva hadn’t been keeping Jeffrey from seeing Colin, Josh found it occasionally difficult stepping in, in a parental role to the boy, when he wasn’t his son. Defining his own role in Colin’s life, as essentially a step-father, was a situation he’d rarely found himself in.

Emma ran down the stairs just as Natalia called through to the living room that supper was ready. They all got seated, said grace, and then tucked into their meals, enjoying the conversation. Once most of it was eaten, Olivia looked over at Natalia and silently asked her if she wanted them to ask Josh their favor. She got a nod in response, and putting her cutlery down she reached over and clasped Natalia’s hand again.

“Remember that other favor I mentioned?” Olivia asked. “Natalia and I were wondering if you would preside over our wedding ceremony. It would mean a great deal to us.”

Josh smiled brightly. “It would be my honor.” He noticed both women breathe a sigh of relief. “When were you looking at having the ceremony?”

“New Year’s Eve,” Natalia said, grinning happily.

Josh smiled. “Great time. New year, new beginnings.”

They returned to finishing off their plates of lasagna, and were preparing to get some ice cream for dessert, when Emma spoke up.

“So, Uncle Josh, when can you find the telescope?” Emma grinned as the adults around her laughed at her one track mind once she got focused on something.

Ava was just finishing her supper at Company when Remy and Christina arrived with Clayton. She briefly looked up at them and returned to her meal. Though she wouldn’t admit it to many, probably only to her mother, but seeing Remy with his son brought out a jealousy since she no longer had that with their son, Max. She had loved Remy, but when their son was born and then soon after died, she couldn’t deal with it all and needed to go away to get better. When she’d returned the previous year for Jeffrey’s ‘memorial’ service, she had a chance to talk with Remy and make peace with him and with losing Max at the infant’s gravesite.

Now though, seeing him all happy with his new son, she felt jealous. She finished her dinner and was about to go pay for her meal, when she looked up and saw Remy standing at the side of her table. "Hi," she said quietly.

Seeing that his presence with the baby and Christina was making Ava uneasy, Remy spoke. "If it's going to make you uncomfortable, we can go somewhere else."

"No. No, don't do that. I'm finished," Ava said quickly, not wanting to get too attached. "You stay and have your supper. I need to head out to Mom's anyway." Ava stood and started past the stroller, but something in her made her turn, and she looked down at the baby. Her heart caught in her throat; she'd only seen Max so briefly, and it had been in a cloud of grief and depression, but Clayton looked so much like Max it took her breath away. "He's beautiful, Remy."

Remy looked down briefly, smiling at his son. Quietly, he spoke. "He's been sick. A lot. And it scares me. Christina took him to the doctor this morning and the doctor said it's just a little cold." He paused and then leaned down to pick Clayton up. "I go into his room at night, just to make sure I can hear him breathing and just watch him."

Ava nodded, not quite sure what to say.

Remy paused and then looked over to where Christina was finishing talking with Lynn at the counter, before turning back to Ava, smiling. "Well, I better go. We just came in to grab some supper."

"Take care, Remy. Look after him." When he left, Ava sighed as she poked her fork around her mostly empty plate. So lost in her own meanderings, she hadn't noticed the person standing next to her table until they sat opposite her.

"What's up?" Leyla asked.

Shaking her head, Ava responded. "What?"

"You just seemed out of it. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Just old memories." Ava shrugged, and then looked up at Leyla. "What can I do for you?"

"You've worked for your mom in the hotel industry, off and on for the past few years, right?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

“I was talking with her this morning about opening up a daycare at the Beacon,” Leyla said and smiled. “Natalia had mentioned it a few months ago about the possibility, so I decided to do something about it.”

Ava raised her eyebrows in much the same manner as her mother. “Mom’s not easy to work for. She expects people to always do their best. And if you’re not, she’ll let you know.”

“I know that. I’ve done my homework,” Leyla grinned. It had been an interesting afternoon tracking down information she needed to get her plan ready, and part of that had been speaking with employees at the Beacon. They had been reticent at first, but upon learning that she was Natalia’s sister, they were more forthcoming.

“That’s good. Not that I don’t mind you stopping by, but did you need something from me?”

“I’ve got a business plan drawn up, and I was wondering if you can take a look at it before I bring it out to Olivia later this evening.”

Looking for something to distract her from her thoughts, Ava held out her hand for the paperwork. “Hand it over.”

The next twenty minutes passed as the two women reviewed the business plan. Ava made notes and suggestions that would help.

Leyla smiled at the other woman as she put the papers back in her folder. “You’re good at this.”

“Learned from the best.” Ava looked over at Leyla. “Listen, did you need a ride out to the farmhouse?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, that would be great. I came into town this morning with Natalia.”

“If you’re ready, we can head out now. I’ve just got to go pay for this,” Ava noted, pointing to her near-empty plate.

After Francesca had kept her and Olivia amused for much of the evening, Natalia finally bathed, changed and put the infant into her crib for the night. Walking down the hall, she poked her head into Emma’s room, where the girl was reading one of her books on her bed.

“Hey, Jellybean? Have you got your homework all finished?” When Emma just nodded, it set off alarms in Natalia’s head. The girl’s earlier exuberance had faded. She moved over to sit

on the bed with her, and she brushed a few locks from Emma's forehead. "Emma, sweetie, you know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

Emma bit down on her lower lip lightly before looking back up at Natalia. "Ma, is the bad man going to hurt us again?" Her lip quivered as tears brimmed brightly in her eyes, threatening to spill over onto her cheeks.

"Oh, honey, I don't think so. He's in the hospital and he's hurt very badly. Frank has police keeping guard on him all the time."

"I'm scared."

Natalia felt her heart breaking at her daughter's quiet admission, and she enveloped her into a hug. "I know, baby. He scared me, too." She pressed a kiss onto the girl's head. "So much. But you know your Mom and me; we're going to protect you and your sisters and Rafe as best we can." She felt Emma's head nod as the girl burrowed closer.

Shadow whimpered from the floor at her mistress's sadness and jumped up onto the bed, turning and resting her snout on Emma's thigh.

Normally she and Olivia tried to discourage the dog from getting up on the bed, but in this instance, Natalia let it go, as she knew that the dog was sensitive to Emma's emotions, and Emma found comfort in that. Natalia sat back a moment and looked down at Emma's face, and she brushed the tear tracks from the girl's cheeks. "Emma, do you want to come downstairs with your mom and me for a while?"

Emma shook her head. "I'm just going to read for a little while longer."

Hesitant to leave her upset daughter, Natalia nodded at Emma's need to feel some independence. "Okay. We'll be downstairs if you need us, okay, sweetie?"

"Okay." Just as she felt Natalia stand, Emma wrapped her arms around her ma. Softly, she said, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Bean. So much." Natalia kissed Emma on the head. She stood and headed out of the room, taking a brief glance back as she saw Emma running her fingers through the ruff of Shadow's neck fur as the book lay open on her lap.

Venturing down the stairs, she heard the unmistakable voices of her sister and Ava talking with Olivia about the day care addition to the Beacon. She met a glance with her partner, and with a nod of her head, she indicated she was going into the kitchen.

Trying to think of something to do to occupy her time, she set about getting some coffee made up. Once done, she still found herself at odds, so she laid out the ingredients to make some cookies; it was comfortable and familiar, and didn't require much concentration. The sound of the mixer running had masked the arrival of another person in the room until Olivia was at her side, jolting her in surprise. Once she calmed her heart rate down, she turned the mixer off and turned to wrap Olivia in a tight hug.

After several moments, Olivia moved back slightly from the hug, but still remained in the embrace, and when she looked at her partner's face, she could see the sadness there. Softly, she pressed a kiss against Natalia's lips, and then wrapped her partner snugly against her.

"Olivia?"

"Yeeeeees?" Olivia responded.

Natalia paused, not sure how to broach the subject again, knowing how Olivia generally felt about medical personnel. Deciding she might as well just say it, she brushed a lock of hair from Olivia's face, in much the same way as she had done with Emma. "I think it might be beneficial to Emma to talk to someone, professionally I mean, about what happened with the attempted kidnapping and the shooting. Probably wouldn't be bad for both of us either."

"I know. Natalia,--"

"I know. But she's been more withdrawn lately. I think she doesn't want to show us just how much she's hurting." Natalia sighed, wondering if she was making any progress. "Maybe if she talks to someone like Remy's mom that she might find it easier. Sometimes it's easier to tell someone you don't know as well." Natalia's voice trailed off, knowing that her last statement could apply to her own state of mind as well. "Maybe Dr. Boudreau could help her, and us, with some coping skills to deal with the fear and guilt."

"You know I don't do well with doctors. And I'm a lousy patient." Olivia sighed.

Though she hadn't meant to, Natalia snorted at the understatement.

"Hey!"

"Sorry," Natalia said gently, smiling all the same.

Olivia looked down at the floor as she started to speak. "I know I don't have the best coping skills. In the past it meant getting drunk or getting laid." She looked up at Natalia

and winced at her own wording, but her partner's face showed understanding. "In the long term it never worked, it just temporarily buried the feelings, and every once in a while they'd resurface...Usually when I'd done something stupid, and rather than talk about it, I ended up in the same cycle." Olivia grinned wryly. "And then you came into my life, and that set off a slightly different pattern of the cycle." She sighed, knowing Natalia was looking for an answer. "I'll think about it. Can I let you know tomorrow?"

Realizing that was probably the best response she was going to get at the moment, Natalia nodded and then rested her head on Olivia's shoulder. She heard Olivia sniff a couple times and pulled back to see a questioning look on her partner's face.

"What?" Natalia asked curiously.

"Are you making chocolate chip cookies?" Olivia looked over Natalia's shoulder at the mixing bowl and the bag of chips, and she grinned widely.

Laughing at her partner's expression, Natalia shook her head at Olivia's ability to focus on snacks at any chance. "Yes, I am."

"When will they be ready?" Olivia was getting excited, and despite having eaten a large supper not that long ago, her stomach growled, loudly. "Hear what you do to me?"

Natalia gave her a kiss and then playfully shoved her towards the door to the living room. "They'll be ready when they're ready."

"That's such a mom answer."

"And your point is what, my dear?"

Olivia stuck her tongue out and shrugged as she headed back into the living room with her daughter and sister-in-law.

Olivia was perched on the couch with one leg tucked underneath the other, as she leaned forward reading the business plan and the notes that had been made. She made a couple more notes on the proposal and then took off her glasses. "Okay, this looks good. Very sound and detailed. If you can review the corrections and draw up a final draft, I'll send it out to the board for approval."

Leyla sighed gratefully and smiled. "You won't regret this."

“You succeed at this and I won’t regret it.” Olivia smiled, and then turned to Ava. “Can you go up and ask Emma if she wants a couple of chocolate chip cookies before bed?”

“Can I get some, too?” Ava added cheekily.

“If you’re a good girl.”

“No promises.”

Ava headed up the stairs and wasn’t gone long before Olivia heard the quickened steps of Emma as she descended the staircase, followed by Shadow, and finally Ava.

Emma looked at her mother smiling hopefully. “There’s cookies?”

Olivia smiled. “Natalia’s making them. Do you want to go see if she needs any help?”

Emma nodded her head and took off into the kitchen.

“Ma? Mom said you were making cookies. Can I help?”

“Well, they’re almost done, sweetie. But if you can take Shadow out to do her business before bedtime, I’m sure they’ll be ready to take out of the oven when you get back.”

“Okay,” Emma hooked the lead onto Shadow’s collar and then pulled on her sneakers and her coat before taking the dog out.

A few minutes later, she and Shadow came back in. After hanging her coat back up, removing her shoes and taking off Shadow’s lead, Emma went over to the sink to wash her hands. When the timer on the oven went off, Natalia directed her to get the cooling racks out of the cupboard to lay them on the counter. Emma waited for her ma to take the cookies out and put the tray on top of the stove, and then she pulled over the little footstool.

“Can I put them onto the cooling racks?” she asked.

“Sure can. Careful though,” Natalia said as she handed her the spatula

With a practiced movement, Emma easily transferred the cookies onto the racks and then put the spatula in the sink.

“Okay, it’s going to take a few minutes to cool. I’m just going to pour the coffee into the carafe. Can you get the cream and sugar for me and bring it into the living room?”

“Okay.” Emma brought out those items and came back. Natalia had poured her a glass of milk which she carried in to the living room. Her final task was to carry in a plate of cookies, and Natalia followed behind carrying the thermos and mugs.

They all enjoyed the drinks, the cookies, and talking and before long it was time for Ava to return to the Beacon, and everyone in the house headed upstairs. Olivia checked in on Francesca and smiled at the infant’s sleeping form, before checking to make sure Emma was in bed. Quietly she knocked on the door and entered when she heard her daughter’s voice tell her to come in. She smiled as it had been a recent mutual agreement between Natalia, Emma and herself to knock on bedroom doors before entering. She had explained to Emma that sometimes parents needed privacy in their bedrooms, and it was polite to knock and wait to receive an answer before entering. As Emma was now at the preteen age years, the girl asked if her moms could do the same for her when her door was closed, and Olivia and Natalia had agreed. But Olivia mentioned that if there was an emergency, they needed to be able to open the door without being asked in.

After a quick story and a kiss goodnight, Emma settled in and quickly fell asleep, and Olivia returned to her room and began to get ready for bed. She smiled as she noticed Natalia had already gotten tucked in and was reading a book. Slipping an old t-shirt and a pair of cotton pajama shorts on, Olivia climbed into bed and curled into Natalia.

“Mmmm. You feel so good,” Olivia murmured lightly.

Putting her book on her nightstand, Natalia turned into Olivia’s embrace and kissed her soundly before resting her head against Olivia’s shoulder. With the long day, it wasn’t long before the two of them fell off to sleep.

A piercing scream woke Natalia from her sleep and it disoriented her for a moment. Checking to make sure that it wasn’t Olivia, who had a tendency for nightmares that woke her abruptly, Natalia slipped out of bed and hauled on a robe as she headed down the hall. Poking her head into Francesca’s room to see if the scream had woken her youngest, Natalia noted the infant still slept soundly. A second cry out followed by half-murmured words came from Emma’s room. Opening the door, Natalia saw that the young girl was twisting about in the bed, the sheets tangled up in her limbs as she fought to get away from them.

“No, no. Stop! Don’t hurt her! You can’t hurt her!” Emma called out, panicking.

“Emma?” Natalia came closer, quietly, hoping that the girl would hear her voice amidst her nightmare.

“No! I won’t let you!”

Natalia sat down on the edge of the bed and attempted to brush a hand against Emma's cheek only to get pushed back.

"No! Stop. You won't get me. I have to protect her." Emma's voice was sounding more desperate as she spoke.

More firmly, Natalia called to her, "Emma. It's Natalia. You're safe here. No one's going to hurt you."

"He's going to hurt Sweet Pea. Have to protect her." Emma's lip quivered.

"No, Bean. He's not going to hurt you or your sisters." Deciding to take a tack that she often took with Olivia when her partner was in the throngs of a nightmare, Natalia went around the other side of the bed and gently pulled Emma against her. She rubbed her back and talked to her gently to reassure her, until the young girl's breathing evened out and she finally fell back into a more relaxed sleep. Natalia stayed with her a little while longer to make sure that the girl didn't slip back into the same nightmare before she gently detached Emma's arms from around her waist and slipped off the bed. Pressing a kiss to Emma's forehead, she whispered gently, "Sweet dreams, Jellybean. Love you."

When she returned to her own bed, she curled back in around Olivia, who shivered as the coolness of the room air hit her skin. She felt Olivia burrow into her embrace as Natalia pulled the duvet back over them.

The morning routine was thrown off as they'd all over slept the alarms. When Olivia finally stirred to her Blackberry ringing, she picked it up. "Hullo?" Olivia answered groggily.

"This is your friendly wake-up call, Olivia," Doris's voice chuckled through the phone.

Her brain still in a fog, Olivia asked, "Uh? What time is it?"

"Nine o'clock."

Quickly jerking herself into an upright position, Olivia panicked. "Oh shit! How did-?"

"I called your office and when there wasn't an answer, I called down to the desk. Greg said you hadn't come in yet."

Olivia looked down at a still sleeping Natalia and frowned. Usually Natalia was the early morning riser but the younger woman was still dead to the world. Hearing Doris's prodding

voice on the line she asked the other woman if they were supposed to be meeting for something that she'd forgotten about.

"No. I just thought I should tell you something that I thought you should hear from me first."

Curiosity getting the better of her, Olivia asked, "And what might that be, Madame Mayor?"

"Just that. I'm stepping down as Mayor."

The news completely taking her by surprise, Olivia blurted out, "What?"

"Not right now, I mean," Doris clarified, realizing her wording was off. "When my term is up next year, I won't be putting my name forward."

"No shit?" Olivia was curious what was going on with her friend. "Um, can I meet with you a bit later? I have to get us all moving and get Emma off to school before I get into the office."

"I have a meeting in a few minutes anyway with my deputy mayor, and then another meeting after that. How about we meet for lunch and I can fill you in?"

"Sure. That sounds good. Where?"

"Towers?"

"All right. See you then."

"Tell Natalia I said hello. Later."

Olivia disconnected the call and put her phone back on the bedside table and then reached over to Natalia, pressing a kiss onto her forehead. When that didn't stir the other woman, she kissed down her nose and onto her lips. Finally, Olivia got a response as she felt Natalia's arm reach around her neck as she deepened the kiss.

"Mmmm. Not that I don't want to continue this, but we need to get moving. We're late." Olivia pulled back from the kiss.

"Ugh, how late?" Natalia tried to burrow back into Olivia's arms.

"Nine o'clock late. Actually now 9:15. We overslept."

“Damnit!” Natalia called out as she quickly climbed out of bed, realizing that she hadn’t taken her robe off when she’d gotten in earlier after attending to Emma’s nightmare. “We need to go get Emma up and ready for school.” She moved in a rush around the room to get her things ready.

“Whoa, slow down, love. I’ll give the school a call and explain things and let them know Emma will be in as soon as we can.” Olivia pulled on her own robe and headed out of the room and down to her daughter’s room. Knocking on the door, there was no response. She knocked harder, and still receiving no answer she opened the door to find an empty bed. Panicking she headed downstairs, looking around the living room and into the kitchen where Leyla was sitting drinking some coffee and reading the newspaper.

“Um. Have you seen Emma?” Olivia asked, slightly frantic.

Looking up at her sister-in-law, she could almost feel the anxiety rolling off her. Smiling, she nodded. “Yeah. I just got back from taking her to school. She missed the bus, but I was able to get her there on time for classes.”

Olivia tilted her head back and took a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “Thank God!”

“She was going to wake you, but I was already awake and ready. Got her lunch all packed and took her over.”

“Thank you. I’ll go let Natalia know so she can calm down a little.”

“Oh, you mean like you?” Leyla grinned, teasing.

“Oh shut up.” Olivia took a second to smell the coffee Leyla had. “Please tell me there’s more coffee in the carafe?”

“Yep. There are a couple mugs on the counter,” Leyla said pointing her thumb in said direction.

“Good. Because I’d have to kill you otherwise.”

“Hah.” Leyla went back to her newspaper.

Olivia poured two cups of coffee and fixed them up the way she and Natalia liked them and brought them upstairs. Entering their room, she saw Natalia emerging from the bathroom, and she handed her partner her cup. “Emma’s at school. Leyla brought her over.”

“Oh, thank God.” Natalia breathed out before taking a sip of her coffee.

“That’s what I said.”

“Did you have meetings this morning?”

“No, just some stuff that I need to clear up in the office. I need to get some budgets approved.” Olivia took a sip. “Oh, I’m meeting with Doris for lunch. Apparently she’s decided she’s not going to run for mayor again when her term is up next year.”

“What? Why?” Natalia was puzzled at Doris’s intentions; she’d been under the impression that the other woman loved her work.

“She didn’t say much; just that she’d give me the details later.”

“Well, let me know.” She leaned over to kiss Olivia. “Now go get showered and dressed and I’ll see you downstairs.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mid-morning had come and gone and Doris blew out a frustrated sigh. She was on her third cup of coffee for the morning, and the caffeine was already making her a little jittery. She briefly considered switching to decaffeinated, but that hadn’t lasted long; the drawn-out meeting with her deputy mayor was tedious, but necessary. The ringing on her office phone caught her attention and she picked up the receiver.

“Yes, Brandon?” She asked her administrative assistant.

“There are two women here to see you: Beth Spaulding and Mel Boudreau.”

“Send them in. And can you bring up some fresh coffee.”

“All right, Madame Mayor.”

Doris took a deep breath as she awaited the women’s arrival and pursed her lips. Though it was getting easier to tell people that she was resigning, she was a little apprehensive about asking Mel and Beth to join her in a law partnership. Well, Beth in particular, since their history, at least where Alan Spaulding had been concerned, was adversarial. She only hoped that enough time had passed to allow the other woman to see this potential venture as moving forward than remaining in the past. She removed her soft blue blazer and folded it over the back of her chair and smiled as Beth and Mel entered.

“Now, I know you’re probably curious as hell as to why I called you here.”

Beth chuckled. “Well, that would be an understatement.” She looked over and saw a matching expression on Mel’s face.

Doris directed the two of them to sit down and then sat back against her desk, preferring that than to her chair for this meeting, not wanting to put any indication of any barriers between them. “I’ve decided when my term of office is up next year I won’t run again.

“Excuse me?” Beth asked, baffled at the other woman’s statement.

“Suffice to say, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. And I’ve changed over the past couple years.” Doris sighed, unsure of their response.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Mel asked her gently, understanding the need to change career directions.

“I’m sure. I’ve thought about this for a while. Right now, there’s seven people who know; both of you, my deputy, my admin assistant, Olivia and Natalia, and Blake.” Taking a deep breath, Doris pressed on. “The reason I’ve asked you here is that I am interested in starting a law firm, and I would like both of you to consider being my partners.”

There was a stunned silence that hung in the air as Beth and Mel absorbed the announcement, and as Doris realized that she’d made said statement. The silence was interrupted by a knock on the door as the administrative assistant brought the coffee, along with some cream and sugar. They each doctored their drinks to their taste and sat back in their places.

“I know it’s a huge thing to ask and not a light undertaking. Mel, I know you’ve been an associate with legal aid in addition to your medical practice. So, however much you want to put into the firm is up to you. We can work that out afterwards if you’re interested.”

“It certainly sounds promising,” Mel nodded. “Can I think it over?”

“Yes. Like I said, it’s a big undertaking.”

“I want to talk this over with my family, if you don’t mind?” Mel asked.

“Go ahead.” Biting down on her lip slightly she turned to Beth, and then she smiled. “I know we haven’t always been on the best of terms, and that’s just covering the surface, but I’m offering a clean slate here. New chances and new opportunities.” Doris paused a moment.

“And I’m quite certain that you probably have no desire to go to work for Alan’s former attorneys.”

“Ya think?” Beth smiled in response. “Not saying that they haven’t offered, they have, but I don’t think that’s the kind of law I want to be practicing.”

“What focus did you like in law school?” Doris asked curiously.

“Child protection and advocating for minors; it struck a chord with me.”

“Interesting.” Doris smiled. “That’s good. Look talk with your family if you need to. New beginnings are a big change. But I think if we go ahead with this firm, it will be something that can make positive changes.”

“Wow. This is something I didn’t really expect from you,” Beth commented softly. “What prompted the change?”

Doris paused, debating on how much to tell, but she realized that if they were all going to be partners in this firm, she needed to tell them some things. “I started thinking I needed something different when I realized that I was hurting people unintentionally, and really I was only hurting myself by not being true to who I am.” Taking a deep breath, Doris continued. “I really didn’t like myself for a long while, and it showed in my relationships with others, including with my daughter Ashlee and close friends.”

Both women nodded, understanding the situation.

“So, now I’m looking at starting over, doing something I’m proud of.” Doris smiled. “If you’ve got any questions, don’t hesitate to give me a call or send me an email.”

“Thank you, Doris.” Mel stood and held out her hand which was met by a strong handshake. “I’ll let you know tomorrow what my decision is.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Thank you, as well,” Beth added. She smiled as she added, “You were the one to help me relax before I took the bar exam.”

“Well, you were also trying to get married at the same time. I think both things would have been nerve-racking, just on their own.” Doris chuckled. “But you passed, and from what I’ve heard, quite highly, so a belated congratulations.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you know tomorrow.” Beth stood and joined Mel at the door. “Have a good day.”

“You, too. Bye.”

Once Doris closed the door to her office, she leaned against the back of it and breathed out a sigh of relief; the meeting had gone better than she had anticipated. Next on her list of things to do was to meet with Olivia for lunch. Shaking her head at the potential comments she’d get from one of her best friends, she laughed. Well, she thought to herself, at least I have good friends now that I can tease with easily. And really, she needed to give a good teasing to Olivia for waking her up on a weekday.

ACT 4

The noise of the crowd during the lunch hour rush in Towers was something Olivia was rather familiar with as she approached the bar where Doris was perched on a stool.

“Have you been waiting long?” Olivia asked. She’d been delayed at her office and she’d cut it close to get there on time.

“About five minutes.” Doris turned to the Maitre’d and alerted him that she was ready. When he came over and escorted them to their table, she thanked him and turned back to her guest.

Olivia waited until their server had filled their glasses and given them some menus before she looked over at Doris. Curiously she asked, “So, what’s this about you deciding to step down from politics?”

“Next year. I’ve just decided not to run again.” Doris took a drink of her water.

“Any particular reason?”

“Just getting frustrated with the backstabbing and maneuvering inherent in the job. And pretending to be something I’m not.” Doris sighed. Olivia had become her best friend over the past year and a half. They’d known each other’s history; they’d both been guilty of those same manipulations. Being similar personality types, she hadn’t ever thought they could become friends, and yet here they were. “I almost decided to resign immediately.”

“What? And pull a Palin?” Olivia joked, but when she saw the sadness in her friend’s face, she apologized. “Sorry. What’s really going on, Doris? There’s more to it than that. I’ve never

seen you back down from a challenge or from hard times.” When Doris was silent for longer than a few moments, Olivia looked around and spotted their server and called him over. Looking at Doris, she asked her if she knew what she wanted to order, and got a quiet answer. When he arrived at the table, she gave him their orders and gave him her credit card.

“What? Olivia, what are you doing?” Doris looked startled.

Olivia placed her hand on Doris’s hand. “Getting our lunch to go. Towers isn’t the place you want to be talking about this. Too many ears.”

“Where are we going?”

“My office. Closed doors.” Olivia picked up her purse. “Come on, we’ll wait up by the bar for lunch.”

In the intervening time, they spoke about nothing in particular, each seeing that the need for the conversation they had started was weighing on them, so when their packages of food arrived they quickly left.

Once in Olivia’s office, they pulled out their lunches and set things up. Opening her door, Olivia called Keira over. “I’m in a meeting. No interruptions unless it’s Natalia, okay?”

“Got it, Ms. Spencer.”

Before the door had a chance to close, Doris spoke. “Thank you.”

“Not a problem. I know Towers. You don’t say anything there you don’t want to read in the gossip rags.” She looked over at her friend and was concerned by her tired state. “You’ve been really quiet.”

“I’ve got a lot on my mind.” Doris rubbed a hand across her forehead.

Sensing the other woman was holding back, she responded, “That’s part of it.”

“Olivia,-”

“Doris, I’m trying to help. I can’t do that if I don’t know what’s going on.” Olivia let out a frustrated sigh.

After a moment’s silence, during which Doris focused on pushing her fork around her salad bowl, she quietly started to speak. “I have nightmares. About the shooting. All I see is

people I care about getting shot, dropping like flies, and I can't do anything. I'm trapped or something and when I look down and there's so much blood – mine, Blake's. Then I look up and I see Edmund holding the gun on Natalia." Her voice stops, choking on the words, and tears roll down her cheeks.

Olivia stopped her eating and stood, pulling Doris up into a hug. She nodded, understanding. She'd been having variations of the same dream, except in the worst of her dreams, Edmund has shot Natalia and she loses the love of her life, or he's shot any of their children. "I know."

Sniffing, Doris pulled out of the hug after a few moments and was grateful when Olivia held out a box of tissues. "Sorry about that."

"No need to apologize." Olivia looked down at her discarded meal, no longer having much appetite. She covered it and put it in the bag and placed it up on her desk. "So, you thought about resigning." She saw the other woman nod. "You know this is a really bad time for that?" Olivia asked gently.

"Yes," Doris spoke more firmly, as she looked over at her friend. "Which is why I'm not. Right now, anyway."

"What changed your mind?"

"Blake." At Olivia's questioning glance, Doris continued, "We talked last night. It helped me focus on things to do, and there's so much to be done. I want to check on the police investigation and see where that's going. I'm going to talk with Rick to see if the city can help fund a memorial scholarship in honor of those that died at the wedding. I couldn't stop the shootings, but I can do something to help now."

"That's a great idea."

"One of Blake's," Doris said, chagrined. "I've also got a meeting with the governor tomorrow to discuss a bill to tighten up punishments for violent crimes." She smiled. Thinking of positive goals was starting to improve her mood, but it didn't last long. "I've got something to tell you."



Olivia noticed the change in Doris's expression. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"No, most likely not." Doris looked up at her friend with sympathy. "When I was at Blake's last night, Clarissa mentioned a couple things about Emma that she's noticed in school. She said that Emma's been having a hard time concentrating in class, not getting her work done, and she's been keeping to herself when she's not in class."

Olivia felt her world collapsing in on her; Emma had been her shining light for so long, and to hear that her light was fading and withdrawing was breaking her heart. She'd been noticing little changes in her daughter, as Emma was not spending as much time with her and Natalia, but she'd put some of that down to changes in the girl's development. Her own troubled dreams and fears seemed to overshadow seeing that in her daughter, and for that, Olivia felt guilty.

Seeing her friend's agonized expression, Doris reached a hand over to cover Olivia's. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make things harder for you, but I thought you'd want to know."

Swallowing around the lump she felt in her throat, Olivia spoke quietly, "Thank you." As she sniffled, she rubbed her hand under her nose then took a deep breath. Looking down at herself and then over at Doris, she tried to lighten the mood. "Wow, we're a pair." Standing, she turned to her cabinet and pulled down a face cloth and towel for each of them. "There's a sink in the corner. You might want to freshen up your face before you leave."

"You're no shining diva, Spencer," Doris shot back with a chuckle.

Olivia stuck out her tongue and then grinned. Once Doris had finished, she cleaned her face from the tear-stained makeup and bloodshot eyes. "Next time, no bad news and we have burgers and fries at Company."

"You're on!" Doris smiled as she wrapped Olivia in a good-bye hug, and then she picked up her purse and left the office.

Olivia dropped down onto her chair, bending forward on her desk as she leaned on her elbows. She sighed knowing this news was going to be as hard on Natalia as it was on her.

The Springfield police station was busy when Eleni arrived that morning, and she tried to balance a couple cups of coffee in her hands when her cell phone rang. Putting the cups on the nearest desk, she pulled her cell out of her pocket and answered the call.

"Yes, Chief, I'm here. Give me a couple minutes to get the report from my office and I'll be in." Hitting the disconnect button, she blew out a frustrated sigh. "Damn it." Eleni looked around the office, and spotting Remy, she called over to him. "Hey, Remy! Have you seen Detective Li?"

"Yeah, she's in with Frank."

"Okay, thanks." Eleni scratched her chin for a moment as she was thinking of something, and then turned to head down the hall to her office. Arriving at her desk there was a folder on top with Edmund Winslow's name on it that she and Anna had been working on the previous evening. Picking up the file, she caught a sticky note attached to the top. *Dr Hastings called - Winslow's neurologist. Latest report on top of files.* Quickly flipping the top of the file over, Eleni glanced over the findings. Blood work was returning to normal parameters. A lung infection had developed. The PT levels measuring the time it takes for his blood to clot were leveling off with the blood thinners. She scanned the MRI and PET scan results. Swelling was down on his brain, and they were waiting on repeated brain function tests, some of which couldn't be done until he came out of the coma, if he ever did come out of the coma.

Remembering she was supposed to be in Frank's office, she tucked the file under her arm and picked up both cups of coffee, hoping the latter hadn't cooled down too badly. Trying to juggle the cups and the folder, she managed to knock on the Chief's office door, and was glad when it was quickly opened.

Thrusting a cup towards Anna, she kept hold of her own between a wrist and her chest. She took a look around the room, where Remy and Anna had taken seats, and Frank was sitting behind his desk.

“What’s the latest on Edmund?”

Eleni held up the report she’d been holding underneath her arm. “Still in a coma. His neurologist says his blood work and scans are coming back within normal range.”

“There’s nothing about that bastard that’s *normal*,” Remy said in disgust, which earned a look from Frank but the younger detective was sure his boss felt the same.

Anna had a contemplative look on her face. Looking back to make sure the door to the office was closed, she turned to face Eleni first and then Frank. “I wasn’t going to say anything about this until I was sure there were no other ears around. Only one other person knows about this, and it’s Jeffrey O’Neill.” She paused, trying to assure them of the gravity of the situation. Jeffrey had suggested that she not tell anyone yet of her father’s warning, but she’d learned to trust these people and she felt if their lives were going to be at risk, they had the right to know the source. “I had a threatening message delivered to my home yesterday morning.”

Eleni looked at her concerned. “What? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I had to be sure I trusted everyone in the room. Look, it’s not personal. I grew up not trusting a lot of people because of my family.” Anna sighed. “The message was from my father. A warning to back off investigating the Winslows.”

“What form did the message come in?” Eleni asked.

“A package was dropped off on my door handle around seven in the morning. After checking the outside of the box, I opened it with a knife along the edges. Carefully examining the packaging there was a single item in there: a pair of exercise hand grips.”

“Hand grips? What kind of threat is that?” Frank asked incredulously.

“You don’t know my father. He’s a martial artist. I’ve told you before that he worked for the Winslow family for generations as security and head of the Royal Guard. He can and has killed people with his bare hands.” Anna put her hands on Frank’s desk. “You know what he and the Winslow family did to Olivia and she was just sixteen at the time. What we’ve been investigating in Edmund’s present and past is far more pervasive than that. And don’t for one minute think that my father doesn’t have eyes and ears around Springfield, especially with Edmund in the hospital, still in critical condition.” Anna looked around to each person

in the room, making sure she made eye contact with each person. “I need to make sure that that information stays inside this room. Nobody else knows about it until I tell them, if I tell them. It’s a threat, specifically for me, but since we are working as a team, that threat will extend to anyone investigating. Which is why I have told you.”

Trying to take in the seriousness of the situation, Eleni asked her, “Can we scale back on how many are on the case?”

Anna stood, holding onto her now cold coffee. “Probably not. More than likely, he already knows who’s investigating. So, right now, it needs to be business as usual.”

Frank ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Okay, if that’s everything, I need to make some phone calls. Eleni, I need to see you later.” Noting that she nodded her head before she left, he sat back in his chair and heaved a sigh. It still wasn’t even 9:30 in the morning and he was already feeling like he’d put in a full day’s work.

The corridor to the offices of St. Elizabeth’s Mission was quiet at this hour of the morning. Most of the volunteers that helped prepare the lunches were already down in the kitchen, and a few others were sorting through clothing that had been donated. Natalia had waved at them as she passed by; many she knew but there were a couple new young women that were helping out. Finding the office she was looking for, she knocked on the door. It took a moment, but the door opened to reveal a smiling face.

“Come in, Natalia. It’s nice to see you.”

Natalia opened the door and smiled at the nun that greeted her. Though in truth, Natalia thought the woman probably wasn’t much older than herself. “Is this a bad time, Sister?”

“No, come on in. Just doing some budgeting. I’m glad for the break, really.” Sister Anne shook her head. “Sorry, where are my manners. How are you?”

Natalia sighed and looked down at her hands that had been fidgeting with the straps of her purse. She had been glad that her sister was going to be staying at the house that morning to look after Francesca. Though she’d occasionally brought the baby over to the mission with her, this was one time that she didn’t want her daughter to hear what she needed to talk about, whether she understood or not.

“Natalia?” Sister Anne was becoming concerned at the other woman’s mannerisms and distraught expression. “Hey, come here.” She guided Natalia over to a set of chairs along the side wall of her office.

Natalia sniffled and brought her hand up to her face, her knuckles pressed against her mouth, as she tried to stall the sobs that had caught in her throat. She hadn't wanted to fall apart so quickly, but she knew she trusted the kind woman before her.

Sister Anne sat patiently with Natalia, offering her tissues as she needed until the tears subsided. "Can you tell me what's the matter? Is it Olivia or the girls?" She saw Natalia shake her head. "Rafe?" Another shake. She was at a loss. She hadn't talked with Natalia in a few weeks, as both their lives had been busy.

When Natalia's breathing evened out, she looked up at Sister Anne. "Do you remember hearing about the shooting at a wedding in the park?"

"Yes, several people were shot, correct?"

Natalia nodded. "I shot at one of them. The bad man, Edmund." Her voice caught in her throat. "He was going to shoot my baby. I saw Olivia's gun and I picked it up and I shot him. I had to protect my daughter." Natalia's tears came forth again, and she felt the nun's arms come around her, hugging her.

"Oh my God, Natalia." She was starting to understand now why the woman before her was falling apart. "Did he die?"

"No. But I wanted him dead." Natalia sat back and wiped at her nose with a tissue. "I'm confused. Why don't I feel guilty? I should feel guilty for trying to take another person's life, shouldn't I?"

"Why do you think you should feel guilty?"

Natalia was a mix of curiosity and confusion when she looked over at Sister Anne; the other woman certainly didn't seem to follow along the same lines that she had expected. "It's what I grew up learning in the Bible: 'Thou shalt not kill'. Aside from the legal aspect of it, I grew up respecting that a life is a life, and taking another person's life was wrong." Natalia bit down on her lower lip. "But in that moment, when he held his gun on Francesca, it didn't feel wrong to shoot him."

"Natalia, you were protecting your daughter's life, and the life of others. Don't get me wrong, I don't advocate the use of violence at all, but I understand the need to protect your family."

When Sister Anne's voice had tapered off, Natalia looked at her. "Sister?"

She hadn't meant to zone out on the woman she was trying to help, but she knew that need to protect. She'd only been fifteen when she and her sister, Kathy, were in a convenience store in Chicago and a gun fight had broken out between two local gangs. A wild shot had penetrated through the store window and hit her older sister in the chest. Kathy hadn't even seen it coming and had dropped to the floor so quickly. One of the gang members, really not much more than a boy, came into the store to try to rob the place, holding his gun on the clerk and when he heard her crying, came over and threatened to kill them both. She remembered lying over her sister's still warm body, crying for all she was worth, paralyzed to do anything more. It was only when they heard sirens that the young man tried to run. By the time the ambulance got to the store, past the police and the gangs, her sister had died. Coming back to the present, she looked over at the other woman and shook her head. "Sorry, Natalia. I just got lost in some old memories."

"Are you okay?" Natalia asked.

"I'm fine." She chuckled slightly. "And here I am, trying to help you." Sister Anne reached out and covered one of Natalia's hands. "Have you talked to Olivia about what you're feeling?"

"Yes. She's trying to make me feel better, but I know she's hurting as much as I am."

"Of course she is. You're both mothers with a strong need to protect your family. That would affect you both, deeply."

"And Emma."

"Emma?" Sister Anne thought of the girl who would come in sometimes with Natalia and help sort through the clothes and perform other tasks, and she was saddened the shootings had affected her so strongly as well.

"She's had a couple bad nightmares. We've caught her having them a couple times and have brought her out of them. She had one last night that was really bad." Natalia had tears coming down her cheeks again. "All I want to do is hold them and make all the hurting go away. How can I do that when I'm hurting, too?"

"You talk to them. Don't keep it bottled up inside, because it will fester, and it won't be good for any of you. Try to get them to talk to you, as well." Sister Anne went up to her desk, and after sorting through a small box, she retrieved a card. Sitting down, she handed it to Natalia. "I have to be honest with you. I think that the help you all might need goes beyond my scope of practice. That's not to say you can't come to me any time you need to talk, you can."

Natalia turned over the card and read the name, *Dr. Felicia Boudreau*, and she smiled. “Olivia and I were talking yesterday about maybe booking an appointment for us with her.”

“That’s good. Make that appointment and talk with her. She’s a very good doctor.”

“Thank you, Sister.” Natalia smiled. She was about to add something when she felt a vibration from her cell phone. Taking it out of her pocket, she looked at the message on the screen. “It’s Olivia. I turned off the phone before I came in.”

“Tell her I said ‘hello’ and if she ever wants to talk, she knows where my door is.”

“Thank you.” Natalia lifted her purse up onto her shoulder and walked out of the office, feeling a little better for having talked with the nun, who had become a good friend over the months that she’d gotten to know her.

Sliding up her phone, she dialed Olivia’s cell number, glad to hear her partner’s voice.

“Hi” Olivia said, lovingly. “How are you?”

Sighing deeply after the talk she’d just had with her friend, Natalia responded “Better. You?”

“Rough morning. Where are you now?”

Sorting through her purse for her car keys, Natalia almost dropped her phone. Resetting the phone between her shoulder and her cheek, she delved back into the bag. She grunted, slightly annoyed at the fact that the darn things always seemed to end up in the bottom of her purse. Finally locating them, she grinned. “I just finished talking with Sister Anne. Why?”

“Just wanted to see if you wanted to grab some lunch.”

If the sound of someone’s voice through a phone was a tangible presence, Natalia swore she could see the joy and love in her partner’s voice at her request, and she smiled reflexively. “Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye love.”

The Turkish food vendor in the market was quickly fixing a wrap with lamb and vegetables for a group of customers when Alex Spaulding walked up, looking around to see if she could locate Dinah. When she had called Phillip last night, she got the latest news on Edmund, as much as he had learned from Rick. Alex was glad that the son of a bitch was

still in a coma. She knew some of the hospital board members that had died through her social circles and their wives from event fundraising galas. She knew her own past wasn't void of any misdoings; however, as far as she was concerned a little blackmail, emotional manipulation and kidnapping were nowhere near outright killing ten people and injuring several others.

Digging into her purse for a few Euros to pay for her lunch, she almost missed Dinah passing by. When she looked up to pay the vendor, she spotted a familiar form standing at a nearby table.

"Alex!" Dinah called out over the din of pedestrian traffic. She wanted to get this over with, to find out what the older woman knew.

"Dinah, dear, how are you?"

Leaning against a booth, Dinah turned to the elder Spaulding. "Just fine. So, what did Phillip say?"

"Getting right to the point, aren't you?" Alex smiled, used to the other woman's tendency to talk her way into or out of most situations.

"Well, I kinda want to know if there's going to ever be a chance of real Edmund coming after my ass for killing fake Edmund. I did want the bastard dead after all."

"Well, someone almost beat you to the punch. Apparently the bullet's still lodged in his brain. Edmund's in a coma, and no idea of when he's going to come out of it."

"Mmmm. Doesn't instill a whole lotta confidence in a girl." Dinah fidgeted with the strap of her purse. "What else is going on?"

"Oh the usual craziness of Springfield. Lizzie's about to pop with the baby, and Phillip's actually excited about being a grandfather."

"That is kinda crazy," Dinah said, grinning at the thought of her cousin being a grandfather. That, she decided, was worthy of plenty of teasing. Pausing for a minute, as she realized she hadn't heard from her mother since the initial text. She'd tried sending a return text but she had been having problems and seemed to keep missing Vanessa when she called the house. Nervously clasping her hands, she looked over at the older woman. "Alex, Phillip didn't happen to mention how Billy Lewis is doing, did he?"

"He's improving. He apparently came through the surgery fine." At the other woman's heavy sigh of relief Alex continued. "I'm sure he's going to be just fine."

“Thank you. You don’t know how much that means.” Glancing down at her watch, Dinah realized she was supposed to be meeting Mallet. “Look, I’ve got to get going. It was nice to see you again. See you around?”

“Are you heading back to Springfield?”

Smiling, Dinah lifted her purse up to her shoulder. “You never know. Stranger things have happened.”

The afternoon sun still warmed the air in the park as Natalia neared the beloved gazebo that held so many memories, happy and sad, for them. Seeing her partner sitting and reclined back against the wooden slats of the railing, she stopped and admired Olivia’s beauty. It would be their anniversary soon, and Natalia considered all they had been through over the past couple years, and she couldn’t be more thankful to have the other woman in her life as her love. Life had definitely tested them, and time after time they returned, building a stronger and more resilient family. She knew that they could overcome so much together, and she only hoped they would persevere through their latest struggle without too much damage.

As she noted Olivia stand to meet her, she moved forward, ascending the short step into the gazebo and was quickly wrapped in a tight embrace. Relaxing into the solid presence of Olivia’s arms, she tucked her head under the older woman’s chin. “You feel so good.” She felt the press of Olivia’s lips against her head as her partner guided her over to the bench. Turning slightly to face her partner, she moved her hands to cover Olivia’s.

“Why the rough morning?”

“Ugh. I had to intervene in an argument between Greg and one of our conference vendors. They’d increased their prices without informing us but the materials they were providing us with weren’t of the same quality they’ve been sending. We’d be paying more for lesser quality. So I had a chat with the vendor. We’ll pay the increased fee; however, they will be providing us with the higher quality materials, across the board. Of course, I did threaten him that if they didn’t, we’d find another vendor.”

“My business mongrel,” Natalia said with a smile.

When Olivia noticed the smile didn’t quite show in her eyes, Olivia grew concerned. “Natalia, what’s wrong? Is it something you were talking about with Sister Anne?”

Natalia shrugged a little but nodded.

“Come here, querida,” Olivia spoke softly, once again bringing the younger woman into her arms, conveying as much love and affection for Natalia as she could. Gently with one hand, she brushed over her partner’s hair, twining her fingers through the thick brown locks. They stayed that way for quite some time, silent but sure in their love for each other.

Eventually, Natalia pulled back, a few small sniffles remained and she passed a hand over her face, brushing away a few stray tears that clung to her cheeks. “I love you so much.” She leaned forward and placed a kiss on Olivia’s lips, starting very tender and light and then growing deeper, more passionate as she felt her partner respond.

“Thank you,” Olivia responded after they parted, catching her breath from the intensity.

Natalia sighed, looking down. “Olivia, Emma had another nightmare last night. I’m really worried for her. When I went in, she was thrashing about, yelling out for someone to stop, and that they couldn’t get her, and couldn’t take Francesca.” When she looked back at Olivia, fresh tears were brimming on the lids of her eyes. “They seem to be the same but are getting progressively worse.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Olivia drew Natalia back against her, wrapping her arms around her partner’s stomach, and she pressed a kiss to the dark head. “We’re not the only ones noticing how this is affecting Emma.” When Natalia pulled to the side to look quizzically, Olivia continued. “When I was talking to Doris earlier, she told me Clarissa’s noticed Emma having a hard time concentrating on her school work and withdrawing from some friends.” Olivia wrapped her arms tighter around Natalia, resting her head against the side of the younger woman’s. Quietly, she spoke. “It’s breaking my heart how much she’s hurting. I wish she would just tell me what she’s feeling, but I feel like she’s shutting me out.”

“Honey, she’s scared. She doesn’t want people to see how much she’s hurting.” Natalia smiled, tapping her fingers against Olivia’s hand that rested over her stomach. Gently, she said, “She reminds me of someone else I know.” She felt Olivia nod and she caressed the older woman’s arms.

Swallowing past a lump she felt in her throat, Olivia said, “I don’t know if that scares me more than her shutting me out. I already see so much of myself in her; I really wish she took after you more in that regard.”

“The only way we’re going to get through this together, is to talk with someone – you, me, and Emma.” Natalia felt Olivia’s slow nod and then the other woman’s chin rest on her shoulder. Assuredly, Natalia continued, “When we get home, we’re going to call Dr. Boudreau and set up an appointment, okay?” It wasn’t so much a question as a statement.

“Okay.” They spent several more minutes in quiet reflection before Olivia asked her how her meeting with Sister Anne went.

“She was helpful. We talked about guilt and protecting family.” Natalia shook her head, slightly baffled. “Just when I think I have an idea of what she’s going to say, she surprises me with her understanding.”

“She’s a good woman. She’s taught me a lot about a faith I never thought I had; not religion, per se, but a different perspective.” She thought about what she was saying, and then added, “I’m not saying you haven’t been a positive influence on me in that regard as well, you have been. For most of my life, my mother’s brand of religious bigotry hung over my head, and I learned to trust only myself, no one else. No God was going to help me. Slowly you broke down those barriers, but I didn’t understand your faith, so I lashed out.” She knew Natalia understood that, felt that. “Sister Anne helped in a time when I wanted to understand more about your faith and I felt I couldn’t ask you.”

Natalia turned in the embrace, to face Olivia, smiling tenderly. “I hope you know you can ask me anything.”

“Anything?” Olivia asked, with a quirk of an eyebrow.

“Behave.” Natalia shook her head, chuckling. She fully anticipated that was probably her partner’s response.

“Where’s the fun in that?” A wiggle of two eyebrows was the response.

“You and your fun.” Natalia grinned. “On a serious note, I’m glad she’s been helpful to you as well. She’s said her door’s open for you to talk with her any time you need it.” Natalia sighed. “I think I’m going to continue to talk with her on a therapeutic level as well. While the personal outcome of the shooting for me has changed, it doesn’t negate that I wanted him to die for threatening to shoot Francesca, and I’d do anything to protect my family. I’m not sure how to completely reconcile that with all I’ve been taught in the church for most of my life.”

“Natalia, you do what you need to do. But you can always talk with me, too. Okay?”

“Okay.” Natalia leaned forward and pressed another kiss on Olivia’s lips, this one quick with much affection. Smiling, she asked, “So where’s this fun you keep mentioning?”

Olivia flashed a huge grin and pushed Natalia back a little so she could stand, and then she reached out a hand as they headed to Olivia’s car. “Your chariot waits.”

“But, I have my car here, Olivia,” Natalia said amusedly.

“Do you have anything in it you need for the rest of the day?”

Natalia thought about what she did have in her car. “Um, no.”

“Okay, well we can come back later, or I can give Greg the keys and he can bring it by the Beacon later this afternoon.”

“Um, okay.” Grinning at Olivia’s infectious smile, she took her partner’s hand and was led to the white Nissan. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.” Olivia leaned in to give her a quick kiss before opening the door and gently guiding her into her seat.

When Doris walked into Company, she looked around for Blake and spotted the red-headed woman in the corner booth, with a concentrated look on her face as she stared at her laptop’s screen. In the other woman’s hand, she quickly jotted down notes on a notepad. Doris looked at her affectionately. “Whatcha workin’ on?”

It was almost comical how much Blake jumped in her seat, as the pen in her hand flew into the air; Doris felt sorry for startling her.

“Why do you insist on sneaking up on me like that? I swear I’m going to get a collar with a bell for you.”

“A collar? Sounds kind of kinky there, Blake.” Doris watched as the other woman’s face flushed a bright shade of pink. “And so early in our relationship; people are going to talk,” she jibed with a smile.

Blake shook her head, rubbing her hands over her face, hoping the blushing had decreased. “Ha ha.” Looking up at the other woman, she asked, “So, what brings you by, other than scaring the daylights out of me?”

“Just wanted to see you?” Doris shrugged with a grin, but then her mood turned somber. “Actually, I came by to talk with you. I spoke with Olivia this morning about the shooting and what Clarissa mentioned about Emma.”

“How did she take it?”

“About as well as any of us?” Doris ran her fingers over the cutlery in front of her absentmindedly.

“Well, let her know if they need any help, let us know.”

Doris’s response was delayed as she heard a familiar voice up at the bar of the restaurant asking for a couple cups of coffee and a take-out order. Looking up, she saw Anna looking around Company before meeting her eyes, and she sighed. Ever since the detective had come over to her distraught after thinking she had been shot, their interactions had been strained again. Doris didn’t quite know what to make of her.

Taking one of the cups of coffee with her over to Doris and Blake’s table, she stalled a moment. “Doris, hi.”

Not wasting any time, Doris looked over at the other woman. “What do you need, Anna?”

“Just giving you an update on the Edmund Winslow case. Jeffrey O’Neill is being formally charged with the attempted murder of Winslow. Given the circumstances, the district attorney’s office is going to release on his own reconnaissance.” Anna paused a moment, as she ran her hands along the side of her mug. “There’s going to be a hearing next week. There are a few people going to be called as witnesses to the event. You will be one of them, as will Natalia Rivera, though I’m sure the DA will take everything into account.” Pursing her lips, Anna blurted, “I’ve got to get back to the station. I just came to pick up some coffee and a late lunch.”

“Thanks for the information,” Doris said thoughtfully.

“No problem. Enjoy your evening.” Anna walked up to the bar to get the cups and bag of meal containers and left.

“Wow,” Blake said softly. “That’s some news.”

“Yeah.” Doris pulled out her cell phone, and then looked up at Blake. “Do you mind if I give Olivia a call?”

“No, go right ahead. I’m going to go refresh my coffee. Did you want some?”

“Please? Thanks.” As she dialed Olivia’s number, she watched as Blake got up to head over to the bar, refilling her own mug and then grabbing a second mug from under the counter to fill. “Hey Olivia, how are you?...Great. Look, Anna just told me about Jeffrey being charged with the attempted murder of Edmund...When are you going to let Ava know?...Ah okay.... How’s Natalia handling it?...That’s understandable...Thanks.... Yeah, that sounds great. What

time?... Good, see you then...Yes, she is...Okay, I'll pass the information along." Doris closed her phone just as Blake was returning.

"They knew?" Blake asked.

"About Jeffrey? No. Olivia's going to talk with Ava this afternoon."

"Ah, okay."

Doris nodded. "Look, Olivia invited us out for supper tonight. You interested?"

"She invited both of us?" Blake asked curiously. "Together?"

"Well, she asked me to go out, and then she asked if you were here with me, and when I said yes, she extended the invitation." Doris shrugged curiously.

"Oh. Okay." Blake looked down at her laptop and frowned at something she was looking over. "Did she want us to bring anything?"

"I said we'd bring a bottle of wine." Doris moved to peer around at the screen. "What are you looking at?"

"I was reading this story online. Fictional. Really interesting. It's about a cop show, that's really not a great cop show, but the female leads are in this relationship. It's kinda hot. The police plot seems really improbable. Kinda like some of those soap operas. Weird, huh?"

Doris shook her head, amused. "So, show me the website for this show." She watched as Blake typed in a web site URL and turned the screen around. "Oh yeah. They're gorgeous. Wait a second, she looks familiar."

"Yeah, she was on one of those '*Law & Order*' shows you keep watching," Blake said, smiling over at Doris. The two women continued to peruse the sites for more information.

ACT 5

The chaos around the Spencer-Rivera household had become a normal state of affairs, with an infant and a ten year old, the various family or guests coming and going; for the life of her, Olivia didn't think she could be happier. As Natalia finished feeding Francesca her supper, Olivia was working on cutting up some vegetables to go into a stew. Emma was working on some school work at the table and occasionally asking Natalia some questions.

Since they'd learned that their daughter was having some problems with school, she and Natalia wanted to keep an eye on the work she brought home with her.

Emma's math exercises went rather easily, since it was one of her favorite subjects; in fact much of her homework was done without any difficulty, until she got to her social studies homework, and she balked.

Natalia noticed that Emma had stopped writing and looked at the girl's saddened face. "Emma, what's wrong?"

"I can't do this," Emma said as she closed her exercise book and placed her pencil on the table.

Turning around from the counter, Olivia came over to stand next to her daughter, as it was unusual for her to say she couldn't do something. "Emma?"

"I can't. I don't know how to do it." Emma's voice sounded small and unsure.

"I'm sure Natalia and I can help you, Jellybean." Olivia leaned closer, pulling Emma against her. "What are you working on?"

Sniffing a little, Emma said, "Laws and how they work in society."

"Sounds interesting," Natalia said with a smile. It had been one of her favorite things to learn in school. Standing up to retrieve a cloth to clean the baby's hands and face, she looked over at Emma, asking her what she had to write about.

"I'm supposed to find something in the newspaper about laws and justice and write about it."

A sinking pit seemed to develop in her stomach as Olivia realized the most recent coverage in the local papers was centered on the shootings at Rick's wedding and the outcomes discovered so far. Pulling Emma against her tighter, she wrapped her daughter in a hug. "Ah, Bean."

"We have to write about the laws that were broken and how to change them." Tears worked their way down Emma's cheeks and were absorbed into Olivia's shirt as the girl grasped onto her mother. She sniffed. "I just want the bad man to go away forever."

Natalia noticed the matching tears falling from her partner's eyes as Olivia pressed a kiss to their daughter's head. She wanted the same thing Emma did, so she knew the hurt the girl was going through. Since Edmund was in the hospital and incapacitated he couldn't do

any more damage, but they were going to have to wait until he was out before any charges could be formally laid. She knew it wasn't fair to promise Emma something about Edmund going to jail for a long time, since she didn't know what was going to happen. Reaching a hand over to rest on Emma's arm, she spoke quietly but with assurance. "So do I, Bean. Your mom and I, your Dad, your sister and so many other people are going to love and protect you and Francesca. Never ever forget that."

When the doorbell rang, Shadow came through from the living room, curious to know who was visiting. When Natalia stood to go open the door, the dog was right behind her, and as Doris and Blake entered, Shadow smelled each of them. Satisfied that neither woman posed a threat to her people, she then curled up on the floor near Emma's feet.

Entering the kitchen, Doris sniffed the air and grinned. "That smells so good right now."

Olivia laughed. "Alas, you're going to have to wait. It will be about another 15 minutes or so before supper is ready; we were a little late getting home."

"Do you have snacks?" Doris inquired hopefully.

"No snacks before supper," Emma said from her mother's arms.

The adults grinned at the well timed comment of the girl. Grinning, Doris looked between Olivia and Natalia. "So, which of you trained her on that one?"

"Both of us," Natalia responded looking at her partner and raising an eyebrow. She knew her partner still usually had something to nibble on when she came home from work, but at least with her influence, those snacks tended to be on the healthy side of things.

Doris looked over at the table and saw Emma's school books, and looked over at the redness that still clung to Emma's eyes. Remembering Clarissa's comments, she wondered what had caused the girl's tears this evening. She looked over at Olivia and, nodding towards the books and back to the other woman, she mouthed the question, "What's wrong?"

"Edmund, what else?" was the answer. Olivia looked over at Francesca's messy shirt and then to Emma. "Hey Bean, could you go grab me a clean shirt for Francesca?" She'd learned her lesson more than once that the infant could very easily transfer as much mess from herself to another, and though occasionally it was endearing, she really didn't relish having to go and change at the moment.

“Okay, Mom.” Emma realized she was temporarily being dismissed, but since she had no desire to talk about what was bothering her, this time she didn’t mind so much. She decided to take her time in her search for a clean shirt for her sister as she left the room.

“What happened?” Doris asked gently.

“She’s got a school project that she’s supposed to write about an article in the paper on a law that was broken, and what can be done to fix the situation.”

“Oh, God,” Blake said, realizing the problem. “And the Springfield Gazette has been full of stories about Edmund and the shootings. No wonder she’s upset.”

“Yeah. And since it has been, others in the class will be writing about it as well. I’m going to have to talk with her teacher to see what we can arrange for her.”

Nodding, Doris added, “I’m sure it was well meant; learning about laws and how to change them is something that is part of the curriculum. It’s just the timing on this particular lesson is unfortunate.”

“It doesn’t have to be the local newspaper, right? What if she uses a paper from another city? We could get The City Times from Oakdale, or maybe the Chicago Tribune. There’s bound to be other criminal or civil law case stories available in the Tribune. The bookstore in town carries newspapers from around the state.”

“It’s a start. Thank you,” Natalia said. “I hate that she’s hurting, and it certainly explains her being withdrawn in school if the shootings are being talked about.”

Smiling, Doris added, “Well, if she wants to write about law and what consequences are, I could talk with her about that.”

Olivia got up to check on the stew and added a couple spices to it, stirring to blend it all together. At Doris’s comment, she turned around, grinning teasingly. “Speaking from experience, are you?”

“Ha ha. You should talk.” Doris could smell the stew and her stomach growled loudly. Chagrined, she looked around the room when the others glanced her way. “What? I’m hungry. I didn’t eat much at lunch.”

Blake smirked. “You and your appetite.”

“What about my appetite?” Doris asked curiously.

“It’s healthy?” Blake responded cheekily.

As Olivia looked between her friends and shook her head in amusement “Are we talking about food now or something else?”

“Shut up.” Both Blake and Doris answered, causing Olivia to snicker.

When Emma came down with Francesca’s shirt, she was happy that they’d moved on to talking about something else.

Seeing her daughter return, Olivia wanted to make sure the conversation did not return to anything related to the shootings and Edmund, so she turned to Doris. “So, how goes that approval for the Beacon expansion?” Quickly she removed the baby’s shirt and put the new one on before lifting the girl out of her high chair and into the playpen.

Doris responded, “In committee.”

“Well, can’t you hurry it along some? What’s the good of having friends in high places if I can’t make it work for me?”

“Are you trying to bribe me, Ms. Spencer?” Doris looked on with a grin.

“Do you want to eat tonight?” Olivia stirred the stew for the last time before taking down some bowls and got Emma to place them on the table for her.

Doris stuck out her tongue. And then in imitation, so did Francesca, which caused the adults to laugh.

Pouring the stew into a large bowl, Olivia placed it on the hot mat in the center of the table, while Natalia got some bread from the cupboard. They all said grace, and then most of the supper meal was kept lighthearted and easy as they all ate and gossiped about the goings on around town. When they were almost finished, there was a knock at the back door.

“I’ll get it!” Emma said as she got down from her chair. Seeing who it was, the girl’s face brightened up. “Uncle Josh!”

“I hear there’s a girl here that would like to look up at the stars,” Josh said brightly.

“You found the telescope?” Emma looked at Josh and then at her mother. “Can we set it up now?”

“Hey, Bean, why don’t you finish, and -”

“I’m all done.” Emma got her bowl and glass and put them into the sink. She was quite eager to get outside while she was still able to, now that the evenings were starting to get darker earlier.

Natalia waved him in the room further. “Come on in, Josh. We’re just about finished with supper.”

“I’m going to go get a sweater so I can go outside,” Emma said before darting into the living room and up the stairs.

Looking around the room at their guests, he turned to Olivia. Slightly chagrined, he tucked his hands into his jeans pockets. “Sorry I didn’t call first. I found the telescope this morning in some old boxes at Cross Creek. I figured with all that’s going on around here, she could use the distraction.”

Grateful for his thoughtfulness, Olivia smiled at her ex-husband. “Thanks, Josh. That means a lot to us.”

“Let us know if you need it back for Shayne and Henry,” Natalia said thankfully.

Josh put up a hand to forestall any argument. “No, it’s a gift.”

“How’s Billy?” Blake asked, remembering that his brother had suffered a major heart attack during the wedding in the melee of the shooting.

“He’s improving. There’s a lot of work to be done with exercise and diet. And he’s begrudging the fact that it means he’s limited to how much sugar and starch he’s allowed, so no regular pies.” Josh grinned knowing his brother’s love of food. “Vanessa’s arranged for Christina to come over and help him with his physical rehabilitation. It’s nice; Vanessa gets to fuss over the baby while Christina helps Billy with his exercises.”

Emma came barreling into the kitchen, full force with excitement about getting the telescope set up. “Can we go outside now, please?”

Looking over at Natalia and then back at Emma, Olivia smiled at her. “Okay, Bean. Take Shadow out with you and stay close to the house.”

Emma quickly got her sneakers on and picked up Shadow’s lead, attaching it to the dog’s collar. “Okay, thanks. Bye.”

“And there she goes,” Olivia commented with a smile. Since Edmund’s incapacitation, they’d allowed her a little more leniency around the yard, but she was still a bit nervous. That said, Josh was going to be out there with Emma, so she felt more comfortable.

Grinning, Josh motioned his thumb towards the door. “I better go before she has it all set up before I get out there.” Zipping up his jacket at the cooling evening air, he headed out onto the porch where Emma already had the main components out of the box. Over the course of the next fifteen minutes, they had assembled the telescope and he had pointed it up at the moon for Emma to look. The fullness of the moon lit the field around the house, and the grin on Emma’s face he thought could light a troubled soul. He only hoped that he could help brighten her life again; it wasn’t much but if it helped, he’d live with that.

“Wow! I can see the craters!”

“Yeah? What else do you see?”

“Cliffs and mountains.” Emma paused looking over at Josh. “This is so neat! Thank you!” She went over and gave him a big hug.

“You’re welcome, Emma.” Putting his hand into a leather bag he’d left on the bench, he pulled out a book and presented it to her.

“*Exploring the Night Sky: The Equinox Astronomy Guide for Beginners*,” Emma read aloud. Sitting on the bench beside Josh, she spent a few minutes flipping through some of the pages to look at the pictures. She flipped through the book until she came upon some information on the moon. Looking up at Josh, she smiled. “Can we show Mom and Ma?”

“You sure can, Emma. I’m sure they’ll enjoy it, too.” He stood to follow her in, taking hold of Shadow’s lead, bringing the dog back in.

Tucking the book against her chest, Emma jumped up from the bench to head inside. Not finding them in the kitchen, she ventured into the living room, where she saw her mothers and Blake and Doris sitting around. Handing the book over to Olivia, she was bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Mom, look what Uncle Josh gave me. It’s got the moon, and stars, and lots of cool stuff. And I got to see the moon in the telescope!”

“Did you thank him?”

“Yes, I did,” Emma grinned. “You have to come out and see.”

“Hey, Emma, how about we do that a bit later. We’ll go out and sit on the bench with some hot chocolate,” Natalia said gently.

“Okay,” Emma said begrudgingly, shrugging her shoulders. She felt a little deflated at having her excitement postponed, if only for a little while, though the promise of hot chocolate helped some.

“Look, I’ve got to get going. I promised Colin I’d give him his bath tonight, and I think Reva’s counting on it,” Josh said wryly. “It gives her some alone time, which she doesn’t have a lot of with an almost three year old on the go.”

Understanding the need for some occasional alone time, Natalia smiled at him. “Tell her ‘hello’ for us.”

Olivia, Blake and Doris each said their goodbyes to him and he left.

“Come here for a minute, Bean,” Olivia said, patting her lap. Settling the girl there, she gave her a hug. “I love you.”

“Mom,” Emma dragged out.

“Yes,” Olivia followed suit. Resting her head against her daughter’s, she knew what she needed to talk with her about was going to be upsetting. “I know it’s not going to be easy with school, especially when other kids in your class are talking about the shootings, but you know what?” She could feel Emma’s shake of head. “We’re going to help you, okay. And Doris said she’d be willing to go into your class and talk about laws, and breaking them and consequences.” She grinned when she saw the other woman’s head pop up at her comment. It hadn’t *quite* been what they’d talked about earlier, but she knew Doris would do just fine.

“What are consequences?” Emma asked curiously.

“It just means that when someone does something bad, they have to pay for what they did,” Natalia responded softly.

Emma bit down on her lip a little before looking up at Natalia. “Like with Rafe?”

“Yes, sweetie.” Natalia smiled sadly. “After Rafe shot Jeffrey, he had to go to jail.”

“Didn’t he go away first?”

“Yes, he did. That usually doesn’t happen. But when he came back, he had a hearing and he was sent to jail.”

Emma was quiet for a moment, thinking things over. "Is that what's going to happen to the bad man who shot people at the wedding?"

"Yes. Well, if he lives, he will be going to jail," Doris added. She was going to talk to the DA and make sure any charges stuck; the bastard was going to pay for a long time.

"Will he get out, like Rafe did?"

"I don't think so, Em. He hurt a lot of people, killed people. He'll be going away for a long time." *At least I hope so!* Olivia thought. She wrapped Emma tighter in her arms.

"Okay," Emma spoke quietly.

Deciding they'd had enough serious talk, Natalia stood up and walked over to Olivia and Emma, placing a kiss on her older daughter's head. "Now, if all of you want to put on your sweaters and go out to look at Emma's telescope, I'll get Francesca bundled up and get some hot chocolate made." Picking Francesca up from her playpen, she cuddled the infant close to her and placed a kiss on the dark locks of curly hair.

Emma hopped down from her mother's lap, tired from the long emotional day, but still excited at the prospect of seeing the night sky again with her new telescope. She quickly headed to the back entrance to pull on her sneakers.

Standing, Olivia followed Emma and Natalia into the kitchen and she placed a kiss against her partner's temple. "Why don't I get Francesca dressed for bed and then wrap her up in some warm blankets? She won't be out long anyway." As Natalia handed the baby over to her, she noticed her partner's yawn. Leaning in to give her a kiss on the lips, Olivia muttered, "Something tells me Sweet Pea won't be the only one to come in early."

"I should not be so tired given how late we slept this morning," Natalia said as she yawned again.

"Quit that, it's catching," Olivia said, smirking past a yawn of her own, as she headed out of the room.

After several minutes, Olivia returned with Francesca covered in her sleeper and a warm sweater, and Olivia had put on a wool pullover sweater. Holding out a sweater to Natalia, she grinned. "Thought you might want this."

"Thanks." Natalia shrugged into the sweater and then picked up the tray of hot chocolate and waited until Olivia held the door open for her.

“What took you so long?” Emma pouted at first and then smiled when she saw the hot chocolate.

Olivia tapped her daughter on the nose gently. “Well, Bean, you already had your sweater on. We had to get Francesca all ready and get our sweaters on.”

Natalia passed the mugs around, leaving the women to get their own cookies that were also on the tray, and then once they were all given out, she placed the tray on top of the barbeque and returned to Olivia’s side.

“Oh my God, Natalia this is great stuff!” Doris said after taking a sip. “Don’t tell me you make that from scratch?” Shaking her head, she grinned. “Never mind, of course you did.”

“And she’s all mine, ladies.” Olivia grinned broadly, wrapping an arm around her partner.

Looking over to where her impatient daughter stood on the grass by her telescope, she walked across to her and leaned down to press a kiss to her head. “So, Bean, I hear you have something you want to show us?”

“Uh huh!” She led her mother and Natalia over to the telescope. “Look, you can see the moon really clear.”

After taking a minute or so to look at the telescope when she had her turn, Natalia was almost as excited as Emma. When she turned back to the others she noticed Olivia was looking at her endearingly and she smiled in return. “I’ve never seen it like this,” she said in wonder.

“Never?” Emma asked curiously.

“Nope. I couldn’t afford a telescope when I was younger with Rafe.”

Excited at being able to share it for the first time with her Ma was great as far as Emma was concerned. “Well, now you have!” Her excitement turned into a yawn, which she tried to suppress. She wanted to stay out longer, so she didn’t have to go to bed so soon. She didn’t want to have any more bad dreams.

Seeing that it was time for their friends to get the girls to bed, Doris and Blake finished their drinks and said their goodbyes and headed back to Doris’s car.

Olivia, Natalia and Emma waved and then headed inside, bringing the dirty mugs in with them. Setting them onto the counter, too tired to deal with cleaning them tonight, Natalia ran some water over them so the remnants wouldn’t stick. Olivia had taken the sleeping

infant upstairs and before laying her in her crib, she gently removed the sweater. She placed a blanket over her and stood back a moment before heading down the hall and poking her head around Emma's open door. The sight of Natalia curled up next to her reading from the astronomy book made her smile. Quickly she moved to their own room to get changed into her pajamas, then returned and leaned over to her daughter, giving Emma a kiss goodnight.

"Night, Bean. Love you."

"Love you, too, Mommy," Emma said tiredly. Despite her earlier intentions of staying up, her eyes were lowering and she lay back against Natalia's shoulder. She watched as her mother left the room and then she closed her eyes.

Not long after, Natalia joined Olivia in their room and got dressed for bed. Climbing into bed, she snuggled close to her partner.

"What happened to *"Charlotte's Web"*?" Olivia asked. It had become one of her daughter's favorite books.

"It got replaced for tonight, but I don't think she paid too much attention to the book. She's exhausted."

"She's not the only one." Olivia curled around Natalia. "I'm so wiped it's not funny."

"Tomorrow we make the appointment for Dr. Boudreau for Emma and us."

"Yes, and I've got to call Emma's teacher about that blasted project." Olivia groused. She hated Emma being hurt from other people's talk. She'd been subjected to that a lot growing up and she never wanted that for her children.

Natalia rubbed a hand rhythmically over her partner's back until she could tell the other woman had slipped into slumber. As she lay on her side, her head resting on Olivia's chest, the rhythmic breathing of her partner beneath her ear, it wasn't long before she joined her in sleep.

When Doris arrived at the bright conference suite of the Beacon hotel, she shielded her eyes as the morning sun poured through the windows. The governor was only in town a couple of days, and it had been her first chance to speak with him. She knew he wanted some status updates about the town, and to review the town's fiscal management along with announcing infrastructure funding, but with recent events in the town, she had a

couple issues she wanted to bring up. She didn't have to wait long before he made his appearance.

"Mayor Wolfe, it's good to see you again," Governor Young said as he extended his hand.

"You as well, Governor."

"I believe in getting down to business quickly, so what can you tell me about this Edmund Winslow case?"

"Right now, he's still in a coma with a bullet lodged in his brain. The police are still reviewing the case against him but last I heard there will be ten charges of murder, along with several charges of assault with a deadly weapon, along with a couple charges of attempted kidnapping, and forcible confinement." She hoped they would be able to get him on the last charge, but she doubted it as it occurred outside the country.

"That's one nasty piece of work you have on your hands."

Growling, Doris said, "Tell me about it. Damned bastard tried to shoot me as well."

The governor looked at her shocked. "I didn't hear that part."

Doris smiled as she responded. "I had someone looking out for me who pushed me to the ground. Fortunately I wasn't hit."

"Is there anything my office can do for you?"

Taking this as her opportunity, Doris grinned broadly as she looked over at the well-dressed man. "As a matter of fact, you can. When we get this bastard convicted, I want him behind bars for the rest of his life. Here's what you can do," Doris said as she laid out a detailed plan for addressing violent attacks, with cases of precedence to back up her argument.

The governor nodded as he reviewed the report. "I agree with all of this. Sometimes we have to step carefully around these issues."

"Forgive me for saying so, but bullshit, Governor. This is a bill that needs to be passed. A person should not be able to walk into a public area, well armed, and open fire, and not expect to be severely punished." Doris paused for a moment to catch her breath. Before he could speak, she continued, "And before you say it, yes, this case is personal to me. Several people that I know and care about were injured or were victims of this man's actions. It will be a personal vindication when he's convicted and sent to prison."

“I’ll bring it to our representatives to bring up in the legislation. I can’t promise anything.”

“Just, please, make it happen. No one else should have to go through this devastation.”

“I will do my best,” the governor said, solemnly, then brightened. “In the meantime, I do have some good news for you. We have allocated some state funding to Springfield for capital infrastructure projects.” He handed Doris the papers to review.

Taking her time, she reviewed the documents and was pleased with the outcome. “This looks good. I’ll bring it to our town manager and if he has any questions, I’m sure he’ll contact your office. Thank you.” Doris outstretched her hand to shake the governor’s.

Taking her hand, he responded as he walked with her to the door. “You’re welcome. Have a good day, Mayor Wolfe.”

Tucking the document into her case, she left for her office.

The first of her morning had been kept busy with teleconferencing meetings with her investors. She’d emailed them Leyla’s business plan for the day care center first thing that morning along with her support of the project, and after informing them of the viability of the project, she had gotten the financial approval to start building the center.

Checking that item off her To-Do list, she scrolled down her Blackberry for the contact number of Emma’s school. Dialing through, she waited for the receptionist to answer.

“Good morning, Springfield Elementary. How may I help you?”

“This is Olivia Spencer; I would like to speak with Mr. Barnes please?”

“One moment, Ms. Spencer. He’s just coming in from recess break.”

“Thank you.” Olivia scanned through some emails on her computer screen as she waited for the teacher to get to the phone. It seemed to take forever before the line was answered.

“Yes, this is Olivia Spencer, Emma’s mother.”

“How can I help you?” The young man’s voice sounded genuinely interested.

“I need to speak with you about her social studies homework.” Olivia twirled her pen between her fingers.

"Is there something she doesn't understand? I thought I was pretty clear when I explained the topic."

"That's not it, Mr. Barnes. She understands it all too well."

"I don't understand. Is there a problem?"

Shaking her head, she wondered if the man lived under a rock. "You might say that. You do realize that a very large chunk of the Springfield Gazette in the past week or so has been about the shootings at the Bauer-Lewis wedding in the park?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What you may not know is that Emma was present at that wedding and could easily have been one of the victims. Her infant sister was nearly shot and killed. If it hadn't been the quick reflexes of the former district attorney who shot the bastard, she might well have been killed." Olivia stopped for a moment and rubbed her fingers along the top of her nose. She could feel a headache starting. Before the teacher could respond, she continued. "In addition, she and my four year old niece were nearly kidnapped by the same bastard only a couple months before that after he killed Emma's babysitter. She has nightmares about both events."

The continued silence on the other end of the line had Olivia wondering if the call had dropped. Pulling the phone away from her ear, she looked at the display which still read that the call was connected. "Mr. Barnes?"

"Sorry, Ms. Spencer. I didn't realize that Emma was at that wedding. It wasn't in the papers."

"No, we were able to keep that information from being reported." Olivia sighed. "Look, I realize it's too late in the term to request a change in topic for their papers, especially as the topic has already been discussed in class but I was wondering if there is something we could do so that we can minimize the chatter about those shootings."

"I can talk with the students and some of the other parents. It shouldn't be too much of a problem. And if Emma wants to write on another social justice issue, she can do that."

Over the phone, Olivia realized that it was hard to determine what the man was thinking. "Thank you." Remembering her comment to Doris last night, she continued. "If you're interested in exploring the social justice aspect some more, a good friend of mine, Doris Wolfe, is also an attorney. She said she'd be willing to talk with your class about laws and the consequences of breaking them if you're interested."

“Mayor Wolfe? That’s interesting. I’ll think about it today and I’ll give her a call one way or another. Thank you, Ms. Spencer.”

“You’re welcome.” Olivia ran her hand through her hair, wincing as her fingers hit some tangles. “Look, I don’t want to be a pain, but I’m trying to protect my daughter here. She’s hurting enough without people talking about a situation that they really don’t know much about.”

“I understand, Ms. Spencer. I will do my best. If you have any other questions about the project, just give me a call. If I’m in class, I will give you a call when I’m finished.”

“Thank you.” Olivia hung up the phone and rested her head against her desk. Two tasks completed and she had one more to get done before getting back to Beacon business. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out the business card of Dr. Felicia Boudreau’s that Natalia had given her the day before. Flipping it between her fingers, she sighed. Despite the fact that doctors were not high on her list of favorite people, psychiatrists were even lower than that, Olivia knew that if she and her family didn’t start talking with a professional, they were never going to start healing properly.

Biting the bullet, Olivia hesitantly pressed the seven numbers and waited for an answer.

“Yes, my name is Olivia Spencer. I need to book an appointment with Dr. Boudreau for myself and my family.”

Sitting with her feet propped up on the coffee table in her office, Doris nearly dropped half of her sandwich when a knock on her door startled her. It was only fast reflexes that saved it from its fate on the floor. Taking a gulp of water from the bottle she’d bought with her lunch, she called for the person to enter. Her young administrative assistant popped his head in the door.

“Yes, Brandon. Can I help you with something?”

“Mrs. Beth Spaulding and Dr. Mel Boudreau are here to see you.”

The women in question stood behind him and waited for permission to enter. “Come on in, ladies.” Doris went to stand but Beth waved her off.

“Sit, finish your lunch.”

“Thanks. It’s not much; ham and Swiss cheese.”

“Do you think it will go well with this?” Mel pulled out a bottle of champagne from behind her back. At Doris confused expression, Mel added, “To new beginnings.”

Comprehension clicking in, Doris smiled broadly. “Really? I mean I’d hoped we could get this working.”

“I’m game if you are,” Beth said. “Now, do you have some extra glasses?”

Standing up and heading over to a shelf in her office, she procured three tumblers before handing them over to the blonde. “Not exactly the right glass for this, but I don’t usually have need for champagne in my office.”

“This will do just fine,” Beth said with a grin. “As long as you don’t tell Alexandra Spaulding that.” Mel and Doris laughed with her a moment as she filled the glasses half-way. “If nothing else, it will be an interesting venture given our histories. So, new beginnings it is.”

“To healing old wounds and making new beginnings,” Doris said as they clinked their glasses together.

The evening air in Amsterdam had cooled significantly, and Dinah had gone inside the hotel looking for Mallet. Not seeing him in the front foyer, she frowned as they were supposed to be meeting there before heading out for a late supper. She wandered down the hallway towards the bar area and, looking around the dimmed room, she didn’t see him. Taking out her phone, she sent him a text asking him where he was. And she waited, and waited. Starting to worry and pacing the hallways of the foreign hotel lobby was not doing her any good, and it was just going to attract on-lookers. Blowing out a deep breath, she headed up to their room.

“Mallet, if you’re asleep, I’m gonna smack you one.” Dinah pulled up in front of their room and swiped the key through the lock. On first look in the room she didn’t see him, but she could hear his voice slightly muffled.

“Are you sure it’s a good time?” Mallet asked. “I guess. What about Interpol, are they able to do anything?...Okay. Thanks. I’ll let her know. When can you have the tickets sent? Perfect. See you soon.”

Mallet was a little startled when he came out of the bathroom to see Dinah sitting at the end of the bed, playing with the straps on her purse. “I guess you heard some of that.”

“I did. What’s going on?”

“That was Jeffrey. Still no sign of Edmund coming out of the coma. The investigation into his activities is on-going, but the noose is tightening.”

“You have to go back now?”

“Yeah, there’s some stuff coming up in reports that needs my attention. Jeffrey mentioned some past cases.”

“What about me? Is it safe for me to go back?” Dinah asked, aware that there was still a warrant out for her arrest.

“Look, wait until we get back to the States to figure that out. I’ll talk with Frank and Jeffrey, see what we can do. Besides, I think your mother will be happy to have you home.”

“I guess. It was not a great parting of ways with me taking off and not leaving much word. I think I broke Mom’s heart the last time we spoke in person.”

“Dinah, Billy had a heart attack. Vanessa’s going to want her family around her, no matter what you have done.” Mallet paused. “Jeffrey’s emailed me the electronic tickets for us. Amsterdam to London, then direct to Chicago.”

“When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Wow. Okay, so quick supper nearby and then we start packing.” Dinah looked around the room. “Well, I will say one thing for traveling around as much as we have; it limits the amount of packing we have to do.”

Mallet grinned. “Thank God for that.”

Throwing a sweater at him, she laughed. “Oh shut up.”

The End

What Dreams May Come

by geekgrllurking

ACT 1

Her dream was always the same, when it came.

It was a typically gorgeous summer day in the park, except everything was far from typical. Above her eleven crows flew in slow motion, the beating of their wings sounding loud in her ears, their shrill cawing sending shivers down her spine. Around her the breeze moved through the trees before dipping down to stir up little whirling dervishes of dust. In the distance a woman's familiar voice cried out.

"Olivia..."

She froze, recognizing her mother's haunting tones. It was not disapproving, or angry, but as she remembered hearing it as a young child being called in for supper. Beckoning her. She spun quickly, hoping to catch a glimpse of her one last time, only to find nothing but row upon row of chairs, all festively decorated.

That's right, she remembered now, it was Rick and Mindy's wedding day. Her hands moved over the red silk of her dress, smoothing the material over her curves. She needed to warn somebody about something, but she couldn't quite remember what. Her heart raced, thudding against her ribs like a wild bird trapped in a cage, desperate to escape. Somewhere the pop-pop-pop of gunfire sounded and a baby cried. She turned again, fear gripping her. She knew that baby's cry anywhere.

"Emma?"

She couldn't move. She was stuck as if drowning neck deep in quicksand, sinking deeper every second. Suddenly Edmund Winslow stood before her, a huge grin plastered across his face as he offered her a drink from a bottle of Johnny Walker. She simply shook her head.

"Come on and play, Olivia! The next song is a good one!" Edmund smiled taking a quick gulp of whiskey before he tossed the bottle over his shoulder. Stepping away from her, he twisted the guitar game controller around from his back, repositioning it as he stepped backwards and to the side, revealing Jeffrey O'Neill and Frank Cooper already playing Rock Band together on a small stage.

Jeffrey stood, stepping out from the game drum set to stand beside Edmund. He slid an arm around Edmund's trim waist and tugged him closer, smiling softly before dropping a lingering kiss to his mouth.

Finally she could move again, so she turned and ran.

"Wait...come back!" Jeffrey's voice floated behind her on the wind, dark and menacing. "You can't fall asleep, you little bitch; the fun is just about to start. And I'm not nearly done with you yet..."

Her stomach churned at the sound of his echoing laughter and she could almost feel his thick fingers clawing at her body, the sour taste of punch and bile rising in her mouth. She ran faster, trying to escape him, to escape the past.

Up ahead on a small rise she spotted the gazebo, where a woman in a white wedding gown paced back and forth. Big white fluffy flakes of snow drifted lazily down from the sky as she slowed down to catch her breath. She tugged the lapels of her long winter jacket a little higher to block out the icy wind whipping around her and made her way to the building.

She cautiously made her way up the steps and into the gazebo, her breathing starting to calm finally. She paused, smiling widely as she recognized the woman waiting there for her.

"Natalia?" Relief flooded through her and her heart started to beat faster again. Her lover turned to face her.

"I'm so sorry..." Natalia's eyes were large and dark, sadness creeping in. She came closer, needing to fix whatever was wrong, pulling her into a tight hug.

"There is nothing to be sorry for, honey." She whispered into the thick dark hair, breathing in the sweet clean scent of cinnamon and something all Natalia. "God, I love you so much."

"Don't you know? I-I don't want to be with him," Natalia murmured against her shoulder starting to cry. She pulled back, their eyes meeting, locking. "I don't love him, I love you!"

Her heart swelled at the words, and for a moment she got lost in Natalia's eyes, falling into their depths and finding peace. She never wanted to leave. They stared at each other for a long moment, before the pop-pop-pop of gunfire in the distance intruded again.

"Momma!" Francesca screamed somewhere far away, and she turned to look but couldn't see anything but more fluffy flakes falling slowly to the ground.

Suddenly Natalia grew light in her arms and she looked quickly back, only to find she was holding a wedding dress in her arms. She turned around and around in circles, but her lover was nowhere to be found.

Her heart breaking, she stood in the heat of the courtyard of the religious retreat and screamed up to the bright summer sky.

“NATAAAAAAALIA!!!”

Olivia Spencer sat bolt upright in bed, inhaling sharply as she jerked awake, heart hammering in her chest as a sadly familiar wave of grief and loss overwhelmed her. Twisting, blindly she reached out, clutching at the blankets, needing to reassure herself that Natalia was still in bed beside her.

“Natalia...” Olivia whispered into the night, sighing with relief upon finding warm familiar curves beside her. She glanced over to see if she had woken her lover, smiling as she merely snuggled into her blankets a little closer. Stroking a hand through her hair with a weary sigh, Olivia started to calm down as she realized where she was, safe at home in her bed.

Another nightmare. She should be used to it by now. Olivia shook her head and carefully slipped out of bed, knowing that sleep was going to elude her for awhile. She tiptoed out into the hallway, needing to make sure everyone was still safe and sound. Cracking open the nursery door, her mind settled even more at the sight of wee Francesca fast asleep, her tiny legs exposed as she snuggled her wubby closer, tucking the soft pink blanket tightly under her chin.

“Like mother, like daughter.” Olivia fully entered the room, smiling softly before she tugged the blanket back down to cover Sweet Pea’s small body. Leaning over to press a soft kiss to the girl’s dark hair, she breathed deep, the clean scent of baby powder and shampoo settling her rattled nerves. With one last rub to her baby girl’s belly, she made her way back out to the hallway, quietly pulling the door almost closed.

Shuffling down the hallway a little further Olivia pushed Emma’s bedroom door open a little wider so she could peek inside. Cornelius, Emma’s old battered teddy stood guard faithfully watching the girl sleep from his post on the bookshelf. It had been almost a year now since Alan’s death and so much had happened since then. There had been so much for the girl to deal with, forcing her to grow up so quickly. Kids seemed to grow up so quickly in Springfield; before she knew it Emma would be driving, leaving home and starting her own family.

Olivia shivered at the thought, her heart growing heavy. Everyone leaves eventually. She sighed and tried to shake off the thought, most likely an unwanted residue of her nightmare. She glanced back at the well loved bear, remembering how Emma's teddy had helped her then.

"Somehow I don't think good old Cornelius is gonna cut it anymore..." Olivia whispered to herself. A low woof came from Emma's bed, and a white fuzzy head popped up from under the thin blanket to stare at her.

"Shadow," Olivia hissed afraid that the dog would wake her daughter. "Quiet."

Tilting her head, the dog quickly hopped to her feet and clumsily stomped all over Emma as she made her way to the edge of the bed, landing on the wide wood planks with a clatter of nails. Olivia winced but sighed with relief as Emma just grunted and shifted, not waking at all. Shadow padded over and sat on Olivia's slipper, staring up hopefully at the woman.

Shaking her head, Olivia backed out of Emma's room, Shadow following close on her heels.

"I suppose you want a treat of some sort, doncha?" Olivia smiled at the tail wag she received with the word 'treat' as they headed down the hallway to the stairs and made their way down to the living room, towards the kitchen.

Flicking the light on, Olivia blinked and made her way over to the cupboard, quickly pulling out the bag of rawhide chew sticks the pup loved to gnaw on for hours on end.

"You tell anyone about this and I'll feed you to the felines, fuzz ball." Olivia tossed the chew stick up and grinned as the dog popped up and snatched it out of the air. Dropping to the floor, Shadow immediately started to chomp on her treat.

"Time for momma's treat." Smiling softly, Olivia turned to pull a highball tumbler from the cupboard, putting it down on the kitchen counter before reaching up to the top shelf, finding a bottle of whiskey they kept there for guests. Pulling the bottle down, Olivia opened the fridge and grabbed some ice cubes from the tray and dropped them into the glass with a clink. Twisting the cap off, Olivia tipped the bottle and paused, staring into the familiar amber depths of the alcohol.

It would be so easy, to just pour and drink the nightmare away, to drink it all away. Olivia could almost feel the burn of whiskey on her tongue, the liquid fire slipping down her throat, landing in her guts with a warm splash of heat. It wouldn't take long before she'd be comfortably numb to it all, to be able to slip back into mindless sleep...

Olivia closed her eyes and flashed back to last February in San Cristobel, Natalia's face in shadows, disappointment in her eyes, whispering into the night. *"I thought we talked about this. That you could come to me, instead of turning to a bottle..."*

"What the hell are you doing, Spencer?" Olivia dropped the bottle back to the counter top. She had said that she would do things differently this time, but it was so easy to slip back into bad old habits. She glanced down as Shadow snorted, suddenly chewing at an itch on her hind leg before looking up at her, slowly wagging her tail, unconditional love and trust reflected back at her.

Olivia sighed and grabbed the cap, twisting it back on tight before reaching and putting it back up on the shelf, quietly closing the cupboard behind it. Grabbing the tumbler she tossed the ice into the sink and opened the fridge, pouring cold milk into the glass instead. She slipped the ceramic lid off the cookie jar and snagged three home baked chocolate chip cookies.



Biting into the chewy goodness, Olivia sighed and headed for the back door. Quickly slipping on a light jacket to keep warm in the cool fall evening, she unlocked the door and made her way out onto the porch, Shadow dashing out past her to go do her business on the lawn. She leaned against the post and watched as Shadow inspected the telescope Josh had brought over a few weeks ago, still set up in the yard, sniffing at the tripod legs.

Glancing up at the star filled sky, Olivia munched quietly and took a sip of milk feeling her nerves settle and calm warmth surround her. She sank down to sit on the top step and

sighed. The last time she'd sat on this exact same spot was when Natalia had left her, her heart broken into as many pieces as there were stars in the sky.

What a difference a year made.

Her little family lay asleep upstairs, warm and safe. A farmhouse full of love, something she never thought she'd want and yet now she couldn't imagine her life without it and she would do anything to keep it from slipping through her fingers. Anything.

Olivia smiled and dipped her cookie into the milk before taking another bite. Shadow ran up and snuffled along her slippers before sticking her head into her lap. Olivia ran her fingers into the warm fur and massaged the dog's ears slowly. Movement overhead caught her eye and Olivia looked up in time to see a shooting star trail brightly across the sky.

"I wish..." Olivia closed her eyes, thinking hard for a moment. She had everything she wanted right there under her roof. There was only one thing left that she could possibly wish for. She opened her eyes and stared up into the heavens, releasing her wish to the stars, the universe, or to whoever was up there listening.

"Please don't let me fuck this up."

A warm September sun shone brightly on the citizens of Springfield, as many of its denizens rushed in and out of Company, the cheery restaurant busy with its usual morning crowd dropping in for takeout orders and the breakfast crowd. Blake Marler and Marina Cooper hustled behind the counter taking orders and filling them as fast as possible, while Buzz clattered and bellowed from the kitchen.

Olivia grinned as she wandered into the mayhem, covering a yawn with her hand as she nodded a greeting to a swamped Blake before she scanned the room and found exactly who she was looking for lurking in one of the corner booths.

"Well, you look like shit." Doris Wolfe looked up and smiled as she easily recognized who was sliding into the booth across from her.

"I love you too, Wolfe." Olivia smirked back and looked up gratefully as Marina dropped a mug of coffee in front of her and a menu and disappeared again just as quickly.

"Jesus, what does the woman dip herself into to turn that particular shade of orange?" Doris shook her head as Olivia just about spit back out her first gulp of coffee.

“Warn a girl before you do that, would you?” Olivia coughed a little, as Doris just chuckled evilly.

“So, was your hot girlfriend keeping you up late again?” Doris couldn’t resist the opportunity to tease the woman about her sex life. The mighty Olivia Spencer brought to her knees willingly by the virtuous Natalia Rivera seemed like one of those lesbian romances Blake was publishing these days. Besides it was fun to push Olivia’s buttons every now and then.

“If you must know,” Olivia glared, stirring some sugar into her coffee, avoiding Doris’ amused gaze. “I was up late working on a proposal last night.”

“Riiiiiight.” Doris smirked, before taking a sip of her own cooling coffee. “I like my version better.”

“I think I like your version better, too...” Olivia grinned and raised an eyebrow, before she whipped open the menu and began looking over her breakfast options.

Doris snorted and shook her head, taking a gulp of her coffee. She watched Olivia over the rim of her cup, taking in the weary droop to her shoulders and dark circles around the eyes. Makeup helped cover it, but the woman was certainly tired, and she somehow doubted it had anything to do with her job. In fact Doris had noticed some of those same features on herself over the last few weeks, often after a particularly rough night reliving Edmund’s rampage in her own dreams.

Doris’ eyes narrowed as she realized that maybe Olivia wasn’t working on a proposal last night after all. She let the silence between them stretch out, not sure if she should bring it up or how to even broach the topic. Maybe talking about her most recent nightmares was the way to approach it. Doris sighed and put her cup back down on the table top and took the bull by the horns.

“Actually, speaking of lack of sleep,” Doris began carefully. “I’m still having nightmares about the whole Winslow thing.” She watched her friend closely, looking for any signs that she had hit a nerve and should duck for cover. Olivia however simply looked up, saying nothing as the mayor continued on. Doris looked down at her hands, relieved in a way to talk about what had been haunting her too.

“It’s like it’s on repeat or something. I keep seeing Blake tackling me, shoving me down out of the way only to end up shot and bleeding out all over me.” She shivered at the memory, the haunting image of Blake’s dead eyes staring up at her immediately flashing into her mind. Doris forced herself back to the here and now, as Olivia dropped her menu to the table top, eyes filled with concern.

“God, Doris.” Olivia murmured sympathetically, reaching out across the table top to squeeze her friend’s arm in sympathy. Doris just shrugged a little and sighed, grabbing her spoon to stir her coffee a little more.

Olivia swallowed hard. She had survived this long; she didn’t see the point in whining about it to some therapist, or saddling her friends with her worries. Still, Doris had opened up to her. Olivia struggled a moment longer, trying to figure out best how to respond.

“Hey, you know what? You’re not alone. We’ve all been having nightmares at our house, but the family therapy seems to be helping. Felicia has been great with Emma. And Natalia has been chatting off and on with Sister Anne.” Olivia smiled softly as her friend looked up at her.

Doris nodded, silently noting that there was no one Olivia seemed to be talking to. She opened her mouth to say as much when two muffins appeared in front of them.

“Compliments of Blake.” Marina grinned as she also quickly topped up each mug. “Sorry for the wait ladies, I’ll be back.” She whisked away again, not stopping long enough to take their order. The interruption, however, had effectively broken the moment, and then Olivia’s BlackBerry buzzed. Apologizing, she quickly read through the text message and typed a terse response; Doris sighed and decided to let it drop. For now.

“Sorry, minor emergency at the Beacon. I’ll have to tear a strip off an employee a little later, nothing major.” Olivia apologized again for the text and put the phone back down on the tabletop, just in case they called back. She took a big sip of her coffee and sighed happily as the warmth trickled down into her stomach.

“You know, I’ve heard that they put crack in the coffee.” Doris leaned forward conspiratorially, pulling the top of her blueberry muffin off.

“Well, Blake would know.” Olivia began peeling the paper muffin cup from the bottom of hers. “Did she spill that tidbit to you during some pillow talk?” Olivia teased, more than happy to turn the spotlight onto Doris’ love life and away from things that kept her up at night.

“Shut up. You know good and well that we’re just friends.” Doris bristled a little, the subject of Blake a sensitive one. They both glanced over to where Blake was busily working away.

“Riiiiight.” Olivia simply arched an eyebrow as Blake waved at Doris from behind the counter. “Is that ‘friends with benefits’, you old wolf?”

Doris couldn't help herself as she smiled back at the redhead. It still caught her by surprise that the woman seemed to genuinely like her. She didn't have that many friends and didn't want to screw that up by being Blake's experiment. No, it was for the best really, to keep her at arm's length. She glanced back and found appraising green eyes watching her thoughtfully.

"Listen, no offense, but it's been my experience that straight girls just end up breaking your heart. Once they've gotten their curiosity, and other urges, satisfied, they leave you for the next handsome face that comes down the road." Doris' voice turned bitter and she tried to ignore the quiet lull in the conversation as Olivia digested her little statement.

"Is that what you really think? I've never heard it put like that before." Olivia stared at her friend. Obviously there was a story there and it didn't sound like it had a happy ending. Then again if you'd asked her opinion on that last summer she would have wholeheartedly agreed. A straight girl did break her heart for a while, too. She frowned a little at the memory.

"Yeah well, you're a little new to the wonderful world of being...you know." Doris' vaguely waved her hand, letting her friend draw her own conclusions.

"Happy?" Olivia smirked.

"Ok, that works." Doris chuckled. Glancing up she noticed a familiar face dashing into the place. "Speaking of exes..." She nodded towards the counter.

Olivia turned to see a frazzled looking Bill Lewis leaning against the wooden counter, chatting to Blake. She realized his baby should be arriving any day now. She felt an old familiar warm spot blossom for the man. He had been so good with Emma, she knew he would make a great dad. She was genuinely happy for him.

"Could I get an extra large coffee and a medium decaf herbal tea?" Bill glanced at his watch, obviously in a hurry. He glanced around and their eyes locked, saw her, smiling warmly and waving at her.

"You do have a thing for dimples, don't you...?" Doris leaned forward a little. Olivia looked back at the mayor and simply rolled her eyes.

"That was a long time ago, and besides, Natalia's dimples are much cuter." Olivia glanced down into her coffee mug and swirled the contents thoughtfully. "Actually, our anniversary is coming up this weekend."

“God, it was September when you moved back to the farmhouse, wasn’t it?” Doris shook her head, amazed at how time flies when life is good. “So, what do you have planned? Anything special?”

Olivia just smiled and took a bite of muffin.

Natalia Rivera pulled open the oak door and listened to the happy tones of the electronic chime sound as she stepped into the Beacon’s new daycare facilities. The old conference room had converted nicely into a warm inviting space and Lewis Construction had done an excellent job, finishing on time and under budget.

The wiggling bundle in her arms didn’t even seem to notice, as Francesca seemed content to tug on her mother’s hair to try to get her attention. Pulling the little fingers away, Natalia gave them a quick kiss before stepping deeper into the room.

“Hey!” Leyla Rivera came in from a small back office, a huge smile erupting as she recognized her visitors. “You’re in early.”

“You’re one to talk. Olivia and I didn’t even hear your car leave this morning.” Natalia bounced her daughter ever so slightly to keep her distracted. Turning at the sound of Leyla’s familiar voice, Francesca’s eyes widened and she reached out with both arms.

“Tee-yah.” Francesca wiggled in Natalia’s arms, trying to get closer to her aunt.

“Hey, little one, come to Tia Leyla.” Leyla laughed and scooped the baby out of her sister’s arms, tickling her little belly until she giggled and squirmed, and then dropped a squeaky kiss on the flushed pudgy cheek.

Natalia’s heart filled with joy at the sounds coming from both her daughter and sister. A year ago she never would have dreamed that her family would have been in contact with each other, let alone grown close again to Leyla. She sent a silent prayer of thanks skyward and grinned back at her sister.

“I just wanted to get in here and get things going. But I guess I didn’t need to rush, as no one’s bothered to come in yet.” Leyla tried not to let the disappointment or worry show in her voice, but Natalia heard it anyway.

“It’s going to take some time for word of mouth to build.” Natalia smiled softly, running her fingers over her daughter’s head and then shifting to tuck a stray lock of Leyla’s hair behind an ear. “Have a little faith...”

The happy tones chimed again as the door opened slowly, and two familiar figures entered the room. Both women looked at each other and smiled. It was the daycare's first official customer.

"Hi there, can we come in?" Jonathan stood in the doorway, his daughter in his arms.

"Absolutely!" Leyla smiled, pleased to see the handsome man again. She watched as the small dark haired girl slid down his lean form to land solidly on the floor. "Hi, Sarah. Have you come to stay with me today?" They all smiled at her shy nod.

"I'd like to sign Sarah up for daycare." Jonathan ran a hand through his messy dark hair, pleased when his daughter's natural curiosity finally kicked in and the girl made her way towards the small pile of toys to one side. "Since Lizzie is ready to pop and I'm busy with the new school project with Lewis Construction, my baby girl needs somewhere to go for the day. And who better than Auntie O's new Beacon daycare facilities." Jonathan grinned widely.

"Sounds good to me!" Leyla smiled warmly up into the dark eyes, swaying ever so slightly with Francesca.

Natalia stood quietly to one side, as Leyla started to get the paper work going, chatting and teasing Jonathan. By the time he had a pen out and was filling out some of the necessary forms the daycare door chimed again as a hotel guest with a toddler wandered into the room, looking around curiously. Leyla smiled warmly and went to greet the newcomers.

Natalia met Leyla's happy gaze and nodded. Things were going to work out here, just fine.

It had been relatively quiet at police headquarters since the Winslow fiasco. There were the usual petty thefts and traffic violations and even one case of a flasher down on Main Street. Not wanting to dwell on the man's short comings, Detective Anna Li had been able to wrap that one up pretty quickly. And although she should be grateful for the peace, somehow it simply felt more like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"What's a five letter word for idiot?" Remy Boudreau called out from his desk, before chomping noisily into an apple. The man loved to do crosswords at lunch. He looked up as the Chief came into the squad room, scanning it briefly as the rest of the cops in the room quickly tried to look busy.

"Oh, it would be too easy..." Anna muttered to herself, sitting up a little straighter in her chair as Frank Cooper made his way towards her desk. "Try 'dunce', Remy."

Remy scribbled it in and nodded. It fit perfectly. His cell phone rang, and seeing Cyrus Foley's name on the call display he quickly answered it. He kept a discreet eye on what was happening in the room though, not wanting to miss a thing.

"Anna, I've got a new assignment for you." Frank smiled warmly.

"Yes?" Anna said cautiously. She was immediately suspicious of the Chief's intentions. Frank was acting all chipper, bouncing on the balls of his feet and grinning at her like that. He was up to something.

"Since Officer Wendell left on maternity leave last week, we're going to need a new officer to serve at Springfield Elementary until she returns." Frank glanced over at Remy and grinned before turning and heading back out the way he had come. He tossed a final parting shot over his shoulder. "It should be an easy gig for you, Li."

"*Diu!*" Anna swore and closed her eyes. Sure she liked kids and all, in small doses, but a whole school under her watch. She was being punished, she was sure of it. Remy had a hand over his mouth as he eavesdropped, trying to keep his laughter under wraps from their boss. "Shut up Boudreau. They're kids, how much trouble can those ankle biters get into anyway?"

"Oh, I almost forgot." Frank waved a junior officer into the room, his arms full of files. "Just drop those files on Li's desk for me, will yah Johnson? Thanks."

The young man quickly deposited the folders and beat a hasty retreat. Detective Li's temper was becoming legendary around the squad. Remy's laughter finally erupted though as Frank disappeared from sight. Even Anna's glare didn't stop him.

"Sorry, man. I'll fill you in later..." Remy chuckled into his cell. "See you tonight."

Anna sighed and flipped through the files on the top of the heap, her mind spinning. How long before the average woman comes back from maternity leave anyway? Wendell was a warrior; she'd pop that kid out and be back in the saddle in six weeks. Anna bit her lip, okay maybe eight weeks? She glanced up to find Remy still grinning at her plight. It seemed like the perfect time to torment her partner a little, just for sport.

"So how is your boyfriend?" Anna smirked, sliding the file back onto the top of her pile. "Big date tonight, lover boy?"

"Shut up." Remy leaned back, still chuckling and tossed his apple core into his garbage can. "Cyrus says hi by the way. He was dropping Mel off at the new firm."

“New law firm?” Anna looked up. She vaguely recalled hearing about Doris getting involved in a new venture. Not that she was stalking her ex, but she had been following things a little in the paper since the shooting.

It had irked Anna that Doris had been raked over the coals by the Springfield Journal, with some of the locals calling for her head, muttering about the blatant disregard for the safety of the citizens. As if Doris could have stopped that mad man. Hell, the woman had been a target the day of the shooting spree. If Blake hadn’t acted so quickly...

Anna shuddered slightly and turned her attention back to her partner. She didn’t even want to think about how worse things could have turned out if Jeffrey hadn’t taken Winslow down.

“Is that the one Mel and Doris are getting started?” She asked. “They just announced that not too long ago. That happened fast.”

“Yeah. The timing was good, Mel’s old lease is up at the end of this month and so she packed up her offices and moved. The new place is pretty swank too.” Remy nodded. “Beth Spaulding is one of the partners too, her husband offered up this nice old Victorian mansion down on Old River Road that Spaulding Enterprises owns.”

Anna whistled. The mansions down there were spectacular historic buildings; the very bricks and mortar and obsessive attention to architectural detail screamed old Springfield money at its finest. Over the years, several of the old mansions had been turned into apartments and rental properties for the not-as-wealthy anymore children of old Springfield money. And a few others had been turned into offices for accountants, doctors and other professionals at every corner practically. It would be a perfect location for a high end law firm.

“Well, send my best wishes to your sister.” Anna stood up and pulled her blazer up off the back of her chair, shrugging it on. “I’m gonna log some down time, I said I’d swing by and visit Jeffrey, drop him off at Cedars for an appointment he has today. It’ll do him good; he’s going stir crazy in that apartment of his.”

“I’m sure your juvenile delinquents in training will be here waiting for you when you get back.” Remy smirked at his superior officer. Anna gave him a glare for good measure before heading out of the squad. His chuckles followed her out the door.

ACT 2

The sign for the new offices of Wolfe, Boudreau and Spaulding, Attorneys at Law, stood tastefully at the edge of a well-manicured lawn. A pathway meandered up through the lawn, past a garden overflowing with bright blooms and ending at a short stairway that headed up to a wrap-around porch on an old Victorian mansion. Beth Spaulding stood on the porch, her cell phone pressed to her ear, trying to hear what her husband was saying on the other end.

“Phillip, is that Peyton screaming at the top of her lungs?” Beth asked worriedly. She knew that she should have stayed home with her baby when the girl had woken with a headache and upset tummy. Phillip had happily volunteered to stay at home so she could go get herself set up at the new office. He refused to let her miss her first day on the job.

“She’s fine, sweetheart,” Phillip’s soothing voice came back to her over the phone. “I just wanted to wish you good luck on your first day one more time.” Beth could hear his quiet pride coming through loud and clear. She smiled and leaned against the porch post, watching a jogger run past.

“I love you,” Beth murmured softly.

“I love you too.” Phillip’s smile colored the tone of his voice and she smiled wider. “Now go rack up those billable hours. Someone around here has to pay the bills.”

Beth laughed as they hung up and she slid her phone into her purse. Bending over, she picked up her box of personal office belongings and headed in. Seeing her name on the brass plate to the side of the door made her smile again. Finally, after so much effort, she had achieved her dream.

She had thought long and hard about what name she would use professionally. In the end Beth realized that she was just old fashioned and romantic enough at heart to want to take Phillip’s name as her own, personally and professionally. And as Doris had been quick to point out, after she had informed her partners of her decision, the Spaulding name wielded a certain power to it which could come in handy for the firm. Beth was going to have to keep an eye on that wily Wolfe.

Maneuvering herself carefully, Beth managed to turn the door handle before pushing the big door open with an elbow. Making her way inside, she looked up and took in the wide staircase that wound its way upstairs to where the partners each had an office. She knew there was also enough space upstairs for a small library and current file room and a fully outfitted private washroom.

The main floor of the mansion had been converted into a reception area, with a waiting lounge in what had once been the living room. A huge brick fireplace dominated the room

and there were several very comfortable leather couches and club chairs for clients to wait in. Wide plank floors glistened, the warmth of the wood complimented the tasteful neutral colors on the walls and the thick crown molding along the edge of the ceiling.

Past the reception area was a small board room, which had once been a dining room. Behind that there was another spacious bathroom and then the kitchen, which was brightly outfitted with state of the art appliances, contrasting nicely with the exposed brick walls. There was a large harvest style table with plenty of chairs for staff to sit and eat their lunches.

Out the back door of the kitchen was a continuation of the wrap-around porch, with stairs down into a spacious back yard. A very comfortable patio set beckoned, with a barbecue tucked away over by a small utility shed.

The basement of the mansion held the vast majority of the files and office supplies for the firm. There was a bedroom with an adjoining bathroom and shower, for those nights spent burning the midnight oil a little too long on a case. And for a little rest and relaxation, or as Doris had justified it, for in-house client entertaining, there was a small pool table and a pub style bar set up with a flat screen television along one wall. Once Mel had gotten her head around spending money on this type of thing for the firm, she had insisted on a nice wine collection behind the bar. Doris had simply smiled, relishing her victory at swaying her two partners to her way of thinking.

“Do you need a hand with that, Mrs. Spaulding?” Their receptionist asked from her desk in the waiting room, nodding at the box in Beth’s hands.

“No, Jenny. I’ve got it covered.” Beth shook her head and smiled, heading up the stairs to her office. A new chapter of her life was beginning and she couldn’t wait to get started.

A gray sedan turned at the streetlight and pulled up outside the Quickie Mart. A woman opened the passenger door and stood, looking both ways down the sidewalk before dashing into the convenience store, while the driver sat in the car idling.

Wrapping the light scarf tighter around her head, the woman quickly went over to the coffee counter and poured two cups, mixing in sugar and cream liberally. Popping the plastic lids on, she looked around the quiet store and headed for the check out.

Paying the teenager at the register quickly, she slid her sunglasses back on and hurried to the door. She bumped into another woman entering the store.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Anna Li said, catching one of the paper cups before it tipped out of the woman’s hands. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good. Thanks.” The mystery woman smiled, nervously tucking stray blonde strands back under her scarf before dashing out the door, making a bee line straight for the waiting sedan.

Anna watched the car take off down the street, sensing something a little off. She shrugged, shaking the feeling off and headed inside. It had taken no time to drop Jeffrey off at the hospital and now she still had time to grab a quick sandwich before heading down to the park for some much needed stress release.

Frank made his way down into the depths of the crime lab, hidden deep in the basement of police headquarters. It was part of his routine now, to pop down and check in with Eleni. It was often the highlight of his day.

Making his way down the busy hallway, he nodded to various officers and old friends before finding himself outside of her office. Tapping lightly on the door, he waited for his ex-wife’s permission to come in.

“Please tell me that’s one of Buzz’s famous cappuccinos.” Eleni Andros smiled, looking over from her computer terminal.

“Still pretty warm, but you might want to pop it into the microwave,” Frank wandered in and dropped the paper cup on her desk top. “Pop sends his best.”

Eleni smiled wider and flipped back the plastic lid, breathing in the aroma. Too impatient to reheat the beverage, she took a quick sip and moaned appreciatively.

Frank swallowed hard at the sexy sound, and the memories they evoked, and turned to sit down.

“So, what are your plans for the weekend, Frank?” Eleni glanced over at the fidgeting man.

“Oh, well. I’ve got my little Sweet Pea with me.” Frank’s face lit up as he started to talk about Francesca. “Otherwise, I’m just hanging around.”

“Sounds heavenly.” Eleni grinned back at him. She remembered spending lazy weekends with Frank, playing with Marina in the backyard, cooking dinner for the family, snuggling

together at night watching television; a part of her longed for those simpler days, when they had been a happy family. Before she'd gone and screwed it all up.

"You know, you're a lucky man, Frank Cooper." Eleni sighed, not wanting to look too closely at her past. She couldn't change it now anyway; all she could do is work on the future.

"I guess." Frank laughed self consciously, ducking his head and rubbing at his neck. Most days he didn't feel all that lucky and he tried not to dwell on how badly his love life had been the last few years. He looked back up, his eyes locking with his ex-wife's. God, she was beautiful like this, strong, powerful and self assured. "So, what are you going to be up to?"

Eleni grimaced and turned back to her monitor, the desktop image of Marina, Shayne, and little Henry almost tormenting her, something she wanted to be a part of desperately and yet tantalizingly just out of reach. She had no one to blame but herself, part of the fall out of screwing it all up.

"I was hoping to see Henry this weekend, but Marina won't even take my calls." Eleni ran a hand through her thick waves of curls in frustration.

Frank frowned. Their daughter was so stubborn sometimes, but then she got that naturally from her mother. Still it was heartbreaking that Eleni couldn't see her own grandchild.

"What if I called her to see if she would let me babysit Henry Friday night?" Frank snapped his fingers and leaned forward, pleased with his plan. "I'm sure she'd jump at the chance for some alone time with Shayne. Come over for dinner and we could look after the kids together."

Eleni stared at Frank's earnest face and hesitated. It sounded...really good actually. She just didn't know if it was wise to have Frank in the middle of her feud with Marina. Still he had offered, and he should know how pig-headed their daughter could be.

"Okay." Eleni said; her decision made. The happy look on Frank's face made her smile wide in response.

"Okay!" Frank stood, suddenly needing to move. He needed to get the ball rolling on all this, get it all organized. "This will be great. Let me call Marina and I'll let you know what's going on."

"Sounds like a plan." Eleni took a sip of her cappuccino and watched as Frank excitedly headed out of her office, waving at her as he disappeared out of the door. She chuckled to herself. Frank was awfully cute when he got like this.

Eleni spun her chair back to start analyzing the computer data on her latest tests and tried not to dwell on the familiar little flip-flops her stomach was making.

It had been a pleasant surprise when Phillip and Peyton had swung by the school to pick Emma up and take her for a picnic lunch in the park. She had been having such a bad day, and the picnic sounded like the perfect escape. Emma giggled as Peyton dragged her dad to the sandbox, forcing him to make a sandcastle with her. She could almost ignore the big security guard watching them all from the park tree line. Almost.

“I’m just going to go down to see the ducks, okay, Daddy?” Emma asked. With a nod of his head, she made her way towards the large park pond. She kicked some stones on the pathway as she went, her mind turning back to her class that morning. It wasn’t right; her new teacher this year was stupid. She wished she had Miss Jennings again.

“It’s not fair,” Emma growled under her breath, bending to pick up a small flat rock at the edge of the pond. She had finished her project, but had left it at home by accident. Natalia had even helped her color the title page. The teacher had said that it was too bad, but Emma would have to learn that you can’t just miss deadlines and sent her back to her seat with a note for her mom, that she had failed the assignment. She had wanted to roll up into a ball and cry, but crying was for babies. So she had just not said a word and stewed about it all morning not even talking to her friends. She had been going to hang out by the teeter-totters and eat her lunch alone until she had seen her father by her locker after the class bell rang.

“I could just hit something.” Emma threw a stone across the water, watching the rock skim and bounce across the surface. A duck quacked and suddenly flew up, startling her. Emma covered her mouth in dismay.

“Oh, my gosh!” she cried out. “I’m sorry little duck!”

Emma hung her head. Great, now she almost hurt a duck too. This day was just going from bad to worse. She looked over at her father, happily playing with Peyton, who was squealing and running around him before being scooped up into a big bear hug. She wished she was little again, when things were easier. It was all so confusing now.

Across the pond, movement caught Emma’s eye. She squinted and realized that it wasn’t someone running along the path or anything. It was a woman, making weird movements with her body. Emma giggled as she recognized the lady. It was the police officer who was friends with her moms.

Emma watched the smooth movements of the police woman, the way they flowed into each other, hands posed perfectly. She looked so elegant, like she was doing a slow motion dance in a way. She tried to copy some of the movements, twisting at the waist and pretending to hack away at someone with her hands.

“Hi-yah!” Emma’s hands chopped the air frantically and then she spun and kicked waist high. It made her feel a little better, to move around and hit into the air. Giggling to herself, she turned to head back to her father, kicking and spinning the whole way.

Anna slowly moved in the warm park sunshine, smiling to herself as she saw a little girl across the way copying some of her moves. It looked a little like Olivia Spencer’s daughter, but the girl had turned and was bouncing back towards the children’s play area.

Shaking her head to clear it again, Anna took a cleansing breath and settled back into her routine. She stretched her arm out into a single whip and then shifted her weight and stepped up, raising her hands before morphing into spreading her arms wide. Just as her arms reached their correct position was when she noticed she had company.

“What are you doing, Mayor Wolfe?” Anna held her final pose and turned her head towards the redhead.

“Watching you.” Doris leaned forward, her hands resting on the back of a park bench, admiring the view. She had to admit the woman moved with grace. Her mind flashed back to other graceful movements she’d had the pleasure of experiencing at the hands of the talented detective.

Anna bit her lip and dropped her stance, sweeping low with her foot and positioning her arms just so. She didn’t want to say anything to screw this up, silence seemed to be the safest option.

“I see you’re as deadly as ever. I could be killed very, very slowly. Oooh... I’m scared.” Doris teased as Anna just shook her head and grinned. “Seriously, what is this, slow-mo kung fu or jujitsu or something?”

Anna let out a slow breath and spun to her right, her left foot placed carefully on the soft grass, as she shifted her weight forward and moved her arms precisely.

“Taoist tai chi.” Anna inhaled and twisted to her right, taking another slow step and swirling her arms along behind her. “Master Moy called it moving meditation. It centers me, frees my

mind to think while my body moves of its own accord. You should try it; work out some of those kinks.”

”Maybe I like my kinks.” Doris sassed raising an eyebrow saucily before flicking her lighter to light up a cigarette. Sinking down onto the seat of the bench, she inhaled deeply and shook her head. “Besides, there’s way too much to learn. I’ll just watch your smooth moves instead.”

Doris exhaled a long trail of smoke and admired the trim form of her ex-lover. She knew that their time spent together between the sheets had not been one of their problems. In fact that had been one thing that had given her pause. Her mind shifted to Blake for a moment, wondering idly what it would be like with her. She blinked slowly, recognizing that a part of her was afraid that Blake would up and leave her once she’d gotten this little experiment out of her system. It had happened to her before, with devastating results.

Anna meanwhile slowed her steady movements even more as her mind raced. Was Doris actually flirting with her?

“I was cutting through the park on my way to a city council meeting and I saw you. Thought I’d stop by and say hello.” Doris closed her eyes for a moment and took another drag of her smoke. It was good to see Anna again. A part of her questioned off and on whether she had she been too hasty where the other woman was concerned. If she was honest, there were still some feelings lingering for Anna. Before she considered moving on, maybe they should talk about it.

Or fuck each other senseless.

Doris’ eyes snapped open at that last random thought. Where had that come from? She watched as Anna bent and twisted, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of cleavage from her black tank top. Oh, that could have something to do with the suddenly randy thoughts.

“Well, I’m glad you did.” Anna continued to shift and flow, trying not to get her hopes up. She concentrated on her movements instead of how she was feeling. It was safer that way.

Doris sat and puffed on her cigarette in silence. Just what the hell did the new and improved Doris Wolfe want anyway? There were days she missed the ‘want-take-have and just cover your ass’ mentality she had lived by for so long. To be honest, she just didn’t know what she wanted anymore. Damn this whole new leaf and morals thing, it was messing with her head way too much.

Tossing her cigarette butt to the ground, Doris twisted her foot and crushed it out. Talking to Anna might be a good idea though; she knew it was high time to figure out her own

feelings between her ex-lover and her potential new one in Blake. It was a good place to start anyway.

“Um...I was wondering if you would be interested in having dinner with me?” Doris finally choked out.

Anna stopped mid-movement and straightened, not quite believing her ears.

Doris cleared her throat self-consciously and looked down at the grass.

“I miss talking with you.” The redhead moistened her lower lip with her tongue. This was so damn hard. After a beat she was relieved to hear the detective’s voice.

“I miss that too, Doris.” Anna smiled. “Sure. I’d love to go out.”

Doris smiled back and nodded as she stood. This was good. They could work out some of their old issues and she could see how she felt. See where things headed. Maybe check out a basketball game or something together. The Springfield High School basketball team would be playing again soon. Even if they just ended up as friends, she could always do with more friends in her life.

“Let me make some arrangements. I’ll call you later, okay?” Doris said, feeling a lot lighter all of a sudden.

Anna gave her a lopsided grin and nodded, a little stunned at the turn of events.

“Good. Well, say, look at the time, I should probably get going. It’s hard work wasting all that taxpayer money.” Doris stood and started to back away. Turning she headed back down the pathway, towards the street. She looked back over her shoulder, with a cute little wave goodbye before turning back and striding back towards city hall.

Anna stood for a moment watching the woman go, the sway of her hips distracting her pleasantly. She shook her head and sighed.

“Okay, what the hell just happened?”

“Happy Anniversary, Lillian. A little early.” Olivia stood at the nurse’s station on B wing of Cedars Hospital. She had spent enough of her own time on the wing to be on the first name basis with most of the staff here.

“Thank you, Olivia.” Lillian flushed a little and smiled up at her. “What brings you here? Are you visiting someone?”

“Oh, I’m here to see Rick. Check out how the old ticker is doing.” Olivia glanced down at her feet. It wasn’t a lie exactly. She did have an appointment with him in about half an hour, two floors up from here. She refused to look at the pamphlets for therapists tucked haphazardly into her purse. Maybe this had been a bad idea after all, researching therapists. She could just keep going to the family sessions with Emma and Natalia. Sure, Natalia had been seeing Felicia a few times on the side as well, but the shooting had been so traumatic it made perfect sense. The nightmares would die down eventually, just like they always did before...

Lillian smiled warmly and nodded, not even blinking at the explanation. She reached out and squeezed Olivia’s arm, breaking her out of her thoughts.

“I guess it’s your anniversary, too. You and Natalia moved back in together not long before the wedding, right?”

“Yeah,” Olivia smiled, touched that Lillian even remembered. “It’ll be a year on Saturday.”

“Oh honey, that’s wonderful. Are you doing anything special?” Lillian grinned at the slightly flustered woman. Luckily, Olivia was saved by the bell, as Lillian’s pager went off. “Sorry. They need me to cover in emergency.” Lillian apologized and headed for the stairs in a rush. “Give my best to Natalia!”

“Okay, thanks!” Olivia stood and waved at the departing nurse as she disappeared into the stairwell. Shaking her head, she turned to go find the elevators herself, headed for Rick’s office and ran right into a quickly moving body.

“Oh, God! I’m sorry are you all right,” Olivia grabbed wide shoulders to catch her balance, strong arms holding her tight and looked up into familiar blue eyes and deep dimples. “Bill?”

Bill Lewis stepped back and smiled wider. Olivia looked good in a black pencil skirt and a flowing green blouse, matching the color of her eyes attractively.

“Hey there! How are you?” Bill looked up, their eyes locking. Olivia smiled and took a step back, moving out of his arms.

“I’m good. How are Lizzie and the baby? She must be due any day now.” Olivia was happy for her ex-husband. After seeing Bill with Emma and now with little Sarah, she knew he was going to be a great father.

“Actually she’s a little overdue.” Bill checked his watch suddenly realizing the time. “And she’s in seeing the doctor now. That’s where I was just headed.”

“Relax, Bill. Trust me, you’re gonna do just fine.” Olivia nodded at the somewhat frazzled father-to-be. She wondered briefly just how much sleep he was getting.

“Thanks, I should go though.” Bill smiled, flashing his dimples at her before dashing past her towards the office he was needed in. “Good to see you.”

“You too.” Olivia shook her head as he disappeared down the hall. She headed to the bank of elevators and hit the call button, thinking that despite all the pain they had gone through, things had turned out exactly as they were meant to be.

She wouldn’t want it any other way.

Natalia checked her watch and hurried into Cedars. She was sure she was going to miss Olivia’s appointment with Rick, having stopped to clean up the reservation mess this morning. Olivia was going to kill someone if she hadn’t stepped in and rearranged everything. There was nothing like a free dinner at the Chef’s table to help smooth ruffled feathers.

Taking the stairs up instead of waiting for the elevator, Natalia passed a quickly descending Lillian who waved at her while muttering something about the emergency room. Finally reaching the sixth floor where the professional offices were located, she made her way down the hallway to the third door on the left. Hurrying into the room, Natalia looked up just in time to keep from tripping over Jeffrey O’Neill’s out stretched leg.

“Jeffrey!” Natalia pulled up short as the wounded man shifted trying to protect himself. “Oh my gosh, I’m sorry.” She swallowed hard and moved carefully around him, realizing it would be rude to not sit beside him in the small waiting room.

“Hey, Natalia!” Jeffrey smiled back at her. “What brings you to Cedars? Everything okay?”

“I’m fine.” Natalia tugged off her light jacket and settled down beside him. “It’s just Olivia’s regular heart check up and I wanted to be here for her. With all the drama around the...” Natalia waved her hands vaguely, both of them knowing the topic she was trying to avoid discussing. “You know. And with Billy’s heart attack, well, I kind of insisted Olivia come in just to be sure.”

“That makes perfect sense.” Jeffrey smiled softly. It was completely understandable and touching that the little spitfire sitting beside him was still in ‘protect-her-family’ mode. “Rick’s running behind, like usual. He wanted to check my leg to see how it’s progressing.”

Natalia nodded and looked down at her hands for a moment. Despite her personal feelings of anger towards the man, she really needed to address the shooting and their roles in how it all played out. She had been talking with their family therapist about how upset she was with the man for past injuries mixing up with her gratitude over the shooting. She sighed knowing that Felicia Boudreau would be happy to hear of this progress, she was sure, but right now it was not the time and place that she really wanted to do it. God rarely presented opportunities when you wanted them though, it seemed.

“I feel I should thank you for everything you did.” Natalia looked up at the man who had saved her and her family from certain tragedy. “And I do appreciate that, Jeffrey. More than you’ll ever know.”

“I’d be lying if I said it was just my job.” Jeffrey shifted self-consciously. It had felt damn good when he had learned Winslow had been taken down with his shot. He only wished that he had finished it once and for all. Still it was a victory for the good guys, even if there was still dangling loose ends with Anna’s father lingering in the background. “It was personal. I’m just glad you didn’t have to deal with the consequences of the shooting.”

Down at the far end of the hallway, the elevator dinged and Olivia stepped out, digging for her cell phone in her purse. Fumbling with the bag, she dropped it to the floor right outside the doorway to the waiting room. Kneeling to retrieve it, she paused as she heard her name mentioned inside by a very familiar voice.

“Olivia has been a rock, Jeffrey. I don’t know what I’d do without her sometimes. We’ve been dealing with a lot, trying to keep our family safe, first with Jane’s death and now the whole shootout thing with Edmund. I’m glad that there wasn’t the additional weight of Edmund’s shooting on my soul as well.” Natalia said sincerely. She would have been tormented by killing Edmund, but she had no doubt that she wouldn’t have done anything differently.

Olivia stood and leaned against the wall, listening to her lover speak. She knew it would have ripped Natalia apart to have had to deal with shooting a man, possibly killing him. She would always be thankful to Jeffrey for saving Natalia, in more ways than one. She moved to enter the small room but paused again as her partner went on.

“I don’t want to seem ungrateful, Jeffrey,” Natalia continued. “And I know you mean well, but I want you to stay away from our family and from Olivia in particular. I realize Ava is your daughter and that you have a wonderful relationship with her. And I know Olivia has somehow been able to forgive you for everything in the past, or at least look past it.”

Jeffrey grew very still, not expecting this turn in the conversation. He turned to face her dark eyes, glittering now with barely controlled fury.

“But I’m not Olivia,” Natalia ground out, her voice low and intense. “I cannot get past what you did to her, how you hurt her.”

Jeffrey’s eyes widened. He flushed with embarrassment and a little anger at being called out after all this time but he wisely held his tongue and waited.

Natalia ran her hand through her long dark hair and tried to organize her thoughts, to calm the churning of her stomach. She took a deep breath, trying to release some of the anger bubbling inside.

“Listen, all I wanted to say was that I know what happened. Not the warm and fuzzy, we were just crazy kids who drank too much and things got out of hand line, okay.” Natalia leaned forward to make her point. “You hurt her, Jeffrey. You took that beautiful spirited little girl that was Olivia Spencer and you damaged her forever.”

Natalia closed her eyes, the pain and anger flowing through her. Felicia had suggested it might be something she had needed to address, to work through. Confronting Jeffrey hadn’t been quite what the doctor had meant maybe, but this was working for her. She slowly opened her eyes and pinned the man with an unyielding stare.

“And while I’ve prayed for the strength to forgive you for it,” Natalia’s eyes grew dark with the conflicted emotions playing just beneath the surface and her voice dropped to a dangerous growl. “I just can’t do it. I will never forgive you for raping Olivia, and you can be sure I will never forget it.”

Jeffrey said nothing, simply taking in everything the angry woman beside him said. He deserved every word and he knew it. Anna had warned him that it had come out when she had revealed where she knew him and Olivia from. And as hard as it was to hear the words falling from Natalia’s lips, it was almost a relief that someone was calling him on it.

Outside the doorway, Olivia swallowed down the pain and shook her head, wiping at a tear slowly trickling down her cheek. She couldn’t believe her ears. No one had ever protected her like this, fought for her like this. It was almost overwhelming really.

“I only have to look as far as your faked death to see the pain you can still inflict, all in the name of the greater good. Well, screw that. All your good intentions aside, I will protect my family from you. And that includes Ava now too, by the way. Make no mistake; Olivia will never be hurt by you again. I’ll see to it personally.” Natalia felt as if the world had

suddenly righted itself again. She stared at the man a moment longer to make sure her message had sunk in. "Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal." Jeffrey said tersely. Not only was he tormented by destroying his marriage to Reva by his own actions, here was another friendship with a good woman effectively ruined because of his past indiscretions.

"Mr. O'Neill," the receptionist called from her desk. "Dr. Bauer can see you now."

Natalia watched as Jeffrey simply nodded and stood, awkwardly making his way over to the office door. Tapping lightly, the nurse opened the door for him and they entered Rick's office.

Natalia glanced around the busy waiting room, at the surreptitious looks shot her way, wondering just who had heard what. She didn't care though; it felt good to finally get it off her chest. She jumped a little as someone suddenly dropped down into the seat Jeffrey had just vacated.

"Oh!" Natalia blinked at a very emotional Olivia staring back at her, her green eyes filled with unshed tears. "How long have –"

Natalia lips were quickly captured, tenderly at first, once, twice and then long fingers slid into her hair as Olivia pressed against her lips, deepening the kiss. Pulling apart slowly, Natalia opened her eyes, oblivious to anyone else sitting in the busy waiting room who might be watching.

"Shh, don't cry." Natalia murmured softly. Reaching out, she wiped away a slowly falling tear with her thumb before gently cupping her lover's flushed cheek. Olivia turned her head slightly, pressing a soft kiss to Natalia's palm, their eyes locking again before she finally found her words.

"You're still my freakin' superhero..." Olivia offered a watery smile.

"No, baby." Natalia whispered as they both leaned forward slightly, foreheads touching affectionately in that old familiar way. "I'm just the woman who loves you..."

ACT 3

It didn't take long for word of mouth to start to spread the news of the new Beacon daycare facilities. The first few days of business had seemed to just fly by for all

concerned, with both staff members and outside clients thrilled with the new service offered at the hotel.

Ava Peralta hesitated outside the door of the busy little area. At their morning meeting, Olivia had encouraged her to drop in and check it out, her mother apparently quite pleased with how everything was going. And to be honest she was a little curious to see how Leyla had taken the business plan they had worked on together and turned it into reality.

Still Ava was a little reluctant to go in. If she was honest with herself, it was seeing all the sturdy little children, running and playing around that was giving her pause. It was at times like that when she would realize that her son would be two if he had lived.

Running a hand through her hair, Ava paced a little in the hallway. She had struggled through the hardest part of her post partum depression in the treatment center Jeffrey had sent her to in Chicago. And moving to San Francisco had helped her heal, but she still didn't like to talk about Max, the gaping hole in her heart was sometimes too much to bear. Remy at least had Christina and little CK to fill that hole deep inside. Who did she have?

Sighing at the dark turn her thoughts had taken, Ava tugged at the door and plastered a smile on her face as the annoyingly happy tones of the chime rang out and several small children looked up from their toys. One of the part-time daycare employees grinned up at her before turning back to keep an eye on the smallest ones at her feet. Looking around the room, she found Leyla sitting behind a small desk, busily entering something into her laptop.

Ava stepped deeper into the room, her attention diverted as she noticed two young boys playing with a truck, making vroom sounds and beeping when the truck would back up. Sudden tears pricked, but she couldn't turn away from the happy laughter of the boys as they played.

Leyla looked up from her work, noticing the familiar form standing transfixed in the middle of the room. She frowned at the wistful look on Ava's face, growing concerned as she saw the other woman fighting off tears. Something seemed very wrong, but she was reluctant to say anything.

To be honest, she was never quite sure where they stood with each other these days. Sometimes she and Ava fought like cats and dogs and other times it felt like they could be good friends, given half a chance. Part of her still didn't quite trust Ava though, waiting for the other shoe to drop as it were.

“Hey there, stranger!” Leyla called out warmly in greeting, drawing Ava from the cheerful playing going on before her. Despite their rocky friendship, she was genuinely glad to see the other woman. Their relationship had been relatively friendly since Ava had taken a look over her business plan, even having suggested some good pointers before she presented the whole thing to Olivia. She watched as the other woman carefully made her way around several discarded toys lying on the floor and came to stand beside the desk.

“Congratulations! It looks great in here.” Ava sat down on the edge of the long desk, pleased as Leyla accepted the compliment.

“Thanks, but I had a lot of help along the way from many people, including you.” Leyla grinned back. “We started off a little slow but everything seems to be falling into place.” She noticed Ava seem to drift off again, as a boy scampered past them. Leyla blinked slowly, realizing something was definitely not right, wondering if maybe she should mention something to Natalia or Olivia about it.

“That’s great.” Ava murmured distracted. A sweet child’s laugh rang out to her left, and she suddenly found it hard to breath, her chest constricting almost painfully. This was becoming too difficult for her. Ava knew she needed to head out before it all overwhelmed her. She stood suddenly. “I should go though. I just wanted to check out how nicely Mom got your new venture set up for you.

“It’s not like it was handed to me, you know.” Leyla frowned, not liking the tone of that comment. She shook her head confused. The woman ran hot and cold. What was wrong with her anyway? She watched as the willowy brunette rolled her eyes and started heading for the door.

“Right. Like this would have happened any other way.” Ava snipped at the confused woman, taking the opportunity to fall back on familiar ground, needing the anger or something to help her to escape the room as the laughter of little boys playing swirled around her.

“Hey, I worked hard to get this up and running.” Leyla grumped back. She had been worried about Ava, but if she wanted to be all prickly like this then she could give as good as she got.

“And Natalia whispering in my mother’s ear on your behalf had nothing to do with it.” Ava’s gaze narrowed, warming up to the brewing disagreement. She smiled in triumph as Leyla’s eyebrows descended and her lips formed a tight line, like she was fairly biting her tongue off. A blaze of anger sparked in Ava stomach and it was good to feel something, anything, again.

"Y'know what? Let's just not do this, okay?" Leyla stood now too, trying hard to keep her anger under check. It was one thing to taunt her, push her buttons, but to drag Natalia into this was just not cool.

"Fine." Ava checked her watch and headed to the door. "I should be going anyway." A yellow Nerf ball launched from across the room and suddenly beaned her in the head, bouncing up and away from her as she passed by the group of boys playing. She stiffened as she heard Leyla stifle a laugh behind her, and tugged the door open, the chimes sounding oddly flat and annoying now.

The day was just going from bad to worse...

Anna pulled her car into the parking lot of Springfield Elementary and quickly found a spot. Stepping slowly out of her car, she slid her sunglasses down onto her nose and zipped her jacket up against the brisk fall breeze. Feeling naked without her service revolver which she had stored in the trunk for safe keeping while at the school, she sighed and locked her car with the key fob, before turning to face the two story brick building.

"Ready or not, here I come." Anna smirked and headed in.

Once inside, she headed down the long hallway, kids scrambling all around her, on their way outside for recess if the ringing bell was any indication. Finally finding the main office, Anna pushed the door open and walked up to the counter.

"Can I help you, dear?" An older pudgy woman looked up and smiled at her before making her way out from behind her desk and to the counter.

The name on her desk plate said Mrs. Kilbride and Anna was surprised that the woman was shorter than she was. Anna removed her sunglasses and returned the warm smile.

"I'm looking for Principal Smith." Anna asked as the other woman checked an open appointment book on the counter.

"You must be Detective Li?" Mrs. Kilbride smiled again as Anna just nodded. "Principal Smith just stepped out for a few minutes." She mimed puffing a cigarette, and shook her head disapprovingly.

"Ah, I see. A three inch break. Not a problem, I'll just wait until he's back." Anna glanced at the chairs lining one side of the office, two boys glaring at each other as they waited there. "Is there a washroom nearby?"

“Oh, sure. Head out this door and then at the end of the hallway turn left. Then right at the library, around the corner and it’s just there on your left. You can’t miss it.” The woman beamed.

“Ok,” Anna frowned, a little unsure.

“I can take you there. I’m going right past.” A young woman’s warm voice sounded behind her. Anna turned to find an attractive teacher standing there. She blinked in surprise a moment before finding her voice.

“Oh, thanks.” Anna smiled, subtly admiring the woman’s soft curves. Why didn’t she have cute teachers like this back in the day? She stretched out her hand. “Detective Anna Li, I’m the new officer for the school.”

“Calliope Jennings. Nice to meet you, Detective.” Ms. Jennings smiled warmly back, shaking the offered hand as a delicate flush colored her cheeks.

“Please, call me Anna.” She moved a little closer, charmed by the younger woman.

“Fine, only if you call me Callie then.” The teacher wrapped her arms around her textbook, hugging it close as she pushed the office door open with her hip, nodding for the detective to follow. Anna stepped out into the hallway, feeling like a fish going against the current as children flowed in and around her.

“You get used to it.” Callie laughed and tilted her head, indicating the direction to head and they waded their way down the hallway.

“What grade do you teach?” Anna asked, distracted by the gentle sway of the woman’s hips in front of her. They turned left at the junction and kept going down the next hallway.

“Grade four. I love working here and the kids are generally good, y’know?” Callie glanced back, just as Anna looked up, their eyes meeting.

“That’s nice to hear.” Anna grinned, barely noticing the library as they passed. She did notice the sudden shouting coming from the doorway to the library though.

“Oh, that’s not good...” Callie murmured and dashed towards the open doorway.

Anna followed, recognizing Olivia’s daughter and another girl in a terse argument as they got closer. Callie had suddenly turned into the big bad Ms. Jennings as she reprimanded the girls, and Anna had to stop the grin as naughty thoughts suddenly came to mind.

“Emma, Sarah, stop that this instant. You both know better than that.” Callie’s voice rose just high enough to be heard over the argument, silencing both girls immediately. Sarah tugged a book out of Emma’s hand and grinned triumphantly as Emma glared back at her. Ms. Jennings held out her hand for the book, taking it from a reluctant Sarah.

“Thank you.” Callie glanced down at the book, fully expecting to see Justin Bieber’s floppy-haired face staring back at her. “Karate for Dummies?”

“She started it.” Sarah glanced back at Emma who was now staring at her feet, before looking down at her own toes too. Anna stepped forward, taking the book from Callie’s hand. She glanced over at Emma, realizing that she had been watching her work out in the park the other day and had obviously made an impression with the girl.

“I don’t care who started it. This book is going back into the library right now and there will be no more fighting, do you understand?” Callie glanced back and forth at the two girls.

“Yes, Ms. Jennings,” they said in unison.

“Ok, let’s go.” Callie shook her head at Anna. She didn’t know what had gotten into the girls. They had been such good friends when they used to be in her class. Anna handed the book back to her and smiled.

“Would you mind if Emma showed me the way to the girl’s washroom, Cal...I mean...Ms. Jennings?” Anna tilted her head at the subdued girl. She glanced at Emma, startled at how much she reminded her of Olivia, so stubborn and determined to do things her own way. It took her back to when they had been kids on San Cristobel, a lifetime ago now. “We could talk about fighting maybe?”

Callie hesitated, but she trusted the detective knew what she was doing, so she nodded. She turned to return the book with Sarah into the library.

“It was nice to meet you.” Anna waved a little at the departing teacher. “I hope we run into each other again sometime.”

“Me, too, Detective.” Callie smiled back at her one final time before herding the other girl into the library.

Oh, yes. This assignment was definitely looking up. Anna grinned to herself before turning back to the quiet girl beside her. They stood alone together for a moment before the girl started to walk down the hallway in a huff. Anna followed closely behind.

“You aren’t gonna tell my mom, are you?” Emma finally asked.

“Nope, I don’t get enough hazard pay for that, but maybe you should. What do you think?” Anna asked as they made their way through the maze of hallways. Emma just shrugged a shoulder and sighed. Anna stifled a grin. Oh, she was going to be a handful some day. Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it?

Anna assessed the situation though. Emma just needed a little focus, self-discipline and some order in her life. She almost felt sorry for Olivia and Natalia and what was going to be coming their way before too long.

“I saw you in the park the other day, doing karate or something.” Emma looked up earnestly at the other woman. She flattened her hand and did a slicing chop through the air. “It looked really cool. That’s why I wanted that book. So I could learn to do that too, but Sarah was being a copy cat and stole it from me before I could sign it out.” Emma pouted slightly as they stopped walking.

Anna looked up to find they were at the washrooms. She would be hard pressed to find her way back to the main office now. She glanced back at the girl, who seemed to be weighing something over in her mind.

“Would you teach me?” Emma blurted out, her eyes shining with curiosity and genuine interest. “I’d be good, I promise.”

“Um, well...” Anna hesitated. She wasn’t sure how Olivia or Natalia would feel about her teaching Emma any sort of martial art, even something as benign as tai chi. Still it would be a good way for the girl to settle down, learn some control and vent some of her frustration. Anna sighed. “Tell you what. I’ll ask your moms, but no promises. Okay?”

Emma’s huge smile said it all.

Anna shook her head. Apparently, she was a total sucker for both generations of Spencer women.

The afternoon sun threw long shadows across the park pathways as Jeffrey made his way to the gazebo. It was a beautiful spot to people watch, with the flower beds all around. He sank down on one of the benches and waited.

Ava’s text had said she would be able to meet with him, and he wasn’t looking forward to this conversation at all. Anna had seemed understanding the other day as he discussed his new orders from the government agency he worked for once again. She would still keep a sharp eye out here for him and keep him in the loop.

Jeffrey looked up as he saw his daughter making her way across the park lawns towards him. She was so elegant and beautiful, it made his heart ache. Natalia's strong words the other day had only been one more reason to leave for awhile. To let things settle down here a bit.

"Dad." Ava smiled as she stepped up into the gazebo, kissing her father on the cheek before sliding down onto the bench beside him.

"Hey, sweetheart." Jeffrey glanced down at their clasped hands. "Thanks for meeting me."

"I've always got time for you, you know that." Ava grinned back.

"I've got a few people I need to talk to." Jeffrey looked back up and met his daughter's eye, not wanting. "I've decided that I'm going to leave town for awhile."

Ava frowned at her father.

"But you've only been back a few months. What about your family?"

"I promise that you, and Colin, will know where I am," Jeffrey said, cutting her off. "You will always know where to find me sweetheart." He said a little softer, his eyes gentling. "It's too hard, Ava. It breaks my heart to watch Reva build a life with Josh, seeing my son being raised by another man. I just need to get my head back together, and then I'll come back."

Ava nodded. She could understand that. She turned and wrapped her arms around her father, not happy with the situation at all, but resigned to accept it.

"And Natalia has made it clear that she doesn't want me near Olivia." Jeffrey pulled away slightly, but kept an arm around his daughter's shoulder as she continued. Natalia's words still stung, even though he knew why she felt the need to talk to him about it. Who could blame her? She was only drawing the line in the sand and telling him not to cross it. A part of him respected her immensely for having the balls to do it too. Jeffrey could see what Olivia saw in the little spitfire. He glanced up to see Ava's eyebrows descend.

"What did she say to you, Dad?" Ava asked quietly, her anger barely controlled. That interfering woman continued to wrap everyone around her little finger, manipulating her mother to do just about anything. It just wasn't right.

"It was nothing that I didn't deserve, okay. So stand down." Jeffrey smiled sadly at his daughter, softly cupping her cheek. "It's for the best right now that I go, but I need you to be strong and to keep an eye on our little family for me. Check in with your brother, Colin, too and make sure he doesn't forget me."

Ava glanced down at her feet, but nodded. It felt like everyone she loved was leaving her or was being taken from her grasp and she didn't like it. She felt herself pulled into a hug, snuggling into her father's strong arms.

"I love you, baby." Jeffrey murmured into his daughter's dark hair. "Promise me you'll try to stay safe."

Ava just nodded against his shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of his cologne and memorizing the sound of his voice, before he disappeared from her life once again.

Olivia sat behind her desk at the Beacon, pouring over the month end projections. Even with the added expenditure of the new daycare facilities, September was shaping up to be quite the profitable month. There had been some concern that Edmund's shooting rampage would scare away tourists and visitors to the area. Apparently, having a local lunatic shoot up the town and have it plastered all over the television news good for business. Who knew?

She looked up as her office door quietly opened to find Natalia standing there. It was so incredibly good to have her lover back at work, even on a part-time basis. Something in the way the woman looked at her just seemed to calm her down. Olivia was sure the staff was thrilled, too, if the happy faces around the hallways and staff meetings were any indication.

"Hey there, gorgeous. Got a minute?" Natalia asked, smiling from the doorway.

"For you, I've got a lifetime." Olivia tossed down her pen and grinned, putting her hands behind her head and leaning back into her leather chair and spinning slightly from side-to-side. "Too sappy?"

"Oh, not at all. Sappy definitely works." Natalia grinned wider and came into the office, watching as Olivia stared at her, seemingly distracted by the sway of her hips as she walked closer. Shaking herself a little to draw attention from the lure of her lover, Natalia willed herself to switch back into business mode as she glanced down at her BlackBerry, checking her schedule for the upcoming week.

"Oh, I've asked Keira to pencil in a meeting next with Greg. He has a proposal for us to look at. Apparently it has something to do with a Halloween extravaganza in support of a local community resource center." Natalia scrolled down looking at the email she'd gotten from him already about it.

“Well, of course it would be an extravaganza if Greg is involved,” Olivia teased, as she came out from behind her desk to see what Natalia’s email from the man said. She leaned over her lover’s shoulder, nuzzling along her cheek as she read over some of the preliminary details. “Hmm, it’s for the local LGBT community.”

“We should really support that, don’t you think?” Natalia asked breathlessly, as her lover’s hands started to wander over her body.

“Definitely.” Olivia said as she nipped at a tender earlobe, then dropping a soft kiss to Natalia’s cheek. Hearing a knock at the door and a discreet cough, Olivia moved slightly as Keira popped her head inside the office.

“Ms Spencer, there’s a Detective Li here to see you, if you’re available?”

“Please, send Anna in.” Olivia and Natalia exchanged worried glances as they waited. Surely they would have heard if there was news about Edmund or any of his fanatical followers or goons.

Anna soon entered the office, smiling warmly as Keira ushered her in and shut the door behind her. She quickly turned her attention to the concerned women in the room.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice,” Anna started as they all sat down.

“Is it Edmund?” Natalia asked anxiously. She may not have shot the man but a part of her, deep down was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with how much she actually wanted to. It was something she definitely needed to explore with Felicia.

Anna’s eyes widened and she realized that, of course, the two women would automatically think this had something to do with that crazy bastard.

“No, no. Nothing to do with that at all. Sorry I should have been clearer when I spoke to your assistant about why I was here to see you.” Anna tried to reassure them; however, they only looked more confused. “There has been no change with the Winslow case. This visit actually has to do with your daughter.”

“What did Ava do?” Olivia asked, immediately jumping to conclusions. She knew her daughter had been moody lately but to do something that attracted the attention of the police was not good at all.

“Whoa, I’m not here about Ava. It’s Emma.” Anna smiled as she tried to explain. “She saw me doing tai chi in the park the other day and now she’s asked me to show her how to do some martial arts. I told her that I’d ask the two of you about it first and then we’d see.”

Natalia and Olivia's eyes narrowed and then they looked at each other. It would almost be funny if Anna wasn't the one who was on the hot seat with the two of them.

"Martial arts?" Olivia asked. "She's still just a baby." She looked up at Natalia as her lover took her hand and squeezed sympathetically.

"Well, actually, Felicia had said that Emma might benefit from some form of regular physical program." Natalia said softly.

"Ok, joining the volleyball team at school is a little different than learning how to fling some guy over your shoulder and slam him into the ground." Olivia's eyes turned a darker shade of green, anger starting to take hold as she stood to start pacing. "She's only a little girl."

Anna sighed and tried again. She knew this wasn't going to be easy. Damn that cute kid.

"It's not like that. I just want to show her the basic moves for Taoist Tai Chi. It's a gentle form of movement, with a certain set pattern of moves that are repeated in various forms. Seniors all over the place do this for exercise. It's very good for your health and flexibility."

"Ok, so let her take up ballet or gymnastics." Olivia waved her arms, starting to get upset. Natalia stood and made her way over to her lover. Olivia shook her head as her lover approached. "I don't need her learning how to hurt people, Natalia."

"Querida, listen. I more than anyone know that hurting someone else is not the answer. If I had actually shot and killed Edmund, I would have struggled with that for the rest of my life. But if I had never done anything to protect myself and my family, and something horrible had happened, I don't think I could ever live with that." Natalia glanced down, their fingers tangling together, both of them needing the connection with the other. "Emma needs structure in her life, to feel like she's in some kind of control. I think the self-discipline of a martial art would be perfect, build her confidence."

Olivia sighed and shook her head. Natalia smiled softly knowing the battle was almost done.

"And she asked me to teach her." Anna added from her chair. "Emma is a bright girl, but she's struggling. She can see her boundaries and know she's starting to push at them. Pushing you, testing you, too, I bet. This would be a good way for her work through stuff."

Olivia turned to Natalia realizing what they were saying was the truth, but she didn't want her baby to grow up too fast. Olivia had suffered consequences that she was still dealing with now because she had rushed to grow up. But then, if she had the opportunity to learn

discipline and honor instead of trying to find meaning in the next party or next cute guy things might have ended up differently.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Olivia sighed again. Natalia wrapped her arms around her lover from behind, recognizing that she had given in to the idea. Kissing her partner's neck tenderly, she held tight for a moment and they both looked back to the waiting detective.

"Ok, Anna. When did you want to start working with Emma?" Olivia finally said.

Anna blinked a moment and grinned. This looked like the beginning of a beautiful new friendship with her and the Spencer-Rivera household.

By the time five o'clock rolled around Olivia was ready for a cocktail, or ten. After a quick call to Natalia to remind her partner that she was meeting up with Doris after work and to see if there was anything she needed to pick up, making the necessary stop at the Mini Mart for some extra diapers and fighting idiot drivers on the congested streets of Springfield, she was more than ready to try to relax. She didn't even have a chance to knock on the Mayor's front door as it suddenly swung open, the redhead greeting her with martini in hand.

"You look like you could use this Spencer." Doris grinned and handed it over, ushering the tired looking woman into her home.

"You have no idea." Olivia chuckled and took a sip of the expertly mixed drink before coming in to settle on the couch in the living room. Apparently Doris had picked up a few things from dating a bartender. A plate of cheese, crackers and fruit sat on the low coffee table and she started to feel herself relax as she popped a strawberry into her mouth.

Olivia looked up as Doris came into the living room and dropped down into the easy chair beside the couch. She was casually dressed in jeans and a white cotton shirt, with a hunter green t-shirt peeking out underneath. Olivia thought she looked good like this, comfortable and at ease, instead of constantly running around and stressed with her job. Politics was not for the timid that was for sure, but with all the extra drama lately it was starting to take a bit of a toll on Doris. She was glad the woman had decided to switch back into private practice once her term was up. Even just getting the new firm set up had seemed to breathe new life into her friend and for that Olivia was glad.

"I was over at the new offices today, getting things unpacked," Doris sighed and leaned back taking a sip of her own red wine. "Even though I'm not really doing anything until my term is up, I still want to be involved in the set up and organization."

"I drove past the other day, the place looks fantastic from the front," Olivia said, spreading a little brie on a cracker and biting into it.

"Thanks. I love the old Victorians myself. And Phillip is giving us a good deal on the rent too." Doris grinned. "I knew Beth was going to be an asset."

Olivia chuckled and the conversation quickly turned to the mundane things of life, troubles at work and funny things the kids had done. By the time Doris stood to refill their drinks, Olivia was fending off questions about what she was going to do for their big one year anniversary.

"Come on, spill it. Moving in with 'the love of your life' was a big deal," Doris paused in her mixing to make little air quotes. She couldn't resist the teasing. Olivia and Natalia were disgustingly cute together, almost annoyingly so, but she couldn't begrudge them their happiness. Doris leaned to the left as a balled up napkin just missed hitting her on the head. "You must have something planned."

"Nothing I'm going to share with you." Olivia chuckled, holding firm. She grew thoughtful for a moment though. "You know, I think we will probably always celebrate that day. It really was the start of our lives together. Even after we get married, it will always hold a special place in my heart."

"So... hot, sweaty, monkey sex is what you're saying then? Gotcha." Doris smirked as she tossed some extra olives into the martini glass, pleased as Olivia broke out laughing. She carefully made her way back to the couch, handing the martini over before sinking down onto the couch beside her friend.

"You know I don't kiss and tell." Olivia said, biting into one of the olives she had snagged from her drink.

"I've noticed, and it's most annoying." Doris said, cutting her off. She took a sip of her wine and glanced over at the other woman, deciding now was as good a time as any to broach the topic that had been nagging at her all day. "Listen, I was thinking..."

"Well, there was your first mistake, Wolfe." Olivia teased, pleased with the roll of eyes her comment caused.

"Remember we were talking about nightmares and stuff lately, right? Are you still having them?" Doris asked, cutting to the chase. Olivia's sudden inhalation and stiffening of shoulders was all the answer she really needed.

"I thought as much." Doris said softly and started to dig into the back pocket of her jeans, pulling out a battered business card. "I found this when I was going through some of my things today. I know you're seeing Felicia Boudreau with the family, but sometimes it's easier talking to someone you don't know. To someone who understands what it's like to be on the gay side of things herself. So here."

Doris handed the card to Olivia, who hesitated slightly before taking it. Doris smiled, pleased that she had gotten that far with the stubborn woman. She leaned forward to slice off some cheese for herself.

"Dr. Tremain is someone I met in Chicago a few years ago. Brooke is..." Doris couldn't really find the right words, her hands waving the knife in front of her as she struggled. "Well, she's pretty great actually. She really helped me figure some stuff out, is very easy to talk to and she is definitely gay friendly," Doris smiled slyly, flashing back to very pleasant memories. "Not that you'll be dabbling, but she's pretty hot in the sack too." Doris waggled her eyebrows at Olivia before grinning and taking another sip of her wine.

"Okay, too much info." Olivia grimaced. She bit her lower lip in thought a moment though. It was sweet of Doris, who was simply trying to be a good friend.

To be honest, Olivia had always thought whining to some shrink about your problems was for weak people, and she was always more than capable of handling her own affairs. However, after seeing Felicia with the family, and all the drama that had swirled around her over the years, she was starting to see how it could help.

The night terrors and issues surrounding her rape had never really been dealt with, the damage that followed in its wake haunting her to this day. Her mother's sudden death, coming to grips with being a lesbian, the urges to kill Frank Cooper on a regular basis, dealing with Emma's new anger problems, they were all weighing on her mind. In fact, Olivia hadn't even mentioned to Felicia how useless and devastated she had felt when Natalia jumped into harm's way with Edmund; it was all becoming too much for her to handle. And alcohol was definitely not the answer. She smiled wryly, taking another sip of her martini.

Still, would it really help her? That was the million dollar question.

"Thanks, Doris." Olivia said as she tucked the card into her purse at her feet. "I'll think about it, okay?"

"That's all I ask." Doris watched her friend over the rim of her wine glass and smiled, please she could possibly help her out. She knew first hand how hard it was dealing with some of

life's curveballs. Speaking of life's curveballs, she had one of her own to worry about. "So, enough about you, Spencer. Guess who's got a date tomorrow night!"

"Really?" Olivia perked up at the sudden change of topic. She swirled her martini in the glass before snagging another olive and popping it into her mouth. "Anyone I know?"

"Yes, actually," Doris fidgeted for a moment. "I saw Anna in the park the other day, so I asked her on a date."

Olivia nearly choked on her olive.

"You what?" She finally sputtered.

"I thought you might have a point, about everyone needing a second chance." Doris grinned back.

"Since when do you listen to me?" Olivia asked. "And what about Blake?"

"Well..." Doris looked away. She didn't want to get hurt anymore than she wanted to hurt Blake. "She's a friend. A good friend and I don't really want to screw that up."

Olivia sighed. She could understand that, it was part of the reason she had been worried about starting things with Natalia.

"Well, I may not have a lot of experience with dating women, but I do know both Anna and Blake are good women and the neither of them deserve to be toyed with. You need to figure out what you want." Olivia warned. Gay or straight, it wasn't right to lead anyone on while you dallied with another. That road just leads to unnecessary drama and pain.

"I know, I know," Doris leaned back and sighed. "Why is this so damn hard?"

"Because nothing good in life is ever easy, my friend." Olivia sipped her drink, feeling the truth of her own words. Her own ups and downs with Natalia had proved that. She glanced over at the other woman, and reached out, squeezing her arm in concern. "Just think about what you're doing, okay? Not that you heard it from me, but I don't want you hurt either."

"Thanks." Doris smiled, touched by the gesture. She cleared her throat, the emotions their talk had stirred up surprising her a little. "So you thought you could squeak out of giving me details on what you're gonna do for your anniversary. Think again my friend..."

Olivia just shook her head, accepting the topic change and took another drink of her martini.

It had been a long week of moving and getting things situated so by the time Friday afternoon rolled around, everyone at Wolfe, Boudreau and Spaulding was looking forward to the weekend. Mel and Doris headed into the kitchen to grab another cup of coffee before hitting the storage boxes in their offices upstairs again. Beth paused a moment as she noticed movement outside.

“We can walk up the wheelchair access ramp if you like, sweetie.” Bill Lewis cringed as he realized that was probably not the right thing to say to his very pregnant wife. The warm sun shining overhead was no match for the cold stare suddenly leveled at him.

“The stairs are fine.” Lizzie growled and started up the first step. Bill took her arm for support as they slowly made their way up onto the porch surrounding the new law firm offices. They both looked up as the front door opened and Beth stepped out, obviously thrilled to see them.

“As stubborn as your father, I see.” Beth teased, as she wrapped her arms around her daughter and gave her a hug. “I thought you were supposed to be taking it easy at home?”

“I know, but I wanted to see your new office, Mom.” Lizzie squeezed back. “Besides I’d get nothing done if I sat around just waiting for this baby to come.” She shifted back to Bill’s side, rubbing her large belly softly. She was more than ready to give birth, but the baby had its own schedule apparently. They followed Beth back into the house, nodding to the receptionist as they made their way into the waiting lounge.

“We saw the doctor on Monday, and he said they will induce labor next week if nothing happens soon.” Bill helped Lizzie down onto one of the leather club chairs. They both looked up as Doris and Mel came out from the staff kitchen, steaming mugs in hand.

“Hi there!” Mel came over smiling at the new arrivals, Doris following not far behind.

“The offices look great; I love the renovations you had done.” Bill said hugging Mel warmly and nodding at Doris. “The location is good too.”

“I know, we’ve had several people just drop by who live in the neighborhood, saw our sign and—” Mel stopped suddenly as a loud moan was suddenly heard.

“Oh, God!” Lizzie groaned again, suddenly feeling an intense wave of pain rush through her body. Everyone froze and all eyes turned to her panicked looking face. She smiled and tried to breathe through the pain. “Be careful what you wish for, huh?”

“Call 911, Jenny.” Beth called out to the receptionist as she knelt down to take her daughter’s hand.

“Already on it, Mrs. Spaulding.” Jenny turned her attention to the phone and started giving details to the person on the other end of the line.

“Here we go, honey.” Bill knelt down on the other side of Lizzie and took her hand. “I’m right here, by your side all the way.” He smiled at her and then started to grimace as another contraction hit and his hand was just about squeezed off.

“That’s it, just try to breath.” Beth tried to soothe, worried for her daughter but knowing this was how this worked. She watched as Lizzie’s eyes bulged and then glanced down, where a wet stain was suddenly growing on her maternity pants.

“Jenny, tell them her water’s just broken.” Mel called out to the woman who was still on the phone with the 911 operator.

“Will do.” Jenny said, relaying the message quickly to the operator.

“Thank God it’s one of the leather chairs,” Doris mumbled, looking unrepentant as Mel glared at her. “What?”

“Ambulance is on its way.” Jenny said from her desk, and in the distance they could just hear a siren approaching.

“Hang on, baby.” Lizzie whispered, rubbing her belly.

“We better start calling the family, let them know the newest little Lewis Spaulding is on the way.” Beth beamed at her daughter. “I’ll talk to your father and we’ll meet you and Bill at Cedars. Just keep breathing, honey.”

Suddenly the ambulance was there, with Jenny waving the two paramedics into the building, wheeling in a gurney with them.

“Your ride’s here,” Bill kissed Lizzie’s head as one of the ambulance attendants came to help her up and over to the bed. They were quickly whisked out of the house, Beth grinning as she grabbed her purse and followed her daughter and son-in-law out.

“I’ll let you know how it goes.” Beth waved and was gone. Silence suddenly descended on the women standing there, the excitement all over.

“Wolfe, Boudreau and Spaulding, tending to all your family needs since 2010. We get them coming and going, apparently.” Doris said, as Mel smiled and shook her head and Jenny started chuckling away at her desk. “Come on, girls. We have to think about advertising for the firm y’know.”

The mayor suddenly grew serious as another thought occurred to her.

“Do we need to check our insurance policy for this?”

Eleni dashed up the short walkway to Frank’s apartment building. She had seen him earlier in the morning to confirm that the evening was still a go. She had even gone shopping for several essential items for making her famous *moussaka*. It had been one of Frank’s favorites when they had been together and seemed like it had been forever since Eleni had made it.

There were days like today when Eleni missed her catering business, the planning of the meals, choosing the fresh ingredients, preparing it all to perfection. What she didn’t miss was the bitchy clients and the sporadic work. And when she had finally sat down and thought about what else she could do with her life, Eleni’s mind had almost immediately turned to Frank and how satisfying his job was for him. Helping people was always a good thing. She liked the routine of her job, the attention to details, following a set procedure for testing things, but it was still the fact that she was helping people, speaking for the victims or the dead in some cases, that she treasured the most. And she really had Frank to thank for it all, indirectly.

That thought brought a big smile to her face, as Eleni arrived at the door and hit the buzzer, patiently waiting with groceries in hand. She heard footsteps and then the door opened, with Frank standing there with his adorable little daughter, sleepy and sucking on her thumb.

“Hey, you made good time.” Frank leaned forward and kissed his ex-wife on the cheek. Francesca reached out and tugged on her curly hair before she was able to pull away. Frank chuckled and took his daughter’s hand, blowing kisses on the palm before heading turning back inside. “Come on in. Henry is down for a little nap and I’m hoping to get Francesca to join him soon.”

Eleni sighed softly, easily flashing back to how good a father Frank had been with Marina, tucking her in as they read stories to her. She smiled wistfully to herself before following him inside, quietly closing the door behind them. It was going to be like old times tonight.

Surprisingly, after all this time, that was actually just fine by her.

Doris knew Friday nights downtown on Main Street were always busy with so many good places to eat and hang out. The Rivoli had come highly recommended by Natalia, even though the savvy brunette had managed to lure one of their chefs to work at the Beacon. The Italian restaurant was small and intimate, and if the amount of couples dining together were any indication, it was a popular Friday night date destination.

Nervously the Mayor fiddled with the cutlery on the table, wondering if she had time for a quick cigarette. No such luck, as she looked up to see Anna entering the busy restaurant before pausing by the front desk. The friendly hostess smiled warmly before escorting her into the dim dining room. Doris let out a long breath, trying to relax a little.

“Your table is right this way, Ms. Li.” The woman paused at a table by the window. Anna raised an eyebrow as Doris Wolfe smiled and stood.

“Anna,” Doris leaned forward and placed a chaste kiss to the petite woman’s cheek, hesitating just a moment longer than was necessary. She always liked Anna’s perfume; one of her favorite memories was of waking up to the scent on her pillowcases. Doris shook her head to come back to the here and now, and sat back down.

“A window seat?” Anna asked before slipping into her chair. Doris had always been so concerned about who saw them out together. It had taken her weeks to talk her out of wearing that silly hat of hers. Apparently times had changed for the Mayor. “That’s new.”

Doris took a sip of her ice water and smiled over the rim at her date.

“I’m just full of surprises, my dear.”

It was quiet at Company for a change, as Natalia dashed in to order some take out. Buzz burgers and a movie with the girls snuggled on the couch sounded like heaven. Francesca had been moody all afternoon, and it never failed to irk her that the minute the girl saw her father she would be as good as gold. Olivia thought he must slip something into her food, and Natalia was starting to believe it too.

Natalia sank down onto one of the stools by the counter, smiling as she saw Blake pop out from the kitchen.

“Hey, you’re working late today.” Natalia said taking note of Blake scowl. She immediately sensed that something was up with the other woman. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Blake grumbled, wiping at the fastidiously clean wood countertop with a damp cloth. She glanced up as a customer waved at her for some help. “Damn needy customers.” She mumbled under her breath.

Natalia bit her lower lip. The redhead was going to rub the varnish completely off at this rate, whatever was bothering her was definitely not nothing. Sighing she pulled out her BlackBerry, found Olivia’s cell number and started typing a text message as Blake went to refill the man’s coffee cup.

There’s leftover tuna casserole in fridge. Start the movie without me. Blake needs some TLC and a friendly ear. Love you xoxo. - NRivera 6:23pm

Hitting send, Natalia slid the phone back into her purse and smiled up at her disheartened friend.

“Listen, something came up and my plans unexpectedly changed. Did you want to grab a bite with me and we can catch up?” Natalia smiled, the look on Blake’s face making up for missing a little snuggle time on the couch.

“You know what? I’d really like that.” Blake said, tossing her cloth into the bar sink and headed towards the kitchen. “Let me just tell Buzz I’m done for the day and I’ll put in an order for some food.”

“It’s a date.” Natalia pulled her jacket off and headed for the corner booth. She could just make out Blake grumbling softly to herself as she went.

“At least somebody wants to date me...”

Eleni had never really heard the whole sordid affair of how Frank and Natalia’s relationship had ended. She had always just assumed that things hadn’t worked out between the two, Natalia’s confusion about her own sexuality probably having a lot to do with that, and that they had just decided to part ways and raise Francesca separately.

Eleni was a little shocked to find out just how strange a situation it had actually been. She had forgotten what life was like in sleepy little Springfield.

“So, let me get this straight. No pun intended.” She smirked at Frank who merely grimaced back as he chopped green peppers beside her. “Olivia coached you on how to woo Natalia?”

“Yeah. It was working too.” Frank admitted sheepishly.

“Really? Huh.” Eleni blinked as she tried to process the latest twist in the tale. “And you didn’t think that was a little...weird?”

Frank smiled weakly and shrugged.

“There you are.” Phillip made his way down the long hallway, finding Beth on the third floor of Cedars Hospital, in the maternity wing. “How are they?”

“Oh Phillip, everything is fine. The baby is beautiful, so perfect.” Beth gushed, as she pulled her husband closer for a hug. “We’re grandparents. Again.”

“You’re too beautiful to be a grandmother.” Phillip kissed her softly as she just smiled up at him.

“Jeezuz, do we need to get a hose on you two or what?” Billy Lewis’ familiar drawl pulled them out of their kiss. The big man looked good, considering his recent heart attack as he and his wife made their way towards the room from the bank of elevators.

“Shut it, Billy.” Vanessa whacked him on the arm as they approached. Her cell phone chimed and she quickly pulled it out to power down. She paused as she recognized the overseas phone number. Quickly she opened the message.

The eagle has landed.

Vanessa smiled, joy flaring in her chest. All her babies would soon be together. Glancing at Beth and realizing they really needed to have a talk soon, but that could wait for now. She had a grandson that she wanted to meet. Vanessa powered down her phone and slid it into her purse and came up beside Billy.

“Can we go in yet?” She asked excitedly.

Beth nodded and pushed open the door to the private room. Everyone quietly entered, to find Bill and Lizzie sitting there, exhausted but thrilled at the arrival of their son.

Vanessa made her way to give Bill a big hug and kiss as Phillip and Billy shuffled closer to Lizzie and the baby.

Lizzie looked up at all of her family surrounding her, and reached out to grab Bill's hand. She glanced down at one of the most gorgeous men she'd ever seen, her own son.

"Say hello to Alan William Lewis."

The little bundle in her arms barely moved, tiny fingers curled into the soft material.

"That's a big name to live up to little man." Billy said, reaching out to pull the blanket down a little. The baby scrunched his face and yawned at his grandfather. Billy chuckled, delighted. The kid already had the old Lewis charm.

Phillip moved down to slip an arm around Beth, as they both watched Lizzie and Billy play with the baby. Beth snuggled closer, squeezing him tight as she noticed tears starting to well in his eyes.

"Alan's here in spirit." She whispered to him. "I know it."

Phillip just nodded, wiping at his eyes, missing his father more than he thought possible at that moment. He kissed Beth's hair and sighed, so glad he was alive to see this day.

Lizzie handed the baby to Bill, the child looking even smaller in his father's arms. Bill turned to his mother, smiling as tears sprang to her eyes.

"The next generation of Lewis men," Vanessa whispered to her son, before taking the baby into her arms. "Springfield will never be the same."

"And then Clarissa put this great spin on the ball and it curved perfectly. The kid has a great arm, I just need to work with her a bit more. It's so cute." Doris smiled softly, before glancing out the window watching a young family wander by, two little children arguing with each other as they passed. "You know, Blake does such a good job with that little girl all by herself..."

The brunette just nodded, and spun the ice around in her rum and coke. Anna felt like a third wheel on her own date. Things had definitely changed with Doris; she was much calmer, content even, which was wonderful for the woman. Unfortunately, Anna knew that she was not the one responsible for it.

Anna smiled sadly, the truth sinking in that this was not going to work between them anymore. She surreptitiously checked her watch before looking for their server, hoping their meal would arrive soon.

"I know we're just friends, but I had hoped..." Blake sighed, dipping a fry into a blob of ketchup on her plate.

"Maybe you should just give her a little time to figure out what she wants." Natalia tried, cringing at how lame that sounded even as Blake rolled her eyes in response.

"I'm not getting any younger, you know." Blake complained. She glanced down at her coffee cup and sighed, finally saying what was really at the heart of this all. "I just want something close to what I had with Ross, to what you have with Olivia. And Doris really makes me happy and sometimes I can see a glimmer of what could be. I guess I just want the chance to see if it could work between us. Is that so much to ask?"

"Oh, honey." Natalia reached out to squeeze her friend's hand, Blake's sad eyes pulling at her heart strings. "That's not too much to ask for at all."

"Natalia took how long to say yes?" Eleni frowned as the oven dinged from the kitchen. Putting her glass of wine down on the end table, she stood to go find the oven mitts and pull out the moussaka. "Didn't that raise any warning bells?"

"Well..." Frank looked a little uncomfortable. "I thought it had to do with Gus."

Eleni nodded, she could see how that could explain it, if you were looking for a way to deny what was really going on right in front of your nose. Poor, sweet Frank. He really was clueless sometimes.

Lovable, but clueless...

"Get your head in the game, Wolfe." Doris stood in the small bathroom at the restaurant washing her hands, staring at herself in the mirror. Talking non-stop about Blake was not helpful; no wonder Anna looked bored out of her mind. Meanwhile, there was her naughty side that wanted to come out to play, to torment the petite woman by slowly taking the good detective's clothes off her sexy little body.

A lecherous grin spread across her reflections' face as Doris met her own stare. Jesus, how long has it been anyway?

Doris almost didn't notice the door open, but she saw in the mirror as Anna stepped cautiously into the room. Their eyes met in the reflection and held, the old familiar chemistry sparkling between them...

"How can I possibly compete with that?" Blake whined. "Have you seen the Detective in her leather jacket, looking all tough and growly? Hell, even Reva Shayne would want to sleep with her."

Natalia smiled a moment at the mental image. Anna Li was pretty hot, with her dark sunglasses and those well fitting jeans she had on the other day...

"Natalia?" Blake waved her hand in front of her eyes, snapping Natalia back to the here and now.

"Sorry," Natalia paused a moment longer with the picture in her mind and then wiped her grin off her face. "You have a lot to offer too though Blake. You're an attractive, smart, funny woman."

"Doris just doesn't want me." Blake sighed.

Natalia didn't have an answer for that one. So she did the only thing she could think of, she pulled out the big guns.

"I think we need something chocolate right about now..."

"And it took Natalia how long to realize she was pregnant?" Eleni bit into the moussaka pleased with the texture and taste. It was perfect. Henry even seemed to like his bite-sized pieces. She leaned over and helped him with his spoon.

"Well, you know, I didn't really ask too many questions." Frank tried to squirm out of it a little, getting a little flustered with the topic. "I'm never very good with the monthly feminine problem."

Eleni closed her eyes, shaking her head and trying hard not to laugh. "Oh, Frank..."

Doris turned slowly, taking the few steps to bring her face-to-face with her ex-lover. Her hands somehow found their way to Anna's shoulders, curving and molding to them as she gently pushed the petite woman against the bathroom door.

They stared at each other a moment longer letting the tension build. This had always worked between them. The sweet seductive pull of attraction pulsed between them as the heat rose, both women needing a release, somewhere, somehow.

Doris moved again, shifting her weight and sliding her thigh between Anna's legs, pressing tight against her center. She felt Anna tremor against her and leaned closer, full lips waiting to be claimed.

Trapped between the door and Doris's curves, Anna couldn't have been more confused, or happier. Maybe all was not lost after all.

"Doris," Anna moaned softly, letting herself go finally, her hands running up Doris' back, her hot breath tickling the redhead's ear as she rolled her hips.

Doris suddenly stopped. This wasn't what she wanted. She didn't want a grope in the bathroom, a quick roll in the hay to satisfy that old familiar itch. Fun sure, but not what she really wanted anymore.

"I can't do this," Doris murmured sadly. Her eyes met the dark eyes before hers and she slowly leaned in for a chaste kiss before stepping back. "I'm so sorry."

Anna sighed and watched as the bathroom door quietly closed behind her ex, as Doris made a hasty exit. She let a long slow breath out and raked a hand through her long dark hair.

"I'm getting too old for this shit."

"I'm getting too old for this shit," Blake sighed and looked down at her hands, fidgeting slightly with her napkin, the decadent chocolate cake long gone from her plate.

"Stop it, you are not. It will happen for you, I have faith," Natalia said finishing up her coffee. "Whether it's Doris or someone else, you will find that someone special when the time is right."

“Do you think?” Blake said hopefully.

“I know.” Natalia smiled and stretched out to squeeze Blake’s hand.

Eleni poured herself a glass of merlot and sank down on the couch beside Frank, both kids passed out in the nursery. It had been a good meal and good company. She had missed her easy friendship with Frank, and working with him now was good for them. It felt like they were rebuilding something important.

This mess with Natalia had really put him through the wringer though. She couldn’t believe the mayor had even been involved.

“Doris Wolfe really told you to man up?” She took a long drink as Frank sighed, sadly nodding his head.

Whatever happened to the strong dynamic man she married. Eleni knew he was still there hidden inside this floppy haired man. Maybe he just needed a little help remembering who that man was.

And maybe she was just the woman to do it.

“Brrr!! A girl could freeze her botox off out here.” Blake grumbled, wrapping her jacket tighter to her throat to keep the chill out as the two women stepped out of Company together. Fall was definitely here, with winter nipping at its heels.

“Don’t ever change, Blake.” Natalia snorted and hugged the redhead

Blake hugged her back, holding on a little tighter.

“Thanks for ditching your girlfriend for me tonight.” Blake chuckled as Natalia’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Yes, you’re busted, but thanks for being a good friend.”

“Anytime.” Natalia smiled softly.

From across the street, Doris stood silently in the shadows, watching the cheery display. Blake and Natalia wandered along, laughing and then hugging again before each hopped into their respective cars. As the cars pulled off Doris turned away, continuing to walk down the quiet street.

She had a lot to think about...

The time had come and Jeffrey knew it. He stood on the doorstep of Cross Creek, his hand raised ready to knock as the door opened unexpectedly. Reva Shayne stood there with her car keys in hand, obviously on her way out.

"Jeffrey," Reva exhaled his name, confused and startled to see him. "What are you doing here so late?"

"I'm sorry, Reva, I should have called first, I guess." Jeffrey looked down at his boots and shuffled a bit. There was no good way to do this as he glanced back up at her, gathering his thoughts. "I just wanted to come see Colin and talk to you for a moment. I figure you should hear this from me."

"Well, Jonathan is inside with Sarah watching Colin and I was just going to go to Cedars to meet up with Josh. Lizzie and Bill had their baby, a perfect little boy." Reva smiled happily, flashing back to the birth of her own child not all that long ago. "What's going on?"

Jeffrey nodded. Jonathan already knew of his plans, but had asked him not to say anything. The young man wasn't happy about it any more than Ava had been, but he understood.

"I'm leaving Springfield, Reva."

Reva frowned, not expecting her ex-husband to so abruptly leave town. However, she didn't think he would have ever abandoned her and their family before either.

"When?" She asked finally. "Why?"

"Tomorrow morning, I catch my flight. I'm headed to D.C." Jeffrey looked down and shifted his weight to his other foot. "The agency has a new assignment for me. I'll be desk bound for awhile until my leg is healed completely, profiling various serial killers. With all my experience with Edmund, they want to pick my brain, I guess."

An awkward silence fell. Slowly Reva nodded, accepting the man's answer at face value, but secretly suspecting there was more to it.

"Go see your son," She finally spoke. "We'll be here waiting for you, when you can finally come home." She could just make out Jeffrey's eyes starting to well with tears, as Reva pulled him close for a hug.

“Be safe.” Reva whispered into his shoulder.

“You too,” Jeffrey murmured into her hair, soaking up the warmth and vitality of the woman he still loved. Reva pulled away and headed for her car. And all Jeffrey could do was stand there and watch her go.

“Good bye,” Jeffrey murmured sadly into the night, before stepping into the small house he used to call home and closing the door behind him.

ACT 4

Saturday morning arrived bright and early, with Olivia detouring to drop Emma at the park for her first tai chi lesson, and letting Leyla out at the Beacon before heading to the downtown core. A few streets west of Main Street was an area that was lovingly referred to by many as ‘the Village’. It was the gay area of town, such as it was which wasn’t really very much.

There were a few restaurants, a dance bar, several coffee shops and new little community center. After all this was Springfield not New York. Olivia had sheepishly admitted to Doris that she had no idea that there was a gay district in town before. The mayor had simply rolled her eyes at her and poured more wine.

Olivia checked the business card in her hand and knew she had the right spot. An old three story building had been converted into a community center as the sign outside the building proudly proclaimed. It looked like it still had some work to be done on it though, and there was a banner with a countdown for funds for a new roof hanging from the front. Parked to one side was an old VW bus from the 1960’s painted purple with the community center name hand painted across the side right above a bright rainbow flag.

Straightening her shoulders, Olivia headed into the building, passed by two very feminine looking men, who were admiring her low-heeled boots just peeking out from her straight-legged jeans, if she had heard their whispers right. Smiling to herself at the little confidence boost that gave her, Olivia made her way to the small reception area, where a bald man with many piercings and tattoos sat.

“Um...can you tell me where I can find Dr. Tremain, please?” She asked hesitantly.

“Brooke’s in room 312, on the third floor. The elevator is out of order at the moment, but the main staircase is just over there.” The big guy smiled and pointed to the right.

Olivia nodded and made her way to the stairs, passing a small room with a fireplace where several teenagers were hanging out on the comfortable yet thread bare furniture. The kids were laughing and joking and that was the important thing she realized as Olivia started up the old wood staircase.

There was a small gymnasium on the second floor, Olivia noticed as she passed an open door on her way up. By the time she hit the third floor she was beginning to think she needed to hit the gym more often again. Pulling open the door, she made her way out into a small maze of hallways, but saw a tasteful sign indicating where rooms 310 to 315 were.

Turning the corner Olivia saw an older woman talking with a girl who was obviously distressed. The woman was average height with short blonde spiky hair and dark-rimmed glasses. She noticed that the woman was casually dressed but in designer clothes, so she fit in with those around her yet obviously had money if you knew what you were looking at.

“I want you to think about that this week and I’ll see you next Saturday, okay?” The older woman ducked her head, making sure she had eye contact and a nod before she sent the girl on her way.

Olivia moved closer, watching as the troubled girl headed towards the stairwell and disappeared through the door. Turning back her eyes met bright blue, caring eyes, watching her just as closely.

“I’m Dr. Brooke Tremain.” The doctor extended her hand, smiling as Olivia shook it. “You must be my ten o’clock appointment?”

“Olivia Spencer.” Olivia let out a breath, not aware that she had been holding it. The doctor nodded and watched her carefully.

“Come on in.” Brooke’s eyes narrowed and she smiled softly leading the obviously nervous woman into the office. “Excuse the mess; I’m only here on Saturday’s. The center is still pretty new and I know the gay community isn’t very big here in Springfield but the timing was really good for me. My normal practice is out of Chicago, but I’ve wanted to get out of the rat race there, you know? So, this is a first step to expanding my practice.”

Olivia hesitated in the doorway. Was she really ready for this? She had faced some demons on her own and with Natalia at her side, but there was only so much that even she could handle on her own. The doctor seemed nice enough too.

“Talk or don’t talk, it’s up to you.” Brooke shrugged and dropped down into one of the worn club chairs in the office, subtly observing her potential new client. “Let me guess, you’re a late bloomer, fresh out of the closet and have so much baggage you need a bellhop.”

Olivia’s smirk said it all. She took another step closer, her hand resting on the door knob as she tried to take that final step. This was going to be very different than the family therapy she was still doing with the kids. This was years and years of her own drama and crap that she needed to work through. And she honestly didn’t know if she could do it.

“Come on, Spencer.” Brooke ran a hand through her short hair and waited, curious if the obviously skittish woman would stay or not. “Satisfaction guaranteed or your mania back.”

Olivia rolled her eyes and snorted. She looked the doctor in the eyes and saw genuine compassion looking back at her. She felt herself physically relax. Maybe this was going to work out okay after all.

“What do I have to lose, right?” Decision made, Olivia stepped all the way into the office and quietly shut the door behind her.

Anna stood in the shadow of the gazebo in the park watching as her young pupil carefully placed her foot at a forty five degree angle from the other one, and shifted her weight slowly, before looking up to see if she’d done it right. Anna nodded, warmed by the huge grin that came over Emma’s face.

“That’s it. Now turn to the right and extend your arm like I showed you.” Anna started to circle the girl, glancing down to see that the white dog, Shadow, was still safely tied to the closest gazebo post. Apparently the dog still couldn’t make any sense of what the girl was doing, as her head was at a tilt watching every move closely. Anna chuckled softly and continued watching Emma’s technique. So far so good.

“I read on the Internet that you can do tai chi with staffs and swords...” Emma said excitedly, her arm drooping slightly.

Anna tapped her on the elbow, to get her back into the right position and sighed. Of course the bright child had researched the different forms out there.

“Well, that’s true.” She weighed her words carefully. “But every journey begins with a single step and that is where we are now. Let’s get the basics down first and then who knows where this will lead you.” Anna stroked a hand through Emma’s soft hair pleased that the answer seemed to satisfy her.

Anna stepped back as Emma moved into the next move, the concentration on the girl's face making her smile. Ms. Jennings had been right, she was a good student. That made another question pop up into her mind and Anna tapped her chin for a moment before deciding it was time to think about starting a new journey herself.

"Say Emma, do you know if Ms. Jennings has a boyfriend..."

Leyla dashed out of the daycare center and made her way to the main office, wanting to make photocopies of the registration list for accounting. Several staff members were going to have the daycare fee deducted directly from their paychecks and she needed to get this info submitted to human resources as soon as possible.

Coming around the corner quickly, Leyla looked up just in time to avoid slamming into Ava, her papers unfortunately flying everywhere as they slipped out of her hands.

"Whoa, slow down there." Ava reached out to stop the shorter woman from falling, gathering her close for a moment. "Are you okay?"

"Sorry!" Leyla said a little flustered, moving away abruptly before bending down to start gathering her forms. She never knew if she was coming or going with Ava. "I'm good, thanks."

"You're in on the weekend, I'm surprised." Ava noted, as she kneeled down to help pick up the documents. Leyla tried really hard not to bristle at the tone in the other woman's voice. "Your sister is so good at organizing everyone else's lives; I would have thought she could have swung weekends off for you too."

Leyla froze, anger racing through her at that unkind remark. It was one thing to pick at her personally, that's fine if it was deserved. Leyla was a grown woman who could look after her own battles, but no one messes with her family, not even if it was Olivia's daughter.

"What the hell does that mean?" Leyla finally spit out.

"What? It's the truth," Ava stood up, handing the papers she had gathered over, well aware she was pushing buttons in the younger woman, but didn't care. It just felt good to finally say what was on her mind. "Natalia can't leave well enough alone. As if my father hasn't been through enough with that madman Winslow, saving her life and getting shot himself, she has to go poke at him. It was the straw that broke the camel's back and now he's gone."

Leyla straightened and glared at the other woman. Sure Ava was upset that her father was leaving town, but that didn't mean she had the right to go around spewing stuff about Natalia, especially stuff that wasn't necessarily true.

"You know what; Jeffrey is a grown man and can fight his own battles. If he can't take the heat then he should get the hell out of the kitchen." Leyla growled. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some work to do. Unlike you, my mommy isn't going to subsidize my living."

Leyla pushed past the tall brunette and made her way into the copier room.

"Bitch." Ava snarled, and turned storming down the hallway and disappearing around the corner in a huff.

"*Put a!*" Leyla muttered under her breath, slamming the copier lid down and jabbing the green button to start the machine. She hung her head and muttered more curses as the photocopier jammed, and started beeping loudly at her.

The annual fall garage sale held at the Catholic Church had gone well and Natalia had left Father Ray happily counting the day's proceeds with the sales committee treasurer. After running around like a crazy woman all day, she was ready to spend a nice evening doing whatever with Olivia.

Natalia had no idea what Olivia had planned for their anniversary, despite her best efforts to get it out of her. Olivia had hinted they were going somewhere special for dinner but that was all she could pry out of her. Her lover had pushed her out the door that morning, sending her on her way to the sale for the day, telling her to trust her and that she would take care of everything.

So, Natalia had done just that and enjoyed a wonderful day.

Frank was looking after Francesca all weekend and Phillip had picked up Emma and Shadow from the park after the tai chi lesson with Anna. And Leyla had even offered to stay at the Beacon over the weekend, claiming she wanted to be on site in case there were any issues with the daycare on its first weekend of operation. Her sister was so sweet, but Natalia knew full well Leyla had just wanted to give them some alone time.

Turning into their driveway, Natalia smiled at the warm light coming from inside the farmhouse. Everything still seemed to be standing so all was right with the world. Parking beside Olivia's car, Natalia hopped out and grabbed the one or two items she had picked up at the sale from the backseat and quickly made her way inside.

“Oh my God, what smells so good?” Natalia asked, coming into the warm kitchen and dropping her bags by the door. Olivia sat at the table, flipping through a magazine, as everything boiled and bubbled away around her.

“Chicken cacciatore. I hope you’re hungry.” She looked up in time to catch a quick kiss from her partner. “Hmm, you’re lips are chilly.”

Natalia grinned and slipped around behind her lover, nuzzling along her hair.

“I can think of a few ways to warm up.” Natalia murmured against soft skin.

“I bet you can.” Olivia smirked, enjoying the feel of Natalia’s cool hands on her shoulders. They both jumped at the sudden knock on the back door.

“I swear if that’s Frank…” Natalia grumped, having suffered more than enough interruptions from her former fiancé. The man had uncanny timing really.



Olivia chuckled at her partner’s words and leaned into her touch. A part of her to this day worried that someone would come through the kitchen door uninvited, even though she personally locked the doors herself now. In this case though she knew who was there and so Olivia stood, shaking her head.

“Oh no, I’m expecting a delivery.” Olivia wandered over to the door and opened it, talking briefly with the delivery guy before slipping him a tip and taking the item from his hands. Natalia had just enough time to pull off her jacket and put it up on one of the hooks by the back door. She turned, curious to see what had arrived.

“It’s for you.” Olivia smiled softly before giving a hand-tied bouquet of blood red gerbera daisies and baby’s breath to her lover. A single white rose sat in the middle of the bouquet, marking the one year anniversary.

“Olivia, they’re beautiful.” Natalia gasped, thrilled. “Thank you. Gerbera daisies are my favorite.”

“I know.” Olivia leaned over and placed a soft kiss on her lover’s lips. “I love you so much. Happy anniversary, sweetheart.” Their lips lingered, tasting each other slowly and without rush. They both knew they had all night which only added to the sweetness.

“Happy anniversary.” Natalia moved away to go find a vase to put the flowers into. “I thought you said you were taking us somewhere special for dinner.”

“I couldn’t think of anywhere more special than right here, in our home, with you.” Olivia smiled shyly at her lover. It was the truth and she didn’t care how sappy it was, it was how she felt. She looked up and met Natalia’s eyes with an intense stare. “A year ago I didn’t think we could ever have this future together. I thought all was lost but you persevered and now here we are, a family; alone, together. It’s just you and me and our little family against the world.”

Natalia nearly melted on the spot. She came closer tangling her fingers with Olivia’s, drawing her attention.

“It seems like I’ve spent most of my life struggling, working constantly and never having a moment to just live, always needing the next paycheck, the next job or just trying to find a safe place to raise Rafe that I could call home.” Natalia glanced down for a moment, lost in difficult memories of the past. She sighed and looked up meeting Olivia’s loving gaze. “And now it seems I’ve found it. Finally. Here with you, in our little farmhouse of love. But it’s not the brick or mortar that makes it a home; it’s you, and me and the kids. Together we are a family and it all began a year ago, when we took that first step to live together to make this house a home. Our very own slice of heaven on Earth.”

Leaning forward their lips met in a slow loving kiss, each needing to feel the bond with the other. They moved into a much needed hug, the emotions and love surrounding them.

They spent the rest of the evening just talking and laughing and spending time connecting with each other. Natalia set the table and talked about the garage sale. Olivia poured the wine and discussed the new LGBT community center and how much she liked the new therapist. Plating their food, Olivia brought their dinner to the table mentioning that she had made another appointment for next week. Natalia smiled, reaching out to take her lover’s hand, thanking God for all their blessings before they started to eat.

It was just a normal evening spent at home, a home that they had built together, each found in the heart of the other. And it was perfect.

The movie had ended long ago, and the flames in the fireplace were getting low, but Natalia was loath to move out from under the blanket and her comfortable spot wrapped in Olivia's arms. She hummed softly to herself as Olivia began to nibble her earlobe, a telling ache growing more insistent, low in her belly. It was a need that would only be satisfied by her lover's sure touch.

"You know, I still can't believe we've made it this far," Olivia murmured against warm skin, luxuriating in the closeness. She nuzzled along Natalia's shoulder, finally voicing her thoughts, "I'm so afraid I'm going to screw this all up somehow." She felt Natalia turn in her arms to gently kiss her in reassurance before pulling away, her eyes sparking with emotion.

"I won't let you go that easy, you're stuck with me I'm afraid. I can't get enough of your kisses, missy." Natalia leaned closer, staring deeply into the green eyes before her. Her eyes fluttered shut and she waited, anticipating the touch of her lover's lips. Instead she felt a gentle pressure and realized that Olivia had pressed her forehead to her own. She smiled softly at the familiar touch and show of affection. She ran her fingers up into the honey blonde hair and lifted her face.

That was then, this was now.

"I want you." Natalia said, certain and clear, no doubt in her intentions or desire.

Olivia grinned, loving this side of her partner, the strong confident woman that constantly amazed her.

"You have me." Olivia dipped her head, once again capturing the full lips before her.

"Anyway you want me, sexy."

Natalia blushed slightly, unsure how to broach something that she had been thinking about a lot lately. Olivia noticed how silent she had become, nuzzled along the soft cheek to find a tender patch of skin behind her ear to nip playfully at.

"Hey, what's going on in the gorgeous mind of yours?" Olivia whispered softly, a little worried she'd said something wrong. "I didn't mean to..."

"No, *querida*, you didn't. I-I..." Natalia closed her eyes and bit the bullet. "It's just. Well...I've been having thoughts, um...fantasies really."

“Go on...” Olivia’s voice dropped an octave and she smirked, raising an eyebrow. This was getting good. Natalia flushed slightly but offered a lopsided grin and a naughty flash of dimples.

“Working with you more again at the Beacon, I-I’ve been thinking about...” Natalia squirmed a little, but continued. “Um...well about making love with you, in all sorts of different places.”

“Really?” Olivia’s eyebrows just about shot off her forehead as she stared down at the sexy brunette, her own fantasies flashing through her head at her lover’s words. She swallowed hard, needing to know more. “Like where?”

“Oh, well. I don’t know.” Natalia chewed on her bottom lip a little. “I guess I’ve been replaying that time at New Year’s Eve in Phillip’s library over and over in my mind. And when you got back from your little Mexico escapade, I so wanted to throw you across the desk in your office and have my way with you.”

Natalia closed her eyes, vividly remembering other fantasies now that she’d opened the floodgates. Twisting a little under the blanket, she slid her body against Olivia, wanting the contact and the reveling in the sexual tension between them. Natalia dipped her head and started to nibble and nuzzle the tip of her cold nose along the collar of Olivia’s shirt, licking at the hot skin and delectable neck.

“Then there’s the gazebo in the park,” Natalia dropped a kiss to her jugular, pleased to find it beating strong. A thrill rushed through her as Olivia moaned softly, watching as the green eyes fluttered shut. She slowly kissed a warm path to the nearest earlobe whispering hotly into the delicate swirls she found. “Or even taking you, in the bathroom at Company.”

“I’m living with a nymphomaniac.” Olivia smirked, finding herself turned on even more. “I may actually have to go to church to thank God for this development.”

“Hey!” Natalia frowned, pulling away slightly not liking the direction of that witty remark.

“Sorry, baby. I didn’t mean anything. I was just teasing.” Olivia wrapped her arms tighter around her lover pulling Natalia into a slow, deep kiss, chasing away any lingering offense. “I would love to do anything you want to try.”

“Well Blake actually suggested...” Natalia began, only to be cut off by her shocked lover.

“Blake!” Olivia covered her eyes with the palm of her hand. “You spoke to Blake about this? Oh, God...”

“Quiet you, Blake had some good advice about this.” Natalia nipped playfully at Olivia’s earlobe.

“I’m sure she did.” Olivia suddenly wondered just how much Blake mentioned about their little escapade in the local lingerie stores toy department. Now there had been an adventure she should have taken with Natalia.

“Anyway,” Natalia blushed ever so slightly but pushed on. “I’ve been looking around online.”

“You have?” Olivia blinked; a little thrill ran along her spine and settled in her nether regions at the thought. “Of course you have. Google is your friend.”

“Yes, it is.” Natalia smiled seductively, glancing back at her lover. “A very, very good friend in this situation.” Natalia blushed a little bit more at her own boldness. “I-I just don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I love what we do with each other, making love with you is amazing but I think maybe we could explore?”

“I would love to explore.” Olivia grinned wolfishly, thoroughly enjoying the idea. Toy shopping with her lover was a much better idea than with Blake.

“And I was thinking maybe we could even find something extra special for our honeymoon?” Natalia waggled her eyebrows and grinned mischievously before dipping her head down and snuggling into Olivia’s neck.

“Really?” Olivia blinked, getting into the idea now that they were talking about it. It could be fun, a lot of fun actually. “I love the way your mind thinks.” Olivia dipped her head and captured her lover’s tender lips.

“All this talk is making me...” Natalia murmured against Olivia’s mouth as she rolled her hips, getting her point across.

“Me too.” Olivia shifted and they both finally stood, the blanket dropping to their feet as they threaded their fingers together.

Olivia brought Natalia’s hand up to her lips, gently kissing the soft skin on the back of her hand. Their eyes met, locked and held. Olivia tugged ever so slightly, pulling Natalia along with her towards the staircase, finally leading the way upstairs to the landing.

“I remember kissing you good night, right here.” Olivia murmured as they stood in the hallway outside of the nursery, remembering the long nights spent dreaming of just this when it had been her bedroom. She watched entranced as Natalia’s eyes grew dark with desire and she leaned forward and pressed their lips together.

“Yes, you were like a very polite prom date,” Natalia sucked on Olivia’s lower lip a moment, pulling it slightly before nipping and kissing her way along the strong jaw. “And all I wanted was for you to come into my bed and ravish me.”

Olivia groaned into the demanding kiss that followed, as Natalia started pulling her further down the hallway, towards their bedroom.

“And now here we are a year later, and you’re still standing out here like a very proper prom date.” Natalia teased. She watched Olivia’s eyes turn a darker shade of green as she dipped her head closer still.

“Oh, honey,” Olivia growled against hot flesh, tugging Natalia’s blouse out of her jeans, needing to feel more of her lover’s skin against her own. “You should know by now that I am anything but proper.”

“And I thank God for that, every single day.” Natalia smirked naughtily as she turned the doorknob to their bedroom and lead her lover inside, impatiently reaching out to tug the hem of Olivia’s brown shirt up. “Now I think I have a present to unwrap.”

Olivia laughed softly and kicked the door closed behind them. It was time for the real celebration to begin.

It had been one of the best anniversaries Olivia could remember. Natalia always seemed to be able to surprise and amaze her. It was going to take a lifetime of loving to figure the woman out, and she was more than ready for the challenge.

Sleep continued to elude her, despite their energetic love making and certainly not because of any nightmare images clawing and dancing across Olivia’s troubled mind for a change. Far from that, in fact. Natalia was asleep, completely spent after their last round of lovemaking, and sprawled across her in all her naked glory. So Olivia happily indulged in her favorite pastime, Natalia watching.

She desperately wanted to wake the sleeping beauty up with kisses and tender caresses. To once more ravish her lover’s sweet body, and to have that ache satisfied deep inside that only Natalia knew how to take care of, but at the same time she knew her lover needed her sleep. Olivia watched as her partner’s lips parted ever so slightly and she sighed, like a soft moan, just a little, her heart doing small somersaults at the sound.

God Spencer, how did you ever get so lucky?

Slowly Olivia ran her fingers through the soft dark hair, tucking stray tendrils behind her ear. She watched entranced as Natalia turned to her in her sleep, as if knowing even in

slumber where she was. A soft smile ghosted across full lips and Olivia desperately wanted to kiss the tempting mouth.

“What are you waiting for, *querida*?” Natalia whispered, her voice rough and gravelly with sleep, as her eyes slowly blinked open. Olivia loved her like this, sleepy and oh so sexy. It always did things to her, her body simply reacting to the unspoken promises, clenching and yearning for her touch.

Olivia slowly ran the pad of her thumb across her lover’s full lips. Natalia sucked it in, her tongue swirling around it seductively, the languid heat beckoning. She released it with a moist pop, as she sat up and rolled slightly towards her lover, wide awake now and ready to play.

“Hmm, looks like somebody is having a tough time falling asleep?” Natalia snuggled close, her voice tickling in Olivia’s ear, followed by butterfly kisses along her temple before crossing a flushed cheek to hover tantalizingly over her lips, her breath warm against my skin. All Olivia could do was slowly nod and wait for her, rewarded with a lopsided grin and a flash of dimples, before her mouth was claimed.

“As someone wise once said to me, screw time and space...” Olivia eventually gasped, panting for much needed air.

“Screw something all right.” Natalia nipped at a tender earlobe as Olivia’s eyebrows rose in mock shock.

“Miss Rivera. Such language...” Olivia couldn’t stop the giggle that bubbled up from inside.

“You love it.” Natalia giggled, “Now come here, Trouble.”

Olivia shook her head and smirked before she was slowly rolled Natalia to her back, handily pinning the brunette to the mattress with the length of her body.

“I’m afraid that I’m not quite done with you just yet...” Olivia teased, moving meticulously, mapping gentle curves and hollows before carefully crawling across her lover’s body, leaving a trail of butterfly kisses in her wake, enjoying the goosebumps that followed behind in waves. Natalia’s moan of pleasure urged her on, until she finally pressed fully against her, one strong leg sliding between her legs, her thigh pressed tight against her partner’s core.

Natalia gasped and tried to catch her breath as hot lips trailed across her jaw line, only to find her lips captured again. Olivia dipped her head once, twice, three times, each time lingering longer, tasting her partner’s sweet lips, ending the last one with her tongue

asking for entrance, before sinking into a slow penetrating kiss. Strong hands tickled across the brunette's stomach, blunt nails dragged across twitching abs, exploring as much skin as possible.

"You are so damn beautiful...and all mine." Olivia growled possessively against her lover's lips. Her steady hand trailed down the well-toned stomach, coming to tangle into the damp curls below. Moaning desperately, Natalia thrust forward, bucking and needing more contact, wantonly parting her thighs wider, a silent plea for much needed attention.

Olivia moaned into Natalia's mouth, tongues meeting and tangling, dancing together. Grinding beneath her, Natalia writhed against the sure touch, silently encouraging her as a wayward hand leisurely trailed down tempting curves, tickling through the dark, soaked curls.

"Please, Olivia," Natalia arched her back off the bed in an effort to get closer, her voice rasping hoarsely in the quiet night air. "Fuck me."

Olivia chuckled and gladly did as she was told.

Natalia gasped as she was suddenly filled, Olivia taking her, fast and hard, angling and thrusting deep, claiming her as her own. Natalia barely recognized the needy moans coming from her mouth, lips still hotly pressed against Olivia's.

She could feel Olivia's smirk as she bucked against her, wanting more, needing to increase their tempo. Natalia growled as her lover ignored her, taking her sweet time to build the pressure, taking her higher, dancing on the razor sharp edge and then suddenly slowing the pace. Her eyes snapped open and Natalia groaned with frustration.

Helplessly Natalia watched Olivia's mouth descend again, demanding, deep kisses and then she was lost again, suddenly distracted by a thumb slowly circling her stiff clit. With a slightly desperate whimper she broke the kiss, Olivia turning to nuzzle along her flushed cheek as she squirmed, needing a release.

"Oh, I know." Olivia whispered, unrepentant. She dipped her head to once more tease Natalia's lips with gentle kisses. Deciding to take pity on her lover, Olivia picked up their pace, moving her hand faster. "Just let go, I've got you now."

Olivia's low, husky voice echoed in her ear, as Natalia's emotions began to overwhelm her, the rush of pleasure building to a fine point, until finally she felt her body shatter into a million pieces and she cried out into the night, only to finally land, safe in Olivia's arms...

When she could move again, Natalia's body finally relaxed and she was unable to stop the contented sigh. Sated and exhausted, she panted into Olivia's honey blonde hair, her breath starting to even out again. She moaned softly as Olivia shifted, feeling the loss of her partner's intimate touch keenly. Sliding to her side, Natalia pulled her into a tight embrace, arms and leg tangling lazily together.

Finally feeling her energy returning, Natalia began to stroke along Olivia's body, enjoying the sensation of just touching the flushed skin. Dragging her fingers along Olivia's naked hip, Natalia dipped lower, finding her way to where she was most needed, groaning as her partner started to spread her legs for her.

"Oh, baby. Is this what you need, hmmm?" Natalia smiled against Olivia's cheek, relishing the whimper her touch was causing, her fingers teasing along the length of her partner and then withdrawing.

"Mmmm, you are so wet for me..." Stretching out over Olivia, she kissed her lover thoroughly, easily distracting her before sinking deep, taking and filling her.

"Oh, God..." Olivia gasped.

Natalia simply smiled, Olivia's body bucking against her as she suddenly started making her way down the long delectable body, dropping kisses as she went. The short hair tickled her nose as Natalia's tongue dipped into the heat of her lover.

Olivia felt the world narrow to just the two of them, the give and take between them growing slick and fast until she felt Natalia's insistent mouth sucking and flicking firmly along her clit. Crying out, her world exploded.

"Shh, now rest," Natalia quietly murmured against Olivia's body, riding out the tremors crashing through her lover.

Olivia draped an arm over her eyes and tried to calm down. Before long she glanced down over the swell of her naked belly at the adorably tousled dark head resting there catching her breath. She could feel puffs of hot breath tickling against her slick flushed skin, triggering tiny aftershocks. A deliciously lazy moan vibrated against her lower body and she felt soft lips making a trail back up to her navel.

"Somebody's still a little twitchy..." An amused voice floated up, as Natalia trailed her moist tongue, teasing the salty hollows of her lover's abs, the hips below moving and lifting of their own accord. "Haven't I worn you out yet?"

“God, Natalia. You’re trying to kill me.” Olivia gasped, thrusting up against her lover, craving her deeper intimate touch once again.

Dark chocolate eyes looked up and held her lover’s gaze. Crawling up the woman’s body like an exotic jungle cat ready to pounce on its prey, Natalia paused here and there, twisting a very erect nipple and licking along puckered scar tissue from the transplant, finally nuzzling a sensitive earlobe, nipping, and then sucking the sting away.

“Hmm...but what a way to go, don’t you think?” She breathed hotly into Olivia’s ear, slowly lowering her weight onto the writhing body below. Capturing the sweet mouth beneath her, Natalia trailed her hand down through soaked curls and claimed her lover once more.

Filling and thrusting deep into the wet heat, Natalia was rewarded with a startled gasp followed by needy moans against her lips. Her lover bucked against her, trying to increase the tempo, but she simply ignored her, taking her time bringing her back to the peak, then slowing it down again, much to Olivia’s frustration.

A slightly desperate whimper finally escaped from her partner’s oh-so-tempting mouth. Smiling at the familiar sound, Natalia took pity and picked up the pace, moving ever faster, thumb circling her clit, bringing her lover once again to the edge.

“Wait for it, not until I tell you.” Natalia whispered, dipping to tease Olivia’s full lips. Her groan of frustration made her smile even wider and she slowed her strokes ever so slightly. “I know, baby...just a little longer. Let me see those gorgeous eyes, hmm...”

Natalia smiled as her lover growled and forced her eyes open. Glancing down she thrilled at the fire blazing in Olivia’s intense green eyes, knowing she was near.

“Now.” Natalia demanded, filling her lover quickly, taking her by surprise. “Come for me now, *querida*.”

It was all Olivia needed to hear, as she suddenly crashed and tumbled over the edge once more. Her body finally relaxing, Olivia moaned, sated and exhausted, into Natalia’s soft hair, her breath starting to even out.

Rolling to her side, Natalia brought her tired lover into a tight embrace. She ran a hand through sweat damp hair, pulling tendrils away from Olivia’s eyes. Dropping slow lazy kisses, she watched Olivia struggle to stay awake, as she nuzzled closer, dropping a tender kiss on her temple and running a soothing hand through sweat damp hair.

The first rays of dawn fell into the master bedroom, gentle light illuminating the white cotton sheet just barely covering them.

“I love watching the sun come up with you,” Olivia murmured sleepily.

“Me too.” Natalia smiled softly, the light from the window slowly growing brighter. Dawn was one of her favorite times of the day, and to spend it wrapped up in Olivia’s embrace was heaven on Earth.

“Happy anniversary, baby.” Olivia said quietly.

“The first of many to come, my love.” Natalia whispered back, tears threatening to fall. This really was a dream come true, something a little over a year ago she thought she had screwed up forever. You just never know what dreams may come. For this perfect moment in time, she sent up a small prayer of thanks.

Lazing together, they quietly listened to the world beginning to wake up. Small birds began to chirp just outside the window, their happy morning sounds heralding the new day.

“So do you think you might be able to get some sleep now?” Natalia murmured eventually, tender kisses pressed against sweat damp skin, a cocky grin covering her sweet lips. Olivia’s deep chuckle and a raised eyebrow was her only answer.

“Come here.” Olivia husked, not happy until Natalia was wrapped tight against her. She sighed, at ease again.

“Better?” Natalia’s lips moved against the soft skin of her lover’s shoulder, smiling softly as Olivia yawned slightly.

“Much.” Olivia pressed her nose into the soft dark hair, breathing in deeply, her mind slowing and starting to drift. “Remind me to send Blake some flowers tomorrow...”

Natalia snorted and squeezed her lover tighter as Olivia simply chuckled softly and then yawned.

“Go to sleep. I’m not going anywhere, love. I promise...” Natalia stroked her fingers lightly across her partner’s forehead and then up into her thick honey blonde hair, memorizing every line and feature for the umpteenth time. She watched contentedly as Olivia fell asleep in her arms, slipping into sweet dreams, before drifting off herself, each woman surrounded by peace, love and joy.

Outside in the distance, a crow cried out.

The End

Springfield's Nightmare Before Christmas

by Skeeter451

ACT 1

Olivia stumbled into the kitchen and headed for the coffeepot and her favorite mug waiting beside it. It wasn't until she had filled the mug and taken a deep drink that she noticed the other occupants of the room. Natalia sat at the table, with Emma in the seat next to her eating her breakfast and Francesca in her high chair smearing her hair with her Cheerios. Leyla also sat nursing her own coffee mug.

"Morning," Olivia grunted her voice thick with sleep.

"Good morning." Natalia flashed Olivia a pair of perfect dimples. "Want some eggs and toast?"

Olivia shook her head. "I'll just have what this beauty is having," she said, leaning down and nuzzling Francesca's belly, making the baby giggle and start smearing the wet lumps of cereal in Olivia's hair.

"Ama!" Francesca laughed and Olivia pulled back.

"Yes, baby?"

"Mwah!" the little girl exclaimed as she made an exaggerated kissy face. Olivia interpreted this to mean 'I love you, Mommy!'

"Mwah, you too, my little Sweet Pea," she said, kissing her daughter on the top of the head, careful to avoid the smeared goo. She looked up to see her partner watching them with adoration. Leyla and Emma, on the other hand, wore matching smirks. She coughed to hide her embarrassment. "So...what are we working on?" she asked, pointing at the various magazines spread out among the breakfast plates.

"Emma and Francesca's Halloween costumes," Natalia answered. "We're looking for theme ideas."

"Well, Sweet Pea's is easy," Olivia said, topping off her coffee and then sitting down next to Natalia. "Just pop her in a pink onesie and sailor hat and she can go as Sweet Pea."

Leyla snorted. "And maybe Emma can be Olive Oyl and Frank Bluto?"

Olivia laughed and leaned over to kiss Natalia. "And you can be Popeye since you're the strongest one of all."

"And what about you?" Natalia asked with a saucy grin. "You like to eat your spinach."

"Me?" Olivia leaned back in her chair and mimicked pulling at imaginary suspenders. "I'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a Buzz burger today."

Natalia nearly spit out her orange juice with laughter. "Oh, you are so not Wimpy, my love."

They all turned as a knock sounded and then the door opened to admit Ava. Immediately the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees as Leyla glared at Olivia's daughter.

"Hi, honey," Olivia said quickly. "Sorry I'm not ready yet, but thanks for coming to pick me up for the meeting."

"No problem, Mom...I'm early anyway," she said. "We've got plenty of time."

"Came for some free breakfast?" Leyla asked with a sneer.

"Hello! Room service," Ava shot back.

"Not the same as home-cooked, is it?"

"I never see you slaving over the stove anytime I'm here," Ava retorted.

"I do plenty!"

Olivia broke in and said, "Bean, if you're done why don't you go get ready for school, okay?"

The little girl nodded and with a worried look at her sister and aunt, left the kitchen.

"Girls, come on, let's be civil," Olivia said.

"Civil?" Ava said. "She wouldn't know civil if it whacked her in her fat head."

"Hey!" Leyla protested.

"Nag, nag, nag all the time," Ava went on. "I feel sorry for anyone who'd want to marry a harpy like you."

"Ava," Olivia said, trying not to raise her voice. "Apologize this instant."

"I can't believe this," Ava said, turning on her mother. "You're taking her side, Mom? Oh that's just great."

"I'm not taking anyone's side," Olivia said, "but I expect the adults of this house to act like adults."

"It's okay, Olivia," Leyla said. "I don't need anyone to defend me. Besides, she's all bark and no bite."

"Oh, I'll show you bite, you bitch!" With that, Ava rushed toward Leyla and hit Francesca's chair with her hip, startling the baby who started to wail a moment later.

"Okay, that's it!" Natalia said, standing up to pick up the crying baby. "You two – take it to the barn if you're going to act like animals."

"Natalia..." Ava started.

"Out!" she pointed, her posture stiff with anger even as she tried to settle the baby. "I will not have this house and family disrupted by all this constant bickering."

Leyla huffed, shoved back her chair as she stood up and stormed out the door.

Ava turned to her mother, but avoided her glare. "Sorry, Mom," she said. "I'll wait for you in the car."

Once outside, the two women continued their arguing, their voices carrying through the closed door. Natalia stood at the window and watched as she soothed the still-crying baby. Olivia joined her a moment later and then asked, "Do they remind you of anyone?" She pointed at the fighting duo.

"Who?" Natalia asked, confused, and then her eyebrows scrunched together. "Oh no! Do not even go there, Olivia."

"I'm just sayin'..."

"Go get dressed. You and Ava have to get to that meeting," she said jerking her head toward the kitchen door.

"Yes, dear," Olivia said and kissed her. "Love you."

"Mwah!" Natalia blew a kiss at her departing partner.

Olivia glanced at her daughter's profile thinking about the events of earlier. Ava was focused on the road and didn't seem to notice her mother's inspection. After a few moments, Olivia asked, "Why do you let her get to you like that?"

"You mean Leyla 'the harpy' Rivera?" Ava asked with a sneer. "She doesn't get to me, Mom. She's just such a hypocrite. She's always accusing me of taking advantage of you and Natalia, but she's the one living in your home and working in your hotel. Does she even pay you two for room and board?"

Olivia decided *not* to answer that, especially since Ava's suite at the Beacon was comped. "I'm glad that Natalia's reunited with at least one family member. Having her sister here makes Natalia happy and that makes me happy."

"Yeah, but she's still only Natalia's sister."

Olivia sighed. "Ava, honey, I know for a long time it was only the three of us and Sam off on his adventures, but weren't we always looking for more? Now we have it. We have a big, crazy and wonderful extended family. It's not perfect, but it's ours and I'm not letting go of any of it. So please, Ava...for me? At least *try* to get along with her."

"I'll try," she pouted. "But no promises."

"Thank you, baby," Olivia said and then opened up the file folder sitting on her lap. She glanced once again at the details of the property they were looking to purchase. "Okay, so let's figure out how we're going to tag-team this guy until he lowers his asking price."

She turned to Ava and chuckled as Ava made a point of expanding her chest to show off the revealing blouse she wore under her blazer. "That's my girl," she said with a proud grin.

Eleni Andros walked down the quiet and cool corridor of the Cedar's lower basement on her way to the morgue. Only one attendant was on duty and sitting at the desk. She showed him her identification and requested access to the small evidence and records room. He stood up and ushered her into the room after unlocking it.

"Thank you," she said, looking around the room and taking note of the various file cabinets and specimen lockers.

He hesitated a moment. "What is it you're looking for?" he asked.

"Not really sure yet," she answered. "But if I need any help, I'll let you know." After he left her alone, Eleni opened the closest file cabinet and pulled out a folder and began to read.

Sometime later, a short stack of folders lay on the desk. She intended to give them a closer review back at her office. Picking up the thickest, which was marked Winslow, E. SPD372891-D, she pulled a log sheet and walked over to the cold storage sample chest. Checking the cross-reference, she pulled several vials of tissue samples and left behind a chain of evidence form. She placed the vials in her kit. She already knew the samples would not prove to be from Edmund Winslow, but she wanted to double check. If the sample wasn't from Winslow, it would be further evidence of DeSilva's evidence tampering.

Checking her notes, she pulled additional samples from cases she suspected were also tampered with. On a few of them, she had noticed the investigating officer was Det. M. Cooper. Closing her evidence kit, she gathered up her files and left the room.

"Find what you're looking for?" the same attendant asked. She noted he had a sandwich and soda on his desk and realized how much time had passed.

"I've made a start, thank you," she said. "Tell me, most of the evidence here is less than two years old. What happens to the evidence from older cases?"

"If samples are not needed by the DA's office or the cases are sent over to the cold case files at the PD, then it's stored at a facility in Chicago. The ME's office will have the manifests referenced by case number."

"All right," she said. "Thanks so much for your help." She walked down the corridor in the direction of the elevator, her rubber soles squeaking on the polished tile of the floor. Turning the corner, she caught a glimpse of her daughter pushing her way through the stairwell doors. With a frown, Eleni picked up her pace to follow.

Once in the stairwell, she heard Marina's footsteps rushing up the stairs and then the sound of the ground floor door opening. By the time she reached the landing, she was nearly running and when she pushed through the door, she saw Marina looking carefully around the loading bay.

"Marina!" she called, finally catching up.

Marina's head snapped around. "Mom! What are you doing here?"

"Working," she answered, tired of her daughter's petulant tone. "What about you?"

"Same thing, not that it's any of your business," Marina said. "Since coming back on the force, I've got a lot to do."

"In the morgue?" Eleni asked. "Which case? There are no autopsies going on. I was there all morning and it was quiet."

"Just needed to check something for an old case," Marina said. "But I've got to run. Shayne is watching Henry and needs to get to work."

"Well, wait a second," Eleni said, stopping Marina's departure. "Some of the cases DeSilva worked on were yours and I have a few questions."

"Well...go through regular channels," Marina said with a scowl. "That's how we do things here in Springfield – by the book. Don't expect special consideration because you used to be married to the chief."

"Hey!" Eleni said, her temper finally breaking. She closed her eyes in an attempt to control herself. "I am still your mother and expect your respect," she said peering closely at her daughter. "So if you don't have time to answer my questions, then I'll have to find the answers elsewhere. But remember – I'm a scientist looking for the truth – don't expect special consideration because I'm your mother."

"What's that's supposed to mean?" Marina huffed as she put her hands on her hips.

"Nothing, I hope," Eleni answered.

Marina rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I've got to go get my son."

Eleni watched her daughter leave the loading area as she worriedly bit the inside of her lip.

"She's straight!" Doris exclaimed. She looked over the table at Olivia. Doris had invited her friend to lunch at Towers and had just mentioned the phone call she received from Blake that morning asking her to dinner.

"Doris," Olivia said. "Two years ago you and everyone else who knows me would have testified on a stack of Bibles as tall as the Empire State Building that I was the straightest woman in Springfield. But you watched me change over that time; why can't Blake change as well?"

"You don't know what it's like, Olivia," Doris said, shaking her head with a heavy sigh. "I've been with plenty of straight women. In college, I had LUGs coming out of the woodwork."

"LUGs?"

"Lesbian Until Graduation," Doris explained. "Women who use the freedom of college as a way to experiment with all that life has to offer before they settle down to their normal lives with their normal husbands and have their normal children."

"But Blake's already had all that," Olivia said, pointing emphatically at Doris. "She's a grown woman who has already experienced a lot that life has to offer. She obviously likes you and is open to the possibility of love. And..." Olivia gave her a wicked grin. "I happen to know for a fact that she likes toys."

Doris's mouth dropped open. "How the heck do you know that? Did Natalia share the contents of your toy chest with her one day during a book signing?"

Olivia chuckled. "No, nothing like that," she said. "Last year before Natalia and I got together I was feeling a little...frustrated...and Blake suggested her favorite remedy."

Olivia smirked as Doris's eyes unfocused, her mind seeming to go to a very happy place. "Um, Earth to Doris?"

"What?" Doris snapped back to reality.

"Just give her a chance, Doris," Olivia said.

Doris sighed and glanced around the restaurant as she seemed to mull Olivia's words over. "I don't know," she finally said. "It's hard enough when a woman who likes only women hurts you, but when you get involved with a straight woman, your chance of getting burned is that much higher."

"Maybe so, but if you won't even give it a chance to work, it'll never even have a chance to fail," Olivia said. "Just think about it, Doris...there's no rush."

Doris smiled. "So...tell me a little bit more about Blake's favorite remedy."

Natalia rushed into her office at the Beacon and dumped her purse down on her desk. Turning on her laptop, she waited impatiently for it to boot up.

"Come on," she muttered under her breath as she clicked on her browser icon. Finally, the program loaded, but then she had to close the extra windows. "At last!" she said, pulling up the USO website. After a couple of clicks, she was logged into the family chat area and then sat back and waited.

Nibbling on her thumb, she waited until at last the computer dinged and showed an incoming message announcement. Bouncing in her seat, she eagerly clicked on the window.

"Hi, baby!" she typed.

"Hey, Ma," she received in her window. "Click on the webcam, remember?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot," she typed and did as he asked. After a moment, the video box popped up and her son's beautiful face came up on her screen. She felt her eyes fill with tears. "Oh, Rafael!"

"Hello, Ma," he smiled.

"Have you lost more weight?" she asked. "Did you take your blood sugar today? What was it before dinner?"

"No, Ma, I haven't lost weight. I'm still the same as when you saw me," he said. "And my sugar is fine. You're looking good. Everything okay there in Crazyland?"

"Oh yes," she said, resting her head on her propped hand as she looked at the image of her son. "We're getting ready for Halloween. It's Sweet Pea's first and we're looking forward to it."

"Don't forget to send lots of pictures," he said pointing at her through the screen. "I can't wait to see my baby sister in a costume."

"Don't worry," she said. "Olivia is an absolute fiend with her camera. She's filled up several external drives with photographs of Francesca alone."

Rafe laughed, his sun-darkened face brightening the screen. "That's classic. Hey! Don't forget that my baby shower gift will be done next month. Send a picture of it so I can show it off to all my buddies. They love hearing about our crazy family."

"You tell them about us?" she said, surprised.



"Sure I do, Ma," he grinned. "You and Olivia are considered by the camp to be the hottest MILFs back home."

"MILFs?" Natalia asked, her face scrunching in confusion.

Rafe leaned forward and typed his answer in the chat box substituting a euphemism for the last word, laughing all the while.

Natalia's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "Rafael!"

"I'm just kidding, Ma," he said. "Everyone here just loves hearing about each other's families and believe me, there are lots of families that are just like ours."

"Thank you, baby," she said, tears in her eyes. "I'm so sad that you'll miss Thanksgiving with us again, not to mention Sweet Pea's first birthday."

"Yeah, me too," he said, his grin turning wry. "I don't suppose Olivia has any pull with the Commander-in-Chief?"

"I wouldn't put it past her to try," she said. "Should I ask?"

"Nah," he laughed. "Just kidding. Besides, I really need to be here, Ma."

"I know, baby," she said. "I'm so proud of you, *mi hijo*, but I'm so scared for you every day."

"I'll be fine, Ma," he said and glanced to the side. "Well, my time's up and the next guy needs the computer before it gets too late here. *Te quiero, Mamá.*"

"*Te quiero, también*, Rafael," she said. "Sleep well and stay safe, okay?" Even though she knew it was senseless, she touched the screen wishing desperately she could touch his face.

"Okay, Ma," he said. "Give kisses to Olivia and my sisters for me and a big hug for Aunt Leyla."

"I will, I promise," she said. "Good night, Rafe."

"Night, Ma," he said and leaned forward to close the connection.

Natalia stood and wiped at her tears so that their employees wouldn't notice them and then she left the office to seek out a much needed hug from her partner.

Olivia looked up as a knock sounded on her office door frame and saw Natalia's head poke around it a moment later.

"Hey, beautiful," she said with a smile, which immediately fell when she noticed Natalia's eyes. She glanced at the clock and saw the time. She quickly stood to take Natalia in her arms. "Oh hey, is he okay?" she asked.

Natalia nodded. "He's fine, he's good. He looks good – tanned and healthy. Strong."

"Then why the tears, baby?" she asked even though she knew the answer. Not a day went by when they both didn't worry for his physical safety and mental well-being, which only increased with each news report of another soldier killed. And ever since his last visit, when Rafe had finally fully accepted her into his heart and family, Olivia had come to love the young man for his own sake and not just for his mother's. Were anything to happen to him, she would be just as devastated as his birth mother.

Natalia shrugged, although she clung to Olivia even tighter. Then she let out a short bark of laughter. "He said his friends at the base think we're both MILFs."

"Oh really?" she said with a smirk. She leaned back and brushed away Natalia's tears.

"Well, I'm the only one who has that particular privilege and I'll fight off a whole battalion of GIs if I have to for you."

Natalia rolled her eyes and Olivia knew her tasteless joke had succeeded. "How did the meeting go?" Natalia asked.

"All right, I think," she answered. "Ava's crunching the numbers and will have a report to us by Monday. We'll be able to make a decision next week."

Natalia nodded. "Sounds good." Then with a sigh she said, "What are we going to do about Ava?"

"Ava?" Olivia asked and raised her eyebrows. "You mean about this morning? If I recall correctly, Leyla started it."

"Yeah, but she was just pulling Ava's chain; Ava was the one who got aggressive."

"Aggressive?" Olivia asked, releasing Natalia and taking a step back. "My daughter was just defending herself. Leyla was the one who instigated the whole thing."

"She may have started it *today*, but Ava is the one who takes everything my sister says out of proportion," Natalia said and held up a hand as she tried to explain. "That's how my family always was when I was growing up so I'm sure it was the same for Leyla, even though I wasn't there. I remember my mother and aunties working in the kitchen on Sundays going on and on about one thing or another. It *sounded* like they were fighting, but it was just a way to show who was boss at the moment. Actually, they all knew they were equals."

"Oh, so what you're saying is that Ava is disrespecting you and your sister's cultural upbringing?"

"Oh, my God! You are so not getting the point. I'm saying that the more aggressive Ava is, the harder Leyla is going to push. If Ava would just lighten up and laugh a bit at her, then Leyla would back off." Natalia ran her fingers through her hair in frustration.

"That doesn't make any sense," Olivia said, waving her arms.

"Maybe not in those words, but it was how we were raised. To us in the family, it was okay to talk trash to and about each other, but if anyone *outside* the family said the exact same thing, everyone stood together. Look at you and me, for example. Once you gave in, we started getting along so much better."

"So everything would be hunky dory if Ava just rolled over, bared her neck and acknowledged Leyla is the alpha bitch? Isn't that what I did with you, Natalia?" Olivia had her hands on her hips and her head tilted to the side, but her defensive posture let Natalia know she had to choose her words very carefully.

"No!" Natalia said. "I'm talking about the moment you stopped treating me like a rival or a subordinate and finally accepted me as your equal and let me help you. But *we're* not the point here; it's Ava and Leyla and their constant fighting."

"Oh, so you agree it's not just Ava anymore?"

Natalia sighed and rubbed her face. "Olivia...I think that what Leyla does is harmless – that in some subconscious way she's trying to help Ava because Ava is a part of her family. But what Ava does is destructive and I think it's going to keep getting worse."

"God, I can't believe this!" Olivia cried. "Ava is fine; she's just a little abrasive. She's just... she's just my daughter, okay?"

"Exactly!" Natalia said, pointing at her. "And look at all the ways you tried to self-destruct in the past."

Olivia stared at her partner. "You think I'm going to self-destruct again?" she asked quietly. "Do you have a time table for this, because I sure would like to know."

"No, Olivia!" Natalia said. "You've changed. I've watched you grow and become the wonderful and beautiful woman you are today. You're not going to self-destruct. But something's going on with Ava and I think she needs our help." She reached toward her, but Olivia pulled quickly away.

Olivia could hear Ava's voice from this morning in her mind accusing her of taking sides and she hardened her expression. "Just tell that sister of yours to quit the head games and leave my daughter alone." Turning her back, she strode quickly out of the office, leaving Natalia alone.

Sitting alone in her office, Eleni Andros sighed in frustration as she ran her hands through her long hair. Sitting in front of her on her desk were two piles of case files. Both of them were cases where DeSilva appeared to have tampered with evidence, either by falsifying records, or by losing or 'accidentally' contaminating samples. However, it was the larger pile of folders that concerned her the most. On all of them, her daughter had been the lead investigator.

She sighed again. It was time to speak with Frank, and it definitely wasn't a conversation she was looking forward to.

Natalia sat in a quiet corner of the Beacon's day care center as she nursed Francesca. Leyla sat at her small desk nearby bottle-feeding the infant boy of a nice couple staying at the hotel who were out making funeral arrangements for the woman's father who had passed away. The couple had been so relieved they wouldn't have to worry about the baby while they completed their difficult arrangements. Natalia smiled. The service the Beacon was providing would eventually more than pay for the added expense. As word got around, business would pick up. And extending the service to the staff had already proved to decrease absenteeism. She thought about the many times Rafe had needed to stay home from school and she had been forced to miss work if she couldn't find a sitter.

A stray thought made her chuckle. Leyla looked up and asked, "What?"

"Oh nothing." She smiled. Francesca finished feeding, so she shifted the baby to her shoulder. "Just thinking. I was marveling at how I went from being a maid in this hotel to becoming part owner."

Leyla laughed. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you slept your way to the top."

"Just the opposite," Natalia laughed along with her sister. "My refusing to sleep with Alan drove him crazy. He even said in his will that dying was the only way he could get me to take anything from him."

"Emma and Rafe's grandfather?" Leyla asked. "What was he like?"

"A tyrant," Natalia said. "Manipulative, diabolical, power-hungry. No wonder Olivia married him." She laughed at the thought. "But in the end he finally got it."

"Got what?"

"The real meaning of family," she answered. "How your family is the most important part of your life. Not money or power or fame. Olivia learned that lesson, too. Nicky got it from his adopted parents, which is why he was so torn when Rafe and I showed up in town. He wanted to take care of us, but it got in the way of his marriage."

Leyla thought for a moment. "I remember him...your Nicky," she said.

"You do?" Natalia said surprised. "You were so young."

"Yeah, I do. You must have been babysitting me and he was visiting. He brought me an ice cream from the street truck and sat on the fire escape to smoke."

"That was Nicky all right," Natalia said. "He didn't want to get me in trouble by smoking inside or doing anything to let the folks know I had visitors." She was silent as she thought about her first love. "I hated that I was responsible for the breakup of his marriage, but it was all part of God's plan."

Leyla blinked. "You really believe that?"

"Of course," she answered. "If I hadn't married Nicky, Olivia would probably not be here today and we wouldn't have the family we have."

"I wish I had that kind of faith," Leyla sighed. "I'm glad you two have each other and you're right, your family is amazing."

"Our family, *hermana*," she pointed out with a kind smile, but remembering her conversation with Olivia earlier, the smile turned into a frown. "Do me a favor, please? Take it easy on Ava. She's a good woman, but she's got a short temper. Every time you push her buttons, she's going to blow up and we don't need the headache."

Leyla's jaw clenched. "She takes herself too seriously," she said. "And she thinks she's a big deal just because she's Olivia's daughter."

"That's not true," Natalia countered. "She hasn't had an easy time of it and her relationship with Olivia wasn't always the best. And losing a baby is always hard on someone."

"She lost a baby?" Leyla asked, her hard tone of voice turning surprised. "I didn't know that."

Natalia nodded. "A son, Max," she said. "That's why she left Springfield for a while. It was too hard seeing Remy, the father, all the time and being reminded of her loss."

"Remy the cop?" Leyla asked. "The one whose wife just had a baby?"

"He's the one," Natalia said and looked down at Francesca who had fallen asleep. She gently placed the baby in a nearby crib and adjusted her blouse. "All right, I've got to get to my meeting with Blake. Everything okay here?"

"Yeah," Leyla answered. "This one's down for the count and it'll be quiet here until the older kids get off the bus."

"Okay, Leyla. Then I'll see you later." She gave her daughter and sister a kiss and left the center after a passing glance at Leyla's thoughtful expression.

Blake Marler pulled another manuscript from her tote bag and handed it to Natalia. They were seated at a table at Towers. Coffee cups and the remains of a light snack were pushed aside to make room for the various projects they were working on.

"I'm really not sure about this one," Blake said as she showed the cover letter to Natalia. "It's good and I think it's well-written, but I'm not sure if it will sell. It's not like anything out there."

"Sometimes that's an advantage," Natalia said, glancing over the paper. "I mean, you can only have so many vampire or apocalypse novels out there at the same time. Being a maverick can sometimes be a good thing."

"See, that's why I like working with you, Natalia," Blake said. "You're not afraid to take chances."

Natalia laughed. "That's what Olivia always says, but I think I've just been lucky."

"Still, you have a good feel for books." Blake reached into her tote again and pulled out an envelope. "That reminds me. This is for you."

Natalia's face scrunched in confusion as she opened the envelope and her expression turned to surprise as she pulled out a check. "Blake, what's this? I told you I didn't want to take any money simply for reading books. I enjoy working with you."

"That's just a small percentage of the profits on the books you've recommended. They're selling like hot cakes and that never would have happened without your contribution." Blake smiled. "Be proud of yourself, Natalia. You've got a gift and should be compensated for it."

Natalia's eyes goggled. "This is a *small* percentage?"

"Yes," Blake said with a laugh. "I've always been lucky that way as well, but your work has helped increase that luck. So take the money; put it in the kids' college fund if you want, but I insist."

"All right," Natalia said reluctantly as she tucked the check into her purse, then she asked, "If the publishing company is doing so well, why do you keep waitressing at Company?"

"Oh, I'd miss being in the center of things," she said, leaning back in her chair. "I really enjoy interacting with people. If I didn't go there every day and simply worked from home or an office, then I'd miss out on what's going on around town. And on seeing some of my favorite people every day like you and Olivia and...Doris."

"Okay, I can see that," Natalia said with a nod. "I did feel a little isolated after Francesca's birth. I love our home and our daughters, but I'm glad to be working again."

"Right," Blake said and squirmed a little in her chair. "So, um...that reminds me. Natalia? Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, Blake," Natalia answered and picked up her cup to drain the rest of her coffee. "How do you make love to a woman?"

Natalia choked and her cup clattered to the table. A waitress immediately came over and started to wipe up the spilled coffee before it could stain the manuscripts on the table. Natalia glanced around and noticed several patrons of the restaurant looking on. Finally, when the waitress left, Natalia said, "Blake! Whu...what?"

"You have right?" Blake asked, seemingly unaware of Natalia's embarrassment. "I mean, sure you have."

"Blake!" she exclaimed again. She looked around, but was relieved to note that the other people in the restaurant weren't paying attention anymore.

"Oh come on, Natalia! Everyone here knows you and Olivia are lovers. Heck, half of the people here were at Phillip's New Year's party when you two were going at it in the library."

"Oh, my God," she said, covering her face with her hands.

"You're not ashamed of it, are you?" Blake asked, blinking at Natalia and shaking her head.

"No!" she said loudly and then lowered her voice. "No, of course not. It's just...Blake, I'm not used to talking about it outside of the bedroom."

"You mean you never talked about sex with your girlfriends?" Blake goggled.

"I never really had time for girlfriends before Olivia," she answered. "And even if I hadn't been entirely cut off from my family, Leyla was still a kid and I couldn't have talked to her about that kind of stuff."

"Well, Olivia doesn't count anymore and Leyla is your sister," Blake said. "We're friends, right?" She waited for Natalia to nod. "And you're gay and I really, really need advice on how to seduce a woman."

Natalia simply stared at the woman sitting across the table from her.

"Please!" Blake whined.

Natalia closed her eyes and sighed. "Okay, okay!" she said. "I assume we're talking about Doris Wolfe here?"

Blake exaggerated her nod. "Yes! See, that's the thing. At least with you and Olivia neither of you knew what you were doing so it didn't matter if it wasn't good. But Doris has a lot of experience, so she's going to want someone who knows what she's doing."

Natalia frowned. "Okay, first of all, Blake...Olivia and I...our first time was good," she said her cheeks hot with embarrassment.

"Really?" Blake asked, surprised.

"Really," she answered. "It was very, very good and you want to know why?"

Blake leaned forward. "Why?"

"Because Olivia and I love each other," she said softly. "It didn't matter that we had never made love with another woman before or how much experience we had in regards to sex. All that mattered was that we are so in love that the ability to show that love physically made it totally mind-blowing. It was that way our first time and every other time since."

"Wow," Blake said with a long exhalation of air as she sat back in her chair.

Natalia gave her a stern look. "But Blake...if you're just looking for a new experience then go pick up a random woman down at Ladies Night. Doris has been hurt enough and if you're not serious about her and she ends up hurt again, then you'll not only have Olivia on your back, but me as well. Got it?"

Blake raised her hands defensively. "Got it," she said with an emphatic nod. She leaned forward again and gave Natalia a wicked grin. "So tell me, were you icked out the first time you...you know...to Olivia?"

"Oh, my God," Natalia said and dropped her head to the table.

In room 217 of Cedars, Lillian Cooper made a small adjustment to the I.V. of the comatose patient. She took a long look at his pale and gaunt face and tilted her head in thought. Picking up her pen, she made a note in the case file lying on the rolling table. 'Patient's color seems improved,' she wrote, and she initialed it and added the time. Closing the file, she exited the room.

A few seconds after the door had swung silently shut behind her, Edmund Winslow's eyes sprang wide open.

ACT 2

Buzz Cooper paused in the middle of unlocking the door to his restaurant and turned at the sound of screaming sirens. He stepped to the edge of the street and watched as two SPD squad cars raced into the entrance to Cedars Hospital. Moments later, he saw his son's car pull in behind them. He frowned as first Frank and then Detective Li exited the vehicle and ran towards the entrance.

"Oh boy," he muttered under his breath and hurried to get inside so he could call his wife.

The scene on the second floor was utter chaos when Frank stepped off the elevator. He paused for a moment to take in the scene, but as Anna rushed past him, he hurried to catch up.

His stepmother was standing near the nurse's station with her arms wrapped around her torso and her face drawn.

"Lillian, are you all right?" he asked, touching her on the arm.

She nodded. "I'm fine, Frank," she said. She turned aside as her telephone began to buzz. "It's your pop," she said, thumbing the device. "I'll call him back later." Frank turned to his officer and barked, "What's going on, Mahoney?"

"Call came in to dispatch at 6:02 am," the man answered. Frank glanced at his watch and noted it was now 6:15. Good, but not good enough. He nodded for the officer to continue. "Mrs. Cooper here says she found Officer Hooks unconscious outside of Winslow's room and Winslow gone. Hooks is in the ER right now with Doctor Bauer."

Frank turned to Lillian. "What happened?"

"I had just come back from my break and found the officer outside room 217 slumped over," she said. "I checked him and found him unresponsive and with a weak pulse. I called the code and opened the door to check on the patient and noted that the bed was empty. I didn't go inside the room."

"No one's been in the room since?" Anna asked.

Lillian shook her head and Anna got on her phone.

"How's Hooks?" Frank asked.

Lillian shrugged and Frank said, "Mahoney..." He jerked his head toward the emergency room, then turned to Anna. "I want a lockdown on the hospital, now! Get everyone you can down here and I want every inch of this place searched." He turned back to Lillian. "You saw Winslow last night?" he asked. "What was his condition?"

Lillian pulled a file from its slot and opened it. "I checked him when I came on duty at 8:00 pm. Officer Hooks was already here and in his usual place outside the door. I did my examination, checked his vitals and made sure his IV was working. I did make a note that his color looked a little better, but other than that he seemed the same as he's been since coming out of surgery."

"Did you see anyone go in or out other than Hooks?" Frank asked.

"No," she shook her head.

"Who else was on duty last night?"

"Dr. Donofrio was on the overnight and Rick relieved her at 6," she answered. "Maria was the other nurse, but she was covering the ER. And Billy Tai was here."

"Tai?" Frank asked, not recognizing the name.

"The floor orderly," she answered. "He's new."

Frank looked at Anna and noted her suspicious expression as she met his gaze. "Where is he now?"

Lillian frowned. "He should still be on duty."

"Get him here," he said.

Lillian walked over to the nurses' station to make the page while Frank moved closer to Anna, who was just clicking off her phone. "Well?" he asked.

"Marina's downstairs and organizing the search; she's got the exits and loading bay all blocked off. Remy's searching the grounds. Eleni's on her way and should be here any minute now. She was still on the road."

The elevator opened and Officer Mahoney and Rick Bauer walked toward them. Frank felt his stomach drop when he saw Rick's face.

"Oh no," Lillian said, placing her hand over her mouth.

"I'm sorry," the doctor told Frank. "By the time we got to him, his heart had already stopped and we weren't able to resuscitate him."

"God damn it!" Frank exclaimed, thinking about Hooks who always eagerly volunteered for extra guard duty because his son was studying abroad and the extra cash was a big help. "What killed him?" he asked Rick.

Rick shrugged. "Not sure yet; we'll need a postmortem, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's some kind of poison."

The elevator doors opened again, this time revealing Eleni, who was carrying her large evidence kit. Anna quickly briefed her and Eleni turned sorrowful eyes to Frank. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Just find out anything you can so we know just what the hell happened here," he said before he left to help with the search.

In the kitchen, Natalia heard the sound of her lover's voice a moment before Olivia pushed through the door, her cell phone pressed against her ear. She could immediately tell from Olivia's expression that something was seriously wrong. She turned off the faucet and grabbed a towel to dry her hands.

"Okay, Anna," Olivia said and caught Natalia's eyes with her own. "Yes, I'll call Ava right away. No, I was going in, but Natalia was going to stay home with the kids today...help them get ready for Halloween."

Natalia frowned. From what Olivia was saying about the sudden change of their plans, she did not care for the direction the conversation was going.

"Yes, I think that's best too," Olivia continued. "Okay, thanks for calling, Anna, and I appreciate all the extra help." She sighed and thumbed her phone shut and then looked at Natalia. "Edmund escaped from the hospital this morning. The officer guarding him is dead."

Natalia gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh no!"

"Anna's sending a security team here to pick us up and take us to the Beacon, just for tonight," Olivia said, putting a hand to her temple. Natalia immediately moved to the cabinet to retrieve a couple of headache tablets from the bottle she always kept there.

"Thank you," Olivia said as she took the pills. "She said that it'll be easier to keep watch over everyone at the Beacon while she gets all the security details set up, but we'll have full protection 24/7 regardless of where we are. Oh, and Anna said she'll come with us tomorrow night so the girls don't have to miss trick or treating."

"All right," Natalia said and bit her lip. "God, I *hate* this!"

"I'm sorry," Olivia said, biting her lip.

Natalia frowned. "What are you sorry for?" she asked. "You're not responsible for Edmund's actions."

"Well, maybe if I hadn't pissed him off so many times he wouldn't be after my family now," she said with a wry shrug.

"You've taken responsibility for your past mistakes, Olivia," she said. "And most importantly, you didn't let the need for revenge consume you, like Edmund has."

"It could have," Olivia said with a shrug. "I wanted to ruin Jeffrey when I found out he was Ava's father."

"But you didn't," Natalia pointed out as she shook her head. "You found forgiveness in your heart and I love you all the more for it. So stop feeling guilty about Edmund's actions. Yes, he lost his daughter and that's a terrible thing, but it will never excuse what he's done since...the harm he's caused and the many lives he's taken. All of that is on Edmund, not on you or anyone else. Him."

"Thank you," Olivia smiled, wiping a tear from her eye. "I'll go get Emma and Francesca ready to go. I'm sorry that your day is ruined."

"Again with the apologies," Natalia said with a roll of her eyes. "I'll just take a guard with me when I run out for the girls' costumes. They can spend the day with Leyla."

As if summoned by the sound of her name, Natalia's sister walked in. "Who can spend the day with me?" she asked.

"Do you mind working today?" Olivia asked her.

"No, why? What's going on?"

"I'll explain," Natalia said. "Olivia, please go get the girls."

Olivia nodded and went to fetch their daughters.

Doris Wolfe looked up at the knock on her open office door. "Come in, Eleni," she said and waved at the chair in front of her desk. "Anything new on Winslow?"

"Nothing," Eleni replied. "As soon as the search warrant comes through for the orderly's house, I'll get going on that."

"Then what's up?" she asked.

Eleni paused and then reached over to push the office door closed. Doris's eyebrows rose questioningly as Eleni leaned forward and said, "Doris, I think someone inside the department is working with Winslow."

Doris pursed her lips. "Go on."

"I'm certain DeSilva was and had been for years. I have evidence that he helped Winslow fake his own death. I'm also sure that someone else in the department was working with DeSilva. And last night, the security system was bypassed by someone using the PD override. Those codes were only changed last week and the hospital security staff doesn't have access to them. It had to have been someone with the department." Doris noted that during her speech, Eleni's hands were clenching in nervousness.

"Have you spoken to Frank about this?" she asked, trying to keep her face neutral.

"Not yet," Eleni answered. "Frank doesn't *want* there to be a dirty cop in his department, so he refuses to listen."

"He'll listen this time," Doris said grimly. "One of our officers is dead and if someone inside the department helped Winslow escape, they're an accessory to murder. You get all of your evidence together and I'll call a meeting for this afternoon."

Eleni nodded. "Thank you for listening, Doris."

"I wish I could say it's been a pleasure, but it hasn't."

Sometime later that morning, Frank met with Anna in Edmund's room, which was now stripped and showed the signs of Eleni's work.

"All right," he said. "What happened?"

Anna crossed her arms. "Sometime after Hooks came on duty last night, the orderly brought him dinner from Company."

"Company?" he barked.

"Marina said she always sends over dinner for whoever is on guard duty," Anna said, wincing at his sharp tone. "Sometimes she sends it with the regular delivery boy but if he's busy, she's been sending it over with Tai, who always stops in for coffee before his shift."

"So then Tai poisoned the food?" Frank asked, unable to wait for her to continue.

Anna sighed. "The ME won't know for sure until the lab results come in, but he strongly suspects that's what happened. Hooks's major systems just shut down one by one until he died. He thinks it might have been cyanide."

"Bastard!" Frank exclaimed. "And what did Eleni find?"

"Nothing," Anna said. "The room has been swept clean. Not even Lillian's prints are left. It was a professional wash."

"Witnesses?"

"None," she said. "So what I figure happened was this – Hooks and Lillian came on duty around eight o'clock. Tai picked up his coffee and Hooks's dinner at eight forty-five and clocked in at nine. He delivered the poisoned meal to Hooks and started to work. Sometime between then and six o'clock, Winslow either got up and walked out of his room or someone – either Tai or another accomplice – bundled him up and carted him out of here."

She continued, checking her notes. "They must have gone through the loading dock. I checked the security tapes, but they're also wiped clean. Nothing during the eight hour period from ten pm to six this morning. Like I said, a professional job."

"What do we have on Tai?" he asked and took the personnel file she handed him.

"He started at Cedars three months ago and has been working the graveyard shift all this time," she said. "Performance review last week was satisfactory. Lillian said he was quiet and seemed shy. Kept to himself, but did his work well. She never had any complaints."

"Did you try his address?" he asked, shuffling through the file.

"I sent an officer over, but there was no response to the knock and no car in the driveway. I spoke with the owner of the house and she said she'll meet us there to let us in. Remy's waiting on the search warrant and will bring it over when it's signed," she answered.

"All right, let's go," he said and left the room.

On the drive over, Anna briefed him on the other details she had been handling, including contacting Phillip Spaulding's security firm and arranging extra coverage.

"I managed to catch Olivia and Natalia before they left the farmhouse and they agreed to wait for the escort. Reva and Jonathan with Colin and Sarah are going over to the Beacon. It will be easy enough to protect the kids at the new day care center."

"Agreed," Frank said then added, "I do think it's a colossal waste of time and money though. Winslow's probably already back in Mexico by now."

"I don't think so, Chief," Anna said, blowing out a puff of air and shaking her head. "Winslow wants one thing – to get revenge on his enemies. And if they're in Springfield, that's where he's going to be."

"That makes no sense," he said, shaking his head. "Why risk getting captured again? Or shot again, for that matter?"

"It doesn't have to make sense to us," she said and Frank resented her conciliatory tone of voice. "It does to him and that's what we have to deal with."

Frank was silent as he considered the fact that his youngest daughter once again needed a *bodyguard*. Christ, how the hell had that happened? He felt a strong jab of resentment at Olivia Spencer and her place in his daughter's life. No matter how much Natalia claimed Olivia had changed, it was still her past actions that were now endangering Francesca. Of course, Natalia had made herself Winslow's enemy by taking a shot at him, but then again that never would have happened if not for Olivia. For the first time he regretted allowing them full custody and wondered if it was too late to do something about it.

Anna pulled into the driveway of a small house. She parked the car behind a blue sedan as a woman of about fifty stepped out of it.

"Detective Li?" she asked.

Anna nodded. "Mrs. Johnston...Chief Cooper."

"Ma'am," Frank said. "Thank you for meeting us."

"It's no trouble," she said. "As I mentioned to Detective Li, Mr. Tai is a monthly tenant. He pays in cash promptly on the first of the month."

"He's lived here for three months now?" he asked.

The woman nodded as she stepped onto the porch and unlocked the door. "He's very quiet. As far as I know, he hasn't had any visitors. No complaints from the neighbors."

"Please wait here," Frank said and he and Anna entered, hands on their gun butts.

The room was simply furnished with old seventies-style furniture, complete with a dark brown shag carpet. A faint odor of stale cigarettes filled the air; the overflowing ashtray added its own fragrance to the miasma. Anna quickly moved down the hall to inspect the small bathroom and bedroom.

In the kitchen, the remains of coagulated bacon fat filled a frying pan on the grease-spattered stove. The sink was full of dishes obviously days old. Frank pulled open the refrigerator to find only a jug of water and an old takeout box from Company.

Back in the living area, he noticed an odd device on the table next to a tattered La-Z-Boy. He picked it up and was examining it when Anna returned.

"Anything?" he asked, not looking up. When she didn't answer right away, he glanced over at her and saw she was staring at what was in his hand.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, her voice leaden.

He nodded at the table. "Right there," he said. "Why? It's a hand gripper."

"Yes," Anna said. "And it's my father's. I told you before about it."

"How can you know that?" he asked. "There must be one of these in every other house in town, so how can you be so sure it's his? Just because he sent you that one before doesn't mean anything, Li."

"I *know* it's his, Chief. I've never seen him without one," she explained. "All the time I was growing up, I'd hear the sound of him working these. A constant squeak, squeak, squeak. Day and night. It never ended." Frank could see goose bumps raising the short hairs on her arms. "Sometimes I still hear the sound in my nightmares."

"But why did he have such an obsession?" Frank asked.

"He always said that he would never be caught without his deadliest weapons," Anna answered. "Guns can misfire, knives can break, but he could always kill with his hands."

"Oh come on!" Frank scoffed.

"Try it," she challenged.

Frank held the grip in his left hand and squeezed. It didn't budge. He switched it to his right hand and was only able to move it a millimeter. "Jesus," he exclaimed.

"Exactly," she said, and then gave him a sarcastic grin. "By the way, Chief...don't worry about any latent prints on that. Like I said, I *know* they're my father's and that he's here in Springfield helping Edmund Winslow."

Frank Cooper slammed down the telephone and yelled, "Eleni! Get in here!"

His ex-wife entered his office, followed quickly by Anna Li. "What's wrong, Frank?"

"You tell me!" he said, standing and leaning his weight on the desk with his palms on the desk. "I just got off the phone with Doris Wolfe."

"Okay..." she started.

"Okay? Okay? I'm sorry, but you going to Doris Wolfe with baseless accusations of a dirty cop inside the department is *not* okay!"

"Frank," Eleni said and then shut the door. "Listen to me carefully. DeSilva was dirty and I'm sure he was working with someone else."

"You're *sure*?" he scoffed. "But you don't have any hard evidence."

"I'm getting it," she said. "Look..." She spread out some papers from the files Frank figured she was not letting out of her sight. "DeSilva was the forensic investigator, but in a lot of these cases, he could not have blown the case without the cooperation of one of the police investigators handling them."

Anna looked over the paperwork and nodded. "It's true that he'd have needed help, but it could have been any officer in the department, not just the investigating officers."

"Exactly!" Frank said. "And that's still not proof. DeSilva had a lot of access to the cases. He was a member of the police department, you know."

"Yes, but he's been gone for a while and yet someone inside the department disabled the hospital's security system last night," Eleni said.

Frank stared at her. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

She nodded back at him, her face very serious. "Yes, Frank, I do."

"And Doris Wolfe knows all this?"

"Yes, Frank," she answered.

"God damn it, Eleni!" he said. "This is the same kind of wild speculation that Harley was doing when she thought Gus was dirty. And look where that led – an injured DA and a young boy in prison."

"Chief, you can't just turn a blind eye to this," Anna said.

"Stay out of this Li," he snarled and then turned back to Eleni. "And you keep your mouth shut to Doris Wolfe." He pushed past the women and stormed out of the office.

The daycare center was busier than during Francesca's feeding, but Leyla enjoyed the hectic pace. She loved working with the children and was so happy and grateful she had this opportunity. She especially loved that she got to spend time with her nieces. Even though Rafe was only five years younger than her, she regretted that she'd missed out on sharing his childhood or being his 'big aunt' as they grew up. Now at least she had the chance to be a part of Emma and Francesca's lives.

She admitted to herself that she missed Chicago and the excitement of the city and her friends. She also missed her parents, once again wishing they would join the twenty-first century. Natalia had learned to be flexible in her thinking and it had rewarded her with a wonderful family as well as letting her maintain her faith. She only wished their parents would be a little less rigid as well. Then maybe they too would find their lives enriched.

Leyla was changing Francesca's diaper when Greg entered the room. She smiled as Emma, spotting the thin man, ran over to speak with him. By now, Leyla had observed many of the hotel's employees interacting with the owners' daughter. While many of them treated the girl with saccharine sweetness as a way to suck up to her parents, Greg always treated her

as an intelligent young lady and never spoke down to her, which was why he was one of Emma's favorite people.

She finished with Francesca and set her back in her playpen. The little girl immediately grabbed one of her plastic blocks and stuffed it in her mouth. Leyla smiled and then went over to join Emma and Greg.

"Hey Leyla," Greg said in greeting. "I've got a window before my next meeting so I thought you might like a break," he offered.

Leyla glanced down at Emma, "What do you say, Em? Think you and Greg here can keep this place from falling down?"

Emma nodded and grabbed Greg's hand. "Come on; let me show you the new moves Anna taught me."

Greg, having been on the receiving end of one too many of Emma's 'moves' before, gave her a sickly grin in reply.

Leyla laughed and left the daycare center to take her break. She felt a small twinge of discomfort as she passed the security guard standing alert by the entrance to the center. The news that Edmund Winslow had disappeared from the hospital had been on everyone's lips.

The Beacon's employee break room was a small room located on the first floor next to the elevator banks. Greg had told her that Olivia had gotten tired of guest complaints about the noise from the elevator machinery, so she had simply converted it into a space for employees to spend their breaks. The bed had been removed and a refrigerator added. A couple of old tables and chairs and a dresser that had suffered at the hands of some drunken college boys gave the staff room to rest and relax.

She nodded a greeting at Maria, one of the housekeepers, and poured herself a cup of coffee. She took it over to the table and sat down with the most current issue of *Runway*. The quiet of the break room was interrupted by the door crashing open, and a second later Ava walked through.

Leyla glanced up from the magazine but remembering Natalia's request from the previous day, she lowered her eyes again to the page. From the corner of her eye, she watched Ava as she got a carton of yogurt from the fridge and grabbed a plastic spoon. Rather than sitting down, she leaned against the dresser to eat her snack, blatantly staring at Leyla.

Finally, Leyla slammed her magazine on the table and snapped, "What?" She noticed that Maria had buried her nose in her book.

Ava shrugged. "Nothing. Why? Got a guilty conscience or something?"

"I've done nothing to you or anyone else for that matter," Leyla defended herself.

"No?" Ava asked and tilted her head. "Why did you come to Springfield?"

"To be with my family," she answered.

"You have a family in Chicago," Ava pointed out.

"I do," she agreed. "But I've missed out on so much of Natalia and Rafe's lives. I don't want to miss out on all of you now."

Ava ignored Leyla's inclusion of her in the generalization. "What about your parents? They're getting older; won't they need you?"

"My parents are none of your business," she growled.

"No?" Ava asked again in that infuriating tone of voice. "Yet you come to Springfield, insert yourself into *my* family and start causing trouble."

"Causing trouble?" Leyla felt the beginnings of a headache start to flare up behind her eyes. "Oh that's rich! Is that what you call me saving your sorry ass from a mass murderer? Trouble?"

"I mean with my mother and Natalia," Ava said calmly as she ignored Leyla's questions.

"They have a lot on their plate right now. Emma acting out, a growing baby, a son in the war and a madman out for revenge against them. They don't need another headache."

"What about you?" she hissed. "If you're so concerned about them, why don't you go back to San Francisco? You cause more worry for them, especially since you continue to ignore simple security precautions."

"I'm not..."

Leyla refused to let her continue. "In fact, I'd say that your behavior indicates a strong tendency towards self-destruction. Why, Ava? What's eating you up?"

Ava growled, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really?" Leyla said with a small smirk, feeling victorious for finally making Ava squirm.

"I think you do. I think you left Springfield for San Francisco to run away from your guilt about your baby and coming back here has brought all of that back."

Ava's face turned red. "You bitch! You have no freaking right! You don't know anything about Max and you don't know anything about *me*."

"I know something is up with you and I think Remy's new baby is making it worse." She paused as she noted Ava's flushed face and realized she had gone too far. "Look, Ava, I just want to help you. After all, I *am* your aunt."

"You're nothing!" Ava seethed. "And if you know what's good for you, you'll get out of Springfield and go crawling back to Mommy and Daddy." Ava threw the yogurt container in the trash with such force that white cream and bits of peaches went flying. She stormed out of the break room without a backward glance.

Leyla sighed and looked at Maria. "Sorry about that," she said softly.

Maria shook her head and continued to read her book.

Passing Keira's empty desk, Ava heard the sound of her mother's angry voice coming from behind the closed inner office door. She paused when she recognized her own name and then Natalia's. She realized that her mom was talking to Natalia and muttered a curse under her breath as she guessed that Leyla must have gone crying to her sister after their little encounter in the break room.

Moving closer, she tried to listen, but with the door closed it was difficult, though she did hear the sound of the telephone handset slamming against its holder. She waited a few more moments and then knocked on the door.

"Come in," Olivia called out and looked up as Ava entered. Ava noted her flushed face and the deepened lines around her eyes which was always an indication that her mother was getting overstressed.

"Oh, Ava," Olivia said and nodded at the folder she was carrying. "Is that the quarterly housekeeping budget?"

"Yes," Ava said and handed it over. "Mom, were you fighting with Natalia?"

Olivia looked up from the report. "What? Oh, no, honey. We're not fighting. You know us – we can get into some pretty heated discussions. Been that way since nearly the day we met."

"Mom..."

Olivia held up a hand to stop her from continuing. "No, seriously, honey, thanks for the report. It's Saturday, so why don't you take the rest of the day off. Just make sure you don't go off alone. It's not safe."

"I'm not afraid of Edmund Winslow or his goons," she said with a pout.

"Well, / am," Olivia said and Ava noted the vein throbbing in her temple. "Will we see you tomorrow night?"

"Sure, I'll drop by," she replied. "I don't want to miss my baby sister's first Halloween."

"That's great, honey," Olivia said and came around the desk and hugged her daughter.

"We'll see you then. In the meantime, enjoy your day."

"Okay, Mom." When Olivia turned to go back to work, Ava said, "Mom? I'll make this better. I promise."

Olivia paused and then sighed. "I just want you to be happy, Ava."

"I want that for you too, Mom," she answered, feeling a lump in her throat. Of all the people who knew Olivia Spencer, she was one of the few who knew just how desperately Olivia had fought for happiness. Now that she had finally won it, Ava was not going to let anyone ruin it for her. "You *and* Natalia both deserve all the happiness you can get. Don't worry. I'll fix this." With that she turned and left the office, ignoring Olivia's worried look.

Back in her office, Ava thought for a moment and then picked up her phone. "Hi...Cyrus?" she said into the handset. "Yeah, I was wondering if we could talk this afternoon...no, in person. How about the park?" She paused. "Okay, great. See you then."

She hung up the phone and looked at it thoughtfully. "Yeah, Mom," she whispered to herself. "I'll fix her just for you."

ACT 3

"Marina!" Chief Frank Cooper called out as he exited his office while simultaneously donning his jacket. His daughter entered the receiving area a moment later. Frank looked around and noted that no one else was nearby, but he lowered his voice regardless. "Listen, I need you to do me a favor."

"What is it, Dad?" Marina asked.

Frank looked around again. "I don't want to get into specifics, but evidence is turning up that there may be a dirty cop in the department."

"What?" Marina exclaimed, her face turning white. "No, that's...that's not possible."

"I don't believe it either," he said, "but I need you to keep your eyes and ears open for anything that might be going on in the department. Can you do that?"

Marina stared at him. "I...I guess I can, but Dad..."

"No, I really need your help on this, Marina," he said. "I will *not* have my tenure as chief of police be sullied by charges of corruption. Remember what happened when Harley started saying Gus was dirty?"

"Well...he was," Marina pointed out.

Frank waved it off. "Yes, but it was for altruistic reasons and even then it turned into a major mess. If Edmund Winslow is involved, you can bet no one will brush it off and a lot of heads will roll. This is serious."

"All right, Dad. I'll keep an eye out," Marina said. "Where are you going?"

"Mayor's office," he growled. "Doris wants to meet to discuss this so-called 'evidence'."

"Oh..." she said wanly. "Well, good luck."

"Thanks, baby," he said and quickly left the office, leaving Marina staring after him.

Ava paced briskly up and down the jogging path as she waited for Cyrus to arrive. She glanced at her watch for what felt like the hundredth time. Finally, she heard someone approaching and looked up to see the young Australian.

"It's about time," she grouched.

He leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Glad to know I can still keep a pretty girl waiting," he joked. "So where's the fire, luv?"

"Do you know Leyla Rivera?" she asked.

"Hmm," he said, scratching his chin in thought. "Natalia's baby sister, right? I've seen her around Company a few times. Lovely little Sheila."

"Maybe on the outside, but she's really a trouble-causing bitch," Ava said.

"Really, now?" Cyrus commented. "Hadn't heard that bit of gossip yet. I take it you're the one she's causing trouble for?"

Ava shook her head. "For my mother," she answered. "Leyla's trying to ruin my mother's happiness and I won't allow that to happen."

"I like your spunk, mate," he said. "But what does all that have to do with me?"

"I'm sure you wouldn't need much imagination to figure out a way to get Leyla to scamper back to Chicago where she belongs," she said softly.

Cyrus scratched his chin again. "No, not much imagination, that's for sure, but, see, there's one little problem, luv."

"What's that?"

"Not in that business anymore," he said with a wry grin. "Walking the straight and narrow these days."

"Oh come on!" Ava exclaimed waving her arms in frustration. "Once in that business, *always* in that business. I know how it works, Cyrus. So how much do you want?"

"Nothing, luv," he answered, shaking his head. "Look, it's not that I'm against making some extra moolah, but my lady wouldn't care for me getting it in that manner, so while I appreciate the offer, I'm going to have to say no."

"Your lady?" she asked.

"Mel Boudreau." He grinned. "You know her...lawyer type, which might sound a bit contradictory, but she's also the honorable type, so if I want to remain in her affections – and I do – that means I must say no."

"She wouldn't have to know," Ava pointed out.

"Ah, but things like that have a way of coming to light in a town like Springfield."

"Boy, you really are whipped," Ava said, shaking her head.

Cyrus laughed. "Maybe so, luv, but only in the best possible way." He leaned in and kissed her cheek again. "Ta, Ava. Good luck with that problem of yours."

"Cyrus..."

"Gotta run!" He waved and headed back down the path.

"God damn it!" she cursed, watching his retreating back.

In the City Hall conference room, the chief of police and Detective Li sat across from the mayor at a table covered in boxes of evidence and case files. Eleni Andros was standing at the white board she had covered in diagrams and case information.

"Well, that's what we have so far, Madame Mayor," she said, placing the cap on the dry-erase marker. She took a seat between Frank and Anna.

"Call me Doris, please; we can bypass the formalities here," Doris said as she made a few more notes on the yellow legal pad in front of her. "All right, then," she said and looked up. "I'll have the assistant DA prepare arrest warrants for DeSilva and Tai. We hadn't issued a warrant for Winslow yet, since he was unconscious. We'll go ahead and assume that Winslow is awake and issue the warrant now, as well as one for your father, Detective. What is his full name again?"

Anna answered, "Hung Feng Li."

"Thank you," Doris said, writing the information down. "Since both Edmund and his henchman are foreign nationals, I'll also make sure they can't slip under the radar by claiming diplomatic immunity.

"Is that possible?" Frank asked.

Doris gave him a scornful glance over the frames of her glasses. "The U.S. government takes a dim view of foreigners murdering its citizens en masse, Frank, no matter what their religion or politics might be. Winslow is the former head of state of an island nation. You don't want to take a chance he can escape justice because of that, do you?"

Frank clenched his jaw at her tone and shifted in his seat, but Doris sensed he would refrain from answering.

"Now," Doris continued. "As for Eleni's theory that someone inside the department is working with Winslow and since Detective Li agrees with the evidence supporting it..."

"Oh come on, Doris!" Frank protested. "You can't believe that there's a dirty cop on the force. DeSilva sure, but I *know* my officers."

"Nevertheless, we need to be absolutely sure. I will not have this going on," Doris said, sitting back and tossing her glasses onto the table. "Your force already puts the Keystone Kops to shame for the wedding massacre and now it seems that the prime suspect just got up and walked out from under your nose. Should I have let you explain to the governor how that happened when he called me today to chew my ass off?"

"One of my men is dead," Frank growled.

"Exactly, which means if someone inside the department is helping Winslow it makes them an accessory to murder." She paused to see if Frank was going to say anything further, but when he remained silent, she continued. "I want the three of you to coordinate the investigation, with Detective Li leading the team."

"Now wait a minute," Frank sputtered. "I'm the chief!"

"Precisely, Frank," Doris said. "You have a department to run. Besides, Anna is fairly new here and less prone toward favoritism. I trust her to remain fair and not fly off the handle."

Frank muttered under his breath and Eleni glanced sharply at him, a blush rising across her face.

"What was that, Frank?" Doris asked.

"Nothing," he grumbled.

Doris paused to stare at him until he squirmed in his chair again. After a quick glance at Anna, who tightened her lips together, Doris looked back at her notes.

"All right," she said, putting her glasses on again. "Finally, I am hiring an outside agency..." Frank opened his mouth to protest, but Doris overrode him before he could, "...run by A.C. Mallet. I'm sure you don't have any objections to *him*, do you Frank?"

"Just that you might not want to involve outsiders, even if it is Mallet," he said.

"Be glad for the compromise, Frank," she said. "The governor wanted to send an Internal Affairs investigator from the state police."

Frank frowned, but kept silent.

"Good," Doris nodded. "Again, Anna, I want you to liaise with Mallet. Contact him as soon as you can. Any questions?"

Anna shook her head and Doris turned to Eleni. "The governor has authorized that any laboratory work you need done will be expedited. Let me know if you have any problems. Any questions?"

"No, but thank you, Doris," Eleni said also shaking her head in reply.

"Frank? Anything else?"

Frank took a deep breath. "Just that this whole thing stinks, Doris."

"I agree," she said and leaned back in her chair. "I have eight dead constituents, a dead cop and a traitor in my police force, so yeah, the whole thing stinks." She leaned forward. "I promise you, Frank, someone is going down for this if it's the last thing I do as mayor. Heads will roll and I intend that Edmund Winslow's will be the first one. Understood?"

"Yeah," Frank said.

"Thank you for coming," Doris said and stood up. "Anna, can you stay a moment?"

"No problem," she answered and Frank glanced sharply at her, but stood, turned, and left the room without even waiting for Eleni.

The forensic scientist also stood and held out her hand for Doris to shake. "Thank you again for listening, Doris."

Doris nodded. "Just make sure your evidence is rock solid, Eleni," she said. "Not only for me, but for all the citizens of Springfield who are counting on bringing Winslow and his cohorts to justice."

Eleni nodded and left the room.

When the conference room door closed behind Eleni, Anna looked at Doris, who had retaken her seat. The mayor closed her eyes and rubbed her aching temples.

"Are you all right?" Anna asked.

Doris waved off the concern. She opened her eyes and looked at Anna. "I need you to keep an eye on Mallet," she said. "Yeah, he's working for himself now, but he's got a lot of close ties to the people he's going to be investigating. The same goes for Frank and Eleni."

"You don't suspect..."

"No," Doris said. "But I can't take any chances. Like I said, you're practically an outsider yourself and are not related or had any relationships with anyone in the department."

"Except you," Anna pointed out.

"Despite what Frank Cooper thinks, I *can* remain impartial where you're concerned," Doris said.

"Ah." Anna smiled. "Caught that, did you?"

"There's little I miss," Doris said smiling back at Anna. "Oh, and Anna..."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about your father," Doris said. "Even if you are estranged from him, it must be difficult for you."

"Don't be sorry, Doris," Anna said, shaking her head. "I will be very happy the day that man is locked up for good."

Doris nodded. "Very well. Then please, do all you can to help stop this nightmare. No matter what, I'm counting on you."

"Thank you, Doris," Anna said. "That means a lot to me."

"Please, can you send Brandon in on your way out?"

"Sure," Anna said. "Enjoy your evening, Doris."

"I will if this hellish day will ever end," Doris said with a wry smirk.

Greg handed Olivia a final invoice to sign. After quickly scanning it and making sure the figures added up correctly, she added her signature to it. She paused a moment as a stray thought occurred to her. Not once during all of her many marriages had she considered

changing her business name. She had always been Olivia Spencer, a name colleagues respected and competitors feared. Now, for the first time, she considered adding Natalia's name to her own, not only for their private lives, which they already used to some extent, but also for their business partnership.

Olivia Spencer-Rivera, she imagined signing official documents and seeing Natalia Spencer-Rivera next to it. She smiled at the image and felt a strong swell of love in her heart for the woman who had given her so much and she was suddenly anxious to get home despite the current friction between them.

"Here you go, Greg," she said, handing the invoice back to him. "Are you all set for the party tomorrow night?"

Greg's face lit up. The First Annual Halloween Extravaganza to benefit the Springfield LGBT Resource and Community Center had been his idea. Olivia and Natalia had liked his proposal and put him in charge and so far they were impressed with his performance.

"All the arrangements are finalized, the food and liquor arrived on time today and my team is ready to decorate the ballroom first thing in the morning, so we'll be ready to go."

"Good," Olivia said and thought for a moment. "You projected 75% occupancy for tonight and 80% tomorrow. How's it going?"

"Reservations as of this morning were at 70%. I checked with the desk earlier and we're at 82% full with walk-ins arriving all the time. Reservations stand at 76% tomorrow night, but with today's walk-ins staying over, we're already at 89% and I expect we'll be booked solid. I called Towers and told them to expect our overflow."

Olivia sat back, impressed. Halloween had never been a big draw for business before, but with it falling on the weekend this year and Greg's little extravaganza, their profits had taken a huge jump. "Very good, Greg," she said with a warm smile for her employee. "Make sure you get the numbers to me as early as possible next week so we can get a check over to the center. I'll speak with Natalia about adding our personal contribution."

"Thank you so much, Ms. Spencer," he said, standing up and leaning over the desk to shake her hand. "Not only for all you and Ms. Rivera are doing for the community, but for giving me this opportunity."

"It was a great idea, Greg," she said, squeezing his hand. "Good for business and good for the community. A win/win for everyone. Now, make sure you don't work too hard and enjoy yourself. Did you finally decide on a costume?"

"Well, it was a tossup between Cher and Lady GaGa," he laughed. "But Lady G won."

Olivia's eyes widened. "Oh God, not that awful meat thing?"

"Noooo!" he chuckled. "The ballroom is going to be rocking with bubbles tomorrow night."

She laughed and shook her head. "Just make sure it's standing and intact Monday morning."

"It will be," he said. "Enjoy your Halloween and I expect to see lots of pictures of the girls."

"I promise. Have a good night, Greg," she said as he left. Her cell phone skittered on the desk with an incoming message. It was from Natalia, asking her to pick up some milk on her way home. She tossed her phone on the desk and started to pack up her briefcase, ready to leave.

A short time later at the mini-mart she had just grabbed a carton of organic milk when she heard someone call her name. Turning, she found a smiling Cyrus Foley approaching her.

"Hi there," she said.

"Evenin', luv," he said. "Listen, I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but I have a bad feeling about it. Ava rang me up earlier, asking me to meet her in the park."

"Oh?" Olivia said, getting a bad feeling. "What did she want?"

"Well..." Cyrus said as he rubbed a hand against his neck. "She wanted me to take care of a small problem for her."

"Let me guess," Olivia said with a groan. "The problem's name is Leyla?"



"Got it in one, luv," he said pointing a finger at her. "Nothing drastic, mind, just something to 'scare' her into running home to Mummy and Daddy, but I have a feeling you're a lady who knows how these things can get out of control."

"Gee thanks," Olivia said dryly. "But so does Ava. You turned her down, I hope."

"Course I did," he answered with a wry grin. "But like I said, thought you should know in case she finds another less scrupulous bloke."

Olivia nodded. "Thanks, Cyrus," she said. "I owe you one."

"Nah," he said. "Just take care of your girl so she doesn't get in trouble."

"I will. Thanks again."

"Ta, luv," he said and left the store. Olivia reached for her cell phone to call her daughter and then muttered "Damn!" when she realized she had left it at the Beacon. She started to head to the register to pay for the milk, but then detoured to the cut flowers display. Ava could wait until tomorrow. Right now, she owed her lover a big apology.

Olivia nodded at the security guard standing at his post on the porch of the farmhouse. "Are you alone, Kyle?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, Ms. Spencer. Jenkins is also on duty with me. He's patrolling the grounds." He held up his walkie-talkie.

"Anything you guys need, just knock. Okay?" she said.

"We'll be fine, ma'am," he said with a smile and pointed to a large cooler sitting on the bench. "Ms. Rivera fixed drinks and sandwiches for us."

Olivia nodded with a smile, once again reminded of just how big her lover's heart was. "All right then, Kyle. You boys have a good night."

"Enjoy your evening, Ms. Spencer," he said.

Olivia entered the house, surprised to find it quiet. The living room was lit only by glow from the fireplace. She placed her purse and briefcase on the end table and walked through to the kitchen, taking the bouquet of flowers and the carton of milk with her. The kitchen was empty, but she noticed the table was set for two with a bottle of wine already

breathing and candles ready to be lit. She had just put the milk away in the refrigerator when she heard Natalia's footsteps descending the stairs.

As Natalia entered the kitchen, Olivia noted the hesitant grin gracing her lips.

"I'm tired of arguing with you," Natalia said.

Olivia smiled. "Me, too," she said and offered the bouquet. "And you were right. Something *is* going on with Ava so I owe you a big apology."

Natalia paused a moment to smell the flowers and then asked, "What happened?"

"Can we talk about it later?" she asked with a sigh. "I'm too tired right now to even think about it."

"All right," Natalia agreed and went for a vase. "Go wash up. Supper's almost ready."

"Where are the kids and Leyla?"

"Cross Creek," Natalia answered. "Reva volunteered her house for a pre-Halloween slumber party for all the kids. Leyla went to help chaperone. I spoke with Anna and she organized the security detail so Cross Creek is locked up tighter than Fort Knox tonight."

Olivia chuckled at the thought of Reva shut in with a crowd of screaming children hyped up on candy and immediately felt better. "So it's just us for dinner?"

Natalia gave her a slow smile complete with sexy dimples. "Just us for the entire night."

Olivia matched her smile. "Wonderful."

After a quick shower, Olivia changed into a pair of light linen slacks and a matching tank top. She put her hair in a ponytail and added a few light touches of makeup and a dab of Natalia's favorite perfume. Glancing at her reflection in the bedroom mirror, she smiled at the look of anticipation in her eyes. She frowned at the thought of Ava, but then she firmly pushed it out of her mind. Tonight was for making up with her partner, who had obviously had the same idea. Olivia vowed that no worries about children, businesses or homicidal royal maniacs would invade her mind. It was time to focus completely on the one who deserved it the most.

"Will you need me for anything else tonight, Madame Mayor?" Brandon asked, poking his head into Doris's office.

"No, thank you, Brandon," she answered. "I've had a hellish day and I plan to go straight home and relax. I suggest you do the same."

He was about to reply when Doris's cell phone announced an incoming text message. She glanced at it and raised her eyebrows. "From Olivia, asking me to meet her in a bit."

"Shall I call her for you?" he asked.

"No, that's all right," she said, shaking her head. "It's flagged nine one one, so I'll just run over to see what she needs on my way home. Goodnight, Brandon."

"Goodnight, Madame Mayor," he responded.

"So then he says to the woman, 'My mommy would look much prettier in that dress than you! You're too fat for it anyway.' I thought I'd die of embarrassment on the spot."

Olivia snorted with laughter at the image of a five-year-old Rafe facing down an angry customer so his mother could buy a second-hand dress.

"Oh God," she said, wiping her eyes. "Even then he was fighting for his mother."

"Oh yes," Natalia said, leaning forward and taking her wineglass from the coffee table. She moved back on the couch, snuggling even closer to Olivia. "You should have seen us on ninety-nine cents day at the thrift store on Western Avenue. We made quite a team."

"Ninety-nine cents?"

"Clothes with a certain color tag were sold for ninety-nine cents each. Rafe and I would buy as much as we could afford and then sell them at the flea market for five dollars apiece. At the thrift store, Rafe would race around finding the best clothes with the sale tag on them, sometimes even snatching them out of people's buggies if he thought I wasn't looking. I always pretended not to see him, but I tried to subtly remind him about it before he went to confession. I hated letting him get away with it, but we really needed all the extra cash we could get."

"Sam used to work the straw market on the weekends on San Cristobel," Olivia said, remembering. "When I'd get home from the restaurant, we'd spend all night making pasties for him to sell the next day to tourists. That extra cash was what saved our behinds on quite a few occasions."

Natalia nodded. "You know, I never really thought about it before, but I think that's where I got my pushiness that you're so fond of."

"From haggling in the flea market?" Olivia asked.

"Yes," she answered. "I was always so shy growing up, but having Rafe forced me to change whether I wanted to or not. And if I hadn't, we'd never have survived."

"Which is yet another reason I admire you so much," Olivia said with a smile. "And you're not 'pushy'; you're a superhero, remember?"

"Well, you're biased," Natalia said, her smile accentuating her dimples.

"Ya think so?"

"I *know* so," Natalia laughed.

Unable to resist those dimples a second longer, Olivia turned to kiss first one then the other and then finally Natalia's wine-sweet lips.

"Mmm," Natalia hummed contentedly.

"I agree," Olivia whispered and plucked Natalia's glass out of her hand so she could push Natalia against the couch. Natalia lay back and gave her a delighted grin as Olivia stretched out on top of her.

"Oh, that's divine," Natalia said, then captured Olivia's lips as she wrapped her arms around Olivia.

Olivia deepened the kiss, enjoying the warmth of Natalia's mouth. She loved her lover's taste and smell. She especially loved breathing Natalia in and the way she felt underneath her. "Oh baby," she mumbled against her partner's mouth, not wanting to break contact. "I love the way you taste."

"Mmm," Natalia hummed again and Olivia could feel her smiling. "You're pretty tasty yourself."

"Thank you," Olivia said with her own smile. She spent a few leisurely minutes just enjoying kissing Natalia, but needing more she began to slide her hand underneath Natalia's top. To her surprise, she was stopped.

"What?" she asked lifting herself up a bit.

"Not here," Natalia said and Olivia shivered at the low tone that told her Natalia was extremely aroused.

"What's wrong with here?" Olivia asked, nibbling on Natalia's neck.

"Nothing's wrong with here," Natalia said. "Here is good. In fact, I *love* here, but not when there are two security guards right outside the windows."

Olivia paused and met Natalia's eyes. "Good point. Let's go."

"Right," Natalia said and allowed Olivia to help her off the couch.

"Come on, beautiful," Olivia said and led Natalia up the stairs, leaving the last embers in the fireplace to die out on their own.

Once Olivia closed the door behind them, Natalia leaned in for a searing kiss. Olivia moaned as Natalia eased away. Her lover smiled at her and said in a low voice that Olivia could feel deep within her, "Get out of those clothes and in bed. I'll be right back."

"When did you get so bossy?" Olivia asked and was delighted by Natalia's mischievous smirk.

"You complaining?" she shot back saucily.

"No," Olivia leaned forward to kiss her again and whispered against her lips, "I like it."

"So quit your bitching," Natalia laughed and headed for the bathroom.

Olivia watched her disappear behind the door, enjoying the way Natalia's backside swayed seductively from side to side. She lit a vanilla scented candle and quickly pulled off her clothes, leaving them on the vanity chair to take care of later. She shut off the lights and pulled back the bedspread. She was finally settling against some pillows cushioning the headboard when the bathroom door opened and her lover stepped out.

She stopped breathing as Natalia approached the bed. Natalia was entirely nude and her flawless olive skin glowed in the light of the candle. She stopped at the edge of the bed and looked at Olivia, who could feel her lover's eyes tracing her from head to toe, pausing to linger in appreciation over certain aspects of her anatomy that caused a faint blush to grace Olivia's cheeks.

"Enjoying the view?" she asked.

Natalia nodded and licked her lips as she met Olivia's eyes. "You're so beautiful," she said.

"Come here." Olivia held out a hand and Natalia took it in her own. She placed one knee on the bed and pushed herself up until she was straddling Olivia's legs. With a happy sigh, Olivia wrapped her arms around Natalia's waist.

"Not too heavy, am I?" Natalia asked.

"Never," Olivia said. "I love you on top of me."

"Yeah?" Natalia husked as she leaned in and began kissing Olivia's face. "Just on top?"

"Oh no," she answered in a whisper. She threw her head back to give Natalia access to her neck. "I love you underneath me and when we're pressed close together side by side. And I especially love it when I can drink from you at the same time you're drinking from me."

"Mmm." Natalia smiled against her skin. "I especially love that, too."

"I love all the ways we make love," Olivia admitted, moving her hands around so she could caress Natalia's bountiful breasts. Natalia arched closer into the touch. "And I love you more and more every time we make love."

"I do, too," Natalia said and pulled back to look into her eyes. "You are so very precious to me, Olivia. You fill me up so much. In every way."

"I know, love," she said.

"Fill me up now, Olivia," Natalia whispered hotly in her ear.

"All right," she answered and slid her hand around to caress along the outside of Natalia's thigh. Olivia felt her lover shift eagerly above her as she ran her hand up the inside until her fingers brushed against damp curls. Moving further, she parted Natalia's slit with her middle finger and groaned in appreciation at the silky wetness she encountered. "Oh, that's nice, Natalia. Is that all for me?"

"All yours, Olivia," she said and watched with hooded eyes as Olivia removed her hand and brought it to Natalia's mouth, slowly painting her slightly opened lips with her own essence. When she was done, Natalia leaned in to kiss her, her taste commingling in their mouths. Natalia breathed out hotly, "Inside me, please. Now, querida."

She had never been able to deny her love anything and certainly not when Natalia had such need in her voice. She slid her fingers once again through Natalia's wetness and without hesitation plunged two fingers deep inside.

Natalia arched her back presenting Olivia with the tempting invitation of her breasts. She lowered her head and greedily sucked Natalia's nipple into her opened mouth, pulling Natalia closer as her lover began to ride her fingers.

Natalia scratched her fingernails along Olivia's scalp, the sting making Olivia even more aroused. She turned her attention to Natalia's other breast as she gripped Natalia's back, feeling the sweat begin to pool in the hollow of her spine. She gave Natalia's breast a final lick and then leaned her head back to look at her love.

As often as she got to see it, the sight of Natalia Rivera luxuriating in the joy of their passion never ceased to take her breath away. Natalia's head was tilted back to expose her sensual neck, her mouth open with her shuddering breaths and her pulse point throbbing in sync with the rhythm of her hips. Olivia spread her own legs to open Natalia up more to her and then she slipped a third finger inside, feeling the slick walls grip her tightly yet release an additional gush of moisture to accommodate her.

Olivia looked into Natalia's eyes, the normal brown nearly black with desire. "My love," Natalia whispered. "Oh God, Olivia. I love you so much."

"Natalia." She said her lover's name like a benediction, a soulful supplication to whatever Power had delivered this magnificent creature into her arms. "Natalia," she repeated.

Natalia's pace increased and Olivia ignored her now aching arm muscles as she began to move in sync with her beautiful soulmate. She leaned forward to capture Natalia's panting lips with her own, her open mouth wanting, needing to take all of Natalia in.

Natalia tightened her arms around Olivia's back as if she were clutching a life preserver. and Olivia tightened her own arm around Natalia's back, reassuring her partner.

"I've got you, baby," she murmured against Natalia's heated skin. "I won't let go."

"Olivia," Natalia sighed and then repeated the name again, this time louder, and then louder still as Olivia felt her walls begin to clench tightly around her fingers as Natalia approached her release. With a final cry of Olivia's name that could probably be heard for a mile, Natalia's body stiffened and then relaxed infinite moments later.

Olivia was trembling with the need for her own release and she realized Natalia was aware of that when her partner slid off of her fingers and moved Olivia so she was lying on her back. Olivia embraced her in a full body clutch and rolled them over. She spread her legs and rolled her hips forward so that she could grind against Natalia's center.

"Oh fuck," she croaked out, the sensation nearly overwhelming her.

"That's it, baby," Natalia said. "Give it to me."

"Yes!" Olivia felt her orgasm build up as she continued to thrust against her lover. She felt Natalia's nails digging into her back as she came again and the bite pushed her over the edge. With her cry "Natalia" still echoing in the room, she collapsed her spent body on top of her partner.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

"Mmmhmm," Natalia agreed.

"Not too heavy, am I?" Olivia asked.

"Never."

Olivia sighed in utter happiness.

Doris noted the parking lot at Ladies Night was filled to capacity. Inside, the bar was dark, smoky and full of women, just the way she liked it. She made her way over to the counter and waited for the bartender to come over. After a few minutes, she did and greeted Doris.

"Hey there, D!" she said. "The usual?"

"Yeah, Sal, thanks," Doris replied. "Wow, what a crowd."

"Ain't it great," Sal said. "Lots of lovely ladies from out of town for that big bash over at the Beacon tomorrow night."

"Fantastic," Doris said with a big grin. Olivia had mentioned the event a few weeks ago along with her hopes of bringing in some much needed business to Springfield.

"Speaking of Olivia...have you seen her? She's meeting me here."

"Not yet, but if I do, I'll let her know you're here."

"Thanks, hon," Doris said, taking her drink and looking around the room for an empty table, wondering when her friend would show up.

The Beacon's bar and lounge was doing a brisk business when Ava walked in. All of the tables were filled to capacity with a few single guests eating and drinking at the bar. She sat down heavily and closed her eyes as she rubbed her temples, trying to rein in her throbbing headache.

"Can I get you some aspirin, Ms. Peralta?" the bartender asked.

"Please, John," she groaned. "And a scotch and soda to wash it down with."

"Right away," he said.

"Tough day?" a voice asked from beside her.

Ava turned to find a smiling man sitting next to her. She noted he was dressed in khaki slacks and a pressed button-down shirt. His face was average, but still attractive with warm brown eyes and perfectly styled brown hair. He looked, in other words, like just another young executive in town on business.

"Something like that," she finally answered.

"Anything I can help with?" he asked with what he probably thought was a charming smile, but Ava saw right through it. Nevertheless, she instantly decided he would make a perfect distraction. She shifted a fraction closer to him, her body language morphing from tired to sultry in a heartbeat.

"Perhaps you can, Mr...?"

"May. Steve May," he answered, his own body language answering hers. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Peralta."

"Ava," she purred. "Are you in Springfield on business, Steve?"

He shook his head. "Just passing through," he said. "On my way back to my regular territory."

"Perfect." She smiled. A salesman and one not likely to wander back here again.

"And you?" he asked. "Let me guess...you're an actress starring as Lady Macbeth with a traveling theatre group?"

Ava threw back her head and laughed. "Hardly," she answered, still chuckling. "No, I live and work right here."

"In Springfield?"

"In the Beacon," she answered. "Family-owned business."

His eyebrows rose, impressed. "Very nice," he said. "Makes for a very brief commute."

"It does," she agreed, sipping her drink and enjoying the warmth sliding down her throat. She was suddenly eager for some other warmth as well. "Would you like to see my suite?"

Steve's smile grew exponentially. "Sure," he answered.

Ava nodded and took her drink and purse with her as she stood. "Come on."

Doris had finally found an empty table and was simply watching the crowd as she sipped her Manhattan.

"Yoo hoo! Doris," she heard and looked around. Her mouth dropped open when she saw Blake approaching.

"Blake?" she asked and was surprised when her friend sat down next to her after setting a drink on the table. Her surprise turned to shock when Blake leaned over and kissed her. And not a simple 'hello friend' kiss either. Blake's lips lingered on hers, causing

Doris's head to swim as her senses were bombarded with the woman's smell and taste. Finally, Blake pulled back and Doris could only stare dumbly at her.

"Hey there," Blake said as if she hadn't just kissed her friend senseless. "Sorry I'm late."

Doris sat there stunned as she watched Blake looking around the room. Finally, she gathered her wits and said, "Um, I'm meeting Olivia. She should be here any minute." Blake turned back to Doris and shook her head. "Oh, no she won't. I sent you that text," she said.

Doris's mouth dropped open again. "You tricked me?"

"No!" Blake protested. "No...well, maybe...I mean, I simply used Olivia's phone, that's all."

"What?" Doris said. "Does *she* know that?"

"Well...no," Blake admitted. "But really, Doris, I've been trying to get you to go out with me for weeks now. I never realized how hard it is to ask someone out on a date."

"Blake," Doris sighed. "We've been over this..."

"Look, Doris," Blake interrupted. "You gave Anna a second chance...don't I at least deserve a first chance?"

Doris paused in thought. She would love nothing more than to jump headfirst into a relationship with Blake. She had certainly fantasized about it on long, lonely nights sitting at home, but the thought of putting her heart out there again only to be stomped on was terrifying. "Nothing's going to happen, Blake," she said, shaking her head.

Blake gave her a wide smile and said, "We'll see."

Doris rolled her eyes.

Blake held the look for a few seconds more and then looked around the crowded club again. "So, this is the famous Ladies Night?" she said then craned her neck to peer into the corner. "Is that Sister Anne?"

ACT 4

Natalia loved this part. Actually, she loved all the parts, but after their intimacy, she especially loved the feel of their bodies pressed together, the sweat cooling over satiated flesh with Olivia still half-lying on top of her. She ran her hand over the nearly invisible line bisecting Olivia's chest and then moved up to her neck where she felt the comforting, strong beat as Olivia's heart rate returned to normal. She sighed in contentment, once again thanking God for the incredible gift of her love's continued good health.

"You're amazing," she mumbled, snuggling impossibly closer to her partner. She felt Olivia's chuckle against her fingers and smiled. "I know I say that a lot, but it's true."

"Thank you," Olivia said and squeezed her tighter. "I happen to think you're pretty amazing yourself."

"Thank you," Natalia echoed. "So is our entire family."

"I know," Olivia said and Natalia heard the subtle sadness in her lover's voice.

"Want to tell me what happened?" she asked, instinctively sensing that Olivia was ready to talk about Ava.

Briefly, Olivia outlined her earlier encounter with Cyrus Foley. "I don't know what the hell Ava is thinking. She, more than anyone, knows how dangerous that sort of thing is," she concluded. "Even if she only intended to scare Leyla away, she damn well knows just how easily Leyla could get hurt if anything went wrong."

Natalia pushed herself up so she could see Olivia's face. "She's *not* thinking, my love," she said. "I know you got angry before, but I don't think it's Leyla who's causing this, she's just the focal point for whatever is bothering Ava."

"Any idea what that might be?" Olivia asked, eyeing her. "She seems to have settled back in Springfield just fine, despite all the craziness that's been going on. And her work at the Beacon has been exemplary. I couldn't be prouder."

"Leyla said that during their argument at the Beacon, Ava really flew off the handle when she mentioned Max," Natalia started, but before she could continue, she felt Olivia stiffen.

"What the hell is she doing bringing him up to Ava?" Olivia's eyes flashed angrily.

"I know, I know," Natalia soothed, caressing Olivia's arm. "I said the same thing to her, but don't you think Ava's reaction does raise some big red flags?" Natalia stopped there, giving Olivia time to process her words. She rested her hand on Olivia's chest, feeling the deep breaths, and knowing them as a sign that her lover was trying to control her emotions.

"It does," Olivia finally admitted. "I worried that seeing Remy's new son would cause her problems. I guess it has."

"What about you, my love?" Natalia asked and when Olivia quirked an eyebrow at her, she continued. "He was your first grandchild. I know it probably hurts you as much as it does Ava."

Olivia stared at the ceiling and then took a deep breath as Natalia wiped the lone tear that ran down her lover's cheek. "I've spoken to Felicia about it," Olivia said, faintly. "She said that when you lose a child there are many reminders of it and each one will hurt as much as it did in the beginning, but eventually you adapt. It's one way we learn to deal with grief."

"I'm sorry for both you and Ava...and Remy, too," Natalia said, earnestly. "I wish Max was a part of our family now, but he's not because God needed him more than we do. But there will be more grandchildren, Olivia. Max will always be our first, but we'll have more and we'll tell them about him and how much love he had in his life, because you and Ava have so much love inside you."

Tears were flowing freely down Olivia's cheeks now and she took a deep breath that was nearly a sob. "Thank you," she said, turning to Natalia. "Thank you for loving me and for loving my children."

"You don't have to thank me, *querida*," Natalia said, giving her a deep kiss. "Loving you is so, so easy. I can't imagine *not* loving you and your children. I love them as much as I do my own, just as you love mine."

"I do," Olivia said, wiping away the last of her tears. "Even when Rafe hated me, I loved him because he was yours. And my Sweet Pea? She is as much my daughter as Ava and Emma. I could not love her any more than I already do."

"Then see...we'll be all right. Our family can and *will* get through anything life throws at us. As long as we're together, we can't fail. So much love means we have so much strength. We can do anything."

"You think so?"

"I *know* so," Natalia said with a mischievous grin. "Do superheroes ever lie?"

Olivia laughed. "No. No they don't."

The living room of Cross Creek cabin was filled with children of various ages and states of consciousness. *Toy Story 3* was playing on the big screen television as Clarissa and Emma watched avidly. Sarah was nodding off and both Henry and Colin were fast asleep. Francesca was also out like a light and sprawled across her sister and Clarissa's laps.

Leyla Rivera quietly crept over to them and lifted up the slumbering toddler.

"Thanks, Aunt Leyla," Emma whispered. "My legs were falling asleep."

"You're welcome, sweetie," she replied and carried her niece into the den which served as a refuge for the adults. Josh and Jonathan were there, both holding beer bottles.

"Reva go to sleep?" she asked, setting Francesca down and grabbing the diaper bag.

Josh nodded tiredly. "I finally convinced her nothing was going to happen tonight, not with that army outside."

"Why don't you go join her?" Leyla said. "Most of the rug rats are down and the rest of them will be asleep soon."

"You sure?" he asked.

"Yeah, man, go ahead," Jonathan said. "I'm sure they'll all be up at the crack of dawn, ready to start the fun all over again."

Josh groaned in an exaggerated fashion. "All right," he agreed. "But next time Reva gets another bright idea like this, please call Ravenwood immediately."

Leyla laughed as she finished changing Francesca who had barely stirred.

Jonathan followed her back to the living room as Josh continued to the bedroom. Leyla settled her niece in the big playpen next to Colin and Henry. After she covered them with a blanket, she glanced around to make sure everything was fine.

"Want a beer?" Jonathan asked softly.

She nodded and headed back to the den where she settled in a recliner with a tired sigh.

"Here you go." Jonathan handed her an opened bottle, which she took gratefully and downed a long drink.

"Oh, that's so good," she sighed again, finally feeling her body relax after the long day.

Jonathan flopped on the couch and rested his feet on the table in front of it, drinking from his own bottle. "Oh yeah," he agreed, letting out a soft belch. He looked at her. "You're really good with the kids."

"Thanks," she said. "Lots of babysitting during and after high school to pay for college."

She smiled at him. "And you're really good with Sarah."

He smiled. "Yeah, well it was just the two of us for a long time, so we're very close. I am glad she finally has a chance to get to know her extended family, as crazy as it might be."

Leyla laughed. "I know. Just trying to keep track of who is related to who and how is tough. When you add in past marriages, then things get really confusing."

"Throw in my Auntie O's relationships and it can get really crazy," he said, joining in the laughter.

"Are we related?" she asked, motioning between them with the hand holding her beer.

"Seeing as how your aunt is my soon-to-be sister-in-law."

He thought for a moment. "Nope," he finally said. "We're only related through adoption, but if we were then you'd be my aunt."

"Ooh, and that would make Sarah my great-niece!"

"I don't think she'd mind," he said. "She likes you."

"Really?" Leyla asked, skeptically. "She barely says two words to me."

"See...that's how I know she likes you," he laughed. "If she didn't, she wouldn't say anything."

"All right, if you say so," she laughed.

They both paused to take a drink. "So," he finally said. "I take it your move to this one-horse town is permanent?"

"I think so," she answered. "My friend Mario going to college at Urbana-Champaign so there's nobody waiting for me back in Chitown, except the parentals and Natalia and I are not feeling the love from them at the moment."

"They'll come around," he said and Leyla laughed.

"I don't think so," she said, shaking her head. "They went nearly twenty years without speaking to Natalia because she had a child out of wedlock. Now that she's in a gay relationship...? Forget about it."

"Man, I just don't get people," he said, putting his empty bottle on the table. "Any fool can see she and Auntie O are meant for each other."

"I know, right?" She threw up her hands, and then sat back with a pout. "Last time I saw him, Papa said I was forbidden to visit Natalia and her family."

"Why?" he asked, his brow scrunched.

Leyla leaned back against the couch and closed her eyes. "He said he didn't want me exposed to degenerates, especially Olivia." Leyla felt tears burning behind her closed eyelids. "He said she would corrupt me just the way she corrupted Natalia."

"Oh man, that's harsh," he said. "So that's why you left?"

"Pretty much," she said bitterly. "They robbed me of my sister for most of my life; I didn't want to miss out on any more. Especially given the wonderful family she's made with Olivia." She paused for a moment. "Well, with one really big exception," she added.

Jonathan's eyebrows rose. "Got a problem with my cousin, I'm guessing."

"Big time," she answered, feeling the familiar ire rise within her at the mere thought of the tall brunette. "I just don't get her. She's got so much and she's always grubbing for more."

"That comes from being an orphan," he said.

She looked at him. "Last I heard, Olivia and Jeffrey were alive and kicking. In fact, if I know my sis, she and Olivia are taking advantage of that big, old, empty farmhouse right now."

Jonathan laughed. "Yeah, no doubt. But what I meant was that her adoptive parents are gone, like mine. It's a big slap of reality when you lose the love and support system which you've relied on your whole life. Something shifts inside and sometimes people deal with it by overcompensating. Maybe that's what you're seeing in Ava."

"Maybe." Leyla shrugged. "I just don't want her to cause trouble for Natalia and Olivia or the kids."

"I don't think she will," he said. "She's as fanatical about family as Auntie O is and that's saying a lot. Just give her a chance, Leyla."

Leyla shrugged again doubtfully. "We'll see," she finally answered.

"Good enough," he smiled. "So...no one is pining away for one Leyla Rivera in the Windy City? What about the rest of the world?"

Leyla threw back her head and laughed heartily.

Several empty glasses and a nearly-empty basket of cheese fries littered the table that Doris and Blake were sitting at. The crowd in the bar had thinned a bit, but it was still more than was usual at this time at night, Doris knew. She turned back to her companion, who she finally noted had moved her chair closer to Doris so she was practically sitting on the mayor's lap. Doris shook her head in amusement and nearly missed what Blake was saying to her.

"Dance with me?"

Doris blinked in surprise. "Umm..."

"Please?" Blake nearly whined, which was so cute that it caused Doris's heart to skip a beat. "I've been thinking about dancing with you for a long time."

"Really?" Doris asked. She had long fantasized what a relationship with the other woman would be like, but she had never considered that Blake might have done the same.

"Yes, really!" Blake emphasized. "How many times do I have to tell you this is not something new for me? I've thought about you for a really long time. Come on. Dance with me."

Blake stood and pulled a bemused Doris to her feet. She led the mayor by the hand to the dance floor and then turned around. Doris smiled gently as her friend seemed to hesitate, but then her heart leapt in her chest as Blake stepped forward and took her in her arms. She stiffened for a moment, but then relaxed and returned the comforting embrace as they began to slowly move to the music.

"Oh..." Blake sighed. "You feel so good."

Doris closed her eyes and allowed herself a moment to enjoy the sensation of the redhead's body pressed intimately against her own, but then the familiar fear came crashing back. "Blake..." she began.

"Shh...just relax, Doris," Blake urged and snuggled closer. "Let yourself go for just a little bit. Okay?"

Doris paused. "All right," she finally said and tightened her grip. *Just for now*, she promised herself. *Just this one dance*.

Blake smiled, laid her head on Doris's shoulder and sighed in contentment.

Leyla was just about to ask Jonathan if he wanted another beer, when they heard a commotion coming from the living room. Their eyes met for a moment, and then they both jumped up at the same time and rushed out of the den.

Emma and Clarissa were standing next to the couch, both tugging on a DVD case.

"No, gimme!" Emma cried loudly and yanked the case away from Clarissa. Her momentum propelled her back against the couch and into the lamp sitting on the end table. The lamp teetered for a moment, and then fell over with a very loud crash.

The two sleeping boys immediately woke up, but Leyla was glad to see that Francesca and Sarah barely stirred. However, a few moments later, both Reva and Josh came stumbling into the living room, their faces creased with sleep.

"What's going on?" Reva croaked.

"I'm sorry," Emma said. She tried to pick up the pieces of the lamp, but Josh intercepted her.

"Don't touch the glass, honey," he said and carefully began to clean up the shards.

"What were you two fighting about?" Leyla asked.

"Nothing," Emma said with a pout, avoiding her aunt's piercing gaze.

"Clarissa?" Reva asked.

The young girl shrugged. "Really, nothing," she answered. "Emma wanted to watch that movie and I wanted to watch another."

"So you were fighting about it?" Leyla asked. "Emma, I'm surprised at you."

Emma mumbled something under her breath.

"What was that?" Leyla asked.

"I said, I don't care!" Emma yelled, and this time both Francesca and Sarah woke up, the former with a very loud cry of protest.

Leyla sighed. "Okay, into the den with you, Emma," she ordered. "You sleep in there. Movie time is over."

Emma pushed past the adults and other children and stomped her way down the hall. A moment later, the door to the den slammed shut.

"I'm sorry, Reva," Leyla said, moving to soothe Francesca back to sleep. "You two go back to bed; Jonathan and I can handle this."

"Don't worry about it, hon," Reva said, waving off the apology. "These things happen. I didn't like that nasty old lamp anyway."

"Regardless, I'll make sure she apologizes to you both in the morning," Leyla said and turned a piercing look on Clarissa.

"I'm sorry, Reva," the young girl said. "I'm sorry, Josh. Sorry Leyla."

"Thank you, sweetie," Reva said for all of them. "Okay then, come on, big guy...let's get back to sleep. I'm exhausted."

Josh followed her and said, "See, I warned you about playing hostess to a bunch of kids."

"Oh hush," she said, swatting at his arm. "You know you love them all just as much as I do."

Leyla chuckled at the couple as they disappeared into their bedroom, and then turned to Jonathan. "Your mom's a character," she said with a smile.

"That she is." Jonathan returned the grin. "Come on; let's get these guys settled down."

Leyla nodded and looked forward for this long day to be finally over.

After what seemed like hours of dancing, Doris finally led Blake back to their table. She sat back in her chair with a sigh, her feet aching pleasantly from the exercise. Despite her misgivings, she found herself having a wonderful time with Blake.

"Want another drink?" Doris asked.

Blake shook her head. "No thank you," she answered. "Take me home?"

"Umm..." Doris's mind instantly replayed the far-too-many-to-count times a woman had said that same phrase to her in this same bar, but this time it was *Blake* saying the words. "Blake..."

Blake seemed oblivious to Doris's discomfort. "Come on, I need a ride," she said, grabbing her purse. "I left my car at home and took a cab here."

"Isn't that convenient?" Doris noted. "Cabs do go both ways, Blake."

"And you have a driver-slash-bodyguard, so let's go." Blake stood and headed for the door. After a few moments, Doris reluctantly followed.

The drive to Blake's house went by in a blur as the redhead chattered on about something or other, not that Doris was really listening. Her mind was busy playing out myriad scenarios, most of them X-rated. Finally, her driver pulled up in front of Blake's house and hopped out to hold the door open for them. Doris glanced at Blake, who had exited the car

in a flash and was striding rapidly up the walk, and then growled at her driver, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

By the time Doris caught up with her, Blake had unlocked the door and was pushing it open. She turned to Doris and said, "Come in."

"No, thanks though, Blake," Doris said. "I'm going to head on home. Long day and all, you know how it is."

"Doris." Blake turned and fixed her with a steely gaze. "There is a madman on the loose in Springfield. Clarissa is away and I don't want to go in by myself."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Doris asked and waved her hand back toward her SUV. "I'll just get Jack and he can check out the house."

"I don't want Jack," Blake said. "I want you."

"Uh..." Doris's mind once again stalled, but it wasn't long before she found her voice. "Was that a double entendre?"

"Maybe." Blake smirked and entered the house.

Doris followed a moment later. Inside the living room, Blake dropped her keys on a bookshelf and turned on a small lamp resting next to it. "Have a seat," she said over her shoulder. "Please, make yourself at home."

Doris looked around the quiet space. "Looks like it's all clear, Blake. No big bad lurking in your corners."

Blake continued on toward the kitchen. "Have a seat," she repeated.

Doris sighed as Blake disappeared into the other room. The last time she had been in Blake's home, she had been beyond exhaustion and didn't take note of the small details. She looked around and noticed several framed pictures. She smiled at one of Blake with Clarissa and then another of her with her twin sons, but frowned when she saw a photo of Holly Reade and another one of Ross Marler. She stared at his photo for a long moment and then wandered over to the couch. "*Stay away from the couch, Doris,*" she whispered to herself. "*Don't go giving her any ideas.*" Detouring quickly, she took a seat on the recliner.

She turned her head at the sound of footsteps and watched as Blake approached her, holding a glass of white wine in each hand. Doris felt herself responding to Blake's warm smile as she held out one of the glasses to her. "How about a toast?"

Doris took the glass and started, "Blake..."

"To new beginnings!" Blake said and clinked her glass against Doris's.

Doris sighed and sniffed the wine before taking a small sip. It was a clean and crisp Sauvignon Blanc, pretty and delicate, just like Blake herself, Doris thought. Although Blake was probably more like a sunny and bright Chardonnay, with a tiny hint of oak depicting the woman's strong backbone.

"That's lovely, Blake," she said looking up at her friend standing over her. She put her glass down on the table next to the recliner. "But I really should go now."

"Don't go," Blake said and put her own glass down.

"I really..." Before Doris could stand, Blake pressed her hand against her chest, pushing Doris back into the seat cushions.

"Blake!" Doris barely had time to protest before she suddenly found her lap filled with a squirming Blake Marler. She gasped in surprise and found her mouth, like her lap, filled with a squirming Blake Marler.

For a few beautiful moments, Doris returned Blake's passionate kiss. She reached out with the intent of pushing Blake away from her, but her breath hitched as she encountered the smooth expanse of the woman's bare thighs, her dress having ridden up. Doris felt a rush of desire zing through her body, instantly heightening all of her senses. She realized that she had never wanted another woman as much as she wanted Blake in this moment.

Doris groaned in pleasure as Blake continued to explore her mouth. Blake tasted like the wine, sweet and fruity, and Doris wanted to explore every inch of what the redhead was offering, to savor the delectable flavor she just knew was there waiting for her. Doris moaned again, helplessly.

As if encouraged by her response, Blake began to move her hands sensuously up Doris's body, finally coming to rest over her breasts in a gentle massage. Knowing this was probably the first time Blake had touched a woman like this, Doris felt her body again reacting, her hips surging forward to increase the contact with the other woman.

With a groan of her own, Blake tore her mouth away and trailed her lips along Doris's jaw line and down to her neck where she latched on with a wet kiss, her tongue teasing the

skin in a promise of things to come. Doris again squeezed the firm legs clenching her tightly and wondered if they would make it to the bedroom before she exploded.

"Blake," she croaked out.

"Oh, Doris," Blake murmured and switched her attention to the other side of Doris's neck.

Doris's head moved back on its own to allow Blake more access, but she felt her desire quickly turning to fear. "Blake!" she said forcefully, finally managing to push the redhead back. "Stop."

Blake was panting as she leaned back and looked up to meet lust-darkened eyes. "What?" she asked shaking her head. "What's wrong?"

"Please, just stop," Doris begged.

"What?" she repeated. "Don't you want me?"

Doris knew that with her body burning with desire, it was useless to attempt to lie. "Of course I want you, Blake," she answered. "God, you are such a beautiful and sensual woman. Just last year I would have had you naked and in bed by now."

Blake gave her a sultry smile. "Sounds like a wonderful plan," she said huskily and leaned forward to kiss Doris again.

Doris put a hand on Blake's chest and pushed her back. "But Blake, this is now," she said. "I don't want just a fling or another one-night stand. I want more and I need it with someone I can trust."

"You can trust me."

"Can I?" Doris asked and Blake frowned. "I trusted Anna and she tore my heart out," Doris continued. "And tonight you lured me to Ladies Night under false pretenses, did all you could to get me into your home and now you're trying to seduce me into your bed. How do I know this is just not another typical Blake Marler seduction ploy?"

"What?" Blake's mouth dropped open in shock.

"You know, Blake," she said, her voice turning hard. "Like when you showed up in Coop's bed to try to seduce him. And why was that, Blake? Oh yeah, to steal him away from my daughter."

Blake finally pushed off of Doris, who managed to get to her feet after a brief struggle. "That was a long time ago, Doris!"

"Not that long," Doris shot back.

"I thought we were friends," Blake said, tears forming in her eyes.

"We were...are!" she said, running her hands through her disheveled hair. "We *are* friends, Blake, but like I said, for the first time in my life I feel free to have the kind of love everyone dreams about."

"You don't think you can have that with me?" Blake asked.

"Blake, you're not gay!" Doris said, waving her hands in frustration. "I've had enough of straight women to last me a lifetime. From the LUGs in college to the furtive housewives in the shadows at a gay bar, looking for a cheap thrill. It's happened to me over and over again. Once whatever itch they've got has been scratched, they go running back to their normal all-American lives."

Blake said forcefully, "That's not what I want from you, Doris Wolfe!" She stepped forward and poked her finger against Doris's chest. "I want forever too and I think we can have that together. Why can't you just give it a chance?"

"I can't, Blake," Doris said, tears forming in her eyes as the fear overwhelmed her. "It'll just hurt too much when you go back to your normal life." She turned to leave and heard Blake take a deep breath.

"All right, Doris," Blake said and Doris's heart nearly broke at the sorrow evident in her voice. "Go. Leave for now, but let me just say one thing."

Doris paused with her hand on the doorknob. "What?" she finally managed.

"I'm not going to give up," Blake said and Doris could hear her determination. "I am going to court you and woo you and romance you like you've never been before. And if it takes a week, a month, a year or a decade, then so be it. You're worth fighting for, Doris. And you're worth waiting for."

Doris didn't turn around or respond to the declaration, but simply said, "Good night, Blake." She stepped outside and made her way down the driveway blindly, getting into the car and fastening her seatbelt on autopilot. As she leaned back in her seat she allowed herself a small smile. "Romance, huh?" she whispered to herself and her smile widened at the thought.

A brisk knock on the back door caused Olivia to stop what she was doing to open it. Standing on the back porch was her best friend.

"Hey D," she said, turning back to the lunch she was preparing for her family. "Come on in."

"Thanks," Doris said and immediately headed over to the always-on coffee machine. "What are you making?"

"Grilled chicken Caesar salad," she answered. "Join us?"

Doris peered over Olivia's shoulder and looked at the cooked breasts her friend was slicing. "Yeah, you twisted my arm."

Olivia snorted. "Oh, the effort it takes to get you to eat my food."



"Where is everyone?" Doris asked.

"Natalia's upstairs with Sweet Pea, Leyla's in town and Jellybean is outside," Olivia answered.

"Yeah, I saw Emma raking leaves as I pulled in," Doris said. "What happened to the Turner kid who normally does your yard work?"

"Emma broke one of Reva's lamps last night during a fight with Clarissa," Olivia answered with a frown. "When I told her she had to pay for it, she was going to use her saved allowance, but I said she had to work it off and use that time to think about what she did."

"Good idea," Doris said. "You don't want her thinking that money can solve every problem."

"No, I don't," Olivia said. "So, what did you do last night?"

"Yeah, about that...lose your phone, Liv?" Doris asked, taking a seat at the table.

Olivia gave her a curious look. "I left it in my office yesterday," she answered.

Doris nodded. "When you retrieve it, you'll find an unauthorized text sent to me."

"Oh?" Olivia asked and went to the refrigerator to get the salad greens.

"Blake used it to lure me to Ladies Night, where she proceeded to wine and dine me," Doris answered and then took a sip of her coffee.

Olivia's eyebrows rose and she smirked at her friend. "And did you guys get to the sixty-nine part?"

"Almost," Doris answered and Olivia smiled at the sweet blush that bloomed on her friend's face. "She managed to get to second base before I ran."

Olivia paused in her preparations to look at Doris. "So let me get this straight...you had a beautiful woman wanting to make mad, passionate love to you and you ran away? Is that about right?"

"Got it in one, Liv," Doris said and refused to meet Olivia's eyes.

"What kind of lesbian are you?" Olivia asked, shaking her head as she went back to tearing lettuce leaves.

"A scared one, okay?" Doris said with a sigh. "I couldn't take getting hurt again, Olivia."

"I've got news for you, my friend," Olivia said. "You're already hurting, only this time you're hurting yourself. So what are you going to do? Spend the rest of your life alone because you're afraid to get close to anyone again?" She barely raised her head from the salad bowl as she gave Doris a piercing look. "And don't give me that bull about Blake being straight. Her orientation until now didn't matter. She's open to exploring a relationship with you, so why can't you be open to the possibility that you could be happy with her?"

"She said she's going to romance me until I give in," Doris said with a smile.

Olivia laughed. "Well, if she's using Natalia as inspiration on how to get her woman, you don't stand a chance. And face it, D...you're falling for her, if you haven't already, and I'm pretty sure it's reciprocal. Besides, I think Blake could be good for you; you need someone who isn't afraid to be out in the open. I also think you're much better for Blake than any of her past lovers. Certainly better than Frank."

"Yeah, what is it with Frank Cooper anyway?" Doris asked, her laughter showing Olivia that she was past her funk. "All the women he's slept with are turning gay."

"What about you, Doris?" Olivia asked, bringing the salad bowl over to the table. She swatted Doris's hand away as the mayor reached for a slice of chicken. "You ever sleep with Frank?"

"Not funny, Liv."

"Oh yeah, that's right," Olivia said and turned for the plates. "Forgot you had that gold star thing going."

Doris gave her a smirk. "Been reading lesbian fanfic again, Olivia?"

Both women laughed.

Olivia had just set another carved pumpkin on the front porch when she heard a vehicle pull up. She looked and saw her eldest daughter getting out of her car. Ava walked briskly up the cement path and handed her mother the bag she was carrying.

"Hi, Mom," she said, leaning over to kiss Olivia's cheek.

"Hi, honey," she said, glancing in the bag. "Thanks for picking these up."

"No problem." Ava smiled and headed for the front door.

"Wait a second," Olivia stopped her. "I want to talk to you about something and you can help me get the lights up." She ignored the guarded look her daughter gave her and reached for the aluminum ladder. "Hold the ladder steady while I tack these up."

She opened the package of pumpkin lights and they worked in silence for a few minutes until Olivia finally said, "So...care to tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on, Mom," Ava said and again avoiding her mother's stare.

Olivia turned to secure another string of the lights. "I ran into Cyrus Foley at the mini-mart yesterday."

Ava swore under her breath and Olivia continued, "I would ask what the hell you were thinking, but it's obvious you weren't."

"She's done nothing except cause trouble," Ava said. "She comes in where she's not wanted, lives here for free, gets a great job at the Beacon and causes trouble for you and Natalia. She needs to go, Mom!"

Olivia took a deep breath and then stepped off the ladder. "Ava," she said, turning to her daughter. "Are you going back to San Francisco?"

Ava backed up a moment. "What? No!"

"Do I need to point out that you live at the Beacon for free and have a great job there?" Olivia asked.

"That's different!" Ava said, waving off her mother's observation. "I'm your daughter."

"And Leyla is Natalia's sister," Olivia said. "She's just as much a part of this family as you or me or Emma. She is an essential component of this wonderful family we're building here. I told you this before, Ava...it's no longer just the three of us. Leyla is Natalia's flesh and blood and that makes her precious to me."

"So you're choosing her over me?" Ava said with tears in her eyes.

"No, honey," Olivia said, moving closer and placing her hands on Ava's arms, squeezing gently. "I'm choosing *both* of you. I need both of you in my life, as much as I need Natalia and Emma and Francesca. We're a family. Look, I'm not asking you to love her or even like her, but at least try not to kill her, okay?"

Ava pouted and thought for a moment. "All right, Mom," she said. "I guess it was a dumb idea."

"Ya think?" Olivia said, rolling her eyes. "Thanks, honey. Now...I'd like you to think about something. You know I've been seeing Dr. Boudreau, right? She's been helping me deal with everything, the wedding massacre mostly, but we also talk about other issues."

"That's great, Mom," Ava said. "I'm glad that she's helping you."

"She is, honey," Olivia said. "She's also helping me with the lingering grief I'm feeling over Max." She paused, watching Ava's carefully guarded face. "It's been really hard for me to see Remy with his new son, especially since Clayton looks a lot like Max."

"Well..." Ava started, her voice breaking on the single word and Olivia's heart ached for her daughter. "I mean, that's good, Mom."

"Ava," Olivia said. "Why don't you see Felicia, too?"

"I don't need her, Mom," Ava said, shaking her head. "I'm fine."

"Ava, I know you're hurting about this, because I am hurting too," Olivia said. "I think this self-destructive behavior is related to that. Talking to an impartial listener can help you work through it."

"How is getting rid of Leyla self-destructive?"

"Well, for one thing, you're missing out on what could be a good friendship with her," Olivia said and then waved that off. "But I'm talking about the phone call I got earlier from one of my security guards about having to forcibly remove some guy from your room last night."

"Oh Jesus!" Ava cried. "Is there anything you *don't* hear about in this town?"

"Probably not," Olivia said with a wry smirk. "Look, honey, you're an adult and are free to do what you want, but I just want you to be careful. Picking up strangers can be dangerous. Believe me, I've been there, done that and am damn lucky I'm still here after all of my own attempts at self-destruction. So please, talk to Felicia."

Ava sighed and finally said, "I'll think about it, Mom. And I'll leave Leyla alone."

"Thanks, baby," Olivia said and hugged her daughter. "Now, let's go get the girls dressed!" Olivia bounced on her heels in anticipation.

Natalia bustled around the kitchen putting the final touches on the snacks for their guests. A knock on the door diverted her to open it, revealing Blake and her daughter. Natalia smiled at the young girl who was dressed in a severe red pantsuit. "Are you going as the mayor again, Clarissa?" she asked.

Clarissa shook her head. "No, the Secretary of State," she answered with a proud smile. ...
"Her political aspirations grew a tiny bit this past year," Blake deadpanned and Natalia laughed.

"Well, Jonathan and Sarah are in the living room playing the Wii and Emma should be dressed soon and we can get started."

"Yay!" the girl exclaimed. "Thanks, Natalia."

Natalia smiled at Blake as Clarissa left. "She's adorable."

"Thank you," Blake said and then paused as she grabbed a carrot stick from the platter.

"Um...so is Doris here? I thought I saw her car in the driveway."

"Yes, she's upstairs helping Olivia with the girls," Natalia said and handed Blake a napkin. When her friend fidgeted, she peered at Blake, seeing discomfort written across her face. "What's going on, Blake?"

"Oh, I kind of got her to go out with me last night," Blake admitted.

Natalia just stared at her friend. "And how did you manage that?" she asked.

"Um, sent her a text from Olivia's phone," Blake said. "I went to the Beacon to see Olivia about something, but she'd already left. When I saw her phone on the desk, I figured that Doris wouldn't refuse to meet with her since they're such good friends."

"Oh boy," Natalia said. "Where did you ask her to meet you?"

"Ladies Night," Blake said.

"*Ladies Night*?" Natalia giggled. "You tricked Doris to meet you at a gay bar by pretending to be my girlfriend?"

"Well, sort of, but we had a really great time," Blake said. "At least until she ran out of my house like a scared rabbit."

Natalia put a hand to her head and rubbed her temple. "Oh boy," she said. "I don't even want to think about what you did once you got her home."

Blake sighed happily. "Oh it was so great, Natalia," she said. "I never imagined that kissing a woman could feel so wonderful. It's so...soft."

Natalia smiled at her friend. "It is," she said softly. "But you shouldn't have tricked her like that, Blake. Doris deserves better than that. She deserves honesty."

"I know," Blake said. "You're right and I guess when I sent that text I wasn't thinking straight."

Natalia snorted in amusement at Blake's choice of words. Blake gave her a ghost of a smile.

"Do you really care about her, Blake?" Natalia asked.

"Yeah, I do," Blake answered, her face revealing the truth of her statement.

"Then just give her time," Natalia advised. "That was a hard lesson I had to learn after I got back from the retreat. As much as you might want something to happen, there comes a point when you just need to step back and wait for the other person to arrive at the same place you're in."

"I just hope I haven't blown it," Blake said, glancing down at the floor.

Natalia cocked her head as she heard Doris's voice out in the living room moving toward the kitchen. "I think you might just find out now," she said.

The door swung open and Natalia watched the silent drama as the mayor caught sight of Blake. Doris's resulting smile provided both of them with an answer.

Natalia smirked as the two women stared at each other. Then she cleared her throat and watched Doris swing her head toward the sound, a faint blush tinting her face.

"Uh...Natalia," she said and then cleared her throat. "Liv needs you upstairs, please."

"Oh sure," Natalia said. "If you guys can finish up?" She waited a moment, but the other women were back to gazing shyly at one another. With a happy smile for her friends, she left the kitchen.

Ava stepped through the front door and into the bustling living room. She glanced around, looking for her cousin. He was leaning casually against the wall as he chatted animatedly with Leyla Rivera. Ava watched as the Latina threw back her head and laughed at something he had said. Suppressing a frown, she approached them.

"Hey, Cuz," Jonathan said.

"Hi, Jon...Leyla," she managed.

"I was just telling Leyla about the haunted cemetery on San Cristobel that we kids used to spend the night in as a way to prove we were macho," he laughed.

"Fun," Ava commented dryly.

"Not as crazy as Springfield, though," he chuckled with a warm smile at Leyla.

"I'm so looking forward to tonight," Leyla said, returning the smile. "It's been a long time I've been out trick-or-treating."

Ava gave an internal roll of her eyes and then said to Jonathan, "Anna just arrived. She wants your help to coordinate this shindig."

"Oh sure," he said. "Be right back."

Ava watched Leyla watch Jonathan as he hurried out of the house. "So...Leyla," she said to get the girl's attention.

Leyla turned to her with a wary expression. "Ava," she said in reply.

"Yeah, look...I'm sorry about yesterday," Ava said. "You know, flying off the handle and all."

"Okay," Leyla said, accepting the apology. "I'm sorry, too. For, you know, bringing up things I shouldn't have."

Ava struck out a hand. "Truce?" she asked. When Leyla didn't answer, she added, "For family's sake?"

Leyla gave a tight nod and shook Ava's hand. "For the family."

Doris laughed at herself as she realized she had no reason to feel so shy around her friend, since it seemed Blake clearly didn't think any less of her for bolting the night before. "So I guess I've been replaced, huh?" she finally said.

Blake looked confused for a moment and then smiled. "You mean Clarissa? Yeah. She's replaced one great female role model for another."

"So I see," Doris said and then added a flirtatious tone to her voice. "And is her mother that fickle as well?"

Blake shook her head. "No," she answered emphatically. "She knows exactly what she wants."

Doris smiled warmly. "Good," she answered.

When Natalia entered Emma's room, she saw Olivia running her hands through her hair in a sign of frustration. "What's up?" she asked and frowned at their daughter who was sitting on her bed with her arms wrapped around her legs and her chin resting on her knees. "Emma, why aren't you ready for trick-or-treating?"

The girl mumbled her reply into her knees.

"Excuse me?" Natalia asked again, her frown deepening.

"I said I'm *not* going!" Emma cried in a loud voice.

Natalia blinked in surprise as Olivia said, "Emma! Don't talk to your mother like that."

"I don't understand, Emma," Natalia said, moving toward the bed and sitting beside her daughter. Emma cringed away. "I thought you wanted to go. We worked on your costume and everything."

"Halloween is stupid," Emma said, still speaking into her knees, refusing to look up and meet her mothers' eyes. "It's for babies and I'm not a baby."

"It is not for babies. Clarissa is older than you are," Natalia pointed out. "She looks adorable, too. And so will you when you put on your costume."

"No!" Emma said.

Natalia looked helplessly at her partner who threw up her hands.

"Jellybean, it's your sister's first Halloween, you don't want to miss that," Olivia said. "And I promised your brother I'd send him lots of photos," Natalia added. "You don't want to disappoint Rafe, do you?"

"I don't care!" Emma said. "I'm *not* going!"

"All right, fine," Olivia said, giving up. "Stay here then, but no candy for you and tomorrow after school, you're going to clean the barn."

Emma didn't respond to her punishment; she just burrowed more deeply into herself.

Olivia followed Natalia out of the room and closed the door silently. Their eyes met and Olivia's heart ached at the pain in Natalia's eyes. "She'll be all right," she said.

"I know," Natalia said. "Why is she acting like this?"

"She's been through a lot, Natalia," Olivia said. "We all have, but first Jane and then the wedding...I'd be more worried if she wasn't acting out."

Natalia sighed. "I just hate it when we have to discipline her."

Olivia nodded her agreement. "I'll ask Ava to stay with her," she said. "I'm not letting Emma's bad behavior keep either of us from missing Sweet Pea's first Halloween."

Natalia nodded and sighed again as she glanced back at Emma's closed door.

Downstairs, Olivia smiled at her daughter who was standing with Leyla, pleased to see that Ava was attempting to at least be friendly with Natalia's sister.

"Where's Emma, Mom?" Ava asked.

"Upstairs," Olivia answered. "She doesn't want to go trick-or-treat and I'm tired of arguing with her. Will you stay with her while the rest of us go?"

Ava glanced at Leyla who was watching as Jonathan came walking back into the house. Olivia noted her daughter's subtle smirk.

"Sorry, Mom," Ava answered. "I've got plans tonight, just came to see you guys off."

Olivia narrowed her eyes. "Not a repeat performance of last night?" she asked.

Ava waved her hand dismissively. "No, no," she said. "Going to catch a horror movie with some friends."

Olivia knew Ava didn't really have friends in town any more, but she chose not to call her daughter on it in front of other people. She turned to Leyla and raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Leyla's face fell as she glanced back toward Jonathan, but then she plastered on a cheerful smile. "Sure, no problem, Olivia," she said.

"Thanks," Olivia said gratefully, not missing the way Ava's smirk turned triumphant.

Anna Li poked her head into the house. "All right, gang," she called. "Let's get this show on the road."

As everyone started to file out of the house, Natalia turned to Olivia, who was watching Jonathan carry Francesca in his arms. "Are you all right?" she asked quietly.

Olivia shook her head. "No," she answered, tears starting to fall from her eyes. "Emma's upstairs, angry and acting out, and Ava just did that to deliberately hurt Leyla."

"I know," Natalia said and Olivia again realized that there wasn't much her lover missed. "It'll be okay, *mi amor*."

"I don't know..." she started.

"Shh..." Natalia interrupted as she took Olivia into her arms. "It *will* be. I promise. Our family is strong and we'll work through this and we will be fine."

Olivia laid her head on Natalia's strong shoulder and soaked up the comfort. Despite her doubts at her partner's assertions, she knew that with this amazing woman at her side, they could do anything.

THE END

Thanks for the Memories

by Skeeter451

ACT 1

The late autumn morning was progressing nicely in Springfield Township and Doris Wolfe was feeling good about herself as she stepped out of her SUV and onto the small parking lot next to Company. Sure, Edmund Winslow was still at large, but there had been no incidents since he disappeared. While it was her nature to remain pessimistic, there was a chance Chief Cooper was right and Winslow had fled the country. Still, she was taking no

chances and expected a preliminary report from A.C. Mallet when he arrived in town. Which Doris sincerely hoped was soon.

Also arriving home for the Thanksgiving holiday was her daughter Ashlee, flying in from California with her best friend Daisy Cooper. Doris was looking forward to seeing Ashlee, but not as much as she was looking forward to seeing the feisty redhead who already had her morning cup of coffee ready and waiting for her as she stepped through the entrance door.

Blake gave her a bright smile and handed her the coffee after Doris perched herself at the counter. She took a sip and hummed in absolute pleasure as its warmth penetrated her body just as the fire in Blake's eyes filled her soul.

"Thank you," she said. "It's wonderful, as usual."

"My pleasure," Blake said and leaned across the counter to steal a quick kiss. Doris sighed happily and congratulated herself for not looking around to see if anyone had noticed. Blake had been good about giving her space, but Doris found herself more and more at ease with the idea of a relationship with Blake. Actually, she admitted to herself, they were already in a relationship, but at last she felt they were ready to move it toward the next level.

"How are you this lovely morning?" Doris asked.

"It just got even lovelier now that you're here," Blake said, then it seemed to Doris that she suddenly grew nervous. "So, I was wondering...tomorrow is my goddaughter's birthday party."

"I know," Doris said with a nod. "I was a little surprised that Frank sent me an invitation, but I figured it was Olivia's influence even though he's hosting the party."

"Probably," Blake said, absently. Obviously something was on her mind and Doris wondered what it was. "Well...I was wondering if you'd go with me?"

Doris was charmed at the faint blush on Blake's face. "Don't you have to work?"

"I'm going to ask Buzz for the night off."

"Okay, then yes," Doris said with a nod. "I'll go with you."

Blake's face lit up. "Great! It's a date." She paused with a frown. "It is a date, right?"

Doris laughed and nodded. "Yes, Blake. I will go with you to Francesca's birthday party on our first official date."

Blake's resultant smile made Doris's stomach flip happily.

The parking lot of the SFPD building was already filled with cars as Olivia swung their car into it and double-parked in front of the entrance. Natalia quickly exited the vehicle and started to unbuckle Francesca from her seat in the back.

Olivia popped the trunk and pulled the baby's weekend bag out. She quickly double-checked the contents then slammed the trunk closed. Natalia was already walking up the steps and she rushed to catch up. Natalia never liked Francesca's weekends with her father and always wanted to get the goodbyes over quickly.

Olivia opened the door with her free hand and waited while Natalia walked through, then she followed. Inside, the desk sergeant buzzed them through with a smile. Frank's office door was open, but Olivia rapped on the sill and Frank looked up from his paperwork, his frown at being interrupted turning into a smile upon seeing his daughter.

"Hey there," he said, getting up and coming around the desk to take the baby from Natalia's arms. "Hi! How's my baby girl?"

"Ai Poppy," Francesca said wrapping her arms around Frank's neck in a tight hug.

Olivia nearly laughed at Frank's shocked expression. The baby had been putting together simple sounds for weeks now, but this was the first time she successfully spoke the name of her father.

"Oh, my baby girl," Frank said happily as he hugged his daughter.

"Congratulations, Poppy," Olivia said with a smirk. She glanced at her partner who had tears in her eyes. She reached over to take Natalia's hand who in turn gave her a grateful smile.

"So is there anything else you need, Frank?" Natalia asked.

"I don't think so," he said. "You sent enough milk?"

"In the bag," Olivia answered. "We'll bring more to the party tomorrow night. If you run out, just call."

"Right," he said, nodding his head. They went through this every time they turned the baby over to him and she guessed they'd be doing it for a long time. It was simply a reflection of Francesca's parents: her and Natalia's obsessive concern and Frank's chronic absent-mindedness.

Frank turned to the baby. "Say goodbye to your moms, baby girl," he told her.

Olivia leaned in to kiss the girl on the cheek. "Bye, Sweet Pea.

"Ai, Mama," the girl replied.

Natalia leaned in for a kiss as well, but also lovingly caressed the spot she kissed on the baby's cheek. "Bye, my beautiful girl."

"Ai," Francesca said.

Natalia waited expectantly for a few moments and then pulled away. "Call anytime, Frank," she said. "For any reason."

"We'll see you tomorrow, Frank," Olivia added.

Frank nodded enthusiastically. "For the party – I can't wait. My baby girl's first birthday party."

Olivia held on to Natalia's hand as they left the station, leaving Frank behind them as he tried to get Francesca to call him Poppy again for the other officers.

In the car on the way to the hotel, Natalia was quiet. When Olivia finally pulled into her spot at the Beacon, she turned to her love and asked, "What is it?"

Natalia gave her a rue chuckle. "It's silly," she said.

"Not if it's bothering you," Olivia said. "Tell me."

"Well, it's just that Sweet Pea calls you Mama and now Frank is Poppy, but I'm no one."

Olivia chuckled. "That's because Frank and I spend hours a day trying to get her to speak our names. And you're not 'no one,' Natalia. You're her mother."

"No, I'm only the one who carried her for nine months, endured endless hours of labor and fed her every day of her life," Natalia said and Olivia's heart clenched to see her love's eyes fill with tears.

"Oh, baby," she said. "Come here."

She embraced Natalia and rubbed her back. "Look, with Rafe it was just you; you were his entire world so of course you came first. It was the same with Emma and me, but our baby has a whole passel of people who love her and I think that's a wonderful thing."

"I do, too," Natalia said. "I told you I was being silly."

"No, baby, you're not silly," Olivia said and pulled back so she could dry Natalia's tears. "Sweet Pea loves you and so do I."

"Thank you," Natalia said and leaned in to give her a thorough kiss. By the time she pulled back, Olivia's head was in the stratosphere.

"Wow," Olivia said. "What was that for?"

"For loving me and our family so well," Natalia answered with a warm grin.

"I can't help it," Olivia said. "It's as natural to me as breathing. Come on, love, let's get to work before one of our employees catches us making out like a couple of horny teenagers."

Natalia gave her a playful smirk. "Like that hasn't happened before."

"Oh God," Olivia said, rolling her eyes. "Don't remind me."

Olivia was warmed to her soul when Natalia took her hand as they walked into the Beacon.

Frank Cooper stared at his beautiful daughter. She was quietly playing with her brightly colored plastic toys as she sat in her walker. He found her happy mutterings soothing as he worked and although he knew a police station was no place for a baby, he enjoyed having her there. It wasn't as often as he would have liked that he got a chance to spend the whole weekend with Francesca, so rather than finding a babysitter for the few hours he needed to be here today, he decided to just let her play in his office.

He wondered how Natalia endured the separation from their baby. Even though she worked full time, she was rarely away from their daughter, a fact that he both appreciated and resented. The former because it meant his daughter received the love and attention she needed from her mother and the latter because Natalia didn't need to work at all and should be giving Francesca her *full* attention instead of sharing it with the Beacon or Olivia.

Not for the first time, Frank wondered how their life would have turned out if he and Natalia had married as they should have. Francesca would have two proper parents to love her and Natalia would have been able to stay home with the baby. Sure, if she decided to go to work when their child grew older he would have fully supported that. And if she hadn't, then he would have been more than happy to support her for the rest of her life. It was a role he was fully prepared to take on.

A knock on his door interrupted his reverie and his mood immediately brightened as his former son-in-law appeared in his open doorway. "Mallet!" he said happily as he stood up to shake hands.

"Frank!" Mallet said, enthusiastically pumping his hand in a firm grip. "It's so great to see you, although..."

Frank's smile dimmed a bit. "Yeah, I wish you were here under better circumstances, but still I'm glad to see you, too."

"Right," Mallet said releasing his hand. He turned toward the baby. "Wow, what a beauty she is!"

With his smile growing again, Frank said, "That she is." He pressed the intercom button on his phone. "Li, get in here," he said and then disconnected the line without waiting for a reply.

Mallet hunched down to get eye level with the girl. "Hey there, little one," he said, raising his hand toward her. Francesca immediately grabbed his finger and tried to bring it to her mouth. Mallet grinned and pulled his hand away; replacing it with the baby's teething ring she had dropped on the play mat.

"Poppy!" Francesca said bouncing happily in her seat.

Both Frank and Mallet laughed at her as Mallet stood back up. "She's going to be a heartbreaker when she grows up, Frank," he said, still chuckling.

"She already is," Frank quipped.

"And she's not even a year old yet, right?" Mallet asked.

"Her birthday's next week," Frank answered, proudly. "In fact, we're having her party at Company tomorrow night. Why don't you come by?"

"Yeah, that might be fun," he said with an agreeable nod. "We'll do that."

"We?" Frank asked with a frown.

Before Mallet could answer, there was another knock at the open door. "What's up, Chief?" Anna asked as she entered the office.

"Li, this is A.C. Mallet, the investigator the mayor hired," Frank said with a nod toward the man, his mood again growing foul at the thought of the mayor's constant interference in police business.

Anna strode forward to shake Mallet's hand. "Anna Li," she said.

"Pleased to meet you, Detective" he replied.

"Li's leading the investigation," Frank said. "She's your contact."

"Good," Mallet said, his tone serious now that they were down to business. "I'd like to see what you have so far."

"Of course. I've got everything ready for you."

Frank gave a sharp nod. "Then why don't you two get to it," he said. "The sooner you get started, the sooner you can clear the department." He answered Anna's resultant frown with a glare. "Any questions?" he added.

"No, Chief," she said. She turned to Mallet. "Want some coffee first?"

He nodded. "I know where it is," he said. "Let's go."

Frank watched them leave his office and absently turned back to check on Francesca. He reflected that life was so simple for her. She didn't have to deal with criminals or politics or overbearing mayors. Her needs were few and uncomplicated. With a heavy sigh, he said a silent prayer that it would always remain so for her.

While Mallet got his coffee, Anna quickly grabbed the boxes with the case information she had prepared for him and brought it to the conference room. She was laying out the various folders and evidence when he joined her, sipping at the steaming Styrofoam cup.

"Is this all you have?" he asked, sarcastically.

"So far, Mr. Mallet," she said, dryly.

"Call me, Mallet, Detective," he said. He set his briefcase and coffee on the table.

"All right," she said with a nod.

"Okay, Anna, so let's see what you've got." He sat down and pulled a yellow legal pad and pen from his briefcase and set them on the table.

Anna sat down next to him and opened up the first folder. "Okay, so we think it all started here..."

Coming into the kitchen, Blake spotted Buzz standing at the prep table chopping carrots.

"Hey, Buzz," Blake said and the stocky man turned around.

"Are you out of here, Blake?" he asked.

"Yep, I've got to pick up Clarissa," she said. "But first I wanted to ask if I can have tomorrow off."

Buzz thought a moment. "Yeah, that's fine. Marina already promised to help with the party. You're going to miss it?"

"Oh no," Blake said. "Not going to miss my goddaughter's birthday. I'm coming with a date."

Buzz's eyebrows rose and he asked, "Really? Who's the lucky fella?"

"Doris Wolfe," she answered with a bright smile. Buzz's eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline.

"What about Doris Wolfe?" Frank asked as he walked into the kitchen carrying Francesca in her car seat.

"You ready for lunch, Frank?" Buzz asked, throwing his towel over his shoulder. "What can I make you?"

Frank ignored him. "What about Doris, Blake?"

Blake stared at him for a few long moments, totally nonplussed. It was one thing to announce to the world she was dating a woman, but quite another to tell her ex-boyfriend who already had two previous lovers fall for each other. She wasn't totally insensitive to

his feelings, but she was not ashamed of her burgeoning relationship with Doris and he would find out eventually.

"I'm bringing Doris to Sweet Pea's party tomorrow," she finally answered. "As my date."

Frank shook his head as if he was clearing his ears. "Your what?" he asked.

Blake glanced at Buzz and noted he was silently watching them. She turned back to Frank and said, "My date, Frank."

"Your date?" Frank asked, shaking his head again. "Doris Wolfe is your date?"

"Yes, Frank," she said, starting to get exasperated with him.

"You're dating Doris Wolfe?"

"Yes, Frank," she repeated with a sigh. She knew him well enough to guess what came next.

"Are you nuts?" Frank yelled.

"Frank, calm down," Buzz said. "We've got customers out there."

"Stay out of this, Pop," he shot to his father, but Blake was glad to note he did lower his voice.

"No, Frank, I am not nuts and who I date is none of your business," Blake said.

"For God's sake, Blake, *Doris Wolfe*?" he blustered. "That woman is a shark, she'll eat you alive."

"Well, I certainly hope so," she flung back and out of the corner of her eye she saw Buzz put a hand over his mouth in an attempt not to laugh. "God, I never realized you were such a homophobe, Frank."

He blinked in surprise at her. "I'm not," he said. "I don't care that it's a woman, Blake, it's Doris Wolfe I can't stand."

"Well, that's just too bad," she said, pointing her finger sharply against his chest. "So you better tell me right now if we're welcome at your daughter's birthday party as a couple or not."

He stood there for a few moments, his face turning red. "No, no you're both welcome to come. Francesca is your goddaughter and Natalia wouldn't like it if I banned Doris."

"Frank..." Buzz started, but Frank once again stopped his father.

"Forget it, Pop," he said and then turned to Blake. "Look, you know what? You're right. It is none of my business. We're not together and you're free to date whoever you want." He turned to Buzz. "I'm going to take Francesca upstairs to feed her. I've lost my appetite." With that he turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Blake sighed and looked at Buzz. "I'm sorry, Buzz."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not your fault, Blake," he said. "You're just trying to find someone to make you happy. I'm sorry that person couldn't be my son, but I've seen you and Doris together a lot and I'd say you two really have chemistry."

"You think so?" she asked, a bright smile on her face.

"Yeah, I really do," he said. "Good luck, dear."

"Thanks, Buzz," she said and glanced at her watch. "Oh gosh, really gotta run now. Poor Clarissa is waiting."

"Go already!" he said and waved her onward with a laugh.

More coffee cups and the remains of a delivery lunch littered the table. Mallet sat back and rubbed his eyes with a sigh as Anna returned the last evidence bag to a box. He finally opened his eyes and looked at her. "You've done some good work here," he said. "Too good. I hate to admit it, but you and Eleni might be right."

Anna inwardly rolled her eyes as she sealed the boxes. She knew her evidence was solid and did not need Mallet's affirmation or praise. Remembering Doris's request to keep an eye on him, she remained silent.

He continued, "But we need more if we hope to pinpoint who Edmund's inside man is. Have there been any leads on DeSilva?"

"He was last seen in El Paso, Texas," she said. "That was eight months ago and the trail has gone long cold."

"Which means he's long over the border," Mallet said. "No sign of him in Mexico?"

"Not that we've been able to determine," she said. "The drug situation in Mexico makes requests from small-town police departments their lowest priority."

He made a note on his pad. "I'll get on that immediately," he said. "I've still got a few contacts in Mexico City."

"See if they also have any leads on where Winslow moved his base of operations. My bet is DeSilva is there."

"Even if he is," Mallet said, continuing to write, "getting him extradited will take time, but if we can question him, we might be able to find out who he was working with inside the department."

"Long shot," Anna said.

Mallet nodded and stood up to walk over to the bulletin board where photos of Edmund Winslow and his henchmen were tacked. She watched as he touched the one of her father. Even from her chair across the room, the photo's penetrating dark eyes haunted her.

"He seems too young to be your father," Mallet noted and then turned to look at her with his eyebrows raised.

"That photo was taken some time ago," she said. "The latest we have was a partial taken by Homeland Security when he last entered the country legally. It shows his hair is much greyer now, but there's not much aging in the face."

"He just walked into the country?"

Anna shrugged. "Happens," she said succinctly. "Of course, he and everyone else on that board are on every watch list in the world so it will be harder for them to come and go as they please."

"You sound like you don't believe that," he pointed out.

She shrugged again. "My father is very good at what he does, Mallet," she said. "But for what it's worth, I believe he and Winslow at least are still close by. Neither of them will rest until their revenge is complete."

"What exactly do they want?" he asked. Anna recognized the bewildered expression on his face; it was the same look Frank and the other officers have when trying to understand Winslow's motivations.

"My father wants whatever Winslow wants and Winslow wants to destroy everyone he believes has ever hurt him, that includes their families."

"That's damn near everyone in town," Mallet huffed in frustration. He paused a moment.

"What about you?" he finally asked. He walked away from the board and leaned his hands on the table. "You're his daughter. If the evidence didn't show Winslow has had someone in the department for long before you got here, you'd be a prime suspect for the insider."

Anna refused to show how much the insinuation rankled her. "Hung Feng Li ceased being my father a long time ago," she said. "I've spent nearly my entire adult life fighting to bring him and Edmund Winslow to justice for all the hurt they have caused. I won't relax until they're both behind bars."

Mallet nodded thoughtfully and Anna guessed he was going to remain as reserved toward her as she was toward him. "Why the children though?" he asked.

Anna breathed an inner sigh of relief that he had moved on to the next subject. "Why should they live when his own daughter is dead?" she answered. "Judging from his attacks on Sarah Randall, Emma Spencer and Ava Peralta, he seems to grab on to any opportunity to cause mayhem."

"We're lucky we didn't lose any kids in the massacre," Mallet said, shaking his head.

"Not for lack of him trying," she said bitterly. "He was targeting Francesca Rivera when Jeffrey finally managed to take him down."

Anna could see he was thinking again. "So Olivia Spencer's great-niece, both of her daughters and her girlfriend's daughter." He ticked off on his fingers. "Maybe he's focused on Olivia?" he suggested.

"Possibly, but unlikely. Olivia is not the only one who's pissed Winslow off," she said. "Again, I think those were just opportunistic. He hasn't had a shot against Jeffrey's son and that would be even greater revenge for him."

"So anyone is fair game," he said.

Anna nodded. "In fact, I'd say the only kid in town who's fairly safe is Marina Cooper's son, Henry," she said and felt a small degree of satisfaction at the hurt that briefly flashed across the man's face. She had gotten the whole story thanks to whispered water cooler gossip about how a sterile A.C. Mallet had illegally adopted a child for his wife, never suspecting the infant was the son of Shayne Lewis and Lara Pizano, Edmund Winslow's daughter, tragically killed in a senseless accident.

"Was Henry at the wedding?" he finally asked and Anna noted how his jaw muscles clenched and unclenched.

"He was safe at Company with his mom," she said, shaking her head.

Mallet thought a moment. "So why hasn't Winslow kidnapped his grandson yet?" he asked.

"If only to get him out of the line of fire?"

"Good questions," she answered. "He might be planning to do just that or someone else might be a target. We just don't know."

"The shooting at the wedding just seems so random," he said. "None of the victims were his obvious prime targets although they were there."

"It was chaos," Anna said. "A lot of people got really lucky that day."

"Did the Saint of Springfield really take a shot at him?" he asked, shaking his head in wonderment. "I never would have believed it of her."

"Yes, she did," Anna answered firmly; obviously Mallet wasn't as observant as he probably thought he was if he couldn't understand a mother's motivation. "I told you, Winslow was about to shoot her daughter. I just wish she had a better aim than Jeffrey."

He chuckled ruefully. "Well, we've got a lot to do so let's get to it."

"Right," she said in agreement, eager to get back to work. "I need to run to the lab to pick up some more analyses on the older cases."

"And I'll get on the horn with my contacts," he said. "Again, Anna...great job. Let's hope all that hard work pays off and we get our man. One dirty cop makes us all look bad and I don't like it."

"Me either, Mallet," she said. "Me either."

Eleni looked around at the gaudy Christmas decorations festooning the wide spaces of the Springfield Mall.

"It's not even Thanksgiving yet," she remarked to Frank who was pushing his daughter's stroller as they walked. "Didn't they used to wait until after the holiday before decorating?"

Frank gave her an absentminded shrug as he looked around the busy crowds for their destination. "They're doing it earlier and earlier each year. By the time Francesca's in school they will probably be decorating before Memorial Day."

Eleni shook her head at the blatant consumerism, once again wondering at the privileged habits of her adopted people, even in hard times such as these.

"There's the store," Frank said and pointed Francesca's stroller toward the baby clothing store.

Eleni followed him as he headed down the aisles making a beeline for the toddler dresses. After shuffling through a dozen selections he threw his hands up in frustration.

"These look all the same," he exclaimed.

Eleni rolled her eyes at him in amusement. "They are not," she said. She pulled two pretty outfits from the rack and held them up. "Which do you like better?" One was a light blue and the other a darker cerulean.

Frank looked back and forth between the two and shrugged. "They're both cute," he answered. "Like I said, all the same."

Eleni was looking between the both of them when she was rudely shoved from behind. With a retort on her lips, she turned to find herself staring into the surprised eyes of her daughter.

As they looked at each other, Shayne Lewis turned the corner of the aisle carrying Henry in his arms.

"Grampa!" the little boy cried and squirmed to get down. Shayne set the boy on his feet and he toddled over to Frank who scooped him up.

"Hey, big guy," Frank said as Henry gave him a wet kiss on the cheek and hugged his neck until Frank's eyes nearly bugged out.

"What are you doing here?" Marina asked as she continued to glare at her mother.

"Shopping for your sister's birthday," Frank said. "Then we're going to grab something for dinner. You guys want to join us?"

Eleni glanced at him to see if he really was that heedless to the hostility pouring off of their daughter.

Marina shook her head. "Oh, my God!" she exclaimed. "Are you two *dating*?"

Eleni closed her eyes and sighed inwardly, not wishing to let Marina know how much the vitriol in her voice hurt.

"Well..." Frank started and Eleni noted the slight blush on his face. "Yeah, I guess we are."

Eleni turned back to Marina just in time to see the woman's face clenched in shock.

"You have got to be kidding me," Marina screeched and Eleni saw Shayne wince at the volume.

"Hey, honey, come on," he began.

"Marina, what..." Frank started but was cut off.

"Are you *crazy*, Dad?" Marina cried. "What is it with you and women, for God's sake?"

"Hey!" Frank blurted out, his face turning red.

"God, first that whore Olivia and then superwuss Natalia and crazy Blake," Marina sneered. "Now you're back full circle with this mail-order bride reject?"

"Marina!" Shayne proclaimed his face taut with embarrassment. "That's your mother!"

"That's enough, Marina!" Eleni finally said, ignoring the onlookers, but was dismayed to note that Henry had his face buried in his grandfather's neck as if trying to hide and Francesca had a look on her face as if she were about to cry.

"What?" Marina said turning to Shayne, the look of scorn on her face shining darkly in the store. "Just because she gave birth to me doesn't mean anything. You can't choose your parents."

"And what kind of example are you setting for your son, Marina?" Eleni said, jerking her head toward the boy quivering in Frank's arms. "You're teaching him it's all right to disrespect your mother. What are you going to do when he can't forgive you for your actions and mistakes?"

"I'm not going to make any!" Marina proclaimed with the righteousness of the blind fool. "I remember all too well what it's like to grow up without a mother and I'm not going to be like you. I'm going to love him and be there for him all his life."

"Be careful of what you say, daughter," Eleni said darkly. "Don't make any promises you can't keep."

"Oh, is that supposed to be some kind of warning, *Mother*?" Marina asked, the venom on the last word causing Eleni to grimace. "Because I assure you, I learned my lesson well from you. I will *not* abandon my child."

"Marina, that's enough," Frank said, handing the now-crying Henry back to his father. "If you can't stop this nonsense and apologize to your mother, then just go home. Don't bother coming tomorrow night."

"But I promised to help," she started, but Frank cut her off with a raised hand.

"Forget it," he said. "We'll manage okay."

"Fine!" Marina huffed and turned on her heel to clack loudly out of the store. Shayne simply shrugged and shook his head in apology to them both. "I'll drop off Francesca's gift in the morning, Frank," he said.

"Thanks, Shayne," he said.

"See you later, Eleni," Shayne said and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"Thank you, Shayne," she said and caressed her grandson's cheek. After the two left, she put her hands over her face, finally unable to stop the tears. Frank held her until her tears stopped and then they continued with their shopping as if nothing had happened.

ACT 2

The small Springfield airfield was nearly deserted when Doris Wolfe's driver swung around the terminal to the small waiting area. He pulled next to a long stretch limousine already parked there and stepped quickly out to open Doris's door for her. She immediately lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out into the chilly morning air.

"Thanks, Jack," she said.

"You're welcome, ma'am."

The limo's back door opened and Philip Spaulding stepped out.

"Good morning, Doris," he said in greeting.

"Philip," she said. "Beautiful day, even if it is on the cold side."

"That it is," he agreed. "I just got off the phone with the tower. The plane is on its final approach so they will only be a few more minutes."

"Thanks again for bringing Ashlee home," she said.

Philip laughed. "That was James's way of impressing Daisy."

"*Trying* to impress Daisy, you mean," she said, joining him in laughter. "Waving money around a Cooper isn't going to get it done."

"I've tried to tell him that," he grinned. "But, I would have done it anyway. I feel better knowing they're safer than they would be on a commercial flight. My flight attendant does much more than just serve cocktails, you know."

"And it's appreciated," she said. Neither Ashlee nor Daisy knew about the Spaulding security team assigned to keep an eye on them at Berkeley. The likelihood of them being one of Winslow's targets was slim, but with the madman's penchant for targeting his enemies' children, Doris wasn't taking any chances.

Philip turned and shaded his eyes against the sun. "There they are now," he said with a pleased tone in his voice at his crew's efficiency.

Together in the crisp air they watched as the jet made a smooth landing on the tarmac and then taxied around to the disembarking area. Doris bounced on her heels in anticipation and after what seemed like an eternity, the hatch finally opened and the three young people stepped out.

"Ashlee!" she cried happily and rushed forward to embrace her daughter.

"Mom!" Ashlee said. "What are you doing here? I thought I was riding with James and Daisy to town."

"I couldn't wait to see you, honey," she said.

"Aww," Ashlee said with a grin. "That's so sweet, thank you."

As Ashlee said her goodbyes to her friends, Doris directed Jack to retrieve her daughter's luggage.

Once inside, Doris took Ashlee's hand as they chatted about the flight from San Francisco and the two days the youngsters had spent in Chicago including the shows they had taken in.

"So, how's the writing coming, honey?" Doris asked. "Last time we spoke, you said you thought you were near the end."

"And I was!" Ashlee said excitedly. "I finally finished it and spent the past couple of weeks getting it ready for submission. That reminds me, do you have Blake Marler's phone number? I lost it when I got a new phone."

"Of course I do, honey," Doris said. "Um, in fact I'll be seeing her tonight. We...uh, we have a date."

Ashlee blinked. "A date?" she asked. "You and Blake?"

"Blake and I," she acknowledged with a nod. "Is that okay?" Well aware of Ashlee's own rocky history with Blake, Doris waited for the answer on tenterhooks.

"What happened with Anna?" Ashlee asked. "You said you were considering giving it another try."

"I did," Doris said. "But both Anna and I realized that we were not meant to be and are working on being friends. She's been a great asset to me and the town and surprisingly has become a good friend to Olivia and her family."

"Okay, good," Ashlee said and Doris could see her daughter's mind at work. "So you decided to date Blake? I knew you were friends with her, but had no idea you were interested in her."

"Actually, she pursued me," Doris said with a wry grin. "I was interested in her of course, but my days of going after straight women were long over."

"She's not that straight obviously," Ashlee laughed. "Well, good for you, Mom. I just want you to be happy and if Blake can make you happy then I'm all for it."

"Thank you, honey," Doris said and leaned in to hug her daughter. Jack pulled the SUV into their driveway and then helped bring Ashlee's luggage into the house. "I'm going to take a walk around the block, ma'am," he said and Doris nodded as he left them alone.

"Okay, that's the story of my love life," Doris said as she got them both a bottle of water from the refrigerator. "What about yours? Anyone interesting at school?"

Ashlee laughed. "I've been too busy with my studies and writing to meet anyone, Mom," she answered. "Although..."

Doris raised her eyebrows. "Although...?"

"I've been corresponding with Rafe Rivera," she admitted with a small shrug. "Emails, letters, the occasional chat online when we can swing it."

"Really?" Doris said surprised. She knew they were friends, but never considered anything more than that.

"Yeah," Ashlee said. "He had a stopover for a couple of hours in San Francisco on his way back to his unit after his last leave. We met up for drinks. Turns out we have a lot in common, other than the whole shooting someone and gay mom thing, that is."

"Wow, so do you think anything will come of it?" Doris asked, immediately worried for a variety of reasons, the least of which that he was a convicted felon.

"Too early to tell, so get out of mom worry mode," Ashlee said with a wry grin.

"Sorry, can't help it," Doris replied.

"I know, Mom, and I love you for it," she said, giving Doris's hand a loving squeeze. "But really, don't worry about it. We have plans to get together when he's stateside, but a lot can happen between now and then, some things I really don't even want to think about."

"I know, honey," she said. The horrors of the war loomed closer to home than she cared for. She made a mental note that if she was still mayor when Rafe came home – not *if* he came home, don't even think that Doris, she told herself – *when* he came home, she'd make sure he received a hero's welcome along with all of the other Springfield veterans.

"Well, I hope things work out the way you want them to honey, and if that's with Rafe Rivera it will certainly be with my blessing." Doris smiled at Ashlee's surprised expression, knowing a few years ago she would have flown off the handle at the news that her daughter was even considering a relationship with someone she had prosecuted so vehemently in court. "Besides," she continued, "Olivia and Natalia are my dearest friends. Anything that binds our families together is all good."

Ashlee wiped a tear from her eye and said in a thick voice, "Thanks, Mom."

Deciding she'd just about maxed out on her emotional sensitivity for the moment, Doris moved on to a less serious subject. "So, tell me about this book of yours. What's it about? What's it called?"

Ashlee smiled widely and launched into what obviously was one of her favorite subjects.

It was amusing how the kitchen table had become their family communal workspace,

Olivia thought as she glanced around the cluttered tabletop. Emma had one third of it covered with her papers and various art supplies as she worked on a drawing. Olivia noted with interest that Emma was copying a drawing from an art book she had picked up at the library.

At the other end of the table, Natalia also had covered it with papers and was focusing on her address book, restlessly flapping through pages. In between Natalia and Emma, Olivia sat with a stack of wedding invitations and envelopes on the table before her and a calligraphy pen in her hand as she waited for Natalia to decide on another invitee. A stack of finished invitations sat in the middle of the table waiting for postage.

"We've already gone through the usual suspects," she said to Natalia, who glanced up at her.

"I know, I'm just trying to decide if..." Natalia broke off her train of thought while she flipped through her book again.

A knock on the door stopped Olivia from asking Natalia to finish the thought. She stood to answer it and found Anna Li waiting on the porch. "Come in," she said and closed the door behind the detective.

"Good morning," Anna said with a smile.

"Good morning," Natalia said, returning the smile.

Emma bounced up from her seat and rushed over to Anna. "Hi Anna! I'm ready to go!" she said.

"Oh no, you're not," Olivia said. "Go put your stuff away first."

Emma rolled her eyes, but at Olivia's stern look simply turned and quickly gathered her supplies from the table and then ran from the room.

"Anything we can get you?" Natalia asked.

"I'll help myself," Anna said walking over to the bottomless coffeepot.

"So how's she doing?" Olivia asked after Anna had fixed her cup.

"Great," Anna said. "She's doing really well. Her coordination is already showing a great improvement."

"She's not over doing it, is she?" Olivia asked, concerned. "Em has a tendency to jump into things with too much gusto and I don't want her to strain herself."

Anna shook her head. "No. I have her keeping a journal of her exercises and diet. She's right on target."

"Good," Olivia said with a nod. "Oh, that reminds me...we'd like you to come for Thanksgiving dinner."

Anna rubbed her nose and hemmed and hawed for a few moments. "I might have to work," she finally said.

"Uh uh!" Olivia said with an emphatic shake of her head. "You used that excuse last year and it's not going to fly this time. No excuses. We both want you here."

Anna glanced at Natalia who nodded in agreement. "All right," Anna said with a smile. "What can I bring?"

"Hmmm," Olivia thought for a moment. "Can you cook?"

Anna nodded. "Learned at the palace, same as you," she said.

"Great," Olivia said. "Do you remember that calabaza and spiced sausage dish everyone on San Cristobal served in the fall?"

"Oh yeah," Anna said. "That's a great dish and it fits in with American Thanksgiving traditions."

"That's why I thought of it," Olivia smirked. "I know a lot of us here will appreciate a taste of the island."

"All right," Anna said. "I'll bring that. Anything else?"

"You're welcome to bring a guest," Natalia said absently and Olivia watched her make a note on her Thanksgiving Day organization list. "Thanks Anna and thanks again for your help with Emma."

As she waited for her young student, Anna smiled. "My pleasure. She's a terrific kid and I'd hate for what happened with Jane and at the wedding to have a lingering effect on her."

Looking down in a moment of regret, Anna sighed before continuing. "It's better that she directs those powerful emotions in a positive manner."

"It seems to be helping," Natalia said.

"I'm glad," Anna said and looked at Olivia with a wry shrug. "It's the least I can do."

Olivia sensed the other woman was again remembering the past. Although she hadn't known until recently, Olivia appreciated the fact that Anna was the only one who had tried to help her during that dark time. Anna herself might see it as a failure on her part, but Olivia didn't; Anna had lost her family and home because of it and Olivia understood the sacrifice. It was for that reason alone Olivia was willing to trust the detective with her daughter, especially when Emma was in such a fragile state.

"Trust me," she finally said, looking directly into Anna's eyes. "It's a lot."

Anna gave her a grateful smile and a short nod.

The rumble of Emma's feet running down the stairs alerted them to her imminent arrival.

Anna took her coffee cup over to the sink to rinse it out.

"Okay, I'm ready now!" Emma said bursting into the kitchen.

"Go kiss your mothers goodbye and we can leave," Anna said, drying her hands.

"Bye Ma," Emma said, kissing first Natalia and then Olivia. "Bye Mom."

"Bye baby," Olivia said. "Have fun."

"And be careful," Natalia added.

"Oh Ma!" Emma moaned with an eye roll and pulled a laughing Anna from the house.

"Oh Ma!" Olivia teased as the door closed behind them.

"Hush, you," Natalia said with a smile.

"Okay, now where were we?" Olivia asked as she picked up her pen.

Natalia sighed. "I'm trying to decide if we should even bother inviting my parents."

"I gotta admit sweetheart, the chances of them coming are practically non-existent."

"I know," Natalia said. "Leyla hasn't spoken to them for months now so I'm sure they don't even know about it."

"Did you invite them to your first wedding?" Olivia asked, strongly suspecting the answer.

"No," Natalia answered confirming Olivia's suspicion. "By then I had stopped trying to include them in our lives. Rafe was five when I finally gave up."

"I'm still surprised they contacted you after all those years," Olivia said.

"They couldn't ignore *mi abuela's* dying request," Natalia said. "That was more important than their pride."

"I suppose," Olivia said. "But I can't imagine how they can value their stupid pride over their own children. They've lost two out of three now, not to mention a handful of grandchildren."

"That's why I *do* want to invite them, so they can make that choice," Natalia said. "But I think that just sending them an invitation is so..."

"Impersonal?" Olivia said.

"And insulting," Natalia agreed.

Olivia thought for a moment. "Then why don't we invite them in person?" she suggested.

"We can take a weekend off when the girls are with their dads and ask your parents if we could meet with them, take them to dinner if they agree?"

"Hmmm," Natalia thought a moment and then nodded. "That will work, I think. I'll call and say we have something important to tell them."

"And no matter what, we can still have a great weekend in the city – maybe hit the Magnificent Mile and get some shopping done."

"That will be fun," Natalia agreed. "Although our closet is bursting at the seams with your clothes already."

"Hey!" Olivia protested. "Some of those are yours too, you know."

"Not as many as yours, though," Natalia retorted.

"Fine, blame me for everything," Olivia laughed. "But actually, I was thinking we'd go shopping for something besides clothes."

"Oh?" Natalia asked, obviously intrigued.

"Yes," Olivia said, flirtatiously. "I was thinking maybe we could get something just for the two of us."

"Really?" Natalia echoed her tone. "And would this be something for me or for you?"

"Like I said, for both of us," Olivia said with a smirk. "Something fun."

Natalia's eyebrows rose. "We already have fun."

"And different," Olivia added.

"Different can be fun," Natalia remarked.

Olivia nodded. "Sure can."

"How different are we talking about?" Natalia asked, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

Olivia leaned over and nuzzled Natalia's cheek as she whispered in her ear, "Nothing we haven't experienced before...just with one small difference."

"Not too small, I hope?" Natalia quipped with a raised eyebrow and Olivia burst out in happy laughter.

At Company, Ashlee sat in a booth with her laptop. She was so thoroughly engrossed in her work she didn't notice anyone approaching until she heard someone clearing their throat. Standing next to her table was a pretty dark haired woman only a few years older than herself.

"Ashlee Wolfe, right?" the woman asked and at Ashlee's nod added, "I'm Leyla Rivera, Natalia's sister."

"Oh, hello," Ashlee said, shaking her hand. "Have a seat." She shoved her computer and papers to the side as the other woman sat down.

"I've got something for you," Leyla said rummaging through her large bag. "Rafe sent it with his birthday gift for Francesca. He wanted to surprise Nat and Olivia so he sent it to me at the hotel and he asked me to give this to you."

"Thanks," Ashlee said taking the small package from Leyla. "Do you mind...?" At Leyla's go ahead gesture she pulled the lid off wondering if Rafe had bothered to wrap it first, knowing the Army inspected everything leaving the field, including emails and chats, which made trying to have a long distance relationship even harder, not to mention extremely frustrating.

"Oh wow," she exclaimed softly. Inside the box was a turquoise pendant on a delicate silver chain. She pulled it out and held it up to the light.

Leyla let out a slow whistle of appreciation. "Wow...I'd say my nephew is sweet on you." Ashlee smiled and could feel herself blushing. She undid the clasp and put it around her neck. "How's it look?" she asked.

"Lovely," Leyla answered and searched through her bag again. She pulled out a compact mirror and handed it to Ashlee. The pendant rested a few inches above her cleavage and indeed it looked pretty against her skin.

"Is there a note?" Leyla asked.

She peeked in the box and spotted a folded piece of paper.

*Ash,
Saw this in the bazaar in town and thought it would look pretty with
your beautiful eyes. Can't wait until I'm home again, so I can see if I'm
right.
Yours,
Rafe*

Leyla whistled again and when Ashlee looked up, she said, "Looks like you're sweet on my nephew, too."

Ashlee could feel her blushing face grow hotter, but she smiled at Leyla, already liking the young woman. "Thank you for the delivery," she said replacing Rafe's note in the box and

closing it. She touched the pendant again and felt a warm hopefulness running through her. "Will you join me for another coffee?" she asked.

"Sure," Leyla answered. "I'd love to hear more about Rafe. Oh!" she added, "I almost forgot... Rafe said to tell you to not forget the secret handshake." When Ashlee let out an amused laugh, Leyla brows furrowed and she asked, "What the heck does that mean?"

"The Springfield chapter of the 'our moms are gay' club," Ashlee explained. "I guess we're gonna have to induct Blake's daughter now."

Leyla laughed. "Okay – so, how did you and Rafe meet?"

"Well, you know about his juvie record?" Ashlee asked and at Leyla's nod she launched into a full explanation to her new friend.

Anna carefully watched the young girl as she followed Anna's lead through the series of slow exercises designed to warm up and stretch their major muscle groups. Using a combination of Tai Chi movements along with the standard cardiopulmonary preparations, Anna made sure the youngster wasn't overdoing it. Despite their resiliency, young children needed extra time to prepare for strenuous exercise and Anna always made sure Emma carefully followed the regimen. While the girl was not the first child who had been entrusted in her care – Anna had worked with them before through her previous department's youth outreach program – this was one child she was not going to take any chances with.

She was glad she had converted the spare bedroom of her apartment into an exercise room complete with punching bag, speed bag and weight lifting equipment. When she had started working with Emma, she had covered the floor in cushioned mats and one wall with floor to ceiling mirrors, the last allowing her to keep a closer eye on the girl. With a final movement, she turned to the young girl. "All right?" she asked. Emma nodded and wiped a bit of sweat from her forehead. "Good, then show me that move from last time."

Emma again nodded, this time with a slightly feral grin as she bowed formally and then rushed at Anna. Inwardly, Anna rejoiced at the young girl's progress as she performed the maneuvers with a flurry of limbs. Emma was by far the most exceptional student of her age group that she had ever had and Anna was already proud of the girl's accomplishments.

Twenty minutes later, Emma finally succeeded in dropping her to the mat and then stood there staring down at Anna in surprise. "I did it!" she cried happily, jumping up and down and then gasped in surprise as Anna smoothly swept her off her feet with a leg. A moment later, Anna had Emma pinned to the mat.

"And what did I say about letting your guard down, sweetie?" she asked lightly as she stared down at the trapped youngster.

"Don't do it?" Emma gave her a wry smile.

"Right," Anna said. "Never, ever let your guard down, but let me show you what to do if you find yourself in this position again."

Anna was pleased with the intense concentration Emma displayed and by the time the young girl had finally broken out of the hold using her newly learned technique it was time to quit for the day.

"Great job, Emma," she said as she handed her a towel and water bottle.

"Thank you, Anna," Emma replied and then drank deeply from the bottle. "I thought I'd never get free. You're so much bigger than me."

"Like I told you, it's all a matter of leverage, not size," Anna said as she wiped the sweat from her brow. "Using your head is more important than using your muscles. Remember that and you'll be all right."

Emma nodded thoughtfully and Anna had spent enough time around the girl to guess she was about to move on to another subject. Sure enough, the youngster wandered over to the bookshelf near the single window. On it, Anna had placed the few mementos from her home she had taken with her when she left San Cristobel. She watched as Emma carefully picked up a small, but intricately carved statue of a Chinese woman sitting on a lotus pad.

"What's this?" the young girl asked. "It's pretty."

"It is," Anna agreed. "That's a statue of Quan Yin. It was my mother's and had been passed down to her through many generations of our family."

"Quan Yin?" Emma asked. "Who's that?"

"She's a goddess in the Buddhist religion," Anna explained. "There's an old legend that tells before she became a goddess, she was the daughter of a cruel king who wanted her to marry a man she did not want to marry. She told her father she would agree to marry the man if the king would ease the misfortunes of his people. The king refused and had his daughter executed."

"That's so sad," Emma said with a frown.

"It is, but that's when she became a goddess with the power to ease the misfortunes of her people herself. My mother taught me that it's very important for a woman to stand up for what she believes in, to be strong and independent and to always help those in need."

"Like my mommies?" Emma said.

Anna nodded. "Yes, Emma, like your mommies. They are both very strong and independent women who do what they can to help others."

Emma was quiet again for another few moments then turned to Anna. "You knew my mommy before, when she lived on the island, didn't you?" she asked. "You were friends?"

"Not friends, but I knew her, yes," Anna said, wondering where this conversation was going.

"What was she like?"

Anna smiled. "She was very pretty, just like you are, although she was a bit older than you when I first knew her. She was very popular in school and had a lot of friends."

Anna frowned when Emma turned to her with haunted eyes. "Something bad happened to Mommy there, didn't it?" she asked in a low tone of voice. "I heard her and Ma talking about the bad thing, but I don't know what it was." She paused then asked, "Was it like Jane? Did someone die?"

"No, baby, no one died," Anna answered, kneeling down in front of the girl. She tucked a sweaty lock of hair off of Emma's forehead. "But, yes, something bad happened to your mommy, but she came through it stronger than ever and today she's happier than she's ever been, isn't she? That's why I want to help you, so the bad things that happened will stop hurting so much and you can be stronger, too."

"Like Quan Yin?" Emma asked.

"Yes, sweetie," she answered. "Just like her."

Anna felt tears in her eyes as the child wrapped her arms around her neck and squeezed tight.

"Thank you," Emma whispered.

"You're welcome, Emma," she replied, her voice thick with emotion.

Once again looking at the grandfather clock to see how long before Blake arrived to pick her up for their date, Doris wondered why she had finally agreed to go out with Blake.

"Because you like her, you idiot," she said to herself and then rolled her eyes at her own foolishness, not only for talking to herself, but also for lying to herself as well.

She knew she more than 'liked' the fiery redhead. She had realized a while ago – even before her date with Anna to see if they could work things out – that she had romantic feelings for Blake. She just didn't know what to do about them.

Blake herself had pretty much decided that for her, first by ambushing her at Ladies Night and then by pursuing her with a dogged determination that was no less than astonishing – and incredibly romantic.

Ever since Doris had run out of Blake's house like a burglar caught with his hands in the safe, Blake had showered her with attention and small gifts, that Doris, with her history of one-night stands and short-lived affairs, had not experienced before. Blake had clearly stated her intentions to woo and woo she had, every day showing up at the mayor's office with a small token of her affection. Sometimes it was a small bouquet of flowers or a box of chocolates or, once, a small, golden butterfly pin that Doris had worn on her blazer every day since. Doris never knew what time Blake would show up at her office, but she invariably looked forward to the brief visit. Of course, there were Doris's visits to Company each morning for her coffee-to-go where she always got a kiss along with a perfect cup of Joe.

As the weeks progressed and Blake continued her subtle courting without pushing or demanding anything from her, Doris had started to relax and she found herself opening up more and more to the other woman. When Blake had casually mentioned she was going to spend some time in the park with Clarissa, Doris had surprised them both with a thermos full of hot chocolate and warm muffins from the bakery. The afternoon that followed had been filled with laughter and warm conversation. While Blake's daughter had played, Doris found herself explaining some of the reasons why she had been reluctant to embark on a relationship, of the heartache she had experienced when lovers she had given her heart to had turned their backs when it was time to resume their normal lives.

Blake had listened quietly as she held the mayor's hand and had offered no promise not to do the same, but Doris could see it in the redhead's eyes and ever since she decided to let her fears go and see where Blake and her own rejoicing heart took her.

The doorbell shook her out of her musings and she once again glanced at the clock, noting that Blake was exactly on time. She walked through the foyer to the front door and opened it with a smile. Blake's own jubilant smile seemed to outshine the porch light.

"Wow," Doris said, giving her a long lingering look. "You look great."

Blake was dressed under her coat in a flowing blue silk dress that reached just past her knees, her delicate calves highlighted by the four inch heels she was wearing. "Thanks," she said. "You look great, as always." She reached out and lightly touched the golden butterfly Doris had pinned to her own dark green dress.

"Let me get my coat and the baby's gift," Doris said, moving back into the house and leaving the door open. "Where's Clarissa?"

"I dropped her off already," Blake said.

"All right," Doris said, as she put on her coat and grabbed her keys and the wrapped package. "I'm ready."

Blake patiently waited while Doris locked the door and as she reached out to take Blake's hand for the short walk to the car, she realized she was indeed ready.

The handmade sign posted on the front of Company's entrance read, 'Closed for Private Party.' Natalia glanced at her partner who was carrying a tall stack of packages. The topmost toppled and before it could crash to the ground, Natalia deftly caught it.

"Thanks," Olivia said. "Saved my butt once again."

Natalia balanced the gift on top of the slightly smaller stack she was carrying. "I think we overdid it here," she said. "We're going to spoil her."

"Never!" Olivia said. "Our Sweet Pea deserves everything we can give her. All our kids do. Get the door?"

Natalia laughed as she pushed open the door and then stood aside to allow her partner to enter first. She decided not to argue with Olivia's statement, especially since she too had overspent for their baby's first birthday. When she thought of Rafe's first year when she'd had to rely on the church's charity just to clothe him, it seemed to her that Francesca's life by contrast was opulent to the extreme.

Then she glanced at her partner. Olivia had told her numerous times that money itself had no meaning, that only the security it provided for the safety and comfort of their family was why the pursuit of it was necessary. Natalia had to admit that now that she had a comfortable nest egg in the bank and an incredible steady income to boot, the constant fear for her child she had experienced during Rafe's childhood was absent. And she certainly did not miss it.

Inside the restaurant, the atmosphere was warm and jovial. A crowd of Coopers were already surrounding the birthday girl, who was cheerfully yanking on her father's hair.

Natalia noted that despite the smile on his face, there were tears in his eyes from the pain.

As they approached, they were loudly greeted by the boisterous family. Buzz and Lillian came over to help with the packages. After thanking them, Natalia went over to see her daughter, already missing her after just one day, while Olivia went to get them drinks.

"Hi Frank," she said. "Hello, Sweet Pea!"

Francesca let go of Frank's hair and leaned toward Natalia with her arms outstretched. Frank stood and handed the baby to her.

"Hi, Natalia," he said, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

Francesca wrapped her arms around Natalia's neck in a big hug and Natalia kissed the top of her sweet smelling head. She looked down at her baby's outfit and asked Frank, "Is this new?"

"Yeah," Frank said sheepishly. "Early birthday present. Eleni helped me pick it out."

"It's beautiful," Natalia said, noting the delicate lace adorning the pretty pink satin dress and the matching patent leather Mary Janes. "Thank you and give my thanks to Eleni, also."

She paused then asked, "Are you two getting closer?" Normally Natalia wouldn't ask about anyone's personal business, but Frank was the father of their child and anyone in his life would, by extension, be in Francesca's life.

"When we're not butting heads at work," he admitted with a wry shrug. "I don't know," he said and Natalia detected a strain of doubt in his voice and she knew him well enough to sense that he wanted something to come of his reunion with his ex-wife. "We have a lot of history, you know." Natalia nodded and he continued, "I've always felt that Eleni and I..."

"What?" she asked, softly. She knew a lot of Frank's history with his ex-wife had, at times, been very turbulent.

Frank sighed. "I just feel that despite everything, we were always meant to be together.

That she has always been the love of my life." He chuckled and looked down as he scuffed his shoe against the tile. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this," he said.

"Because we're friends, Frank," she said, putting a comforting hand on his arm. "More than that since we'll always have Francesca to share."

Frank nodded. "Thanks Natalia," he said. "I don't think that I could have asked for a better woman to raise my daughter."

Just then Olivia approached them holding two glasses of soda.

"Mama!" Francesca yelled happily and Natalia rolled her eyes.

Olivia gave her a brief shrug as if to say 'It's not my fault!' and put both glasses on a nearby table before leaning in to kiss Francesca's cheek.

"Happy Birthday, my beautiful little Sweet Pea," she said as she wound an arm around Natalia's back and caressed the baby's cheek with her other hand.

"Mama!" Francesca said again.

Olivia smiled sweetly at her daughter and then turned to Frank. "Hi Frankie," she said giving him a big smile as well. "Thanks so much for throwing Sweet Pea her party."

"My pleasure," he said, returning the smile.

Natalia turned her head to look at Olivia. "Can you go see if Buzz made any of his souvlaki? I'm dying for some."

"Are you kidding? Of course he did," Frank laughed. "Pop always makes every Greek dish he knows for a Cooper family event."

Olivia nodded in agreement. "Beef or lamb?" she asked Natalia.

"Both," Natalia said, giving her a cheeky grin.

"Be right back," Olivia said, lightly kissing her on the lips before heading off in the direction of the buffet table.

Natalia watched as her lover playfully shoved Doris Wolfe aside. She smiled as the mayor immediately shoved Olivia back. Then she turned back to Frank. "If you really feel that Eleni is the love of your life, Frank, then you should go for it. Don't let work or the past keep you from giving it a shot. Life can be too unpredictable and if you let her get away, you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

Frank glanced to another part of the room and she followed his gaze. Eleni was standing with Lillian and Josh and talking animatedly, with plenty of hand movements. Natalia looked back at Frank and watched him smile in a very familiar way; it was the way he used to smile at her when they were engaged.

Finally, Frank turned back to Natalia. "Thank you," he said with real meaning.

"You're a good man, Frank Cooper," she said. "You deserve to be happy."

Frank shrugged and then said, "Did you know that Blake and Doris Wolfe are here... together?"

Natalia bit her lip and then nodded. "Yes," she answered. "They're both very good friends of ours."

"Did you and Olivia encourage this?" he asked, his eyes flashing.

She shook her head. "No, Frank, but honestly we could see it coming for a while so it's not a surprise."

Frank sighed and turned to stare absently at nothing. "Oh well, Blake and I have been over for a long while now, so it doesn't really matter." He paused and then said almost as if to himself, "I wonder if Eleni ever..."

Natalia looked at him blankly, and then blinked rapidly as his meaning hit her hard. She wanted to remain silent, let him think she was still the innocent woman he had idealized. However, she had lived with Olivia long enough that her inner snark was given free rein to let itself loose at people other than her partner. "Well," she started in a casual tone, "which Greek island is Eleni from again?"

Frank turned his head slowly in her direction and his mouth worked, but no sound emerged. She had to bite down on her laughter at the look on his face.

Just then Natalia noticed Francesca had started to squirm in the way that meant she was hungry. She tilted her head toward the back room. "I'll go feed her," she said.

"I..." he started, but she interrupted him.

"It's okay," she said. "I need to anyway. Can you let Olivia know where I've gone?" she asked and didn't wait for an answer. She clutched Francesca to her and rushed away before she could break into a fit of hysterical laughter.

"Hey!" Blake called out into the cold night air. Doris, just about to light her cigarette, turned with two raised eyebrows. Blake marched up to her and plucked the cigarette from Doris's mouth. "Give me that."

"What...?" Doris began, but Blake interrupted her by grabbing Doris's blouse and pulling her in for a long kiss. Finally she leaned back and smirked at Doris.

"There," she said. "I wanted to do that before you got all stinky."

Doris smiled. "Well then, you better make my nicotine deprivation worth my while."

Blake wrapped her arms around Doris's neck as the mayor leaned in to capture her lips. Blake's head swam and her body tingled with desire as Doris deepened the kiss. Letting out a moan of appreciation, she let one hand travel down Doris's back until it was wrapped around her waist, then she pulled Doris's body closer to her own.

So lost in the kiss, she was suddenly startled when Doris pulled abruptly back. Blake's eyes snapped open and then two loud voices cried out at the same time, "Mom!"

Turning, she was shocked to see her twin sons and a smirking Holly Reade standing behind them.

The scene before her, Olivia thought, would have been an inspiration for Michelangelo. Natalia was seated at Buzz's desk, casually leaning back as she cradled the baby in her arms. Francesca was quietly suckling at her mother's breast, her eyes closed in contentment while Natalia softly hummed a lullaby.

As Olivia watched, Francesca released the nipple with a soft sigh and Natalia gently wiped her mouth.

"Ay, *mami*," Natalia said softly to her baby. "*Tu eres muy hermosa, mi hija*. So, so beautiful."

Olivia felt herself fall in love with them all over again and she croaked out hoarsely, "*Ella es tan hermosa como su madre*."

Natalia looked up with a loving smile on her lips. "She takes after both her mommies, then," Natalia said. "You are also beautiful, my love."

"Well," Olivia said. Her voice was hoarse with emotion. "Isn't she the luckiest girl in the world?"

"Kevin! Jason!" Blake cried out happily and rushed forward to embrace them.

Doris watched as the boys wriggled free after a few moments.

"Mom!" Kevin said angrily.

"What are you doing?" Jason added.

Blake ignored the question. "Why are you home?" she asked, then turned to Holly. "What happened? Where's Ed? Is everything all right?"

"Ed is at Rick and Mindy's. The boys are fine, Blake," Holly answered. "They had some trouble, but we'll talk about that later." Holly gave a pointed look in Doris's direction. Blake turned to her and met her eyes. She reached out to grab Doris's hand and pulled her forward.

"Boys, this is Doris Wolfe, my girlfriend," she said and Doris could feel her hand trembling in Blake's.

"Your girlfriend?" Jason asked scornfully. "You're gay?"

"For *her*?" Kevin added. Doris inwardly rolled her eyes.

"Hey, hey!" Blake admonished. "Didn't they teach you manners at that fancy school?"

"Your mother is right," Holly said in a quiet voice. "Show respect."

Both boys glared sullenly, but kept silent.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're home," Blake said, her natural exuberance taking over. "Come on! Let's go inside. Clarissa's going to be so happy to see you." With that she herded the boys through Company's entrance, leaving Doris alone with Holly.

Doris pasted a fake smile on her face and turned to Holly, who had a small smirk gracing her lips.

"So," Doris said, uncomfortable.

"So," Holly repeated. "I see you finally came out, Doris. It's about time."

Doris's mouth dropped open. "You knew?"

"Of course I knew," Holly said with a chuckle. "There wasn't much that went on in this town that I didn't know about. Not everything made the nightly news."

"Well, that's just...yeah," Doris said, sensing that Holly Reade had a lot of other secrets stored away as potential blackmail fodder against a rainy day. She was glad that she had come out, although the last time she had been blackmailed resulted in one of the best friendships she had ever had.

"How long have you and Blake...?" Holly asked.

"Not long," Doris answered. "Although we've been friends for more than a year." Doris paused. "Is this the part where you ask me my intentions toward your daughter?"

Holly laughed. "Knowing my daughter, all kinds of depraved acts of debauchery." Doris laughed out loud at that. "But as long as she's happy then I don't care who she is with."

"Thank you," Doris said quietly. "Cigarette?" Holly shook her head and Doris lit up. She tilted her chin at Company and asked, "How old are they?"

"The twins?" Holly said and then at Doris's quick nod, "Fourteen."

"Oh God," Doris muttered.

"Indeed," Holly said with a small chuckle.

Blake watched her sons as they stood talking with their sister. From the hurt on Clarissa's face, she guessed that the boys were teasing her about something. She was very happy to see her sons, but she was worried about why they were here. The last time she had spoken to her mother about them everything was fine and when asked, Holly had said her and Ed were taking the boys to Italy with them over their holiday break. Deciding to get some answers, she searched out her mother.

Holly was speaking with Olivia, the two old friends in an animated conversation about what Blake guessed was both of their successful love lives.

"Hey," she said interrupting them. "Can I borrow my mom for a few?" she asked her friend.

"Sure," Olivia said agreeably. "I want to go check on Natalia anyway." Blake waited while Olivia turned to the older woman. "Holly, come by the Beacon for lunch before you head out of town again. You can get to know Natalia better. You're going to love her."

"I'm sure I will, dear," Holly said with a warm smile. "She seems absolutely lovely and congratulations on your beautiful daughter's birthday."

"Thank you," Olivia said with the adoring look Blake had noticed she always wore when speaking of her family.

"Thanks, Olivia," Blake said and led her mother to an empty booth. "Now tell me what's going on. Why are you here with the boys?"

At that, Holly launched into an explanation of Kevin and Jason's increasing disciplinary problems at the boarding school, culminating in a practical joke against a teacher resulting in a fire that caused thousands of Euros worth of damage to the school's cafeteria.

"Oh, my God!" Blake exclaimed. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Fortunately not," Holly answered. "But they were expelled. I made several inquiries into other schools in Europe, but none are willing to take both of them at the same time and I think splitting them up will do more harm than good at this point."

Blake glanced at the twins. "They seem like strangers to me," she said softly. "I mean, they're my sons and I love them, but I hardly know them. I had no idea they were so wild."

"Perhaps this is your chance, then?" Holly commented and Blake turned to her, surprised.

"You mean you want them to live with me?" Holly's unwillingness to let Blake raise her own children was legendary.

Her mother gave her a small yet wry shrug. "I think you can handle it now," she answered.

"You've grown a lot these past few years, but make sure *you* think you can handle it, Blake. It won't be easy. They're at an age where they'll need firm guidance."

"I'd like to give it a shot," she said. She had missed her boys terribly. In fact, now that they were home, she realized how big a hole in her life their absence had been. With them here and Doris finally seeming to come around, her hopes for a happy and fulfilled life seemed within her grasp. Unconsciously, she looked around the festive room to seek out the mayor.

Doris was nibbling from a plate of finger food and talking with Beth Spaulding. As if sensing her attention, Doris turned to meet Blake's gaze, giving her a saucy smile and a wink before turning back to her law partner.

"Is it serious?" her mother's voice broke into Blake's thoughts.

"Doris and I?" Blake asked and at Holly's nod she continued, "I hope so. I think so. I know I am."

"She's a formidable woman," Holly said. "Strong, intelligent, shrewd. In fact, I'd say she's a lot like Ross."

"You're not planning on stealing her away from me, are you, Mother?" Blake asked with a raised eyebrow.

Holly laughed gaily. "No dear," she answered. "I'm very happy with Ed."

"Good, because she's all mine," Blake said with an emphatic nod.

"Ashlee!" Leyla said happily as she saw her newest friend arrive at the party. "I'm so glad you could make it."

Ashlee settled herself into the booth next to Leyla. "Not late, am I?" she asked.

"Nah," Leyla answered. "I've been enjoying people watching." She directed Ashlee's gaze toward the section where Doris and Blake were standing. "Although I think your mom is looking a little green around the edges."

"Oh?" Ashlee remarked. "Oh! Blake's sons?" Ashlee frowned. "Yeah, they don't look too happy about Mom and Blake. I hope they're not going to get as bad as Rafe did."

"Yeah, I heard he was pretty rough," Leyla said.

"He was brutal," Ashlee agreed. "I gave him a hard time about it, too, although I wasn't the nicest to Mom when she finally came out to me." She watched them for a moment and then laughed. "Well, if anyone can handle hostile step-kids, it's my mom. At least we've got two more inductees for our club."

Ashlee looked around the crowd again and Leyla watched as her gaze stopped on a tall figure. "Is she back in town?" Ashlee asked, her tone dark.

"Ava? Yes," Leyla said, her voice matching her friend's. "She's been back a while."

"I take it you don't like her very much either, do you?" Ashlee asked with a wry smirk.

Leyla shrugged. "I *have* to like her, she's family. What's your beef?"

"She tried to steal my boyfriend," Ashlee answered. "I was pretty insecure back then and she was everything I was not – tall, charming, *thin*. Add to that my mother's attempts to sabotage any relationship I had and it's amazing Coop and I lasted as long as we did."

"Coop?" Leyla asked, her mind thinking of the intricate Springfield relationships. "Buzz's son, the one who died?" at Ashlee's nod, she placed a hand on her friend's arm. "Oh Ashlee, I'm so sorry. And that bitch tried to ruin it for you?"

Ashlee laughed. "So much for family."

"You're practically family, too," she said.

"Thanks, but it's okay," Ashlee said. "Coop and I weren't together at the time, but he'll always be in my heart. First loves, you know?"

Leyla nodded. "Yeah," she said and her eyes brightened as Jonathan entered the room with Sarah walking beside him. Sarah ran to play with Emma and Clarissa as Jonathan headed for the food table, stopping briefly to kiss his aunt.

"Speaking of first crushes," Ashlee laughed.

Leyla turned to her. "You and Jonathan?"

"Oh, I tried, but he was hung up on Lizzie at the time."

"Oh," Leyla said, her voice low.

Jonathan's face brightened as he caught sight of Leyla, then widened with surprise on seeing who was sitting next to her.

"Hey, Sweet Cheeks," he said, pulling Ashlee to her feet and into a huge bear hug. "Welcome home. I heard from Auntie O that you'd be visiting and hoped to run into you."

"Great to see you, too, big guy," Ashlee said, returning the hug.

Jonathan suddenly pulled back and said with a cheeky grin. "Is the big bad Wolfe around? I don't need to spend the night in jail."

Leyla watched the two old friends, feeling a little left out and a bit jealous at their apparent shared history.

Then Jonathan turned to her and said, "Can I steal you away from this pretty girl for a sec? I want to ask you something."

Leyla turned to Ashlee who held up a hand. "I'm gonna go mingle," Ashlee said.

"Okay," Leyla agreed with a nod and Jonathan slid into the booth in the seat Ashlee had just vacated.

"So...here's the thing," he started. "We always seem to meet up either here or at the daycare or Auntie O's and that's great and all, but I was wondering if maybe..." he paused.

"What?" Leyla prompted.

"Well, Sarah's at her mom's for the next couple of days and I was wondering if you would like to go out tomorrow? With me?"

"You're asking me out?" she asked and smiled at his resultant grin.

"Yeah," he answered. "I am."

"Well, it's about time!" she said, swatting him on the arm. "What took you so long?"

He laughed. "Never seemed like the right time. So, I take it that's a yes?"

"Definitely a yes," she answered.

"Great," his smile warmed her. "Hey, there're Daisy and James. Have you met Daisy yet? She's a character."

"Not yet," she answered.

"Come on," he said taking her hand and Leyla was happy when he didn't let go even after the introductions.

Anna sipped from her mug of coffee as she watched the gathering. Her gaze fell on Doris and Blake and lingered for a moment. She was glad Doris was here with Blake, the mayor's affection for the redhead had been evident during their last and final date. As if sensing

her perusal, Doris turned to her and gave her a smile. She turned back to Blake and pantomimed lighting a cigarette and with a sour look Blake nodded.

"Join me for a smoke?" Doris said when she neared the detective.

"Sure," Anna said. "It'll give me a chance to check outside."

While Doris lit up, Anna checked the area, especially the stairs leading to the boarding room. When she returned, Doris was already halfway through her cigarette.

"You never let your guard down, do you?" Doris asked, taking a long pull from her cigarette.

"Isn't that what you pay me for?" Anna smiled.

"Good point," Doris said and Anna laughed. Finally coming to the purpose for asking Anna to join her outside, Doris asked, "So how did your meeting with Mallet go?"

Anna quickly outlined the highlights of the meeting, finishing on their strategy for deepening the investigation. Doris silently smoked through one cigarette and then lit another as Anna spoke.

When Anna had finished, Doris nodded thoughtfully. "So tell me your impressions of Mallet," she asked.

Anna paused to gather her thoughts. "He seems competent. He certainly has a solid background in police work and procedure," she answered. "I think his contacts with the CIA may help us in nabbing Winslow and my father, but I still think that's going to take time."

"And personally?" Doris asked.

Again, Anna paused. She didn't care to discuss a colleague's private life with a civilian, but she firmly believed the inside man to be the greater danger and she trusted Doris implicitly. "I've observed him around the other detectives and the Chief and he does have a very close relationship with each of them. For now, I think he believes he can remain impartial, but if the truth proves the traitor is one of his friends, I don't think he can be trusted. From what I've learned, he's destroyed evidence implicating a cop before."

Doris nodded. "Gus Aitoro," she said and chuckled mirthlessly. "Funny how things work out, you know?"

Anna shook her head. "What do you mean?"

"Gus was allowing petty criminals to slide in order to get Olivia's name moved up on the heart transplant list," Doris answered.

Anna thought about that, dredging her memory for the bits of Springfield knowledge she kept filed away. "The same Gus whose heart Olivia now has?" Anna asked. "Natalia's husband?" Doris nodded as she puffed on her cigarette. "Whoa," Anna said, blinking her eyes.

"Well, keep doing what you've been doing, Anna," Doris said.

"All right," she agreed, although she would have anyway without her ex-girlfriend requesting it. She decided to change the subject. "It looked like your date doesn't approve of your habit," Anna said pointing her chin at the cigarette.

Doris laughed mirthlessly. "She doesn't."

"You going to quit?" Anna asked.

"Maybe," Doris shrugged. "I should quit anyway. Easier said than done, though."

Anna nodded then looked in her eyes. "I'm happy for you, D. Really."

"And you?" Doris asked. "Can I be happy for you, too, soon?"

"I'm working on it," Anna said. "Moving on, but you know, it's...easier said than done, though."

Doris nodded and crushed out her cigarette.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you," the gathered friends and family sang some more off key than others. "Happy birthday, dear Francesca. Happy birthday to you."

The crowd broke into loud applause at their own performance. The little girl sitting in her high chair with a large sheet cake on a rolling cart before her looked around in astonishment and then burst into tears with a shrill cry.

A collective "aww" went through the crowd. Francesca raised her arms for her mother and Natalia quickly scooped her up as Olivia blew out the candle and started to slice the cake. Frank grabbed the plates as she filled them and passed them out to the waiting guests. Doris took two plates and handed one to Blake who accepted it with a kiss to the mayor's cheek, both women ignoring identical glares from the teenage boys slouching against the wall.

Buzz paused on his way to the kitchen with a bin full of dirty glasses to ask Natalia, "Is she all right?"

Natalia nodded. "She was just startled," she answered.

Francesca indeed had ceased her crying and gave her grandfather a smile. Buzz leaned over to huff into her belly, causing her to laugh. He grinned and then continued on his task.

Leyla left the table where she had been sitting with Ashlee, Daisy and James and pulled the baby's highchair over to the table piled with gifts. Natalia sat the now-calm girl in it and looked around. "Emma, do you want to help your sister unwrap her gifts?"

Emma nodded eagerly and skipped to the overflowing table, leaving Clarissa behind without a glance. Natalia said to her, "Do you want to help, too, Clarissa? Francesca has so many."

Clarissa nodded eagerly and walked over to the table to pick up a package. Meanwhile, Emma was showing Francesca how to unwrap a gift, but the baby seemed more interested in the paper rather than what was inside, much to her parents' amusement.

Lillian stood by the table with a pad and pencil to record each gift and the giver's identity for later thanking. Eleni simply stood watching the family's interactions, her gaze flitting from Frank to Francesca to Natalia and back again.

Beth snuggled next to Phillip who was watching his daughter with a small smile on his lips. Beth leaned over and whispered to him, "She seems to be doing better."

He nodded, his gaze not leaving Emma's laughing form. "She's going to be just fine."

Holly Reade sat at one end of the counter sipping from a steaming mug of coffee, her plate of cake next to her untouched. Her eyes scanned the room in a constant observation of the various interplays going on. An amused grin played over her lips at her daughter's clumsy attempts to feed her date some cake.

Ava Peralta sat at the other end of the counter with her back to it and her elbows leaning against the top as she observed her youngest sister enjoying her celebration. Jonathan approached her and handed her a bottle of beer, receiving a smile of thanks in return.

Anna Li, like Holly, also scanned the crowd constantly, especially the entrances and exits. She stiffened when the door to the restaurant opened, but relaxed slightly when A.C. Mallet stuck his head in.

"Hey everyone!" he said. "We're not too late, are we?" As he stepped into the room, a second figure walked in behind him, revealing a shyly smiling Dinah Marler.

The room grew silent as the couple walked in. Mallet grabbed a slack-jawed Frank's hand to shake and pressed a present into his other.

"Congratulations on your daughter's first birthday, buddy," he said, grinning widely.

Eleni had straightened from her relaxed posture and caught the eye of Anna, who blinked, then turned back to the tableau unfolding in the restaurant.

"Oh boy," Doris whispered and Blake looked at her curiously.

"What..." she began but cut herself off at the mayor's subtle head shake. Doris then turned to Beth and gave her an almost imperceptible tilt of her head toward Dinah.

Frank finally closed his mouth and thrust Francesca's gift to the side, not bothering to see who took it. He then stepped purposefully forward until he was standing in front of Mallet's companion.

"Dinah Marler," he stated in a firm voice. "I am hereby arresting you for the murder of David Andrews, also known as the Edmund Winslow impersonator."

The only sound heard in the room was the soft crinkling of Francesca happily tearing her birthday wrapping paper.

ACT 3

Olivia shook her head in disgust as she watched the drama play out in the restaurant. Leave it to Frank to let work get in the way of family. She moved to get between him and Dinah. "For Christ's sake, Frank," she exclaimed. "You can't arrest someone at your daughter's birthday party."

"Get out of my way, Liv, before I arrest you for obstruction," he said, moving her aside.

The room was abuzz. Frank looked around for Anna and motioned her over.

"Frank, come on," Mallet said. "Don't do this now. Look, Dinah can turn herself in on Monday morning. If you take her in now, she'll be stuck in jail over the weekend. We don't even have a lawyer yet."

"She has one," Beth Spaulding said as she stepped forward. She handed the police chief a business card. "Frank, I will personally vouch that Dinah Marler will surrender at the police station first thing Monday morning. You have my word."

"Oh? The word of a Spaulding?" Frank sneered and Olivia could hear the old Spaulding-Cooper feud rise up in Frank's voice. "Forget it," Frank said and turned to Anna. "Take her in and get her processed." When Anna hesitated, he barked, "Do it, Li!"

Olivia looked at Natalia who watched as Anna escorted Dinah from the restaurant followed by Beth. She had a grim look on her face.

Frank ran his hand through his hair and then said to the room at large, "Sorry about that folks. I guess the party is over, but you're welcome to stay. I've got work to do."

As he brushed by her, Natalia snagged him by the arm.

"Are you forgetting someone, Frank?" she asked and Olivia could hear the barely contained fury in her voice. She was so glad it was not directed at her this time.

Frank looked confused until Natalia jerked her head toward their daughter who was still playing happily with her wrapping paper.

"Oh," he said and blinked. "Can you take her home?"

"You bet we're taking her home, Frank," Natalia spat. "Thank God she's too young to realize how you just ruined her party."

"Me?" Frank protested. "I'm just doing my job, Natalia. Dinah Marler is wanted for murder and has been a fugitive from justice for over a year now. Am I just supposed to let a murderer go free?"

"And yet Edmund Winslow is happily prancing about God knows where," Olivia said.

"I told you to stay out of this, Olivia," he growled. "This is *not* your business."

"Francesca *is* my business, Frank," she shot back, poking him in the chest. "She's my daughter and don't you forget it. If you hurt her, you'll have to deal with me and I guarantee, it won't be pretty."

"Oh, like I'm supposed to be scared the old Olivia Spencer is back?" he said with a cruel laugh. He turned back to Natalia, effectively dismissing Olivia. "Look, I'm sorry about the baby, but I've got a job to do." With that, he turned and left the building.

Olivia looked around and saw Buzz standing nearby. The man gave her a wry grin and shrug. "I'm sorry about that," he said. "Look, Lillian and I can take the little one if you two had plans. We don't mind."

Olivia shook her head. "Thanks, Buzz. We appreciate that, but it's okay. I guess Frank just has a different set of priorities than we do."

"He's under a lot of pressure," Buzz said and Olivia admired him for his dedication to his son, no matter how clueless and incompetent Frank was in his chosen profession.

"Thanks for hosting Francesca's party, Buzz," Natalia said. Olivia moved to help her gather up the presents. Emma and Leyla had already re-boxed the opened ones.

"Hey, it's not every day one of my grandkids turns one," he said with his natural exuberance.

After he left to oversee the cleanup, Olivia moved over to Natalia and placed a hand on her partner's lower back, still sensing the younger woman's tension. "Ready to go home, sweetheart?"

"Oh, you bet I am," Natalia said, her eyes still dancing with ire. "Sweet Pea can finish unwrapping her gifts at home."

"Just as long as she doesn't throw a conniption when we toss the paper in the trash," Olivia quipped and was glad to see her partner laugh at her joke. With a final glance around the nearly-empty restaurant, she gave a sigh. Their baby's party was definitely over.

Despite the late hour, the boys and Clarissa were bickering loudly from their seats in the back of Blake's car and the noise continued to rise with each passing minute. By the time, Blake pulled the car into Doris's driveway the cacophony had escalated to a roar. Blake glanced at her date and noted Doris's clenched jaw.

"Hey guys," Blake said, raising her voice to be heard over the noise. "Simmer down."

"This isn't home," Kevin said.

"Where are we?" Jason asked.

"Aunt Doris's house, doofus," Clarissa said with a sneer.

"Aunt Doris's house," Kevin mimicked.

"Kevin, stop that," Blake admonished. "You guys be quiet while I walk Doris to her door."

"Goodnight, Aunt Doris," Clarissa said.

"Goodnight, sweetheart," Doris said, giving the young girl a warm smile. "Goodnight, boys," she added this time with a slightly cooler smile.

Both twins ignored her and turned to look out the window. Blake saw Doris smirk at Clarissa's eye roll.

Doris was quiet on the short stroll up the way and Blake could feel her own apprehension growing with each step. Now that their first date was coming to an end, Blake was nervous that Doris's former fears would come back with full force in the face of the reality of Blake's kids and other assorted baggage. Blake adored spending time with Doris – indeed she was coming to realize just how much she adored Doris – but she was afraid that Doris would decide that Blake just wasn't worth the hassle.

After Doris unlocked her door, she turned to Blake. "What a night, huh?" she asked with a rueful grin.

"I am so sorry," Blake started, but stopped when Doris shook her head in confusion.

"For what?"

"For everything!" Blake exclaimed, waving both hands around. "My mother showing up out of the blue, my juvenile delinquent sons with the horrible way they treated you, and my step-daughter getting arrested."

Doris shrugged. "I've been a politician and a public servant for most of my career, Blake," she said with a smile. "If I haven't grown a thick skin by now, I never will. And Dinah's case is going to be good for the firm, so don't worry about it." She paused and moved closer to Blake who almost imagined she could feel the heat coming off of the other woman's body.

"I had a really great time tonight," Doris whispered in what Blake thought was the sexiest voice on the planet.

"Really?" she managed to croak out. "Even with my hellions?"

"Yes, Blake, I had a wonderful time because I was with you...and I want to spend a lot more time with you so the hellions better get used to me," Doris said moving even closer.

Blake could feel her smile light up at her girlfriend's reassuring words and her mood went from anxious to flirtatious in a flash. "So does this mean you will go out with me on a second date?"

Doris nodded. "And a third and a fourth and so on," she said. "If that's what you want?"

"Oh, I definitely want," Blake agreed and embraced the other woman, pulling their bodies together and eliminating any unnecessary space between them.

This kiss was not like their previous kisses, Blake noted with the one small part of her mind that could still function. It was heady and passionate as their others had been, but this time it held the promise of even greater things to come. As Doris seemed to fully put her heart and soul into the kiss, it was as if she was finally allowing herself to feel intimacy with Blake. And the skillful way Doris was kissing her gave Blake a glimpse of just how great a lover Doris could be.

Blake couldn't wait to find out.

The intrusive blare of her car horn snapped them back to reality.

"Wow," Blake said with barely enough breath to speak. "That was..."

"Yeah," Doris husked and dipped her head to nip at Blake's throat.

The car horn sounded again.

"I'm gonna kill 'em," Blake growled.

Doris laughed. "It's okay, baby," she said. "We have plenty of time."

Blake's stomach flipped at the endearment and the promise of the future. "Thank you," she said. "Talk to you tomorrow?" she asked.

"Call me when you get home so I know you're all safe," Doris said softly.

"All right," Blake said softly, touched by the concern. "Good night."

"Night," Doris said and kissed her briefly, but broke it off before the horn could sound for a third time.

Blake returned to the car with a light spring in her step. She ignored the boys' identical glares, but smiled happily at Clarissa's delighted grin.

"Okay gang," she said, starting the engine. "Let's get home!"

Officer Mahoney inspected the contents of the two women's purses and brief cases before patting them both down.

"Watch it there, bud," Mel warned with a growl in her voice. "This is not the TSA."

The officer said nothing, but Mel was happy to see a blush cross his features. He led them to the interview room and said, "Wait here. I'll bring the prisoner."

Mel set her case on the table and pulled a legal pad from it while Beth nervously paced.

"Relax," Mel said to her partner.

Beth gave a short chuckle. "Sorry," she said. "First big criminal case and all."

"From what Doris said, you handled yourself pretty well during the arrest."

"Not well enough to keep our client out of jail during the weekend."

The door opened just as Beth said that.

"That was my own damn fault for showing my face in public on a Saturday night," Dinah said as she was led into the room by the cop.

"Remove the cuffs," Mel ordered Mahoney. When he hesitated, she added, "She's not going anywhere."

Without a word, he complied and the three women took a seat at the table.

"All right," Mel began. "Let's start with the events of that day. We need everything you did from the moment you woke up until after the death of David Andrews."

Dinah nodded and began her tale.

Blake walked into Towers and looked around. The room was filled with the usual business crowd, but she didn't see the person she was meeting.

"Table for one, Ms. Marler?" the hostess asked as she approached.

"I'm meeting Ashlee Wolfe," she said. "Is she here yet?"

"I am now," a voice from behind her said.

Turning, she saw a grinning Ashlee. Blake leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Right on time," she said and turned back to the hostess. "We'll have a table for two, please."

"Right this way, ladies," the woman said.

Once they were settled and had ordered, Ashlee reached into her portfolio, pulled out a thick, bound manuscript and handed it to Blake. "Here it is," she said with a smile and an excited bounce in her seat.

"Fantastic," Blake said flipping through the pages. "I can't wait to sink my teeth into it. From your emails it sounds intriguing."

"I think it is," Ashlee said. "I got some really great feedback from my professor. She was a big help in some areas I had trouble in."

"Oh good. I'm so glad the program is working out for you. It's been hard on your mom – she misses you so much – but she's also so proud of you and she knows that being there is the best thing for your future."

"I miss her too," Ashlee said. "Oh and please...don't feel you have to publish that just because you're dating my mom."

"Oh, don't worry about that, honey," Blake said with a smile. "This is business and Doris is personal. But really Ashlee, if this is as good as your work on Jenna's book, I'll be more than happy to publish this. And, if it makes you feel better, I'll give a copy to Natalia without telling her who wrote it. She's got a talent for knowing what will do well and what won't. If she gives it a thumbs-up, you'll know it wasn't from any bias on my part."

"Fair enough. Thanks Blake," Ashlee said. "Mom's worked so hard to get where she is...I want to show her that I can do the same."

"Oh honey, your mother adores you," Blake said, laying her hand on Ashlee's and giving it a squeeze. "No matter what you do, she will always love you and I also think she did a wonderful job raising you. It's one of the things I admire most about her."

"Thanks, Blake," Ashlee said again with a smile. "Oh and speaking of Mom and you dating..."

Blake groaned and dropped her head to her chest. "Let me guess...if you hurt my mother, blah, blah, blah." Blake looked up to see Ashlee smiling sweetly at her.

"Two words," Ashlee said holding up two fingers. "Alan. Spaulding."

Blake nodded with a grin and said, "Gotcha."

The waitress arrived with their meals and after she left, Ashlee said brightly. "So what else have you been up to – other than work and chasing my mother?"

Blake laughed as she picked up her fork, prepared to enjoy her meal and conversation with Doris's wonderful daughter. The boys might not be too happy yet, but at least Clarissa and Ashlee were on their side and that, she told herself, was half the battle.

The officer on duty glanced up as Shayne Lewis entered the station.

"Hello, Shayne," he said. "Marina is not here right now."

"That's okay, Carey," Shayne told the officer. "I'm here to visit a prisoner, Dinah Marler."

"All right," he said. "She's with her lawyers right now, but you're welcome to wait if you wish."

"That's fine," Shayne answered and the officer pushed the register book across the desk.

After signing the log, Shayne took a seat, prepared to wait. After a few minutes, the door to the station opened and in walked Marina. She stopped short when she noticed him sitting there.

"Shayne," she said, obviously surprised. "Why aren't you at work?"

He stood up to face her. "I had a few minutes so I thought I'd come by to see Dinah."

"Dinah?" she asked and Shayne winced at her tone. "Why the hell would you come see her?"

"Well, she's a friend, Marina," he explained. "You said it yourself; she did what she did to help Henry. I'm not ever going to forget that."

"A friend?" Marina spat. "She was once a lot more than that!"

"Marina, where is this jealousy coming from?" he asked. "I have never given you any reason for you to be acting this way. What's going on?"

"Nothing!" she said and Shayne noticed that the desk officer was watching them avidly. Shayne pulled Marina outside.

"Listen, your relationship with your mother is your business...I don't care for the way you treat her, but that's up to you to fix or not. However, my friends are my business and I will *not* let you tell me who can or cannot be my friend. Dinah was there for me when I needed her and I will return the favor. Understand?"

"Oh fine," she said and he was dismayed to see she had started to cry. "Just be that way. You're just like my parents. Go ahead and turn your back on me."

"Marina, I'm not turning my back on you and I'm not going to choose between you or my friends. Just tell me what is going on with you."

"I said nothing!" she nearly screeched as she waved her arms. "Why does everyone blame me? Fine, you know what? Have your stupid friends. I don't care. Dinah's in jail and that's where she's going to stay so there's nothing you can do about it anyway."

With that she turned and briskly walked away. Shayne ran his hands through his hair and wondered just what the hell was up with Marina Cooper.

By the time Dinah had ended her narrative, her mouth was dry and both lawyers had their pads teeming with notes. After taking a sip of water, she leaned back in the uncomfortable aluminum chair and asked, "So what's the plan?"

"First we need to get you out of here," Beth said glancing at her watch. "The arraignment hearing was supposed to be first thing this morning, but the D.A.'s office requested a postponement while they deal with a small problem."

Dinah noticed that Mel had a smirk on her face. "What problem?" she asked.

"Though she's remaining on as Mayor, Doris Wolfe resigned as D.A., which threw the office into chaos. If they haven't gotten their act together by the afternoon deadline, the judge will have to release you on your own recognizance even though you're a flight risk."

"I practically turned myself in," Dinah said.

"Which we will argue if the prosecutor objects to bail," Mel said. "Either way, you should be out of here by late this afternoon."

"If the judge does rule me a flight risk, won't he set a high bail?" Dinah asked. "I don't think Mal and I can cover it, even if my mom helps out."

"Phillip has promised to ensure you make bail," Beth said softly.

"And Doris resigned to help me?" she asked.

Beth nodded. "She was going to do it anyway. This way it helps our case."

Dinah sat back in amazement. She had not received this kind of help since her father was alive and even then it had often come with a high price. "Why are you all doing this?" she asked. "Phillip and Doris and your firm?"

"Well, Phillip because anything that goes against Edmund Winslow is good in his book," Beth explained. "You thought David Andrews was Winslow and for Phillip that makes you a hero. He just wishes it *had* been Winslow because then the trauma to his daughter would not have happened. As for Doris and us...well, we're a new firm and even with the names Wolfe and Spaulding attached to it, a high profile case will attract the types of clients we want. Win or lose, we all win."

"Will you?" Dinah asked looking between Beth and Mel. "Win, I mean?"

A slow smile spread across the dark-skinned woman's face. "With Wolfe, Boudreau and Spaulding on the case? I can't see how we can lose."

Jeffrey O'Neill walked into the Beacon's lobby, outwardly displaying the casual, regal air he had carefully cultivated decades ago, but inwardly he was very hesitant to be entering a building co-owned by a woman who had made it quite clear his presence was no longer welcome or even tolerated. However, the hotel was a public place and his daughter's workplace. Besides, he rationalized to himself, Natalia had only banned him from the farmhouse and did not specifically state the Beacon.

"I'm here to see Ava Peralta," he told the concierge, who was standing behind his lectern.

The man didn't deign to glance up at him. "Ms. Peralta is in the ballroom overseeing preparations for tonight's reception, sir."

Jeffrey didn't respond, he simply turned around and walked toward the ballroom, not bothering to see if the man had even glanced up.

The ballroom was a beehive of activity as workers quickly set up tables and swarmed over the walls and ceiling hanging decorations. He quickly located the tall, dark-haired form of his daughter. She was standing at the main table directing who he assumed was the technician working on the sound system. Jeffrey stopped and watched as she tapped on the microphone.

"Testing, tes..." Just then she caught sight of him and her face broke into a happy expression. "Dad!" she yelled into the mike, causing a loud whine of feedback and the technician to tear off his headphones in pain. "Sorry, Pete," she said and Jeffrey watched with a smile on his face as she ran around the table and into his waiting arms.

"Dad," she said again.

He closed his eyes as he hugged his daughter tightly. "Hi honey," he said with tears in his voice.

"When did you get back?" she asked, pulling back. "It seems like you've been gone forever."

"Just now," he answered.

"Did you reserve a room?" she asked. "Why didn't you call? We're pretty booked with this wedding, but I think I can find something."

"Whoa! Honey, slow down," he said, laughing at her enthusiasm. "I've already got a room at Towers."

"Towers!" she said, scornfully. "No way, Dad! Listen, I'll find something here or you can just stay with me."

"Ava, it's fine, really," he said.

"But..."

"Tell you what," he said, stopping her with a raised hand. "You can buy your old man some coffee at Company while we catch up. How about that?"

Ava huffed in frustration, but then she smiled in resignation. "All right," she said. "Give me a minute to finish up here."

"Great," he said. "I'll wait for you outside."

Ava nodded and hurried back to the technician. Jeffrey gave her one last look, admiring the competent air she projected, then turned and quickly headed for the exit. The sooner he was off the Beacon's property, the better he would feel.

Blake smiled happily as her girlfriend entered the restaurant. Doris's answering grin and brief kiss made her glow all the more.

"Hello, there," she said, grabbing Doris's favorite mug and filling it with coffee. "Weren't you just here an hour ago?"

"Well, yeah, but I needed some more coffee and Brandon's brew just isn't the same as yours," the mayor answered.

"Uh huh," Blake said with a knowing wink. "Okay, if you say so."

"Busy morning?" Doris asked.

"Not too bad," she said. "How about you?"

"Endless budget reports," Doris said. "Every day I feel more and more like a paper pusher."

"Well, hang in there, honey," she said consolingly. "In the meantime, do you want to come over tonight?"

Doris raised her eyes. "You've got the kids, right?"

"Oh sure," she said. "But I promised Natalia I'd bake some pies for tomorrow and I could use the help."

Doris's eyes widened in surprise. "You want me to *bake*?" she asked, her voice lowering on the last word as if it were a dirty word.

"Well, yeah," Blake said. "Why not?"

"Blake, I...I'm not exactly the baking type," she answered.

"That's okay," Blake answered, patting her hand reassuringly on Doris's arm. "I am. Don't worry, I promise you nothing too strenuous, okay?"

Blake watched as Doris sat there thinking a few moments and then the other woman smiled. "All right," she finally said. "Just don't tell anyone, okay? It'd ruin my reputation."

"I promise," Blake said, crossing her heart. "See you at seven? Dress comfy."

"Seven it is," Doris said.

Jeffrey followed his daughter as she made her way past the other diners to an empty booth near the back. He could feel several pairs of eyes watching their progress, among them Doris Wolfe who was sitting at the counter across from Blake Marler. As he and Ava settled into the booth, Blake pushed away from the counter and walked over to them with her pad and pencil ready.

"Hi, Ava," she said with a big smile. "Hello, Jeffrey. Just get back?"

"Uh, yeah," he answered, rubbing his hand down his cheek to smooth his beard.

"Going to stick around this time?" Blake questioned and Jeffrey had to remind himself that she was the biggest gossip in a town full of gossips.

"Possibly," he answered cryptically. "Haven't quite decided yet, but there is a lot here for me." He gave Ava a fond smile and was pleased with her answering grin.

"Um hmm," Blake nodded. "So, what can I get you?"

"Just coffee for me, Blake," Ava said.

"The same for me please," he followed.

"You're sure that's all?" Blake asked. "Buzz just pulled a fresh batch of apple pies out of the oven and a slice of pie with some ice cream is heaven."

Ava shook her head and Jeffrey said, "Maybe later."

"Okay," Blake said, closing her pad. "Two coffees, coming right up."

Jeffrey followed the redhead's progress as she headed for the coffeepot and noted the look that passed between her and the mayor. After Blake had delivered their order, he turned to Ava and asked, "What's up with those two? They look thicker than thieves."

Ava snorted as she stirred sweetener in her cup. "They're dating," she said.

Jeffrey's eyes rose. "So Doris is all the way out of the closet?" he asked.

"Well...yeah," she said with a nonchalant shrug. "I mean, she never gave a press conference declaring it or anything, but it's no secret here in town."

"Have there been any repercussions for her?" he pressed. "Politically, I mean?"

"Not that I know of," she answered, setting down her spoon and looking at him. "I think she might have gotten some hate mail, but that was from the regular nut jobs on the fringe. People in Springfield have more to worry about than who their mayor is sleeping with."

Jeffrey nodded thoughtfully as he watched the interaction between the two women. He felt bad for his friend Anna that things hadn't worked out for her, but he knew that her energies were better focused on pursuing Winslow rather than on a relationship.

"Why the questions, Dad?" Ava asked and Jeffrey turned back from his inner thoughts.

"Can I trust you to keep a secret?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "'What's up?"

"I *am* coming back to Springfield, honey," he said and laughed at her resultant happy squeal. "Permanently."

"That's so great!" She reached over the table to hug him briefly. "But why's that a secret?" she asked as she sat back down.

"Well, I'm going to need to do something with my career," he answered. "Either get my job as the district attorney back or I'm thinking about running for political office."

"For mayor?"

He nodded and glanced back at Doris Wolfe.

"Dad," Ava said sharply and he turned back to her. He blinked at her sternly frowning face. "I hope you're not planning on running a smear campaign against Doris because she's gay."

"Oh no, honey, of course not," he answered, not wanting to reveal he had been thinking of doing just that. "I just asked about Doris because I wondered how accepting folks in town have been. You know, to see if the voters can separate personal and politics."

"Politics *is* personal, Dad," she said. "You know that."

He grinned. "I do," he admitted. "When did you get so smart?"

"Are you kidding?" she asked with a laugh. "With you and Olivia Spencer in my gene pool how could I *not* be?"

"I guess so," he said and rubbed at the back of his neck. "That brings me to my next question...if I do decide to run for office, will you manage my campaign?"

Ava bit her lip thoughtfully. "My work at the Beacon takes up most of my time, Dad. I don't know if I can find any extra for that."

"Well, you could take a sabbatical, couldn't you?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I'm sure Mom wouldn't mind, but like I said I really enjoy my work."

"Well, there's no reason to decide right this minute," he said, deciding to let her off the hook for now. "Just think it over, okay?"

"Sure, Dad," she said. "So what time do you want to come over tomorrow?"

He blinked in surprise at the question. "What do you mean, honey?" he asked, already suspecting her answer.

"Thanksgiving dinner at the farmhouse," she said, sipping her coffee. "You're coming, of course."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, honey, but Natalia clearly said I'm not welcome there anymore."

"Bull!" she said, slamming her cup on the table with a hard thunk. "It's Thanksgiving, the one day of the year when family gets together. She's always going on about how important family is...well, you're my family."

"Yeah, but really Ava, it's fine," he said. "I'll just have dinner at Towers."

"No, Dad," she said holding up a hand. "I'll talk with her and Mom. You *will* be there."

Jeffrey wanted to protest further, but he knew it would be futile in the face of his daughter's persistence. She was, after all, a product of her genes.

Olivia pulled another file from the shrinking pile that Keira had left her. Opening it, she noted that she also needed Natalia's signature on it. Standing up, she quickly crossed the hallway separating their offices and entered her partner's office. Natalia was obviously just ending a call and she hung up the phone and turned to greet her.

"Hi!" she said. "What have you got there?"

"Need your signature, please," she said placing the folder on Natalia's desk.

She leaned against the desk as Natalia looked over the papers with an adorable frown of concentration on her face. Olivia once again felt the pride swell up in her heart for just how far her love had come. Perfectly content with working as a waitress and a maid, Natalia only needed a nudge in the right direction from someone who believed in her. For the rest of her life, Olivia would count that as one of her greatest accomplishments.

Finally setting the papers on the desk, Natalia grabbed her pen and signed her name with a flourish. She neatly placed them back in the folder and handed it to Olivia. "There you go," she said, smiling.

"Thanks," Olivia said, tucking the folder under her arm. "Are you almost done?" she asked.

"Just about," Natalia said. "I just need to tie up a few loose ends. And I've got to return a few calls regarding upcoming bookings. You?"

"Yep, should be ready in about an hour," she said as she headed for the door. "Can't wait to get the holiday weekend started."

"Me either," Natalia said. "At least we'll get to enjoy Thanksgiving this time."

"Hey, I had fun last year," Olivia laughed.

"You weren't in labor, my love," Natalia quipped.

"Thank goodness for that!" Olivia said.

A knock on the door caused them both to turn and the slender form of Ava appeared. "Hi," she said. "Have you both got a moment?"

"Yeah, honey," Olivia nodded. "What do you need?"

"I just saw Dad," Ava said. "He's back in town."

Olivia glanced at Natalia and she could see the anger flare up in her partner's eyes, although she was sure Ava would not be able to see it. "Oh?" she asked casually, turning back to her daughter.

"I invited him tomorrow, but he thinks he's not welcome," Ava said with a glare aimed at Natalia.

"Ava..." Olivia started, but was cut off by Natalia laying a hand on her arm as she stood up.

"That's right, Ava," she said and Olivia could hear the firmness in her tone. "He's not welcome in our home and he's not invited to our Thanksgiving dinner."

"He's my father, Natalia," Ava said and Olivia could see she was trying to control her temper. She sensed it wouldn't last long because she knew this was one issue Natalia would not budge on.

"I know he is," Natalia said. "He's also the man who hurt your mother and I won't have him in my home or around my children. I don't think he's changed since then. Everything he's done recently has proven that he cares more about his own agenda than his responsibilities."

"That has nothing to do with you or Mom, who forgave him for what he did to her a long time ago," Ava said, her voice starting to rise. "Long before *you* came into the picture."

"I know she did," Natalia said. "Her forgiving nature is one of the many things I adore about your mother, but Ava.../ haven't forgiven him and I don't know if I ever can."

"Isn't your God all about forgiveness?" Ava sneered.

"Yes, He is," Natalia said. "But I'm only human and I can't forgive such a heinous act so easily. It's going to take time, but for now he's not welcome in our home. And that's final."

"Then if he's not welcome, neither am I and I'm not coming," Ava shouted, her control finally breaking.

"Ava..." Olivia started, but was interrupted again.

"No, Mom!" Ava said, swiping furiously at the tears in her eyes. She turned back to Natalia.

"God, you are *such* a hypocrite. You begged my mother for her forgiveness when you tore her heart out and got it, but you can't forgive my father for something he did decades ago and has tried to make up for it ever since?"

"I'm sorry, Ava," Natalia said, her own tears starting to fall. "I just can't."

"Well, to hell with you," Ava said and turned to Olivia. "Have a nice Thanksgiving, Mom. Give my sisters a kiss for me, please."

She turned to leave and Olivia moved to stop her. "Ava...wait!"

"No!" Ava said and ran from the room.

Olivia stared at her departing form for a moment and then turned to her partner who was slumped in her chair with her hands covering her face. Olivia moved to kneel down in front of her. "Hey," she said softly.

"I'm sorry," Natalia muttered. "I'm so sorry."

"No, sweetheart," Olivia said. "It's okay."

"She's right," Natalia said, wiping her face with her hands. Olivia reached over to the credenza and grabbed a tissue from the box. She gently wiped at Natalia's eyes, now horribly smeared with her makeup. "I *am* a hypocrite."

"No, you're not," Olivia said. "She forgets that you haven't had time to deal with what Jeffrey did, not like she and I have. You'll get there and while I know you probably won't hustle another game of pool with him, you will forgive him. I know you will."

"I just can't," Natalia said. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," she said again. "Ava's an adult and can make her own decisions. If she doesn't want to be with us, then that's fine. It hurts, but we'll have our other friends and family with us."

"Maybe I should..."

"No, Natalia," Olivia said, guessing where her partner's thoughts were going. "You can't back down from your decision now. She'll be okay, I promise."

Natalia ran a hand through her hair. "So, what? You're psychic now?"

"No," she said. "I just know my daughter. She'll be fine."

"I'm sorry," Natalia said again.

"Say it one more time, and you will be," Olivia laughed and then stood up. "Come on; let's finish up work so we can get our weekend started."

Natalia nodded and reached for her phone. Olivia considered hunting down her daughter, but decided to give her some time to cool off and instead returned to her office to resume her work.

Her bodyguard opened the door for her to step out onto the driveway of Blake's house.

"Will you need me anymore tonight, Madame Mayor?" he asked.

She glared at him. "Yes," she answered with a hiss. "I will text you when I wish to be picked up."

"Very good, ma'am," he said tipping his hat.

Doris clacked up the driveway and then slowed her steps before she reached the front door to light up a cigarette. Blake had made clear her displeasure with her smoking habit and Doris knew this would probably be the last cigarette she'd get for the rest of the evening... at least until she called Jack to go home. As much as she'd love to, she had no intention of staying the night.

Things with Blake were going good, she thought to herself. Very good and she did not want to mess things up by jumping into the sack too quickly, even though Blake seemed to be ready. As she puffed on her cigarette, she remembered something her best friend had told her about her many failed relationships and her determination to do the exact opposite, even though the road to Olivia's happiness with Natalia had been, at times, painful to watch.

It had worked, Doris knew, because their love was strong, but while it might have also worked had Olivia done things her old fashioned way, Doris wanted to take the lesson as her own which was why, despite Blake's utter sexiness, she wanted to wait until they both were sure the time was right.

The noise of a car pulling up the driveway caused her to turn around. She could see the cheerful face of Rick Bauer through the windshield and his wife seated beside him. Then both rear doors opened at the same time and Blake's sons stepped out of the car. Rick waved to Doris through the glass then backed the car out of the driveway.

"Good evening, boys," she said as they approached the door. Doris thought for a moment they would simply ignore her, but as she raised her cigarette to her lips, they both paused as one to look at her.

"Got a smoke?" Kevin asked and Doris raised her eyes.

"It's okay," Jason added.

"Yeah, we know how," Kevin said.

"Everyone at our school smokes," Jason said. "It's like a European thing."

"This is America," Doris pointed out. "And you boys are too young."

"Oh yeah?" Jason asked with a sneer.

"How old were you when you started?" Kevin asked.

Doris pursed her lips, and then finally answered. "Fourteen."

Both boys smirked and Doris rolled her eyes. "Your mother wouldn't like it."

"She doesn't have to know," Kevin said.

"Yeah, she wouldn't," Jason said.

Doris laughed. "Your mother is not stupid boys," she said. "She complains that she can smell the smoke on me all the time."

Both boys shrugged in perfect unison and Doris thought that while they might not be identical, they were definitely twins.

"Do you like our mom?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, do you?" Jason added.

"I like her very much," Doris answered.

"In a gay way," Jason said and Doris knew it wasn't a question.

"More than just that, Jason," Doris said. "I value my friendship with your mother as well."

"But still gay," Kevin said.

"Our mom's not gay," Jason declared. "She was married to our dad."

"No," Doris agreed. "Your mom is not gay."

"Then why was she kissing you?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah," Jason said, echoing his brother's derisive tone. "If she's not gay, why was she kissing you?"

Doris crushed out her cigarette in the dirt and felt a headache coming on. She willed it away, because she wasn't going to let anything ruin her evening with her girlfriend. For a moment, she couldn't believe the absurdity of the situation; she'd never imagine she'd be standing in front of Blake Marler's house discussing her sexual orientation with her sons.

"That answer is quite complicated, boys," she answered as she carefully tucked her butt into the tin she kept in her purse. "You'll learn that there are rarely any absolutes in the world. Your mom may not be gay, but she's not straight either. She is, however, open to a relationship with me and I'm okay with that even though she's been married before. So you have a choice to make – deal with your mom and me being together or don't. Either way, I'm not going anywhere." With that she turned and opened the front door leaving the twins behind.

With a couple of pot holders, Eleni pulled the casserole dish out of the oven and set it on top of a trivet. She turned her attention to preparing a fresh salad. She glanced up over the counter at her ex-husband, who was sitting on the couch with his attention glued to where a football game was playing on the sports network. They had both had a long day at work tying up some loose ends before the long holiday weekend. Eleni was tired and had looked forward to going back to her apartment for a well-deserved rest, but Frank had given her those puppy dog eyes as he told her he was dying for some of her lamb pastitsio, so she agreed to come over.

"It's almost ready, Frank," she said, placing the salad bowl on the small table she had already set while the dish was baking.

"Oh great," he said, turning down the volume on the TV, but leaving it on, she noted. He disappeared into the tiny bathroom for a few seconds, then sat down just as she placed his plate in front of him. "Mmm," he said, picking his fork and digging in. "Oh, I've missed this. Thank you, honey."

"You're welcome," she said and put her own plate on the table, before grabbing him another beer.

They ate in silence for a while, then Eleni asked, "Are you going to the farmhouse tomorrow?"

Frank shrugged. "Probably not," he said. "I think I'll drop by on Friday to give Francesca a birthday kiss. Don't want to miss out on her actual birthday."

"Sounds good," she said. "I have some forensic journals I need to catch up on, so I might just spend the day relaxing."

"Oh yeah?" he said. "Maybe I'll drop by."

"If you want," she said. "I'm looking forward to tomorrow though. Thanksgiving with the Coopers is always fun."

"It is," he agreed. "Pop's real glad you're coming, Eleni. So am I."

"Too bad our daughter isn't," she said with a scowl.

"Don't worry about Marina," he said. "She's just got some issues to work through."

She simply nodded, but inside she wondered if her daughter's 'issues' went beyond her feelings of abandonment. Pushing aside the thought, she concentrated on enjoying her evening with Frank.

Doris stood over the stove in Blake Marler's kitchen, stirring a saucepan of chocolate pudding and waiting impatiently for it to come to a boil. At the island, Blake was measuring wet ingredients into a large mixing bowl for pumpkin pies. Doris found she had a hard time keeping her eyes on the pudding and not on her beautiful girlfriend. Every now and then Blake would glance up and catch her looking and Doris would quickly turn her attention back to the pan with a blush.

"So the boys will be able to start school on Monday," Blake said as she reached for the sugar canister.

"Well, that's good," Doris said. "You won't have to worry about them running wild for most of the day."

Blake nodded. "Fortunately Mom brought their medical and school records with her so there was no delay in getting them enrolled."

"Are you going to look into another boarding school for them?" Doris asked.

"I'm not sure any will take them," Blake said. "Granted, it was an accident, but burning down the cafeteria is a bit much for even the most liberal of schools." Blake paused and seemed to think a moment. "But I think it might be nice to have them home. That is if..."

Doris looked at her while continuing to stir. Blake was looking at her with an inscrutable expression. "If what?" she asked.

"If you don't mind them being here, that is," Blake said softly.

Doris felt her heart swell with Blake's question. "Blake, they're your sons," she said sincerely.

"It doesn't matter if they like me or not. They belong with their mother. If you want them here, that's all that matters."

"Yes, but I want them to like you," Blake said. "I want..."

"What?" Doris asked when Blake paused for an extended time.

"I want you *all* here," Blake said. "Kevin, Jason, Clarissa...and you."

Doris smiled softly. She admired the way Blake was so free and open with her emotion, the same emotions she herself had kept a tight rein on for most of her life. "Then we'll make it happen...together," she said. "But again, I'm not going to worry about them liking me or not. They either will or they won't and that's up to them, not you or me. It's like Olivia and Rafe – he hated her with an unholy passion, but he got over it."

"Love triumphs over hate?" Blake asked with a wry smile.

"You betcha," she answered with a laugh and then realized they were heading into too serious a territory for now and she changed the subject. "So, speaking of Olivia and Natalia, I was thinking about what to get them for their upcoming ceremony."

Blake seemed relieved at the about face in the conversation. She grinned. "Oh? What?" she asked eagerly.

"A marriage license," she answered and smiled at the surprised look on her girlfriend's face.

"Is that legal?" Blake asked.

"Well...no," she shrugged. "On the other hand, it's not *illegal*...at least not yet. It's like that mayor in California who ordered his clerk to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. At the time, it wasn't illegal for him to do it. Now it is since they passed that stupid law."

"So you want to start a revolution in Illinois?"

"No, I want to give my dear friends a very unique gift that no one else can give them," Doris explained. "Even if a marriage license is issued, it is not an official document on public record until it's filed with the state. Like Remy and Christina's marriage wasn't binding because Remy had forgotten to file the license. Olivia and Natalia have the choice to file or not. Even if they don't, they'll at least have something memorable for their special day."

"That's a wonderful idea, Doris," Blake said. "Will your clerk issue the license if you ask?"

"Oh yes, I'm sure he will," Doris said with a chuckle. "I think he's dating Olivia's banquet manager." Doris smiled as Blake laughed and turned back to the stove. The pudding had begun to thicken. "Is this done yet?" she asked.

Blake peered over Doris's shoulder, taking the time to run a gentle hand down her back causing Doris to shiver. "Not yet," she said, finally wrapping her arms around Doris's waist.

"Wait until the bubbles get really thick and the color is a deep brown. Then take it off the stove and continue to stir for a couple of minutes to cool slightly. Then you can pour it into the baked shells." She pointed her chin at the waiting pie plates lining the counter. Doris knew the unbaked shells were waiting for Blake to fill them with the pumpkin custard she was mixing.

For just a moment she felt a strange sense of etherealness wash over her. Was this what life with Blake would be like? Evenings baking while the kids upstairs did whatever kids do? Could she be satisfied with such mundane domesticity? Then she thought about the way her life had been: daily political machinations and legal maneuverings where it didn't matter who she hurt as long as she came out on top. Countless nights slinking about Ladies Night in a horrible fedora looking for a warm body to spend a few illicit hours with and then dreading the mornings after when one false move on her part could result in exposure?

So caught up in her musings she missed what Blake was saying to her. "I'm sorry, what?" she asked.

"Where did you go?" Blake asked with a smile.

"Just thinking," she answered. Then after a long and contemplative look at Blake, she continued, "I'm having a good time tonight, Blake. Thanks for asking me over."

"You're welcome," Blake answered with a big smile and tightening her arms that were still around Doris. "Better this than running all over town tomorrow picking up things that Natalia and Olivia forgot."

Doris laughed and turned her neck so she could give her girlfriend a warm kiss, enjoying the way Blake responded with a hint of passion. After a few moments, the redhead went back to her mixing and Doris turned once again to the stove.

Yeah she definitely could get used to this, she thought. Life with Blake promised to be much more rewarding than anything she had ever contemplated before.

Olivia watched as Natalia flitted around the kitchen in a random pattern, moving from one task to another. Occasionally, she would disappear into the living room and dust a few pieces of furniture, but after that she would dash into the kitchen to spend a few moments on another task such as wiping down the already impeccably clean counter space.

Olivia knew her partner was still upset about the confrontation earlier with Ava. Her silence during dinner did not go unnoticed by Leyla or Emma, but neither had said a word.

After, Natalia had declined any help with the cleanup, but Olivia stayed nearby as she read budget reports, her mind focused on her partner and not her work. Emma quietly took herself to her room while Leyla went to visit Jonathan after she put the baby to bed.

While Natalia was rearranging the dining room table for the fifth time, Olivia came to a decision. She said to Natalia, "I'm going to check on the kids and make sure Emma went to sleep."

Natalia nodded absently and moved to get their good china out of the cabinet.

Upstairs, Francesca was sleeping soundly, her sweet face angelic in repose as she clutched her blanket. Emma was also sound asleep, Olivia was happy to note, although she had left her video game on and her clothes strewn around the floor.

After quickly straightening Emma's room, she shut off the game, leaving just the soft glow of the nightlight to watch over their sleeping daughter. She then headed to the master bathroom and ran hot water into the tub, adding a good handful of lavender bath salts. She lit a few candles in the bathroom and the bedroom. She then returned downstairs.

Natalia was once again adjusting the dining room table. Olivia walked over to her and took her hand before she could flee back into the kitchen.

"Oh," Natalia said, obviously startled to see her. "I heard the water running and thought you were taking a bath."

"That's for you, sweetheart," Olivia said and gently tugged on her hand. "Come on."

"Olivia!" Natalia protested, trying to yank her hand away, but Olivia refused to let go. "I have a ton of things to do."

"That all can wait until tomorrow," she said. "Right now, you're going to take a bath." When Natalia opened her mouth to protest again, but Olivia stopped her with a pout and her patented puppy dog eyes. "Please, *mi amor*?"

Natalia sighed and Olivia could feel her give in, so she tugged again and this time Natalia followed her to the bathroom.

There, Natalia kept her eyes glued to her face as Olivia slowly undressed her, first removing her blouse and bra, then her slacks and panties. She pinned Natalia's hair up with a few quick moves and then held Natalia's hand, steadying her as she stepped into the tub. When Natalia leaned back into the water, a soft sigh escaping her lips, Olivia kneeled beside the tub.

"You're not joining me, *querida*?" Natalia asked, her voice indicating she was already relaxing from the heat of the water.

"No, sweetheart," Olivia answered as she lathered a washcloth with gel. "I want to take care of you tonight."

"You always take good care of me," Natalia whispered, still watching Olivia's face as she began to gently wash her partner.

"We take good care of each other," she agreed.

"I don't deserve it," Natalia sighed and finally looked away.

"Of course, you do," Olivia chided gently. She knew Natalia was still feeling guilty about Ava. "Don't I deserve it when you take care of me?"

"Yes," Natalia said with a pout.

"Believe me, *querida*, I have done far worse than you have or ever will or could ever imagine doing," Olivia said.

Natalia turned to look at her again and Olivia was glad to see Natalia's eyes darken as she ran the washcloth over her sex. Olivia wasn't trying to arouse, so she quickly moved on, but she knew that they only needed to have their hands on each other for them to be turned on. It was one of the things that had surprised her the most when she realized she was attracted to the other woman. Something as simple as a hug from Natalia could do more for her than any of her previous lovers.

She helped Natalia to stand and step out on to the rug. She took the towel she had set out and used it to carefully dry Natalia.

"Thank you, *mi amor*," Natalia said, reaching for her robe.

Olivia intercepted her hand and smiled. "I'm not done taking care of you yet, baby," she said and led Natalia to the bed.

Olivia stepped back a pace and began to remove her own clothes as Natalia sat on the edge of the bed to watch, her breathing quickening as each article of clothing hit the floor. When Olivia was finally nude, she pushed Natalia back and laid on top of her, knowing how much her partner loved to feel her naked form pressed against her own. Indeed, she could feel Natalia shudder against her as she spread her legs to allow Olivia to move even closer.

Olivia spent a few moments looking down at her lover. Natalia was the most beautiful woman she had ever known, but she was never more beautiful than this with her skin glowing with love and desire in her eyes as she anticipated Olivia's lovemaking.

"Olivia," Natalia breathed out.

"I love you so much, Natalia," she said and leaned down to kiss her deeply.

She spent what seemed an eternity kissing her love, knowing that an eternity spent kissing Natalia would never be enough. Natalia's mouth was like a sweet well, dark and deep and she reveled in exploring its sensual mysteries.

"You are exquisite," Olivia whispered with awe in her voice as she kissed a path down Natalia's sternum and then with her tongue licked over to one of Natalia's full breasts, gently laving the engorged nipple and causing Natalia to gasp and arch upwards.

"Olivia," Natalia said and Olivia could feel the passion in her lover's voice to her very core. "Olivia, please."

Olivia let go of the nipple and licked her way across Natalia's chest to give the other the same attention. Natalia's hands entwined themselves in Olivia's hair; tugging and pulling in the way Olivia knew Natalia was ready for more. Instead of immediately granting the unspoken request, Olivia began to move over Natalia's torso, kissing, licking and nipping at every inch of skin. Natalia's firm abdomen clenched even tighter under Olivia's ministrations and her hips gyrated in an attempt for more friction. Olivia used both hands to caress Natalia's breasts and could feel the sweat already beginning to pool in the hollows of Natalia's body.

"Oh fuck, Olivia, please!" Natalia begged as one hand left Olivia's head and clutched desperately at the bed sheets. Olivia knew that when she started to swear, Natalia was at her greatest need, so she left the area of skin between Natalia's thigh and hip that she had been exploring and nuzzled her way to her lover's swollen lips. Natalia's short hairs were soaked with her arousal and Olivia tasted them with great relish and enjoyment. Eating Natalia was better than dining at the world's finest restaurant and Olivia knew in her soul she would never grow tired of it.

As Olivia let her tongue worship Natalia, she glanced up at her lover, not wanting to miss the spectacular view. Natalia had her head thrown back into the pillow with her long neck arched upward and Olivia could see her throat working as her urgent moans grew louder.

Olivia opened her mouth even wider to take more of her lover in and she slid the length of her tongue along Natalia's quivering clit until its tip penetrated Natalia's entrance. She continued tongue fucking Natalia as the woman writhed in ecstasy beneath her. While Olivia watched, Natalia grabbed the sheet in both fists and jammed it into her mouth to muffle her shrieks. Olivia's mouth was suddenly flooded with sweet liquid as Natalia's body seemed to arch impossibly higher off the bed. She grabbed Natalia's hips to hold her in place as she continued to love Natalia with her mouth, bringing the woman to completion again and again.

Finally, Natalia pushed her weakly away, her body collapsing on the bed. Olivia gently lapped up Natalia's essence, and then moved to take Natalia into her arms. Olivia felt her lover's breathing begin to slow, but then Olivia realized that Natalia was crying and the tears quickly turned to sobs.

Olivia held her lover tightly, lending her love and her strength during Natalia's emotional release, fulfilling her promise to always take care of her. As Natalia finally fell into an exhausted sleep, Olivia knew her partner was going to be just fine.

The dining room table was filled with cooling pies and Doris looked on with satisfaction. "Not bad," she whispered to herself.

Blake had excused herself some minutes ago to use the bathroom and Doris went in search of her now. She finally found her in the living room stoking the fire to new life.

"The pies look great," she said, taking a seat on the couch. She noticed an open bottle of wine on the coffee table and filled the two glasses next to it. She was taking a sip as Blake finished with the fire.

"I've had a wonderful time tonight, Blake," she said setting down her glass. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Thank you for coming," Blake answered, sipping her own wine. She also set down her glass and took Doris's hand. "I enjoy spending time with you," she said in a soft voice.

"Me too," Doris admitted, shivering as Blake gently stroked her hand.

"It's a lot different, isn't it?" Blake asked thoughtfully.

Doris had some idea what Blake meant, but she wanted to hear the other woman say it.

"What is?"

"Being with a woman," Blake said. "I mean, of course it's different, how could it not be, but there's a totally different energy being with you."

Doris chuckled. "Your New Age is showing, baby," she said. "Energy?"

"Yes," Blake answered with a nod. "With men, it's always like they're focused on the end game. Always moving toward that goal, but you're not like that. I feel like just being with me makes you happy."

"It does," Doris said, her voice thick with feeling.

"And being with you makes me happy, too," Blake said. "I'm so sorry for ambushing you that night, Doris. I really didn't understand before, but now I do. My whole approach was as a straight woman going after a man, so no wonder you got spooked. Thank you so much for giving me a chance."

"Come here," Doris husked and pulled a compliant Blake into her arms.

One kiss led to the next which led to another in what seemed to Doris an infinite number of kisses. Never one for holding back her passion, Doris was amazed that she was utterly content with their leisurely kisses, softly exploring Blake's taste and smell and her beautiful essence. Pulling away slightly, Doris finally whispered into Blake's ivory-colored ear, "Blake, I have a confession to make."

"What's that?" Blake whispered back, leaning her head back to offer her throat to Doris's attention.

"I'm more interested in the end game than I've led on," she said, mouthing her way down the smooth expanse of Blake's neck until she was nuzzling Blake's cleavage.

"Oh, thank God!" Blake exclaimed, pressing closer to Doris as if offering the mayor a delectable treat. Unable to stop herself, Doris cupped one of Blake's full breasts in her hand, the sensation sending a sharp dart of desire through her already aroused body.

"Ohhh," Blake moaned. "Doris."

"Blake," Doris strangled out. "I want you, but..." she paused and swallowed thickly, unable to believe she was doing this. "But..."

"But you want to wait," Blake finished. "Oh God, you're killing me."

"I'm sorry," Doris said, finally easing back from the passionate embrace.

Blake looked up, her face flushed with lust and her breathing rapid. "It's...it's okay," she said in a choked voice. "I said I'd wait and if that was anything what it'll be like, it's worth the wait."

Doris smirked, her confidence renewed now that she knew Blake wasn't upset at her. "I promise you, it will be soooo worth it. It's just that I don't want to worry about getting interrupted by noisy kids or having to be places the next day." She leaned in close again to nip at the side of Blake's mouth as she murmured, "I want it to be just you and me and a large soft bed so that I can show you everything you've been fantasizing about."

"Oh God," Blake moaned again.

This time Doris moved further away and picked up her wine glass, amused that so much time had passed without her realizing it. The chilled wine had warmed and droplets of condensation collected on her fingers as she drank. She glanced at her watch and saw it was indeed late.

"I better go," she said and dashed off a quick text to her driver. She looked at Blake and smirked at the still flushed look on the redhead's face. "I'll pick you and the kids up tomorrow? Ashlee said she's going to ride over with Jonathan and Leyla." Blake nodded and Doris could see she was still trying to regain her composure. "Are you all right?"

Blake glanced at her and narrowed her eyes. "I'm fine," she growled. "Except for the fact that you're driving me crazy." Then she smiled. "It's a good thing I'm crazy about you, Doris Wolfe."

"I'd say that is a very good thing, indeed," she answered.

ACT 4

Olivia felt the bed move slightly as Natalia slipped out from under the covers into the chilly morning air.

"Mmm," she said in protest. "It's still dark."

"Shh," Natalia whispered. "Go back to sleep, *querida*."

Olivia cracked an eye open. The digital LED on the clock read 05:27. She rolled over in time to see a robed Natalia disappear into the hallway and a moment later she heard the muffled whump of the furnace kicking in and a fresh blast of warm air blew into the room.

She drifted in that pleasant state between sleep and consciousness, awake enough to hear the soothing sounds of her lover taking a shower, yet her subconscious thoughtfully replaying images of their lovemaking the night before. Still upset about the confrontation with Ava, Natalia had been too distracted to focus on her holiday feast preparations. After Olivia had made sure the girls were asleep, she drew her partner into their bedroom where she had proceeded to make love to her until Natalia had fallen into a deep and contented sleep. Olivia felt a small smile grace her lips as she remembered holding her sleeping lover until she too had fallen asleep.

Minutes after the shower cut off, Natalia reentered the bedroom and Olivia watched through slitted eyes as she dressed in a pair of warm sweats. As Natalia was binding her still-damp hair in a ponytail, she finally noticed Olivia watching her from the bed.

"Why aren't you sleeping, love?" she asked, moving over to the bed.

Olivia reached a hand out from the blanket toward her lover. "Come back to bed," she croaked.

"I promised Sister Anne we would be at the mission by nine and I need to get working on all the things you wouldn't let me do last night," Natalia said with a smirk.

Olivia simply raised an unrepentant eyebrow and felt smug at Natalia's answering blush.

"Rest for a while, *querida*," Natalia said with a laugh. "Come down when you're ready."

As Natalia moved away, Olivia tried to hold on to Natalia's warm hand, but the other woman slipped free and quickly disappeared from the bedroom.

Olivia snuggled deeper into the blankets and considered getting up. There really was a lot to do today to get ready for their second Thanksgiving as a family. She grinned at the memory of how chaotic and disorganized they had been last year which aptly culminated in their Sweet Pea's timely arrival. Once again Olivia sent a silent prayer of thanks into the universe for the continued good health of mother and daughter and while she was at it, she sent thanks for Emma and their son who would be spending his Thanksgiving on the field of war.

Then her thoughts turned to their other daughter who also would not be present today. Olivia's heart ached for her daughter's pain, but she sensed that Ava needed the space to work out her issues on her own. Olivia didn't want Ava to disengage herself from her father, but she did want Ava to at least understand why Natalia felt the way she did.

Olivia knew that even though Ava intellectually understood the circumstances surrounding her conception, she suspected her daughter subconsciously did not want to fully comprehend the ramifications of the act. Growing up, Ava had known she had been adopted which left her with the knowledge that her birth parents had rejected her on some level, but then when she had learned that her beginnings had not only been unwanted, but a result of an act of violence, it had been that much harder to deal with. Add to that finding out her birth mother was the woman who had tried to have her killed, that knowledge came with a terrible price.

That Ava had managed to get past all that and not only forgive her parents, but to love them as well, simply showed what an incredible young woman she was. Yet even though she had reached that place of love and forgiveness, she was unable to understand how Natalia could not do the same. Ava thought if *she* could forgive her parents for their actions, then Natalia should be able to look past what Jeffrey had done. Olivia knew that her lover would indeed do that – someday – but that day might be a long time coming and until then, Olivia would support her partner's decision. Just as she would continue to love and support her daughter, no matter how stubborn she could be.

Glancing at the clock, she noted that it was still much too early to get up, but she knew that there would be no more sleep for her today. With a groan, Olivia finally pushed the blankets aside and crawled out of the warm bed. It was time to get ready for the second annual Spencer-Rivera Thanksgiving.

It had snowed the previous night and clouds still covered the sky, but Natalia thought the sun might make an appearance before long. She paused a moment before going back inside the mission with the final box of supplies to watch the gray clouds scudding across the sky.

"Looks like it's clearing up," a familiar voice said from beside her.

Natalia turned to find Father Ray smiling at her.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Father," she said.

"To you as well, Natalia," he said and then reached for the box. "Here, let me help you."

"Thank you," she said handing him the box.

"Are you dropping off donations?" he asked as he peeked at the contents of the box.

Natalia held open the door to the mission for him, then followed him into the main room, already crowded with those seeking a hot meal on the one day of the year they were almost guaranteed to get one. "No, Father," she said as she moved around him to lead him into the small kitchen. "We're cooking."

"We?" he asked, then his eyebrows rose as he caught sight of an apron-clad Olivia who was sitting at the stainless steel table peeling what seemed to Natalia a hundred pounds of potatoes.

Olivia raised her eyes from her task. "Hello, Father Ray," she said upon seeing the priest. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Happy Thanksgiving, Olivia," he said and set the box down on the table near Olivia.

"Where's Francesca?" he asked turning to Natalia.

"She's spending the morning with her sister at the Spauldings," she answered.

"And Rafael?" he asked. "He's well?"

"Yes, Father," Natalia said. "Thank you for asking." Natalia's eyes met her partner's, and she knew that Olivia had noticed he had not inquired about Emma or Ava.

"Have you come to lend a hand, Father?" Olivia asked jovially. "If so, grab a knife. These taters ain't gonna peel themselves."

He shook his head. "Just making my rounds," he answered. "Although I am glad to see you here, Olivia. I would have thought writing a check would be more your speed."

"And that was certainly true at one time," she replied. "But Sister Anne has been a great friend to me and I owe her more than just money."

Father Ray nodded thoughtfully. As if summoned by her name, the nun entered the kitchen carrying a brown paper sack filled with canned food.

"Oh, hello Ray," she said. "Natalia, there are about a dozen cans of green beans in here. Can you add them to the pot?"

"Sure," Natalia said grabbing a can opener.

Sister Anne turned back to Father Ray and asked, "Will you have time to say mass here for the homeless?"

Father Ray pinched his nose, an unfortunate move on his part, Olivia thought, as it drew attention to an area he was sorely overabundant in.

"We discussed this last week, Sister," he said. "Everyone's welcome to attend the regular scheduled mass at the church."

"Many have no way of getting there and it's too cold to walk," she pointed out.

"If you want, we can send the Beacon's courtesy van over," Natalia said.

Olivia nodded in agreement then said to Father Ray, "That is if you don't mind your service attended by a bunch of homeless folk, Father."

"All God's children are welcome in His house," he answered, the faint blush on his face telling her he had been thinking just that.

"Then we'll give Ava a call and she'll send the van over when you're ready for it," Natalia said to Sister Anne.

"And we really should see about getting the mission a van or a bus," Olivia added. "I'll check the listings after the holiday."

"Thank you," Sister Anne said. "For everything. You two are truly among the greatest blessings we have here."

Olivia noted Father Ray frowned at that, but then his face cleared as he said, "Then I'll see you later, Sister." He turned to Olivia and Natalia. "Ladies, enjoy your holiday."

"Thank you, Father," Natalia said and Olivia nodded.

After he left, Olivia turned to Natalia and asked, "Do you think we should send him to that spa we went to after we first got together?" Natalia looked at her curiously. "Because, really, those eyebrows have got to go."

Natalia quirked up her lips as she finally got what Olivia was saying. "I don't know," she answered playfully with a finger on her chin. "I don't think they carry enough wax, do you?"

Sister Anne burst out laughing.

By two, the farmhouse smelled wonderful with the warm aromas of roasting meat and steaming vegetables. Leyla and Emma had finished setting the large table and Natalia obsessively basted the turkey every twenty minutes.

"What time is everyone supposed to get here?" Olivia asked as she headed for the refrigerator to start preparing her special homemade eggnog punch.

"Doris and Blake should be here any minute," Natalia answered. "Blake wanted to help and she said Doris wanted to get a good seat for the game." Olivia chuckled at that and Natalia continued, "I told everyone else to be here by four."

"Sounds good," Olivia said glancing at the clock. "It smells wonderful in here, *querida*. Have I told you how much I love your cooking?"

"Oh, maybe once or twice," Natalia said with a smile. "Usually when it's your turn to cook and you don't want to."

"Me?" Olivia questioned with innocence in her voice. "I never do that."

A knock on the back door proved Natalia right about their friends' imminent arrival.

Clarissa and the twins were carrying covered pie dishes and Blake and Doris both had their arms full of recycled grocery bags.

"Set the pies on the buffet in the dining room, please," Natalia instructed the kids, who did as she asked. "Thanks so much for bringing them, Blake. You must have worked really hard."

"Oh, it was nothing," Blake said as she started to pull items from the bags. "Doris helped."

Olivia watched as Natalia looked at the mayor with a big smirk on her face. "Oh? You bake? How sweet."

Doris rolled her eyes. "Ha. Ha," she said and turned to Blake. "Thanks a lot. You promised not to tell."

"Sorry, honey," Blake said. "I'll just have to make it up to you."

Olivia snorted. "Gonna take a lot to make that one up, Blake," she said, winking at Doris.

"I don't mind," Blake said absently then looked up in confusion as the other three women laughed at her. "What?"

"Better make sure you spike that punch real good, Liv," Doris said and then left for the living room to claim her seat.

"What?" Blake asked again.

Olivia chuckled and grabbed the rum from the liquor cabinet.

Sister Anne stood waiting and watching as the parishioners for the Thanksgiving Day mass filed out of the church. Father Ray gave each one a smile and a handshake, but when the supplicants from the mission, who had waited until last to leave, filed by, his smile was a bit more restrained.

Anne thought that even though Ray had taken a vow of poverty and certainly honored that vow, he had still been brought up privileged and that sometimes showed in his attitude toward those less fortunate. She wondered if that was more a reflection of his family's notorious background or his cultural heritage. She would have loved to sit down and discuss it with him, but he wasn't the type to discuss his own shortcomings, especially with someone he perceived as a subordinate.

She liked Ray, she thought as she watched the last of the mission's itinerants file into the borrowed van, but she thought him outdated and parochial in his beliefs. She felt a wave of pity for him and for his flock.

"Thank you for coming, Sister," he said as he joined her.

"You're welcome, Ray," she answered. "And thanks for having us. I'm glad we could make it."

He nodded. "Yes, it was kind of Natalia to offer the hotel's van for your use," he said.

"And Olivia," she reminded, feeling a twinge of irritation at his continual dismissal of Natalia's partner.

"And Olivia, of course," he agreed, shifting his eyes away from hers.

"You still don't approve, do you, Ray?" she asked and his gaze whipped back to hers. "Even after seeing the great love they have for each other and how their family is thriving."

"It's not up to me to approve or disapprove, Sister," he said, his tone dark. "Church policy clearly states that such lifestyles are abominable in the eyes of God."

"That's the Church's policy, Ray, not God's."

"The Church isn't wrong about this," he stated emphatically.

"The Church has been wrong about a lot of things, Ray," she retorted, unable to keep the ire out of her voice. "It's just that when the world changes, it takes the Church a while to catch up. Like when it pardoned scientists condemned for heresy or canonized martyrs it had burned at the stake."

He gave a low, chuckling scoff. "Olivia Spencer and Natalia Rivera are hardly saints, Sister, no matter how many hours they serve at your little soup kitchen."

"No," she agreed. "They're not saints. They're just two women who live each day of their lives for each other and for their family. And that's all God asks of them."

"I don't think Olivia even believes in God," he said.

"Maybe not," she said. "But she believes in Natalia and I believe that's enough for God. Have a nice Thanksgiving, Ray."

With that she left him standing on the church steps, suddenly eager to get back to the mission because she had a lot of hungry people to feed.

Clarissa slowly crunched through the sparse snow cover as she made her way to the duck pond. Emma was using a rake to gather snow into a pile.

"What are you doing?" Clarissa asked.

Emma paused in her labor to glance at her friend. "Building a snowman," she answered then went back to work.

Clarissa looked around at the small pile Emma had made and said, "I don't think there's enough snow and it's not really cold enough to stick."

Emma shrugged, not stopping her raking. "I still want to try. Anna says that you'll never know unless you try."

Clarissa frowned at the mention of the detective's name, and then she shrugged. "Can I help?" she asked.

Emma nodded. "If you want, sure." She handed Clarissa the rake then picked up a shovel lying on the ground. Both girls began using their tools to scoop up the bigger drifts closer to the pond.

As the two girls worked, Emma chatted ceaselessly on a variety of topics, mostly on the things she was learning from Detective Li. Finally Clarissa's patience snapped. "Anna, Anna, Anna!" she said. "That's all you talk about."

Emma stopped working and frowned at her. "Well, she's great," she said. "And she's teaching me martial arts."

"That's all you do now," Clarissa complained. "All you care about is that dumb stuff."

"It's not dumb," Emma said loudly. "It's so I can defend myself from the bad men."

"But it's all you care about!" Clarissa cried.

Before Emma could reply, Clarissa heard a pair of familiar, derisive chuckles. She turned to see her two brothers approaching and she rolled her eyes. Since returning home, the twins had given her nothing but grief. At first, she thought having Kevin and Jason home would be a good thing. Emma worshipped her older brother and Clarissa wanted that as well, but her brothers were nothing but big bullies and after less than a week, she wished they would go away again.

"What's this?" Jason asked.

"It's a widdle snowman," Kevin answered mockingly.

"That's the most pitiful snowman I've ever seen," Jason laughed.

Emma scowled. "Go away. We don't need your help."

Kevin laughed. "This thing will never be a proper snowman."

"It's just a big old lump," Jason added.

"So?" Emma asked. "It's ours and that's what counts."

"It's stupid," Jason said.

"Just like you," Kevin said.

"Go away," Emma said, dropping her shovel and striding over to the boys who simply laughed at her.

Jason started to kick apart the pile of snow they had gathered together and a moment later Kevin joined him.

"Hey! Stop that," Clarissa cried as their hard work was rapidly being destroyed. She felt helpless tears sting her eyes.

Emma stepped forward again to get between the boys and the snow.

"Go away," she repeated in low voice.

Kevin laughed again cruelly and reached out an arm to shove Emma backward. Clarissa cried, "Emma!" as the younger girl fell back onto the snow pile.

Before she realized what was happening, Clarissa watched as Emma nimbly leaped to her feet and grabbed Kevin's still-outstretched arm with both hands. Giving him no time to react, Emma twisted the arm until the taller boy fell to his knees, where Emma immediately pushed him onto his face.

Jason recovered from his shock long enough to charge at Emma, who simply nimbly stepped out of his way and stuck out a foot, deftly tripping him so he too was lying on his face on the ground.

"I said, go away," Emma said in that same calm low voice.

Clarissa realized her mouth was hanging open and she shut it as the boys slowly got to their feet. She tensed to see if they would retaliate but Kevin said, "Come on, Jase. Let's leave the stupid snowman to the stupid girls."

"Yeah," his twin replied and Clarissa grinned as she realized neither one of them looked at her or Emma. "Stupid girls."

After they had left, Clarissa said, "I guess that martial arts stuff isn't so dumb after all."

"Ya think?" Emma said as she stood there with her arms folded watching the retreating twins. "Maybe Anna can teach you, too. If you want," Emma added.

Clarissa nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, that might be cool."

Emma nodded in agreement, then looked at her. "BFFs?" she asked and pulled her mitten off to hold out her pinky.

"BFFs," Clarissa agreed and twined her own pinky with Emma's.

By four, Josh and Doris were taking bets on the football game while Jonathan, Leyla and Ashlee were trying to outdo each other on the Wii game console Olivia had asked her nephew to bring downstairs from Emma's room. Olivia had intended it to keep the kids occupied, but that was a futile effort as the young adults monopolized the device. Sarah was trying to get Francesca and Colin to participate in an impromptu tea party with her.

Reva, meanwhile, was helping in the kitchen, but Olivia noted that her idea of helping was to sit at the table, drink coffee and direct the other women as they worked. She did, however, get up to answer the knock at the door just as Natalia pulled the turkey out of the oven.

"Wow, that looks great," Anna Li exclaimed as she entered the door Reva held open. She was carrying a covered casserole dish and a moment later she was followed by Emma's old teacher, much to Olivia's surprise.

"Ms. Jennings!" Natalia said before Olivia could.

"Hello, Ms. Rivera, Ms. Spencer," she smiled and handed Natalia a wrapped bottle of wine. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Thank you," Natalia said. "How nice to see you again. And please, it's Natalia and Olivia."

"I'm Callie," she said, warmly. "And it's good to see you again, too. When Anna asked me to join her, I immediately agreed."

Natalia turned to Anna with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, you did say I could bring a date," Anna said with a shrug.

"So I did," Natalia smiled.

Olivia turned a smirk on Ms. Jennings. "So...diversity, huh?" she asked.

"So...roommates, huh?" Ms. Jennings shot back with a saucy grin of her own.

Both women burst into laughter and Olivia noticed that even Natalia was chuckling. Olivia put an arm around the teacher's shoulder and said, "Callie, this lazy wench is Reva Lewis and the other lady is Blake Marler." She then steered the woman into the living room.

"These juvenile delinquents are my nephew and Reva's son Jonathan, Natalia's sister Leyla and Ashlee Wolfe. Her mother there and Blake's girlfriend you may know, Mayor Doris Wolfe and this furry fellow is Josh, Reva's husband. Everyone, this is Callie Jennings, Emma's old school teacher." Then feeling a little wicked, Olivia added, "Anna's date."

At that, Doris's head swiveled from the television to inspect the teacher. Then her eyes met Olivia's and narrowed before turning back to the game.

"Where's Emma?" Callie asked.

"Outside with the other kids," Olivia answered.

"I think I'll go say hello," Callie said.

"Okay," Olivia agreed. "Tell them to come in. Dinner's almost ready and they need to get cleaned up."

As the teacher left through the front door, Olivia's eyes again met with Doris's and smirked at the expression on her friend's face. With a shrug, she headed back to the kitchen.

Natalia was giving the turkey its final baste as Blake worked to plate the various vegetables. Olivia lifted the cover off the casserole and took a big sniff. "Oh yeah," she groaned in appreciation. "Smells just like home."

"Does it need to be heated up?" Natalia asked.

"Just for a few minutes," Anna answered. "It's best served hot."

Blake took the casserole over to the oven.

"So, Anna," Reva said, once again holding court at the table. "Any progress on Winslow?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid," Anna answered. Briefly she outlined the progress she and Mallet had made, which wasn't much other than widening the manhunt to include more international agencies. She also told them Mallet's theory that Winslow might be specifically targeting Olivia's family.

Reva turned to Olivia, who was making the gravy from the turkey drippings. "You really need to stop dancing on people's graves, Liv," she said.

"I will if you will," Olivia smirked back as she dipped a finger into the hot gravy and popped it in her mouth. "Perfect," she announced to her partner.

"Can you plate the dressing, *querida*?" Natalia asked as she arranged the turkey on the serving platter. Then she turned to Anna and asked, "Are we his target?" Olivia could hear the concern in her voice.

"I don't think so," Anna answered. "At least, not his only target."

"Good," Natalia said. "But that's enough talk about that subject. Today is for giving thanks and remembering our many blessings. Everyone grab a dish and let's go."

Olivia smiled at her as Natalia carried the turkey into the dining room.

"All right, ladies," she said to the group. "You heard my woman...let's get this feast on the table."

With the children seated at a small table and the adults at the main table, Natalia felt a glow of satisfaction. She had always dreamed of scenes like this; a table bursting with homemade food with loved ones seated around it. Her heart felt filled with so much love it was only the absence of Rafe and Ava that kept the day from being perfect. So many times

after being forced to leave her parent's home, Natalia had wished for this and felt so grateful that it was now possible thanks to the amazing woman at her side.

"Josh?" Natalia asked. "Will you say the blessing for us?"

"I'd be happy to, Natalia," the kind man answered and everyone joined hands. "Dear Father," he began. "On this day of giving thanks, we ask that our hearts be filled with Your love and our thoughts for those who cannot be here with us today. We ask Your blessing for those families whose loved ones were tragically taken from them and that this Thanksgiving Day you give them comfort to ease their pain. We ask for Your blessing for our lovely hosts Olivia and Natalia and their children, especially Rafael and we pray You keep him safe as well as the other brave men and women who are fighting for our freedoms. May they come home soon. Lord, we also ask that we remember those who are less fortunate so that we may be truly thankful for Your many blessings. Amen."

"Amen," everyone echoed and Natalia spent an extra moment reinforcing the former preacher's prayer to keep their son well. She finally looked up at Josh and said. "Thank you. That was lovely."

"You're welcome," he said with his usual warm smile. Then he turned to Olivia. "Are you going to carve that bird Spencer, or are you just going to let it look pretty?"

Olivia picked up her freshly honed carving knife and said, "Oh, I'm gonna carve this bird up real good, Lewis."

Everyone laughed and Natalia started passing around the bountiful dishes.

While the others relaxed around the table, Doris slipped out the front door for a cigarette. Hearing the door open behind her, she turned, hoping it was Blake, but she frowned when Callie emerged instead. The two women looked at each other for a moment, and then Doris held out her pack of smokes and smirked as the other woman took one.

After a few minutes of smoking in the cold, Doris finally decided to break the silence. "So, you're a teacher?" she asked. "I heard Anna was assigned to the school. Is that how you met?"

Ms. Jennings nodded. "You're actually familiar with my work, Mayor Wolfe."

Doris frowned and frantically thought about what the teacher could mean.

Callie continued. "Two years ago Emma Spencer was my student."

Doris felt her stomach drop. "Oh God," she said. "My Two Mommies?"

The younger woman nodded. "I'm sure you could imagine my dismay when my student's report celebrating her loving family was turned into a political tool to spread hate and ignorance."

"Ms. Jennings..." Doris started.

"And imagine my surprise when later on I found out that you yourself are gay," Callie continued on.

Doris sighed. "I'm sorry," she said then twisted her mouth in chagrin. "I know that's a pathetic apology, but I really do regret that whole thing."

Callie shook her head. "A homosexual who persecutes other homosexuals is the worst kind of hypocrite, Mayor Wolfe. That was a horrible thing you did, not only to Emma and her mothers, but to the entire gay community as well."

"I know," Doris agreed. "And you're right, that was a terrible thing I did and I'm truly, truly sorry. I can only promise that I will never do something like that again."

Callie considered her thoughtfully as she ground out her cigarette. "I understand you've started your own law firm," she said. Doris nodded her head warily and Callie continued, "I'm on the board at the Springfield LGBT Community Resource Center and thanks to the generosity of several prominent benefactors, including Olivia and Natalia, we find our small organization growing faster than we can keep up with. That leaves us with an urgent need for legal services. Perhaps you would care to help?" Doris waited a moment and sure enough Ms. Jennings added, "Pro bono, of course."

Doris smirked, suddenly happy that her ex-lover had attracted the feisty little teacher, who had just proven herself worthy of the detective. "As a proud member of the community, Ms. Jennings, it would be my pleasure to provide my services...pro bono, of course."

"Excellent," Ms. Jennings said with an emphatic nod. "And call me Callie, Doris."

The Towers restaurant had made an attempt to be festive, Ava thought, but it still looked exactly like what it was: a lonely way station for people far from home and staffed by people too single or too newly-employed to warrant the day off. Looking around, she spotted individual diners, a few couples and the odd family who had opted to enjoy their

Thanksgiving feast out rather than stay home. She knew the restaurant at the Beacon looked the same.

Finally spotting Jeffrey sitting at a table for two, she made her way to it. He stood up with a smile and gave her a warm hug.

"Hi honey," he said. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"You too, Dad," she said then sat in the chair he held out for her. They made small talk as their traditional dinner was served, both of them carefully avoiding the subject of Olivia and Natalia. Ava felt a heaviness in her heart for not being with the rest of her family, but that did not lessen her anger at Natalia's stubbornness. It just wasn't fair that Natalia had turned a blind eye to the crimes her partner had committed, yet could not see past a mistake Jeffrey had made as a kid.

Realizing that her father had asked her a question, she returned her attention back to him. "I'm sorry," she said. "What was that?"

"I asked if you had given further consideration of my job offer as campaign manager," he said.

"Oh...well, not really, no," she answered. "Work was very busy with the holiday travelers this week. So, you've made up your mind you'll run?"

"Pretty much," he answered. "With Doris Wolfe stepping down as D.A. I've got a good shot at getting my job back and that makes running for office more feasible."

"Well," she hedged. "I really do like Doris, she's like Mom's best friend and you know how politics can get."

"I do," he said. "Which is why I want my daughter working with me. It will show the voters how good a family man I am with traditional family values."

Ava felt a sense of disquiet at that and tried to hide it from her father, but he must have seen it on her face because he added, "What is it, honey?"

Before she could evade the question, a mild disturbance from the entrance caught their attention.

Led by Felicia, the Boudreau clan consisting of Mel, Cyrus, Christina and Remy, who was carrying Clayton in his arms, entered the restaurant. As always upon seeing the young boy who resembled his half brother so much, Ava felt her heart clench in pain.

"Cute kid," Jeffrey remarked. "So, I really do think you should consider my offer, honey."

Ava turned to stare at him.

"What?" she asked.

"It could be your own start in politics," he said before popping another bite of turkey in his mouth.

"Cute kid?" she asked.

He looked at her, a confused look on his face. Glancing at the Boudreaus, he turned to her with a shrug and said, "He does take after his parents I imagine. What?"

"And he doesn't remind you of anyone?" she asked.

He glanced over at the family who was finally being seated at their table. "Well, like I said, he looks a lot like Remy. Ava, what's this about?"

"Do you even remember him, Dad?" she asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Who?"

"Who? *Who?*" she repeated, this time louder. "Don't you think that little boy reminds you of someone? Say...your grandson?"

"I suppose," he answered. "But Ava, Max was only around a couple of days and that was two years ago."

Ava sat there in surprise. She felt as if blinders had been removed from her eyes and a series of images replayed through her mind: flying from San Francisco for her father's memorial service, her step-mother crying for her husband, her baby brother left without a father, Olivia mourning a lost friend. Then her mind flashed to things she knew had happened, but had not experienced: a naïve young girl dancing with a handsome young man, that same girl waking up with the sick realization she had been violated, realizing she was pregnant and trying to get help only to be condemned by her own mother, forced to give away the child because she was left alone and responsible not only for herself, but for her siblings as well.

"Oh, my God," Ava exclaimed in a strangled whisper. "Natalia was right. You really haven't changed, have you?"

Jeffrey looked at her with the same look of confusion on his face. "What do you mean, Ava?"

"You're still running away from your family."

He looked thunderstruck. "I just got back to Springfield," he claimed.

"That's not what I mean," she spat. "You always run away. You left Reva and your son. You left Mom alone and pregnant after you *raped* her."

"Ava!" he said in a whisper after quickly glancing around the restaurant. "Keep your voice down!"

"Why?" she asked, not modulating her volume. "Are you afraid that bit of gossip will hurt your political ambitions?"

"No, honey, that's not it," he said. "Look, I was just a kid. I had a job to do and I was the only one who could do it. What was I supposed to do?"

"That's your excuse? You had a job? Did you think that throwing a wad of cash at Mom was enough? That's how you take responsibility for your actions? What about me? Did you even care what happened to me?" Ava felt the tears running down her face.

"Honey, I didn't know Olivia was going to give you up for adoption," he said.

"But you knew she was pregnant," Ava pointed out as she roughly wiped her face with her cloth napkin. "Anna told you, but you just went on your merry way as if I didn't even exist."

"Ava, let's go somewhere and discuss this," he said.

"All you cared about was your fricking *job*," she hissed as if he hadn't spoken. "That's *all* you've ever cared about. What about your family, Dad?"

"I care, Ava," he said, his own face flushed with either anger or embarrassment, Ava couldn't tell. "I always have cared about you and I always will."

"No, you don't," she insisted and wiped at her face again. "Your job was more important than Mom and me and here you are nearly thirty years later and it's still more important than your wife and son. You abandoned us all and now you can't even remember your own grandson."

"Ava..."

"What kind of man are you?" she asked.

"Ava, that's not fair," he said. "I've tried to make it up to you and your mother."

"And what about Reva and Colin?" she said. "How are you going to make it up to them?"

"That's not your concern, Ava," he said angrily.

"Colin is my brother, Dad," she said. "He'll always be my concern." She stood up and threw her napkin on top of her uneaten dinner, and then she leaned forward to say in his face.

"But you know what? He'll be okay because he has his mother and Josh and me and Olivia and even Natalia because we all understand the true meaning of family. If you haven't learned that by now, Dad, then you never will."

"Ava..." he started, also standing up, but she interrupted him again with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Oh, and by the way..." She picked up her purse and pushed her chair back so hard it fell over. "I'm going to have to decline your job offer. My skills will be better utilized serving the family business. But here's a word of advice: if you even *think* about using Doris's sexual orientation against her, you'll regret it. She's got a lot of allies in this town who would be glad to run your sorry ass out of town before you knew what was happening. Happy Thanksgiving, Jeffrey."

As she strode out of the restaurant, she caught sight of Remy watching her and in his eyes was the kind understanding that she had always admired. He gave her a small smile and a nod as she left the restaurant.

Putting another dish in the rack to dry, Natalia glanced out the window and saw a tall figure crossing the snow-covered yard and disappear into the barn. She looked at the guard who was on his break and eating his holiday dinner at the table, "Who is that in the barn?"

He immediately put down his fork and keyed his walkie-talkie and held a finger to his ear as he queried the agents on duty outside.

"Ms. Peralta," he answered Natalia a moment later.

Natalia nodded, shut off the tap and dried her hands before grabbing her coat from the hook near the back door.

"Should I go, ma'am?" he asked, half standing up

She held out a hand to stop him. "No, no. that's all right. Finish your dinner."

"Thank you," he said, sitting down again. "It's very good."

"You're welcome," Natalia said absently as she buttoned her coat and hurried from the house, not bothering to put on her boots. She barely noticed the cold from the snow as she walked toward the barn.

Pushing open the heavy door, she called out, "Ava?"

The inside was dark and Natalia felt along the wall until she found the switch that turned on the bare bulb that hung from the rafters on a worn electrical cord. "Ava," she said again and heard a small noise from one of the horse stalls.

"Can you turn off the light?" Ava asked in a voice hoarse from tears.

Natalia immediately switched off the light, but then she lit the Coleman lantern that sat on the supply cabinet. She carried the lamp to the stall and set it outside so it provided a soft light.

Inside the stall, Ava was huddled in the corner and hugging her knees against her chest in the same manner Emma did when she was upset. Natalia stepped over and quietly sat next to the young woman, who was weeping.

Wanting to give Ava time, Natalia simply sat there on the cold floor and her thoughts turned back to when she had first come to know the younger woman. Ava had been an active participant in her mother's campaign to steal Nicky away from her. At the time, Natalia had naturally resented Ava for her actions, but now she recognized them as just another part of the fierce Spencer loyalty toward family.

Olivia had told her that when she first revealed their relationship to her daughter, that she was in love with Natalia, but who had left, Ava's first response had been for Olivia to go and get her woman. After learning of that immediate acceptance, Natalia had grown to respect Ava for the remarkable woman she was.

"Sometimes I wonder if it was my fault he died," Ava said in a whisper. "All the lies and the scheming I did. Was it some sort of divine punishment for what I did?"

"No, sweetie, God doesn't work that way," Natalia said. "When Rafe got diabetes, I wondered the same thing. Was he being punished for my having him out of wedlock, or for not doing what my parents wanted me to and give him to a family who could better provide for him? But in time I realized that in a way Rafe's illness was a blessing. It caused us both to grow stronger and to overcome the obstacles it presented."

"I don't think I can ever see Max's death as a blessing, Natalia," Ava said.

"No, me either," Natalia agreed. "I can't imagine the horror of losing a child although Olivia and I live with that fear every day Rafe is overseas, but I think perhaps you have a chance to learn from the actions you took during that time – to learn from them and maybe take a different course next time."

Ava was silent a while then she said, "You were right, you know." Upon Natalia's questioning look she added, "About Jeffrey. He hasn't changed, hasn't learned anything from the past. All he cares about is his 'job.' He doesn't..."

Natalia's heart broke at the sorrow in Ava's voice.

"He doesn't even remember what Max looked like," Ava finished and broke into fresh sobs.

"Oh sweetie," Natalia said and pulled the crying woman into her arms. "It's all right," she said softly. "You'll always remember Max and so will Remy and Olivia. Max will live forever in our family's hearts. If Jeffrey can't do that, then that is his loss, Ava, and not your fault and certainly not Max's."

"I just miss him so much," Ava cried, speaking about her son. "Why does it still hurt so much, Natalia?"

"Because he was your son and you love him," Natalia answered simply.

"I just want it to stop hurting."

"I know," Natalia said, rubbing her hand soothingly over Ava's back. "I don't think it ever will stop hurting, sweetie, but it will get better. I think you can make it a little easier to deal with. Your mom told you how Dr. Boudreau has been helping us. Perhaps she is a good person to talk to about your feelings about Max, especially since she was his family, too?"

"Huh." Ava lifted a hand to wipe her nose. "I never thought about it that way," she said with a sniff. "Do you think she can help?"

"I do," Natalia said emphatically and felt the younger woman give a heavy sigh.

"All right," Ava said. "I guess it couldn't hurt as much as this."

"Of course it won't," Natalia said. "And just remember that no matter what, I am your family, too, and I will always be there for you."

"Even when I do stupid things?" Ava asked.

"Even then," Natalia answered. "I love you, Ava."

Ava sighed again and Natalia felt the other woman's body relax the tension it had been holding. Looking up, she saw Olivia standing quietly at the entrance to the stall, tears running down her face. As their eyes met, Olivia mouthed silently, "Thank you."

"I love you," Natalia said silently back. She felt the cold cement under her, but was warmed by the precious woman in her arms and the love shining at her from her partner.

Their guests had lingered long after dinner, Natalia noted with satisfaction and contentment. The children had slowly dropped off one by one and an emotionally exhausted Ava had been sleeping peacefully in Rafe's bedroom the last time Natalia had checked on her. Emma, Clarissa and Sarah had decided on a no-boys-allowed slumber party in Emma's room after the girls had confiscated the Wii from the protesting young adults. Ashlee decided to spend the rest of the evening with Daisy and James at the mansion and Jonathan and Leyla had gone with her.

After they left, Natalia thought about her feelings for the burgeoning relationship between her sister and the charming young man. From what she knew, Jonathan had been somewhat of a rake in his younger days, but then again, all of their children had been in trouble in one form or another so she certainly wasn't in any position to judge. However, she also knew from her own observations that the responsibility of being a single father had matured him. He had directed that wild energy in a positive manner of nurturing and protecting his daughter. She also knew from an overheard conversation between him and Josh Lewis that he was making a fine career for himself.

Still, she worried for his safety and – by extension – Leyla's safety with Winslow on the loose. Jonathan's mad uncle had been trying to murder him since the day he had been born and the fact that he hadn't succeeded was due to Olivia's protection and Jonathan's own luck. In any case, she thought they made a lovely couple and she prayed things worked out for them.

Anna handed her a handwritten sheet, the recipe for the calabaza casserole she had brought. Olivia had enjoyed it so much, Natalia wanted to add it to their regular diet.

"Thank you," she said looking over the ingredients. "Are some of these spices available locally? I recognize some from Puerto Rican cuisine, but not all of them."

"Not here in Springfield, but in Chicago," the detective answered. "There's a small bodega I visit every few months to stock up," she said as she took the paper and added an address to it.

"Oh, I know this place," Natalia said happily, recognizing the name of a small shop in her old neighborhood. "Olivia and I are planning a trip to Chicago soon. I'll pick up extra for you, too."

"Thanks, Natalia," Anna said with a warm smile. "And thanks so much for having Callie and I today. We've had a great time."

"Thank you for coming," Natalia answered. "You both are welcome anytime and I don't just mean all the times you're here watching our backs or picking up Emma."

"All right," Anna said. "I think Callie is ready to go, so I'll say good night."

"Good night and be careful going home," Natalia said, moving in for a hug.

Looking around, she noticed Josh and Reva gathering up their sleeping son. Doris and Blake were also preparing to leave. Blake's sons were already heading out the front door without saying goodbye. She frowned at that. While the boys hadn't been outright rude, they hadn't gone out of their way to be polite or sociable either. Although she did sense something had gone on between them and the girls; when earlier Emma declared her room a boys-free zone, they had simply shifted their eyes and said nothing. Supposing they were the next set of Springfield's juvenile delinquents, she wished Blake strength in dealing with them.

Moving over to Olivia's side, she smiled as her lover put an arm around her shoulders as they said goodbye to their guests. As the last car pulled away, Olivia looked at her and said, "Another successful Thanksgiving, baby."

"The best yet," she agreed.

"But not as good as next year's," Olivia said with her eyes twinkling.

"Can't wait," Natalia responded with an emphatic nod. "Let's go to bed; I'm exhausted."

"Right there with ya."

Natalia woke up with the realization that the other half of their bed was empty. Looking around the room, she could see no sign of her partner. She grabbed her silk robe and went in search of Olivia.

The nursery's door was ajar and inside under the soft light of the Plush Bunny lamp. Olivia sat in the rocker cradling Francesca with one arm while holding a bottle for the baby with her other hand.

"Hey," Natalia said softly.

Olivia looked up with a wide smile. "Hi, baby. Sorry if I woke you."

"You know I can never sleep without you by my side," she said, moving closer.

"Me without you, either," Olivia grinned.

"You should have woken me if she needed feeding," Natalia said. "I guess she went to sleep too early last night."

"Too much excitement all day," Olivia agreed. As Olivia finished feeding the baby, Natalia glanced at the Sponge Bob wind up alarm clock Emma had bought for her sister, insisting that Francesca would need it for school, never mind that event was still years away.

"Oh!" Natalia exclaimed as she noted that the time was well past midnight. "It's her birthday."

Olivia smiled down at the baby. "Yeah, so it is. She's officially one year old. Happy birthday, Sweet Pea." Olivia kissed the child's hair.

Natalia reached for her daughter, who was yawning. She carried her over to crib and laid her down. She then leaned down to kiss her.

"Good night, my darling girl and happy birthday," she whispered. "I love you."

"Ov you, *Mamí*," the baby said and promptly fell asleep.

Surprised, Natalia quickly looked at Olivia who had a wide smile on her face.

"Love you, too, *Mamí*," Olivia said.

"You taught her to call me mommy in Spanish?" she asked, feeling tears in her eyes. "How did you know?"

Olivia shrugged in the adorable self-deprecating way of hers. "I heard you call her that so I asked Leyla. She said it's like a term of endearment between Hispanic mothers and their daughters. I figured it was apropos since we're teaching her Spanish anyway."

Natalia quirked her lips. "So how long have you been coaching her?"

"About a week," Olivia said with another shrug.

Natalia walked over and drew her lover into her arms. "Thank you, *querida*," she said, leaning in for a long kiss.

"Back to bed?" Olivia asked as she pulled away, slightly out of breath.

"Tired?" Natalia asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Not really," Olivia replied.

"Good," Natalia said with a nod. "Then definitely back to bed."

Natalia felt Olivia's saucy smirk throughout her body and she took her lover's hand to lead her back to their bedroom, offering up another prayer of thanks for all of their many blessings.

As she pulled her car into her parking spot at her apartment complex, Anna felt herself smiling. Her date with Callie had ended very late and on a very good note. The two women had agreed to spend plenty of time together this weekend. As she approached her apartment, she jiggled her keys happily and thought about the romantic dinner she was planning to cook for the beautiful teacher, but then she stopped short, her whole body growing cold. Hanging from the doorknob of her apartment was a festive gift bag, colorful tissue paper and curled ribbons jutting out of the top.

Instinctively, she looked around, even though she knew she would find no one around, especially this late at night. Walking forward again, she plucked the bag from the handle and then unlocked the door. She entered quickly and double locked the door behind her. She put the bag on her kitchen island and laid her service revolver next to it and then just stared at it for a few minutes. The gaily decorated bag seemed to mock her with its innocence and her anger grew with each passing moment.

Finally, she reached a hand inside and drew out a wrapped object about six inches long and the same wide. With trembling hands, she unwrapped it and felt her body grow even colder.



Sitting before her was a bronze statue of an armored woman sitting on an equally armored war horse. Her open helm revealed the grim, but determined visage of a very young woman, her expression one of surety and determination. One hand held the reins of the horse and the other held an outstretched medieval long sword. The entire pose was that of a woman ready to do battle armed with the holy knowledge that her cause was divinely ordained.

The most chilling aspect of her gift was that someone – her father she presumed – had wrapped a white cord around the body of the woman. It was as if to say that even the strong and determined can be bound by forces beyond her control.

"What the hell?" Anna whispered and breathed deep, suddenly very frightened to her core.

THE END

Friends and Lovers by Geekgrrllurking

ACT 1

A light layer of frost covered the window in the master bedroom of the farmhouse, a testament to the fact that old man winter was well on his way. Warm and snug inside, Olivia Spencer yawned, groaning softly as she sleepily ran a hand through her tousled hair. Shuffling into the bathroom, she stretched slowly, working the kinks out of her back. Leaning forward on the vanity, she stared at her reflection and shook her head, smiling as she recalled just how she got those achy muscles.

"God, you're getting old, Spencer."

"I don't believe a word of it, *querida*," Natalia Rivera said as she stepped into the spacious bathroom and wrapped her arms around her grumbling partner.

"Hmph. So says the woman who tried to kill me last night. Somehow I think you're a little biased," Olivia grumped but leaned into the embrace.

"Besides, don't you know that cougars are sexy?" Natalia nuzzled along the soft hair behind her lover's ear before finding and nipping playfully at a tempting earlobe. "I'm just sayin'."

Olivia turned in her lover's arms, enjoying the sweet curves pressing her back against the vanity and closed the scant distance to taste her lover's full lips.

"We will be late if you keep this up, missy."

Natalia sighed and nodded, nuzzling closer. Their dinner in Chicago with her parents had been arranged for weeks and a part of her was dreading it, but she knew it was the right thing to do. Her mother had sounded stunned when she had called to make the arrangements. It would almost have been funny if it hadn't been such a sad statement about their relationship. Regardless of the less than warm reception Natalia had Christmas presents wrapped and ready from their family for both of her parents.

Natalia leaned into her lover, taking comfort from her sleepy warmth as long fingers dragged lazily through her hair. The one good thing about all the craziness around them this year with Edmund was that Natalia realized just how important all her family ties were. Leyla's deciding to come back into her life had been an unexpected blessing, one that Natalia cherished more and more with each passing day as she got to know the young woman better.

And now, despite how she had been treated over the years, Natalia still wanted her older brother Leo and her parents involved in her life in some way too. She didn't hold out much hope of their actually attending the wedding ceremony over New Year's, but deep down a part of her wished her parents would surprise her and rise to the occasion. Realistically though, she knew they had a hard enough time admitting their daughter was in a committed lesbian relationship.

Olivia sensed the change in her lover's mood and pulled the slight brunette into a tighter hug, tucking the dark head under her chin. She wouldn't push Natalia when she went into one of these introspective funks but she could just hold her, so she knew she wasn't alone. Sometimes actions were more important than words.

"We can head out of town once we swing by the Beacon to drop Sweet Pea off and then it's just you and me and some serious retail therapy with the credit cards." Olivia smirked into

the soft dark hair. She still wasn't sure what she was going to get the dark-haired beauty for Christmas -- hopefully something would come to her soon.

"And alone time with my parents." Natalia said quietly.

"And time with your parents." Olivia conceded with a slight grimace. Her eyes suddenly twinkled with mischief. "And I'm definitely looking forward to finding our honeymoon present." Olivia waggled her eyebrows and flushed with pleasure as Natalia blushed slightly, snuggling closer into the crook of her neck. Grinning unrepentantly, she pulled back to catch the dark eyes of her lover.

"You still want to, right?"

Natalia bit her bottom lip and nodded her head shyly, her gaze travelling down Olivia's body. The desire she felt for the other woman did things to her that she never would have even considered before. And now...well, now she couldn't wait for the next adventure with her lover.

"In fact, I don't know if I can wait until our honeymoon to..." Natalia leaned in, trapping her lover against the vanity and whispered the naughty details into Olivia's ear.

Olivia smiled knowingly and tugged, pulling the tails of Natalia's white cotton shirt out of her jeans, all thoughts of a shower and getting dressed disappearing with the suggestive words falling from those delectable lips. Natalia caught her roving hands and pressed them to the countertop behind her, effectively trapping her before starting a searing trail of kisses down her body.

Olivia grinned as she felt herself guided up onto the marble vanity countertop, Natalia making quick work of removing her sleep shorts as she went.

"Well, so much for an early start..."

Natalia's lips trailed down Olivia's warm skin, pausing only to peel her lover's shirt from her body in one quick movement, thrilling at the gasp this caused.

"Little cold, baby?" Natalia smirked as her thumbs slowly circled erect nipples, and then flicked them, enjoying the hiss of pleasure from her lover with her actions. Olivia squirmed beneath her touch, clearly wanting more; and she was more than happy to oblige.

"More like hot for you," Olivia growled and arched into her fiancée's sure touch.

“Oh, really?” Natalia grinned against soft skin, nipping and biting as she made her way down toned abs, gently licking to take any sting away. Her nose nuzzled along sensitive skin, as she descended below an adorable navel and down into the patch of short hair below. Breathing against the moist heat she found there, she smiled as Olivia rocked her hips clearly needing more. “Mmm, somebody’s twitchy this morning.”

Olivia whimpered softly in response, the hum of her lover’s voice vibrating against her heated flesh driving her insane with want. She leaned back as the brunette shifted her position slightly, eagerly moving in to taste her desire.

“God, I knew there were benefits to living with a morning person.” Olivia sighed as Natalia’s tongue finally swirled around her clit, her right hand finding its way into soft dark hair, urging her on. Her lover hummed against her and flicked hard with the tip of her tongue in response. Olivia chuckled, her body jerking, enjoying every second of attention Natalia paid her.

It still shocked her sometimes how unbelievably arousing it was to find Natalia between her legs, taking control and wantonly pleasuring her so thoroughly. Liquid fire rushed through her veins as Natalia suddenly lightly bit and sucked on her, pushing her quickly beyond rational thought as her head fell back, and she cried out softly.

Natalia glanced up over the swell of Olivia’s naked belly at the adorably tousled honey-blond head. She paused and waited, wanting to see those amazing green eyes once more before taking her completely over the edge. She wasn’t disappointed as Olivia’s eyes opened, hooded and dark with desire, stared intensely at her. Dipping her head again, she captured the stiff throbbing clit, flicking hard with her tongue as Olivia ground hard against her, clearly needing more. Natalia trailed her fingers through damp curls and claimed her lover, thrusting her hand deeply, intimately loving her with her touch.

Olivia moaned loudly, her eyes slamming shut as she was thoroughly taken, the first hints of her orgasm threatening to overtake her. Filling and thrusting deep into the wet heat, Natalia was rewarded with more needy moans as the lithe woman before her bucked, trying to increase the tempo. Natalia ignored her, taking her time bringing her to the peak and then slowing it down again, much to Olivia’s frustration.

A slightly desperate whimper finally escaped from the older woman. Smiling at the familiar sound Natalia knew Olivia was close and took pity. Picking up the pace, she angled her hand slightly, thrusting deeper and began moving ever faster with the flicking of her tongue, circling the needy clit, bringing her lover once again to the brink. Natalia looked up and watched the fire of desire blazing in Olivia’s intense gaze.

Humming softly in sympathy, Natalia watched as Olivia suddenly arched and stilled, frozen as she danced along the edge of pleasure and then came crashing and tumbling over to the other side. Thrusting hard against her, Natalia hung on for dear life, taking care to ride the waves of pleasure along with her lover, teasing her higher if possible. Her body finally relaxing, Olivia slumped and moaned softly, sated and exhausted as she tried to catch her breath.

“You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?” Olivia panted once she could finally get her wits about her again as Natalia chuckled against her. She could feel puffs of hot breath tickling against her slick flushed skin, triggering tiny aftershocks. A deliciously lazy moan vibrated deep in Olivia’s chest and Natalia gently pulled herself away and moved back up her body. She smiled as soft lips made a trail back up to her navel, a moist tongue tracing the salty hollows of her abs, her hips below moving and lifting of their own accord.

“Have I not worn you out yet?” Natalia murmured, moving up to capture Olivia’s lips possessively before once again moving away and standing. Pulling Olivia off the vanity and onto her feet, she held on tight to her slightly wobbly lover, a part of her pleased she had affected her so intensely with their lovemaking.

“I’ll never be tired of you.” Olivia sighed, burrowing her nose along the collar of Natalia’s shirt, breathing her scent in contentedly. “Don’t you know, you’re stuck with me?”

“And I thank God for that. Every. Single. Day.” Natalia smiled softly, running her fingers through the thick strands of hair, meaning every word. “Now hop in that shower, while I finish packing for the weekend. I can take mine when you head down for breakfast.” Natalia swatted her lover’s bare bottom playfully before turning to make her way back out to their bedroom.

“That can wait,” Olivia said, her fingers tangling with Natalia’s, pulling her back towards her body, missing her lover’s warmth. “I was thinking we could conserve some energy and shower together.” Olivia grinned and arched an eyebrow saucily before moving away to step into the stall.

Swallowing hard, Natalia blinked for a moment and then stripped quickly before following her lover into the narrow shower stall, the hot water hitting her like needles. Natalia’s eyes raked hungrily down Olivia’s sleek wet form, desire plain on her face.

“I like the way you think.” Natalia moved her hand, hesitantly, almost reverently, across Olivia’s delicate collarbone and down to trace along lush full breasts before looking up at her lover’s eyes again, sharp teeth biting her full bottom lip.

“God what you do to me,” Olivia murmured softly, a little shocked at how quickly arousal was flaring deep in her belly again. Taking a deep, shaky breath she pushed her needs to the side and reached out for the bottle of shampoo beside her. Moving slowly she popped it open and squeezed a dollop onto the palm of her hand. Olivia knew that she wanted to take her time, savoring the feel of this amazing woman slick and slippery beneath her fingertips.

“Turn around,” Olivia all but growled. With a little sexy smile Natalia spun slowly under the water spray, giving her the opportunity to watch the rivulets of water race down her lover’s back and delightfully toned bottom. She whimpered slightly at the sight.

Covering both hands with the shampoo, Olivia ran her fingers into the long dark tresses, building a lather of suds. Natalia stepped back against her, Olivia’s nipples rubbing against the slope of her back. She heard a low moan as the brunette tipped her head forward and taking the hint, she started to massage her scalp.

Natalia’s hands came up to brace against the tile wall, her legs parting slightly, Olivia smirked and took the invitation, sliding her muscled thigh between, pressing tight to her core. Natalia’s breath hitched, and she could feel her wet heat start to rock against her.

Olivia started to rub little circles at the top of her lover’s head, tracing her fingers down behind her ears, kneading and pulling at the cords of her elegant neck before gathering the dark tresses back up to the top of her head and starting all over again. Natalia’s rumbling purr of pure pleasure hit her low, coiling in the pit of her stomach as her desire made itself known again, enjoying the feel of her body moving against her thigh, the curve of her ass pressing against her in a most delightful way.

Reluctantly Natalia moved away, her partner’s growl of frustration making her laugh as she turned her into the spray of the showerhead, rinsing the soap and suds from her long dark hair. Leaning back into the water spray, Natalia’s breasts presented too great a temptation, finding their way into Olivia’s hands, palming the stiff nubs, the weight perfect as she squeezed and massaged them.

“Please, Olivia,” Natalia moaned finally as she leaned forward again, watching her lover play with her body, whose thumbs were now circling very erect nipples. Unable to take much more of the teasing, her body flushed with a need that needed tending to now. Pushing weakly on Olivia’s shoulder with her left hand, her partner grinned, taking the not so subtle hint and sank to her knees, bringing them nose to navel.

Olivia watched entranced as water trickled over tight abs, down and around an adorable bellybutton, small droplets of water falling into the tiny hollow. Nuzzling against the soft warm skin, she kissed and sucked at the water collecting there, her tongue laving around

the delicate edge of skin. Natalia giggled, her stomach jiggling with the movement, coarse hair tickling at Olivia's throat reminding her of other places she was looking forward to exploring.

She ran her hands along the gentle curve of Natalia's hips to hold her steady, as she felt her lover's fingers slide through her own hair, pulling the moist strands back out of her eyes. Looking up the long body into dark chocolate eyes her heart clenched at the beauty and trust reflecting back.

"I love you so much..." Olivia murmured against soft skin, dipping her head to follow a trail of water trickling down the swell of stomach before her, licking and sucking her way lower, pausing when finally reaching damp dark curls. Her hand slipped lower along Natalia's leg, trailing up the inside of a smooth thigh. She grinned knowingly as her lover thrust forward, her body silently demanding her touch.

Guiding a leg over her shoulder, Olivia opened Natalia further, her tongue sinking into sweet hot folds, lazily circling the stiff clit found there, before taking her in and starting to suck.

Rocking against an insistent mouth, Natalia quickly started to lose control, seemingly unable to get close enough, her left hand tangled into slick wet hair desperately trying to keep Olivia right where she needed her. Her lover continued to torment her with a few quick faint flicks of her tongue, before starting to build a steady rhythm. Wrapping a strong arm around her waist, she felt fingertips trail along her most sensitive flesh, parting her and then suddenly without any preamble or warning, she was filled completely.

"Oh, God..." Gasping, Natalia bucked hard, so much so that Olivia almost lost her grip on her needy clit. Moving back tighter against her lover's body, Olivia started to build the tempo with her thrusting hand, pulling out slightly and hesitating ever so slightly before pushing in, repeating this movement over and over again, taking her closer with each stroke.

Moans filled the air, mumbled words mixing with the steam, begging in several languages for release. Natalia's cries echoed around them as she twitched in anticipation, racing headlong to her fast approaching orgasm. Finally, Olivia felt her stiffen in her arms, shuddering around her, Natalia's body holding and clutching her fingers intimately, deeper even as she came hard for her.

Olivia watched, finally contented as Natalia's movements started to slow, waves of pleasure obviously still flowing through her body as she throbbed steadily against her mouth. Finally stilling, Olivia gently slid back up her partner's lithe body, before catching and holding her close. Natalia needed her lover's strength and the safety of Olivia's arms as she

tried to catch her breath, completely spent. Leaning in, she smiled as she tasted herself on her lover's lips, kissing the full mouth almost reverently.

"I'm beginning to think we need to conserve water together more often," Natalia murmured softly against her lover's lips, sated and content. "Much more often."

Olivia just chuckled, agreeing completely

It was quiet in Company, the usual Friday morning crowd having thinned as patrons dashed off to work after picking up a quick bite to go. Doris Wolfe sat at the counter watching her girlfriend chat with an older couple sitting in a booth by the window.

Olivia sauntered in and made her way towards the counter, sliding into the stool beside Doris and smiling happily at her.

"You look disgustingly chipper this morning." Doris turned slightly to greet her friend, and quickly assessed Olivia's mood. "Someone got some last night."

Olivia raised an eyebrow and simply smirked, denying nothing. After all, what would be the point?

"Someone around here should, don't you think?" Olivia couldn't help the teasing jab, grinning wider as Doris' eyes narrowed at her over the rim of her cooling coffee mug.

"Olivia, are you picking on Doris again?" Blake efficiently filled two take out cups of coffee, popped the lids on, and quickly made change for the ten dollar bill Olivia slid across the counter.

"Heavens no!" Olivia grinned, dropping some change in the tip jar and pocketing the rest. "Would I do that?"

Blake paused and stared a moment in obvious disbelief before shaking her head and making her way back into the kitchen. Olivia and Doris quietly watched her leave and then turned to face each other again before giggling like two school girls.

"So?" Olivia prompted, taking a quick sip of her coffee cup.

"Blake still has no clue." Doris grinned happily. "It took some digging to find decent tickets, but that's why you pay your amazing assistant Keira so well." She had been planning the theatre trip to Chicago for a while now, wanting to surprise Blake as an early Christmas

present. Enrolling Keira's help had been Olivia's suggestion, having great faith in her assistant's abilities to live up to her Beacon staff nickname, the Miracle Worker. "We have tickets for tonight."

"Tonight!" Olivia blinked. "That's fast."

"I know, but it was the best we could do on such short notice." Doris glanced back at the kitchen to see where Blake was. The coast was still clear so she turned back to Olivia. "I booked dinner reservations before the show and then we'll slowly make our way home after the show." Doris smiled softly, suddenly far away in her thoughts. "I can't wait to see her face."

Olivia reached out to squeeze Doris' arm. For all her teasing, she was genuinely glad to see her friend so happy. Looking over the mayor's shoulder she saw Blake dash out of the kitchen with a breakfast order and head straight for one of the busy tables.

"As much as I'd love to stay and chat I have to get going." Olivia grabbed both of her takeout cups from the countertop and stood to leave.

"Good luck with Natalia's family tonight." Doris said, waving her off, not wanting to be in either of her friend's shoes tonight for anything. Shaking her head, she took another sip of her coffee as the door closed behind Olivia. "You're going to need it, my friend."

"Hey there," Leyla looked up from her desk as her sister Natalia wandered into the daycare center of the Beacon, the electric door chime giving her fair warning of someone opening the door. "You look fantastic today. Did you do something different to your hair?"

"Um, no." Natalia flushed slightly and bit her bottom lip, flashing instantly to Olivia passionately washing her hair in the shower earlier that morning. "I-I was in a bit of a rush to get out of the house and just sort of let it do what it wanted, I guess."

"Well, whatever you're doing, keep it up." Leyla flashed another bright smile at her sister, who seemed to blush harder at her comment, before coming around her desk to take her squirming niece from Natalia's arms.

"How's my little Sweet Pea this morning? Are you gonna stay with me for awhile until your Papi comes?" Leyla tickled Francesca's wee belly, both women smiling at the girl's happy giggles.

"Are you sure you'll be okay at the farmhouse with the kids until Frank and Phillip show up Saturday morning?" Natalia asked pulling one of the baby's socks up higher.

"Please, it's an armed fortress. We will be fine." Leyla turned to her baby niece and dropped a soft kiss to the closest chubby cheek. "Won't we, *m'ija*?" Leyla smiled as the small girl reached out and tugged on her hair. She glanced back at her older sister, growing concerned by the small frown she found there.

"What about you? How are you doing?" Leyla asked, watching Natalia continue to fidget with Francesca's clothes. "You're worried about Mama and Papa, aren't you?"

Natalia shrugged and looked down before sighing, nodding her head. For all the independence and security she felt with Olivia and the family that they had built together, Carmen and Hector Rivera were still her parents. For all their past drama, their intimidating hurtful ways, they were still very important to her. She couldn't help feeling deep down that they had the potential to love and accept her for who she truly was.

Leyla looked down and thought about how much she should say. They hadn't really discussed their parents much since she'd come to live in Springfield and with good reason. She cleared her throat and glanced back up at her older sister.

"Listen, we both know what Papa is like. His whole rampage forbidding me to see you, telling me that you and Olivia would corrupt me with your evil sinful ways..." Leyla rolled her eyes and sighed. "Well, it was the straw that broke the camel's back, and I was out of there as soon as I could call you to see if your offer was still open. And the whole time Mama never said anything, y'know?"

Natalia sighed, knowing her mother's silences sometimes said more than someone yelling at the top of their lungs. Leyla reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her sister's ear and smiled gently.

"My point is Mama didn't disagree with him, but she also didn't say anything bad about you either. She just looked out the window or started baking cookies whenever the topic came up." Leyla's lip twitched, knowing that the baking thing seemed to be genetic if Natalia's own habits were any indication.

Natalia blinked, thinking about Leyla's words and suddenly feeling a little better. Maybe there was a glimmer of hope after all.

"Ma-mi! Ma-mi!" Francesca squeaked, bouncing and reaching out for her mother from Leyla's arms. Natalia's heart clenched, her baby's simple words choking her up. It still thrilled her to hear her baby girl call her that. It made her think of Rafe at that age, with

the same dark hair and big eyes. And her heart clenched again as she thought of her baby boy so far away at this time of year. She pulled her daughter back into her arms for another hug before she'd have to leave.

The door chime sounded again and both women turned to see Jonathan enter with little Sarah not far behind him.

"Hey there." Leyla couldn't seem to stop the smile that spread across her face, Natalia noted.

"Hey." Jonathan waved as Sarah suddenly raced over to the two women and tugged shyly at Leyla's pant leg.

"Yes, Sarah?" Leyla glanced down at the small girl grinning widely at her.

"Hi," Sarah said.

Leyla and Natalia laughed

"Hi, Sarah. Are you ready to spend some time with me today?" Leyla asked, pleased when the girl nodded excitedly and glanced over at the center's stuffed toy box.

"What am I? Chopped liver?" Jonathan asked, mock hurt as he put his hand to his chest as if wounded and pouted.

"I think your daddy needs a goodbye kiss before he heads off to work." Leyla smiled at the man's antics. Sarah looked over at her father, a little torn between going to play with the toys or going to see him but finally running over to him.

Jonathan lifted her tiny form up into his arms and gave her a squeaky kiss on her cheek.

"Goodbye, my little princess twinkle bottom," Jonathan murmured into her dark hair, smiling as she squeezed him harder.

"Bye, Daddy," Sarah said. "Have good day."

Jonathan chuckled and nodded his head, his baby sounding so grown up all of a sudden.

"You too, baby girl."

Natalia's heart warmed at the sight of Olivia's nephew so in love with his daughter. Jonathan was a good man and a good father. She glanced over at Leyla who was watching

them with a huge smile on her face. Natalia's eyes narrowed, realizing that her sister was quite taken with the man as well.

"I've got to go," Jonathan said, slipping Sarah back to the ground and gently swatting her bottom as she made a beeline to the toy box. "Thanks, ladies. I'll see you later, Leyla."

They both waved as Jonathan left, the door barely clicking shut before Natalia turned to her sister.

"Well?"

Leyla rolled her eyes at Natalia, before pulling Francesca to her.

"Say goodbye to your nosey mami, Sweet Pea." Leyla shook her head. She had been enduring teasing on all fronts as she and Jonathan had been trying for weeks to set up a date, both their schedules and a bout of stomach flu making it harder than it should have been. Natalia just grinned at her and leaned closer to her wiggling daughter.

"Love you." Natalia ran her fingers through Francesca's dark hair and kissed a pudgy cheek in goodbye and then turned to drop another quick kiss to her sister's cheek too.

"Love you too. And if you play your cards right with that one, maybe I won't be the only one getting lucky this weekend." Natalia couldn't resist before turning to go.

Leyla's mouth opened and closed, a little shocked at her sister's words. Olivia was definitely rubbing off on her big sister.

"Natalia!"

Natalia's laughter followed her out of the daycare center.

Doris crushed out her cigarette, dropping it into the tin in her purse and popping a mint into her mouth before knocking on the door to Blake's home. Her excitement grew as she stood outside in the late afternoon air, waiting for the door to open.

"Hi there!" Blake smiled as opened the door and leaned against it, just staring at Doris looking all nervous and adorable. "Come on in before you freeze to death."

"Thanks" Doris grinned and stepped into the warmth of the home. Pulling her leather gloves off and tucking them into her long dark coat, she noticed the quiet in the normally bustling household these days. "Where are the kids?"

"Clarissa is at a sleepover at Emma's and my mother is taking the boys out for burgers and a movie. She wanted to spend some quality time with them before she flies out on Tuesday to meet up with Ed in California," Blake said happily. "So I'm all yours."

"Perfect." Doris smiled knowingly, having already recruited Holly Reade's help before starting this venture. Blake's mother was actually quite refreshing to deal with, seemingly cut from the same cloth as Olivia and herself. She wasn't exactly sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but Doris did know that she'd have to remember to keep an eye on the woman. For now though they were definitely starting out on the right foot together. Grinning like the cat that ate the canary, Doris bounced slightly on her toes, anxious to reveal her plans. "Actually, I have a surprise for you. An early Christmas present."

"Really? For me?" Blake's eyes widened, her smile warming Doris' heart, and a few other body parts.

"For you, really." Doris pulled a simple white envelope out and handed it over to the surprised woman. With a little shocked laugh Blake opened it, pulling out two theatre tickets.

"Oh, my God. Tickets to see *Wicked* at the Cadillac Palace Theatre in Chicago! It's been sold out for weeks." Blake gasped. "I wanted to see it when the musical was first here, but my life was crazy at the time and I could never make it. And I just loved the book."

Blake looked closer at the tickets; clearly they were two of the best seats in the house. A lot of thought and effort had gone into getting these and it touched her that her girlfriend had gone to such trouble. The most Frank had ever done when they were together was get two-for-one coupons for the Applebee's in the next town over. And she had treated that time, if she recalled it correctly.

"I know." Doris said softly, grinning. "I remember your mentioning it was one of your favorites."

Blake looked up at that, pleased that Doris remembered. The woman was constantly surprising her now that she had finally decided to give their relationship a chance to grow. Stepping closer, she leaned forward and gently kissed Doris' lips. Pulling slowly away, she let her fingers linger on the mayor's flushed cheek and let her feelings seep into her eyes as they continued to stare at each other, the moment stretching out pleurably.

“Thank you,” Blake said quietly, still lost in Doris’ eyes.

“You’re more than welcome,” Doris said just as softly. “Now we also have dinner reservations in Chicago, so if you’re ready...” She offered a lopsided grin as Blake blinked at her before dashing to grab her winter coat and gloves from the closet. They headed out into the cold, both women ready for a night on the town.

The Fellowes Inn was a small, privately owned hotel that Olivia had booked them into for their little weekend getaway. She had told Natalia that it was a good opportunity to check out what similar types of hotels to the Beacon were like. Which was true, but in reality it was also one of the most romantic places she had stumbled across when looking for accommodations. Olivia wanted a haven for them this weekend before the hustle and bustle of Christmas and their wedding overtook all their time. Swiping the key card through the reader, Olivia pushed the heavy oak door open and entered the elegantly decorated suite.

“Wow, this is nice!” Natalia said from the doorway behind her. A small fireplace was along one wall and there was a large picture window to the right, overlooking the cityscape which was just starting to twinkle with lights. Both could be easily viewed from the large king sized bed that dominated one side of the room. A comfortable couch was nestled in front of the fireplace and a small dining area sat back to one side.

Their bags were already in the room, neatly placed near the chest of drawers. They had been brought up earlier when they had registered and dropped them off in the lobby before heading out to hit some of the shops that afternoon. Olivia dropped several shopping bags filled to the brim onto the plush-looking bed and sank down, enjoying the soft comfort it offered.

“My feet are killing me,” She grumbled, kicking off her stylish winter boots with a thump as they landed on the carpeted floor.

“At least we were able to get a good start on our Christmas shopping,” Natalia said sitting down beside her lover and lying back to join her on the mattress. “Oh, this is really nice.”

Both women sighed happily.

“I don’t want to move from this spot.” Natalia sighed.

“Me neither,” Olivia murmured before turning her head to take in the contours of the dark beauty’s face. Rolling to her side she propped herself up on one elbow and glanced down at her lover. “Have I told you lately how much I love you?”

“Hmm...” Natalia tapped her lip and frowned, making a show of thinking hard. “I vaguely recall something this morning, but I had some water in my ears so I can’t be sure...” She grinned up at Olivia, who was rolling her eyes.

“Why do I put up with this abuse?” Olivia murmured softly as she leaned over, dropping her lips ever closer to her intended target. She stared down at her lover’s mouth, watching fascinated as Natalia moistened them with a slow lick of her lips.

“Poor Ms. Spencer, so hard done by.” Natalia teased, running her right hand up and into thick honey-blond hair. “Let me see if I can make it up to you.” She gently tugged her partner closer into a slow tender kiss.

Pulling apart, they smiled at each other a moment before a small beep from Natalia’s cell phone caught their attention, followed closely by a discreet chime from Olivia’s BlackBerry.

“Where are your pills?” Natalia nuzzled along Olivia’s ear, dropping a series of butterfly kisses there.

“In my makeup bag.” Olivia kissed the tip of Natalia’s nose gently, before lifting herself off of her lover and shifting away. Standing, she looked down at her fiancée wanting nothing more than to pounce on her seductive curves and never come out from under the covers. She sighed and checked her watch. It was getting late. “We should get dressed anyway. Don’t want to keep your parents waiting.”

Reluctantly, Olivia headed for their luggage as Natalia sat back up. Finding her pills, she grabbed them and made her way to the washroom. Watching the door close behind her, Natalia sighed.

“No, we don’t want to keep them waiting,” Natalia murmured, biting her lip, trying hard not to worry about what would happen tonight. Standing, she made her way over to the large window and stared out at the glittering lights of Chicago.

“Please, God. Give me strength...”

ACT 2

The Cadillac Palace Theatre was gorgeous, decked out in all its old world glory and gilt, festively decorated for the holiday season on top of its usual opulence. The seats inside the theatre were plush and comfortable but that was hardly noticed as the audience sat with bated breath watching one of theatre's greatest moments.

The stirring crescendo of the musical's show-stopping song, *Defying Gravity*, grew in intensity as Elphaba, the green witch, rose up high above the stage, the tails of her long skirt flowing out and down to the ground. As the song ended, the lights suddenly went out, throwing the theatre into complete darkness. Thunderous applause burst forth from the audience immediately and the theatre house lights soon came up, indicating the start of the intermission.

"That was simply stunning," Blake said, turning to Doris who was blinking from the sudden bright light. "The actress who plays the green witch is wonderful, but I would have loved to have seen Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth on Broadway. I have the soundtrack somewhere at home, I'm going to have to dig it out," Blake said, flipping open the program to read some of the liner notes.

"Did you see them in *Glee*?" Doris asked. "Menzel was great as Rachel's mother."

"You watch *Glee*, too?" Blake glanced up, tilting her head slightly as she asked the question.

"Are you kidding? Sue Sylvester is my hero. I need to find me a tracksuit like that somewhere and wear it to the office one day before I leave for good. My image consultant would have a meltdown," Doris joked as Blake laughed, pleased that they had something else in common. A comfortable silence fell as they just shyly stared at each other. Doris finally broke it, noticing the mass exodus had thinned a little. "Hey, would you like a glass of wine or something?"

"Sure, why don't I come with you?" Blake reached down and grabbed her purse. "I'll try to find the washrooms while you're doing that."

Together they followed the throng out of the seating area and towards a small kiosk set up to serve drinks. Finally, getting two glasses of white wine Doris made her way over to where they were going to meet again, finding Blake standing there perusing the play program. Her heart thumped a little faster at the look on the redhead's face when she looked up to find her approaching.

"I'm not sure which was longer, the line up in the ladies washroom or the one at the bar," Blake said, gladly taking a sip of her wine. "Dinner was lovely, Doris. How did you ever find that cute little restaurant?"

"An old friend who lives here recommended it to me." Doris shifted a little closer, finding it hard to hear over the loud crowd swirling around them.

"How old a friend?" Blake frowned slightly as an irrational pang of jealousy suddenly shot through her. She knew Doris had a robust love life before, in fact they both had. Actually most people in Springfield did, so much so that it seemed almost incestuous sometimes; but that wasn't the issue here. It was more that this mysterious friend was still in touch with Doris.

Doris caught the tone in Blake's voice and smiled softly. It was oddly sweet that Blake was being a little possessive of her. Reaching out, she ran her hand along the redhead's upper arm, trying to soothe any ruffled feathers that might be developing.

"Relax. We dated for awhile, years ago. It didn't work out but we stayed friends." Doris felt Blake shift closer, enjoying the affection. She reached up and tucked a stray strand of hair behind Blake's ear. "Anyway, she's started a therapy practice in Springfield and is in town a few days a week. We met up for lunch a few weeks ago at Terroni's down on Main Street, and she said it reminded her of the one we went to tonight."

The lights flicked off and back on again, signalling that the second act of the show was about to start. The crowd started to move around them as people started heading back to their seats.

"We should head back in." Setting their empty glasses on a nearby cart, Doris turned and shyly took Blake's hand, entwining their fingers. "After all, we need to find out what that wicked witch is up to."

"Indeed." Blake smiled warmly and squeezed Doris' hand, following her through the crowd.

The restaurant was busy, which wasn't surprising for the popular Chicago destination. It was a new hotspot, becoming known as a place for the rich and powerful to see and to be seen. Olivia had made the reservations with this in mind, wanting to impress Natalia's parents. She would never say as much to her partner, but she wanted to show the Riveras just how far the girl they had tossed to the curb had come.

Olivia realized that this was probably petty and that Natalia more than likely would have made her change the venue if she knew, but so what? If it did nothing more than to make Carmen and Hector Rivera feel off balance and out of their depth tonight, then it was worth it. Olivia wanted to make it very clear that they didn't want anything from the older

couple, other than their simple presence in Natalia's life. And that was only because Natalia wished it.

"Olivia, they're here," Natalia murmured softly, an edge of nervousness to her voice. Olivia reached out and squeezed her partner's arm, the warm touch reassuring and comforting and just what was needed to settle her down.

"They're right on time." Glancing up from the menu she had been studying, Olivia watched the Riveras make their way to their table, following the hostess. Taking a sip of her ice water, Olivia watched Natalia rise from her seat and then did the same.

"Here we are. Rivera, table of four." The hostess smiled at the older couple and then quickly disappeared back to her station at the front door. Hector nodded his thanks to the girl and then held his wife's chair out for her as she sat, before they all settled down into their seats.

"I'm so glad you could meet us for dinner." Natalia smiled warmly at her parents.

"Well, we were certainly surprised to hear from you," Carmen said. Hector grunted in agreement, not really joining in the conversation as he looked around the restaurant.

"Nice place," he said grudgingly.

Olivia took another sip of her ice water and smiled as she noticed him recognize a relatively famous football player sitting three tables over. Score one for the home team.

"Yes, we've been meaning to check it out." Olivia picked up her menu, subtly observing Natalia's father sitting across the table from her. "Just to see if there is anything we can incorporate into the Beacon. Natalia is good at spotting what works and then adding it into our hotel business model." She smiled softly at her lover, their eyes meeting and holding for a moment.

"How are the children?" Carmen asked, shifting in her seat, slightly uncomfortable with the tender look passing between the two women. Hector blinked and picked up his menu, quickly starting to look through it. His eyes nearly bugged out of his head as he noticed the prices.

Olivia moistened her lips and grinned to herself. Two points.

"They are doing great. Actually, Emma wanted me to give you this." Natalia leaned over and pulled a red envelope out of her purse, handing it to her mother. She also took the opportunity to bring out a small photo album she had put together. "We have some

Christmas presents for you both from the family too, and I wanted you to have this. It's some more pictures of the kids and a few from Thanksgiving this year."

"T-thank you." Carmen blinked and reached out to take the album and card from her daughter. Natalia smile widely, watching as her mother opened it as her father continued to pretend to not be interested, all the while watching over the rim of his menu. The older woman paused on a shot of the girls, her thumb traced along Francesca's wee face, as she lay fast asleep in Emma's arms, holding her close on the couch, Shadow sitting by her legs. Carmen turned to another page, bringing it a little closer so she could see the shot better in the dim restaurant light.

"Is this Raphael? Oh, Hector, he looks just like Leo in this one," Carmen said, flipping to the one of Rafe in his uniform, standing in a desert somewhere overseas. She leaned over and showed her husband, who finally put his menu down and paid attention.

"He's a handsome boy." Hector nodded in agreement, smiling softly at the picture of his grandson, obviously proud of his military service. "Your brother was pleased to know another family member had joined the service." His smile dimmed as his thoughts turned to his eldest child. He handed the photo album back to his wife and tried to focus on Natalia's words.

"How is Leo doing?" Natalia asked, knowing her brother was still struggling from what little information Leyla had been able to gather, but she was praying things were getting better on that front.

"He's fine," Hector said, suddenly frowning and sitting up a little straighter. Sticking his chin out a little, Natalia was struck at the familiar movement, recognizing a similar one in Francesca, when she didn't get what she wanted. Hector ran a hand through his short dark hair and glanced over at his wife. "He is as well as can be expected, considering."

Carmen sighed and closed the small album. Olivia watched both their movements, knowing there was more going on than they were willing to share.

"It's been over a year since..." Carmen's voice faded out slightly as she paused and then she met Olivia's eyes, intensely staring at her. "Since his friends died in that horrible confrontation they had with the Taliban in Afghanistan. I don't know, he's just been so --"

"You worry too much woman. He just needs some time to adjust," Hector said gruffly. "Anyone would be a little short and upset having to deal with everything he's had on his plate."

“And he is progressing with the artificial leg,” Carmen added, glancing at her husband who buried his nose back into his menu.

Olivia and Natalia exchanged concerned looks, as thoughts of Rafe and the very real possibility the same could happen to him raced through their minds. It was a sad reality that many returning vets had to deal with the loss of limbs, not to mention the emotional and mental problems from seeing combat.

The tense moment was broken as their server arrived and took their drink order, promising to return for their dinner order shortly. In the meantime, Carmen slid open the envelope from Emma, pulling out the handmade Christmas card, smiling as gold and silver glitter spilled out everywhere. There was a drawing of the farmhouse on the front of the card, colorful lights along the front porch and the whole family standing in front, including Shadow and Leyla.

Inside Emma had written:

To Gramma and Grampa Rivera,

Feliz Navidad!

Love and hugs,

Emma, Francesca and Rafe

Below that Natalia had signed her and Olivia’s names as well, and at the last minute, Leyla had broken down and added hers too. Olivia noticed Carmen’s eyes grow brighter as tears welled, clearly touched by the card.

“This is just lovely.” Carmen turned to Olivia and then Natalia. “How is sweet little Emma? Is she still helping you cook, *mija*?”

“She can make *arroz con habichuelas* better than *Tia Jo*,” Natalia said with maternal pride.

“That’s not hard, though,” Carmen chuckled, as Natalia grinned along, both women turning to fill Olivia in on the joke. “My sister is a horrible cook.” Olivia nodded and smiled too. Hector cleared his throat and Carmen glanced over at her husband, taking in his disapproving stare.

The uncomfortable moment passed as their server arrived with their drinks and took their meal orders before disappearing again. The conversation quickly turned to more generic topics, covering everything from what was happening in the old neighborhood, to how

Natalia's aunts and cousins were all doing and before anyone knew it their food had arrived.

Under the table, Olivia reached out her hand and found Natalia's cold fingers, squeezing them to silently communicate how happy she was that everything had been going relatively well so far. The hard part was still to come though, and they both knew it. Natalia glanced over at her lover and smiled, squeezing her hand back. No time like the present she supposed.

"I'm glad we could get together like this before Christmas, and I hope we can continue keeping in touch," Natalia started, biting her lower lip as she tried to find the right words. Her eyes met her mother's and then moved to lock with her father's eyes. "I-I also wanted you to know that Olivia and I are getting married on New Year's, and we wanted to personally invite you both to our wedding."

The sound of cutlery clattering and patrons talking around them suddenly seemed quite loud, filling the stunned silence caused by Natalia's words.

"*Querido Dios, Natalia no ves lo mal que es esto?*" Hector asked, incredulous. Did the girl not see how wrong this was?

"Hector," Carmen hissed as a warning for her husband, looking around the bustling restaurant to see if anyone had noticed his raised voice.

"*¿Ha perdido el derecho de comentar en mi vida hace mucho tiempo.*" Natalia spat back at her father. Olivia struggled to keep up with her limited Spanish, making out something about Hector's losing the right to comment on her life long ago.

"This is your fault," Hector glared at Olivia, eyes glittering with anger and disgust. Olivia threw her napkin down, ready to go toe-to-toe with the old man if needed. In fact she'd enjoy just that.

"No, Papa. Just stop," Natalia argued, trying to defend herself and her choices against her father's ignorance and anger. "This is no one's *fault*. It's just who I am, who I have always been."

"It is a sin before God, and if you were a good Catholic, you would know that. The laws of man are not the same laws of God." Hector all but growled at his daughter. He knew he should have taken Natalia aside and tried to talk some sense into the girl. They had talked about it one weekend in the summer; Leo had even been ready to help him organize it, but Carmen had talked them all out of it, scolding them that interventions were for addicts not homosexuals.

It made Hector crazy that he could do nothing about it; that he couldn't control what was happening to his family. And now Leyla was living in that den of iniquity too, being exposed to who knows what. There was only one thing that hadn't been taken from him. He could still speak his mind and tonight there would be no stopping him. He straightened his shoulders and glared at Natalia. It just seemed like everything had gone downhill since she had become pregnant in the first place. He leaned forward, his fist hitting the table in frustration.

"You have been nothing but an embarrassment to this family and our good name."

Silence fell around the table, Carmen even looking slightly stunned at her husband's harsh words. Hector was far from finished though as he turned his attention to his daughter's manipulative lover.

"And you, some catch you are. All flash and talk, no real substance, throwing your money around, sniffing after my daughters like a bitch in heat when they could have real men to take care of them." Hector leaned forward, snarling at Olivia. "What of my little Leyla, have you corrupted her yet?"

Olivia's eyebrows rose and her mouth opened in disbelief and then snapped shut. A dormant, yet familiar, dark fury rose from the pit of her stomach and she took a breath, ready to put the man in his place.

"What did you just call me?"

Olivia felt Natalia's warm hand on her arm, pulling her focus from the nasty bitter man sitting across from her. Turning, their eyes locked; and she saw the pain lurking in her lover's dark eyes. Now was not the time to rip the man a new one, despite how very much she wanted to.

Natalia, however, was not finished, and turned to glare at her father. He had insulted her and the woman she loved and even managed to drag Leyla into it. She had known this was not going to go over well, but this was uncalled for.

"Debería haber sabido mejor que pensar que se preocupan por nada pero el padre de ti mismo," Natalia said to her father. She ran a hand through her hair in frustration. How did he always manage to turn these things into being all about him? "This has nothing to do with you, Papa. I don't even live in the same city as you, or interact with the family here. You took care of that long ago, didn't you? I thought you should hear it from me personally. I wanted to look you in the eye and tell you in person that I am marrying a woman, a woman that I love with all my heart and soul. And I prayed that you might want to share in our lives, to once again be a part of my family, and that is why we are here tonight. To give you that

opportunity.” Natalia leaned forward, her heart breaking as she spoke, but she needed to say the words, to make it real. “Clearly you have decided to throw me and my loved ones away again. Can’t you just for once be happy for me or is your heart really as small as your mind, old man?”

“Vigile a su niño la lengua,” Hector said in a low dangerous tone, staring hard at his daughter as he warned her to watch her tongue. Anger glittered in his eyes before he turned to glare at Olivia. It was bad enough Natalia had a child out of wedlock, now somehow this woman had turned his daughter into a degenerate. How could his own child go against the teachings of the Church. How could they mock all that they believed in by getting married? What had he done to deserve this? He just couldn’t understand what they were thinking. He shook his head and stood. “Let’s go, Carmen. I’ve had enough of this farce.”

Hector stormed off without even a backward glance, quickly disappearing out the front of the restaurant as several patrons watched him go. Carmen sighed and stood, looking over at Olivia, her eyes narrowing as if in judgment and apparent disapproval.

Olivia lifted her chin, staring the older woman down. If she wanted a piece of them too, Olivia was more than ready to protect herself and the woman she loved. They glared at each other a moment longer before Carmen finally nodded, a small sad smile eventually gracing her pinched lips.

“Hurt her, and you will answer to me,” Carmen said, quietly making herself crystal clear. Olivia frowned, swallowing hard as she nodded. Staring a moment longer, Carmen finally stepped closer to Natalia, reaching out to cup her flushed cheek, murmuring softly to her daughter.

“Ser feliz mi pequeña.”

Natalia’s eyes welled with tears and she nodded. Her mother smiled, tenderly kissing her cheek. Moving away she slid the photo album and the card into the small gift bag Natalia had put their Christmas presents into and then turned to leave, dutifully following her husband from the restaurant.

Olivia watched the formidable woman go, sagging in her chair a little in relief, before turning to see how her lover was holding up.

“Are you okay, baby?” Olivia leaned slightly, trying to catch Natalia’s eye. “I’m so sorry it didn’t work out better.”

"It was about how I expected it to go with my father; but Olivia, don't you see?" Natalia wiped a tear away. "That was as close to a blessing as we're going to get."

"Are you kidding?" Olivia frowned, confused. "A blessing? He hates me; they both do."

Natalia leaned forward and reached out, needing the contact with her lover, their connection grounding her, reassuring herself that this was what mattered, not her father's bitterness and anger.

"No, *querida*, I didn't mean from my father; he is as cold and lost in himself as he ever was. My mother though, she told me to be *happy*, Olivia." Natalia shook her head, smiling sadly. "I don't think she hates you. In fact, I think my mother likes you very much."

Olivia sighed softly, not exactly believing that was the case. She squeezed Natalia's hand, both women needing the comfort of the other.

"Now let's finish our meal." Natalia sniffed, wiping any remaining moisture from her eyes with her thumb. She refused to let her father's vitriol spoil everything. She would take her victories where she found them and tonight her mother had surprised her, pleasantly so. Pouring a little more wine into both their glasses, she tried to focus on the bright side of the night's events. Maybe there was hope all.

Friday night in Company was busy with the usual hustle and bustle of activity - waitresses running back and forth, families eating together in booths and a steady stream of customers dropping in to pick up their takeout orders. Leyla leaned against the polished wood countertop, waiting patiently for their order to come up. Buzz burgers were the popular choice by unanimous vote, handily beating out both pizza and tacos. Emma and Clarissa were laughing and teasing each other as they sat huddled together a few stools over, playing *Animal Planet: Emergency Vets* on Clarissa's little pink Nintendo DS. Leyla smiled warmly at the two of them happily playing away. After all, what girl wouldn't enjoy a game where you fixed sick animals?

Blinking slowly, Leyla started to relax and stifled a yawn. It had been a busy afternoon in the daycare center and she was more than ready to plop down in front of the big screen and watch *Karate Kid* for the zillionth time with the girls. Maybe she could even talk them into checking out some Christmas cartoons or something too. Surely the *Grinch* had to be running on some channel somewhere.

Leyla shivered as a cold draft from the doorway of the restaurant hit her and she turned just in time to watch someone tall, dark, and handsome come through the door.

“Well, hello,” she muttered under her breath, watching as Jonathan pulled the zip down on his bomber jacket and shook some snow out of his dark, messy hair. Following close at his heels was his daughter, bundled and wrapped up in her winter clothes, looking very much like a mini pink version of the Michelin Man. Jonathan nodded as he noticed her sitting at the counter almost immediately, a grin spreading across his face as they made their way towards where she was sitting.

“Hey,” Jonathan said as he pulled Sarah’s scarf off of her, sending the girl spinning a little, giggling the whole time. Leyla watched shaking her head in disbelief.

“Jesus, can she even breathe in there?” Leyla raised an eyebrow and smirked at the tall man. He laughed and shook his head.

“Yeah, Lizzie can go a little crazy with the clothes, but I like to send the little munchkin back looking exactly as I got her,” Jonathan said, smiling as Sarah finally noticed Emma and Clarissa a few chairs away and excitedly waddled over towards her friends.

“So you’re dropping her to Lizzie and Bill for the weekend?” Leyla asked, watching as Emma hopped down and helped her younger cousin open her coat and start to explain what the game was that they were playing.

“Yeah, even with the new baby, Lizzie wants her little girl around and I think it’s good for Sarah to get to know her baby brother. I don’t want her to get spoiled, and pick up that only child attitude you hear about.” Jonathan rubbed at the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. “Besides we were isolated from everyone for so long, it’s important that she spend time with the rest of her family too.”

“Family is important. You often don’t realize how much until it’s taken away,” Leyla said sadly, trying not to dwell on her own messed up situation with her parents and their long estrangement with Natalia. She wished she had been able to be there for Natalia when she was younger, or to have her sister around to talk about silly stupid things growing up, like makeup and boyfriends. She shook her head to try to get the sad thoughts from her mind.

Jonathan, meanwhile, had started to place his order with the waitress behind the bar. Leyla smiled softly. He was a good father, and she was impressed that he cared so much about how his daughter related to those around her. He could have easily turned into a paranoid bitter man, after hiding for all that time, wanting to protect his child. Instead of being overprotective though, Jonathan was quick to let his daughter experience the world around her.

Suddenly from behind them, they heard a shout and then a loud crash. Turning quickly both adults saw that Sarah had perhaps experienced just a little too much of the world around

her, as the waitress coming quickly out of the kitchen had somehow missed the little pink blob and tripped right over her, the tray of food balanced on one hand crashing on the floor with Sarah and the waitress ending up tangled together in a heap on the floor.

Silence descended on the room and then an earth shattering wail started from the bottom of the pile. Sarah's scared cries were muffled slightly by winter clothing and the waitress lying across her.

"Oh, baby." Leyla was there in a flash, having the advantage over Jonathan by being just a touch closer to girl. She quickly moved the serving tray to one side and carefully navigated herself around broken plates and scattered bits of food to get to the child. Emma and Clarissa stood to one side, both girls transfixed by the spectacle of the whole thing.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Buzz shouted as he quickly made his way out of the kitchen, stopping in his tracks at the mess in the middle of his restaurant.

"She's gonna get in trouble now," Clarissa whispered, afraid of what her mother's boss would do to poor little Sarah.

"No, Leyla will protect her," Emma said back, confident in her aunt's ability to take care of things.

"Oh, no." Buzz murmured and quickly rushed to help his waitress up from the mess. He didn't even want to think about the paperwork he'd have to do if she was hurt on the job. Meanwhile, Leyla had finally lifted the crying girl up and into her arms, holding her close as she wept.

"Sshh, it's okay. You're okay." Leyla shifted Sarah's weight to her other arm, bouncing slightly to move her higher, as Sarah's little arms wrapped around her neck.

"Em...Emmm...Emma!!!" Sarah finally sobbed out, her bottom lip quivering. "Emma was going to get hurt an...an...an..."

"Breathe, baby. Slow deep breaths." Leyla ran circles across the child's back, to calm her down as Jonathan wrapped his strong arms around both of them. Finally, Sarah seemed to relax, and leaned into her, nuzzling into the crook of her neck.

"You know what, I think a trip to the little girl's room is in order, what do you say, sweetheart?" Leyla said as Sarah shyly nodded her agreement, wiping at her left eye. "We'll get you all cleaned up and you can tell us all what happened then. Okay?"

"Okay," Sarah said quietly. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I didn't mean..."

"It's okay. It was just an accident." Jonathan's heart nearly broke at the sad look on his baby girl's face. Leyla nodded towards the washrooms and Jonathan watched as she and the three girls all traipsed off to the bathroom together, amazed at how easily she had handled the entire situation.

Buzz hustled out from the kitchen with a yellow bucket and a mop, and started to clean up the food. Sweeping up the broken plates and food into a garbage bag, he quickly slapped the mop down onto the tiles and started washing the slop up.

"Sorry Buzz, I'll pay for the damages," Jonathan said, but Buzz just waved him off.

"Don't even start, it was an accident and luckily only a few plates were broken." Buzz quickly splashed the mop back into the bucket, wrung it dry and threw it back down onto the floor for a second wipe down. "How's Sarah, did she get hurt?"

"No, she's just more scared by it all," Jonathan said sinking back down onto one of the stools by the counter. He wondered now if taking her to Lizzie's tonight was a good plan, maybe being somewhere safe and familiar would comfort her more after the accident.

"She probably thought the world was crashing down around her." Buzz dumped his mop back into the bucket and shook his head. "Poor little thing, I hope she'll be okay."

Glancing up both men were surprised to see Sarah suddenly come skipping out of the washroom, with Emma and Clarissa close behind. Leyla followed them out, and smiled as the waitress popped out of the kitchen, waving that her order was ready.

"I guess that kid of yours bounces back pretty well." Buzz thumped Jonathan on the back and smiled before disappearing back into his kitchen to look for his wet floor signage before someone else fell.

"Hey, we're up. I guess I'll see you guys later," Leyla said, brown bag in hand and the most delicious smells coming from inside.

"Um, listen. Are you interested in maybe going out tomorrow night?" Jonathan asked. "I know we've been trying to meet up, and I was only able to get Lizzie to confirm she wanted Sarah for the weekend this morning or I would have asked sooner..." Jonathan took a breath afraid he was rambling in his nervousness. Why was this part always so hard?

"Sure, I'd love to." Leyla smiled, zipping her jacket up. "Call me with the details." Bending down she kissed Sarah's head. "And you have a great time with your mom. I bet she'll love to hear all about how you saved Emma from getting run down by that waitress."

Sarah grinned and nodded her head. "I'm a super hero."

"You sure are, baby." Leyla stood and smiled, ruffling the fine dark hair. "Come on girls before our food gets too cold." The girls followed her to the door and she waved back at Jonathan and Sarah.

"I like Leyla, Daddy," Sarah said as her father picked her up into his arms.

"You do?" Jonathan said, as his daughter nodded her head vigorously. "Well, Daddy likes her too." His eyes followed the seductive curves of Leyla's form through the frosted window. Oh, yes, Daddy liked her a lot.

"They were so gay for each other," Doris said, taking a sip of her excellent merlot. The small pub was relatively close to the theatre. It had been snowing rather heavily as they exited the show, and Blake had suggested a beverage to warm them up a bit before heading back to Springfield. That had been an hour ago.

"You see lesbians everywhere." Blake rolled her eyes. "The witches were friends, not a couple."

"Give me a break. The whole thing is a love story between those two women." Doris snorted in disbelief. "Did we see the same show?"

"Apparently not." Blake stole a fry from Doris' plate popping it into her mouth.

"It's probably because the green witch wore a hat. It's the perfect disguise, every time," Doris mumbled to herself. "Hey!" She complained as Blake snagged another one, smiling as she merely stuck out her tongue in response.

"So anything new with Dinah's case?" Blake leaned back, watching Doris fidget, playing with a sugar packet on the tabletop. Doris sighed and shook her head.

"We got her out on bail no problem. I know Judge Garrison and his wife quite well, so I wasn't very worried about that, even if Philip hadn't stepped up with the funds. What we need to work on now is discrediting her confession. Mel has been poring over case studies to see if there is any precedent. So we'll see." Doris shrugged her shoulder and tossed the sugar packet back into its little holder with the other ones. She lifted her wine glass and swirled the dark red liquid a little before glancing over the rim to find Blake staring at her. "What?"

“Nothing,” Blake said, smiling at the restless woman, who clearly needed a cigarette but was trying to hold back. “I have faith in all of you. I know you will take care of her as best you can.” As her deceased husband Ross’ daughter, Dinah was still family as far as Blake was concerned, even if they hadn’t always got along. She tilted her head as Doris became quiet.

“I like this,” Doris finally said, taking another sip of her wine. She looked up and met Blake’s eyes, as the redhead just waited for her to elaborate. “I like spending time with you, doing things together. I value your friendship and trust, Blake.”

Blake smiled and ran her hand along Doris’ arm, stroking back and forth before tangling their fingers together on the tabletop.

“I owe you an apology too, I think,” Doris continued. She had thought about this a lot since her date with Anna. She knew on some level that she had hurt Blake by going out with her ex-lover, and she didn’t want that to linger between them. “My date with Anna Li...”

“You don’t have to say anything.” Blake shifted away, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“Yeah, I do.” Doris smiled sadly. What a confusing mess that had been, but at least she had figured out that Blake was what she wanted. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry if that hurt you. I knew you were interested in me, but I was afraid ...” Doris grew quiet, not finishing her thought.

“Afraid of what?” Blake glanced up. “Me?”

Doris moistened her lip and nodded.

“Afraid of messing up our friendship. I don’t have a whole lot of friends, you know.” Doris grinned, taking Blake’s hand again. “But also I realized how much family was coming to mean to me. I need something more in my life than just some stranger in a bar. I need someone I can trust and who believes in me, too. Does that make sense at all?”

“It makes perfect sense to me.” Blake grinned and nodded. “So consider your apology accepted.”

Blake’s cell phone chimed on the tabletop and she reached for it.

“Oh, it’s my mother.” Blake scrolled down to read the text as Doris took another swallow of her drink. “She says the roads are getting bad and is wondering when I’ll be home.”

Doris frowned and turned towards the window of the pub, noticing that the snow was still coming down pretty hard. Blake glanced up at the flat screen over the bar, a weather report scrolling along the bottom of the screen in flashing red.

“Oh, that doesn’t look good.” Doris turned to see what Blake was looking at. It looked like things were quite messy on the roads.

“We should probably get going. It’s a long enough drive back to Springfield, we don’t want to get stuck in the middle of all that.” Doris waved at their server to bring the bill. Before long, they both had their jackets on and were headed out of the pub and into the cold Chicago night.

The snow fell heavily around them as they slowly made their way to the underground parking lot where Doris’ car was.

“I had fun tonight. Thank you for my Christmas present,” Blake said, sliding her gloved hand into Doris’, both women enjoying the warmth the simple move had produced.

“You’re welcome. It was my pleasure.”

Blake pulled on Doris’ hand, bringing her closer. Their breath mingled, the white puffs swirling together before Blake moved nearer still, stopping a hairs breadth from sweet full lips. There would be no rushing Doris this time; she could be patient and would wait for the woman to come to her.

She wasn’t disappointed.

Their lips touched, gently at first, cold from the air and then warming as they pressed against each other. Around them big fluffy flakes fell, landing in their hair and on their coats; but they were completely oblivious. Slowly, they pulled apart, their eyes locking.

“The weather is getting worse; maybe we should stay in the city? Go back to Springfield tomorrow...” Doris let the decision rest on Blake’s shoulders. If they were going to take their relationship to the next level, she wanted it to be right for both of them.

“I-I...” Blake’s eyes widened, and then she blinked. This was it; did she want to take the next step? Was she really as ready as she thought to take a walk on the wild side, to take a chance with Doris? She looked deeper into Doris’ eyes and knew her answer. Decision made, she smiled and pressed her lips softly against hers once more.

“Hell, yes.”

Eleni wandered through the halls of police headquarters, the quiet sounds of the late shift echoing around her. She had finally finished her report for the coroner from a recent hit-and-run downtown and was just going to drop a copy in Frank's internal mailbox when she noticed the lights were still shining brightly in his office.

Stepping into the open doorway, she tapped lightly and smiled as he looked up from his computer monitor.

"Hey, you're here late," Eleni said, walking into her ex-husband's office.

"So are you." Frank's eyes travelled down the woman's sleek form. She looked gorgeous even dishevelled and tired from a long day at work. "What's that?"

"Hit-and-run report." She dropped the folder on the Chief's desk and plopped down into the chair opposite him. "We're still waiting for paint analysis to come in, but we've got most of what you'll need to help the investigation."

"Okay, good." Frank nodded as he started to flip through the file.

Her eyes dropped to the framed photo on Frank's desk. Marina, Shayne and Henry were all smiling at the camera, the picture perfect little family, except it was a house of cards built on sand.

"We should talk about what we're going to do," Eleni said, regretting her words as a haunted look suddenly came over Frank's face. "We can't just sit on this. It's your career that's on the line too."

"I know, I know," Frank ran his hands through his dark hair, pulling the floppy locks out of his eyes. "I just need some time to think, to figure out what's the best way to handle this."

"Well, you can't sweep it under the rug Frank. It affects too many people," Eleni said sadly.

Frank leaned back in his leather chair and sighed as he stared up at the ceiling. It hurt too much to deal with Marina right now. His thoughts turned to his other daughter, and he smiled as he once again looked down to meet Eleni's concerned gaze.

"Hey, would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow night? I've got Francesca for the weekend, and I know you both love spending time together." Frank smiled hopefully. It would be the perfect opportunity to hash this out between the two of them and figure out

a game plan. It would be great just to spend time with each other, like the good old days. "What do you say? I'll make my famous spaghetti and meatballs."

Eleni smiled softly, ready to decline the offer but hesitated. She remembered a particularly hot summer day and a *Lady and the Tramp* like moment on the rooftop of their old apartment building with Frank's famous spaghetti and meatballs. Frank had been buff back then, his body one of the things that had attracted her to him. God, they had been so in love. It had been messy and sweaty and hot and she had found tomato sauce in the most surprising places the next day, but it had been such a good time. Grinning, she shrugged and made her decision.

"Sure, why not. It's been a long time since I've tasted your meatballs," she said as she stood, slowly making her way to the door again. "Now go home, before you make yourself sick."

"Yes, dear," Frank teased as he started to power down his computer. Standing he pulled his jacket from the back of his chair and flicked off his monitor. He laughed as she rolled her eyes and left.

"Good night, Frank," Eleni called out as she disappeared down the hallway.

Shutting off his lights, Frank closed his office door and locked it before heading home. Whistling happily as he headed down the hall, the Chief was suddenly looking forward to a nice quiet weekend at home.



This place reminds me of the Beacon,” Blake murmured a little nervously, sinking down onto the king sized bed. She glanced down as Doris’ hand traced along her leg. Doris had great legs actually, toned with really nice thighs. Not that she’d noticed. Well, not much anyway. Blake swallowed hard and looked back up to meet Doris’ amused eyes.

“You didn’t hear a word I just said, did you?”

“Uhh...” Blake blinked, her mouth opening and closing as she struggled for what they had just been discussing.

“I said that I can see it.” Doris looked around the room and then back at a pale looking Blake. “Hey, relax. We don’t have to do anything. I just want to spend time with you. Okay?” Doris tucked a stray strand of hair behind Blake’s ear.

“So much for all my bravado and research.” Blake smiled softly and stood, making her way across the suite to look out the window at the swirling snowstorm outside. It matched the swirling emotions stirring deep inside. What if she didn’t like it? What if Doris didn’t like it, if she did something wrong or weird or who knows what...

“Hey, stop thinking so hard,” Doris whispered softly, slowly standing herself and walking towards the redhead. She wrapped her arms around Blake, feeling her tremble ever so slightly. “Are you sure about this?”

In that instant she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this was it, that for all her blustering and teasing, this was what she wanted, who she wanted. The person she wanted to try to figure out how to build a life with. Everything else would work itself out. Taking a deep breath Blake shifted, and turned in Doris’ arms.

“I don’t want some character from a book or a play,” Blake offered a lopsided grin. “I don’t need someone who’s worldly and knows all the tricks, or some caped crusader to save the day.” She brought their joined hands up to her mouth and softly kissed them. “I just want you.”

“God, Blake...” Doris murmured, her eyes closing, hot tears threatening to fall. “I want you, too.” Opening her eyes again slowly, she found Blake staring at her; and she swallowed hard. The air suddenly seemed thick, filled with electricity.

Blake smiled before leaning forward and silencing Doris with an achingly tender kiss. Her arms slipped around Doris’ waist before claiming the full lips over and over again with bruising kisses meant to chase all doubts from the other woman’s mind. Pulling away slightly, her hands tangling into thick hair, she smiled up into the slightly dazed eyes before her. “And, for the record, I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

Doris smiled softly, trailing the back of her fingers across Blake's flushed cheek, and then continued until they were buried in Blake's hair. Pulling her closer, she crushed their lips together possessively, claiming the redhead for her very own as they kissed.

Blake's eyes fluttered shut and she just felt. She felt the fullness of Doris' lips on hers, the gentle swipe of a tongue against her lower lip, the soft puff of air against her cheek as she sighed against her skin. A shiver ran down her spine, and it wasn't from nerves.

It was desire, pure and simple.

"You are so beautiful," Blake whispered. Doris stilled in her arms, as if she had said something wrong and fear rose in her mind, stirring her insecurities. "I-I'm sorry..."

Doris leaned back to look into her eyes and shook her head, placing one fingertip on Blake's plump lip to stop her from continuing. Her finger trailed down, slowly tickling its way across pale skin before moving to the buttons of her blouse. Slowly, she unbuttoned them, one by one revealing glimpses of her flesh and her dark lace bra beneath.

Doris studied Blake, who was watching the movement of her hands intensely, before slowly glancing up to meet her gaze. She looked terrified and excited all at the same time, and Doris couldn't stop the smile that spread across her lips. Her expression became serious again, and she reached out to take Blake's hands in her own before turning them over and placing a gentle kiss into each palm.

"I want you to touch me, Blake," she said softly, before moving the redhead's hands to her body. Blake exhaled as she felt the warm skin, trembling slightly. "It's okay, there's no right or wrong, there's just the two of us." Doris moved their hands together across her heated flesh, bringing them slowly up to cup her breasts. The action parted her shirt completely and Blake gasped softly, enjoying the view.

"Doris..." Blake's voice was uncertain and a little breathy and probably more than a little horny. Doris grinned then and leaned forward to nibble a tender earlobe.

"Shhh, I know. I've got you." Doris placed butterfly kisses along the fine hair at her temple. She slid a finger under Blake's chin and tipped her face back up, their eyes locking, searching the depths of each other. "Just...touch me."

Tearing her eyes away, Blake glanced down to take in the deliciously tempting swell of her girlfriend's breasts covered by delicate lace, followed below that by the long planes of her stomach. She brushed tentatively with her thumbs, the movement causing Doris to gasp with pleasure, her nipples growing erect beneath the material, pressing against her. Squeezing ever so slightly, she wanted to explore more, so she dropped her hands to run

over the ridges of her ribs. The slight shiver beneath her fingers gave her the confidence she needed to slide even lower, across her belly, swirling the tips of her fingers around her navel and along the waistband of her pants.

Doris moaned softly, the sound vibrating deep inside her chest as her blouse was pushed off her shoulders and down her arms, the material falling to the hotel floor with a whisper. Blake lowered her head and kissed her collarbone, before dipping even lower, her lips skimming across her stomach.

Blake suddenly noticed a hand in her hair, stroking gently at first and then clutching slightly as she swirled her tongue around the sensitive rim of her lover's navel before sucking gently. Pausing for a moment to take it all in, she pressed her cheek to Doris' smooth belly.

"You're so soft..." she whispered almost reverently. She heard Doris chuckle quietly, her stomach moving as she did. Blake smiled too, and let her fingers play across the ticklish skin, watching as it twitched under her slow movements. Finally, she moved back up the center of Doris' body, finding and capturing her lips once more. The kiss soon turned demanding, almost urgent. Pulling apart their eyes locked as they panted, trying to catch their breath.

Blake ran her hand back down to cup a lace covered breast, squeezing gently as she explored, feeling the nipple harden even more against her palm. Doris sucked in a breath and arched closer.

"I want you. All of you," Blake murmured, their eyes locking. "Teach me; show me how to touch you."

Blake just had time to register Doris' naughty smile before her lips once more captured and claimed. Slowly they undressed each other, with whispered words of encouragement and suggestions, eventually ending up tangled together on the bed. The feel of naked skin sliding and pressing against each other for the first time pulled a low moan from both women.

Blake raked her eyes down Doris' naked body, taking in the gentle curves and valleys, noting the passage of time on both their bodies. Instead of being worried about her looks for a change, she couldn't wait to explore her lover's body. Taking her sweet time, her mouth travelled along a long elegant neck and over full, lush breasts. She smiled to herself as an impatient Doris guided her hand to her sex, holding her tightly against her.

“God, you’re so wet,” Blake gasped, her fingers stroking through the heat of her lover’s body, thrilling at the sound that was ripped from Doris’ throat. She did that; she had made her lover cry out in passion. She was so responsive to her touch; it was a little overwhelming.

“So good,” Doris rasped as Blake’s weight settled on top her. “I knew you’d feel so, fucking, good. Oh, God!” She just caught Blake’s grin of mischief as she felt herself slowly penetrated, filled intimately and claimed by her lover’s touch. Doris bucked against her, gasping in surprise, lost on a wave of sensation, as Blake began to move. She was suddenly everywhere, sucking and nipping her way down her body, as if mapping it for future reference, all the while building a steady rhythm that she was helpless to do anything but follow along. She willingly remained trapped beneath her, writhing with need.

“Mine,” Blake growled, as her partner’s hips began to arch off the mattress to meet her thrust for thrust. She shifted, and added the extra strength of her thigh between her girlfriend’s legs.

Doris made a small sound at the back of her throat, one that Blake definitely planned on hearing again someday, as she curled her fingers and found the spot that her lover couldn’t resist. She made a sympathetic groan as Doris throbbed beneath her before claiming her mouth again, kissing her hard. Doris’ body started to tense, building to her peak, her body straining to pull her lover deeper.

“Look at me,” Blake murmured against kiss swollen lips, pleased as Doris’ eyes snapped open at her soft request, desperately trying to focus on her words but clearly too near her release to speak. “I want to watch you come for me, baby.”

Doris bucked against her hand, Blake’s words driving her impossibly higher. All Doris could do was nod and gasp for more air before she was rewarded, her clit slowly circled by an insistent thumb. Their eyes locked and held, and Doris felt as if her very soul was exposed, overwhelmed by the woman making love to her. Her body suddenly responded to the intimacy and she came hard.

“God, Blake!” Doris cried out, her breathy cries echoing in her lover’s ears as she thrashed against her and then slumped to the mattress in a twitchy, spent heap. Blake just laughed softly, pleased with herself, as she gently pulled herself from her lover’s heat.

As her racing heart slowed, Doris blinked up at Blake, the redhead’s indulgent smile warming something deep inside as she moved her hands along her body again. Blake snuggled closer, burrowing against her neck, as Doris reached up and put her arms around her, holding her tight and breathing her scent in. Her fingers lazily traced along the redhead’s back, and she sighed happily content.

"I thought you said you hadn't done this before," Doris said, her voice a little raspy.

"Well, I have had sex before, and I know what I like so I just went with it. I'm a quick study, I guess," Blake said, suddenly a little self-conscious. "So, it was okay?"

Doris snorted and looked at her girlfriend. Was she serious? It was the best orgasm she'd had in years and it was only the first time the other woman had been up to bat. She was about to say as much when she saw the worry in Blake's eyes.

"It was perfect," Doris whispered, running the back of her knuckles along Blake's lips before pressing a soft kiss there. "You're perfect."

Kissing her cheeks and tracing along a delicately arching eyebrow, Doris felt her energy returning and moved to once again take Blake's lips, sinking deeper into her lover's mouth, their tongues dueling and playing together. She didn't even think Blake realized she had started to roll them over until her backside hit the sheets. As her weight settled between the redhead's legs, Doris quickly discovered just how ready she was for her.

Rolling her hips, Doris dragged her thigh against her lover's center, soft needy moans hitting her hard as she desperately began to explore her tempting body. Sweet kisses roamed across her flushed skin, fingers tickling and teasing her breasts to rock hard tips.

Blake's mind swirled with sensation, enjoying every moment. Making love with a woman was the same, and yet so very different. There was no rough stubble scratching against tender skin, no hard muscles, and other things, pressing against her. She didn't feel like she had to rush to try to keep up or worry about pleasuring her partner. There was absolutely no need to worry about getting pregnant, which was refreshing. Instead there was this incredible feeling of being taken care of, nurtured, aroused and tormented and made to feel like she was the center of Doris' universe.

They took their time, slowly building the desire. Kissing and cuddling had helped to settle her nerves, but Blake was becoming impatient. What she craved now was Doris's touch to sooth her soul.

"You are so amazing," Doris whispered into the darkness, before moving along Blake's torso, trailing fingers tickling along soft breasts, palms rolling against stiff nipples. Blake arched into the warm touch, wanting more.

Doris finally seemed to take the hint, her hand wandering down to where her lover's legs met, finding her folds swollen and slick, Blake shifting to spread herself a little wider for her. Happily, she teased the stiff clit with the pad of her thumb, grinning indulgently as

Blake arched up to meet her, gasping as if trying to catch a deep breath, followed by thick moans of pleasure.

“Please...” Blake whispered on an exhale, slow and steady. She felt everything so intensely, responding so subtly to Doris’ sure touch, her body inviting her with every movement. They both groaned with pleasure as Doris pressed deeply into her, their bodies dancing back and forth together.

Blake arms snaked up around Doris’ neck, as if needing to feel even closer. Picking up the tempo of her thrusts, she felt Doris angle deeper, panting desperately into her ear, rocking in and out of her harder. Before she knew it, she felt her body tighten, clenching greedily around Doris’ buried fingers. Her back arched and finally Blake came hard, releasing a deep guttural cry as she shuddered against her.

Tangled together in a heap, exhausted and spent, they kissed and nuzzled each other softly, their thundering heartbeats slowing. Doris shifted her larger frame to one side, keeping Blake close as she quieted in her arms. Holding each other, they curled up together in the soft blankets, touching softly. They lay breathing for a bit, gathering strength and comfort from each other.

Doris ran the pad of her thumb across full lips and dipped her head to kiss her lover once more. Blake was so damn beautiful like this, all carefree and happy, that it made her ache inside.

“Sleep for a while now,” Doris murmured, as Blake’s eyes started to droop. Reaching out, she pulled the heavy quilt from the bottom of the bed and dragged it over the top of them. Finally settled down, Blake wrapped herself around her and nuzzled into the crook of her neck, sighing happily. Doris ran her fingers slowly through Blake’s hair and watched her fall asleep, the simple pleasure filling a hole that she didn’t even know had existed inside.

Outside the window, big happy flakes fell slowly to the ground...

Several hours later, Blake stretched and reached out in the darkness, her hand grasping along the hotel nightstand until she found what she had been looking for. Grabbing Doris’ cigarettes and lighter she rolled back under the covers, grinning as she heard her new lover groan and stretch beside her. Doris pushed the blanket down and snuggled closer, dropping soft butterfly kisses along Blake’s shoulder.

“Doris?”

Blake shivered at the soft touch of her lover’s lips sliding along her skin, distracting her. Slipping a cigarette out of the pack, she flicked the disposable lighter a few times until a

flame sparked to life. Bringing it to the tip of the cigarette, she inhaled deeply as the tobacco and paper caught, bringing the smoke into her lungs and feeling the rush of nicotine hit her system. Exhaling slowly, Blake sank deeper into the comfort of her lover's embrace.

"God, I needed that..."

"What the hell? Since when do you smoke?" Doris frowned, stealing the cigarette from Blake's mouth and staring at her like she had grown a second head. Popping the cigarette between her own lips she took a deep drag on it herself as Blake grinned beside her.

"Well, technically for two weeks in high school. My boyfriend smoked, and so I thought I'd be cool too but luckily I didn't get hooked, and then we broke up so I stopped." Blake trailed her fingers lazily through Doris' hair, straightening the tousled locks a little bit. "I know I give you a hard time about it, and I do think you should stop, but sometimes though, when the mood strikes, I'll light one up if I've been drinking a lot or after really good sex..." Blake nipped playfully at Doris' earlobe, enjoying the shiver it caused in her lover.

Doris snorted and shook her head as her lover chuckled softly.

"You constantly surprise me, Marler."

"Good." Blake chuckled sleepily and snuggled closer, her eyes getting droopy with every passing second. Yawning, she gave up the fight to stay awake. "Just don't tell my mother about the smoking, 'kay? She'd kill me..."

Doris watched as Blake drifted off to sleep snuggled up tight next to her, as she finished her cigarette.

"Don't worry. All your secrets are safe with me."

ACT 3

Saturday morning arrived bright and early and after a lazy morning of snuggling in bed and a wonderful breakfast in their suite, it was time to hit the stores. Before they knew it, lunch had also come and gone. Finally, they had exhausted the usual shopping centers around Chicago.

“I think this is the place here,” Olivia said as she slowly drove down a relatively busy Chicago street. They had decided to explore Boystown last, taking their time to experience what it was like in the well-known Chicago gay district. Olivia pulled the folded map she’d printed off to find Miss Kitty’s, the adult sex shop that they had been checking out online and seemed to have a wide selection for them to look at.

Natalia kept her eyes peeled for a parking spot and soon they were out in the cold afternoon, walking down the street. Several couples walked past, hand in hand, walking various dogs or simply wrapped up in each other. Olivia smiled and reached down for Natalia’s hand, feeling like she was suddenly free to show affection in public for her partner. A little shy about it at first, Natalia straightened her shoulders and smiled back at her lover, oddly touched as Olivia slipped both their hands into the pocket of her long jacket, keeping her warm.

Pushing the door open to the cheerfully decorated store, with rainbow flags and Christmas lights everywhere, they stepped inside Miss Kitty’s. Olivia nodded as she glanced around the tastefully designed store, which was certainly not hurting for customers. It wasn’t at all like the store she’d been to in Springfield. That was more a lingerie and dress store with a naughty back room for toys and such.

Behind the cash register was a kindly-looking older woman with spiky short hair, who nodded at them as they entered and then went back to helping the next customer who walked up to the counter. Natalia started to relax a little. She had entered a sex shop and hadn’t been struck down by lightning, so far so good.

“How are you holding up?” Olivia murmured as she browsed along a shelf, looking at some bumper stickers and dream-catchers with various slogans and rainbow motifs.

“I’m good. How about you?” Natalia glanced at the back of the store, seeing that it was one of the more popular areas of the store. And most likely where they would find what they were really looking for.

“Oh, you know me.” Olivia blinked as she came across a rack of collars and leather vests. Her mind immediately pictured Natalia standing in their bedroom in black high heels, a thong and a leather vest, slowly licking her lips as she snapped a collar tight around her throat. Smirking to herself, she took a moment to enjoy the wave of heat that flowed through her at the thought. Putting a collar back on its hook, she cleared her throat self-consciously. “I’m cool as a cucumber.”

Wandering deeper into the store, they both started to check out some of the other items on display as they slowly made their way to the back as they looked at some clothing. Natalia

made a bee-line for the book section as soon as she discovered it. Olivia lost her in the crowd after that.

Pausing at a table display, Olivia smiled and picked up a familiar silver box. It was still pretty heavy just as she recalled. Suddenly, a very familiar voice spoke from behind her.

“Olivia?”

Olivia’s eyes widened as she dropped the box back onto the table as if it had burned her.

“This can’t be happening to me again,” she muttered under her breath, looking over her shoulder to find a smiling Blake Marler standing there.

Frank pulled onto the gravel driveway of the little farmhouse and quickly parked his car beside a boring looking rental car. He was a little curious about whose car that could be, especially with Edmund and his henchmen still out there. Carefully, he made his way to the back door of the small house and turned the handle, entering the home, just like he always used to. Walking into the kitchen, Frank found Emma busily helping to prepare something along one counter, her iPod blaring away as she worked.

Tapping the girl on the shoulder, Frank was stunned that Emma yelled and practically jumped out of her skin with fright. Before he knew it, Emma spun low, her leg pushing out as she kicked Frank’s feet out from under him. Losing his balance, he wobbled for a moment almost catching himself and then he fell, landing soundly on his ass. He didn’t even have a second to move, as Shadow came rushing out growling at him, ready to protect her family.

Holly Reade and Clarissa came running in; Holly just barely keeping her laughter inside. “There’s this wonderful invention called a doorbell Frank. Maybe you should try it sometime.”

Frank glared at his ex-girlfriend’s mom, a woman who still scared the crap out of him.

“Oh my gosh Uncle Frank, I’m so sorry,” Emma apologized worried that she had hurt the old man. Shadow continued to circle him, her fur on edge as she sensed something wasn’t quite right about the man.

“Don’t worry about it, Emma.” Frank rubbed his ass, just knowing there was going to be a bruise there by that night. “You’ve got some good moves there.”

“Miss Li is a great teacher,” Clarissa spoke up, smiling at Emma. “I hope she’ll let me come with Emma soon too.”

“Looks like you might have some new recruits for the force, Frank,” Holly said, pouring herself another cup of coffee from the carafe. “Lord knows, it needs all the help it can get.”

Frank glared at her. He never did like the old curmudgeon anymore than she liked him. Luckily, Frank heard the happy giggle of his daughter and sure enough, he turned just as Leyla came into the room with Francesca in her arms.

“Pa-pi!” Francesca squiggled in Leyla’s arms, reaching out to her father.

Frank sighed and took his baby girl into his arms. At least someone around here was happy to see him.

“Blake?” Olivia turned in disbelief. “What are you doing here?”

“I love this store.” Blake came closer, picking up another vibrator from the sale table. “This stuff is great; in fact, they have more in the back.”

“Y’know, we really have to stop meeting like this.” Olivia blinked, convinced she was having a serious flashback. Over Blake’s shoulder, she saw Doris and Natalia making their way towards them, her lover clearly blushing at something that had been said.

“No.” Natalia shook her head, trying to make the other woman understand. “I was just reading and trying to figure out what the...”

“That’s okay, really. There’s no need to be embarrassed. A girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.”

Doris smirked, her smile growing wider as they joined Blake and Olivia. She locked eyes with Olivia, enjoying this little reunion immensely. “Found her checking out the *Joys of Lesbian Sex* book. I think I know what Santa’s going to be sticking in her stocking this year, the gift that keeps on giving.” Blake swatted Doris on the arm, as they both started to giggle.

“What are you two doing here?” Olivia asked, trying to change the topic before Natalia blushed to death before their very eyes. She took note of how closely the two women were standing. “I thought the play was last night.”

“It was.” Doris bounced a little and slipped her arm around Blake’s waist, pulling her closer. “We ended up staying over, the weather was a little messy for driving, and Blake’s mom was home with the boys so...”

Olivia exchanged a glance with Natalia, raising an eyebrow at this latest development. It was a big step for both women to finally take. Natalia’s smile widened as she realized what had happened, and she squeezed Blake’s arm, happy for her friend.

“I had suggested that we should do some shopping before heading home, and I always visit Miss Kitty’s if I have time,” Blake said, leaning closer to Natalia. “The owner’s brother is one of my better selling mystery authors.”

“Come on, girls. Time’s a’wastin’ here,” Doris said starting to herd the group towards the back room. She didn’t want to miss this for the world. Blake, meanwhile, grabbed Natalia’s arm and started walking straight for the back.

“They’ve got these great dildos. There’s this one that glows in the dark that’s a lot of fun...” Blake nattered on, oblivious to Natalia’s look of panic.

Natalia coughed slightly and glanced back over her shoulder at Olivia, silently pleading for help, before she was dragged by Blake through a small knot of customers and disappeared from sight.

“Just don’t,” Olivia said to a smirking Doris, her mouth open and ready to comment.

“Oh, come on, this will be fun. I’m just a little surprised to find you looking at toys. I figured little Miss Pure-As-The-Driven-Snow would have refused to even set foot in a place like this,” Doris said as they slowly made their way through the store.

“Actually it was kind of Natalia’s suggestion. She wants to be a little more...adventurous.” Olivia grinned, thinking that she was a very lucky woman indeed.

Doris and Olivia stepped into the back room just in time to see Natalia’s face

“It’s like a buffet,” Blake rambled on as they browsed through all the various sizes and shapes on display.

“I guess the question is, just how big is your appetite,” Natalia teased back, as she reached out and tentatively touched a purple silicon one, very large and would be relatively realistic looking, if it wasn’t purple. To one side was displayed some very pretty glass dildos, almost works of art. “Glass? Wouldn’t that break?”

Olivia stepped forward at that point, slipping her arms around Natalia's waist and kissing her temple.

"Find anything you like, sweetheart?" Olivia asked softly. Natalia just shrugged and leaned back into her lover's warmth. "You know, even if we don't find anything, that's okay. You're my ultimate sex toy anyway," Olivia said, nipping lightly on Natalia's earlobe. Natalia's beaming smile was reward enough for all the torment she was enduring today.

Blake walked up beside them, with a red cock in her hand. Olivia wondered which level of hell they had managed to get trapped in.

"Olivia, doesn't this remind you of the one we found in Springfield last year?" Blake smiled, turning the stiff piece around in her hand to judge the girth of it.

Natalia stilled in her arms as Olivia closed her eyes.

"You've gone toy shopping before? With Blake?"

"Uhm...I can explain." Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to find the right words, a blush starting to form on her cheeks.

Natalia turned around and waited, arms crossed, her foot tapping on the floor.

"Y'know I always thought it was a little weird you'd never tried one before," Doris said.

"So not helping here, Wolfe," Olivia growled at her friend, who merely smirked at her.

"You mean you haven't seen the red one yet?" Blake asked Natalia, a little incredulous. "It was a real nice one, and at least this big..." She stretched her hands out wide, just as Doris reached out and grabbed it, interrupting her train of thought.

"Sorry we gotta go." Doris pulled the redhead away behind her, before she was killed in the crossfire. "Oh, look a purple one with two heads! Come on." Blake wisely grabbed Doris' hand and fled before things got ugly.

"And while you're at it, just where is this infamous red model that the two of you bought together?" Natalia tilted her head, waiting for an answer. Olivia hung her head in defeat, and started to explain the situation.

"We didn't buy it together, I bought it. For me to use. All by myself. And it's not that I haven't dabbled with them on occasion, but I was so...on edge and you smelled so damn good... and then the whole yoga downward dog thing just tipped me over the edge." Olivia

fidged and sighed as she turned to her lover and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, before looking her in the eye to explain. "What I really wanted was you, so very badly. But I got flustered when I ran into Blake at the toy store and then...well, I ended up tossing the damn thing out. I didn't want a poor substitute for the real thing, and I decided you were worth the wait. Every. Agonizing. Second."

Natalia smiled softly at her partner's words, and gently leaned in to kiss her sweet lips.

"Forgiven?" Olivia asked quietly. She didn't mean to upset her partner.

"Nothing to forgive," Natalia said, laying her hand on Olivia's and she meant it. She had just enjoyed yanking Olivia's chain, and the added bonus of actually getting her to blush over something, was priceless.

"You know, we don't have to do this if it's too much. We could see if Philip's library is available for a little naughty librarian action again, or if I have the office sound proofed and we could..." Olivia grinned as Natalia swatted her on the shoulder.

"Sound proofing? I am not that loud." Natalia grinned at their old joke, both of them knowing that she was in fact a little vocal in the bedroom at times. "No, I think I've found something we'll both enjoy on the honeymoon. It'll be the gift that keeps on giving." Natalia smirked, enjoying herself.

"Besides I've already found the perfect something. You," Natalia said softly, their eyes meeting and Olivia fell in love all over again.

"However, I would like to pick up that big purple one Blake and I were looking at," Natalia shifted closer, whispering in her lover's ear. "Because I can't wait to fuck your brains out with it..."

Natalia smiled and patted Olivia's cheek before moving away to make their purchase. Olivia blinked, stunned for a moment as her mind flooded with images before she finally rushed to catch up to her lover.

"Will that be Visa, MasterCard or American Express?"

The date was going well, as they sat at a small little sushi place on the outskirts of town where they eventually decided to meet. Leyla swirled her white wine enjoying some dessert and the stories Jonathan was telling of his life back on San Cristobel.

“So my mom looks at Auntie O and just pushes the pumpkin pie, whip cream and all right into her face.” Jonathan laughed at the memory.

“Oh boy, did your mother survive that unscathed?” Leyla knew that Olivia was a pussy cat most days, but certainly still had her claws and knew how to use them. Her sister Marissa sounded a little similar to Olivia in some ways. Leyla would have liked to have met her.

“Yeah, she and Olivia were fine. That was the way they were with each other. They would argue like cats and dogs one minute, get it out of their systems and be the best of friends the next. She really missed Olivia when she moved to America from the islands.” Jonathan popped the last bit of his sushi into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “I did too.”

“The place sounds lovely. Maybe I can go with Natalia and Olivia the next time the family all goes.” Leyla caught the waiter’s attention and ordered a coffee. “We never got to travel much when I was kid. There was no money for it, but also my dad was a hard ass. My mother hid in her Church commitments and my father tried to control us all with an iron fist.”

“So living with Natalia must be really big change for you.” Jonathan leaned forward. “Not only are you free to do as you wish, but you get to know her better.”

Leyla smiled thinking of how Natalia’s return into their lives had signalled her new beginning, a fresh start that she was going to grab onto and take. She didn’t mind hard work and Natalia was a good person, despite everything her father and brother had spouted at her all those years.

“I sometimes think that because of Natalia’s teenage pregnancy and her being thrown out, that’s why my father was so over protective of me. For a long time I was very angry with Natalia, for leaving me behind. Now though I see that she had no choice in the matter, just like I had no choices while I lived under their roof.”

Leyla leaned forward and took a sip of her wine, deciding now was as good a time as any to bring it up, and hopefully it wouldn’t scare the handsome man sitting across from her away.

“I just want to be upfront with you. I’m not looking for any sort of serious commitment or relationship. Don’t get me wrong, I love Sarah and enjoy spending time with her so it’s not that, and I’m not scared of it. With my father and brother being so over protective, I’ve never really had a chance to date much. So I’m taking the time now to go out and meet people and see what’s out there.” She studied his face to figure out what he was thinking, hoping some of it might show in his expression.

Suddenly, Jonathan smiled, almost relieved. "I know exactly what you're saying. I was in isolation for so long, hiding with Sarah that I almost forgot what dating is all about. I'm not looking for anything serious either. Just someone to have a good time with and maybe a little bit more."

Leyla leaned back in her chair. They apparently were both on the same track.

"So friends with benefits and we'll see where we go from there?" Leyla asked, just wanting to be clear.

Jonathan grinned and nodded, as he flagged the server for their bill.

"Feel like dancing?"

Leyla smiled and nodded her head enthusiastically. This looked like the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

A warm cozy fire crackled in the small fireplace in the Fellowes hotel suite. Olivia sat on the bed with her laptop open, searching the Internet, while Natalia was reading a lesbian romance novel she'd picked up at Miss Kitty's. Safely tucked away in their bag was their special purchase from that afternoon. Once the owner of the store found out that they were friends with Blake the woman was thrilled and really helped them get what they needed. They would be heading back to Springfield with a training dvd, instructions and the necessary paraphernalia. She even threw in a packet of edible undies for free when she found out it was for their honeymoon.

Natalia smiled, thinking of how many ways she was going to kill Blake for embarrassing her so thoroughly today. A chime from the laptop caught her attention and Olivia's happy laugh.

"Ok, I think we've got our hotel in Paris booked for Valentine's weekend," Olivia said from the bed, doing a little seated happy dance with her arms above her head.

Natalia grinned. She had loved the idea of going to Paris for their honeymoon, but the timing of their wedding and getting the Beacon under control while they were gone would be tricky at New Year's. So the honeymoon night would be in a suite at the Beacon and then they would take a trip to France over Valentine's weekend.

"Any luck on the flights yet?" Natalia asked, opening her book up again and starting to get lost in the story while trying to listen to her partner.

"No, not yet, but it's still early to book flights and get a good deal." Olivia glanced up from her screen and took in the sight of her lover, lounging peacefully in the wingback chair by the fireplace. The amber light from the fire made her skin glow with an even darker tan. God, she was beautiful. She felt a familiar tightening in her lower regions, the sharp pangs of desire washing over her.

Natalia glanced up in time to see the hungry look in her partner's eyes. She could almost sense that she was about to be ravished at any moment. Smiling seductively, she waited as Olivia closed her laptop and put it on the nightstand beside the bed before making her way across the room to her side.

Running her fingers through the soft dark hair, Olivia sighed softly and dipped her head to place the first of many kisses on the woman's lips.

On the nightstand a cell phone rang, the first few notes of *Tie a Yellow Ribbon* floated through the air. That ringtone was used for only one person in the family.

Groaning as she pulled away, Natalia walked over to the phone and answered it, "Hi Rafe. How are you, baby?" Natalia's voice always seemed to change when she spoke with her son. Olivia watched her sink down onto the thick mattress and start to speak with him, her face always so happy to have any kind of contact with him as he was stationed overseas.

Olivia had a bad feeling about getting Rafe permission to come to their wedding. The military had been dragging their feet about letting him go, and she was beginning to think it wouldn't happen.

"Oh, Rafe. No." Natalia frowned at the obvious bad news. She nodded again, not that he could see her, but it was a habit she had. "Ok, we'll definitely save you some wedding cake."

Olivia moved over to the bed and lay down beside her lover, knowing that this was going to hurt Natalia that her son would miss her wedding.

"So soon? Ok, thanks for calling. I love you." Natalia barely had the phone snapped closed before the tears started to fall.

"I'm sorry, honey." Olivia opened her arms as Natalia rolled into her embrace, snuggling together. "Well, we knew it was a long shot. He's overseas and it's hard to get permission to come home for Christmas and a wedding."

"It still sucks." Natalia pressed her nose into the crook on Olivia's neck, inhaling deeply, trying to calm herself down. "I just wanted all my babies here with me..."

Stroking long fingers through the dark hair, Olivia tried to comfort her lover as best as possible, rocking her softly as she cried.

The evening had started out so well, with little Francesca and Eleni playing in the living room as Frank toiled away in the kitchen making meatballs. Dinner was excellent and Francesca was a good girl all evening, even settling down to sleep quickly.

The downhill slide had started with a simple question from Eleni, asking if Mallet had seen Marina yet. It had all spiralled away from there, with Frank getting his anger up about how if Mallet had just stayed with Marina, none of this would be happening. Eleni, of course, put the blame squarely on Marina herself.

“Damn it, Eleni. She’s our daughter,” Frank sputtered, his arms flailing at his sides.

“I know, Frank. And we will support her and love her regardless, but we can’t just sweep it under the rug and let her get away with it,” Eleni said extremely calmly, almost resigned to the fact that this did not look good for Marina. Not at all. “We each took an oath to uphold the law. And you are the Chief of Police, for Christ’s sake. Grow a set.”

Frank looked a little shocked at her and then spun away to pace.

“I’m also her father, first and foremost.” Frank looked away, staring out his small apartment window, hands thrust into his pockets as he pouted. “And you’re her mother. How can you be so heartless?”

“I’m not. My heart is shattering as surely as I am standing here beside you.” Eleni’s eyes began to shine with unshed tears. “But we also taught her right from wrong, and if she has chosen the wrong side and has broken the law, then we must follow our beliefs and uphold the law.” Eleni’s lip trembled, and before she knew it, she was crying.

Frank moved closer, pulling her into a hug taking comfort that he wasn’t alone in this. Holding her close, he dropped soft kisses to her forehead, tears flowing from his own eyes. Looking up, Eleni reached out and captured a tear on her fingertip. Frank swallowed hard, and he hesitated a moment before dipping his head and gently kissing his ex-wife.

Eleni shifted in his arms, a little surprised by the sudden display of affection. She knew she should pull away, that this was probably not the smartest idea either of them had had. And yet she stayed right where she was, kissing him back.

Reaching between them, Eleni lifted her hand and slowly began to unbutton her blouse. Frank wiped the tears still welling in her eyes away with his thumbs before tracing along her cheek to rub the pad of his thumb across her full lips. She glanced down and reached for his shirt, starting to tug his shirt out of his pants and working his belt loose.

“Eleni, are you sure?” Frank asked softly.

Eleni smiled and nodded. “Tonight, I need the father of my child in my arms, reminding me that there is still hope out there and that only love can save the world.”

Dipping his head, Frank nodded and smiled gently, before capturing her full soft lips and escaping together into the night.

Only love could save the world, indeed.

ACT 4

Sunday morning in the Marler household was frantic like usual. Standing in the kitchen, Blake was making scrambled eggs and bacon while her mother was putting on the coffee.

“You know, I’m glad you talked me into coming back for Christmas and the wedding,” Holly said, tossing in several scoops of coffee into the filter and sliding the compartment closed. Blake licked some milk from her thumb and nodded in agreement.

“Me too, mother. With the boys home again, it will be nice to have you here too. A big family Christmas.” Blake broke several eggs into a bowl and started to mix in the milk.

“And depending if Ed can sell his place in California quickly, we may even have a Springfield home of our own by then.” Holly poured water into the machine and hit the little red button to start it going. “Ed was talking about moving back here since so many of our family members are living here again. We could easily make Springfield our home base while we continue to travel the world.”

Upstairs there was a loud thump and then silence, followed closely by footsteps thundering down the hallway and down the stairs. The twins dashed into the kitchen and skidded to a stop.

“Um...we didn’t do it,” The boys said almost in unison.

Blake continued to stir her egg mixture into the heated pan and then turned to the boys.

"If you broke something or knocked something over then clean it up. If you two are old enough to get into enough mischief to get kicked out of school, then you are old enough to clean up after yourselves. Now, go on, scoot," Blake grumped. She'd had enough of their antics and this was going to have to stop. Poor little Clarissa didn't feel at home in her own house.

The twins looked at each other and turned, reluctantly heading back upstairs to take care of whatever the problem was.

"I'll be up in fifteen minutes to check on what happened. So get a move on," Blake said gruffly, pleased as the boys picked up their pace dashing back upstairs. Holly pulled two mugs out of the cupboard and scooped two sugars into hers and one into Blake's.

"Those boys remind me of you, Blake, when you were their age. You were always getting into adventures, with a nose for trouble." Holly poured out the coffee and added some cream to both mugs, stirring before handing Blake her mug. "I think you'll do just fine with them. You're ready, I can see that now. And maybe with a little help along the way..."

Both women glanced up as Doris tapped lightly on the kitchen window and waved before making her way past to the front of the house.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind. I asked Doris to join us for breakfast." Holly's eyes twinkled with mischief as Blake's narrowed.

"I see where I get the nose for trouble from..." Blake grumped but slid an arm around her mother's shoulders and smiled, pleased that her mother and Doris seemed to get along.

"You know, I never did like that Frank Cooper sniffing around you..." Holly couldn't resist one last poke before dashing out of the kitchen to let Doris in.

"Mother!"

Holly's laughter floated back through the house, warming Blake's heart. Her house was quickly becoming a home.

Buzz and Lillian sank down into the corner booth at Company, surprised to see Eleni there, with little Francesca in her arms.

"Hello there," Lillian said warmly. "Did you kidnap Francesca?"

"Nope." Eleni laughed and poked the girl's belly making her giggle and squirm. "Somebody's daddy went to go get the highchair from the storage room."

"I'll go see if he needs a hand," Buzz grumbled, half terrified of what kind of mess his son would leave the storage room in after hunting for the chair.

It didn't take long and both men returned with the high chair, with Frank slipping the baby into it easily before sliding into the booth beside Eleni.

"She is so adorable in that outfit, Frank," Lillian said as she started to look through the menu.

"Eleni got it for her last week," Frank said proudly, as he reached across the tabletop and squeezed her hand. Buzz and Lillian glanced at each other. Something had definitely changed since the last time they'd eaten with Frank.

"Are you two..." Buzz finally out right asked. He was getting too old to beat around the bush.

"Pop!" Frank squawked, and Eleni blushed but smiled softly, squeezing his hand.

"We're seeing how things go, but yes." She smiled at the older couple, before turning and meeting Frank's happy gaze.

Outside on the sidewalk, Marina paused and stared into Company. Inside she could see her family gathered together in the corner, happy and warm. Jealousy raged deep in her soul and she turned to leave.

Frank stood to go get more coffee refills and saw Marina, turning to leave. Dashing to the door, he quickly made his way out into the cold to speak with her.

"Marina, wait!" Frank waved, pleased that his daughter turned and waited for him to catch up.

"What? I need to get home," Marina said angrily. It was a good enough excuse to get out of there, the pain of the perfect happy little family eating away at her.

"What the hell is going on with you, sweetie?" Frank asked, honestly wanting to know. Maybe if she could tell him herself, he could fix it or help her make it better. But he couldn't do that if he didn't know what was going on.

"Maybe I should ask you the same thing. You seem awfully cozy with Mom these days. The perfect little family with your new daughter. Out with the old and in with the new, right?"

Tears threatened to fall, the pain of it all hitting her harder than she expected. The pain of her parent's divorce cut deep still after all this time, and it had put her into a tailspin for years, thinking it was somehow her fault and then realizing that it was her mother who had forsaken her family for her desires. For a woman who had such traditional ideals growing up, Eleni had done her fair share of bed hopping with Alan-Michael Spaulding.

"Y'know what, Dad? Do your little retread of a romance with Eleni. You can do better, no, you have done better in the past, but whatever." Marina threw her hands up in frustration. "I'm done. I have my own family to take care of now."

"Marina, honey, don't be like that." Frank shifted in the snow, as he shivered in the cold without his jacket on, the slush at his feet making it worse. "Talk to me."

"I don't even think I know who you are anymore," Marina said sadly.

"I could say the same about you," Frank said, his voice holding a thread of warning. He knew what she had done; Lord knows what she was doing now. His own daughter mixed up in stuff that he was afraid to dig deeper into.

"I've got to go," Marina's voice broke slightly as she wiped at her eye with the back of her hand, turning to walk back down the street, the snow softly falling around her.

Frank stuffed his hands deep into his pants pockets, his heart breaking with each step she took from him. He turned and opened the door to Company, stepping into the warmth and love waiting for him there.

Fluffy white snow covered the city, hiding the dirt and shadows under a pristine layer of white. Olivia had set their alarm in time to surprise Natalia with one last treat before heading back home to their happy little family. Staring up at the stone spire of Holy Name Cathedral on State Street, Natalia thought it seemed as if it stretched clear up into the sky. Massive bronze doors with The Tree of Life on it greeted them as they entered the huge Gothic revival architecture style Church.

The inside was even more stunning than the outside, with vaulted ceilings and statues and gilt everywhere. Natalia's spirit seemed to soar inside such a huge place of worship.

"Thank you, querida," Natalia said as they slid into a pew and stared around the Cathedral. "I love coming here. I used to visit all the time when Rafe was little. How did you know?"

"I didn't. I just thought that you might like to go to Mass and this one looked like it would be fun to check out." Olivia smiled shyly as Natalia took her hand and squeezed.

"Well, I love this surprise very much."

They looked up and around the Church as it filled up with parishioners coming to Mass.

Natalia flipped through the handouts and then they both sat back and waited for the service to start. "You know, it's going to be a great Christmas, even if Rafe can't come and is stationed on the other side of the world. Family is important and even though he won't be with us physically I know in all our hearts he will be there."

"And we'll still have Leyla and Ava home with us. It's going to be fantastic." Olivia tried to make Natalia feel better, knowing that Rafe's phone call from the night before was obviously still troubling her. "I just wish your parents had come around a little bit."

Natalia sighed, nodding her head in agreement. The weekend seemed to be full of disappointment.



"It's upsetting that they just don't seem to want me in their lives. My father just can't seem to get in his head that we are not the enemy here, his control issues and homophobia is the problem." Natalia glanced around at all the people sitting in the pews around them, wondering just how many of them would hate her if they knew about whom she loved. "I

know he doesn't understand our love, but all I can do is hope and pray that with time things will change. And someday we will be married here, in this Church."

"Oh, honey, I don't think so," Olivia disagreed. She wanted to believe that to be true, but she doubted that she would ever live to see that day.

"No, really. I know our marriage vows wouldn't be recognized by the Catholic Church or the state of Illinois for that matter," Natalia said, smiling softly. "I have faith that someday we will stand here before God and man, and we will renew our vows. Times change, people change. Sometimes we don't like the changes and it's hard to accept. And sometimes change takes longer than we want it to." Natalia looked up at the altar as the pipe organ began to play the processional hymn, the notes vibrating deep inside her chest. "I have faith."

Olivia blinked and looked over at her fiancée, wishing not for the first time that she had such faith in a higher power or even in her fellow mankind. She didn't need it though, as long as Natalia was at her side, she was content to believe in her and their future together.

"And I have faith in you." Stretching out, Olivia took Natalia's hand, entwining their fingers together and squeezed, feeling a peace and quiet joy flow over her. It was more than enough.

A heavy metal door creaked open, allowing a lone figure to step into the small space. The cement floor was covered in a dingy film of dirt, cinder block walls and a ratty looking quilt in a heap on the floor in the corner. It would be of little help keeping out the cold and dampness of the room. A cockroach crawled over the stained quilt, disappearing quickly under the edge of it to hide, apparently missing the comfort and familiarity of the earlier darkness.

The place wasn't perfect, but with some adjustments it would do. A cruel smile appeared, slowly spreading wider as the decision was made.

Yes, it would do nicely.

THE END

The Study of Butterflies

by CharmedLassie

ACT 1

Olivia Spencer awoke with a weight on her chest, as though she'd been fighting the urge to wake. The darkness of the room only enhanced the feeling that she was being slowly suffocated. On more than one occasion in the past she'd woken from a nightmare like this, unable to breathe from either fear or recollection. She forced herself through the sense of isolation with a few deep gulps of air and the discomfort faded. Automatically, she stretched an arm across the bed, just to touch Natalia and reassure herself, but the space beside her was empty. More than that, it was cold. On the frequent occasions Natalia slipped out in the middle of the night to check on the girls, she was always back under the covers within a few minutes, unless Francesca was awake and Olivia couldn't hear anything to suggest that.

Checking the digital clock display, she discovered it was nearing three thirty a.m. How long had Natalia been gone?

The darkness in the room was itself odd. Most nights Natalia left the door ajar, despite the baby monitor, using the excuse that they could listen for Emma too. On the rare occasions Olivia did wake in darkness, Natalia was always there – or her voice was filtering through the monitor as she quieted Francesca. It was soothing. But right now the only sound was her own uneven breathing.

Retrieving her dressing gown from the back of the door she fumbled for the knob. The glare of the landing light half-blinded her. She paused for a moment until she adjusted well enough to go downstairs. All the remnants of Christmas, the decorations and the lights, seemed muted in the silent room. Even though the television screen was flickering, the sound was turned down to an illegible murmur. Natalia sat rigidly on the sofa, staring with unblinking eyes at the set.

Padding across the room – being careful not to knock a dozen baubles off the Christmas tree as she passed it – Olivia gently sat down beside her. “Hey,” she said softly.

It took a few moments for Natalia to recognize she was no longer alone. When she finally did, concern flitted over her face. “Did I wake you? Or Emma?”

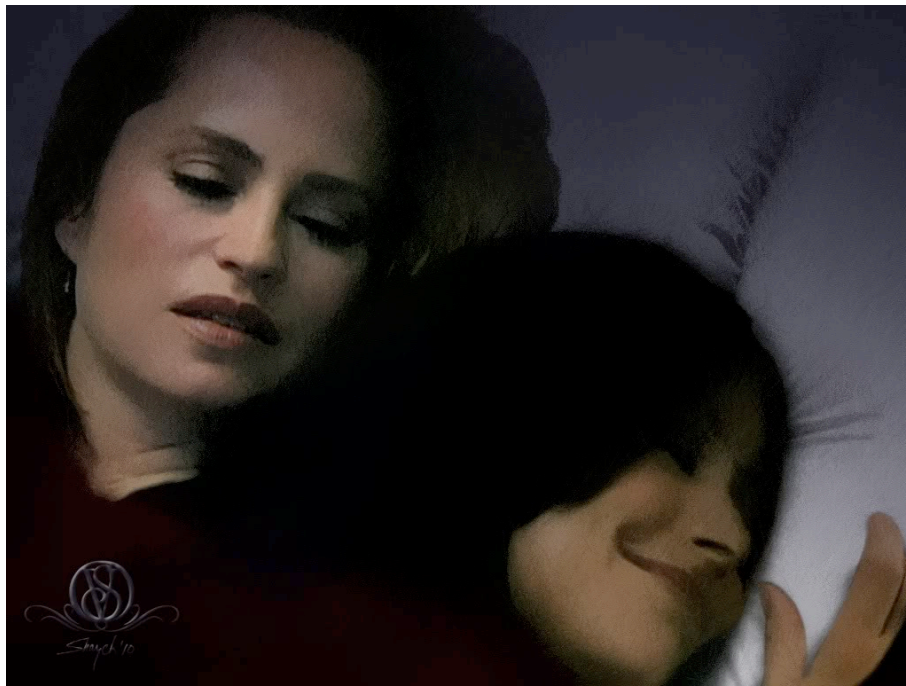
Olivia shook her head. “You’re quiet as a mouse down here. Couldn’t sleep, huh?”

“Thought I heard Francesca, but she was sound asleep,” Natalia explained. “I came down for a bottle just in case but...” A tired smile settled on her lips. “I sat down and forgot all about it.”

Holding a hand against her forehead, Olivia asked, “Are you sick?”

As her partner began to protest, Olivia’s eyes strayed to the coffee table. There, delicately placed on top of its envelope, was the last letter received from Rafe. It was full of Christmas greetings and painful apologies. Her insides released the knot of anxiety that had been forming as she drew her hand down to cup Natalia’s cheek.

“How about we go back to that cold bed? Try and get some sleep before every girl and her dog – and, yes, I mean that literally – try and wake us up?”



The coaxing tone worked. Natalia went through the routine of shutting off the television and lamp for the second time that night then followed her upstairs obediently. As she wrapped her arms around her a few minutes later, Olivia tried to blot out the vacant expression she’d caught in Natalia’s eyes downstairs. After all, it was natural she’d want her son at the ceremony. The fact that couldn’t happen – at least not in the human sense of being able to walk her down the aisle – was bound to hurt. They all just had to do their damndest to lessen the pain. He was there in spirit and thanks to the wonder of the Internet he wouldn’t be completely away from it all.

“Aspirin’s on the top shelf,” Jonathan said helpfully.

Anna Li shot him a look – placed somewhere between gratitude and annoyance – then searched out the relevant packet. Even the weight of the drugs in her hand felt like a relief. There was something about the kind of headache you woke up with that made it ten times worse than your standard work-induced stinker. Maybe it was the realization that the day under direction of Chief Cooper had yet to start and things were most likely getting worse before they got better – if they got better. She wasn’t convinced Springfield possessed that ability.

Realizing Jonathan hadn’t just made his remark and moved on she made the effort to focus on him. He was holding a basket crammed full of sweets and snacks, mainly of the child variety. “I thought you were a conscientious dad,” she said, turning towards the checkout.

“Everyone deserves some treats now and then.” He flashed her a boyish grin. “Anyway, who says they’re all for Sarah?”

Resting her hip against the nearest shelf, Anna examined Jonathan’s haul and smirked. “You like chips with rhinos on the packet now?”

“Who wouldn’t? Except maybe Frank.” Jonathan fell into step beside her. “So I er... I asked Leyla on a date. We went out.”

That was hardly a surprise. Anyone with half a brain would’ve noticed the attraction between them that had been brewing for a while now.

“That’s good,” she said finally, having searched for something insignificant to say that wouldn’t offend.

The headache had obviously taken its toll on her tone. His smile flickered. “You don’t think so?”

“I’m not the one dating her, am I?” she retorted, reaching around into her bag for her purse. It came out all right, scattering coins everywhere. Jonathan dropped his basket and knelt beside her to collect them.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Work,” she said with a shake of the head. “Don’t ask.” Anna dropped her shoulders, frustrated with both herself and the cases she’d been working on nonstop recently. Finally, she realized it couldn’t hurt to elaborate. He was mixed up in this like everyone else, wasn’t

he? “Since Edmund pulled his disappearing act everyone’s been tense, and the ongoing corruption investigation isn’t helping any.”

“Has there been anything from him, any clues, hints?”

“You’re supposed to be focusing on your life,” she reminded him. “And your date,” she added deliberately. “Are you seeing her again?”

“Sure,” he replied, picking up his basket. “You could try being happy yourself, now you’ve got a pretty teacher hanging off your arm.”

“I’m happy, thanks,” she said as she tightened her grip on the aspirin. “And after I’ve had a few of these I’ll be ecstatic.”

“Dad, I just told you we’re busy,” Marina complained as Frank led her out onto the street. “Grandpa needs me in there.”

He looked up and down before he spoke. Aside from Doris Wolfe pacing the pavement across the road, they were pretty much alone. Turning back to his daughter, he said, “I’m going to ask you something, and I want an honest answer.”

Marina’s brow creased. “What’s this about?”

“Yes or no,” he persisted. “Will you be honest with me?”

He watched her carefully as she considered his words. He knew that he could be jumping the gun with this, that maybe someone else should be having this conversation. Perhaps he was too close but didn’t he owe it to himself as a father to give her the opportunity to explain herself? You didn’t convict someone behind closed doors, at least it wasn’t the way he liked to do it. Besides, he forced himself to remember, this was only one aspect of many, the evidence mounting as it was looked particularly damning. He’d lost count of the number of conversations between him and Eleni when they’d tried to look at it all subjectively, completely in Marina’s favor. It was almost impossible. But, out of all of it, this was the part giving him sleepless nights.

Finally, Marina touched his arm. “Of course I will, Dad. What do you want to know?”

“Did you help Edmund escape from the hospital?” he asked bluntly.

She stared back at him. “Excuse me?”

Frank forced himself to remain strong. He didn't want to believe this, he didn't want to ask the question but he had to. "Come on, it's simple enough."

His daughter turned away from him, shivering in the cool December air. "I can't believe you're asking me this. It's her, isn't it?" She glanced back accusingly. "Why do you believe her?"

"I believe in facts, that's all," he answered. "And, I have to tell you, some things are adding up badly. This isn't down to your mother."

"Sure it is," Marina snapped. "She put the idea into your head because of the way I've treated her since she turned up here like unwanted garbage."

"Marina!" he said sharply. "You won't talk about her like that in front of me, okay?"

Tears formed in her eyes. "I want things to be how they were before. She's screwing everything up. I hate her."

Frank glanced away momentarily and forced himself to come back to the main point. "You haven't answered the question," he reminded her.

Her eyes darted from side to side. Briefly, he wondered if he'd believe her if she denied it. She was his child; he at least had to trust her, didn't he?

"He was blackmailing me," she said finally, looking away. "I didn't have a choice, I'm sorry."

There was a lengthy silence. Frank looked at her, wondering how and why and when, but not caring enough to ask right now. The important thing was that his suspicions had been correct and he didn't know what the hell happened next. He couldn't stand there any longer. Turning, he began to walk away.

"Dad?" Marina's cracking voice halted him. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am," he said faintly. "Always. But parents can't constantly protect their kids, Marina. However much they want to."

He left her standing there and only glanced back when he was across the street. Her head was turned from him but he could still see the tears cascading down her face. Didn't she realize that it hurt him as much as it hurt her?

Doris Wolfe inhaled deeply as she stood outside Company with her cell phone pressed to her ear. Her arm was beginning to ache from holding it up for so long, and she'd done two circuits of the block while listening to the ramblings in a conversation she positively felt no part of. For the sake of politeness and company solidarity, she allowed Beth and Mel to duke it out, knowing they sat right next to each other at the office. They were purposefully including her in this; she supposed they didn't have to.

"Alright, ladies," she cut in eventually, "we need to talk about this in person obviously."

There was a surprised silence on the line, as though they'd forgotten she was even there. Then Mel asked hesitantly, "Weren't you going out of town for a few days?"

Inwardly sighing, she kept her voice level. "It was only one night and it can be rearranged. We need to win this case; we're going to win it."

When she walked into Company a few moments later she was still debating how to broach the subject. Blake was pouring coffee for a customer but noted her presence immediately. The smile that slid onto her face flickered and died within the space of five seconds. Wincing, Doris stepped forward to meet her at the end of the counter. The fact she looked absolutely stunning in a simple brown shirt and pants combo wouldn't make this any easier.

Clearing her throat, she managed a throaty. "Hi."

They stared at each other for ten seconds then Blake reached for a fresh mug. "Coffee?"

"Please." As her girlfriend poured, she tried to go on, "About tonight –"

"Doris," Blake interrupted swiftly, "it's fine. I know what the look on your face means."

She felt her cheeks grow warm – she knew the implications of that statement as well as Blake did and being compared to Frank Cooper was not her favorite way to spend lunchtime. Her first impulse was to retort but she reined that in and instead watched the liquid level in her cup steadily rise. By the time Blake pushed the drink an inch towards her, she was calmer and raised her eyes reluctantly.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

A smile drifted across Blake's face. "That was really difficult for you, wasn't it?"

She shrugged, feeling the mood lighten a little. Her history with relationships, or lack thereof, hadn't prepared her for the etiquette in these situations. With Anna, the cop was as

likely to be canceling on her as the other way round. Blake was a much more reliable person. Well, these days anyway. Now she knew how crappy Olivia felt when she had to cancel on Natalia, and also why she didn't do it all that often.

"Keep looking guilty," Blake observed. "It's good for my morale."

Doris smiled ruefully. "It's work. I am sorry, you know?"

Blake met her eye. "Oh, believe me, I know. Guess that gorgeous restaurant you were talking about will still be there in a few weeks, right?"

"If you still want to go, we'll reschedule. I promise."

"Don't promise," warned Blake, surreptitiously stroking the back of her hand. "Could we have dinner tonight? Would you have time for dinner with me tonight?" Suggestively, she smiled up at Doris. "It would be a shame to waste the overnight sitter."

Finally, Doris relaxed. "Sure. What time should I order the takeout for?"

A playful expression slipped over her girlfriend's face. "I was thinking a little more adventurous than that."

Ava Peralta let the door swing shut behind her and squinted around the sparsely-populated crowd. Her mother had the habit of standing out wherever she was so a cursory glance around the room settled that she wasn't there. She knew Doris often dragged Olivia to Ladies Night and when she hadn't found her at either the farmhouse or the Beacon she'd just thought...

Well, it didn't matter. Knowing how loved-up Olivia Spencer was these days she was probably out doing something romantic for Natalia. Despite Ava's ongoing irritation at her soon-to-be stepmother, she had a grudging respect for Natalia. After all, she made her mother happy. God, she'd remembered seeing her unhappy when Natalia was gone and this was infinitely better than that, even if conversation did dry up at times.

Just as she was thinking she'd go back to the hotel and grab some dinner before maybe bedding down with a movie and a glass of wine, she spotted a familiar figure by the window chatting to a leggy blonde. At first she was convinced she was seeing things but, no, a second look confirmed that it was the younger, more irritating version of Natalia that she was watching. Half of her brain told her to back-off and leave it but she couldn't. She was still her mother's daughter.

Striding over, she forgot the pleasantries and immediately questioned, “What are you doing here?”

Leyla turned, annoyed at the interruption and – it seemed – especially because of who had made it. “I’m having a drink, what does it look like?”

Ava bristled. “At Ladies Night?”

“Oh, is that what it is?” asked the day care manager sarcastically. “The sign on the door didn’t tip me off at all.”

“Well, being able to read and generally be anything apart from a pain in the ass is obviously hard for you,” Ava shot back then winced at herself. So much for their truce, huh?

The blonde Leyla had been chatting with cleared her throat. “Is this going to take long?”

“No,” Leyla said instantly.

Ava glanced between them, her eyes settling on the leggy bimbo. “Depends how much of an experiment you wanna be. I could disappear right now, and you could have the most unmemorable night of your life. Or you could leave.”

The look of outrage on Leyla’s face was payment enough. She grabbed Ava’s arm, possibly with the intention of leading her away, but the blonde had already made a swift exit after a moment of consideration. Ava shook off her captor.

“So I don’t think she’s a keeper,” she said with a smirk.

Leyla glared at her. “Why did you do that?”

“This is where women come to meet other women,” Ava replied. “I didn’t think you were into that. Besides, aren’t you dating Jonathan?”

“He told you that?”

“Of course he did. Or were you trying to keep it a secret? So it didn’t interfere with your secret life over here maybe?”

“Ava, just butt out, okay? I don’t understand why you’re making this into something. I’m just having a drink. Or I was. I’m entitled to drink with who I want when I want.”

"I wonder what everyone would think of you messing Jonathan around," said Ava. "He's my cousin, I'm entitled to be worried when he doesn't know what he's getting into."

"Everyone being your mother, I suppose?" Leyla retorted, a triumphant smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. "After all, you always go running back there when something happens that you don't like, don't you?"

Biting down on her tongue, Ava forcibly stopped her response. It wasn't worth it. Besides, she'd already had all the conversations with Olivia after the Cyrus debacle. She didn't particularly want another lecture, especially knowing that Leyla would probably spin this out of all recognition. The woman just really got to her; she couldn't hold it in sometimes. And, she reluctantly admitted, maybe she was doubly irritated at Leyla right now because she was Natalia's sister. But that didn't excuse her coming in here and messing with people, did it?

Knowing she had to have the last word, she pasted on the biggest smile she could muster and stared squarely at the woman in front of her. "Since you've scared off your date, I think I'll leave you to wallow in a drink. Don't drown."

She heard Leyla mumbling something as she walked away but she didn't turn around. She didn't know that she'd won this one, but she certainly wanted to believe she had for as long as possible.

"It's pretty full," Blake said unnecessarily.

They'd been hit with the stench of bodies the moment they walked into the foyer. Every table seemed full; Doris could honestly say she'd never seen the restaurant this full. Was it that everyone in Springfield had suddenly decided to take a holiday from cooking for themselves during the boredom between Christmas and New Years or had the psychic word gone out that she'd be here tonight on a date? She felt a little apprehensive as she surveyed the mass of people. Part of her wanted to turn and suggest they get that takeout she'd suggested earlier to have at home but... no, she was past that. The reason she was getting out of politics was so she didn't have to turn and hide who she was. She was here with Blake, and she wasn't about to mess that up.

Clearing her throat, she stepped forward and alerted the harassed waitress to their presence. "Excuse me, I've got a reservation for eight. Doris Wolfe."

"Hmm?" The act of balancing words in her brain long enough to absorb them was apparently beyond the abilities of this particular brunette at the moment. She stood,

mouthed silently to herself, then began to walk off. Doris was about to call her back when she returned of her own accord. "Sorry, I just have to take a soda to table five," she said as a confused frown crossed her face. "Or was it a coffee? Was it table six?"

"Go," Blake put in quickly, "we'll get a drink at the bar."

The young woman flashed a weak smile then wandered off, still muttering to herself about soda and table numbers. Doris glanced to Blake as they strolled to the bar. "You really think she'll remember us?"

"Who could forget that murderous look you just threw her?" Blake retorted.

Doris shrugged. "It's a gift."

"Can't argue with that," Blake said, stiffening as she caught sight of something over her shoulder. "Oh, this should be interesting."

Curiosity got the better of her and Doris turned around just in time to find herself face-to-face with Frank and Eleni, both dressed in clothes that suggested they were on a date. Trying to suppress the smirk she inevitably found wanting to stretch her lips, she began to fail miserably – until Blake elbowed her in the side.

"Frank, hi," her girlfriend said smoothly. "And Eleni, it's good to see you."

To his credit, Frank caught on pretty quickly. He looked between them, grasped the notion of a date, and promptly swallowed. Then he was all charm, presumably for Eleni's sake. Though, Doris thought to herself, the woman knew him. Which begged the question of why she was on a date with him in the first place. A disturbing image crossed her mind: had they perhaps...

"Ew," she murmured aloud without thinking. Three pairs of eyes abruptly focused on her. Far from being embarrassed, she swiftly went on, "Who told Springfield to eat out tonight?"

Frank immediately grabbed onto the lifejacket. "It is pretty busy. You guys have a table booked?"

Blake nodded. "Don't know about getting to it though. Everyone's rushed off their feet."

Thankfully, before anymore pointless small talk about the number of diners was required, the bartender scurried up. It took them a good five minutes to sort out their respective drinks and by then the haggard waitress was rushing towards them.

“Mr. Cooper? I’ve got your table.”

Doris cleared her throat pointedly. “What about ours?”

The brunette visibly recoiled a few inches. “Um... we... actually..”

“What?” she pressed.

“Your reservation slipped through a glitch in the computer system, we haven’t got you a table,” was the concise and quick reply.

Wisely, depending on your viewpoint, the woman had put Frank between them. Her opportunity of snarling at the waitress having been extinguished, Doris took a steadying breath and glanced apologetically to Blake. “Sorry.”

Blake shook her head. “These things happen.” To Eleni, she said, “Enjoy your meal.”

Doris felt his mouth opening before she saw it. Silently, she prayed for him to not make the suggestion but –

“Don’t suppose,” he said, halting the waitress in his tracks, “you have a couple of extra chairs do you? We could all squeeze in.”

And there it was. Doris closed her eyes and tried not to think of the kick Olivia Spencer would get out of this story when she heard it.

After fifteen minutes of waiting for Natalia to return from the bathroom, Olivia accepted something had waylaid her and reluctantly climbed the stairs, cursing every step she took away from the romantic little supper she’d set-up in the kitchen. It was only reheated soup and some of Natalia’s delicious homemade bread but the candles really brightened up the kitchen.

Sure enough, she found Natalia in the dimly-lit nursery cradling a whimpering Francesca. The sound of their daughter in pain banished the selfish urges prodding at the surface and she immediately kneeled in front of them.

“More teeth?”

Natalia nodded. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to leave her. And I couldn’t call you without waking Emma.”

“Hey, that’s fine,” Olivia admonished. “I’ll grab the medicine from the bathroom, might take the edge off.”

Just as she reached the bathroom, however, Francesca let out a wail worthy of an opera singer. Olivia froze with one hand on the medicine cabinet but it was no good. There was the familiar thump of Emma jumping out of bed and in a few moments her bleary-eyed daughter appeared in the doorway.

“Is Francesca okay?”

Olivia tried to smile. Though, truth be told, fatigue and impatience were taking its toll on her ability to do so. “She’s fine, Jellybean. Why don’t you go back to bed and we’ll take care of it?”

Emma had the beginnings of an argument on her face. If Natalia hadn’t suddenly appeared in the doorway with Francesca clamped to her shoulder then a battle of wills would’ve most certainly been on the cards. As it was, Emma’s head whipped straight around.

“You should be in bed,” Natalia said softly, bouncing Francesca slightly in her arms. The little girl grumbled and wrapped a fist around several strands of silky hair. Wincing, Natalia disentangled herself then returned her attentions to their other daughter. “I’m sorry we woke you up, sweetie, but you really need to sleep.”

“I’m awake now though,” Emma complained.

“Well, you need to not be,” Natalia said decisively. “One of us will read you a story,” she added in a coaxing tone. “Who do you want?”

Before Emma had even spoken, Olivia had stepped forward to receive Francesca into her arms. “We know when we’re not wanted don’t we, Sweet Pea? C’mon, let’s get some medicine into that little mouth of yours.”

Natalia smiled as she was pulled out of the bathroom by Emma. A couple of minutes later Olivia was settled in the nursery chair with her eyes closed, gently swaying back and forth with Francesca. The gentle movement was rocking them both to sleep.

“Hope you know what you’re interrupting, kiddo,” she murmured. “I had a nice bottle of wine, classy food as well. And afterwards I was going to dazzle her with car brochures. When you’re older you’ll understand. A lot older,” she said as an afterthought.

A voice from the doorway startled her with, “Oh, about forty?”

Opening her eyes, Olivia threw a mock-frown at her girlfriend. "It's rude to eavesdrop on private conversations."

"Has that ever stopped you from doing it?"

She shrugged, dislodging Francesca slightly. "Oops, sorry, Sweet Pea. You carry on." She looked back to Natalia. "Emma asleep already?"

"Erm... not quite. She wants hot chocolate."

Olivia groaned. "It's gonna be a long night, isn't it?"

A sultry smile crossed Natalia's lips. "You bet."

As she watched her partner vanish, Olivia pressed her lips briefly to Francesca's head. "And that's why we don't mess with your Mami."

Doris had been on her fair share of screwy dates: a few fellow politicians hoping for extra-curricular activities that never materialized. Or the women she'd gone out who'd misinterpreted something... or everything. There had been one particularly humiliating evening back in the old days where a straight-laced knitting-mad constituent had almost got the shock of her life. However, sitting opposite Frank Cooper while Blake nervously smoothed down her skirt and simultaneously fiddled with her hair was a new experience altogether.

She'd managed to have a hushed conversation with Blake as they were escorted to the table to ascertain she was alright with this. After all, she remembered the tangled history she already had with Eleni and throwing Frank into that mix could be a recipe for disaster. But Blake, eager to please, had just shaken her head and smiled tightly. No matter how excruciating this evening could prove to be, they were in it for the long haul. At first Doris had wanted to run in the opposite direction: surgery without anaesthesia would be preferable. But now, well, right now she was beginning to get into the spirit of the evening.

Leaning over, ostensibly to rearrange their cramped seating arrangements, Blake whispered, "Can you look a little less excited about this please?"

"Haven't a clue what you're talking about," she retorted. Snapping her menu open, she bopped Frank on the nose. "Oh, sorry!"

"Not a problem," he replied.

Eleni had buried her head into her own menu and hadn't noticed a thing. "Really don't know what I'm in the mood for."

"Something soft and cool, a salad maybe?" Doris suggested. "Who wants steamy food in a place this crowded?"

Blake cleared her throat. "Not me."

As Doris innocently raised her wine glass to her lips, she didn't notice Frank was about to speak until it was too late.

"Oh, I think I can manage something hot," he murmured with a grin on his face.

It was all she could do not to splutter all over the fine tablecloth. A faint tinge settled on Eleni's cheeks and Blake looked petrified. Frank, however, seemed oblivious. He looked up from his menu with concern on his face.

"Doris, do you need a glass of water?"

Shaking her head, she patted her neck. "Drinking too fast, that's all. Speaking of which, we should get a bottle or two. Make a night of it."

Eleni nodded vigorously. "I'm with you on that. The wine, that is."

Doris masked her smirk. "Of course."

The four of them pondered the menu for several minutes. It was a good excuse not to talk, or so the other three seemed to think. For her part, Doris was considering how uncomfortable she could make Frank in the space of a short meal. Maybe they could even stretch it to dessert and beyond. It wasn't that she deliberately enjoyed antagonizing the man, but anyone had to admit he had it coming... just a little. She wondered how much of her distaste had come second-hand through Olivia. Before her entanglement with the Spencer-Rivera family, she'd mostly found him to be an incompetent irritation who occasionally put her off her coffee at Company.

"I think we'll split a large starter," Frank said suddenly then glanced anxiously at his date. "If that's okay?"

Eleni nodded. "Sounds good. Do you two know what you're having?"

Before Blake opened her mouth, Doris jumped in, "I think sharing a starter's a great idea. Don't you?" she added, raising an eyebrow at her girlfriend.

“Sounds good,” Blake echoed hollowly.

Frank was looking around like a schoolboy. “Well, we’ll need a waiter from somewhere. Wait, if I can just –”

“Watch the –” Eleni and Blake said simultaneously but it was too late.

“Wine,” Doris concluded as the Merlot began to seep through the tablecloth, steamrolling towards Eleni. In his customary manner, Frank instantly tried to atone for his error, standing to perhaps block the flow of the tide. Either way, he didn’t get a chance. Eleni backed out of his reach and he fumbled for a grip before his hands slid into the spillage. The tablecloth ended up lopsidedly hanging from the edge of the table while Blake sat poised ready to put her glass down.

Frank had reddened down to his collar. Suddenly the choice of a salmon shirt seemed a disastrous decision. Doris’s lips twitched as the thought crossed her mind but she was swiftly admonished by an elbow in the side from Blake.

Standing, she muttered, “I’ll get a cloth from the bar.”

The air thinned as she battled over to the bar. Glancing over at the tableau after she reached the edge of the scrum, she saw Frank grinning like a child as Eleni and a waiter fixed the damage on the table. Blake sat still clutching her wine glass looking about as comfortable as if she’d spiked her drink with sulphuric acid.

Finally coaxing a cloth out of the ragged bartender, Doris weaved her way back to the table and touched her girlfriend’s shoulder lightly before leaning down to whisper, “Did I tell you that you look gorgeous tonight?”

By degrees, she noticed Blake’s muscles relax. Running her fingers briefly along the exposed flesh below her ear, Doris then dragged herself away long enough to toss the cloth at Frank.

“Here you go, slugger.”

The goofy smile on his face was growing. “Thanks.”

Thankfully, they got through the starters without any more disasters. Well, unless you counted Frank feeding Eleni a mushroom which was about as nauseating an experience as you could get outside a delivery room. Blake’s eyes were frequently fixed on something in the distance; Doris, unfortunately, couldn’t tear hers away. It was like watching the mating ritual of an ostrich.

After the waiter had cleared the plates, Frank managed to draw his gaze away from his date.

“How’s work, Doris?” He threw the question out casually but his eyes were as sharp as they ever got.

A sudden mistrust overtook her as she blinked at his audacity. If he was fishing for information her office held regarding the corruption investigation he needed a better reel. She’d assumed when they sat down that their jobs would be the unspoken black cloud hanging over the evening. If they discussed her work they’d discuss his, and that would never end well. The things she’d been calling Chief Cooper in private would pale in comparison to what she’d say to his face given half the chance.

Blake was shrewd enough to realize that. She cut in with, “Have you seen the beautiful little dress Natalia bought for Francesca for the ceremony?”

“Why, yes, I have,” he replied. “It’s adorable, isn’t it? She’s adorable.”

“You’re a very lucky man, Frank,” Doris said in what she hoped was a conciliatory tone. Judging from the merest quirk of Blake’s eyebrow, it didn’t work. Hurrying on, she added, “And any girl would be fortunate to have you as a father.”

Leaning closer under the pretext of getting her drink, Blake queried, “What are you doing?”

“Hell if I know,” she whispered. “Frank, are you okay?”

Something that she couldn’t decipher had settled over his face. Eleni touched his shoulder. “Frank, you’ve drifted off a little.”

He glanced to her and she shot him an unfathomable look. Doris turned her head to Blake and shrugged.

“Sorry,” Frank said finally, “I just let my mind go back to work, that’s all. So much to do, you know how it is. Or maybe you don’t anymore, huh, Doris?” he added with a derisive chuckle.

“I’ve hardly given up work,” she said testily.

“I wasn’t suggesting – ” he began in a semi-conciliatory manner.

“Good,” she interrupted. “Anyone for more wine?”

“Yes,” Blake said instantly.

Doris signaled to the waiter who stumbled around three other tables before reaching them. After he'd rushed off again, she leaned back in her chair. The reference to work, and particularly the insinuation that she couldn't handle public office anymore, had angered her. So Chief Cooper thought she was searching for an easier life? Well, in one sense that was true, but she knew if she truly wanted a simple life she wouldn't be placing herself in direct competition with Alan Spaulding's favorite lawyers on a regular basis. This wasn't the easy option by any stretch of the imagination. She was giving up everything she'd work so hard to obtain. Or did Frank think she'd fallen into politics having taken a wrong turn? She sipped her drink and stewed for a minute or so.

"Any word on Edmund?" she asked innocently.

Blake exhaled. "Oh, boy."

Frank exchanged another glance with Eleni and shook his head. "Not exactly."

"Meaning no?" she clarified sardonically.

"Practicing for the courtroom, Doris?" Eleni interjected in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Can't hurt," she responded before looking straight back to an uncomfortable-looking Frank. "Well?"

He was growing red in the face again. Finally, with extreme difficulty, he shook his head. "No."

Doris let the word hover there for a minute. "Well done," she said sardonically. Then, as Blake's eyes bore a hole through her, she pushed her chair back. "If you'll excuse me for a minute..."

What the hell was she doing? Doris wondered as she rounded the corner and tried to comprehend precisely why she was making this evening quite so difficult. Sure, it was always going to be a little Springfield slice of hell, but she was going out of her way to make it uncomfortable. If she didn't know better she'd swear she was channelling Olivia. Leaning against the wall near the restroom, Doris chuckled to herself. Maybe that was it; maybe her problem was a diluted version of Olivia's. Add that to the fact that Frank was the police equivalent of a marshmallow, and she had her reasons right there.

However, she quickly realized as she saw Blake stomping towards her, that those might not be legitimate enough reasons for public inquiry.

"What are you doing?" her girlfriend demanded.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she murmured. "It just needed saying."

"Why, because this evening was going so well? I really think you should just..." Trailing off, Blake frowned at the slightly amused expression on her face. "What?"

"Well," she said slowly, "perhaps I got a little jealous?"

After a moment Blake pursed her lips. "You know, that's a really good try."

"I thought so." No need for Blake to realize quite how serious she was. Glancing around to check they were thoroughly alone, she leaned forward to kiss her lightly. She withdrew as she heard a masculine cough behind them.

Frank showed no embarrassment. "Doris, can I speak with you for a minute?"

She cleared her throat. "Sure. I'll see you back at the table, okay, honey?"

Blake distinctly rolled her eyes as she walked away. Doris turned her attention back to Frank.

"I don't care about you two," he said bluntly, "if that's what you're thinking."

"It crossed my mind," she admitted, not believing his denial for a second.

"So that's why you're bringing up Edmund? Just trying to cause trouble as usual."

"Hey," she said, grabbing his arm as he made to turn around, "you brought up the issue of work, Chief Cooper. You insinuated earlier I'd given up doing my job. You can question my work ethic and I can't do the same? I'm bringing up Edmund because somehow he managed to escape under armed guard on your watch. And now he's roaming around the country, planning how to ruin our lives next?"

Frank snorted and crossed his arms. "Come on, Doris, how are you even involved in this? You don't have to pretend you care anymore."

"He shot at me," she replied angrily, frustrated at the way her voice trembled at the words. She might be coping better these days but that didn't mean she was any less haunted by the events at Rick and Mindy's non-wedding. "You couldn't even be bothered to turn up until it was over, so don't even try saying I shouldn't be a bit pissed off."

"That isn't fair. No one could've predicted – "

“No, not when you falsely ID a body, huh, Frank? Oh, and as to why I care? I suppose that means I’m the only one who’s bothered about the little family up at the farmhouse, does it?”

His eyes narrowed. Shaking her off, he stepped back. “I’ve got as much interest in catching Edmund as the next man. That’s my daughter up there, in case you’ve forgotten. Not to mention Natalia and Emma.”

“And Olivia,” she reminded him testily.

His eyes flickered. “And Olivia. You can’t make me worry more than I do.”

At least in that she’d have to admit he was sincere. Doris inwardly growled at what she was about to say then squeezed her fingers into her palm as she did so.

“I guess that’s something we have in common,” she said grudgingly.

He managed a dry laugh. “Let’s not pretend that’s the only thing.”

ACT 2

With the amount of wine Doris had consumed the previous evening, she looked forward to having brunch with Blake out at the farmhouse with their friends, especially if it contained massive amounts of coffee. At this point, she’d be happy with the caffeine mainlined into her system. The other option was laughter and she was getting lots of that.

“Oh, come on, you two!” Doris Wolfe said, wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes.

The four of them were in the kitchen; Blake and Natalia sat stoically at the table while she and Olivia used the counter and fridge respectively for support. Olivia hadn’t been able to keep the smirk from her face the moment she’d first heard about the double-date of the night before, but the tale of Frank accidentally headbutting a waitress after dessert seemed to have broken her. The infectious laughter had carried Doris along with it but so far their girlfriends were proving immune.

“Come on,” Olivia repeated, glancing incredulously between Blake and Natalia and finally settling on her partner. “You have to admit, it’s a little funny.”

“Frank doesn’t deserve to be laughed at,” Natalia replied, though her voice lacked conviction.

“You two are just juvenile,” Blake chipped in.

Olivia shrugged. “I’ll take the compliment.”

Doris moved behind Blake and placed her hands on her shoulders. “Just remember the moment he finally slipped.”

“He slipped?” Olivia asked, barely holding in her glee.

“What she means is that she tripped him,” Blake clarified.

“It was accidental! We were on the way to the parking lot and...” Halting the explanation, she shrugged. “Well, he was there and so was the floor I guess.”

To their surprise, Natalia finally burst out laughing. A second, and then Blake joined her. Feeling that her job was done, Doris stepped back to lean against the counter. After a few moments they were all adult enough to talk again.

“So did you two just come over here to make us laugh?” Olivia asked. “Not that I object to the principle.”

“No, actually,” Doris answered as she smoothed down her shirt in a vain attempt to stop herself smiling. “We were wondering what your plans were tonight. You haven’t mentioned anything.”

Olivia glanced to Natalia, apparently at a loss. “Um, plans?”

“Last night of freedom,” Blake elaborated. “Don’t you want to let loose?”

The hotelier crossed her arms. “Don’t look at me when you say that.”

“Sorry, force of habit. Seriously, though,” Blake went on, “you must have something planned.”

Natalia shook her head. “Just a quiet night with the girls.”

Doris groaned. “You can’t.”

“Why not?” Olivia questioned.

“It’s tradition,” she argued. “You’ve done it every other time you’ve been married I’m sure.”

Natalia chuckled. “She might have a point there.”

“Zip it, you,” Olivia warned then she looked back to Doris. “You, too, for that matter.”

She wasn’t fazed. “It’s tradition,” she repeated. “You’ve got to spend the night apart getting absolutely drunk before you get shackled.”

“We’re already shackled!” Olivia retorted then grimaced at Natalia. “Honey, I mean that in the good way. You know, as in shackled to... the best thing that ever happened to me?” she concluded lamely. Doris rolled her eyes and repressed her snort.

Natalia threw her a mock glare and moved to put the kettle on. “Honestly, you know, we don’t want a fuss. Every time you make a fuss about something in this town it seems to blow up in your face.”

That was a sobering thought but Doris didn’t appreciate losing the battle. “Is this the last time?” she questioned.

“Hey!” Olivia admonished. Then she murmured, “Yes, of course it is.”

“Good,” Blake replied, ‘then you’re out of excuses, ladies.”

“We haven’t got a babysitter,” Natalia pointed out hopefully.

Doris smirked. “I think I know just the man.”

It was just another painful day in Springfield PD.

Frank Cooper massaged his forehead as he read through the latest report Anna had dropped onto his desk. It was for an aggravated burglary; something he thought he should really care more about than he did, but his mind was permanently stuck on other things. He glanced across his desk to the photograph of Francesca there and managed a small smile. But seeing his smallest girl reminded him of the bigger one and... well, he didn’t like where that path led him.

A knock on the door disturbed him. He stayed silent, half-hopeful whoever it was would take the hint, but then it opened without ceremony. When he saw Olivia and Doris step over the threshold, he wasn’t surprised.

He pasted on his best smile, trying not to remember the smirk on the politician’s face as he’d picked himself up from the pavement the previous night. Though he supposed if she decided to call him on that then he could drop into conversation that Eleni hadn’t left his

place until this morning. No, he was too much of a gentleman for that, but Doris Wolfe was nothing like a lady in his eyes. Unfortunately, the rules still applied.

“What can I do for you two ladies?”

Uncharacteristically, Olivia looked reluctant to talk. Doris nudged her into speech with a well-placed elbow.

“Um, I wanted to ask you a favor actually.”

Now why did that make him nervous? He gestured for them to sit down. “Sure, go ahead.”

“I was wondering if you were, um, free this evening. Tonight.” Olivia crossed her arms, as if this was a real struggle for her. “Natalia and I would be extremely grateful if maybe you could babysit the girls for us.”

Frank released his breath. “Is that all? I thought you were about to confess to a felony.”

“Is that a yes?” Olivia asked.

“Of course, it is. I’d love to do it.” The idea sounded like heaven as a matter of fact. If he was up at the farmhouse looking after two kids then he absolutely positively could not be dragged into a field in the middle of nowhere to look at a pile of manure that some idiot mistook for a body. “What time do you want me there?”

“Six,” Doris put in quickly.

Olivia shot her a look. “If that’s convenient.”

“Not a problem. I’ll see you tonight.”

Business done, both women got up to leave. Doris smirked at him before she left, no doubt trying to remind him how ridiculous he’d looked the night before with his head on the sidewalk. Honestly, Blake could see who she wanted and he wanted her to be happy but her judgement was about as good as... well, Natalia’s.

Olivia lingered behind as the mayor vanished. “Thanks, Frank. I mean it.”

He just nodded and held his ambivalent expression until she was out of the door. Then he tried to refocus on the report in front of his eyes. Now that he could look forward to an evening with his daughter, he felt like getting this case cracked before dinner time.

Josh looked up from reading to Colin as Reva entered the living room, twirling around in a red dress and looking every bit like the cat that had just licked out of the cream bowl.

“How do I look?”

“Stunning,” he said sincerely. “But too happy.”

“I’m happy for Olivia,” she retorted.

“Mmm hmm,” he murmured, willing to leave that be.

Unfortunately, Reva didn’t seem inclined to do so. As she put on her earrings she reminded him, “Jonathan could easily have Colin tonight. You could come. I know you wouldn’t be the only ex there, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“It’s off-putting to have the person officiating the ceremony at the bachelorette party.”

“Precisely,” Reva replied.

Josh smiled softly and wondered if he should possibly send Olivia an SOS message before she got to Towers. Then he was reminded by a sharp nudge to his side that he was in the middle of explaining something to a very sleepy young man beside him.

“I’m staying in,” he said firmly. “I’m teaching Colin how to plan the foundations of lower level buildings.”

Reva paused midway through putting her coat on to scrutinize them. “Okay, boys, you have your fun and I’ll have mine.”

“Play nice,” Josh called after her as she left a few minutes later. He was certain he heard a chuckle follow her from the house.

“Why did I let you talk me into this?” Olivia queried as she and Doris stepped into the foyer of Towers. “And I bet I look like crap.”

She was wearing a green dress that she didn’t particularly like and if her make-up was perfect it was by some divine intervention. Francesca had decided it was time to scream the house down five minutes before she left, and, of course, Natalia had gone first. The

grouchy look on Emma's face was matched only by Frank's befuddlement as he was almost thrown a struggling toddler. Olivia had briefed him on everything new within thirty seconds and she hoped the dazed expression on his face was no indication of whether it had sunk in or not. She was half-tempted to give him a call and just... No, that was crazy. Natalia was supposed to be the one with separation anxieties. Olivia Spencer was the tough momma.

"I didn't talk you into it," her friend replied. "I didn't give you a choice, as I recall."

Olivia swept her hair back over her shoulders. "Which is the only reason that I'm here, just so we're clear."

"Oh, we're clear," Doris said. "I don't know what you're so worked up about. It's just a couple of drinks, that's all. No lewd behavior allowed. Well, not from you anyway."

She suppressed a smile. "I'll tell Blake you said that," she returned as she heard the door open behind them. Turning, she saw her eldest daughter striding in. "Ava, hi. You look great." It was no lie. She was in a slinky black number that Olivia couldn't help but eye jealously.

Ava gave her a quick hug. "No need to sound so surprised. Where are the rest of the unlucky losers?"

Olivia cast Doris a glance. "Don't tell me you made people come."

"How else was she supposed to get them here?" Ava quipped. "Actually, you'd be surprised who wanted to come. Let's get a drink."

Ushered towards the bar, she was shocked to see Reva waiting for her, accompanied by none other than Phillip. Although quite concerned about what had possessed Reva to come, she glanced to Phillip first. "You do know this is a bachelorette party?"

He grinned amicably. "You know, I do believe Doris mentioned that on the phone."

"And you're here because..."

"Well, let's just say it's a mission of mine not to let you mess your life up anymore. Call it a philanthropic urge."

Olivia fixed him with a stare for a few moments. "Or a crack to the head. I think we need some wine over here."

Doris chuckled and pulled over a bartender. Meanwhile, Olivia turned to Reva.

“And what are you doing here?”

“Making sure.” She left the rest unsaid, though Olivia certainly grasped the implication. It never hurt to confirm you weren’t about to be usurped again.

Settling back on a stool with a glass of wine, Olivia let the initial conversation wash over her. Her mind was across town with Natalia at Company. Although it was – dare she say it – sweet of Doris to insist on this, she’d much rather be at home. Preferably in bed, though the location was negotiable. She smiled into her drink. Hell, even the activity was negotiable. She could sit through *The Little Mermaid* for the five thousandth time and not mind right now. Perhaps she’d draw the line at willingly changing diapers, but that was human nature more than anything else. Nope, she was well and truly domesticated.

“You know, I think we lost her.”

She glanced up at Doris’s comment. All four of them were staring at her knowingly and in a manner that made her want to toss something at them. Clearing her throat, she settled for reaching for the wine bottle. “Is it my fault you’re all boring?”

Ava clutched her chest in mock-pain. “Ouch, Mom.”

Reva let out a snort. “Don’t try pretending you weren’t wishing us to the other side of the planet.”

“Would I do that?” Olivia asked. “Deny it, that is?”

Doris raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I don’t know. You’re very down at heel these days. Natalia only has to think the word “jump” and you stand to attention.”

Olivia placed her glass down delicately. “That’s fighting talk, Wolfe.”

“Well, at least you’re listening to us now,” her friend shot back. “I was going to ask Reva and Phillip if they had any little stories to share. If that’s the most fun to be had, I want to hear it.”

Ava inhaled deeply and smiled. “This’ll be fun.”

“You know what I find highly amusing,” Phillip said after a moment, “and, believe me, I’ll regret bringing it up, but three of you have technically been my stepmother at some point.”

Olivia felt like burying her head in her arms. “Can we discuss any of my other marriages?”

“Forget the marriages,” Ava said conversationally, “what about everything else?”

Throwing her a look, Olivia pointed out, “Don’t think I’ll forget you started this. When it comes to holding Francesca while she throws up tomorrow...”

Ava laughed. “I’ll leave that to Frank, thanks. Which reminds me: Frank, Buzz, Buzz, Frank?”

“Don’t,” she warned.

“There’s Josh,” Reva put in.

“Bill,” Ava added.

“Jeffrey,” went on Reva.

Olivia turned her glare on Doris. “I blame you for this.”

“Hey, I’m still recovering from the reminder that I was married to Alan. Besides,” she continued, gesturing to Phillip, “aren’t you missing out a vital piece of history here?”

Phillip cleared his throat and suddenly became very interested in his shoes. Olivia knew his concerns. No matter how long they let them heal, the old wounds were still there deep underneath the surface. Yet he’d done so much for her recently. God, if you’d asked her three years ago if she could’ve invited him to her bachelorette party and wedding without being held at gunpoint, she would’ve laughed. Actually, if you’d have told her she’d be marrying a woman, the former wife of the man she’d chased after and ended up being given his heart... Ouch, the more she thought about it the more of a headache she got. Turning her attention back to Phillip, she nudged him roughly.

“Well, this one actually gave me a keepsake.” As he raised his eyes apprehensively, she went on, “Emma is the best thing I ever got out of a relationship. Unfortunately, that means I can’t really hate you.”

“And the dancing on my grave?” he asked innocently.

She sniffed. “Delirium.”

Doris gestured for another bottle of wine. “Any other misdemeanors you want to confess to, Spencer?”

It was Reva who suggested, “What about that time you ran me over?”

Olivia snorted. "You stepped in front of my car. And you admitted that, so don't even try it."

Reva just smiled. "Does Natalia know that?"

Ava grimaced. "Back to your corners, ladies. And you can stop drinking so fast," she added.

Olivia looked up in surprise. "God, I swear Natalia puts you up to this. It's bad for my heart, yes, but in moderation a drink or two is not going to hurt me. And, damn it, once in a while a girl needs a drink. Especially when, you know, she's getting married in the morning." A smile twitched over her lips unbidden. Realizing she was being watched, she cleared her throat and tried to remember her original point. She couldn't.

"It was the alcohol consumption," Doris supplied finally.

Reva looked amused. "Are you actually nervous?"

"No," she said instantly. "You can't be nervous about something you're so sure about. Besides, we've felt married for the last year. Longer. This is just a party so everyone can get drunk. Everyone else," she corrected with a soft smile. "It means a lot to Natalia that so many people want to celebrate with us. And she'd be completely happy if... Well, let's just say we might have to do it all again in a few years when Rafe's around."

"And hopefully," Phillip put in, "it'll be legally recognized then as well."

Olivia shot him a grateful smile. "Amen to that."

Doris coughed. "Can I make a toast?"

"No," she replied.

Her friend proceeded regardless and held up her glass. "To a drunken wedding, to the fact that Natalia hasn't seen sense yet and," she went on, despite Olivia kicking her, "to family."

They all raised their glasses. "To family."

This wasn't so bad, Natalia supposed.

As far as bachelorette parties went you probably couldn't get a more sedate group than her sister, Blake, Mel and Beth. Well, Leyla might prove to be a bit of a handful as the night wore on, but she wasn't worrying about that right now. Instead she just reclined into the

booth and listened to Mel and Beth discussing something work-related while she pondered how Frank was getting on back at home. It wasn't that she didn't trust him with the girls, far from it. It was just that, since Edmund's rampage, Emma had been a little difficult to predict. The help she'd got from Anna in basic martial arts had built some of her confidence back up, but Natalia's heart still tightened whenever she allowed herself to think of those nightmares her little girl had slipped into after the shootings. If something like that was to happen when she wasn't there then she'd feel horribly guilty about it.

She also wondered what kind of night Olivia was having. According to Blake, Doris had managed to convince Reva and Phillip to go, along with Ava, of course. Knowing Olivia that could end in a black eye and jail for the night. Perhaps she was being pessimistic, but it felt the right way to be at the moment. If she let herself be cautious about everything, then maybe nothing would go wrong.

"You look bored," Blake said anxiously, pushing a glass of wine into her hands.

She smiled. "No, no, I'm fine. Just...worried about Frank."

"Oh, he'll be fine. Emma can tell him what to do."

"Mmm, that's what I'm worried about," Natalia replied. Noticing her sister was being unusually quiet, she touched her arm. "Are you okay?" she asked softly, shooting her a reassuring smile.

"Of course, why wouldn't I be?" Leyla replied lightly, though her eyes still seemed vacant.

"You just seem quiet, that's all," Natalia responded pensively.

"I'm fine. Look, this is supposed to be your night. You could at least crack a smile."

Natalia quirked an eyebrow at her sister even as a grin crossed her face. "Now, why does that sound like an order?"

Leyla thought about it for a millisecond. "Maybe because it is one?" She clapped her hands, regaining some of that energy that had opened the Beacon day care and made Natalia wince once in a while. "Right, ladies, we're letting my sister down here. We came out tonight to celebrate, not to get stuck in work conversations and worry about the kids we left at home."

Natalia cleared her throat. "It's just – "

“Just nothing,” Leyla interrupted. “Tomorrow you can be the dutiful mother – and wife, if you insist but I’m not open to details. Now I’m gonna ask Buzz for a bottle of something bubbly and you’re all going to smile and pretend you like it. How’s that?”

Blake nodded for the group and Leyla slid out of the booth. Natalia shrugged and murmured an apology. Mel, however, waved it away.

“You know what? We’ve been way too work-orientated tonight. Consider the subject dropped.” She glanced to Beth. “Right?”

“Definitely. But I don’t suppose we want to talk about Olivia either?”

Natalia threw them all a sharp glance but couldn’t keep up the momentum. Somehow her stomach had decided to do a selection of triple somersaults all of a sudden.

“You look green,” Mel commented, startling her from her thoughts. “Are you sick?”

“Worried about tomorrow?” Beth supplied.

“No, no, absolutely not,” she said firmly.

Beth looked sceptical. “Really? Before my wedding I was... Well, I wasn’t a nervous wreck but I was nervous. I suppose it wasn’t helped by the fact I had my head stuck in law books until I was almost dragged down the aisle,” she said with a self-deprecating grin. Looking over at Natalia, she placed a hand on the younger woman’s arm. “But I still say, it doesn’t matter how well you know somebody, things change all of a sudden when there’s an insignificant piece of paper involved.”

“Or not, in our case,” Natalia said, stifling a sigh. Maybe if it was legally recognized then her father wouldn’t be able to discharge her from her family again. She let that thought pass, having talked it over with Olivia she knew his opinion didn’t matter. In fact, all she needed to do was look at Olivia doing the simplest task, feeding Francesca or helping Emma with her homework, and she knew she didn’t want anyone with bigoted opinions anywhere near her family.

“No,” Beth conceded after a moment, probably seeing something on her face, “but you’ve got more that bonds you together than the average couple on their wedding day.”

She thought of the house deeds with Olivia’s name etched on them and her share in the Beacon. It couldn’t be denied that her life was intrinsically entwined with Olivia’s now, come what may. They had pieces of paper scattered all over the place, not insignificant but true reflections of their lives together. Tomorrow was an affirmation of that, but that was

all it needed to be. It wasn't making any new statement about how happy they were – how happy *she* was.

"I know Olivia really well," she answered finally. "To the extent that I've wanted to kill her on several occasions."

Blake touched her arm. "That doesn't make you overly special."

She chuckled. "Okay. But I've had motive and opportunity, and I still didn't do it."

"Alright, that does make you special," Beth conceded.

"Coming through," Leyla announced, returning with a tray of glasses and a bottle perched precariously at the center. "What are we talking about?"

"Killing Olivia," Blake answered.

A grin settled on Leyla's face as she returned to her seat. "Is it a game?"

Natalia swatted at her, trying her best to look annoyed but failing miserably. "Nobody is talking about killing my girlfriend."

"Fiancée," Blake corrected.

Reddening, Natalia pointed out, "That was just a slip of the tongue."

They all took great pleasure in that and, despite the resolve, conversation quickly turned to Olivia. Blake had plenty of stories which she reluctantly volunteered. Eventually, Natalia got into the spirit of the evening. She forgot to worry, forgot to wonder about the potential war going on up at the farmhouse between Frank and Emma. For a few moments she even forgot to be sad about Rafe not coming to the wedding. Then, during a lull in conversation, it came back to her and she felt a wave of guilt and sadness wash over her.

Without ceremony, she excused herself to go to the bathroom.

As she scrubbed the tears from underneath her eyes and looked at herself in the mirror she had a distinct feeling of déjà vu. Hadn't she been in a similar situation all that time ago, though it was sickness and not tears plaguing her back then? And now... Well, now she had the family she thought she'd wrecked. Despite everything, the odds being stacked against them, here they were, the night before their wedding.

A faint thrill of excitement swept through her. She was going to stand next to Olivia in front of all their friends and commit herself to her, to their family. There were going to be smiling faces all around, none of those blank stares she'd feared so much thanks to Father Ray and his meddling. Although Rafe couldn't be there in person, he'd be watching and she was so thankful that he'd finally accepted the family they were. Although tomorrow wouldn't change a thing in reality, it was a public symbol, and she was honored that Olivia Spencer even wanted her to be there.

Taking a deep breath and wiping her face clean, she left the restroom and plunged straight into Buzz who was clearing a table near the door.

"Sorry, sorry," he said quickly. "My fault."

"Actually, I ran into you," Natalia responded with a grin.

"Well, yeah, but you don't call a woman clumsy the night before she walks down the aisle. It's impolite." He paused and glanced at the younger woman affectionately. "Are you doing okay, you nervous?"

"No, I feel like I should be, but this is the most natural thing that's ever happened to me. It might not mean anything to the rest of the world but it's my way of showing Olivia that I'm... that I'm not going anywhere," she finished with difficulty. There was a lump in her throat. "I'm so happy and I'd just like everybody to know it. I've been through some terrible stuff in the last few years, but I'm where I want to be now. Does that sound selfish?"

He exhaled rapidly. "You are about the most unselfish person I know. And I'm proud to know you. Now, go on, go have a good night. You can bet Olivia's doing the same."

"With Reva and Doris around?" Natalia queried.

Chuckling, he patted her shoulder. "Okay, you win."

Frank Cooper was almost asleep.

Emma had put a film on before he'd finally managed to persuade her that the reason she couldn't keep her eyes open was because she was tired. She was excited, bless her, and no amount of cajoling would get her to admit it. She was trying to be a grown-up but still harbored the dreams of a little girl. Hopefully she'd stay like that for a while because once she decided she wanted to be a proper grown-up, Olivia and Natalia would have a war on

their hands. Mentally, he braced himself for when Francesca hit that age as well. Now that would be an experience judging by her current dexterity with a spoon and mashed potato.

He'd agreed to go to the ceremony tomorrow partly because he thought he should. Any lingering doubts about Olivia's sincerity in her feelings had long since vanished, but there was no doubt it could get a little awkward sitting there watching them make vows to each other. He vaguely recalled Olivia being in the same position at his wedding. At least this time there was no chance of Natalia running out: someone would have to pry her away from Olivia these days. No, he'd go and he'd pretend to be comfortable with it, but that wouldn't stop him hoping an urgent call came in halfway through.

As he was pondering those points, he heard a crash outside in the yard. Neither Olivia nor Natalia had taken their cars so he was immediately on high alert. It was only just past ten anyway – he didn't expect them home for a while yet. Going to the window he saw a pair of taillights disappearing into the distance and felt the old familiar worry creep up on him.

Then the back door banged and he rushed through to the kitchen only to come face-to-face with what he assumed was an intruder. Briefly, he glanced around to see if there was anything he could use to defend himself then he caught sight of his prowler.

"Olivia, you scared the hell out of me!" He placed a hand on chest, trying to calm his galloping heart rate.

She frowned and closed the door behind her. "I do live here."

"No, I just expected you to be out longer, that's all."

"Yeah..." She sighed deeply. "When Reva moved onto a blow-by-blow account, literally in some cases, of my life I thought it was time to call it a night."

Frank barely suppressed his smile. "Right. Do you want me to stick around or..?"

"God, no, go home. Thanks for watching them. Emma get to bed okay?"

"Eventually, yeah."

She chuckled. "Right, no elaboration needed. Francesca?"

"Slept like a log since I put her down."

Olivia seemed faintly impressed. "You've got the magic touch."

It was a genuine compliment. He smiled and then went to retrieve his coat from the living room. When he returned, it was to find a red-faced Natalia trying to sneak in as well. Olivia had taken a seat at the table and quirked an eyebrow expectantly.

“What are you doing home?” she asked.

“Um...” Natalia looked caught then her face cleared. “Well, I could ask you the same thing.”

“Can it,” Olivia advised.

Grinning, Natalia looked to Frank. “Emma get to bed okay?”

“After a struggle.”

“Not again. Francesca?” she went on with an anxious look on her face.

It was easier just to repeat himself. “Slept like a log since I put her down.”

“Wow, impressive there.” As Olivia began chuckling, Natalia glanced over. “What?”

“Nothing. Anyway, I was just seeing Frank off.”

He cleared his throat. “It’s been a pleasure. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

As he let himself out into the cool air he had to smile to himself. He might not agree with the way it happened, but he had to admit it, those two were made for each other. Eleni crossed his mind and his grin grew. Perhaps things had worked out the way they were supposed to after all.

ACT 3

Once more, Olivia woke up alone. She didn’t much like the sensation before but today she was at least hoping for a little cuddle or... something before. She pouted until she realized that Natalia couldn’t see her so it was pointless. With that in mind, she grabbed her robe and went in search of her errant partner.

The younger woman was not with the girls who were both fast asleep; nor was she in the bathroom. The radio was on in the kitchen though; Olivia heard it as she crept down the stairs. Resolving to be as quiet as a mouse, she padded across the carpet and through to where Natalia was focused solely on the stove. She didn’t even hear her come in.

With a triumphant smirk she swept over and grabbed her around the waist. “Hey.”

“Aargh!” Natalia spun around, almost jabbing a fork through her arm.

Olivia swatted it away. “Watch what you’re doing with that.”

Her partner’s face was radiant. “Well, if you sneak up on women with dangerous weapons, you can expect to get hurt. Especially today. Someone might think you were looking for a way out.”

“Never.” Pulling her close, Olivia dropped a lingering kiss onto her lips. When she drew back she was feeling lightheaded. “The girls are still asleep; we’ve got plenty of time. What d’ya say?”

Natalia stepped back, leaving a safe distance between them. “Nope.”

Olivia groaned. “Why the hell not?”

Natalia grinned at her partner’s frustration. “The look on your face right now is priceless, you know that?”



She decided to try a bit of blackmail. “You know, I woke up and you weren’t there again. That’s not good for a girl’s ego at the best of times, but on her wedding day..”

“On her wedding day, she should wake up alone,” Natalia replied, “because on the wedding night...”

Olivia thought about that for a long minute. “Okay, I can live with that.”

“Natalia!” Olivia yelled from the foot of the staircase. “What are you doing up there?”

“Never you mind,” was the muffled reply.

Pausing, Olivia dropped her head to one side and considered climbing – no, running – up the stairs to see precisely what Natalia was doing, but one sidelong glance at Emma pouting on the sofa beside Francesca warned her otherwise. They were already running late as it was. She’d promised Ava she’d be at the Beacon twenty minutes ago and she still had to drop Francesca with Frank. It was something to do with the snooze button on the alarm clock and a warm body nestled beside hers, she was certain. If they couldn’t even make it to their own wedding because they couldn’t get out of bed, then maybe they were guaranteed a long and happy life together. Suppressing her smirk, she was about to call goodbye when Natalia appeared at the top of the stairs in a fluffy bathrobe.

“You were gonna say goodbye, right?” Natalia questioned.

Surveying her shrewdly, Olivia deduced there was nothing different about her appearance. She hadn’t even showered yet. She cleared her throat to remove the connotations of that from her mind.

“Of course, I was.”

Natalia leaned her hip against the wall. “Come up here and say it then.”

“Back in a minute, Jellybean,” Olivia muttered, practically leaping up the stairs two at a time. The disgruntled sigh that came from her middle daughter didn’t make her feel at all guilty as she edged Natalia back towards the bedroom.

“Wait,” Natalia said sternly. “No, you don’t. You have to get to the Beacon, you have to get ready and look absolutely gorgeous, so that you don’t embarrass me today.”

“Oh,” Olivia said with mock surprise. “I’m likely to embarrass you?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be unusual,” Natalia said with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “The amount of time it takes me to keep you from completely humiliating yourself on a daily –”

Olivia cut her off with a short sharp kiss. Drawing back, she realized it hadn't done either of them any good. The blood had rushed up to Natalia's cheeks and she was sure her own expression resembled a hungry tiger. Which, to be fair, wasn't too far from the truth. Putting an inch of distance between them, she composed herself – but barely.

"I can't wait for tonight," she said huskily. "A honeymoon without the kids. Just you, me..."

"That's only if we both make it to the ceremony," Natalia retorted.

The younger woman was always better at pulling herself back together, no matter how distracted she was at any given time. One of the many irritating things about her, Olivia decided at that moment.

"Okay, we're going, we're going," she said sullenly. "Emma'll probably drag me down the stairs by my ankles if I don't anyway."

"She's looking forward to looking absolutely adorable, that's all."

"Mmm hmm, but heaven forbid we use that word. She's not adorable, she's not cute. She's growing up too fast, that's what she is," Olivia concluded with a heavy sigh.

Natalia just smiled. "We'll deal with that another day, Momma Bear."

Olivia threw her a look. "I'm sure. Shouldn't Leyla be here by now?"

"She wanted to check in at the Beacon. I think she was a little scared of the boss to be honest," Natalia added innocently.

"She's getting wiser," Olivia answered.

Leaning forward, Natalia planted a chaste kiss on her cheek. "Go on, get out of here. I'll see you in a few hours."

Holding her gaze, Olivia murmured, "Promise?"

"You bet," replied her partner. "I heard there was cake afterwards so..."

Olivia edged closer. "Always a reason."

Natalia nodded and let their lips drift towards each other. "Mmm hmm."

"Mom!" Emma's irate voice rose from downstairs.

Growling, Olivia backed towards the door. “The interrupting she gets from Frank.”

“Go,” Natalia said softly, “I’ll see you soon.”

The look in her love’s eyes remained on her mind until well after she’d started the car and set off with the girls into town. She just had to pray that a pesky wedding and subsequent reception wouldn’t quash the full meaning of a honeymoon. Casting her eyes heavenward, she tried to remind God she’d been really good lately and He owed her one for making her squirm through Natalia’s last wedding. She sincerely hoped He was listening.

“Damn,” Leyla muttered as she checked her watch. One little trip to the store to buy a celebratory bottle for Natalia and now she was running way behind schedule. She sincerely hoped Olivia had set off already with the girls because another icy look from her direction and she might just speak her mind. Or, you know, not, because she valued her face the way it looked. While she couldn’t deny Olivia loved her family, she had to admit she was scary about it at times.

Adjusting the bag on her arm, she was about to set off across the road when she noticed a figure crossing to meet her.

“Anna, hi,” she said, somewhat surprised the detective had approached her. They hadn’t had much to do with each other since she’d come to town.

“Are you getting ready for the ceremony later?” Anna asked when they met.

“Yeah, I’m actually late. Got a feeling Olivia will kill me for it later. Are you coming?”

The officer shook her head. “Unfortunately, someone has to hold the fort. Anyhow, I heard you had a date with Jonathan.”

Leyla repressed her sigh. “So did half the town by the sound of it.”

Anna chuckled. “It’s tough to keep things secret around here.”

“Any idea where I can buy a set of muzzles?” she asked, trying to keep the frustration from her voice.

“Not off the top of my head. But if you find any let me know – I could do with a few at the station.”

With that, Anna smiled and walked on. Leyla watched her go then turned slowly to continue walking herself. This dating-in-a-small-town thing was becoming a little annoying. She liked Jonathan, she liked Sarah. She just wasn't sure she wanted to commit to anything with every set of eyes in town focused solely on them. In Chicago the only people she had to avoid if she wanted an easy life were her parents and their friends. Now though it seemed she couldn't move for people waiting to get involved.

Suddenly she had an unwavering urge for a jolt of caffeine. Checking her watch, she grimaced, but nevertheless began walking speedily over to Company. She'd get it in a takeout cup.

"Have I told you how gorgeous you look?"

A shiver ran through Doris at the words though she endeavored to play it completely cool. Still, judging from the smug look on Blake's face, she failed in that respect. She wasn't prepared to completely relinquish control, however, and steadfastly studied the vase of flowers on the table in front of them. They'd been tasked with checking everything was in order and waiting for Natalia's arrival. Obviously, her organizational skills at Rick and Mindy's wedding-that-didn't-happen had been remembered in some quarters. Olivia was already dressed, looking pretty damn good, with Ava and Emma keeping her company.

"Are you going all shy on me?" Blake asked.

Doris smirked. "Just mentally counting how many times you have said it. I'm coming in at five," she added.

"That's fairly low, considering," commented her girlfriend.

Feeling her composure slip, Doris had no choice but to press her lips briefly to Blake's soft cheek and then turn away. Anymore than that right now and she knew where they'd end up. Reaching out, she fluffed up the flowers.

After a pause Blake took the hint and distanced herself, albeit slightly. "It's romantic though, isn't it?" she went on eventually. "When you think of all they've gone through and they actually made it to this point. I wasn't convinced at first but... They're quite cute together."

Doris bit back a snort. "Don't let Olivia hear you say that."

"Oh, she's a softie now."

“And you’ll tell her that to her face?”

“No,” Blake conceded with a shrug, “from a distance and with a wall between us, maybe. But I still maintain that they’re sweet,” she persisted.

Doris let out a dry chuckle and tried not to consider the implications of the statement. “These flowers are nice, aren’t they?”

“Beautiful.” Blake’s breath was abruptly on the back of her neck. “But you don’t really care about flowers right now.”

“If anything was below standard today, Olivia would dice everything around her into little cubes. It’s self-preservation. Besides, these are beautiful.”

“At this moment you’re too interested in them.”

Reluctantly, and knowing she didn’t really have much of a choice, Doris turned to face her. There was a knowing glint in Blake’s eye, one that surprisingly stung her. On the one hand, she didn’t want Blake to get any ideas; on the other, she didn’t like to be thought so little of.

Taking her hands, Blake asserted, “There’s no need to look so worried. I’m talking about Olivia and Natalia, that’s all.”

“I didn’t think it was anything else,” Doris lied smoothly. Then, seeing the flicker of disapproval cross her girlfriend’s face, she asked hesitantly, “After Ross, do you really see yourself wanting to get married again?”

“Well, I do like weddings,” she answered after a moment. “But there are other ways to show commitment. Just so happens that Olivia and Natalia want the wedding, the symbol. Considering all they’ve had to go through to get to this point, it’s understandable. And it’ll help Emma and Francesca in the long run. It’s right for their family. Plus, Olivia likes a good party.”

“And you don’t like the idea of dressing up and getting all the attention?” Doris said innocently.

Blake nudged her with a big grin. “Well, I didn’t say that. But I’m not steering my life towards that. I’m trying to enjoy the time I’ve got with Clarissa and my boys. And you,” she added, inching forward. “Maybe I’m taking a page out of Olivia’s book, doing things differently than I have before.”

There was a lump in Doris's throat. Squeezing Blake's hand, she waited until it had disappeared before she answered, "Well, that's all right then."

Drawing her into a deep kiss, Doris enjoyed the contact for as long as possible. When her cell phone buzzed in her pocket, she groaned as she pulled back.

"If that's Olivia with some reminder for flowers, I'll..." She trailed off as she actually read the message and a smile slipped onto her face.

Blake gazed at her expectantly. "What? What is it?"

"Ashlee wanting me to offer them her congratulations. And reminding me not to muck this wedding up." Putting the phone away, she glanced to her girlfriend. "Now, would I do that?"

Not even thinking about it, Blake answered with a grin, "Yes."

Josh had to smile as he edged into the huddle of men. "Guess I'm in the right place here."

Buzz chuckled. "It wasn't on purpose. We just sorta drifted together."

Bill was leaning against the wall with his cell phone in his hand. His brow cleared as he read a message and he popped the phone back into his pocket. "Sorry," he explained, "just checking on the family."

Phillip patted him on the shoulder. "Quite right."

"Oh, he's only doing it for your benefit," Buzz joked. "And you," he went on, looking at Josh, "aren't you supposed to be running this show?"

He exhaled. "I don't think anyone besides Olivia is running this show. She wouldn't deign to have me conduct the ceremony if she could do it herself."

"Well, that's true enough," replied Buzz.

"Olivia's certainly independent," Phillip said wistfully.

"Feisty," Buzz added.

"Unpredictable," Bill put in.

Josh pondered his contribution for a moment. “Stunningly beautiful?”

“That’s a cop-out,” said Buzz, shaking his head.

“Or maybe Olivia’s behind you and I’m just the smart one,” Josh answered.

Buzz spun so fast that he nearly knocked Bill’s re-emerging cell phone from his hand. Phillip stifled his laughter as Josh raised an imaginary glass to his fellow exes.

“To Olivia and Natalia,” he said. “And let’s hope everything runs smoothly because if I know one thing it’s that when you push Olivia Spencer to the limit, weird and wonderful things happen.”

“That had better be set up properly,” Doris warned, smirking as Frank almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of her voice. She’d noticed that he’d been fiddling with the laptop again, much to the amusement of the man on the other end of the connection. Judging from Rafe’s raised eyebrow, he thought as much of Frank’s technical skill as she did.

Frank spun around. “It is. I was just adjusting things.”

“If you break it, Olivia will strangle you with her bare hands,” Doris said with a smirk; she wouldn’t mind watching that.

“Um, actually,” Rafe piped up through the speakers, “I think she’d have to get in line.”

Gulping, Frank just nodded.

Doris clamped a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “You’re looking a little hot under the collar there, Frankie. Need a glass of water?”

Rafe cleared his throat. “He was going to get my baby sister for me to take a look at.”

Frank gratefully took the out and fled towards where Buzz and Lillian were fussing over Francesca. Doris turned back to the screen ruefully. “Spoilsport.”

“We guys have to stick together, especially with you and Olivia around.” He paused. “How’s Ashlee doing?”

“You probably hear from her as much as I do,” Doris answered with a smile as she thought of her daughter. “But she’s good, she’s doing really well.”

The smile that spread over his face was enhanced a few seconds later when Frank appeared with a squirming Francesca in his arms. As Rafe cooed over the web link, Doris had to conceal her sentimentality. It wasn't good for her image.

"It's too tight," Emma complained, tugging at her dress.

Olivia glanced over to Ava for help, who happily consented after applying her mascara. Swapping places with her eldest daughter in front of the mirror, she stepped back to watch the scene play out. Emma had loved the dress when they'd bought it; adored it ever since. There certainly wasn't anything wrong with it now, except that perhaps it looked duller under the lights than it would at the ceremony. Her insides interrupted her with a flutter and she forced herself to return to the matter at hand. The fact that Natalia would be on her way now should be irrelevant.

"Look," Ava was saying, "you can't argue with me. You look beautiful, okay, Em? You're gonna be the prettiest girl out there and you'll do a great job."

"What if I forget to do something?" the girl asked softly. "Or what if I fall over or –"

"If that happens," Ava cut in, "then you pick yourself up and carry on. And everyone'll be proud of you for doing just that. Sometimes things go wrong and the best thing you can do is carry on. If you stopped every time something went wrong, you'd never move."

Perhaps that was why Ava had needed desperately to go to San Francisco, Olivia mused to herself. Catching her eldest daughter's eye in the mirror, she smiled. Ava met her gaze briefly then looked back to her sister.

"You look beautiful," she repeated, "and you'll make everyone proud. This is just about you being a part of Mom and Natalia's day because they love you so much. And if you'd really rather just sit in the back row and watch everything, that's fine."

Emma had paled slightly. "But I'd miss it!"

Ava grinned. "And we wouldn't want that, would we?"

With a flourish, Emma turned from the mirror. "Mom, are you sure I look okay?"

"Stunning," Olivia agreed unhesitatingly. "Do you need the bathroom before we start?"

After thinking about it for a millisecond, Emma nodded and fled the room. Releasing her breath into a half-laugh, Ava plopped down into a chair and studied her own reflection.

“You look beautiful, too,” Olivia said quietly. “In fact, you look absolutely amazing.”

Ava waved away the compliment. “So do you.”

“Well, I trot it out for the big occasions,” she quipped.

“Are you nervous?” asked Ava, ignoring the statement.

Olivia thought about that for a second. All right, her insides had been fluttering a little, she mused, but was that nerves or just plain happiness? She didn’t have any reservations. She and Natalia had been living in a type of marriage for longer than either of them had realized. This ceremony wasn’t going to change anything but it was a symbol, a signal to the world that they were together and solid as a rock. Everybody had to like that or just plain old get out of her life and her way.

“No,” she answered finally. “I’m too sure to be nervous.”

Apprehensively, she wondered whether to broach the subject of Ava’s recent confrontations with Natalia or just leave it alone. At the end of the day, she could easily see both sides and raising the issue five minutes before she walked down the aisle could be disastrous. Ava was here because they were a family now, whatever the difficulties. Olivia knew that her daughter could be stubborn at times, occasionally combining both her mother’s and father’s obstinacy. She was just relieved it hadn’t led to a fracture so serious that Ava had walked away from the ceremony. Having as many family members here as possible was important to Natalia. And, Olivia quietly admitted to herself, it didn’t do her any harm either.

By the time Emma had returned from the bathroom, she and Ava were completely ready to go. Olivia looked at herself in the mirror, hardly believing this was the woman she’d become in just a few short years. Kissing both her girls impulsively, she let out a determined sigh.

“Let’s do this.”

Ava chuckled. “Don’t we need Natalia for that? Doris said she’d come get us when she arrived. So sit down and be patient.”

“Oh, yeah, because that’s my greatest quality.”

Blake surveyed the multitude of people ahead of them and tried not to let the worry that was creeping at the edges of her mind expand into anything more. She focused on checking who'd turned up and who had politely declined the offer. Most of Olivia's exes had accepted – Bill, Buzz, Phillip – and Frank was there for Francesca's sake. Blake briefly wondered whether the expensive photographer Olivia had hired knew the minefield of photo opportunities he was letting himself in for. Reva was near to the front with Colin at her knee; Beth was reassuring Peyton vigorously about something or other; and Rick was anxiously checking his pager every two seconds as though he was expecting to be called away. Knowing Rick, he probably was. Blake's eyes settled on her mother talking to Clarissa animatedly and smiled at the fact Holly had decided to stick around for the wedding. While the wedding really wasn't something the boys were interested in, and they'd been removed from boredom accordingly, it was nice that Clarissa had someone else to share her excitement with.

For a few minutes Blake tried to concentrate on the fact that everybody looked happy to be here. That idealism was quashed, however, when Doris stomped down the aisle looking thoroughly concerned.

"There's no sign of them."

Blake chewed on her lip. "Leyla was supposed to be bringing her, right? Maybe they're stuck in traffic."

"Everybody else is here," Doris pointed out.

"Well, she'll be here soon then," Blake said decisively. "We just have to stop the natives getting restless." Spotting Frank juggling his cell phone and Francesca while Buzz chatted happily away to Lillian, she rushed over to grab the toddler. "Here, let me."

He grinned gratefully. "Thanks. She's picked up this habit of squirming like I don't know what."

Crouching down, Blake set the little girl against her knee. Francesca suddenly became very interested in pulling at her hair, something Blake could tolerate for the time being.

"I don't suppose you've heard of any accidents or anything," she asked Frank carefully. "Anything that could be holding up traffic?"

He looked up and caught her meaning. "Have you tried calling her?"

"Yeah," Blake admitted, "but there's no answer. Although those dresses aren't big on pocket space, so she might not have it with her."

It suddenly occurred to her that she was making excuses and avoiding the one thing she was too reluctant to say aloud. Standing with Francesca, she held the girl close to her cheek, inhaling the soft baby powder smell that was endemic around toddlers. Just the action helped soothe her nerves. Glancing over to Doris, she caught her eye and saw her own anxiety reflected there. Then her girlfriend's gaze slipped to something over her shoulder.

Her heart leapt as she turned – then plummeted at double the speed.

There was Leyla, completely underdressed for a wedding, looking petrified. Seeing her, Jonathan nudged Sarah from her seat and stood up. Somehow the idea that all eyes were on her did the young woman no good.

Doris was the first to speak. "What's going on? Is Natalia okay?"

Leyla was gnawing on her lip. "I don't know."

Frank was on his feet now. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"What's happened?" Jonathan asked, more gently.

Looking over gratefully, Leyla addressed her next words to him. "I was really late getting to the farmhouse. I lost track of time and somehow... Well, anyway, when I got there the door was open and Natalia wasn't there. I checked every room and the garden and the shed and everywhere I could think of but she just wasn't there."

An icy feeling was settling in the pit of Blake's stomach. "Was her car still there?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes," Leyla said with her voice breaking. "And her dress was still in the closet."

"Maybe she went out to see if she could find you," Doris suggested weakly.

"On foot and leaving the door open on her way out?" Blake murmured.

Frank already had his phone to his ear. "Anna, I need you at the farmhouse straight away. I'll meet you there." Clamping his phone shut, he put a hand on Leyla's shoulder. "I need you to come with me, tell me absolutely everything, okay?"

A crowd was gathering around them – Phillip, Reva and Mel being faces Blake picked out immediately. Josh looked particularly concerned at the forefront. Jonathan whispered something to Reva then prodded Sarah in her direction.

"I'll come with you," he said to Leyla.

Frank didn't seem to care about the entourage. Turning back to Doris, he said, "I'll call you when I get to the farmhouse. Hopefully it's all a mix-up, but I don't think you should let Olivia know until we're sure what's happened."

"That could take weeks," Doris argued.

"Okay," he snapped, "do you want to be the one to tell her?"

"Tell me what?" a voice behind them asked.

With her stomach suddenly turning to quicksand, Blake turned in the direction of Olivia, Ava, and Emma. All three of them looked absolutely stunning, a sense offset by the absolute panic in Olivia's eyes. She glanced around all of them and settled her gaze on Frank.

"Is Natalia okay? Has there been an accident?"

He squirmed under her glare. "We don't know. We don't know where she is."

ACT 4

This wasn't happening. It just wasn't happening.

Somehow she'd heard the words but they hadn't sunk in. How could they not know where she was? That was a ridiculous idea. The farmhouse was barely a few miles up the road; it wasn't exactly a lot of ground to cover. She suddenly felt sick. Here she was standing in front of this mass of people, all of them looking straight at her, and she couldn't comprehend what was going on. Bizarrely, she was stuck in a moment from the past. Glancing sideways to Blake, she tried to ask a question but couldn't.

They couldn't find her, she told herself. Well, was she all right? Leyla was here, looking petrified. Had something happened that she knew of, but wasn't telling? Was there an accident she didn't want to own up to? Or had Natalia maybe told her something, given her a message to pass on? Just like she had with Blake all those months ago...

"No," she said forcefully, more to herself than anyone else. "She wouldn't."

Doris gripped her arm, understanding her straight away. "Of course, she wouldn't."

“She’s not at the farmhouse,” Frank explained, “but her car’s still there, so that’s a starting point. I’ll meet you there, if that’s okay?”

She felt herself nod. After a moment he turned and pushed through the throng. Now there was just a herd of insignificant faces staring at her. A thought suddenly struck her hard.

“Francesca...” she murmured.

“Shush, she’s here,” Blake said.

Taking her daughter, Olivia buried her face into her soft hair. She vaguely heard Doris telling people to back off. The next time she looked up she was faced only with a select few faces – Doris, Blake, Phillip, Buzz, and Ava who was clutching Emma tightly. The majority of people were spilling from the room. She wanted to call them to come back, explain that it was a mistake and Natalia would be walking through the door any minute. She’d be bitterly disappointed if they all went so soon. But she couldn’t articulate the words; she just watched them all go.

“Where did Leyla go?” she asked with a shaking voice.

“Frank took her with him,” Blake replied, “Jonathan, too.”

“I... I need to get home,” she murmured, eliciting a squeal from Francesca as she held her too close. “I need to see.”

“I’ll drive you,” Doris answered.

“I’ll sort things here,” Blake put in, reaching for Francesca. “Why don’t you leave her here with us?”

“Yeah, we’ll keep her safe,” Buzz added.

“Rafe’s on the laptop on a video connection,” said Doris quietly. “Tell him there’s been an unspecified delay. Um, we’ll call back if we can?”

“Sure thing,” he answered.

Olivia was grateful but her brain was barely functioning. She looked to Phillip, hardly knowing why. His face was set in a fiercely determined expression which softened slightly as she met his gaze.

“I’ll bring Emma and Ava home for you, okay?” he said. “But you go. We shouldn’t hold you up.”

She didn’t need any further encouragement. As she rushed down the aisle with her dress flapping at her legs, she just tried to repeat her new mantra.

It’s a mistake, that’s all. A mistake.

Doris barely knew how she kept control of the car on the drive to the farmhouse. Her mind was just as active as Olivia’s, if not in quite so much turmoil. She supposed she knew exactly what was going through her friend’s head; she wanted to speak and dispel her anxieties as much as she could but that’d just bring about fresh ones. If she assured Olivia that Natalia wouldn’t just not turn up, then she inevitably told her that something terrible had happened.

Her hands gripped tightly on the steering wheel as she turned up towards the long driveway. She didn’t like this feeling of helplessness that was overtaking her, probably no more than Olivia did.

The yard was already a tangle of police officers and Springfield residents. Olivia jumped out of the car and stomped straight over to Frank by the door.

“Okay,” the hotel owner snapped. “Now you tell me what’s going on.”

Anxiety was etched on his face. “The door was open. Not just unlocked; ajar. But not deliberately, I don’t think. Leyla said it was barely noticeable.”

“There’s no way –” Olivia was barely managing to keep her composure as her life threatened to crumble around her.

“I know that,” Frank interrupted her. “Eleni’s on her way over.”

Doris studied him a moment. “You’re going all out on this awfully quickly,” she observed. “What happened to waiting more than half an hour before panicking?”

“Edmund happened,” he said shortly. “I’d rather we kicked up a real stink and found her safe and well than wait and...”

He didn’t have to finish the sentence. From the look on her face, Olivia had concluded it in her head. There was an excruciating pause while something else passed through her mind,

then her eyes regained focus. Her lips even pressed together in that old formidable manner Doris remembered being on the receiving end of more than once. Briefly, she wondered how long Olivia could keep up the pretense for. They all glanced over as Phillip pulled up with Ava and Emma both visible in the car.

Turning urgently back to Frank, she asked, "Can I have a look inside? Just to see if there's anything out of place."

He nodded. "Don't touch anything."

The three of them proceeded inside to a house that felt eerily cold. It was just the connotations of Natalia's disappearance; Doris was sure of it, but it didn't make the feeling go away in a hurry. Judging from the way Olivia's eyes passed easily over the kitchen, everything there was as she'd left it a few hours ago. Doris followed her and Frank into the living room where Olivia immediately stopped short.

"Did Leyla mention making tea?" she asked coolly.

"No. She said she came in, looked for Natalia and left," Frank replied.

Doris looked at the two cups and their position on the table. The handles were both pointing towards the door, as if someone had placed both of them down and they'd remained untouched. Sure enough, both of them were full practically to the brim.

"So, she had a visitor," Doris murmured then looked to Frank. "And she let them in of her own accord."

He shook his head. "Let's wait until we've got forensics before we jump to that conclusion." He turned to Olivia and asked, "Do you want to look upstairs?"

She visibly shuddered. "I need air."

Doris took her arm and steered her towards the door.

Back outside Olivia walked straight past her daughters then did a double-take. "Where's Francesca?" she asked, suddenly panicked.

"Blake's got her," answered Doris. "She's perfectly safe. If you want her here, I can –"

"No," Olivia interrupted. "She's better off away from this."

For a lengthy moment she stared into space then she asked, in a heartbreakingly soft voice, "Is this it? Has she gone again? Has Father Ray come along and persuaded her to walk out on me again?"

Doris exchanged a look with Ava who was gazing miserably at her mother's back. Neither of them wanted to speak, so it fell to Frank to slip a hand onto Olivia's shoulder.

"She wouldn't leave," he said, "not now, especially not today. I know that for a fact, Olivia, so don't argue with me. She wouldn't leave Francesca, think about that if nothing else. And," he went on after a moment of deliberation, "she wouldn't leave you either. Much as I hate saying it, you two are perfect together and the perfect parents to my little girl."

There was silence then a rustle behind them which went unnoticed by both Olivia and Frank. Doris, however, saw Ava try in vain to keep hold of Emma as she tried to flee. Phillip was already jogging after his daughter and, sensing Olivia didn't really know she was there in the first place, Doris went after them.

Right now Phillip felt about ready to implode. This was Rick and Mindy's wedding all over again; he felt completely out of control and it drove him crazy. Of course, he could take his frustrations out on Frank for making his little girl feel like a spare part, but that'd no doubt hold up the investigation a little bit.

He found Emma at the edge of the lake, gazing listlessly at a lone duck twirling around on the water. Phillip slowed down as he felt someone come up beside him. To his surprise, it was Doris.

"We can toss a coin on who gets to slap him later," she said by way of explanation then she gestured to Emma. "Shall we?"

At first they couldn't get her to look at them. When she did, it was clear she'd been trying to stop herself crying. Phillip felt his insides splitting as he hugged her.

"Sweetheart, it'll be okay," he found himself lying.

She shook her head. "When she comes back, she'll be coming back to Francesca. It's just like the last time, isn't it? She's gone and doesn't think of me at all."

"Emma," Doris said firmly, "that's not true."

"But Frank said –"

Phillip cut in, "He's Francesca's daddy, isn't he? Of course, he thinks of her right away. But that doesn't mean you're any less important to Natalia. I know for a fact that she loves you as much as she loves your sister."

Emma didn't look convinced. Just as he was wracking his brains for something else to say, Doris knelt down beside them and looked Emma square in the face.

"Can I be honest with you, Em? Are you grown up enough to handle that?"

She nodded hesitantly. "Yes."

"Good," Doris said smoothly. "Okay, you know that Frank is a really good man, don't you? He's a police detective, he likes looking after people, and he's good at it sometimes."

Phillip noted the addendum and repressed his snort. Emma, though, was hooked on every word. He hoped Doris had some clue of where she was headed or this could do more harm than good.

"Frank is a really good man," she repeated, "but he's an idiot sometimes. Everyone's an idiot sometimes, but Frank's really good at it."

Emma chuckled through her tears. "Is he?"

"He just doesn't think when he opens his mouth, that's all," Doris answered. "I mean, you know when you're at school and someone says something, and you really want to say something back?" Emma nodded. "Well, I bet Natalia tells you to think before you say something, right? Because she wants you to grow up properly, and think about what you should say and what you shouldn't."

"That's right," said Emma carefully.

"Well, Frank needs someone to tell him not to once in a while," Doris concluded. "If he had he would've remembered to mention you. And if your mom hadn't been so upset, she would've set him straight right away, I promise you that. But she's upset at the moment, and she'll need you to be as good as you possibly can be."

Emma had listened very attentive. The cloud washed over her face, only to be replaced by a fresh one. "Where is Natalia?"

Olivia felt that, if for a moment, she stopped then she'd stop completely. The number of times she'd circled the driveway was incomprehensible, but no one seemed in a rush to halt her progress. Once in a while she caught the eye of Ava helplessly watching her by the cars, but no one said a word. Eleni had arrived a few minutes earlier and was swiftly being briefed by Frank. It felt bizarre to be leaving her fate in the hands of those two but right now she didn't think she was capable of anything else. Being useless had never been her forte.

Finally, she felt the presence of Doris behind her. Turning she found her holding Emma's hand. Her daughter looked positively catatonic. Kneeling down, she clutched her in a massive hug and tried to tell her it was all going to be all right. Looking up at the anxiety etched on Doris's face, she knew she couldn't make that promise. Her insides suddenly made an effort to split. She just pulled Emma closer and hoped it'd pass.

When Frank cleared his throat beside her, she was instantly alert. Standing, she took Emma's hand and instinctively moved closer to Doris. She also felt Ava approach behind her and slot a hand onto her shoulder.

"Well?" she pressed.

He held up a transparent bag containing a small bracelet caked in mud. "Is this Natalia's?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "Yes," she said shakily. "Where did you find it?"

"Trodden into the dirt by the porch. It's possible the kidnapper doesn't even know it came off."

She stood a little straighter. "Don't we need to rule everything else out first?"

Frank looked uncomfortable. "That's a secondary concern right now."

"No. No, it isn't." Her grip tightened on Emma's hand. "I want you to do this properly and if that means checking with everyone who she might've gone to in order to – to get away, then you're gonna do that, okay?"

He rubbed at his forehead. "Sure I am. Who would you like us to talk to first?"

"Father Ray," she said instantly and with venom. "And if he claims ignorance, pull the cop card for God's sake. He can stop hiding behind that damn collar and start telling the truth."

"Mom," Ava murmured, "he's got nothing to tell. This isn't like the last time."

She turned to half-face her daughter. "If that's true, then that's what he'll say."

After giving Frank a short list of people to talk to, she gestured Phillip to come over from where he was hovering by the car.

"You don't have to stay," she said.

"Well, I figured Emma could get some stuff together –"

"No," she interrupted, "she's not going anywhere without me right now."

His soft eyes met hers. "That wasn't my intention. All of you are welcome to stay for as long as you want."

Before she could debate that in her mind, she finally saw Leyla slinking away from the farmhouse. Pushing past Phillip, she broke into a run fast enough to grab her viciously by the arm. The younger woman tried to shake her off, but to no avail.

"Why the hell weren't you here when I left?" she demanded. "You were late. To your own sister's wedding day, you were late."

Tears were glistening in Leyla's eyes. "I got delayed. It isn't my fault."

"Really? Because I'm looking at this situation and I'm thinking it is your fault. I'm actually thinking I want to wrap you around a pole right now."

"Mom!" Ava said sharply with a gesture towards Emma.

Letting go, she backed away a few inches and felt instantly ashamed of herself. If Natalia could see her screaming at her sister, as if she was the one to blame... She turned around and glanced across to the apprehensive faces watching her. Emma looked scared; Ava concerned; Phillip was sporting a determined expression she didn't want to cross; and Doris wore an impartial mask that was cracked in several places. Behind them, Frank stood with his eyes closed. When he finally opened them, she stared squarely at him.

In a steely level voice, she said, "Find Edmund before I do, or you'll have another body on your hands."

THE END

The Likes of Which You'll Never Know

by Kristin

ACT 1

It was dark and rumbly; that was all Natalia knew. Her head swam. The minute a thought was formed, it was just as quickly washed away. She knew she had arms, legs, and a back that was no doubt aching, but for the life of her she couldn't feel them.

Natalia desperately tried to struggle against the confined space. She quickly discovered that every movement was in vain. It was like struggling against quicksand. Even if she had the strength, there was no way to tell which way was up. Her equilibrium turned and her foot caught the sharp terrain below her. She stumbled and flailed out her hands trying to catch herself only to find she was already lying down.

She couldn't shake the notion that she was making her way to an inferno. Was this purgatory or had she simply passed "Go" and been sent straight to Hell? She focused her attention on the rusted iron gates that loomed high above her. They sang out in high pitched wails as they shook from tremors resonating deep underground. Natalia drove her ear against the flat surface below her attempting to muffle the sound.

Her attention was suddenly drawn to a blade of light that cut through the gates. Slowly it engulfed the entrance, illuminating her entire field of vision. This was God here to save her. Natalia's chin shook awaiting His voice. Her steady breaths echoed through the quiet space. A dark figure drifted weightlessly into the white glow above her. As it loomed closer, she was struck by the realization that this wasn't God at all. A mild wave of nausea numbed her lips and everything fell away.

The last time Olivia was here - staring at a wedding dress lying tauntingly out before her - it was much different. It was in a box, for starters. That box was in a room that Natalia single-handedly occupied. And most importantly, Natalia was here with tears in her eyes and professions of love on the tip of her tongue. *She couldn't have the one thing she wanted.* Olivia had no words for how much she wanted to hear that she was what Natalia wanted. Even now, after all they had been through and the intimacy they had shared, that thought turned lazy flips in her stomach.



The sensation was cut devastatingly short by the reality that Natalia was gone... again. Olivia's confession didn't matter. She could have all the words in the world, and they would do nothing but echo in an empty room.

"You okay?" Doris asked as she placed her hands on Olivia's shoulders from behind. Olivia shook her head 'no' refusing to turn and take her eyes off the dress. She felt Doris' grip tighten briefly as she let out a breath of understanding.

"How long do you get for killing a priest?" Olivia asked absentmindedly as she finally turned to meet Doris' gaze.

"Too long," Doris answered. "Besides, you don't know for sure that he's had anything to do with this."

Olivia rolled her eyes and paced a few steps away. She didn't want to give the slightest acknowledgement that she believed Doris was most likely right. It was easier to point blame at Father Ray than it was to find some equally painful alternative explanation for Natalia's disappearance.

"We don't have the best track record with weddings," Olivia admitted as she placed her hands on the dresser behind her and leaned back against it. "Natalia locked me in a bathroom during her wedding to Gus. Then the Frank wedding, which you know way too well. And now this."

Doris couldn't help but shake her head.

"Ma'am, please don't touch anything," a man's booming voice startled them. Olivia raised her hands suddenly acquiescing to the young officer's wishes. He nodded at her and then headed back out of the room.

"It's not like I moved anything," Olivia grumbled as she stepped towards Doris. "I mean, they're going to find my fingerprints here anyway. This is my room in my house." Olivia's voice rose as she finished her statement. Doris recognized the shift in Olivia's posture. Her shoulders tensed and her back straightened. It was only a matter of time before Olivia would be lashing out.

"Ma'am," the young officer said as he moved into the room again.

"Ms. Spencer," Olivia corrected him immediately.

"Sorry," he offered unapologetically. "Ms. Spencer, do you have anything we can pull the victim's fingerprints from to cross check?"

"Ms. Rivera," Olivia said firmly. The officer stared at her blankly.

"I thought your name was Spencer," he stated flatly.

Doris could swear she saw steam shoot forcefully from Olivia's ears as her face reddened.

"It is," Olivia stated slowly. "The 'victim,' as you so caringly referred to her, is named Natalia Rivera. And I think your best shot at pulling Ms. Rivera's prints is to dust my ass!"

"Okay, okay." Doris stepped in, pushing Olivia gently away from the officer. "I think maybe we should go. We should give them some space to do their job."

Olivia scoffed at Doris' words but allowed herself to be led out of the room.

Outside the farmhouse, it seemed as though the number of police vehicles had tripled. Olivia spotted Ava walking hand-in-hand with Emma by the old barn. There was so much for Olivia to explain to Emma, again. Everything was repeating itself. Even though Olivia was fully aware that this time was much different, those scars of being left before ached.

"Why don't you go get your girls, and I'll take you guys to the Beacon?" Doris asked pulling Olivia's attention back to her. Olivia shook her head and started to back away. "I know Emma could use the rest," Doris continued.

Olivia swallowed hard and finally conceded with a nod. She walked purposely over to the barn watching her every step. The numbness had started to kick in making her feel as though she was floating to her destination.

"Hey Ava," Olivia said as she approached her children. "We're going to go."

"We're going to leave?" Ava questioned quickly. "Why..."

"No argument. We should just go and let them do their job," Olivia responded. She saw Emma staring up at her biting her lip. "Plus, I want to spend some time with my baby." She kneeled down and opened her arms out. Emma ran over and hugged her mom soundly.

Olivia carried Emma in her arms back to the farmhouse with Ava walking closely behind. All Olivia could hear in her head was Natalia reprimanding her for carrying Emma. She knew she partly did it just to see if Natalia would magically appear scolding her for it.

Doris leaned up against a post on the front porch with a phone to her ear. She said her good-byes and hung up as the family approached.

"There you are," Doris said placing her phone in her pocket. "That was Blake. She said she's willing to take care of Francesca for a while if you need it."

"Let's just get to the Beacon," Olivia answered. "I'll give her a call once we get settled in. I think we would all feel better to have her with us."

"Yes," Emma chirped drawing everyone's attention down and inciting the first legitimate group of smiles since the news of Natalia's disappearance.

"I need to speak with Frank before we go," Olivia stated looking over her shoulder at him. She turned back and met eyes with Doris.

"I'll get the car ready," Doris said shifting side to side. "Come on, girls."

Olivia stood back for a moment waiting for Frank to finish his conversation with one of the other officers. Patience was something that had never come naturally to her. Natalia had taught her differently, though. Maybe it was never a matter of having that skill. Maybe Olivia never had anything really worth being patient for, with the exception of Emma, of course. She had always been patient with Emma. With Natalia, it wasn't the same kind of patience. Natalia was really the first one to make Olivia wait for what she desired. And for Natalia, she would happily wait until the end of time.

Frank finally noticed her standing off to the side. He walked over tentatively, unsure of what to expect.

“I just wanted to let you know we’re going to the Beacon,” Olivia said crossing her arms. “We want to give you some room to do your job.”

Frank could see Olivia struggling with the words of a plan that was most likely not her own. She winced holding back what she really wanted to say. “If you could please call me the minute you know anything.”

“Sure thing,” Frank answered feeling a momentary bit of pride in being in control. His spirits dropped the moment he saw Olivia’s eyes narrow. She wasn’t able to hold back anymore.

“I’m serious, Frank,” she had warned him. “I go too long without a phone call and you might find me wandering the streets of Springfield with a gun in my hand.”

Frank just nodded his head as she stared him down. Olivia turned and walked towards the car. Doris, Ava, and Emma were already inside and ready to go. She eyed Frank one last time and then got in.

The ride over to the Beacon was very quiet. Doris watched as Olivia stared distraughtly out of her window. She glanced in the rear view mirror to find Ava doing the same. Emma was lying down across the back seat with her head in her sister’s lap.

“How’s it going over there?” Doris asked breaking the silence.

“I shouldn’t have yelled at Leyla like that,” Olivia answered without looking over.

“You were upset. It was understandable.” Doris comforted her.

“Maybe she deserved it,” Ava said surprising both women. “Maybe she’s really just a burden for everyone. Maybe she got kicked out of her parents’ house instead of leaving of her own accord.”

“Ava,” Olivia warned.

“No,” Ava responded immediately. “I don’t want to hear you defend her anymore. We don’t know her. We don’t know why she’s here butting into everyone’s life. And now her behavior has gotten Natalia into trouble – injured or even killed.”

“Ava,” Olivia repeated turning around to look her in the eyes.

Emma's head turned looking back and forth between her mother and sister. "I like her," Emma said finally breaking the glare between the women.

Olivia looked down at Emma and offered a closed mouth smile. She faced forward again and settled back into her seat. "Me too," Olivia said softly.

Mel knocked tentatively on the face of the thick oak door before crossing her arms and resting her weight against it. The office door was wide open revealing a full head of blond, curly hair hovering over a desk. She watched Beth writing feverishly as she mumbled incoherently to herself.

"So now you're a mad scientist?" Mel asked into the room.

Beth looked up with a scrunched brow and then relaxed at the sight of her business partner. She ran her hand around the back of her neck rubbing as she turned her head to the side.

"I didn't know you were going to be here," Beth said.

"I had to pick up something I left in my office," Mel responded moving into the room. She took a seat in one of the leather chairs that sat in front of Beth's desk. "I'm surprised to see you here, considering."

"I know," Beth agreed as she sat back and let out a breath. "Philip is very worried about them. He's running around trying to secretly solve every problem. You don't mess with his family."

"Secretly?" Mel asked.

"He has to tip toe when it comes to Olivia," Beth responded. "I think he'll be forever trying to make up for his past."

"Ah," Mel said as she nodded. "So why are you here?"

"I'm mostly just staying out of the way," Beth stated as she nudged at the paper in front of her. "I'm really nervous about Dinah's trial too. I thought I would come here and just jot down a few ideas."

"You're going to be great," Mel offered reassuringly.

"Are you sure I'm the right person to do the opening statement? You have so much more experience," Beth asked.

"You know this case better than any of us," Mel responded placing a hand on the desk. "You have the passion and knowledge that will win this. You're Dinah's best shot. If any of us thought any differently, we wouldn't ask you to represent us."

Beth smiled at her timidly and let out a breath. She shook her head and rolled her shoulders.

"Okay," Beth said in a sigh. "I should know better than to argue with an attorney anyway."

Frank leaned back against his car and scratched the patch of scruff already forming along his chin. Today was definitely not what he expected. Here he was again on a wedding day not knowing where the bride had run off to. The only thing he was sure of was that he wouldn't find her stowed away in a gazebo in the middle of a snow storm with tears in her eyes. Some days he felt that Natalia falling in love with Olivia was the worst thing that happened to him. Other days, like today, made him realize how trivial it had all been.

He caught sight of some movement out by the pond. Leyla was walking up to the farmhouse with her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

"Leyla," Frank called out. "Where have you been?"

Her eyes connected with his for a moment and then she continued on her path walking away from him.

"Leyla," Frank said again as he jogged to catch up with her. He placed his hand on her arm to stop her. "Where are you going?"

"Don't touch me," she responded curtly as she turned out of his reach.

"Hey," Frank offered defensively. "I just wanted to make sure you're okay." Leyla didn't speak. She turned and looked away. "I know this is difficult right now, but I need to get a statement from you."

"Oh, I see," Leyla said as she rolled her eyes. "You ready?"

Frank nodded.

“Fuck,” she said as she pointed deliberately at him. “Off.”

“You remind me of another Rivera,” Frank said placing his hands on his hips.

“Don't talk about my family like you know them,” Leyla yelled.

Frank let out a light bark and looked her up and down. “I know them a hell of a lot better than you do. I've done more than you can ever imagine to help them. And where were you, Leyla? Where were you when Natalia needed you today?”

Frank immediately regretted the words the minute they left his mouth. He just snapped. Between the stress of the wedding and everyone coming down on him to find Natalia, he was feeling at the end of his rope. He watched the hurt dance across Leyla's eyes and moved to apologize.

“Chief,” Frank heard Remy call out. He looked up to see Remy and Anna approaching him. When he turned back, it was too late. Leyla was already making her way down the driveway.

“What's going on?” Remy asked.

Frank dropped his head and kicked at the dirt.

Olivia heard a light knock on the door as she was rocking a sleepy Francesca in her arms. She adjusted the girl and then stood up to answer. “Any chance that's your Ma?” she whispered to the child as she made her way over.

Olivia cracked the door enough to see Doris standing on the other side. She closed it and took off the latch and opened it again. “It's just Aunt Doris,” Olivia said to Francesca.

“Just?” Doris teased as she came in. Olivia looked up at her with a raised eyebrow. “I wanted to check on you.”

“We're okay,” Olivia said as she went back to rocking Francesca. “How was your dinner with Blake?”

“It was fine,” Doris responded. “We're all pretty somber right now.” Doris rubbed her face, finally feeling the effects of the day. “Blake said to give her a call if you needed anything. Or if you wanted her to take Francesca while you got some rest.”

"I don't think I'll be sleeping much," Olivia said as she sat down. "I have Ava here to help too, so I think we'll be okay."

"Well, you know Blake and I would do anything for you," Doris offered. Olivia just looked down at her daughter in her arms. She couldn't help the tears. They slid down her cheeks as she closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Doris said with a frown placing her hand on Olivia's forearm.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Olivia said shaking her head. "We'll get through this. Won't we Sweet Pea?" Olivia held the girl to her a little tighter. "This isn't our first rodeo."

"You know, I'd do it all again in a heartbeat," Doris said.

"What?" Olivia asked.

"The nunnery road trip," she answered. "I mean, it sucked watching you in pain like that. But the passion you have for Natalia and the passion I know she has for you, I would ride to the ends of the earth to make sure you got that back."

Olivia's eyes met Doris' and she knew instantly that the woman was telling the truth. If it wasn't for the wrenching pain in her gut, she would have smiled at her dear friend. Olivia felt how much her life had changed and how distant she was from the pain of even just a year ago.

"It's different this time," Olivia stated as she looked into the distance.

Doris hesitated and then simply nodded in agreement.

ACT 2

Anna stood sternly with her hands on her hips on the front porch of the farmhouse. She watched the last rays of the sunset disappear in the western horizon. Things had spun so quickly out of her control since she had gotten to Springfield. That was something she had dedicated her life to maintaining: control. She had felt powerless on the island with her father and now she was beginning to believe she would never escape it.

She turned and watched Chief Cooper push at the tired lines on his face as he instructed one of the investigative officers. She realized that even though she wasn't well-loved in this town right now, she wasn't going to receive the worst of this. Everyone was going to

be expecting so much out of Frank. This wasn't just another missing person. This was the mother of his child. And there wasn't much chance the other mother of his child would be too forgiving unless he delivered quickly.

"Hey Chief," Anna said as she approached Frank. "You doing okay?"

Frank watched her for a moment, a little thrown by someone demonstrating compassion for him. He had felt like the town's punching bag from the moment this had happened.

"Yeah," he finally answered, nodding his head.

"Do we have anything solid yet?" Anna asked hoping to have something to give her focus. Frank shifted a little on his feet and looked past her.

"Eleni said they found some traces of blood on the handle of the back door," he told her quietly. "They're going to take a closer look at it in the lab."

"So there's a chance she's wounded?" Anna questioned.

"What do you think?" Frank responded rhetorically. "This has Edmund written all over it. What frustrates me is that our team is going to bust their ass all night to find evidence. And then in the end, it's just going to point to him. And by then, God knows where he's going to be or what he's done with Natalia."

"I don't know," Anna stated as the different scenarios rotated through her mind. She shifted her weight on her feet and crossed her arms. "That just seems too simple. Edmund would have left his mark. His violence has escalated. He would have left Natalia's body as some cruel reminder of his power." Anna pulled out of her haze to find Frank staring at her in fear. She could see he was playing out her words in his mind.

"You've got to find your father," Frank said suddenly. "You've got to call him and get him to tell us where Natalia is before it's too late."

"Are you serious?" Anna asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes!" Frank responded. "We can't waste any more time." Anna rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Sure, Chief, let me just do that," she responded pulling her phone from her pocket. She placed it to her ear and locked her eyes with his.

“Hi Daddy, it’s your estranged daughter. Oh, I’m fine. How’s the grip strength these days? Good. Good. Look, do you remember that girl that I went to school with that was raped and you covered up the assault? Yeah, her girlfriend was kidnapped. Do you think you can tell me where you hid her?”

Anna held out her phone to Frank and nodded for him to take it. He shook his head as he turned around. He grabbed his coat from the bench and pulled it onto his shoulders. Frank walked past Anna and headed out towards his car.

“Where are you going?” Anna called out after him. He opened the door firmly and glanced up at her.

“Church,” he answered. “You coming?”

Anna shoved her phone back in her coat pocket and ran out to the car.

Eleni approached the square of crime scene tape that marked off a fairly large area just outside the back door of the farmhouse. They had staged bright lights illuminating the area. She watched Detective Boudreau and Crime Scene Technician Burchard in a heated discussion about what appeared to be markings on the ground.

“What’s going on men?” she asked as she placed her hands in her pockets.

“Footprints,” Remy answered.

“And tire tracks,” Burchard followed up. “There are cars all around this property today, but I haven’t seen any back here. I don’t think this is a common place for the homeowners to park.”

Eleni eyed the parallel markings that led through the light covering of wet snow in the back yard to the gravel driveway.

“I agree,” Remy continued. “I’ve never seen Olivia or Natalia pull their car on the grass back here.”

“So if you guys are in agreement, then what’s the discussion about?” Eleni asked moving under the tape.

“Shoes,” Remy responded.

“Shoes?” Eleni repeated. “Isn’t that usually more of a ladies’ territory. Unless you guys...”

Remy just shook his head with a smile. “These markings here. We’re debating whether they’re Nike or Reebok.” He pointed down at a specific impression in the mud.

“Hmm,” Eleni hummed as she bent down to have a closer look. “They’re deeper than I would expect for that shoe size.”

“With the snow fall last night, they most likely wouldn’t have been made until the ground was wet from the melt off this afternoon,” Remy said eyeing the footprint closer.

“Right,” Eleni said standing up. She let out a quick breath doing a visual scan. “Get me full film of the area and cast all the markings.”

Buchard nodded. It wasn’t much, but it gave Eleni a little hope that it was at least somewhere to start.

Anna followed closely as Frank strode swiftly up the steps of the church. She checked her watch, noting the church should be just finishing up with evening Mass. As they approached the front, the doors swung open forcefully and a rush of warm air and mixed conversations hit them. Frank looked stunned for a moment. He had been out of it on the way over only saying a few words. He was definitely a man on a mission.

Frank and Anna made their way through the crowd of exiting parishioners. A few stood talking in small groups in the center aisle. Anna trailed Frank as he wove around them and headed straight for the front podium.

“Father,” Frank stated strongly. “We need to speak with you.”

Ray looked up at him for a moment and then his eyes moved to Anna. He watched her hands go to her hips pushing her jacket back and revealing the badge and gun on her belt. He gave a quick nod and then looked back down at a couple of churchgoers that had approached him after the service.

“Well, have a good evening,” he told them. “God bless.” Frank and Anna moved closer to Ray as the parishioners left.

“We need to talk somewhere private,” Frank stated.

“Of course,” Ray agreed and motioned for them to head towards the back.

Ray led them into his office and offered them a seat. It was the same room Frank and Natalia had their pre-wedding counseling before. Frank stared at the matching love seats as Anna found a place on one of them.

“Can I get you two any coffee or tea?” Ray asked as he closed the door.

“No, thank you,” Frank answered. He sat down next to Anna only after Ray took his seat on the facing couch. “We need to speak to you about Natalia.”

Anna watched Ray’s mouth twitch ever so slightly. He finished pouring his cup of tea resting on the small table between them and then looked up at Anna. He motioned again offering her something to drink. She shook her head ‘no.’

“I know this must be a difficult day for you, Frank,” Ray said settling back into his seat. “You might be in some need of counsel.”

“Why’s that?” Frank asked.

“What has happened to Natalia shouldn’t rest on your shoulders,” Ray continued.

“This is my responsibility, Father,” Frank said as he shifted forward. “This is the mother of my child and an innocent woman.”

“Natalia chose this path,” Ray interrupted him. “You tried to help her before, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“So you’re saying I should just give up on her?” Frank asked in confusion.

“No,” Ray responded. “But you can’t be held responsible for today’s events.”

Anna’s eyes stayed fixed on Father Ray during his discussion with Frank. There was something undeniably smug about his demeanor that made her itch. She had seen this cockiness in interrogations before. It was nothing that a swift kick to the groin couldn’t eliminate. Staring at his white and black collar, she understood that this time it was unfortunately not an option.

“Where is she?” Anna asked Ray point blank.

“What do you mean?” Ray questioned back immediately.

“You’ve seen her today, haven’t you?” she asked. “I can tell. You’ve seen her.”

"My meetings are confidential," Ray answered. He shifted his eyes back to Frank. "You know that."

"Not this time," Frank responded. "There are serious consequences here."

"I know," Ray said. "Her sins today have put her in a very precarious position. The church has a specific stance on this and yet she continues to push the limits of our compassion."

Anna's jaw shifted as she studied Father Ray's behavior. The man was no doubt infuriating with his painfully skewed view of the world, but he wasn't downright stupid. She glanced over at Frank who seemed at his wits end with the man.

"Where is Natalia?" Anna asked Ray. "She didn't show at her wedding today, and if you know something about her disappearance, you need to cooperate starting right now."

Ray attempted to stifle a smile as he set his tea cup back on the table in front of him. Anna noticed the gesture and was quickly reconsidering that kick to the groin.

"I wasn't aware that Natalia had left," he said looking back up at Anna.

"We're not saying she did," Anna responded placing her linked hands in her lap. Frank stood up from the couch. "She may have been taken," Anna continued. Frank looked down at her and shook his head ever so slightly. He didn't want to give out any information that would put the people responsible ahead of the game.

"Are you accusing me?" Ray asked feeling a bit threatened by Frank towering in front of him.

"No," Frank answered. "We just want to know if you spoke with her today and if you have any information that can help with our investigation."

"There's a chance you may have been the last person to see her," Anna said prodding the priest.

"I stopped by her house earlier," Ray admitted. "I wanted to give Natalia an opportunity to assess her decisions."

"Did she call you for confession?" Anna asked. Ray shook his head.

"I went over there uninvited. I figured she would need some counseling and direction on this day," he said.

“What did you two talk about?” Frank questioned.

“Not much,” Ray responded. “She was busy getting ready for the wedding. She offered me some tea. We spoke about her volunteer work as she prepared it. Then I began to question her about her intentions with Olivia. Let’s just say that she wasn’t terribly receptive. We had a few brief words and then she asked me to leave.”

“Other than your confrontation, did she seem upset or scared about anything?” Anna asked sitting forward.

“No,” Ray answered. “She was a little concerned about her sister being late, but that’s all.”

“Did you notice any suspicious cars or people anywhere near the vicinity of the farmhouse?” Frank asked.

Ray shook his head again. “No. It was a quiet day. I don’t recall seeing anyone on my drive out there,” he said.

“Okay,” Frank said as he motioned to Anna that they were done. “If you hear from her or remember anything that could be of any help, please call me immediately,” Frank told Ray.

Anna stood up and nodded to him. He nodded back. She still didn’t care for his demeanor but couldn’t find any signs that he was lying to them. She thought he had actually been surprisingly cooperative once the misunderstanding was cleared up. Anna walked over and stood next to Frank.

“I will pray for her,” Ray said drawing their attention back to him. “I will pray for her to find the right path. This turmoil in her life should be a sign that she’s chosen the wrong one. We can help guide her back.”

Frank just stared at Father Ray unsure of how to respond to his deeply inappropriate timing.

“Well, there goes my ‘thank you,’” Anna said under her breath as she turned and walked out the door.

Natalia’s head lolled to the right as she struggled to focus her eyes. Her surroundings had changed but the confusion and nausea remained. She was sitting on a cold cement floor in the corner of a room. Her back was propped up against a cinderblock wall behind her. Her hands felt slightly numb and frozen. It was a sad improvement from not being able to feel

them at all before. She attempted to rub her hands together for warmth when she noticed her wrists had been bound in front of her.

It was a small frustration in comparison to all the horrors of the day, but the futility of the moment made her whimper. She wanted to be unconscious. She wanted to escape. She kind of wanted a donut. None of her desires were of any use to her at the moment. Whatever drug coursed through her veins was rendering her completely powerless over herself. Her head lolled back to the left and came into contact with the wall. She winced at the sensation of the concrete against her temple.

“Look who's awake,” a high pitched voice rang out in front of her. Natalia squinted her eyes, willing them desperately to focus, but all she could make out was a fuzzy dark figure in the distance. “Can I get you something to drink? Coffee, tea... perhaps a horchata?” The words rolled off her kidnapper's tongue menacingly and then turned into a fit of laughter. Natalia heard a deeper voice rumble followed by another laugh. She cast her eyes towards the dark corner of the room searching for another figure.

“You thought you could just leave?” the higher voice asked as it approached her. The single light source in the small, windowless room hung high above. As the figure hovered over her, she could see a glow emitting around the kidnapper's head but the face was still buried in shadow. “Always just running away. No idea what you left behind,” the voice continued. “I had to make up for your mistakes.” There was a familiar shake in her kidnapper's voice.

“Leyla,” Natalia attempted to say. Her voice was muffled and strange. Natalia clenched her jaw biting at the rag that been tied around her mouth and rested between her teeth. “Ley...” she tried again.

“No, no, no,” the figure approached her. “It's still my turn. You see, you've already had all your turns. You took them all at once. Everything is about you, isn't it Natalia? It always has been. When you left on your terms to live your life, who do you think they punished?” The figure swayed a little and threw her head back. “You know Papa. Someone had to pay.”

“Leyla, please,” Natalia cried out through the gag.

“No!” Leyla called back again. “You see, Natalia, it worked out for the better. Because I didn't make your mistakes. I didn't repeat your sins. Papa showed me the righteous path. He saved me.” Leyla approached Natalia and kneeled. She placed a hand on her cheek softly. “And now I'm going to save you.”

Natalia sat frozen in place by her sister's words. Her touch felt cold and distant. She flinched at the feel the clammy skin against her face.

“But where do we start?” Leyla asked standing abruptly. “So many sins and so little time. It was bad enough that you were a whore so young, but now you want to offend God and his followers by betrothing yourself to a woman. This, of course, only after you’ve collected a sufficient number of bastard children.” Leyla shook her head disapprovingly. “You’ve done so much wrong we’re past the point of saving. We just need to wipe the slate clean.”

Leyla’s eyes danced as they studied Natalia. She offered a crooked smile.

“So let’s just go back to where you went wrong the very first time,” Leyla whispered.

“Have you met Marco?” Leyla turned and called out, “Marco!” Natalia heard a shuffle from the corner she was watching before. A large figure made its way towards them.

“Polo,” the deep voice answered as the man wrapped his arms around Leyla’s waist from behind. He rested his head on her shoulder and gazed down at Natalia.

“Surprise,” Leyla chirped out.

Natalia felt her heart race and her stomach twist painfully. The world tilted and turned as she stared at the man before her. She released soft whimpers from her trembling lips. Then her stomach lurched again. Leyla moved quickly down releasing the rag from her mouth. Natalia leaned over to her right coughing and spitting to her side. It quelled the nausea for a brief moment. Then she felt her eyes water and her body ready, but the bile remained in her stomach. She sat back against the wall taking in deep breaths. Natalia raised her joined hands and wiped at her mouth.

“That happy to see me?” the man asked shaking his head.

“Nicky?” Natalia cried softly.

“Hi,” he responded with a smile and a small wave. He then tightened his grip on Leyla and glanced sideways at her. “This one turned out nice, hey?” Nicky kissed Leyla on the cheek and released his grip giving her a quick slap to the bottom. Leyla yelped in response and swatted at him. Nicky moved around her and squatted down in front of Natalia.

“Long time, no see,” Nicky said to her softly. “Well, I’ve been seeing.”

“You’re alive,” Natalia whispered in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Nicky said flatly. “I see the drugs are making you a little slow on the uptake.” He shifted sitting down in front of Natalia. “I’ll just cut to the chase then. You’re broken and I’m

here to fix you.” Nicky spoke the words slowly and deliberately as though he was speaking to a child.

“Your family warned me about you, but I fell for it anyway. I fell for the good little church girl just trying to do her best. You lured me into a marriage that I thought would correct all your mistakes. But it was just a set up, wasn’t it?” Nicky rubbed at his neck and looked away. “You tried to whore me out to the first bidder. And when that didn’t work, you ripped my heart out of my chest and gave it to her!”

“Nicky, it wasn’t like that,” Natalia pleaded.

“You’re damn right it wasn’t!” he yelled back. “Did you think I was going to fall for that? That I was going to be another pawn in one of your sinful traps? I mean, what the hell, Natalia! You were just so hard up to help her, weren’t you? You were so worried that you’d miss your turn on the town bike. And now you’ve manipulated her into sharing a home and a bed. You’ve stolen her business and you have her raising another man’s child. When is it going to stop, Natalia?”

“No,” Natalia cried out covering her face.

“Now you want her hand in marriage,” he continued. “You want to condemn her to an eternal hell just like you tried to do to me! I see you, Natalia. I see you for who you really are.” Nicky’s hands suddenly wrapped around Natalia’s wrists pulling them forcefully to his chest. He scoffed at her soft cries as she struggled to pull away. “Come on my little whor...chata,” Nicky taunted her. Natalia heard the high laugh burst out behind him. He turned to glance back at Leyla. “That joke just doesn’t get old, does it?” Nicky’s grip grew stronger as she struggled. Her strength was fading quickly. This was too much for her to handle. The tears streamed down her face blurring her vision.

“Stay away from my mother!” Natalia heard Ava scream out of nowhere. A sudden blinding white light and piercing sound filled Natalia’s head. She lost all connection for a moment and then the world softly faded back into view. The room was silent. There was no Ava or Leyla or Nicky.

Natalia heard solid footsteps approaching her, but couldn’t see who they were from.

“I have to applaud your efforts,” she heard a male voice echo. “But your threats were a waste of time.” The footsteps came to a stop. She could finally see a pair of legs before her, but she was too exhausted to raise her head. “You were the only one to figure me out. Perhaps we’re kindred spirits.” The man reached down and tilted her chin up to look at him. Natalia recognized him immediately. “But I will have my way with Olivia again whether you like it or not,” Jeffrey commented. “This time... this time I think she will like it.”

ACT 3

Frank pushed open the door to Company and scanned the room. All the tables had been cleaned and the chairs put up. There was a bit of an eerie quietness around the restaurant.

“Hello,” Frank called out into the empty space as he took a few tentative steps.

He heard a noise from the back and turned just as Marina made her way through the dividing door.

“Hey, Daddy,” she responded as she came over to give him a hug. “How are you holding up?”

“Hey,” he replied as he hugged her. He took a seat at the bar as she moved behind the counter. Marina searched his face while she started wiping down the condiment containers in front of her.

“It’s been a rough day,” Frank admitted as he rubbed at his forehead.

“So, no news yet on Natalia?” she asked.

Frank just shook his head ‘no.’ The frustration of the day was pushing him to his limits. He felt the tears prick at the corner of his eyes. Marina noticed the shift in his demeanor and placed her hand on top of his.

“I’m sorry,” Marina offered. “Everything has been so crazy. I know I haven’t helped in that department. But you’ll fix it. I know you will.” She watched her father swallow back the emotion that was so close to the surface. Frank shook it off and then placed his other hand on top of their joined ones.

“Let me fix you a sandwich,” Marina said suddenly, pulling away.

“Marina,” Frank called stopping her. “I hate the thought of even asking you to do this, but...” Frank’s voice trailed off as he watched his daughter already readying herself for a fight. “It’s just that the evidence may indicate that Edmund could be involved. Considering everything that’s been going on at the department and what you’ve told me, we might need to bring you down for questioning.”

“Is that really necessary?” Marina asked obviously annoyed by the implications.

"We just need to solve this as quickly as possible," Frank answered shaking his head. "I need to show that we're leaving no stone unturned."

Marina stared at Frank for a moment and then looked away placing her hands on her hips.

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll do this for you." Frank nodded in thanks.

Marina headed in the back to make her father's dinner. Frank watched her disappear behind the door and then let out a breath. Sometimes dealing with her felt like trapping a wild animal. He knew his daughter was a good person, but she had a temper that burned.

Frank's phone let out a sharp ring that startled him. He pulled it from his belt and placed it to his ear.

"Chief Cooper," Frank spoke into the phone.

"Hey, it's me," Eleni said. "I need you to come down to the lab. We have some test results in from what we pulled from the farmhouse today."

"Okay," Frank responded. "Have you spoken with Anna yet?"

"I'm calling her next," Eleni reassured.

"Good. I'm headed your way," he told her and then hung up his phone.

Frank stood up from his seat and made his way into the back. He saw Marina standing at the food prep counter putting the finishing touches on his sandwich.

"I'm going to need to get it to go," he said as he approached her.

"Sure," Marina responded and pulled some plastic wrap from the top shelf. "Is everything okay?"

"Eleni called. We have some evidence to go over," he said quickly. "Can you meet me at the station tomorrow morning?"

Marina handed him the wrapped sandwich and nodded with a smile.

"Thanks sweetheart," Frank said as he took it from her. He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and headed out.

Eleni stared at the results on the computer screen in front of her. What she was able to ascertain from the evidence review was still yet to produce any solid leads in her mind. She thought it best to pull Frank and Anna in to get their read on it. She knew this was bothering Frank deeply, not only from his obvious connection to Natalia, but from his behavior since the investigation started.

"Knock, knock," Anna said as she stepped into the lab. "What've we got?"

"Not much," Eleni responded as she pulled the glasses from her face. "But I think it's enough to help us paint a picture of what happened today."

"Well, we spoke with Father Ray and confirmed that he was at the house," Anna stated. "I don't know if that's any help."

"We did pull his prints off a tea cup," Eleni replied. Then she pushed on the desktop and stood up.

"His prints are in the system?" Anna asked.

"Ray Santos has an interesting background," Eleni said as she leaned against the desk and crossed her arms. "His family is very heavily involved in the mafia. He's done his best to stay out of it, but family ties are hard to break... even with God on your side."

"I guess that's one way to explain his arrogance. Sounds like it's genetic," Anna commented.

"Hey ladies," Frank said as he entered the room. "Sorry I'm late." He approached the women and stood next to Anna. He and Eleni eyed each other for a moment. Anna watched the exchange closely.

"What did I miss?" he asked breaking the stare.

"Part of your sandwich," Eleni replied as she pulled a small piece of lettuce off Frank's jacket. He blushed a little wiping at his lapels.

"So..." Anna said attempting to move the awkward exchange along.

"So," Eleni picked up. "The big star of the day is phenobarbital, also known as Luminal. It's a sedative and hypnotic used to control seizures. We found traces of it in the blood sample we pulled from the door handle." Eleni turned pulling a few papers from her desk. "The specific type was phenobarbital sodium and my best guess is that it was injected."

"Why do you say that?" Anna asked.

“Mostly because of the ratio of blood to phenobarbital,” Eleni explained. “If that percentage had been in Natalia’s bloodstream, I think we would have a body on our hands. We also weren’t able to identify any specific evidence that there was much of a struggle or any other spots of blood indicating a cut. I think the sample we pulled was most likely off a used syringe or something similar.”

“So there’s strong evidence that Natalia was drugged,” Frank stated.

“Yes,” Eleni confirmed. “But that’s not all...”

“Reebok!” Buchard exclaimed with his hands in the air as he entered the room.

The three turned their heads to look in his direction. Buchard smiled at them in victory.

“Have you found Ms. Rivera yet?” Eleni asked. His smile dropped immediately. “So put your hands down, Buchard,” Eleni stated and turned back to Frank and Anna.

“Sorry,” she continued. “As I was saying, we found a few other things. About 8 feet outside the rear door of the house we found some tire markings and footprints. Unfortunately, the tire treads matched up to a pretty common tire type so they won’t give us much to go on.” Eleni sat back down at her computer and pulled up a few photos from the crime scene. “The footprints were a little more interesting. Other than being made by Reebok, as Buchard so eloquently stated, we found the displacement to be somewhat unique.”

“Meaning?” Frank asked.

“The shoe size is relatively small, but the impressions were quite deep. So either we’re dealing with a small, heavyset person or someone small carrying something heavy,” Eleni explained.

Frank turned to Anna eyeing her for a moment. “How tall is your father?” he asked.

“Around 5’6,” Anna replied. Frank nodded his head knowingly at her. “This isn’t him,” she continued. “He doesn’t need to use pheno... whatever to kidnap someone.”

“Maybe this time, he did,” Frank responded. Anna rolled her eyes at him.

“How easy is it to get a hold of this stuff anyway?” she asked Eleni.

“Fairly easy,” Eleni answered. “It’s a common drug. It would be accessible in hospitals or even veterinary clinics.”

“So this is pretty much as useless as the tire tracks?” Frank asked. Eleni narrowed her eyes at him unhappy with his implication and tone. “I apologize,” he backpedaled quickly. “I’m just tired.”

“It’s okay,” Eleni said as she relaxed into her chair. “Both of you should go get some rest. It’s been a long day.”

Anna ran her hand up through her hair and offered a closed mouthed smile. “See you tomorrow,” she said as she turned on her heels and headed out the door.

Frank watched her leave and then turned back to Eleni. “You did a good job,” he said sheepishly. Eleni stood again and did a quick scan of the room to make sure they were alone. She placed her hands on his shoulders. “A great job,” Frank continued as Eleni leaned in and gave him a quick kiss.

“We’ll see about that, Chief,” she responded.

Farley’s was busier than expected, especially for this time of night. Jonathan scanned the room as he held the door open for Leyla. She had called him unexpectedly this afternoon, mostly just needing a shoulder to lean on. He suggested that he take her to dinner. She hesitantly agreed expressing that she wouldn’t be much fun right now. They had a casual meal and then decided it might be nice to go get a drink and blow off some steam. Both of them were hoping that the town bar would have cleared out a little by now.

Jonathan watched Leyla’s expression drop as she took in the full room. “We can go somewhere else if you like,” he suggested.

Leyla smiled at him appreciatively. It made her feel safe that he was so aware of her emotions.

“No, it’s okay,” she finally responded. “It should be fine.”

Jonathan reluctantly agreed as she passed by him. He followed her into the main room. Just as he cleared the threshold, she grabbed his hand and pulled him along behind her.

“Let’s go play pool,” she insisted making her way.

Leyla tried to stay out of sight choosing a small table in the back corner behind the pool table. She watched Jonathan head up to the bar to get some drinks. It seemed as though he couldn’t make it two feet without someone stopping to hug him or catch up. She knew

small towns had their reputations for everyone being in everyone else's business, but this place was just ridiculous. She was starting to miss the anonymity of the city.

"Here we go," Jonathan said as he placed two beers on the table. Leyla reached out and took a swig from one as she stared straight forward. Jonathan watched her closely, a little scared to say anything. In his brief absence, she seemed to have developed this shield around herself. He knew tonight would be a rollercoaster of emotions. He just wanted to give her a chance to escape the horrors of the day.

Leyla ran through her drink fairly quickly as she watched the room in front of them. Jonathan volunteered to go grab them some more, hoping the second beer would help her loosen up. When he returned, she was standing by the pool table.

"So you boys gonna give up the table any time soon?" she asked trying her best to stay polite. One of the men eyed her and then smirked.

"I don't have any big plans to," the man responded.

Jonathan approached Leyla's side brushing up against her to let her know he was there. He handed Leyla her drink as he surveyed the situation.

"Perhaps we can play in," Leyla suggested.

"You going to make it worth my time?" the man asked.

Leyla smiled and then looked up at Jonathan.

Olivia turned in her bed, patting firmly at the pillow beneath her head. She didn't know why she even bothered trying to sleep. In a moment of exhaustion, she had convinced herself to at least change into her pajamas and lay down. After flipping through the channels over and over again, she gave up and turned it off. She felt better in the silence anyway.

She caught sight of the familiar picture of her family sitting on her night stand. "How am I back here again?" she asked herself as her eyes drifted over Natalia's face. This was all too much. It was like a nightmare repeating itself. Olivia knew she was trapped in her own personal version of hell; the absolute hopelessness of it all consuming her.

Her head fell back against the pillows as the tears started. She held herself, attempting to quell the sobs rising from her chest. "Not again," she whispered and then covered her mouth.

A sudden wail pulled Olivia up from the bed. She moved quickly over to the crib. Francesca was sitting up staring at her. Olivia scooped her up into her arms and held her close.

"Ay, Mami," Francesca said softly. Olivia looked into Francesca's eyes, watching her brow scrunch in the same familiar way Natalia's did when she was confused.

"I know, baby," Olivia said giving her a kiss. "I miss her, too."

Olivia carried her over to the couch and sat down. She lay back against the cushions and rested Francesca against her chest.

It was going to be a long night for both of them.

"Hot damn!" Leyla's new pool buddy yelled out. "Where did you learn to shoot like that?"

"It's a family secret," Leyla replied stretching her arms over the table to set up another shot. Jonathan watched her with a smile. Maybe this was a good idea.

"I brought shots," their other new pool friend said as he approached the table. Leyla struck the cue ball hard landing the 8 ball in the pocket.

"I think that deserves one," she said as she grabbed a glass and tossed back the liquor.

"Whoa, Leyla," Jonathan called out moving to her quickly. "I don't know if we should, you know, mix it up like that."

"It's fine," she responded rolling her eyes. He watched her with concern. "Look," she whispered moving closer to him. "This is the most fun I've had in a while. It's really helping me take my mind off things. I feel like my old self again."

Leyla pouted at him and batted her eyes. Jonathan started to laugh in response when he was pulled down firmly into a kiss. Leyla took her time, drawing him in closer and licking at his bottom lip. When she released him, Jonathan was a bit disheveled.

Leyla turned away eyeing her new friends. "Okay," she said. "Who's my next victim?"

Jonathan watched Leyla closely as she flirted and chatted her way through the next few games and the next few shots. He was trying to be the responsible one in the situation, but Leyla was proving to be quite the charmer.

"I'm going to go to the bathroom," Leyla said, handing Jonathan her pool stick at the end of their third game. "I'll be right back." She gave him a quick kiss and then made her way to the back of the bar.

Leyla was a bit drunker than she originally intended, but right now it felt perfect. She needed the escape. It was bad enough that the whole town insisted on blaming her for her sister's disappearance, but what really hurt is that she agreed with them. Although she knew better, she felt the burden of Natalia's absence throughout her childhood. What if somehow it had been her fault? What if her inability to be there for Natalia back then was the same reason things turned out the way they had today?

She stood at the bathroom sink washing her hands, and then splashed some water on her face. She watched herself in the mirror for a moment as she patted her face dry with a paper towel. Then she took a deep breath and headed back out.

Leyla heard her name called out as she passed the bar on the way back to the pool table. She unfortunately recognized the voice.

"Frank," she responded turning to face him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"What does it look like?" she questioned back not in the mood for his questions.

"Olivia is looking for you," he said. "I called her earlier to update her on the investigation. She was concerned because she hadn't heard from you."

"You want to take me downtown for that, too?" Leyla laughed shaking her head.

"Leyla," Frank said as he slid off the bar stool. He placed his hand on her shoulder, rubbing it gently. "I just want to make sure you're okay."

"What is it with you?" she asked, moving closer. "You just can't keep your hands off me, can you?"

Frank removed his hand, holding it up. "I didn't mean it like that," he said attempting to move back from her as she advanced. He was trapped against his bar stool.

“Oh, come on, Papi,” Leyla slurred out as she grabbed his shirt. “You know what they say? Once you go Rivera, you never go back.”

“Hey there, Leyla,” Anna said as she draped her arm across her shoulders. Frank’s face was frozen in fear over what had just transpired. Anna had caught the whole scene from the corner of the room and came over to help. She couldn’t suppress her smile at Frank’s obvious discomfort.

“Are you having a good time tonight?” Anna asked hoping to pull her attention away from Frank. She did admire the girl’s tenacity in messing with the man.

“Yes, yes I am,” Leyla answered, moving her arms around Anna’s waist. She let her head fall against Anna’s shoulder as she slouched into her arms. Perhaps Leyla was a little drunker than Anna realized. “You smell good,” Leyla slurred out, burying her nose into Anna’s neck. “Do you wear men’s cologne?”

“We should probably get you home,” Anna said, suddenly feeling a little awkward herself.

“Oh, I see,” Leyla responded lifting her head with a smile. “I like where you’re going with this. Who hasn’t had an Asian lady fantasy? Am I right?” she said, nudging Frank in the ribs.

Anna looked up to see Jonathan staring at the unfortunate trio.

“I’ll take it from here,” he said as he pulled Leyla into his arms. “Sorry,” he muttered to Anna and Frank as he wrapped her arm around his shoulders. “Come on, Leyla.”

Leyla made it to the end of the bar before she launched into protests about leaving. Jonathan closed his eyes in frustration. He partly blamed himself for taking this on tonight, but he couldn’t seem to shake his irritation at Leyla’s behavior.

ACT 4

Olivia stroked Francesca’s hair softly as she lay against her chest. She placed a kiss on her temple and hummed in a way she had heard Natalia sing to her before. She knew this had to be more confusing for Francesca than the rest of them. A soft noise kept buzzing in Olivia’s ear. She felt the vibrations like a bug moving around her head. The noise got louder and louder.

Olivia looked up to see Ava entering the room. She was carrying something in her arms. As Ava got closer, she realized it was Francesca. Olivia looked down quickly checking for where Francesca was before.

"That was Natalia on the phone," Ava stated as she walked across the room. "She'll be back soon."

Olivia stared at her for a moment confused and asked, "What?"

Olivia opened her eyes slowly taking in her surroundings. A noise from outside her door drew her awake. She wasn't even aware she had fallen asleep. She heard the noise again. It sounded like a light scratching on the door and muffled steps and voices. She shook her head to clear the thoughts of her dream.

Francesca was sound asleep lying on her. Olivia moved slowly to an upright position and then stood with her daughter in her arms. She went to her bedroom and placed her down gently in her crib.

Olivia walked over to the front door quietly and peered through the peep hole. She let out a breath and then opened the door slowly.

"Oh, hey there," Frank said as he fumbled with a box. Olivia brought her index finger to her lips.

"Shhh," she said. "Francesca is asleep. What are you doing out here?"

"I put together some things for you," he whispered holding up the box. She nodded for him to come inside. "I wasn't sure if you had everything you needed for the baby," he continued. "It's just some extra bottles, clothes, and toys."

"Well, thank you, that's very thoughtful," she said motioning to where he could put the box down. They stared at each other for a moment.

"I was just going to leave it, because I wasn't sure if you were up yet," Frank said putting his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah, well I didn't really sleep much," Olivia replied. "You want me to order some coffee up?"

"Nah. I need to get to the station," Frank answered. "How are you doing, Olivia?"

That was a bigger question than she was ready for. Olivia ran her hands through her hair and let out a breath. She plopped down on the couch behind her. Frank sat down next to her tentatively.

"It's hard," she finally said. "It's really hard not knowing." Frank nodded in agreement. "You know what's weird? I don't even want a drink. I don't want to eat bacon or lash out or fall back on any of my old vices. I just... I just want her back."

"I know," Frank said softly. "I want that, too." Olivia watched him as he stared ahead. "I loved Natalia. She was my friend before she was more to me."

"She's kind of hard not to love," Olivia said drawing his eyes over to her. Frank nodded again. "Believe me, I tried to not love her."

"I know," Frank said patting Olivia's hand.

She stared into the distance lost in thought of how hard she tried to fight them being together.

"I turned her down," Olivia said mostly to herself. Frank watched her closely. "Not the time after the retreat," Olivia continued looking forward. "It was after your wedding fell through. I finally told her I was in love with her and she told me she was in love with me. And then I told her that we could never be together."

"Why?" Frank asked.

"There would be too many problems for us," Olivia answered. "I didn't think she'd be able handle people's reaction to our relationship. I knew there was a problem with her religion. I told her we had to forget our feelings for each other and move on. We had to try to just be friends."

"What happened?" Frank questioned.

"The same thing that happened when I tried to get her to leave me alone after my heart surgery. She stayed persistent until I gave in to her love. What a pain in the ass," Olivia said with a sad smile.

Frank laughed lightly at her comment and put his head down for a moment. Then he stood.

"Alright, Olivia. Call me if you need anything," Frank said checking his pockets.

"Is there any chance we'll be able to get back in the house soon?" Olivia asked.

"I'll do my best to finish up and get my team out of there," he answered.

"Frank," Olivia said looking up at him. "Thank you for everything. Really."

"No problem," Frank responded. "We'll find her."

The tires crunched against the gravel as the dark sedan slowly made its way up the farmhouse driveway. Jeffrey scanned the area looking for any officers. Noticing that the area was all clear of life, he pulled the car to a stop. As he climbed out, the only sound he heard was the light tapping of the crime scene tape against the front door.

Even though he wasn't feeling very welcome in this town or especially in this home, he had to know. If there was any sign of Edmund, he had to find it. This would always be his responsibility. He just wished more people understood that.

Jeffrey made his way to the back of the house and walked around the marked off area careful not to disturb anything. He let out a sigh. It was never simple.

"Natalia, Natalia."

She heard a soft voice calling her name. Natalia struggled to open her eyes. She felt something against her mouth. Water spilled from the cup between her lips. It tasted sweet and very welcome. She lifted her head from against the wall and tilted it towards the cup.

"There you go," she heard the voice say.

"Olivia?" Natalia asked pulling back from the drink.

"Yes," the voice answered.

"Olivia, I had the worst dream," Natalia continued as she peeled her eyes open. A dark figure was crouched before her holding out the cup. "They took me away from you."

"It's okay," Olivia hummed. "You're right where you belong."

Natalia felt herself relax at the words. She wanted so badly to reach out and touch Olivia's face. As she stretched out her hands, she realized they were still bound together at the wrists. "Olivia?" Natalia questioned in confusion at her discovery.

“You said you wanted to do something different for our honeymoon,” Olivia answered low and deep.

She suddenly moved closer straddling Natalia's lap. Natalia took in a sharp breath at the friction of Olivia's thighs sliding against her own. Olivia lifted herself slightly and then ground down harder into Natalia. Her lips were right beside Natalia's ear, and she could feel the heat across her neck.

“You know, I'm all for following your heart, babe. But you follow your heart all the way to the altar. You run away. You pretend like it didn't happen,” Olivia whispered hoarsely.

Natalia let out a low grunt that was a mixture of excitement and confusion. She felt as though she was being picked up by the waves again. Her sensibilities were being tossed about. The sensation of Olivia moving in her lap overwhelmed her in so many ways. Yet she couldn't fight this needling feeling that she had experienced these words before.

“You commit to Frank. You commit to the family. You commit to me,” Olivia continued. Natalia let out a cry as she realized that these weren't Olivia's words at all. These were Buzz's words. And she was still there, trapped on that cold concrete floor.

Natalia rolled her head back against the wall overcome by the confusion, nausea, and fatigue. She just wanted the seemingly endless hallucinations to stop. She didn't know what to believe anymore. Her mind was working against her torturing her every second she stayed trapped in that barren room. She whimpered in exhaustion finally succumbing to the feeling of hopelessness. The tears fell like rain down her face. Her soft cries echoing against the walls.

“Stop it!” a voice screamed out.

Natalia flinched, shutting her eyes as tight as possible in an attempt to block the sound.

“I said 'stop it!'” the voice called out at her again.

“No!” Natalia yelled back unwilling and unable to stop her tears. She felt a cold hand grab her jaw and hold her head firmly up.

“You stop it,” the kidnapper said through clenched teeth. She went quiet for a moment listening to the heavy breathing of her tormentor. She felt the rag being pulled up around her mouth again.



“It’ll all work out,” the voice said softly. Natalia felt a hand stroke her cheek. “Saint Natalia will pay for everyone’s sins. He’ll decide what do with you when it’s done.”

Anna looked up from the two-way mirror in front of her to the security monitor in the top right corner of the room. She let out a sigh as she watched Frank come rushing through the door that led into the hallway outside. She quickly reached for the door handle hoping to cut Frank off before he burst into the adjoining interrogation room.

“Chief,” she called out sharply as she stepped out into the hall. Frank froze in place and turned his glare from the door to Anna.

“You want to tell me what the hell is going on here?” Frank demanded. He moved closer to her as he placed his hands on his hips.

“Yes,” Anna answered simply meeting his eyes. “Marina came in this morning looking for you...”

“And you just threw her into an interrogation room and gave her a polygraph?” Frank asked shaking his head disbelievingly.

“I did this for you,” Anna replied. “I wanted to remove any suspicion.”

“That’s no excuse for this,” Frank said forcefully. “You should have checked with me first.

“I thought you’d be in before her,” Anna defended.

“Did Marina agree to this?” Frank asked.

“Sorta,” Anna answered casually as she let out a breath and looked away.

“Sorta?” Frank questioned.

“I told her this would be a step in the right direction. You know, as far as us being lenient in other legal matters that concerned her,” Anna replied. Frank lifted his chin as he closed his eyes. This was going to be such a big mess. “Come on,” she continued as she opened the door.

Frank stepped into the dimly lit room tentatively. He glanced over at the two-way mirror and caught Marina staring right at him. His eyes stayed locked to hers for a moment until he reminded himself that she couldn’t see him through the mirror. Anna leaned over and adjusted the volume on the intercom so they could listen in

“Do you know the current location of Edmund Winslow?” the polygraph examiner asked.

“No,” Marina responded calmly.

“Did you assist Edmund Winslow in his plans to kidnap Natalia Rivera?”

“No.”

“Did you assist Edmund Winslow in capturing Natalia Rivera?”

“No.”

The interviewer stopped for a moment assessing the reading. He fidgeted with his glasses and then continued.

“Do you know if Edmund Winslow intends to murder Natalia Rivera?”

Marina shook her head slightly. The interviewer looked up from his computer.

“Ms. Cooper, please answer the question verbally.”

Marina eyed him closely and responded firmly, “No.”

“Call me when this is over,” Frank said quickly drawing Anna's attention from the window. He was out of the door before she had a chance to reply. Anna shook her head and sighed.

Anna could tell the questioning was winding down. The examiner was asking a few control questions and noting down Marina's level of response.

“Okay,” the examiner said standing. He walked to the other side of the table and removed the measuring device from Marina's arm and index finger. “They'll send an officer for you when you're ready to be moved.” She nodded almost imperceptibly and then crossed her arms.

Anna turned off the intercom and stepped out into the hall.

“Lorenzo,” Anna greeted the examiner as he closed the door to the interrogation room behind him.

“Li,” he responded back. “Do you want to go over it now or wait for the Chief?”

Anna moved her hands to her hips. “I'm going to play it safe with this one and wait,” she said and nodded for Lorenzo to follow her. They walked in silence out to Chief Cooper's office.

Anna knocked softly on the door. She could hear Frank inside on the phone.

“I don't care,” she heard him say into the handset. “If you're done, get it cleaned up and get out of there. It's been hard enough on the family without them being kicked out of their own home, too. Call me when it's done.”

Frank looked up at his door as he hung up the phone. He motioned with his hand for them to come in.

“So what does it look like?” Frank asked, shifting his papers nervously.

Lorenzo was sitting in a chair in front of Frank's desk, holding tightly onto his briefcase. He looked back at Anna, who was standing behind him. She nodded for him to speak as she closed the office door.

“She's clear,” Lorenzo said flatly. “Her blood pressure is a little high, but it's consistent.”

Frank nodded.

"There were no abnormalities, so I would have to conclude that she's being honest," Lorenzo said.

"She's always been honest with me," Frank replied. "Even when she was involved with Edmund, she owned up to it. That's why this is not okay."

Anna leaned back against the wall and fought to not roll her eyes at the impending speech.

"You're not going to tell Chief Andros, are you?" Lorenzo asked. Frank just stared blankly at him. "No offense, but she's scarier than you." Frank's jaw worked as he tried to suppress a smile.

"Let's just assume that Detective Li coerced you into this," Frank answered. "And you won't let it happen again."

"Understood," Lorenzo answered quickly.

"You can go," Frank dismissed him. He got up and headed towards the door. Lorenzo gave Anna a quick nod and then slid out. Anna closed the door again behind him.

"What did you think you were doing?" Frank asked her as he stood up from his chair.

"Compiling evidence," Anna answered.

Frank grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and pulled it on. He picked up his cell phone from his desk and dropped it in his pocket.

"You stay here," he told Anna. "I'm going to release Marina. I don't want you anywhere near her."

Frank strode past Anna out of his office. He entered the hallway to the interrogation room and stepped purposefully towards her door. He hesitated as he grabbed the handle and took in a deep breath.

"Marina," he said as he stepped into the room. She didn't say a word. She just sat still in her chair staring forward with her arms crossed.

"Marina, I'm so..." Frank started.

"Don't," she cut him off. "I thought you trusted me." She stood up suddenly and eyed him. "I'm your daughter."

"I know," Frank responded. "There was just a misunderstanding. After what happened with Edmund, we can't take any chances."

"Maybe that's the problem with us," she said looking away. "Maybe I need you just for once to take a chance on me. To trust me to help you. I'm not a helpless child. I'm not a burden. I'm your family."

"Marina," Frank pleaded.

"We'll talk later," she said pushing past him and heading out the door.

Beth looked down and adjusted the alignment of her pencil. She pushed at the pink eraser with her fingertip, working to make it perfectly parallel with her notepad. She lowered her hands in her lap for a moment and then nudged at it again.

"A little anxious?" Mel asked as she glanced over at her partner.

Beth let out a breath and turned to look back at the court room pews behind her. There were a few more people here than she was hoping. She turned back around and pinched the pencil between her index finger and thumb adjusting its placement again.

Mel reached out and placed her hand on Beth's forearm. "You're going to be fine," she offered.

"Sorry," Beth whispered. "This is just like a nightmare scenario. I've got public speaking, my first court case, and I'm the judge's first exposure to our new law firm. It's just a lot."

Mel watched her friend closely considering the stress she was under. She knew Beth would have no problem once things got started, but that certainly didn't help with first time jitters.

"Well, look at it this way," Mel said meeting Beth's eyes. "At least you're not on trial for murder."

Beth let out a small nervous laugh and then smiled at Mel.

"Speaking of which," Mel said, turning her attention to the double doors that led into the courtroom.

Dinah was being led in by an officer. She had a navy pant suit on and her hair and makeup were tastefully done. The officer took her over to the defense.

She hugged Mel and then Beth. Dinah took a seat next to them and then glanced over at the prosecution.

"You ready?" Dinah leaned over and quietly asked Beth.

"Yes," Beth answered. "I'm a little nervous."

"Don't worry, you'll be fine," Dinah offered reassuringly. "No one's accusing you of murder."

Beth winced in response to Dinah's words. "Mel already beat you to that joke," she said.

"Figures," Dinah responded leaning back a little in her chair. "She always was too smart for her own good." Mel smirked in response and then looked back at Beth.

"All rise," the bailiff called out drawing their attention to the front of the courtroom. "The Honorable David Grayson presiding."

Beth watched as the judge made his way slowly up the steps to his seat. His reading glasses sat on top of his head and he was holding a stack of folders under his left arm. She always wondered why judges looked like disheveled scientists that had been interrupted half way through a creation to come look at something real quick.

Perhaps that was the trick of it. Maybe these proceedings were just a bit of science. She just had to get the chemistry right.

"Be seated, please," Judge Grayson called out. "Defense, you may begin your opening statement."

Beth took a deep breath and placed her hands on the desk in front of her. She glanced at her notes quickly and stood up.

"Here we go," she muttered under her breath as she stepped out from behind the desk.

Olivia glanced in the rear view mirror to check on her girls sitting in the back seat. Emma had her hand dangling over the side of her baby sister's car seat. Francesca lightly held on to Emma's finger. As soon as she appeared disinterested, Emma would pull away and

wiggle her fingers. Francesca would smile and grasp for them again. Olivia smiled lightly in response and then refocused her eyes on the road.

The sun was setting behind them as she drove her family slowly out to the farmhouse. The day had whisked by quickly without much action. Everybody was being very quiet and calm. The shock of Natalia's disappearance left the family somewhat numb.

Frank had called while they were having an early dinner to let them know it was okay to go back to the house. Olivia struggled with the decision briefly, but then decided they would all be better off in their home.

Olivia noted the dark SUVs that sat at the far end of the property as she entered the driveway. Phillip had called her earlier letting her know that he had set up an enhanced security detail for the house. Olivia wanted to argue with him, but she couldn't. She couldn't muster much of anything today. She just simply went through the motions.

Emma helped her mom unload Francesca and their things from the car. Their interactions were mostly silent. Emma's recent defiant behavior had calmed considerably. Olivia knew that Emma was taking cues from her. It hurt to see her own depression reflected in her daughter's eyes.

Once they got inside the house, Emma quickly made her way up to her room. Olivia adjusted Francesca on her hip and paused for a moment to survey the otherwise empty kitchen. Natalia had made this the heart of their home and now it felt cold and abandoned.

Olivia took Francesca upstairs to change her diaper and dress her for bed. She settled into the rocking chair and fed Francesca a bottle. Francesca went to sleep without too much protest. Olivia laid her down and stepped quietly out of the room. As she closed the door softly behind her, she noticed Emma's bedroom light on.

Olivia went back downstairs and quickly made some hot chocolate. It felt strangely like a peace offering, but Olivia couldn't pinpoint the battle she was fighting. She made her way back up the stairs and knocked on Emma's bedroom door.

"Come in," Emma answered softly.

Olivia turned the handle and pushed at the door, revealing the dimly lit room. Emma was sitting on her bed, reading a book. The only light on was a lamp on her nightstand.

"I brought some hot chocolate," Olivia said holding up the cup. She offered her daughter a closed mouthed smile.

Emma reached out her hands and took the cup. Olivia made her way around to the other side of the bed and took a seat. She watched Emma blow lightly across the top of the drink and take a sip. Then she rested the cup on top of the book in her lap.

"You okay, Jellybean?" Olivia asked, reaching out to brush a strand of hair back from Emma's face.

Emma nodded her head lightly.

"I know this is hard," Olivia said. "I want you to know it's okay to feel sad or upset." Emma continued to stare at the cup as her mother spoke. "And I know I've been really distracted. But you can always talk to me about anything. You should never be afraid to tell me how you're feeling."

"Mom," Emma whispered. She paused for a moment and then met Olivia's eyes with her own. She didn't have words for what she felt. She just knew that if anyone hurt her Ma, she would use everything Anna had taught her on them.

"What is it, sweetie?" Olivia asked, noticing her daughter's hesitation.

"Your hot chocolate isn't as good as Natalia's," Emma finally said, holding it up.

Olivia wrapped her hands around the cup and took a sip. She stared down into it.

"You're right. This hot chocolate sucks," Olivia stated. Emma's brief laugh filled the room as Olivia turned and smiled at her. "Don't tell your Ma I said that word."

Olivia set the cup on the nightstand and slid down to rest her head against the headboard.

"Come here," she said to Emma, pulling her daughter into her arms. "I want to tell you something."

"What's that?" Emma asked as she settled by her mother's side.

"A couple years ago, after we moved into the farmhouse, I was in the kitchen with your Ma. I was supervising her dish stacking. You know how she needs some guidance in that department," Olivia said and looked down at her daughter. Emma nodded her head in agreement. "I was telling her about how we went down to the pond to feed the ducks and our clothes got all muddy. Do you remember that?"

"Yeah, you slipped and fell when the mother duck quacked at you," Emma recalled.

“Thanks for the reminder,” Olivia responded. “Anyway, Natalia and I were talking about how much you loved it here and how well you were adjusting. And you know what she said about you?”

Emma shook her head ‘no.’

“She said, ‘I can’t imagine this house without her.’”

The sum of Natalia’s previously spoken words resonated in Olivia’s head causing her to take pause. What would this house be without Natalia? What would her life be without Natalia? This wasn’t just some surprise pregnancy or unfortunate life-threatening surgery. Natalia had become her soul. There was no convenient transplant to replace everything that Natalia was to her.

There was a chance that she was gone forever; that someone had stolen her life. She hadn’t thought of that possibility yet. Olivia was convinced that if Natalia left this world that the very second it happened she would feel it in her chest. She knew Natalia had to be somewhere fighting and persisting. Olivia closed her eyes for a moment to hold back the tears.

“Do you think she’s hurt, Mommy?” Emma asked as she raised her head up.

“I don’t know,” Olivia responded honestly.

Emma placed her head back down on her mother’s chest.

“Is it okay if I sleep here tonight?” Olivia asked.

“Can we keep the light on?” Emma questioned back.

Olivia simply nodded as she squeezed Emma tighter.

The End.

The Path of the Night

by ocean gazer

“One may not reach the dawn save by the path of the night.” Kahlil Gibran

PROLOGUE

January 4th

Anna shut the door of the observation room behind her and shook her head. From the way Frank and Eleni were huddled together nervously, watching their daughter through the one-way glass of the interrogation room, a person might think Marina was about to be hauled off to death row or something. Given the way things were handled in Springfield, it was unlikely the woman would ever even set foot in jail – especially considering that she was the police chief’s daughter.

She rolled her eyes and then squared her shoulders, preparing herself for the task ahead. It wasn’t the interrogation itself she was concerned about; it was the idea of trying to conduct it with the baleful eyes of her chief on her that was causing her stress.

Frank had protested the idea of bringing Marina in again for questioning – first arguing that she had been cleared as an Edmund-accomplice-cum-suspect, and then complaining that it would take time away from the work of finding Natalia. Anna hadn’t disagreed with him on either count, since he was actually correct. She’d simply pointed out that they couldn’t put aside every other case just to focus on Natalia, and reminded him that they were investigating Marina. Eleni had backed her up on that. Then Anna had brought out her trump card – even if Marina didn’t know what Edmund was up to or where he was now, she might still have some knowledge, based on what he’d done in the past, which would prove useful.

With a soft sigh, she opened the door to the interrogation room and stepped inside, closing the door behind her and then taking a seat across the table from Marina. The younger woman glared at her. Anna folded her hands on the table top and regarded her for a long moment, just waiting.

As she expected, Marina couldn’t contain an outburst. “I don’t know why you brought me here. I’ve already taken your stupid lie detector test; you already know I’m not helping Edmund. I can’t lead you to him, and I can’t tell you where Natalia Rivera is.”

Anna leaned forward slightly. “I know that. That’s not why you’re here. Marina, we know you helped DeSilva tamper with evidence on dozens of cases. That’s a very serious matter.” Watching carefully, she saw the younger woman flinch and then drop her gaze to the floor, and decided to press the point. “It’s pretty clear that you’re a dirty cop.”

She waited a heartbeat, half-expecting an outraged protest. Instead, she could see a sick look on Marina's face. Anna gentled her voice a bit, well aware of the woman's parents in the other room. "We need to know why you did what you did, how Edmund was tied in to that, and who else was involved. If you cooperate and tell us what we need to know, we're prepared to go easy on you. You might get away with no jail time and just losing your badge."

Not that she wanted the woman to walk away without consequences. But the reality was that most of the suspicious files she and Eleni had uncovered were small potatoes – cases where there was no question of the suspect's guilt, but the evidence had been shaky at best until the tampering. The only major, serious cases that had Marina's dirty fingerprints all over them were those directly related to Edmund Winslow. Still, they needed this all out on the table, to know just how deep the corruption went.

She shook herself out of her musings, watching with interest as Marina looked up at her. The younger woman tilted her head to the side, studying her, and Anna couldn't quite decipher the expression in her eyes, especially since her face was completely blank. But the uncomfortable scrutiny didn't last long, and then she could see the sudden flare of hope in Marina's eyes, the sudden mix of fear and relief.

"I wouldn't go to jail...I wouldn't lose my family...my son?"

Even though Anna already knew the answer, she shrugged slightly. "I can't make any promises. But cooperation would go a long way toward showing your good intentions."

She watched Marina sit up straighter in her chair. For the first time in recent memory, the aura of anger that usually surrounded the younger woman was gone, and Anna marveled at it. At that moment, she could see the best pieces of Frank Cooper shining through his daughter – his slow and steady presence, his kindness.

Marina's voice was steady. "It's a long story. Let me start at the beginning..."

"No, sir, I'm sorry. I don't speak Spanish and there's no one here right now who does. Please leave a name and number and I'll have someone call you back. Maybe they can help you with whatever case you're trying to get information about."

Hector Rivera slammed down the phone and glared at his wife. She looked up at him, eyes wide and red. He wanted to yell, but it wasn't her fault the person on the other end of the phone was a fool, even if she was the one who insisted he call. "The clerk couldn't understand my accent and assumed I couldn't speak English. I will not leave my name and

phone number lying around for the police. Who knows how they'd decide to use it, or what hours of the day they'd call."

He saw the glint of irritation in her eyes. "You were speaking perfectly good English." There was no reason to reaffirm that, but he nodded anyhow. Her expression turned sad. "But how will we know if there's news...about Natalia...or if there's anything we can do if we don't leave them a way to reach us?"

Hector walked across the room to sit in his favorite chair. His wife followed, sitting on the couch, Kleenex box still in hand. He sighed. "There is nothing we can do to help the police. They will ask us questions about her friends, her enemies, and all we can tell them is what they already know – she had a bastard child and is again flouting God's law by trying to marry a woman. She's chosen a path in life that's led her to this end."

He studied his wife, knowing she wanted to argue, knowing she knew better than to try. He continued, "Leyla will tell us if there's news about what happened or if she's been found. We don't need the police for that."

Carmen's voice was quiet, but brighter than it had been. "She's a good daughter. She will tell us what's happening. You're right; we don't need to contact the police."

Hector nodded and sat back in his chair. "Of course I'm right."

Watching Carmen, he saw the way the tears were bubbling up in her eyes again. He didn't like seeing her so upset. Speaking softly, he said, "We'll call her later this evening. We can ask what is happening and ask her to keep us informed. I know you would like to talk to her."

There was no mistaking the flash of surprise in her eyes and no disguising the note of bitterness in her tone. "I thought you told her not to bother coming back as long as she was spending time with Natalia and Olivia. She's barely spoken to us since the two of you had that big fight months ago, right before she moved down to Springfield."

He waved a dismissive hand in the air. "I was angry; she was angry. We are alike in that way; we understand each other."

Despite hoping his wife would drop the subject, he wasn't surprised when she sighed deeply and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "We've already alienated one daughter. What makes you think the same thing won't happen with Leyla?"

Hector shook his head. "Natalia brought her punishments on herself by her actions. It's different with Leyla. She has done nothing wrong." He leaned forward slightly in his chair,

meeting Carmen's eyes. "Believe me when I say that no matter how angry we were with each other, it won't matter at a time like this. Let's have dinner and then we'll call her. You'll see that I'm right."

While she didn't answer in words, he could see the hope and love in her eyes at the thought of talking to Leyla again. He managed a smile and Carmen nodded in response, then got up and made her way back to the kitchen. He left her to her work and picked up his newspaper.

Natalia hadn't been part of their lives at all for nearly twenty years; he couldn't quite grasp how her being missing now was so much different in his wife's eyes. He cared for his daughter, in his own way, and would never wish actual harm to come to her. At the same time, the woman who'd walked back over their threshold was a stranger to him; she wasn't his sweet, obedient little girl.

Uncomfortable with such introspection, he shook his head and turned his attention to the sports page.

Anna settled back in her chair, running her hand through her hair. She had been talking to Marina for well over an hour now, and she had a pretty clear picture of what had been going on.

DeSilva had been a dirty cop for years and Marina had gotten mixed up with him when he helped her out on a couple of cases. She hadn't known he was working for Edmund until her own run-in with the madman – she'd planted drugs on a social worker for blackmail purposes, fearing that baby Henry would be taken from her. Winslow had gotten wind of it and started blackmailing her to help him. By then, she was in too deep to get out. Her big fear was that if she exposed Edmund, it would lead to her losing Henry; and losing her son was the one thing she couldn't risk. Marina and DeSilva were the only ones on the police force who'd been working for Edmund and the only ones who'd been involved in the tampering.

Closer to home, Marina didn't seem to know who Hung Li was and didn't know where the orderly had come from who'd helped with Winslow's escape from the hospital. She'd agreed to help with that only after Edmund said he'd let her off the hook and finally gave her the film negatives that showed her planting the drugs in the social worker's desk. It had seemed like her only chance to break free from him. Marina hadn't seen or heard from him since his escape.

Anna's instincts told her that this was, indeed, what had happened, that Marina was telling the truth. It also fit with what Eleni had uncovered in the case files, in terms of what was done and who'd signed off on it. Of course, Anna also knew better than most just how Edmund worked – he discarded underlings like so much garbage when he had no further use for them. Only ruthless, unwaveringly loyal people like her father would be around for the long haul.

Unfortunately, Marina knew little enough about Edmund's habits and whereabouts, certainly nothing that would help them find where he might have taken Natalia.

Still, at least they'd wrapped up one of their open cases. But despite Marina's confession and explanation, there was one thing nagging at Anna. "So why did you let DeSilva tamper with your evidence in the first place? I mean, I understand that once it happened a few times, you felt like you were in too deep to just back out. But why did it happen at all?"

She could almost feel the wall drop back into place around Marina and she realized that this was the biggest reason the other woman had been afraid of exposure, bigger even than the possibility of losing Henry. She almost didn't press the point, not sure it really mattered. After all, they had her confession; they knew what had been done and who'd been involved. The reason why probably didn't really matter. And yet...Anna wanted to know.

"It can be off the record if you want, Marina, but it would really help if we knew your motive. I know you've lost your badge before; I can't understand why you'd risk it again by doing something like this. I mean, you were a shining star out of the police academy and your dad has always been an upstanding cop. Why mess up your record, your chance to follow in his footsteps?"

She didn't miss the tension flooding through the woman across the table from her or the mix of fear and anger in Marina's eyes. She opened her mouth to ask again, when the door to the room banged open. Anna glanced up, seeing Eleni and Frank burst into the room, in full-on protective parent mode.

They both spoke at once.

"She's already told us what we wanted to know," Eleni protested.

"You have no right to badger her like that, Detective Li!" Frank thundered.

Anna fought to keep her exasperation in check as she looked away from the parents to the daughter. She noted that Marina was halfway out of her chair and smiling at Frank and Eleni.

“Mom, Dad...I...”

But neither seemed to pay any attention to their daughter, Anna noted, since they were too busy advancing on her. She looked at them for a moment, shaking her head at the unprofessional display, and then shifted her gaze back toward Marina. Or, more accurately, where Marina had been just moments before.

Anna swore under her breath and zigzagged past Frank and Eleni to race out the door after Marina. She ran down the hallway, finally catching up to the other woman in the waiting area near the main entrance. She caught Marina by the arm and spun her around gently, aware that the room was full of people. She pitched her voice low, noting in her peripheral vision that Frank and Eleni had caught up with them. “Come on. Let’s go in the back and wrap this up.”

Marina wrestled out of her grasp, not bothering to keep her voice down. “I’m finished, Detective. I’ve answered all your questions and I’m leaving.”

Anna shook her head, mentally giving up. Apparently Marina misread her gesture, though, since the younger woman advanced on her all of a sudden, anger blazing in her eyes. “Okay, fine; I didn’t answer your last question. You want to know why I did it...why I turned into a dirty cop? It was because I was trying to live up to everybody’s expectations! My dad was so proud of having his daughter be a cop, but how could he continue to be proud of me when I couldn’t close my cases?”

Anna took a step back, filled with a sudden surge of sympathy. She murmured, “Not every case ends up being rock solid. We do the best we can with what we find.”

If anything, her attempt to be soothing had the opposite effect. Marina laughed bitterly. “Well, that wasn’t good enough for Frank Cooper’s daughter. I asked DeSilva for help and saw how he managed to have such a high close rate on his cases. I had to stand out...I had to do whatever I could to make my dad proud...to make him notice me. And if that makes me a bad person, then I guess you should probably throw me in jail, because I would do it again just to see the pride in his eyes once more.”

With that, Marina burst into tears and ran out of the police station into the snowy day beyond. Frank ran after her, while Eleni turned on her heel and practically raced back down the hallway. Anna was left standing alone, feeling like she finally had the last piece of the puzzle in place, and understanding all too well where the police chief’s daughter was coming from. She didn’t condone the choices the younger woman had made, but she could understand why she’d made them.

Anna glanced around the room again and shook her head at the hastily averted gazes and the heads bent together, whispering. Just great. She'd learned enough about Springfield to know that by this time tomorrow, everyone in town would know what had happened.

Olivia fought the urge to pace as she stood outside Father Ray's office, waiting for him to finish up a session with one of his parishioners. Not for the first time, she thought about turning on her heel and leaving. Not for the first time, she reminded herself that she couldn't.

At long last, the door to his office opened. Mrs. Elliott walked out and Olivia grimaced. The sour church lady wasn't one of her favorite people in the universe, and she knew the feeling was mutual. She exchanged a saccharine smile with the old bat, and then squared her shoulders and approached the open door. She knocked, even though Father Ray was expecting her, and caught the jerk of his chin that invited her in.

Shutting the door behind her, she took a deep breath and approached his desk, sitting down in one of the chairs in front of it. He didn't look too pleased to see her, but his tone was mild. "I have to admit that I didn't expect to see you here. Given that you only come to church to please Natalia, I didn't think you'd seek out any sort of religious guidance."

The words raised her hackles, but she forced down the reaction. She refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her rattled by his veiled insults. "Let's not play games, Father. You know I'm not here for any of the 'guidance' you're likely to give. I'm sure you know exactly why I'm here."

She watched him closely and saw him frown in confusion, his response too immediate to be feigned. "Actually, Olivia, I don't. Unless you think I had something to do with Natalia's disappearance..."

Her question was blunt. "Did you?"

He scrubbed his hand over his face and she was struck by how tired he looked. "No, I didn't." He suddenly straightened up in his chair and met her eyes. "Olivia, you know I'm disappointed in the way Natalia has turned her back on the church, and you know I don't approve of her relationship with you. But surely you know I would never do anything to hurt her."

The words were out of her mouth before she could think about them. "I know you wouldn't."

It was true, though she hadn't really thought about it before. While she disagreed with his counsel and didn't appreciate the way he tried to meddle in her partner's life, she did know he cared about Natalia. She sat back in her chair and reorganized her thoughts. "Listen, Father...that's not why I'm here. I want to know if you managed to scare Natalia into having second thoughts about the ceremony."

He shook his head and opened his mouth and she quickly interrupted before he could say a word. "I know you're going to tell me that what you talked about with her is confidential. But that's a bunch of bulls...bullcrap."

She leaned forward in the chair, anger flaring along her spine, and glared at the priest, not missing the way he glared at her in return. Her tone was acid. "You already violated your whole priest-parishioner confidentiality thing by talking to the police. So don't even try and pretend that you can't talk to me. Frank told me what you told him...that Natalia didn't want to hear what you had to say and that she asked you to leave. Is that the truth, or was that just to cover your own backside?"

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished she could call them back. This whole conversation was a bad idea. He'd never tell her what she most needed to know, and she wasn't sure she could keep from slapping his usual smirk off his face. She pushed out of the chair, getting to her feet, ready to leave the room. A simple statement stopped her.

"It is the truth. Natalia didn't want me there, spoiling her special day."

She sat down with a thud and stared in shock at the priest. Father Ray looked down at his hands, folded on the desk top, and shook his head. His voice was quiet. "Much as I wish she had regrets about the path she's on, much as I wish she would listen to my counsel, I can't let you believe a lie. I wouldn't be much good as a man of God if I did."

Almost unable to believe her ears, she simply sat gaping as he continued, "She had no doubts about the ceremony, and almost glowed every time she said your name. She was a little nervous, but nothing out of the ordinary for a...a bride on her...wedding day. Her only concern was what had happened to make her sister so late."

Olivia felt a weight lift from her shoulders. It didn't ease her worry one bit about what had happened to her partner, but it helped to know that the priest hadn't managed to invoke any doubts and fears. At least she knew Natalia had been happy and excited in what might have been her final hours...

A chill walked down her spine at the thought and she felt the burn of tears. She would not cry in front of the priest. She fisted her hand, digging her fingernails into her palm, letting

the slight pain center her. She stood again, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Thank you for being honest, Father. It...it means a lot."

He looked up at her then and she saw the sorrow in his eyes, knew he was worried about what had happened to Natalia. At least they had one thing in common. He said, "You're welcome."

Then, as if it was too uncomfortable for them to have such common ground, he raised one of his ample eyebrows and a smirk appeared on his face. "You do know, of course, that I will never stop praying for her to find her way back to the path of righteousness, that I will never stop praying for her lost soul."

Despite the situation, Olivia felt an answering smirk pull at her lips. It definitely helped to be back on familiar ground with the man. "Of course you won't. Just like I'll never stop giving her reasons to stay with me and choose our family as her path." She rolled her eyes at his long-suffering sigh, but sobered up quickly. "First, Father, just pray that she comes home safely."

He managed a small smile. "I already am."

Not sure how to respond, she settled for a quick wave before she turned and opened the door, walking briskly down the hall. He could be a thorn in her side for the rest of her life if his prayers helped bring Natalia back to her.

Edmund giggled maniacally as he stood over the fire and watched the layers of snow melt off his sleeve. He heard a "harrumph" from the other room, but ignored the verbal equivalent of eye rolling in favor of watching the icy crystals shrink and die under his gaze. He liked the way it made him feel to know that he alone determined whether the snowflakes would melt or stay intact.

Before long, the snow was gone and he was too warm in his coat. He walked across the room, shrugging out of the garment and slipping it onto a hanger. Glancing into the other room, he smiled at the sight of Hung Li meticulously going over a set of plans Edmund had drawn up for the next target on his list. He knew his associate would find and eliminate whatever flaws and obstacles he'd overlooked in his enthusiasm for his task.

Edmund walked back over to the fire, smiling like the cat who'd eaten the canary. It was so good to be rid of those bumbling Springfield cops and once again be working with a professional. Granted, DeSilva and Marina had served their purpose, but they both lacked

the kind of cunning and callousness he needed. He'd been all too happy to cut the final strings tying them to him once he was free from that damned hospital.

He growled under his breath at the memory of that damned bitch – Spencer's little whore – holding a gun on him. Who knew the town saint had it in her to go all Rambo? She was clearly paying for her holier-than-thou attitude now, though. He growled even more at the reminder that his nemesis was actually the one who'd shot him. One of these days, Jeffrey O'Neill would suffer dearly for that. But Edmund had other prey in his sights right now. O'Neill was going to be his last target – the icing on his revenge cake, so to speak. The mere thought made him burst into laughter again.

As the old adage said, revenge was a dish best served cold.

ACT 1

January 10th

Olivia stood at the top of the staircase in the farmhouse, looking down at the people gathered in her living room. Actually, they didn't all fit in the living room; she knew from an up-close-and-personal perspective that the crowd spilled over into the kitchen as well. Someone – probably Doris, Phillip, or Josh, though she still didn't know for sure – had decided there needed to be a potluck at her house to show the town's support for her, to show that they'd be there for her while Natalia was missing.

As always, the thought of her lover being God-knew-where, enduring God-knew-what made her stomach tie itself in knots. She'd thought it was hard to endure the uncertainty when Natalia ran away after finding out she was pregnant with Francesca. This kind of uncertainty was a million times worse. A broken heart would heal. But if her lover was taken from her forever, against her will, Olivia was afraid she'd die, too, her heart smashed and mangled beyond repair.

A glimpse of a dark head snapped her away from her spiraling thoughts and brought the faintest hint of a smile to her face. She usually didn't have a whole lot of faith in Frank Cooper's investigative abilities. But in this instance, she was actually impressed with his tenacity and determination to find Natalia. Best of all, she knew it wasn't in an attempt to play the knight in shining armor and get his lady love back. He'd finally moved on, and she could honestly say he was happier with Eleni than she'd seen him in a long time. His interest in finding the missing woman was twofold – one, because he cared about her as a friend and the mother of his child, and two, because when push came to shove, he really did want to protect and serve the people of Springfield.

She had to admit that Jonathan, Remy, and Anna were equally dedicated. Not because they knew Natalia well; Remy was the only one who'd spent much time with her. And not just because it was their job. She could see it in their eyes when they talked to her, could read it in their faces when they took extra time to keep her updated – they wanted to get Natalia back for Olivia's sake. The rest of the police department was taking their cues from the three of them. Honestly, she couldn't remember the last time they'd all taken an investigation so seriously.

Her eyes swept over the room, taking in all the people there.

She saw Frank lean in to say something to Eleni before the two of them walked over to the corner near the kitchen doorway where Mallet was standing, to confer with him. Anna and Jonathan were in the corner on the opposite side of the doorway, passing a cell phone from hand to hand and talking animatedly. Doris and Callie Jennings stood near the two of them, exchanging occasional comments, but mostly just watching the crowd.

Olivia smiled at the sight of Phillip and James wandering through the room, handing out fruit punch and sodas from trays they carried. She could just imagine both Alan and Alex being horrified at the sight of Spauldings acting like the hired help. Her gaze shifted to where Bill had his arm draped around Billy's shoulders as they stood beside Vanessa and Beth, who were chatting away. Shayne, Josh, and Reva had camped out in some of the folding chairs and were all laughing at something or other.

Her gaze shifted again, taking in more of the people in her living room. Father Ray, who'd surprised the hell out of her by coming, wore a smile as he stood at the back of the couch with Remy and Ava, who were chattering away. Lizzie and Christina had taken over the couch, sitting with their sons, presumably comparing notes. She couldn't help but smile at the sight of Buzz amusing himself by chasing Emma, Sarah, and Clarissa through the throngs of people.

Looking around to see where the other kids were, she saw Marina in a chair in a corner by the front door, watching over Henry, Colin, and Peyton as they played with blocks. Olivia's heart clenched at the sight of the other woman and she fisted her hand. One part of her wanted to charge down the stairs, yelling and screaming, and throw Marina out of her house. After all, if the little brat hadn't helped Edmund escape in the first place, Natalia might not have been kidnapped. The other part of her couldn't help but feel a stab of sympathy. The younger woman had been ignored by everyone except her family most of the evening, from what Olivia had seen, and she knew exactly what it felt like to make a spectacular mistake and then try to recover from it. She also knew, all too well, what it was like to crave the praise and attention of a parent. Still, understanding didn't equal forgiving and forgetting, and she didn't want to be anywhere near the little brat right now.

Shaking off her depressing thoughts, she looked around the room again. Rick and Mindy were wandering around, collecting dirty plates. Mel and Cyrus came in from the kitchen with trays of finger foods, and Matt trailed behind them with a tray of cookies. Sister Anne and Lillian looked to be deep in an intense conversation, while Blake wandered around, a goofy smile on her face as she held a sleeping Francesca. Olivia's heart softened at the sight of her youngest daughter.

It seemed like the only person who was a regular part of the Spencer-Rivera's life who wasn't here right now was Leyla. Olivia didn't envy her; the woman had left for Chicago that afternoon to update her parents about the search for Natalia. Somehow, she was sure she'd blow a gasket if she had to listen to Mr. Rivera say anything to the effect of the kidnapping being a punishment from God or something equally inane. She wouldn't be surprised if Leyla needed a stiff drink or twenty for having to put up with that. Still, the young woman felt she owed it to her parents to talk to them in person, and to spend some family time with them.

Olivia looked around the room again, and the sight of so many people gathered for the sole purpose of showing their concern and support for her nearly brought tears to her eyes. She actually had to grab hold of the railing at the top of the stairs to steady herself. For more years than she could count, she'd assumed she didn't deserve anything like a happy ending. That she didn't deserve to be loved. She'd been convinced she wasn't a good person and that the only people who could or should love her were her daughters. And yet here she was, standing in front of the evidence that there were more than just a mere handful of people who cared about her, that it wasn't just her few actual friends who would lend a hand when needed.

It overwhelmed her for a moment.

She certainly hadn't done anything to deserve this. But maybe that was the whole point. Maybe love and support weren't things that could only be received if they were earned. Maybe they were gifts given freely, given out of grace.

She shook her head for a moment, not sure whether it was Natalia or Sister Anne she was channeling there, but not interested in getting any more philosophical than that. All she knew was that as hard as this ordeal had been, and would be, it was slightly easier to bear knowing that she wasn't alone.

The walls were moving. Natalia could feel them pressing against her, hard and cold, squishing her into her little corner like a little bug. She pushed and pushed against them,

but they didn't move at all, and then they started laughing at her. The sound was everywhere all at once. It was big and loud and made everything shake.

Like an earthquake. Like she was being tossed around like a little rag doll in a house that was being shaken up and tossed around so that everything would fall on the floor and break. She put out her hands to brace herself from falling down and shattering into a million little pieces, and felt nothing but air. The walls weren't pressing on her any more. No, they were far away now, like little dots, and she was tiny like a ladybug and the ground was going to split open around her and swallow her whole.

Like she was a piece of candy. Like in Willy Wonka's factory where evil little children disobeyed their parents and ate what they shouldn't eat and got sick or disfigured or even dead. But not Charlie, 'cause Charlie was a good boy and listened to his grandpa.

Like Rafe listened to her, even though she wasn't a grandpa, she was just a mom. He did listen to her, didn't he? He wore his coat when he went out to play and called if he was going to be late for dinner and did his homework most of the time. Had he done his homework? Was he even in school today? Where was he?

Had she lost him somewhere...left him in the grocery cart in the parking lot or let him wander off with strangers who gave him candy? Why wasn't he here with her? Wasn't there someone else who was supposed to be with her? Why was she all alone? What happened to green eyes? Why couldn't she remember?

She slammed her fist against something hard and gasped at the sudden flash of pain. Her hand felt wet and she lifted it and stared at it and saw the pretty trickles of red running like little, tiny rivers over her knuckles.

Blood. From punching a cinderblock wall.

In a sudden moment of clarity – pain chasing away whatever drug was running merrily through her veins – she remembered it all. Rafe was grown up and overseas, Olivia had green eyes and was the love of her life, and she was locked away in a tiny cell. She'd been drugged, kidnapped, imprisoned, taunted, and tormented. And she was all alone, so alone. She was sad she was alone because she was scared. She was glad she was alone because it meant Olivia and their children were safe.

She'd spend the rest of her days, locked away in this cell, alone except for her kidnapper, if it meant Olivia, Emma, Francesca, Leyla, Ava, and Rafe were all safe. She had to stay strong and keep fighting so she could keep them safe, no matter what.

Natalia tried to hold on to those thoughts, to pull them around her like a cloak, to hold fast to whatever was true. But the pain in her hand ebbed slowly away and she glanced to the side and saw the wall smiling at her – an evil smile – and she felt the cell begin to close in around her and poke at her and make fun of her.

She curled up on her side in a little ball, hands pressed over her ears, whimpering to try and keep the echoing laughter at bay.

Blake stood at the foot of the stairs, Francesca in her arms, surveying the crowd. She couldn't quite believe how many people were packed into the farmhouse and found herself getting misty-eyed at the display of community support. As she knew better than anyone, the people of Springfield could be a vindictive, back-stabbing bunch who had in times past nearly made a sport out of hurting each other. But more than any other place she knew, they also had an amazing capacity to band together to protect one of their own. Natalia might not have been born and bred here, but she was one of those people who was the heart and soul of their little town, and God help anyone who messed with her.

She freed one hand to surreptitiously wipe a tear from her eye at the thought of her missing friend. She couldn't imagine how Olivia must feel right now, not knowing where Natalia was or what exactly had happened to her.

Her eyes tracked over to where Olivia was standing next to Doris in one corner of the living room, out of the way of the foot traffic. They were clearly deep in conversation from the serious, focused expressions on their faces. Blake studied Olivia, taking in the bruised looking bags under her eyes, the worry lines in her forehead, the tired slump of her shoulders. Her heart ached for the woman, for the pain and fear that were so obviously written in her eyes no matter how hard she tried to mask them.

There was something else there, too, and Blake nearly gasped out loud when she realized what it was. There was an aura of defeat surrounding Olivia. It was unlike anything she would ever have imagined from the woman who always seemed so imposing, so strong.

She almost, almost went barging across the room, ready to break into the conversation and implore Olivia not to give up, to hold on to hope. But something held her still, something beyond the simple weight of the sleeping child in her arms. She watched as Doris jabbed a finger into the palm of her hand, making some kind of point, watched as Olivia nodded slowly, tentatively, in response.

Even from across the room, Blake could see the spark of anger in her lover's blue eyes and could tell from the sudden shift in Doris' body language that she was letting that anger

come out in tone and gesture. While Olivia didn't seem to be responding in kind, weariness still enveloping her like a cloak, she was at least listening intently and nodding at times.

Blake was moved to tears again, watching her lover with her friend. The two women were so alike – both fierce and proud, both opinionated and strong, both hiding the fear that they really weren't worth much. She only hoped that she could give Doris half the love, understanding, and encouragement that Natalia had given Olivia.

More than anything, she hoped that Natalia was alive and would come back home, safe and sound. She was afraid Olivia wouldn't survive otherwise, even with the love and support of the town around her.

Blake leaned down and kissed the top of Francesca's head, then looked up to the heavens and breathed a prayer. *Please God, let Natalia be alive, let her come home to her family.*

It wouldn't even matter if she was physically hurt or emotionally scarred from whatever ordeal she was enduring. As long as she was here – with her lover, with her children, with her friends – the rest would fall into place.

As long as there was life and breath, there would be love and hope to keep the darkness at bay.

Edmund growled under his breath at the soft trill of his cell phone. It wasn't because there was anyone nearby who would be alerted by the ringing. It was because the unexpected sound nearly sent him tumbling off the tree limb he was sitting on.

At that thought, he laughed. Considering that he'd grown up on a tropical island, he had a strange affinity for these northern forests.

He fished the phone out of his pocket and glanced at the display, then down at his watch. The man was right on time, as always.

Edmund didn't waste time on pleasantries. "Report."

Hung Li's voice was smooth and cultured. *"The package is still secure and all the loose ends have been tied up."*

Edmund mentally translated that as meaning that the hired muscle who'd helped take, hide, and secure their prize had been eliminated and their bodies effectively disposed of. They'd learned the hard way that those who weren't in the inner circle of their criminal

organization couldn't be trusted to keep their mouths shut. Killing was a lot less expensive than buying silence.

His associate continued, *"The police have not yet found our safe house or our storage sites. They aren't even close to stumbling across the locations, but we'd better keep tabs on their activities anyhow, just in case."*

Despite the fact that Hung Li couldn't see him, Edmund nodded. He wasn't going to go to all the trouble of acquiring a new toy and then losing it because he'd forgotten to keep an eye on what his enemies were up to.

He might be crazy – certifiable, even! – but he wasn't stupid.

"The trail connecting us to the package is cold, but there are still clues out there that might lead to us and to..."

Edmund broke in, "Hello, what have we just been talking about? That's why you and I will be out in the field, spying on the cops...to see if they manage to find the trail or connect the dots."

Only his years of experience in dealing with the other man allowed him to hear the slight note of irritation in the smooth tone. *"Of course, Sir."*

Edmund wanted to laugh at the display of pique, but didn't. His colleague was, after all, a professional, who had spent his career covering other people's tracks – particularly Edmund's – or, more accurately, saving their butts. He didn't want to alienate Hung Li; they made good partners. So he switched gears a bit. "It sounds like you and I can handle things here in Springfield and keep our prize secure on our own. What do you think about sending the rest of the crew back to the stronghold in Mexico?"

There was a measurable pause. *"I think that might be for the best. The smuggling side of the business has suffered a bit in recent months with so many of our people being involved in the intrigues of Springfield."*

Edmund rolled his eyes at the implied rebuke in the man's words, but didn't say anything, letting Hung Li say his piece.

"I also think it will be easier for us to finish our plans here and deal with the current situation if we don't have so many of our henchmen bumbling around. Few of them have the type of finesse that you and I have perfected over the years; and the fewer of us there are here in town, the less likely it is that the police will find us...or our package."

He nodded to himself, not at all surprised by his colleague's suggestion. It made perfect sense to him. "I agree. Relay the orders to the appropriate people; have them leave town tonight, if possible. I'll check in with you later."

Edmund disconnected the call, slipped the phone back into his pocket, and then swung himself out of the tree, landing with an icy crunch in the layer of snow underneath. It was times like this when it was good to be the boss. His colleague could take care of all the dirty little details; he had more entertaining ideas of how he could spend the rest of his evening.

Jeffrey choked on a cloud of dust as he emerged from an old warehouse on the outskirts of town. He paused for a moment, pulling off the night-vision goggles he'd used to see in the pitch-black interior. He blinked hard, letting his eyes adjust to the faint rays of moonlight reflecting off the patches of snow on the ground. Luckily, the weather had turned a few days ago. After what felt like non-stop snowstorms, they'd switched over to cold temperatures, clear skies, and sunny days; it was supposed to be like that for the next two weeks. He definitely wasn't going to complain. It made it a lot easier to be out and about, searching for Edmund.

Eyesight adjusted, he brushed at his jacket, sending dust particles dancing on the slight breeze, before pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and scrubbing it over his face. After a few moments, he was reasonably grime-free – or as near as possible without the benefit of a mirror to inspect himself in.

He walked over to his car and unlocked the door, climbing into the driver's seat, but making no move to put the key in the ignition. Instead, he opened the folder lying on the passenger seat and pulled out a steno notepad. Pulling a pen from its home in the spiral wiring that held the notebook together, he crossed off some lines on his checklist. He'd had high hopes for this warehouse having significance, but it was yet another dead end when it came to finding the place where Edmund Winslow was holed up.

He carefully replaced the pen, closed the notebook, and put everything back neatly in the folder. Then, and only then, he pounded his fists on the steering wheel, cursing softly and steadily.

Ostensibly, he was helping Anna and Jonathan in the search for Natalia Rivera, completely off the record and behind the scenes. He was reasonably sure Frank Cooper didn't have a clue that he was still in town, let alone working with one of the Springfield PD detectives. But in reality, that wasn't his focus. He had no vested interest in the missing woman being

found. He was still stung by the way she'd confronted him and somehow turned Ava against him.

His sole interest was in drawing out Edmund and getting his arch-nemesis out of the way once and for all. He didn't care if that meant a lifetime in jail or a more permanent sort of goodbye. All he cared about was finding the man and making him pay for the hell he'd put him through.

Everything Jeffrey had valued in the world was lost because of Edmund Winslow. He'd bait whatever trap he could, use any tactic he could dream up, to get his hands on the man and make him suffer.

It wouldn't – couldn't – change anything that had happened. Jeffrey knew that much. Reva wouldn't take him back, and he wouldn't get back the year of his life he'd spent chasing the man. But it would make his sacrifices worth it if he could just put a stop to the thus-far-elusive Winslow.

With a frustrated growl, Jeffrey pounded on the steering wheel once more with a closed fist. He could barely eat, barely sleep. All his attention was focused on either finding Edmund on his own or finding Edmund with the help of the trap he'd baited.

He jumped in his seat when his cell phone rang, and flipped it open without bothering to look at the display. After all, there were only three people who had this particular number, and one of them wasn't speaking to him, even if she'd known he was still in town.

"What?" he practically shouted into the phone.

He'd subconsciously been hoping it was Jonathan, so he almost grimaced when he heard the distinctly feminine clearing of a throat. *"Bad day there, Chief?"*

He actually took the phone away from his head and glared at it before putting it back up to his ear. "You could say that. What do you want, Anna? I told you I'd check in later if I found anything. And as usual, I've hit another fucking dead end."

He took perverse pleasure in the nearly inaudible intake of breath that told him he'd rattled Anna's cage. He liked the woman and she was a damn good investigator...operative...whatever. But his patience was paper thin and he didn't like her checking up on him every freaking day to see what, if anything, he'd found.

"Look, Jeffrey...I know you're tired and frustrated. But I'm worried. You're so wrapped up in vengeance on Edmund that you seem to be forgetting about Natalia. She's the one we need to find. Maybe you need to step away for a bit...get to where it's not so personal."

Under different circumstances, he might have applauded her for remembering the lessons he himself had helped teach her. But when it was directed at him...

"Given that I'm not getting any kind of paycheck to be doing this job, you've got no right to jump on my back for how I'm going about it," he snapped. "Like I said before, I'll let you know when and if I've got something."

He slammed the phone shut on whatever response she might have made and put the key in the ignition, turning it. Jamming the car into gear, he took off with a squeal of tires. His objective was clear. It wasn't his problem if she wasn't on the same page he was.

Emma sat up in her bed, leaning back against her pillows, the covers pulled up to her chest. Shadow lay beside her, looking up at her sometimes like she knew Emma was sad. She was glad she had her puppy here with her. She didn't want to be alone, but she didn't want to run to her mommy either. Mommy had enough to worry about with Natalia being taken away from them. And she didn't want to watch her mommy try to put on her brave face, the one she wore when she wanted to convince people that everything would be okay...even when she didn't know if it would be.

When she was a little girl, Emma hadn't really noticed that that was what her mommy did. But when she started growing up and got to be a big girl, she'd started paying attention to things like that. Even though she didn't feel very grown up right now with Ma being gone. She felt like a little kid again. And she didn't like that feeling...almost as much as she didn't like the bad man taking Natalia.

She reached down and patted a lump under her covers next to Shadow's head. Feeling the shape of her teddy bear made her feel better, even if she didn't want Mommy or Leyla or Ava to know she was doing something so babyish.

There was a creaking sound in the hallway and Emma froze in place for a minute, listening hard. Then she heard a footstep and the sounds of breathing and recognized them as being her mommy's. She relaxed a little bit, trying not to laugh at the way Shadow's ears perked up and her fuzzy little head swiveled around.

"Hey, Jellybean. I wanted to come and check on you and see how you liked the potluck."

Emma smiled, just a little. "It was nice of everybody to come and let us know that they miss Ma, too. I was happy to see everybody."

She heard a little snuffle when her mommy sat down on the edge of the bed, and Emma frowned. Then she saw her mommy smile really big, like she was making herself look happy. "It was really nice of them, wasn't it? The food was really good, too."

Emma nodded, but didn't say anything. She looked down at Shadow and put her hand on her puppy's head, petting her. She felt her mommy's hand on her shoulder, rubbing gently.

"Y'know, Em, it's normal to be scared and sad when things like this happen. It's really hard to have Natalia gone and not know where she is. But you know Anna and Uncle Frank and Jonathan are working really hard to bring her back home to us. Maybe you'd feel less scared and sad if you talked to me about it."

Emma knew her mommy was right; she would feel better if she talked about it. She didn't really know what was going on, and it scared her because she didn't. But she knew listening to her would make things harder for her mommy. Mommy already had to take care of her and Sweet Pea, had to keep things running at the Beacon, had to keep Leyla and Ava from being upset or fighting. That was a lot for anyone to do all at once...even someone as super as her mommy.

Emma didn't want to make things any harder. She had Shadow; she'd be okay.

She just looked up and tried to smile. Her mommy frowned at her, and she felt sad. She was still making her feel bad, even when she was trying to help. Emma wriggled around in her bed, trying to sit up straighter without squishing one of Shadow's paws.

"It's okay, Mommy. I know everybody is trying to bring Ma back home. It'll be okay."

She tried not to squirm when her mommy stared at her for a long, long time. It felt weird and she didn't like it, so she looked down at Shadow and started petting her again. The big puppy eyes stared happily at her and she felt a little better. She could share anything with Shadow.

"Alright, Emma. But if you need me for anything...don't hesitate to come and get me, okay?"

She felt the bed move as her mommy got up, so she looked up again. Her mommy bent over her and hugged her tight, and she reached up to hug her back. Hugs didn't fix everything, but they made her feel better when she was sad. She held on for a long time and then heard a soft whisper. "I love you, Jellybean."

"I love you, too, Mommy."

She smiled for real when her mommy tapped her playfully on the tip of the nose and then kissed her on the forehead. "Good night, Emma."

She said good night, too, and then snuggled down under her covers, squirming around so that she could lie down and get the pillows where she wanted them. Shadow stood up and moved toward the edge of the bed. When Emma finally settled down, the puppy came to lie on top of her legs.

She felt around under her covers and fished out Cornelius. She didn't think she'd be able to fall asleep for a long time, but she wanted to hold him anyway. Between him and Shadow, she felt safe, even if she was still sad.

Jonathan paced back and forth in his living room, cell phone to his ear, listening to the ringing on the other end of the line. At long last he heard a breathless *"Hello?"* followed by fumbling noises.

He frowned. "It's Jonathan," he said simply, wondering why Leyla hadn't looked at the caller ID on her cell phone to know who was calling her.

"What's up? Did the police find something?"

Jonathan shook his head, not in answer to the question – though it was the appropriate answer – but due to her obvious confusion about why he'd called. "No; no news. It's just...you'd said you'd call when you got to your parents' place, and you left here several hours ago and...well, I got a little worried."

There was more fumbling on the other end of the phone, but even with the background noise he could hear her frustration. *"What are you, my mother, checking up on me? I'm a big girl and don't have to answer to anyone."*

He fought the urge to kick the table leg when he paced past it; with his luck, the thing would collapse and wake Sarah. But his own frustration was rising. "Look, Leyla, I'm not trying to check up on you. Maybe I should be, given the way you acted the other night, but I'm not that kind of guy."

"I already apologized for that."

He sank down on the couch. "I know you did."

Granted, her apology had simply been the word sorry, and it had been muttered while she was so hung-over that she couldn't get out of bed. But he had no doubt that she regretted hurting him by flirting with every man or woman that wandered by. She'd told him once that she had a bit of a wild streak, that she wasn't the goody two-shoes everyone seemed to think she was. It was his mistake for not believing her, for relying solely on the glimpses he'd gotten of her when she was taking care of kids or otherwise being a nice, responsible young woman. Still, that was a conversation for another time, if they continued dating and things got exclusive.

He hastened to explain. "That's not why I called. It's just that you told me you'd call, and I know how long it takes to get up there. I thought maybe something bad had happened to you."

"I can take care of myself."

No, he wasn't imagining it; there was a definite chill in her tone. He couldn't help but raise his voice in response. "I didn't say you couldn't. But when I got the 'this user is currently out of service area, please try again later' message, I got a little worried that Edmund or his goons had tracked you down. Sorry if I give a damn what happens to you."

The minute the words were out of his mouth, he wished he could call them back. Or, at least, that he could repeat them without sounding like he was yelling. But she responded before he could say anything else. *"Why did you try to call? Didn't I tell you I was going to call when I got here?"*

Jonathan gaped, feeling like his eyes were about to pop out of his head. What the hell? He heard the fumbling noises again, then a muffled sound like a voice, and then Leyla's whispered *"Damn it, not now."*

He didn't know what was going on, what she was doing, but something was up. She was acting weird, even by Springfield standards.

Before he could collect his thoughts enough to ask her anything, there was a rush of words in his ear. *"Look, sorry I didn't answer earlier, that I wasn't at your beck and call, but I've been a little busy. I've got to go; I'll talk to you when I get back to town, okay?"*

The line went dead.

Jonathan banged his head against the back of couch, which wasn't nearly as satisfying an outlet for his frustration as he'd hoped, the padded cushions diluting the impact and all. He played over the phone call in his mind. For a brief second, he wondered if she'd been nabbed by the kidnapper and that her odd manner was her way of cluing him in to the fact

that something was wrong. But he dismissed the thought as soon as it came to him. If she had been trying to alert him, she'd have started saying things that he knew weren't true. She wouldn't have been practically arguing with him.

Maybe it was just the latent stress of having her sister being missing and the person responsible still being on the loose. But that didn't quite sound right. Her reaction to stress, at least from what little he'd seen, was to shut down, not act out. She and Natalia weren't all that much alike, looks aside, but there were some striking similarities.

Maybe it was the fact that she was up in Chicago dealing with her parents. He'd heard enough about her mom and her dick of a father from both her and Olivia to know that they knew just how to push buttons. Still, she had lived around them as an adult, so presumably she knew how to handle them and their outrageous moments. From what she'd told him, it was only her dad who was likely to get all sanctimonious and such about Natalia being missing; her mom was likely to be in tears and just wanting her daughter to be safe.

Maybe he'd caught her after she'd spent time with another man. Maybe that was why she'd gone on the defensive. Two weeks ago, he would have laughed at the idea. Now, after seeing how flirty she could be, he couldn't escape the idea that if she had some friends with benefits, they'd be in Chicago. But that didn't quite explain the phone call. After all, if she wanted to keep him from being suspicious, she'd have made up a story about her afternoon and then launched into bitching about her parents. Her prickliness just made him wonder, and he was sure she was smart enough to know that.

Finally, he gave up trying to puzzle it out. No matter what was making her act so weird, there wasn't anything he could do about it now. She'd be back in Springfield eventually and they could talk about it then. It wasn't like there was a rush or anything.

Olivia sat on the edge of the bed, gingerly, as if the mattress were filled with gunpowder and a single wrong move would set it off. She hadn't been able to stomach being in here much since Natalia...

She shook her head vehemently, not willing to mentally finish that sentence. If she finished it, it made it real. If it was real, then all the bad outcomes that could go along with it were also real. If she accepted that those were real, then she would never be able to get any sleep and face the morning.

Not that she'd get much sleep anyhow. Between the by-now-unfamiliar sense of being alone and the worries that haunted her dreams, she was lucky to sleep for a solid hour before jolting awake. Despite the support of friends and family – she smiled a little at the

memory of the potluck that had filled the house to overflowing just a few hours ago – she was lost and floundering, and unable to do a damn thing about it. And she had to – she had to find a way to hold it together, to believe that Natalia would be okay, to believe that Natalia would come back to her. Not just for her own sake, but for the sake of the kids.

Francesca was too young to really have a grasp of the situation yet, even though she had taken to crying for Mami. But their other daughter...

She fought the urge to break down and cry as she thought about Emma. It was clear her little girl was upset and scared, but she had all her walls up and Olivia couldn't get in. Or maybe she was too tired and upset and scared herself to have made the kind of effort needed to be there for her daughter. She rubbed a hand tiredly over her eyes as she pondered that. She knew she'd left a lot to Leyla and Ava, who'd both stepped up to help with the girls as much as they could. Still, she thought she'd done a pretty good job of handling everything and balancing out her worries, her work, her daughters, her duties, her friends, and her fears. Maybe it wasn't enough.

She tried to play back the past several days in her head...and was disturbed when she realized that she couldn't. It was all just a blur that she was too exhausted to make any sense of.

With a soft sigh, she started to lie back on the bed, and then froze. She couldn't do it...couldn't bear to be here tonight without Natalia by her side. Swallowing down the threat of tears, she pushed back up to a sitting position and then stood. She walked to the door and shut it firmly behind her, not looking back.

She padded across the hall and poked her head into the nursery. Thankfully, Francesca was sound asleep, and had continued sleeping through the night despite the chaos of Natalia being missing. Easing the door shut, she tiptoed down the hallway to Emma's room. Peeking through the slightly opened door, she let her eyes adjust to the darkness for a moment. After a moment, she was able to make out the figure of her daughter, asleep, curled up with her fudge-colored teddy bear, Cornelius, in one arm, and Shadow draped protectively over her legs. The sight was both sweet and heart-breaking.

Once again fighting the urge to break down and cry, Olivia turned away and headed towards the stairs. She didn't bother trying to be quiet, since neither Leyla nor Ava was here tonight. For the life of her, she couldn't remember why they'd both left; she was sure they'd told her, but at the moment, she was coming up blank. God, she was tired.

She plopped down on the couch, contemplating the baby monitor for a minute, trying to remember if it was on or not. Then, she heard a soft gurgle and a rustle of cloth. She collapsed against the back of the couch, slumped over in a way that would have earned her

a lecture on good posture if Natalia were here. She'd gladly listen to that lecture every single day for the rest of her life if only it meant her partner was safe and sound.



Slowly, she straightened up, shifting so her back was braced against the arm of the couch. Putting her feet on the cushions, she bent her knees, drawing them up to her chest. She sat there for a long time, staring into space, fighting the despair that seemed to be her constant companion.

Nothing she did could turn off the worry and the dread that formed a solid lump in the pit of her stomach and the back of her throat. She was exhausted and no good to herself, her daughters, or Natalia like this. She had to get some rest.

Pushing up off the couch, moving slowly as if her feet were encased in lead, she plodded to the kitchen. Reaching up to the top shelf over the stove, she pulled out a small bottle of whiskey. It was one she'd bought a while ago and kept around to prove to herself that she didn't need to fall into the bottle anymore – not when she had a partner she could share her demons with. But tonight, her partner wasn't here and her partner's disappearance was

the reason for her demons. She needed nightmare-free sleep in order to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and the bottle would help her find the oblivion she needed.

She put her hand on the bottle cap, ready to twist it open, but froze. To drink or not to drink. That was the question.

It would be easy, oh so easy, to drink her worries away for the moment. But they'd still be there in the morning, in all their stark and fearsome glory. She'd still have the burden of caring for her daughters and holding things together on her shoulders – only she'd be saddled with a hangover to boot. There had been a time in her life when the prospect of being happily drunk far outweighed the prospect of suffering for it the next day. There had been a time when even the knowledge that Emma depended on her hadn't kept her from losing herself in the bottle, as inconceivable as that thought was now.

That time had passed; she wasn't that person anymore. No matter how badly she wanted to lose herself tonight, she couldn't. She wouldn't.

She put the bottle back up in its isolated spot in the cupboard. Opening the fridge instead, she poured herself a glass of milk. Then, she grabbed a handful of the Oreos that someone had left behind after the potluck and headed back out to the couch. Propping her feet up on the coffee table and dumping the cookies into a haphazard pile on her shirt-covered stomach, she began munching, dipping the Oreos into her milk.

She knew that eating sugar before bed was generally not the best plan for falling asleep. But the sweet treat was comforting, reminding her of Natalia's tendency to whip up a batch of hot chocolate as a bedtime snack. She ate absently, and then put the crumb-filled, half-empty glass of milk on a coaster on the coffee table. Shifting around, she put a couple of throw pillows against the arm of the couch, and then leaned back against them, stretching her legs out on the cushions. She pulled the afghan off the back of the couch and draped it over her body. Warm and full, she lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes. While she didn't think she'd actually fall asleep – her mind full of worries that milk couldn't obliterate like alcohol could – she'd at least be resting her body. That might be enough.

The taste of chocolate in her mouth reminded Olivia of happier times. When the memories of sitting here with Natalia and Emma over a cup of hot chocolate threatened to make the tears come, she decided to stop fighting them. She felt hot water leak out from behind her closed eyelids as she pictured the scene in her mind, concentrating on remembering every detail to keep away the fear that she might never have another moment like that with her family.

She cried softly as she pictured the smiles on the faces of her daughter and her partner, remembering how they'd teased each other about who had more mini marshmallows. She

smiled at the memory of the speculative gleam in Emma's eye and her not-at-all-subtle attempts to steal marshmallows from either of her mommies' mugs. And she smiled a bit more as she recalled the beautiful, indulgent smile on Natalia's face and the twinkle in rich brown eyes.

It was the last coherent thought she had for the night.

ACT 2

January 11th

Olivia scrubbed the remnants of sleep from her eyes and lifted her coffee mug to her lips for a generous sip. Given that she'd spent the night on the couch, she'd slept more soundly than she'd expected and was still groggy. Her neck and back were stiff and sore, but that was a minor annoyance compared to the benefit of finally getting more than a couple hours of restless sleep.

She'd been awake for a little while already, getting the girls up and fed. Francesca had been her usual sassy self – content enough because she had one of her mommies around. But Emma...

She shook her head as she walked into the living room and sat down on the couch. Her daughter wasn't sulky, or clingy, or whiny, or grouchy, or any of the other things she'd expected with Natalia being taken from them so suddenly. While Olivia hadn't spelled out every bit of the story of what had happened – or at least what the police had pieced together so far – she knew her little girl was smart enough to read between those lines. Not to mention the fact that Emma had grown up in a town where kidnapping was almost the local pastime.

So she had no doubt that her daughter was every bit as aware of the situation as the rest of them. It was just that Emma was being so self-contained and so withdrawn that Olivia wasn't sure how to help her. She was trying to be there for her, but was afraid that, between her own worry and grief, and having to take care of everything else to boot, she wasn't really being any help to the girl. More than anything, she wanted to make sure Emma had the support and stability she needed to get through this time.

Standing, she walked over to the end table, setting down her coffee mug and picking up the phone. She dialed a number from memory. She only let her ex-husband get out a few words before she said, "Phillip, it's Olivia. I'm hoping you can do me a big favor. Can Emma

stay at the mansion for a few days...if she wants to? I haven't asked her about it yet; I wanted to have it set up first, just in case."

There was a measurable pause before she heard a response. *"Of course. She can stay here any time; you know that. But if you just need a little help with doing things, you know Beth and I--"*

"No, it's not that, Phillip. I just...I think it'd be better for Emma to be there right now, okay?"

"Better for her?"

Olivia pulled the phone receiver away from her ear and glared at it. She didn't know what the hell kind of weird word game he was trying to play, but she didn't have the brain capacity for it, whatever it was. Putting the receiver back up to her ear, she growled, "Yes, better for her. You know, where she's not in a house where every single thing reminds her of the fact that her ma is missing. I'll talk to Em and then will call you back if she's coming over. Okay?"

She didn't hear his actual reply, since she slammed the phone down before he could get that far. She was exhausted and overwhelmed and didn't have the energy for verbal sparring. It disappointed her that he didn't seem to understand that. Then again, he'd been the one *doing* the kidnapping in the past, not the one dealing with its aftermath.

But still, didn't anyone understand what she was going through? Didn't anyone know she was almost at her breaking point?

Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she picked up her coffee mug and took another long sip. The bitter brew washed away the sour taste left in her mouth by the conversation.

She trudged back into the kitchen, refilling her mug from the still mostly full carafe. It was the little things like that which drove home the reality of Natalia's absence in her life. How could she feel anything but lost? How could she not feel like she was desperate and drowning?

Emma needed to be someplace where the adults around her were focused solely on her and her needs. Not stuck in a house with an oblivious baby sister and a sad and stressed mother. Even if Leyla hadn't been out of town for the foreseeable future, the young woman had been preoccupied with her own worries lately. Ava was still struggling her way out of the grip of depression. None of them were the kind of stable influence that Jellybean needed right now.

Olivia wanted nothing more than to have her daughter stay with her – to know that she was safe. She wanted to feel the love of her precious little girl to help fill some of the emptiness in her heart from Natalia's absence. But she loved her daughter so much that she would do what was best for her, even though it made her own heart ache.

She took another sip of coffee, and then set the mug down. Time to go talk to Emma and try to sell her on the idea of taking Shadow and going to Daddy's for a while.

“Objection!”

“Overruled.”

Beth shook her head, fighting the urge to argue with the judge. She couldn't figure out why he kept overruling every objection she made. A hint of motion off to the side caught her eye; Mel was sliding a piece of paper her way. On the bottom of the yellow legal pad was a series of scrawled words. *You have to tell him WHY you're objecting.*

Beth felt her cheeks grow hot. She knew that, she really did. It was just that trial law in practice was not exactly the same as trial law in books. Not for the first time, she thought Mel should be taking the lead here. But the other woman had decided that it was time for her to get some experience, and Dinah hadn't cared one way or the other who handled what. While Doris was working with the two of them as a consultant, working on this case as a lawyer would be a clear conflict of interest for the mayor.

Beth couldn't decide if Mel actually trusted her ability to argue the case, or if the other woman just had some fantastic trick up her sleeve that would win the case no matter how badly the newbie lawyer bungled it.

She shot a warning look at Dinah, who was tapping her pencil on the table, before turning her focus back to the witness stand where an annoyed-looking Frank Cooper was explaining, yet again, that Dinah's fingerprints were on the alleged murder weapon – the stroller. She didn't blame him for being frustrated; anyone could have read the information contained in the report in front of him, and she knew he'd rather be spending his time working on the Natalia Rivera case.

The prosecutor finished his questions, and Beth stood. This part, at least, she knew she couldn't mess up. “Isn't it true, Chief Cooper, that there were other fingerprints on the stroller as well, not just ones belonging to the defendant?”

“Yes.”

She didn't bother to look at him, instead opting to gaze over at the jury. "Isn't it true that fingerprints from law enforcement officials, such as Anthony Camaletti Mallet and Marina Nadine Cooper, were also found on the stroller because they hadn't worn gloves before handling it?"

There was no mistaking his annoyance as he answered in the affirmative. No doubt he wasn't too happy with having to 'fess up that his officers didn't have the strongest grasp of the concept of not contaminating evidence. Especially since, by now, everyone in town had heard about Marina and DeSilva being dirty cops, tampering with evidence on dozens of cases before being caught. Honestly, it was a wonder anyone had even noticed, given the general ineptitude of the Springfield police department. Beth sometimes felt like most of the cops in town aspired to be Inspector Jacques Clouseau.

Shaking her head briefly to stop her woolgathering, she turned her focus back to Frank. "Then isn't it true that the defendant isn't the only person who could have used the stroller as a weapon?"

She caught a flash of exasperation in his eyes, though his tone was perfectly even as he conceded her point.

"No further questions."

She went back to her seat, not at all surprised that the prosecutor had nothing further. He'd only managed to shoot himself in the foot by introducing the stroller evidence in the first place. Not that she was complaining. She needed all the help she could get.

Mel nodded at her and she managed a slight smile in response. Dinah was practically bouncing in her seat, and Beth put a restraining hand on the woman's arm. It wasn't because she didn't appreciate the enthusiasm. It was because she didn't want to have to deal with another reprimand from the judge for not keeping her client in line. Once was more than enough.

The prosecutor was standing again. "I call Anthony Camaletti Mallet to the stand."

Beth bit down on her lip to keep from smiling. While she had no doubt he would be a formidable witness, she also knew he'd spent days trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together, only to end up suspecting the innocent Marina of being the murderer. She had no doubt that she could ask plenty of questions that would leave the jury wondering how, exactly, the man had risen up the investigative ranks to get to where he was today.

This part was going to be fun.

A figure in a dark hoodie and black sweatpants stood in the shadows of a tree deep in the woods. It was dark enough to begin with in this particular area, despite the clear and sunny skies, because of the dense canopy of bare deciduous branches and the thick clusters of towering evergreens. But this tree was even darker yet. The shadowed figure knew from long experience that a person could pass within inches of someone hiding there and never even know it.

It was exciting, this game of cat-and-mouse. Watching the police department wandering around, cluelessly searching for clues, was incredibly amusing. The stupid saps had no idea what they were looking for – and even who they were hunting was a matter of debate.

The figure grinned.

Watching the poor, earnest searchers – even the chief of police and the CIA man were out combing through the days-old snowdrifts – was hysterical. If the scene had been made into a movie, the cops would be bumping into each other in a comedy of errors sort of way. It wouldn't be at all surprising to hear yelps of pain as they stepped on each others' toes and ran smack dab into each other upon rounding tree trunks.

The funniest part was that they truly had no idea what was happening. They were following leads blindly, grabbing up handfuls of rock in hopes of striking gold. When, for all they knew, there was nothing but pyrite planted in front of them to confuse the issue.

The figure grinned again, fighting the urge to laugh. That could wait until later, when there was no fear of being accidentally discovered by one of the cops. Moving slowly so as to not draw any attention, the person slipped out of the hiding spot, careful to walk only where the cops had already trampled a path, easing into the deeper, darker woods beyond.

Stalking the fruitless hunters was fun, but there were other, more pressing, things to attend to.

No matter; the game would still be afoot later. Of that, there was no doubt, or his name wasn't Edmund Winslow.

Phillip took a deep breath and squared his shoulders before knocking on the farmhouse door. He hadn't called before coming over, but was certain Olivia was home, since her car was in the driveway. But whether she was in any shape to receive visitors, he didn't know.

A part of him didn't seriously think she'd fallen into the bottom of the bottle. After all, she'd been clear enough on the phone earlier – no slurred words or random ramblings. She hadn't asked him to take care of Francesca along with Emma, and he knew full well that Frank was too busy to take care of his daughter right now. But he also knew how hard old habits were to break in times of stress, and he was worried.

He heard the faint sounds of locks being turned, and then the door opened. Olivia stood in front of him in rumpled sweatpants and a loose long-sleeved shirt, her feet bare of shoes, her face bare of makeup. Her eyes were puffy, but not bloodshot; she looked tired, but not hung over. She looked like hell, but not like the walking dead. Those were all good signs.

She frowned, and he hastened to say, "No, there's no problem with Emma or anything. She got off to school just fine and James is going to pick her up later."

He watched relief flood her face, though she didn't say anything, just turned on silent feet and went back into the living room. He followed her, despite the lack of an overt invitation, pausing to shut and lock the door behind him, then hang his coat on the coat rack. As he turned back towards her, he saw her plop down on to the couch and prop her feet up on the coffee table, and he headed over to sit down next to her.

For a long moment, there was silence. Then Olivia spoke, her tone flat. "I'm assuming this isn't a social call. What do you want, Phillip?"

In a way, he was glad she wasn't going to beat around the bush, but he was still uncertain about jumping right into a patch of thorns. "I wanted to talk about Emma," he started, staring down at his hands.

Feeling a gaze on him, he turned his head and looked up, momentarily taken aback by the flare of anger in Olivia's eyes. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound...or whatever that archaic saying was. Keeping his eyes locked on his not-at-all-happy ex-wife, he said slowly, "I know you're hurting right now, Olivia, even if I don't know exactly what it feels like to be in your shoes. But Emma's hurting, too and needs you to be strong for her. I don't mind having her with us in the mansion for as long as you need, so that you have some time and some space. But her world's been turned upside down; and as much as she loves me and Beth, it's not the same as being here in her own house with her sister and her mom."

He took a deep breath, aware of the tension flooding through the woman next to him. He said gently, "She loves you and needs you, Olivia. As much as you deserve to be selfish here and focus on your own sorrow and your own needs, you can't."

He'd mentally geared himself up for a fight, so was surprised to see the hurt look on her face. "You think this is about me?" she whispered, before turning away from him and leaning back against the back of the couch.

Phillip watched as her eyes slid closed and she brought a hand up to rub at her forehead, like she was warding off a headache. Suddenly unsure of his footing, he asked cautiously, "So what is it about?"

He could barely hear her whisper. "Emma. I'm trying to do what's best for Emma."

The layers of pain and guilt in those quiet words made him realize he'd clearly gotten something wrong. Reaching out, he laid his hand against her arm, not liking the way she jumped at the simple touch. He kept his voice gentle. "What do you think is best for her?"

After a long moment of silence, he saw her shake her head and heard a soft, bitter laugh. "Apparently I have no idea, since you felt compelled to come over and confront me about it."

He had seen many sides to Olivia Spencer over the years and had learned to deal with all of them. But this one he didn't much like. "Cut the pity party, Olivia," he snapped. Then, he softened his tone and said, "Talk to me. What's going on in your head about our daughter?"

He wanted to leave it a more open-ended question, knowing there was a lot more in her head than just the things related to Emma. But now that she was on the defensive, she'd never talk about the rest of it with him. At least not yet. Still, the subject of their daughter gave him a legitimate opening.

Even so, he wasn't surprised when she didn't respond right away. He sat back, mimicking her posture, giving her space to speak in her own time. Long minutes ticked by.

"I tried to talk to Emma last night, when everyone had gone home." Her voice was small in the quiet room. "But she was so withdrawn, so self-contained. She wouldn't say anything, except that she'd be okay."

The pain in her voice was clear, and he ached for her. She continued talking, her words coming slowly. "I'm sad and exhausted and going crazy, Phillip. Emma clearly needs more attention than I have to spare right now. She needs someone who can spend a lot of time with her, who can coax her to open up. I don't know if I can be what she needs right now. God knows I want her to be here with me, so I know she's safe and can see how she's doing. But it's better to have her stay with you, where the focus is all on her, not on Natalia's absence."

One small part of Phillip's mind noted how far Olivia had come in a couple of years. She'd always been a good mother – that had never been in doubt. But she'd spent most of the time that he'd known her focused on herself – her wants, her needs, her appetites, and even on her self-pitying, self-destructive routines. Now, here she was, sacrificing what she wanted to do right by her daughter.

The other part of Phillip's mind was focused solely on the here and now, and the obvious pain of the woman beside him. He turned sideways on the couch and then leaned forward to pull Olivia up and into a hug. It was an extremely awkward angle for him, but when he felt her sit up a little straighter and lean heavily against him, he forgot the twinge of discomfort. He knew there wasn't really anything he could do to help with the situation of Natalia being missing, so he'd do this one little thing that he could.

She trembled slightly in his arms and he murmured, "Oh, Olivia." She didn't seem to be crying, and part of him wished that she would, because she might feel better for venting her feelings. Then again, Emma didn't get her stoic nature out of thin air. Like mother, like daughter.

After a couple of minutes, he felt her pull away, and released her. She opened her mouth and he spoke quickly, cutting her off. "I know that you want to help Emma, and I know how much it must hurt to think that she needs more than you can give her. But I think you're wrong."

He watched her closely and was relieved to see a spark of irritation in her eyes at his words. Good; it meant she wasn't completely stuck inside her own misery. He continued persistently, "Emma's not holding back because you're too preoccupied or aren't spending enough time with her. She's holding back because she knows you're upset and doesn't want to add to your burdens."

He paused then, watching the emotions flit across her face in rapid succession as she processed his words. He could almost tell the exact moment that she realized the truth of the observation. He pressed the point. "Yes, you may have to push a little to get her to talk. But it's not a matter of her feeling neglected by you. It's that she needs to know she's not making things harder for you...a burden shared is a burden halved, and all that."

Absently, he wondered when he'd started thinking in clichés. But he quickly forgot to ponder it when he saw some of the gloom seem to lift from Olivia's face. She looked thoughtful, and then nodded. "I think you're right, Phillip. She would worry about making things harder. I'll talk to her about it today or tomorrow; depending on how things go, I might stop by the mansion. I don't think it'll break through her walls right away, but it will give her time to mull things over."

She paused there and he started to respond, and then thought better of it when he saw the thoughtful look on her face. Her voice was steady. "I'd still like her to stay with you for a night or two, though, Phillip. I do have my hands full right now and am running exhausted...and I know it worries her to see it. She doesn't need that stress on top of everything else in her head."

He nodded, knowing she was right. "Listen, I need to get back to work. I'm sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusions, but I'm not sorry we talked. If there's anything I can do, Olivia, you know you just have to ask."

To his surprise, she leaned over and hugged him. "I'm glad we talked, too. Thank you. And thanks for the offer to help."

He wanted to say more, but didn't know what. So he got to his feet as Olivia did the same. She walked him to the door in silence, opening the door while he shrugged into his coat. He walked outside and stood on the front step for a moment, turning back to face her. "They'll find her, Olivia. I have faith that they will."

He wasn't surprised when her only response was a wan smile. He nodded and she closed the door, and he turned back towards his car.

He could tell she was struggling to stay hopeful, no matter how much she might say all the right things to anyone who asked. The woman was a born realist; she knew the odds as well as anyone. But he knew better than most that miracles could and did happen. And if anyone deserved a miracle, it was Natalia Rivera.

Marina glanced at the clock for the tenth time in as many minutes. Not that it really mattered exactly how late Shayne was in getting home – she'd already had to tell her grandpa that she would be late for her afternoon shift at Company, if she made it at all, because she had to stay home with Henry. She knew from recent experience that it was damned near impossible to get a babysitter on short notice; she'd learned to plan ahead in making arrangements when Shayne wasn't around.

Normally, she would have just brought Henry to the restaurant with her – hell, he'd spent half his life in the kitchen already. But her mom had made some off-handed comment about workplace rules and how children didn't belong in certain settings, and she'd decided it wasn't worth the hassle. Lord knew Eleni wouldn't hesitate to throw her own daughter under the bus and tell the driver to gun it. Marina had learned that the hard way already. In a weird way, though, she was glad that her secret about being a dirty cop was finally out in the open; at least that way, her mom had one less thing to poke at her about.

Of course, it grated on her that everyone in town now looked at her like she had some damned scarlet letter pinned to her front. Half of Springfield had done equally bad things! Hell, they'd done worse things, because for all her faults, she hadn't ever killed a person. And yet she was the big bad wolf. It wasn't fair.

The kitchen door slammed shut and she jumped at the sound. Shayne raised his hands in a gesture that was half-apology, half-alarm. "Whoa. I thought you were at work."

She rolled her eyes. "Kinda hard to go to work when you're an hour late getting home and I have to stay here with Henry." She caught his puzzled look and threw up her hands in exasperation. "Remember...my mom made the big stink about him being in Company...I told you I didn't want her calling Child Welfare on me. We had this conversation, Shayne."

He scrubbed a hand over his face and said softly, "Sorry. I guess I forgot."

She stared at him, unable to believe her ears. "How the hell could you forget? Don't you remember how pissed off I was? Do you ever remember anything I tell you?"

The sharp edge of his voice made her take a step back. "You've spent more than a year taking him to work with you every day, so it's going to take a little while for me to remember that things have changed. Besides, you know I have a lot on my mind right now, Marina."

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her raging emotions. "Oh, how could I possibly forget? Poor little Dinah is on trial...of course that's all you've got energy to think about. I'm so sorry that I expected you to pay any attention to what's going on with me and your son."

That stung him; she could tell by the way he took a half-step back and by the flash of hurt in his eyes. But she was hurting, too. His words were quiet, his tone flatter than she'd expected. "What's going on with you, Marina?"

She fisted her hands, battling to hold back the tide. But she couldn't, and the dam broke. "What do you think? I've been going through hell the past few weeks, and all you have energy to think about is Dinah and that damned trial. I'm here supporting you, raising your son, and all you can think about is her. What about me? All the hell I've dealt with because of DeSilva and Edmund, and it's like you don't even care about how hard it's been for me."

Shayne's eyes flashed. "What the hell are you talking about? I'm still here; I'm still with you, even after finding out that you were a dirty cop, even after finding out that you helped that bastard Winslow escape. By all rights, I should have walked away the minute I found out just how much crap you've pulled over the years."

A part of her was thrilled to see the anger on his face and to know she'd put that emotion there. She felt in control in a way that was rare for her these days. She spat, "The fact that you even think you should have walked away means that you aren't 100% on my side."

She watched him shake his head, heard the annoyance in his tone. "No, it just means that I thought you were above doing something like that. But then I reminded myself that Edmund was blackmailing you and you were trying to protect Henry. And then I felt sorry for you, trying to live up to your dad's expectations and getting too far in over your head to pull out. How dare you accuse me of not being there for you?"

She stepped right up to him, getting in his face. "But you're not, Shayne. Don't you get it? Dinah's a fucking murderer, and you're there by her side like a little faithful puppy. You can't even come home for lunch on time for me. I've made some bad choices and done some bad things, but I've never killed anyone in cold blood. What makes me so much worse than her?"

He was breathing hard, clearly trying to control his reactions. But the color was high in his cheeks and he practically spat his words at her. "She at least had the guts to own up to what she did, to confess to her bad deeds. She didn't spend years trying to cover them up."

Marina raised her hand and slapped him. Hard. She snapped, "And then she ran away, went gallivanting around Europe so she wouldn't be arrested. Again...what makes her any better than me? Hell, what makes anyone in this damned town any better than me? People here are murderers, kidnappers, adulterers, rapists, thieves...and yet I'm the town pariah and everyone else is a saint in comparison."

She was breathing hard and felt the anger starting to fade. Apparently Shayne felt the same; he abruptly stepped to the side, sank down into a chair at the kitchen table, and cradled his head in his hands.

"Marina, I'm sorry. It's just that because you were mixed up with Edmund, it's hard for anyone to forgive and forget, since he's still on the loose and still hurting innocent people. Maybe I haven't been as supportive as I should have been. But Dinah is a friend, and she needs support, too, and I'm not going to turn my back on her."

She sank down into the chair next to him. "You still love her, don't you?"

His voice was a bare whisper. "Maybe. I don't know."

For a long moment, there was silence, except for the pitter patter of little feet as Henry ran around his room upstairs.

At last, Shayne asked, "Do you still love Mallet?"

She sighed softly. "I don't know if I ever stopped."

This time, there was no sound of footsteps as silence settled around them, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the wall.

Marina wanted to keep fighting, wanted to yell and scream and vent all the frustrations that seemed to choke in her throat on a daily basis. She also wanted to hug Shayne and feel him hug her back, and have a moment of peace in the middle of the maelstrom that was her life recently. She didn't know which way to go, what to do.

She started in surprise when she felt strong arms wrap around her from behind. She hadn't even realized Shayne had gotten up from his chair. She leaned back against him, letting herself take comfort in the display of affection, finding that it calmed her inner turmoil in a way she hadn't expected.

"I'm sorry, Shayne. I don't know what came over me. Of course Dinah's your friend and you want to be there for her."

His tone was contrite. "Hey, it's okay. I should have known that spending so much time at the trial might upset you, especially after everything else that's happened. I'm sorry too. I should have remembered you needed me here with Henry."

She half turned in his embrace and looked up at him. "What do we do now? I mean about the whole 'do you still love him or her?' thing."

Whatever response she'd expected, laughter wasn't it. "There's nothing we can do. No matter what we may or may not feel, Dinah and Mallet are still together. But you and I still care about each other, and we still have a son to raise together. Maybe we should just decide to be friends with benefits and not try to make this into something more than it really is."

She nodded, agreeing with him in principle, but feeling like it was yet another piece of her life that had crumbled before her eyes. It wasn't fair. Then again, nobody had ever promised that life was fair.

Before she had time to get too lost in that train of thought, Henry padded into the kitchen and announced he was hungry. She shared a smile with Shayne as he moved off towards the refrigerator to see what he could scrounge up for their growing boy. At least that was one thing that never changed.

"I wish I had more news for you, Auntie O, but we just haven't come up with anything definitive to show where Natalia is or who has her."

Jonathan sighed as he sat back in his chair and looked across the desk at Olivia, watching her process his words. He'd stopped by the Beacon mainly to keep his aunt in the loop – lack of progress aside – but a small part of him wanted to check on her, to make sure she wasn't falling completely to pieces.

There were bags under her eyes and worry lines seemed permanently etched in her forehead. There was a tired slump to her shoulders and she looked smaller than her actual size – her larger-than-life personality nowhere to be found. It worried him, even though he'd expected it. He was just so used to her being strong and in control.

He heard her sigh and watched as she rubbed at her temples. Her voice was surprisingly steady, though. "I know you're all working hard to find her. I really appreciate you keeping me up to date on how it's going."

He started to say something, but stopped short at the distinctive trill of his cell phone ring tone, muffled though it was by being in his pocket. He smiled apologetically at her as he fished it out, not missing the flash of hope in her eyes. He glanced at the caller ID and shook his head, letting Olivia know that it wasn't a call from the station, seeing her slump slightly in her seat at the gesture.

"Hey, Leyla," he said into the phone. "How are you doing?" From the corner of his eye he saw his aunt perk up slightly as she realized who he was talking to.

"Hi, Jonathan. I just wanted to apologize for being so short with you on the phone the other night."

He couldn't help it; he smiled. "It's okay. Don't even worry about it. I know things have been really hard for you. It's a stressful time for everyone; I'm actually here talking to Auntie O about that."

Not that he and Olivia had actually gotten that far, but he wanted to alert Leyla to the fact that he wasn't alone.

"Oh, hey, can I talk to her?"

Expecting a slightly different response, it took him a minute to kick his brain into gear enough to answer, "Sure."

He shifted in his chair, leaning forward to hand the phone to Olivia, who had an eyebrow raised. He couldn't tell if it was a question or a comment, but she took the phone willingly as he settled back into his chair.

"Hi, Leyla. How's everything going with your parents?"

He watched a wry smile flit across his aunt's face as she listened to the answer. Her tone held a note of amusement. "Sounds like it's going better than I would have expected. I've met your parents, remember?"

There was a long pause while she listened to the answer and he futilely wished he could hear both sides of the conversation. Then her expression grew more solemn and she asked, "How are you holding up?"

The pause for her to listen to the answer was fairly short this time, and he suspected Leyla was brushing off the concern. A few moments later, Olivia said, "Of course. Take as much time as you need with your parents. I've got Greg helping out in the daycare center right now, and the banquet staff is being great about covering for him."

He watched her nod at the phone and then heard, "No problem, just give me a call when you're able to come back. Here's Jonathan."

He stretched forward again to take the phone, pressing it up against his ear. "So, gonna be staying in Chicago a while longer?"

He'd meant it as a conversation starter, but he could hear the bristle in her tone.

"I need to be here. I have...I mean, my mom hurt her back and is a bit of a mess. I've got my hands full...you should understand that."

He shook his head slightly, wondering why exactly he always seemed to set her off. "I do understand. Listen, Leyla, I didn't mean to sound like I was questioning you. I know it's tough for you and your family with Natalia being missing. I just want you to be okay."

Her sigh came across clearly over the phone line. *"Look, I don't mean to be so touchy. I just need you...everyone...to give me some space so I can take care of what I need to take care of."*

Taking a deep breath, he tried to keep his voice gentle. "Don't worry about it. Take care of yourself, okay? I'll talk to you whenever you get back to town."

"Okay. And Jonathan..."

Over the phone connection, he heard a faint thud and a dull pounding noise, interrupting whatever she'd been about to say. Instead, she cursed under her breath. A quick "*I've got to go*" and the line went dead.

He flipped his phone shut to find Olivia staring at him, concern written on her face. He just shook his head and said, "She seems like she's under a lot of stress, and I think I must be a safe person for her to be testy with."

It didn't really surprise him when his aunt just raised an eyebrow and said, "I'd be stressed, too, dealing with her parents. I have no doubt her father thinks Natalia being missing is God's punishment or something."

He nodded noncommittally. He honestly hoped that was all it was – the stress of her sister being kidnapped along with the stress of dealing with her narrow-minded parents. Still, she seemed like she wasn't quite herself, and it nagged at him.

"Even so, I'm worried about her."

He looked up in surprise at Olivia's words, seeing the worry in her eyes. Apparently she was picking up on something odd, too. His response was an exhaled, "Yeah."

Then, remembering what all his aunt had on her plate, he added, "I'm sure that whatever's going on, she can handle it. Besides, she's got friends there she can lean on. It's not like she has to deal with everything all alone."

He watched as Olivia considered his words and then nodded, some of the worry draining from her features. He only wished he could convince himself so easily that everything was okay.

Natalia cringed away from the shadow looming over her, but couldn't escape the tight grip on her hair. Her cheek ached from where she'd been slapped, but she was glad for the pain because it chased away some of the lingering foggiess from whatever drug she'd been given.

"You're pathetic."

The hiss was like a snake, poised and ready to strike. The words were venom, burning into her, ready to kill her.

“You deserve to suffer. All the sins you’ve committed, all the people you’ve hurt. You deserve to be judged, to be cast down from your pedestal into the flames. This...here...you brought it on yourself, you meddling bitch.”

Natalia sniffled and tears spilled down her cheeks, both from the painful grip on her hair and the hate in those snarled words. And the worst part was that she did deserve it. She’d hurt everybody she claimed to love. She was weak and pathetic.

She gasped as the hand tightened in her hair, forcing her head to turn towards her captor. The black hoodie made the face below invisible – like Death himself in his long, black cape, only his cold, dead eyes visible. The only thing missing was the scythe. Natalia shut her eyes. She couldn’t stand to look up into that featureless face; she couldn’t get past her fear of her tormentor or the pain from the demons unleashed by the implacable figure.

Without warning, the fingers let go of her hair and then she felt the crack of knuckles against her cheek. Pain blossomed along her jawbone and she tasted blood in her mouth. Unable to keep her balance, she toppled over onto her side on the cold, hard floor. She curled into a ball, trembling.

Once again, the hateful hiss sliced through the air. “Pathetic.”

She didn’t move, didn’t respond, just wrapped her arms around her legs and tried to make herself as small as possible. For a long, long time, the hooded figure stood over her, occasionally prodding her with a booted foot. Then, she heard a mocking “We’ll play again later” before the tell-tale sound of footsteps told Natalia her captor was leaving. Moments later, she heard the metallic clang of a door, and she was once again all alone.

She stayed in her curled position, hugging herself tighter and giving in to her tears.

Today was the first time her captor had hurt her physically. It scared her. Not the pain itself; she could handle that. It scared her that maybe her tormentor was tired of the game and was ready to just kill her and be done with it.

She didn’t know how long she’d been here – the drugs and the lack of light in her cell made it impossible to tell day from night. But she had to believe that Olivia would move heaven and earth to find her, would harass Frank and the police every single day to make sure they kept looking.

Unless Olivia thought she’d run away again.

That thought burned her in a way none of the taunts had. Maybe no one was looking for her; maybe they’d all realized they were better off without her around. After all, she’d

nearly killed Olivia by locking her in that bathroom. She'd broken Frank's heart by not being honest with him – or herself – from the beginning. She'd disappointed her parents and left her sister alone in that apartment with them. She'd hurt Ava by being unable to forgive Jeffrey for his past actions. She'd put her family in danger by pointing that gun at Edmund and making herself a target in the process. She'd raised Rafe without the benefit of a father and then coddled him too much. The list went on and on.

Maybe they'd all finally seen just what a horrible person she really was and were happy to be rid of her. Maybe they were having a party right now, to celebrate that her past sins were coming back to haunt her.

The room began to spin and the walls loomed menacingly over her and the hard floor started laughing at her. She pulled her arms up over her head to shut out the sound, wondering if this was what it felt like to lose your mind.

Josh took a sip of tea, not because he was thirsty, but because it gave him a chance to peer over the rim of his cup at his hostess. He didn't much like what he saw.

It was safe to say he was one of the few people who had seen Olivia at her best, her worst, and every state in between. This wasn't her worst – he still had nightmares about her nearly managing to commit suicide while Puccini's *Tosca* played in the background. But it came close, if only because he hadn't expected to find her like this.

Tired – yes. Stressed – of course. Depressed – well, duh. But this...this was something else. He was facing an anguished, plaintive creature who was dabbing at her eyes with the edges of a napkin, trails of mascara trickling artistically down her cheeks. When she wasn't wiping her eyes, she was wringing her hands helplessly.

When Olivia called him earlier and said she needed to talk, he'd never imagined this scenario playing out. It was what he'd have expected from Reva, honestly. He loved Reva dearly, but no one was better at the scene-chewing, histrionic drama than she was. Well, except old-school Olivia Spencer – the tigress he used to know before Natalia brought out her inner kitten.

Suddenly aware of eyes on him, he self-consciously set his cup of tea down on the kitchen table and sat back in his chair. Olivia sniffled and dabbed at her eyes some more, though he could see from across the table that the paper was soaked through and useless. He reached out and handed her another napkin, which she took with a watery smile.

He narrowed his eyes and didn't bother to disguise his annoyance. "What do you want from me?"

He almost winced at the wounded look she gave him, but didn't back down, folding his arms across his chest. He knew her pain was real, knew she was devastated because Natalia was missing. But this was a production of some kind, and he didn't know what role she'd cast him in – even if he'd been inclined to play along, which he wasn't.

Watching her as closely as he was, he saw the exact moment the mask fell. She was still crying, but started wiping the tears away with the back of her hand, and her expression turned bleak instead of sorrowful. Now this was the real deal.

She looked down at the table top and sighed. "I'm sorry, Josh. I don't know what came over me."

He didn't say anything, just waited. She looked up abruptly, still sniffing, but with a slight quirk of the mouth that told him she got it. He clearly heard the wry note in her voice. "Okay, so I was hoping to play on your sympathy to get you to run interference for me."

Josh smiled slightly, unfolding his arms and leaning forward, reaching out with one hand to wipe away some of the still-falling tears. "What's wrong, Olivia? I mean besides the obvious..."

Her sigh shook her whole body and she slumped forward against the table, her head bowed, her voice subdued. "I'm making everything worse. I think I'm doing the right thing for Emma, sending her to stay with Phillip so she has adults around who can focus on her. Only Phillip comes over to tell me that I'm being selfish."

She laughed bitterly and looked up at him, shaking her head as she said, "Okay, so he didn't understand why I did what I did, but does that really matter? It's what everyone else is going to think, too...that I'm abandoning my baby. They're going to think that when push comes to shove, I put myself above Emma."

He cleared his throat, but didn't get a chance to say anything before she continued talking, her voice thick with sorrow. "I've always been the tough bitch, able to handle everything life throws my way. Run over people before they run over me. I've always been able to keep going, no matter what, and to make sure Emma was taken care of. Now, I'm barely able to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and my daughter's shutting me out. I'm trying to do whatever I can to help her, but I can barely keep myself afloat. I feel like I'm on the verge of losing control."

He could tell the admission scared her, and reached out to cover her hand with one of his. She looked back down at the table top and her voice was so quiet he could barely hear her. "I've never felt a pain like this before. Half the time I feel like a zombie because I'm so cold and dead inside. The rest of the time I feel like I've got a massive fever because the pain and the fear burn through every nerve ending. I...I'm scared and alone, and I don't think I can survive if Natalia is..."

He was out of his chair before the last words choked in her throat, and fell to his knees on the floor beside her. She turned to him, and he pulled her down into his arms and felt the dam burst. His shirt was soaked from her tears and he didn't even want to think about where she was wiping her nose. Still, he was grateful for it. For all her tough exterior, he'd always known there was a fragile, emotional soul underneath. And unlike the crocodile tears from earlier, these were heart-wrenching, soul-shaking sobs. She needed the release.

After a while, he felt her begin to calm in his arms and he whispered, "First of all, no one needs to run interference for you. Phillip knows he jumped to conclusions and he knows you love Emma. Anyone who knows you knows how much you love that little girl. Those who don't know you...well...who cares what they think? They don't matter. Second of all..."

He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat so that he could get the words out. "If the worst does happen, if Natalia winds up dead, you will survive. It won't be easy, but you'll go on. You'll do it for Emma, you'll do it for Francesca, and you'll do it to keep Natalia's memory alive. As long as you live, a part of her will always be with you."

He paused then, holding her tighter as her sobs began anew, rubbing her back soothingly. After a long moment, he said gently, "You've never felt a pain like this before because you've never had a love like this before."

He felt a fresh batch of tears against his shoulder and continued to hold her close, offering what comfort he could. Once she began to settle down again, he said calmly, "I know you're scared and sad. I think it's good that Olivia 2.0 is able to show her feelings so openly and is able to love so deeply. You know I think the changes in you have been for the better. But don't entirely shut out Olivia Spencer 1.0...don't just roll over and give up without a fight."

He wasn't at all surprised when she shoved out of his arms and looked up at him, disbelief and irritation written across her face. Good; that was exactly what he'd hoped for.

She snarled, "What the hell..."

Before she could say more than that, he interrupted, "I know that finding Natalia is a job for the police and the CIA – or whoever Mallet works for these days. There's not much you can do to help with that. What I mean, is don't just sit around wallowing and worrying. There

was a time when you'd have haunted the police station and made Frank's life hell on an hourly basis, when you'd be out waving money at private detectives, when you'd be pulling out all the stops to intimidate your enemies in the hopes that one of them would slip up and show his hand."

She glared at him and her tone was icy. "I've got Francesca to take care of, Emma to reassure, the Beacon to run, and the farmhouse to tend to. There's nothing I can do to make Frank work any harder than he already is. Phillip's already spending money to help with the search, and we already have a good idea who kidnapped Natalia."

She shook her head and pointed her finger emphatically in his direction as she continued, "Even if I had Edmund in my reach, there's nothing I could do to intimidate him. If it's Anna's father who's the kidnapper, well, there's no chance in hell he'd be intimidated by the likes of me." She paused, sighing. "I can't get out there and be the bitch on wheels I used to be, because there's nothing and no one for me to direct that towards."

He reached out and traced the track of a tear as it slid down her cheek. "I know that, Olivia," he said softly. "I just wanted to remind you that there's a fine line between realism and pessimism, between mourning and wallowing, and I don't want you to cross it. It won't do you any good, it won't do Emma and Francesca any good...and more importantly, it won't do Natalia any good."

Her whisper was just the ghost of her breath, but he heard it anyhow. "I don't want to give up, but I don't have the kind of faith Natalia does. I don't know if I have the strength to do this."

He pulled her into another hug, relieved that she didn't resist it, but saddened that she was so pliable, that the anger that had breathed life into her a moment before had sputtered out. "Yes, you do. I know you do. Your strength is the love you have for Natalia and for your daughters."

She pulled away from him again and cocked her head thoughtfully to the side. "Is it really as simple as that?"

He didn't answer right away, remembering his own doubts over the years, the doubts that he'd had to wrestle with even when he served as a minister. Finally, looking her in the eyes, he quoted quietly, "So faith, hope, and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love."

Her eyes filled with tears again, but there was a new lightness in her expression that hadn't been there before. He smiled, just a little.

ACT 3

January 12th

Olivia swore under her breath as she reached for the cordless phone, knocking it off the charger and onto the floor. Shifting her grip on Francesca, who squealed in delight at this fun new game, she bent over to retrieve the handset. She fumbled a bit, but managed to press the talk button and get the phone up to her ear.

“Hello?”

All she heard was the crackle of static, and a chill went down her spine. Could it be Natalia, somehow finding a phone to make a call, but too injured to speak? No; she’d have dialed Olivia’s cell phone number instead. What if it was the kidnapper, calling to taunt her?

A soft whimper sounded in the ear not pressed up against the phone, and she shifted her attention to her daughter. Sweet Pea had obviously picked up on her unease, and the last thing she wanted to do was scare the toddler.

Pressing a kiss to the smooth forehead, she carefully set the little girl down in the playpen near the couch, glad to see that a set of colored blocks immediately caught Francesca’s interest.

Turning her back on her daughter, she growled into the phone. “Hello? Who is this?”

For another long moment there was nothing but static, and then she heard a lightly accented voice. *“Hello, Olivia. Sorry to call out of the blue like this, but I wanted to get a message to you while I could.”*

She closed her eyes and let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Hi, Rafe.”

She’d spoken to him briefly a few days before. But since his unit was on some kind of assignment where phone privileges were very limited, they’d agreed that she’d be the one to call and leave a message if there was any news. Sadly, there wasn’t. She rubbed at the bridge of her nose and asked, “How are you holding up?”

There was a static-filled delay before he responded. *“Okay, I guess. I’m worried about Ma, but the worst part is being all the way over here and feeling helpless.”*

“Join the club,” she muttered, before she could think better of it. The young man had enough on his plate with being in a war zone; she’d sworn to herself that she wasn’t going to confide her worries to him.

She started to say more, intent on distracting him, but she was too slow. His words broke through the static. *“Somehow, I can’t picture you being helpless.”*

Sighing, she turned and glanced down at Francesca, who was busily building something that looked strangely like a hotel. Satisfied that the girl was no longer picking up on her mood, she walked around the couch and sank down into the cushions.

“It’s hard to feel like there’s nothing I can do,” she confessed. “If we had any clues, anything that would lead us to where Edmund’s holed up, I’d be the first in line to kick his ass and make him tell me where Natalia is. But the police have nothing, and all I can do is sit here like some damsel in distress, wringing my hands.”

Through the static, she clearly heard a snort and then uproarious laughter. She actually pulled the phone away from her ear and glared at it, like that would do any good. Putting it back up to her ear, she could still hear laughter, and her tone turned acidic. “I’m so glad my problems are amusing to you.”

Immediately, she heard a *“Sorry”* on the other end of the phone and waited impatiently for the young man to get himself under control. There was a time when he would have found her distress enjoyable, but they’d moved well beyond that. Still, the unexpected reminder of that time – especially with the additional parallel of her partner being missing – brought a fresh stab of pain.

Caught up in old memories of Rafe taunting her, it took her a moment to register that there were words breaking through the static on the other end of the line.

“...just not the damsel in distress type. I mean, maybe it doesn’t feel like there’s much you can do since you’re not a cop and not out there with Frank and those guys. But you can keep the pressure on them to make sure they don’t write Ma off or move the investigation to the back burner; you can send out press releases on a national level; you can lean on your contacts in San Cristobel to see what they know about Edmund’s associates.”

She heard him chuckle as he finished with, *“Hell, you could run off to Mexico again with Rambo Reva Shayne and break into his stronghold.”*

Olivia sat stunned for a minute, realizing that, apart from keeping pressure on the local police and giving Phillip free reign to hire private detectives, none of the other options had occurred to her. Still... “None of that seems like enough.”

Rafe's sigh was clear, even through the static-filled phone line. *"I know it doesn't."*

There was a note in his voice that reminded her of where he was and what kinds of things he'd been doing, and she realized he knew exactly how she felt. She listened intently as he continued, *"But at some point, doing whatever you can, no matter how small it seems, has to be enough. I wish there was something I could do other than stay strong and pray for Ma to come home safe. But I can't, so I do that with my whole heart."*

Olivia felt a lump in the back of her throat. Once again, Rafe had surprised her. But she'd cried enough recently and she didn't want to get all weepy in front of him. She tried to keep her tone light. "We'll be a team and each do our part. You keep the faith for both of us, and I'll hound Frank and the police department to make sure they don't let up for a minute until Natalia is found."

She could almost picture the young man nodding. *"Yes, ma'am. You'll be a hell of a partner. Kick their asses into gear for me, too, okay?"*

"Damn straight."

There was another burst of static on the phone line and then an audible curse. *"Listen, Olivia, I have to go. We're moving out and I need to grab my gear. Hang in there."*

She nodded, even knowing he couldn't see her. "I'll try. You, too. Stay safe."

The call disconnected and she dropped the phone into her lap, rubbing at the bridge of her nose with one hand, thinking. Okay, so maybe she couldn't do much at all in the grand scheme of things to find Natalia and bring her home safely. Maybe it was normal to feel overwhelmed and helpless in such a desperate situation. But there were things she could do, and she would do them with her whole heart.

First and foremost, like Josh had reminded her, she could love her girls and keep them safe, and she could love Natalia and try to emulate her faith in happy endings. Secondly, like Rafe had just reminded her, she could kick asses into gear with the best of them. She knew Frank, Anna, Jonathan, and Remy were working their butts off on the investigation, but there were other people on the case she could hound and harass to ensure they were giving it their all.

That way, even if the worst happened – she swallowed hard and fisted her hands at the thought – she'd know she'd done everything in her power to prevent it. And that would sit better on her conscience than if she'd been sitting around on her hands, waiting.

Olivia Freakin' Spencer was back.

Olivia stood in the doorway of Emma's room in the Spaulding mansion. The door was wide open, but her daughter had her back to it, shoving papers haphazardly into her backpack. She smiled a little at the normalcy of the scene, then lifted her hand and used her knuckles to rap on the door.

"Daddy, it's way too early to leave for school..."

Emma had pivoted to face the doorway as she spoke, and Olivia frowned at the way the girl froze on seeing her. Okay, so her daughter hadn't known she was coming over today, but it still shouldn't have shocked her so much, should it?

For an awful, eternal moment, Olivia lived with the fear that she'd finally fucked things up badly enough to alienate Emma. But then...

"Mommy."

The word was quiet, nearly a whisper. But it was full of need, and sadness, and all the things Emma had been holding inside in recent days. And it was accompanied by a sudden flurry of movement and small arms snaking around Olivia's waist in a tight hug.

Olivia bent down and lifted Emma up in her arms, in a way she hadn't in years. Then, remembering why she hadn't done it – namely because her daughter was too heavy for that – she walked over to the twin bed and sat down, Emma in her lap.

For several minutes, they sat like that; Olivia rocked her daughter gently, while Emma cuddled against her, head nestled on her shoulder. There were no words, no tears, just the rustle of cloth and the sounds of the household below moving about its daily tasks.

"I'm sorry, Jellybean."

She felt the weight of Emma's head lift from her shoulder and looked down to see her daughter staring at her like she'd lost her mind. So she elaborated, choosing her words carefully. "I'm afraid that when I suggested you come and stay with Daddy and Beth, I didn't explain it very well, so you ended up feeling like you were being a burden on me. That's not true at all and I should have made sure you didn't feel that way."

Watching Emma carefully, she saw the faint tremble in the girl's lower lip. A part of her was terrified by this conversation, not sure if she had the tools to help her daughter. Another part was more relieved than words could describe, because she'd been so worried about how closed off Emma had been.

Her daughter's voice was very, very quiet. "You didn't make me feel that way. But you have all those other things to take care of and I didn't want you to worry about me, too. I wanted to come to Daddy's because I knew it would help you."

Olivia's heart broke at those words, even knowing that she should have expected them. Stoicism didn't just come out of thin air, after all. "Emma, I love you, so of course I worry about you. But you're never a burden on me. I didn't send you to Daddy's to help me; I thought maybe it would help you. I just thought maybe it would be easier for you to be here at the mansion instead of at home without Natalia being there."

She felt the tension in the small body nestled against her. "Is it bad that I don't think about Natalia as much here as I do at home?"

Olivia felt tears prick her eyes and hugged her daughter tighter, feeling Emma's head lean on her shoulder again. "No, baby, it's not bad. It's normal, because you're not surrounded by things that remind you of her. It doesn't mean you don't love her."

She could practically feel some of the tension flood out of her daughter at the words. Talking about this wasn't easy, but she was glad that they were able to do it, that Emma was finally opening up to her again. There was silence for several moments, before Emma said quietly, "I miss you and Francesca, but I want to stay here again tonight. Daddy said I can build a snow fort with James after school, and then we're going to have pizza for dinner and he's letting me and Peyton stay up a little late to watch a movie. I just..."

Emma trailed off there, and Olivia finished the sentence for her. "...want to forget the bad things for a little while."

Under different circumstances, she might have laughed at the way Emma pulled out of her arms enough to stare at her incredulously, like she was psychic or something. But she simply smiled at her daughter and said softly, "I understand. We have to keep living...we can't just stop and spend all our time being scared and sad. Natalia wouldn't want us to do that."

She hadn't thought about it in those terms, exactly, but it was true. Her partner wouldn't want them to exhaust themselves with grief, even though there was no way to avoid feeling it and being overwhelmed by it at times. And there was one more thing she needed Emma to understand.

"Jellybean, there's nothing wrong with wanting to forget the bad stuff," she said, trying to choose her words carefully, "But we'll still feel scared and sad a lot of the time...and that's normal. I hope you know you can come and talk to me about whatever you feel, whenever

you need to. Just like when I was really sad yesterday, I talked to Josh. It helped me a lot, because it reminded me that I don't have to carry my sadness all alone."

Emma's eyes were wide. "You did?"

Olivia couldn't help but smile. Yup, her daughter knew exactly how much she held close to her vest. She was reasonably sure no other child on earth would have been that impressed by the simple fact of her mother talking to someone.

"Yes, Jellybean, I did. It was hard, but I felt a lot better afterwards."

She watched Emma carefully. Her daughter had her head cocked to the side, clearly mulling over what she'd said. The girl's tone was thoughtful. "It's kinda like how we're supposed to talk to the doctors about the bad things that happened, isn't it?"

Olivia reached out and ruffled honey-colored hair. "Exactly. Only we stay at home and talk to each other and don't have to go to someone's office."

A giggle greeted that statement and she felt a weight lift from her shoulders. They still had a long road ahead of them and Emma still hadn't opened up that much; but she was showing signs of her old spark, and that was a huge relief. Just as that thought occurred to Olivia, she saw her daughter grow solemn again.

"I'll think about it, okay, Mommy? But...I...not now...like last time...can't..."

There was frustration on the young face, presumably because Emma couldn't find the words to explain what she wanted to say. Olivia ran her fingertips soothingly down her daughter's cheek as she said, "You don't have to say anything if you're not ready, Jellybean. Okay? Just know that when you are ready, when you want to talk, I'll be there."

Olivia saw the flash of relief in hazel eyes and decided to change the subject. She'd explained what she needed to explain, and apologized, after a fashion, for her own misreading of the situation. The door was open for future conversations, but she wasn't going to shove the girl through. The fact that Emma had let down her guard and confessed some of what was in her head was a huge step, and made her think that things would somehow be okay.

Olivia leaned forward and kissed her daughter's forehead. "How about I take you to school this morning and we stop to get some hot chocolate and pancakes on the way?"

Emma's face brightened, but then her brows scrunched in confusion. "But don't you have to get back to Sweet Pea?"

Olivia shook her head. "Nope. I already dropped her off at the daycare. Greg is running it today since Aunt Leyla is still in Chicago."

She didn't miss Emma's conspiratorial grin. "Maybe I should skip building the snow fort and come to the Beacon after school. I can help Greg with the little kids and then practice some of my moves on him."

Olivia smiled back. "I think he'd like that, Jellybean."

Emma gave her a hug and then jumped off her lap and bounced around the room, gathering up her things. Olivia made a mental note to give Greg bonus pay for hazard duty.

A figure in a dark suit sat in a well-camouflaged car, hidden behind overgrown shrubs, binoculars in hand. Despite the darkness of the foliage and the distance from the subjects under observation, seeing clearly was no problem at all. Not with the specialized and expensive equipment in the car.

The police officers seemed to be growing desperate in their search, finding only small bits and pieces of a larger puzzle. It was almost an amateur effort, really, despite having a couple of professionals in the mix. In an odd way, it was quite amusing to watch. At least for someone on the outside looking in, someone who had no investment in a quick solution to the mystery. It wasn't hard to feel some sympathy for the few competent investigators in this two-bit town, or to imagine how frustrated they must be with their colleagues.

The figure smiled grimly.

Continuing to watch this farce wasn't strictly part of the job, but it never hurt to know what the adversary was up to, even when they didn't seem remotely close to stumbling across anything important. The trick of being successful in any endeavor was to never, ever relax, to never let down the protective guard.

Of course, it was truly quite difficult to take the police in this town seriously, particularly after watching them for a while. It would be a miracle if they could solve a case even with the clues staring them in the face. Trying to unravel the current set of tangled threads and figure out which had significance was simply beyond their capabilities. Even though the team currently out in the field had the only real professionals on it, their chances of success were slim, at best, with only having fools for helpers.

The figure chuckled slightly, then put down the binoculars and rolled up the dark-tinted window. The car started quietly and then slowly crept down the faint path of tire tracks cutting their way through the slowly melting snow. There was other business to attend to; remaining out here any longer was pointless.

That much was a fact, or his name wasn't Hung Feng Li.

“Hey, Mom.”

Olivia looked up from her paperwork to see Ava standing in her office doorway. She smiled at her daughter. “Come on in, honey. Give me just a sec to finish signing this contract.”

She refocused on the page in front of her, vaguely aware of the shuffling sounds indicating that Ava was moving through the office and taking a seat in front of her desk. Finishing up the last signature with a flourish, Olivia set the stapled document in her outbox and folded her hands on top of her desk. She looked at her daughter, who was studying her curiously.

Ava blew out a breath and then asked, “So, uh, why did you want to see me, Mom?”

Olivia felt herself tense at the uncertain note in her daughter’s voice. She hastened to reassure her. “It’s nothing bad. Honestly. And it’s nothing to do with work or anything like that. I just thought maybe you’d want to go out and have lunch with me today.”

“Um...I guess...why?”

Was it her imagination, or was her daughter fidgeting? What in the world? Oh right. She took a deep breath. “Look, Ava, I know I’ve been kind of a basket case lately, and I’m sorry if you feel like you have to walk on eggshells around me.”

The sharp shake of a dark head was too quick to have been rehearsed. “You don’t need to apologize, Mom. Seriously. You’ve been handling things a lot better than most of us would.”

Olivia managed a smile, the words making her feel a little better. “Thanks, honey. So what do you say? Want to head out to Company or Towers? I’m paying.”

She was struck by the way her daughter couldn’t quite look her in the eye, the way Ava’s thumb rubbed against her forefinger where her hands were sitting in her lap. The young woman’s words were halting. “I guess I could take time for that. If you really want to, I mean. It’s just...it’s...I’ve got some things I need to do today. I was going to work through lunch and leave around one to go take care of...stuff. Errands, I mean.”

Her daughter never had mastered the art of lying to her face. Well, actually, Olivia was sure she wasn't lying about planning to work through lunch and needing to leave early. But she was damn sure Ava wasn't going to be out running errands; there was no reason in the world for her to temporize and evade about something so mundane.

Olivia reached up and rubbed the bridge of her nose. She wanted to come right out and ask what was going on, but wasn't sure she had the energy to deal with a verbal fencing match. "It's no big deal. I just thought it would give us some time together."

She intentionally left the statement open-ended, waiting to see what kind of answer she would get. It wasn't any of the ones she expected. Ava practically jumped to her feet and all but sprinted to the door. "Thanks, Mom. Maybe tomorrow, okay?"

Olivia barely had time to nod before her daughter was out the door. She leaned back in her office chair. What the hell was that?

Come to think of it, Ava had snuck out of the office a few times in the past several days, being evasive when anyone asked what she was doing. Olivia hadn't thought anything of it at the time, being so caught up in her own misery and worry about Natalia. But now that she was feeling a little...not better, not exactly, but stronger, she could see a pattern and see how unusual it was. Ava was definitely her mother's daughter, which meant work was always a priority. It was more than a little odd for her to be neglecting it. Especially under the circumstances.

After all, Ava and Natalia weren't particularly close, even though they were on much friendlier terms now than they had been for a while. While she had no doubt that her daughter was worried about the missing woman, Ava's way of showing her concern would be to throw herself into work, to take as much of that burden from Olivia as she could. This wasn't like her at all.

Olivia rubbed the bridge of her nose again, half-tempted to go track her daughter down and badger her for answers. But maybe the young woman just needed some space to deal with all the chaos and stress of life in Springfield these days. Whatever was going on, Olivia knew there wasn't anything she could do about it until Ava was ready to open up and talk about it. With her stubborn streak, pigs might well fly before that happened.

Decisively, Olivia pushed up out of her chair. Okay, so she'd just find someone else to have lunch with. Doris was probably over watching Dinah's trial, and Anna was probably out hunting for clues. But she might be able to cajole Buzz into taking off his apron and sitting down for a bite. Or hell, if she couldn't, Blake probably could turn on the charm and coax him to take a break. Buzz would be good company – sympathetic without being maudlin. That was what she needed.

She headed out of her office, telling Keira she'd be out for the rest of the day, but to call if anything important came up. Her assistant, used to this routine, just nodded. Olivia headed down the hallway towards the elevator, catching a glimpse of a dark head ducking out of sight around a corner. It wasn't Ava – the figure was too short and stocky for that – but it caught her off guard nonetheless, bringing her uncertainties to the surface again.

She shook her head. Great, just what she needed. One more person to be worried about.

Mallet sat at the counter at Company, sipping his mid-afternoon coffee, watching Marina out of the corner of his eye. He hadn't spent much time around her since arriving back in town – partly because he'd been busy, and partly because he didn't want to upset her. She seemed happy enough with Shayne, raising his son, and he didn't want to intrude on her life. Especially since he was the one who'd walked away from her in the first place.

At the time, he'd thought he was doing the right thing, stepping out of the picture to let Henry be raised by his real father. But now that he was back in Springfield, not distracted by the glamour of Europe and the excitement of living with such an unpredictable woman as Dinah, he realized just how silly and selfish he'd looked. After all, Olivia was raising Frank's child as her own, and no one seemed to think it was bad for little Francesca. Frank was still a part of his daughter's life. Just like Shayne could have been a part of Henry's life while Mallet and Marina raised him.

Mallet took another sip of coffee, shaking his head at his stupidity. He felt a familiar presence beside him and turned to see Marina standing next to him, coffee carafe in hand, smile on her face. He smiled back and raised his cup. She topped off his coffee and then stepped back around to the other side of the counter. She set the carafe on the hot plate of the coffee maker and turned back to him. It was so reminiscent of old times that it almost took his breath away. There was a part of him that missed her, missed the quiet life they'd had together.

He studied her, taking in the bags under her eyes and the thinner lines of her face. The revelation of her being a dirty cop had come as a shock to all of them, and he could see that the stress of the whole thing had taken a toll on her. She looked exhausted, haunted.

He felt a sudden surge of sympathy for her. He'd always known how much she adored her father, how much she needed his approval. It wasn't hard to imagine her getting sucked in to evidence tampering to close her cases quickly and make her father proud. It still bothered him that she'd helped Edmund escape, but then again, the madman had been blackmailing her. While Mallet didn't condone murder, there was a tiny part of him that

wished Jeffrey O'Neill had been a better shot. At least that way, Winslow would be out of their lives for good, no longer able to terrorize Springfield.

He shook himself out of his thoughts when he realized Marina was staring at him, clearly concerned about his woolgathering. He mustered up a smile at the worried look in her eyes and started to say something, only to stop with his mouth hanging open when she suddenly glanced over his shoulder and tensed. A scant second later, he recognized the sound of the bell over the door and turned to see Eleni Andros stride into the room. He glanced back at Marina, who gave him a tight smile and then headed briskly into the kitchen.

Mallet knew how much Marina despised her mother for walking out on her. Heck, he found the woman difficult to deal with, and he only had to work with her, not live with her. Still, he'd hoped that they'd managed to rebuild some bridges now that Eleni was back in town for good and dating Frank.

He practically jumped in surprise when Eleni sat down next to him, her gaze trained on the door her daughter had just disappeared through. Trying to smooth it over, he said, "She'll come around. Just give her time."

Her response was a disbelieving snort. Yeah, he didn't blame her there. After all, Marina didn't get her fiery temper out of thin air. Like mother, like daughter.

But as if to prove him correct, the kitchen door opened and Marina came out, heading for the counter. She wasn't smiling, but she was at least polite as she took her mother's order, and then headed back to the kitchen.

Mallet sipped his coffee, somewhat at a loss for words. He didn't want to get sucked into shop talk about the Natalia Rivera case. They were just spinning their wheels, with no new leads to go on, and the mere thought of the confusing mess made his head ache. Luckily, Eleni's mind was on something else.

"Do you have any news on how Dinah's trial is going?"

He took another drink of coffee, the unexpected question leaving him wondering what she was really asking. Marina came out of the kitchen again and busied herself with filling napkin holders behind the counter. He watched her for a minute, buying some time to ponder the question. At long last, the gears clicked into place. He glanced at Eleni and answered, "The defense is poking holes in all of the evidence the prosecution presents, but they're not pressing too hard to suggest the information in the file was tampered with or that the evidence itself was contaminated."

Not that he wanted to think too hard about that, knowing that he was one of the people who had handled some of the John Doe/Edmund Winslow evidence improperly.

He heard Eleni's soft sigh. "I can't imagine why not. I mean, what exactly are they waiting for?"

Well, that was the twenty-five thousand dollar question if he'd ever heard it. "Beats me."

Eleni swiveled on her stool, turning to face him. He heard the conviction in her tone. "I believe very strongly in the law and in punishing people who break it. Clearly, Dinah intended harm to someone she thought was Edmund Winslow. But given what kind of man he is and that she was acting in an effort to stop him...maybe this is one time when we ought to take the circumstances into account."

Mallet blinked, trying to digest her words. Granted, he wanted Dinah freed for his own reasons. But was she really saying...?

Before he could ask, he heard an indignant, "I don't believe you!"

He glanced back at Marina, who had stomped over to them, her face red with anger, her hands fisted at her sides. She shook her head, her words acidic. "You treat me like I'm the worst criminal ever for tampering with files, and yet you want a confessed murderer to go free? She skipped the country to avoid getting arrested because she knew she was guilty!"

He could hear the answering bite in Eleni's voice as she turned to face her daughter. "Maybe she did kill someone. But at least she was trying to protect Henry, not to mention the rest of the town, from that madman."

He gaped incredulously at those words, his eyes still fixed on Marina, who was glaring at her mother. Her voice dripped with venom. "Are you fucking serious? Why the hell do you think I blackmailed the social worker...you know, that big thing that got me in too deep with Edmund to get out again? It was to keep Henry safe! My God, you can understand and forgive everyone else for what they do wrong, but nothing I do is ever right."

Eleni snapped, "Don't be so damned dramatic! Not everything in this world revolves around you."

Mallet winced at that low blow.

Marina slammed her fist down on the counter, anger lacing her tone. "Is that really what you think? Seriously? Believe me, I know that where you're concerned, nothing in this world revolves around me. Let's face it, Mother; if I were on trial for the exact same thing as

Dinah, you'd be the first one to say they should hold me accountable. If I'd been kidnapped like Natalia, you'd be scolding Dad for putting in too many hours on the case, not worrying about my wellbeing the way everyone in town is freaking out about little Miss Mary Poppins."

Eleni slapped her hand down on the counter and interrupted, "Well, maybe if you stopped blaming me and everyone else for your own problems, I wouldn't have to push so hard for you to take responsibility!"

But Mallet could tell Marina hadn't heard a word her mom said, intent on finishing her interrupted speech. The words tumbled out of her mouth in a breathless rush. "Hell, if I'd been one of Edmund's victims at the wedding massacre, you'd only notice because I was lying on your damned autopsy table!"

With that, Marina stormed off...not back into the kitchen, but out the front door.

Mallet turned in his seat to watch her go, whistling under his breath. He'd never seen her so angry. Then again, he'd never seen her interact with her mom before, and it was clear that something about Eleni seemed to bring out the worst in her daughter.

He glanced back at Eleni, who seemed shell-shocked, staring down at the countertop and shaking her head. She muttered, "Is that really what she thinks, that I don't care about her, that I don't notice her? I've tried to start over with her, but she won't let me. She's still stuck in the past."

He felt a surge of sympathy. "Listen, Eleni, I know this is none of my business. But I know Marina. You can't just tell her you're sorry, you have to show her. And with all due respect, with the way you went digging into old files and exposing her secrets, what you said to her was at odds with what you actually did."

Okay, so he didn't really know whether that was entirely accurate or not, since he hadn't been around when Eleni came back to town. But based on what he'd seen so far, it seemed like a good guess. Given the surprised look in her eyes, the thought hadn't even occurred to her. Her words only confirmed that. "But that was me doing my job. It didn't have anything to do with her."

Mallet shook his head. "Maybe to you. But what would you think if the first thing your estranged mother did when she got to town was start going over your old paperwork, looking for problems?"

He held up a hand when he saw Eleni start to protest. He tried to keep his tone even, neutral, as he continued, "I know that's not why you started digging deeper; I'm just saying

that's what it might have looked like to her. Look, I'm not saying she doesn't have any blame here, because she can hold a grudge with the best of them. I'm just saying there's another perspective here than how you're seeing things."

She stared at him for a long moment, her expression unreadable as various emotions flitted across her features. Finally, defeat won, and she visibly slumped on the barstool. "So what do I do to try and make this right?"

He was silent for a long moment. "Right now, there's nothing you can do. Just give her time."

Natalia leaned her back against the wall and drew her knees up to her chest. She wrapped her arms around her legs and cradled her chin on her knees. A shiver racked her body and she hugged herself tighter.

She was cold, exhausted, and scared.

Her head ached and felt like it was stuffed with cotton, but that was a definite improvement. At least she finally felt halfway lucid, mostly able to tell what was real and what wasn't. The misty, ever-shifting dreamlike state she'd been in since the time of her capture had been terrifying.

Her memories weren't entirely clear – or reliable – but they haunted her. Even telling herself over and over that she'd been drugged, that she must have been hallucinating, didn't make the images any less disturbing, the accusations any less harsh. All her past sins had marched through her mind, refusing to let her ignore them, reminding her of how flawed she was. She wasn't worthy of anyone's respect. After all, if she hadn't done so much damage, hurt so many people, she wouldn't have driven someone to kidnap her. It was a punishment for her wicked deeds, as her father had often said whenever he'd disciplined her.

She must have brought this on herself, as her tormentor pointed out time and time again.

She still didn't know who was keeping her captive. The kidnapper had taken to wearing a mask recently; or maybe had been wearing one all along and she'd only noticed it now, as the drugs began to wear off. Natalia had fought back the last time her captor came into her cell, had tried to reach up and pull the mask off, to see the face underneath. That had only earned her a hard kick in the ribs and her wrists being bound again for several hours.

Reflexively, she loosened her grip on her legs and rubbed absently at first one wrist, then the other. Her skin was raw in spots from the rope, and what wasn't raw still ached.

Another shiver ran through her and she stopped rubbing her wrists, once again hugging her knees tightly to her chest, trying to warm herself. She rocked slightly in place, moving carefully so as not to aggravate her sore ribs, hoping the motion would help warm her. It didn't take long before the chill in her bones started to fade.

If only she could chase away the chill in her heart and soul so easily.

She'd tried to pray every time she'd had a lucid moment in her drugged state, but it had given her no comfort. It had been like opening herself up to a vast, endless darkness. Not even the faintest glimmer of light had broken through. She'd felt like she was standing on the edge of a chasm, a vast, dark crack in the earth below, unable to see the bottom. It had been – and still was – terrifying to face that abyss and feel alone, to feel no hint of the God who'd walked hand-in-hand with her since she was a child.

Taking a deep breath, Natalia closed her eyes and opened her soul and walked through the familiar rituals of prayer, murmuring under her breath. She hugged herself more tightly at the feel of the dark emptiness, the lack of Presence. It was just her in that emptiness, alone with her demons.

Abruptly she opened her eyes, tears stinging them. But even the faint light in her cell couldn't chase away the lingering fear. It only amplified it. God was too far away for her to find, and the faces of everyone she'd ever wronged swarmed around her like a parade of ghosts – fingers wagging at her accusingly, mouths twisted in anger, eyes gleaming with hatred.

She shrank in on herself, trying in vain to hide. She whispered, horrified, "I never meant to hurt anyone. I'm so, so sorry for what I've done."

The faces disappeared, as if puffs of smoke borne away on the wind, leaving her alone. She deserved to be alone; she'd been deserted by God and wasn't worthy of anyone's time or attention. She had to atone for her sins; she wasn't worthy of love.

But Olivia loved her.

That thought made her open her eyes wider. Olivia had seen her at some of her worst moments, had seen the badness she was capable of, and yet for some reason, still loved her. She could almost hear her lover's chiding voice in her mind – *We all make mistakes because we're human, Natalia; but you're a good person with a good heart.*

The familiar, slightly wry tone she heard in her head sent an ache through her. She wasn't sure she was worthy of her partner's love, not right now, but she'd give anything to be back home – safe and sound with Olivia and their children.

Well, no, not anything. She'd willingly live out the rest of her days, trapped in this hell, if it ensured that Olivia, Emma, Francesca, Ava, and Rafe would be safe.

It might even be appropriate penance.

Her mind was set to wander back through dark places when she thought she heard a soft thump against the ceiling. Instantly she froze, muscles tensed, ears perked, listening. That was a noise she'd heard before, usually before her captor came to taunt her. Several long moments passed and there was only silence – no footsteps, no sounds that indicated motion.

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding and consciously uncurled herself, straightening her legs on the hard floor and leaning her back against the wall. She closed her eyes, taking deliberate, measured breaths to control the wild beating of her heart.

Casting around for something to help calm her, her thoughts drifted again to Olivia. She fought the urge to break down and cry as she thought about her lover, her best friend. Strong. She had to be strong. She had to be strong for Olivia, to survive until she could make her way back home again. She couldn't fall apart. She had to keep fighting. But it was so hard, and she felt like she was hanging on by her fingernails.

She took a deep breath and focused on picturing Olivia's face, the familiar features soothing her. She took comfort in the mental image of the woman she loved, the woman who loved her, flaws and all. Natalia wasn't sure what she'd done to deserve someone as wonderful as Olivia Spencer. All she knew was that she was grateful beyond measure for such a gift.

Holding thoughts of Olivia close, her racing heart began to calm and her fear slipped away for the moment. Her muscles slowly began to relax and she felt the fog of sleep drifting through her mind.

Exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally, she let go, letting sleep claim her, the thoughts of her lover blanketing her.

Driving along, Josh saw Olivia's car parked on a side street and made a sudden, un-signaled right turn that left the motorist behind him honking wildly. He ignored it, since the little old lady should have stopped at the stop sign instead of following him straight through. Two wrongs might not make a right, but they meant that if she had hit him, she'd have been at fault.

He pulled in behind the white Nissan and chewed on his lower lip. This wasn't familiar territory and he wasn't quite sure what Olivia would be doing down here. Especially since she'd been so distraught the day before, to the point where he'd planned to stop by and check in on her later today to see if he could irritate her into getting out and about.

Climbing out of his car, he shut the door behind him and glanced around the building fronts. They appeared to be a combination of derelict apartment buildings and shabby warehouses. He wondered if Olivia had gotten a tip on some disreputable place where Edmund Winslow was hiding out. He cracked his knuckles. If so, he sure as hell wanted a piece of the madman. Assuming he could figure out just which one of the dilapidated buildings his quarry was in...

Suddenly, a door marked "Shelter Donations" opened and Olivia walked out, a nun trailing closely behind her. Josh blinked in surprise before managing to paste a smirk onto his face, and then walked over to join the duo.

Olivia must have read his amusement because she rolled her eyes at him. But her tone was perfectly even. "Josh, this is Sister Anne. Sister Anne, this is my friend Josh."

He tipped his head forward respectfully and held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Sister." The nun had a firm grip and a pleasant smile, and he warmed to her immediately.

"Likewise." There was a brief pause before Sister Anne looked over at Olivia and said, "I'll just get the last container out of your trunk." The nun smiled at them both before walking over to the car.

Josh opened his mouth to ask the obvious question, but shut it when Olivia shot him a barbed glare.

"No, I'm not turning into a church lady or anything," she declared, her tone daring him to disagree. She continued, "But I've gotten to know Sister Anne, and she really has helped me – and Natalia – deal with some of the religious issues that have come up during our relationship. She's become an advisor and friend, and she does good work down here at the shelter."

He smiled. "I don't know why, but I'm relieved that you haven't gone off the religious deep end in your old age."

He wasn't quite prepared for the way she stepped forward and lightly cuffed the side of his head. "Watch who you're calling old."

Rubbing his head, he rolled his eyes at her and mock-complained, "Ouch!" She merely laughed at him; after a moment, he gave up and joined in. "Alright, you win," he conceded. "I have to admit I'm glad to see you out and about today. And donating items to the shelter, no less."

He was puzzled when a dark cloud suddenly came across her face. Her voice trembled, just a little. "I...Natalia baked some cookies for the shelter guests before she...like she really needed to be doing that before our ceremony...but you know how she is..."

Josh mentally kicked himself and reached out to run a soothing hand down her upper arm as she stared off into the distance. But she shook her head and seemed to rally herself. "I'd put them in the freezer, you know, after she went missing. Just seemed like I needed to hold on to whatever I could of her..."

His heart ached as she faltered, but he was impressed when she picked up her train of thought quickly, her voice stronger now. "But the people here can't wait; they need help and food today. Natalia can bake more cookies when she comes home. Or Emma and I can bake them on her behalf if we have to."

He'd been so intent on Olivia that he literally jumped when he heard Sister Anne's voice coming from beside him. "That's what it means to have faith. It's not waiting for a specific outcome, like having Natalia as the baker, but trusting that there will be more cookies, somehow, someway."

Despite the seriousness of the topic, Josh couldn't help but laugh at the analogy. "I see why Olivia likes you. You've got a very commonsense approach to theology."

Sister Anne simply shrugged. "Religion isn't just about the Mystery and Might; it's also about how to live daily life in community with one another."

The former minister in him had his interest piqued, and when Olivia waved her hands around in the air, Josh was certain she'd picked up on his reaction. Her words confirmed it. "No, no, no. The two of you will have to save the theology discussion until after I leave."

"Off to see how things are going at the Beacon?" he asked.

He was surprised when she shook her head. "No, I was there this morning, getting caught up on my inbox. I'm going to check in with the police department. It's time to make a nuisance of myself and see if they've got any new information. I'm also going to hunt down Mallet and make damn sure he knows that if he takes weeks on end to decipher any clues they do happen to get, I'll whack him upside the head with Francesca's stroller."

Josh glanced to the side to see if the sudden tinge of anger in Olivia's tone had shocked the nun. But Sister Anne just stood there impassively, a tiny hint of a smile on her lips. He wondered if she was as relieved to see the outburst as he was. Now that was the Olivia Spencer he knew – ready to kick ass and take names.

Her mention of Mallet reminded him of something else, and before he knew it, he'd turned back toward Olivia, saying, "If only Dinah had gotten the right guy, none of this would have happened."

There was a spark of something in those green eyes – it might have been amusement or it might have been irritation. He couldn't really tell. Olivia's words didn't clarify it either. "You're right. Maybe I need to go yell at Dinah for a while, too."

Knowing just how capricious her moods could be, he held out a hand to stop her as she turned to walk away. "Now, Olivia..."

She turned back and smiled mischievously at him. He just shook his head, chuckling. She chuckled for a moment, too, before her smile faded. Her words were earnest. "No, I'm not going to go off on Dinah. But I'm definitely going to the police station. Gotta make sure those clowns don't butcher yet another case. You know how they are."

There was anger smoldering in her eyes, and he felt like he should counter it somehow, but God knew, there was nothing he could say to that. Well, there was one thing. "Yes, I do. Just don't expect me to be a character witness if you get yourself arrested for assaulting an officer."

She raised an eyebrow. "I won't. That's what I keep Phillip around for."

He choked with laughter as she turned and said goodbye to Sister Anne before heading back to her car, leaving him standing there with the nun. He followed the Nissan with his eyes as Olivia drove off, and then turned back to the Sister. Her words caught him off-guard.

"It's good to see her angry. It means she's finally thinking again, not just reacting. It was a pleasure to meet you, Josh, but I need to get back to work."

He bid her adieu, watching as she walked back to the door. She certainly wasn't what he would have expected, that was for sure. But he had to agree with her assessment of Olivia's anger. Even if he half-expected to get a phone call about bail money later...

Anna took another sip of coffee, grateful that she'd stopped by Company on the way in to the office instead of settling for the usual PD sludge. She was glad that Frank and Mallet had called another meeting to compare notes and go over the bits of evidence their search teams had found in recent days, but she couldn't help but feel antsy, wanting to get back out and do something.

She heard Frank clear his throat and quickly glanced around the room to see that everyone was finally there – Mallet, Remy, Eleni, Officers Johnson, Tyson, and Baird, and Jonathan and Cyrus, who'd been specially deputized to help in the investigation. She turned her attention back to the police chief, watching as he ticked off points on his fingers.

"The good news is that each of our teams has found some bits of evidence that point to possible culprits in the kidnapping. The bad news, of course, is that we still haven't turned up any sign of Natalia. As we all know, the longer she's missing..."

Anna felt a surge of sympathy when he had to swallow hard before finishing with "...the smaller the chance that we'll find her alive."

She understood his reaction. She felt that same sick feeling in the pit of her stomach every time she thought about that possibility. A quick glance at Jonathan and Remy told her that they both felt the same way she and Frank did. Cyrus, Eleni, and the three junior officers looked sympathetic, but not overly upset, which made sense since they didn't really know Natalia at all. She studied Mallet for a moment, wondering why he always seemed to wear the same expressionless expression. Not for the first time, she wondered if his face was a mask or if he really was as devoid of deep thoughts and emotions as he seemed.

With an effort, she turned her attention back to Frank, who was winding up whatever he'd been saying. She had a feeling she hadn't missed much as he nodded towards Remy, who stood up and laid some plastic evidence bags in the middle of the table.

Frank continued, "We all know about the initial evidence that Eleni and her techs found at the farmhouse. Even though none of those bits and pieces pointed to a specific suspect, they strongly suggested that Natalia was kidnapped. The traces of phenil...pheno...that drug makes it pretty clear that she didn't leave of her own free will. So far, we haven't found any evidence to the contrary, so we've been focused on finding who took her."

Anna fought the urge to pipe up and ask him to get on with it. She admired his dedication to this case, but going over the same old information every time they had a meeting was getting on her last nerve. Thankfully, he seemed to pick up on her impatience, gesturing to the bags at the center of the table.

“My investigating team found these items in various spots in the woods near the farmhouse – places where we now know Edmund was prowling around in the months prior to the shooting at Rick and Mindy’s wedding. There are labels from Mexican cigars, a handkerchief monogrammed with an ‘EW,’ and a collection of pesos. Given that we know he has a headquarters in Mexico, it seems logical that these items are his and it suggests that he is the kidnapper.”

Anna glanced at Frank’s team – Mallet, Remy, and the three junior officers. The junior officers all looked pleased with their boss’ summary. Mallet looked like he usually did, but was nodding in agreement. Remy had a guarded look on his face, and she knew him well enough by now to realize that he wasn’t at all convinced by the evidence, but wasn’t in the mood to challenge his boss. Once again, she felt a surge of pride in the detective she was trying to mentor. If she could just keep him away from Frank’s influence, he’d actually be a good investigator.

She looked over at her team – Eleni, Jonathan, and Cyrus – waiting to see if any of them would say anything. Eleni caught her eye and quickly shook her head; Anna sighed, but couldn’t blame the woman for not wanting to outright contradict her boyfriend. Cyrus just shrugged, and she couldn’t blame him either, since he wasn’t an actual cop. Jonathan canted his head to the side, studying her for a moment, and then nodded slightly.

She sat back slightly in her chair as Jonathan said, “I agree that these things could point to Edmund. But none of them are conclusively his. The handkerchief is the strongest piece of evidence, and yet he’s not the only person in the greater Springfield area with those initials. Besides, there’s no way of telling how long these items were out there. Like you said, he was lurking around before the wedding fiasco. He could have dropped these things at that time.”

Anna saw Frank’s frown and knew he was about to object. She spoke quickly. “Jonathan’s right. There’s no way to tell whether Edmund’s been anywhere near the farmhouse recently. For all we know, he left town – even the country – after he escaped.”

She didn’t really believe that Edmund had disappeared entirely, but she also wasn’t convinced that he was the kidnapper. She heard Frank sigh and watched him shake his head before conceding their point. He leveled his gaze on her and asked, “So what have you come up with?”

Anna nodded at Jonathan, who placed another set of evidence bags in the middle of the table. She smiled at him and then said, “These items were all uncovered near the house rented by the hospital orderly, who we presume was hired by my father to assist in Edmund’s escape. What we’ve found does seem to point to my father.”

She gestured to each of the bags in turn as she presented her case. “The first is a store receipt for duct tape, rope, bottled water, and candy bars, dated the day before Natalia’s disappearance. The second is a torn piece of paper with a few partial words on it...we can make out ‘San Cri’ and ‘reven’ and ‘ung’. Our best guess is that the missing words are San Cristobel, revenge, and Hung Feng Li. Finally, we have a cast of a boot print which matches a partial boot print found in the woods behind the farmhouse a few days after Natalia disappeared.”

She watched as the bags were passed from person to person. Her team’s evidence was slightly stronger than the evidence found by Frank and Mallet’s team, she knew, but it was still far from conclusive. Certainly, it wasn’t a smoking gun.

Remy echoed her thoughts as he piped up for the first time. “Unless we know who owns the boot that made that print, it doesn’t point to anyone in particular or prove that the person was the kidnapper. And you’re only guessing at what the torn paper says.”

Anna sighed, not at all surprised by him seeing the obvious problems. Before he could point to the third bag, she offered, “We did go and check at the store listed on the receipt. We’d hoped to get some footage from their security tape for the day and time printed on the receipt, to help us figure out who purchased the items. Unfortunately, they’d already taped over it. We talked to the clerk who was at the cash register at the time, but she couldn’t seem to recall what she’d done earlier that day, let alone what had happened several days before. She did sit down with a sketch artist; but as you’ll see, the picture is somewhat generic.”

She nodded at Eleni, who reached into a folder and pulled out a sketch that was quickly passed around the table. If the situation weren’t so serious, Anna might have laughed when Frank scowled at the picture and said, “The only thing it tells us is that our kidnapper likes oversized hoodies. My God, you can’t even tell for sure that it’s a man, let alone what ethnicity he is.”

Anna sighed and reached for her cup of coffee, taking a healthy swallow. Setting the cup back down, she put her elbows on the table, leaning forward. “Let’s face it, Chief. We’ve all got a whole lot of nothing conclusive. You have things that suggest Edmund’s involvement; we’ve got things that suggest my father’s involvement. It’s possible they’re both working together, and it’s equally possible that we’re barking up the wrong tree.”

When Mallet cleared his throat, she looked up at him in surprise. He looked and sounded puzzled. “Why would either of them kidnap her themselves?”

Frank gaped at Mallet in disbelief, and for once Anna was in complete agreement with him. She could hear the incredulous note in the chief’s voice. “Well, Edmund has a grudge

against half the town, and Olivia Spencer is definitely in his sights. He killed Emma's nanny and vandalized the farmhouse. Not to mention the fact that Natalia picked up a gun with the intention of shooting him. Anna's father has worked for Winslow and the royal family for years; he'd be the first to take action to protect Edmund from a perceived threat."

Anna watched Mallet shake his head, and she jumped in to bolster Frank's words. Or, more accurately, to fill in the blanks and answer the question that had been asked. "Edmund doesn't have DeSilva or Marina working for him any more. We know from Marina's lie detector test that she hasn't seen Edmund since his escape from the hospital. Cyrus managed to track down DeSilva in Peoria, and while he wasn't exactly cooperative, both his boss and a neighbor vouch for the fact that he hasn't left the area in the past two weeks. While it's possible that Edmund still has henchmen around to do his bidding, there's been no sign of activity like there was the last time he had people in town. Everything points to one or both of them, no other helpers."

If anything, Mallet looked even more confused. "No; I mean, I know all that. What I mean is, are they the only ones with a motive to kidnap her?"

Anna couldn't help it; she rolled her eyes. Hadn't he read the initial case reports? Well, she mentally amended, maybe he hadn't. After all, he was here to check into the tainted evidence and make sure that the Springfield PD was once again on the straight and narrow. He'd only started helping out on this case when it became obvious that they were running into nothing but dead ends. She glanced around the table and saw that she wasn't the only one who'd had that reaction – Cyrus and Jonathan were both smirking and Remy was shaking his head.

Luckily Frank had, as usual, completely missed the nuance. His response was completely serious. "If anyone does have a motive, we can't find it. Natalia has had her share of run-ins with people, but nothing serious enough to earn her any actual enemies. If anyone in Springfield is universally liked, it's her. Olivia has her share of enemies, but these days, they're mostly business rivals who would never do anything like this. The only other person who's raised our suspicions is Father Ray Santos; but it's hard to believe a priest would do something like that, no matter how strongly he disagrees with Natalia's choices."

Simple fairness compelled Anna to speak up grudgingly. "I don't much like the priest, but I didn't think he was lying to us when he said he didn't know anything about her being missing."

She caught the sympathetic look Frank gave her and realized that he'd been as bothered as she was by their interview with Father Ray. It made her feel a little better. She glanced back up at Mallet, who sighed heavily. She couldn't blame him. This whole investigation felt like searching for a needle in a very large haystack.

Cyrus spoke up unexpectedly. “Seems as though we’ve right well exhausted the obvious places to look for clues. Maybe it’s time we all went our separate ways for a couple of days, follow our guts and see where they lead.”

Anna leaned back in her chair, waiting to see what Frank would say to that. To her surprise, he was nodding. “I agree. I think a couple of us should stay here, to go over all our notes and all the evidence, and see if we can look at it from a new angle. Everyone else can try looking in a new direction and see if they come up with anything. At this point, we’ve got nothing else to go on.”

Mallet quickly volunteered to go over evidence, as did Officer Baird. Frank said he’d work with them as well, and that everyone else should nose around on their own. He set a time for them all to meet up the next day and go over what they’d found, if anything. Then he dismissed them.

Most everyone filed out of the room quickly, but Anna sat there for a moment, drinking the lukewarm remains of her coffee. She’d check in with Jonathan later, see what he was thinking about doing. But before then, she needed to check in with Jeffrey – both to see if his contacts had turned up anything and to see if he had any ideas on which direction to go.

She was reasonably sure Frank would have a cat if he knew O’Neill was helping behind the scenes. But there was no one on earth who knew Edmund and her father better than Jeffrey. If anyone could help her track down their whereabouts, it was him.

She could only hope that it would be soon enough for Natalia.

ACT 4

January 14th

Frank slid into a booth at Company, feeling like he should have just hit the snooze button one more time. Luckily, he’d missed the bulk of the early morning breakfast rush and Blake was able to give him a steaming cup of coffee mere seconds after he’d sat down. He waved distractedly at her as a way of saying thanks, and then yawned widely.

Deciding the coffee would probably burn his tongue if he didn’t wait a minute, he left the mug on the table and reached for one of the menus nestled between the napkin holder and the salt and pepper shakers. It was probably a bad sign that he was too tired to remember what he wanted, since he knew the offerings by heart. He browsed through the

selections, picking up his mug to take a hearty sip of liquid caffeine. By the time Blake wandered back over, he'd figured out what he wanted. He raised an eyebrow at the little frown on her face as she looked at him, but didn't ask about it. Whatever it was, it couldn't be important or she'd have blurted it out by now. She probably just thought he looked as tired as he felt.

He downed the mug of coffee in several long sips and started to feel more human. By the time he'd put away a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and pancakes, and refilled his mug from the carafe a few times, he felt pretty much back to normal. So he was a little taken aback when Marina slid into the seat across the table from him, her eyebrows scrunched in worry.

"Blake said you didn't quite seem like yourself. Is everything okay, Dad?"

Frank leaned back against the padded back of the booth seat. The question struck him as funny – Natalia was missing, Edmund and Hung Li were at large, so no, nothing was really okay – but he knew what she meant. "I just had a rough night. I had bad dreams where I was wandering around in underground tunnels. I was supposed to find a killer clown, like in one of those late night horror movies, but it was pitch-black and I couldn't see more than a foot in front of my face. All I found were the bodies of his victims."

He shuddered at the memory. Even knowing the nightmares were just a sign of how helpless he felt at having no solid leads, it had been immensely unnerving to wake up and feel like he was responsible for those dream deaths.

He felt a warm hand cover his where it rested on the table. He looked up into the worried eyes of his daughter, and tried to laugh it off. "I'm just tired. I've been working too hard and it's taking its toll." He reached out with his free hand and held up the mug. "Nothing more of this won't cure."

She didn't look convinced and he forced a smile. He said, "I appreciate the concern, honey, but I'll be fine." Trying to get the attention off himself, he said the first thing that came to mind. "So I hear you blew up at your mother the other day."

Her exasperated sigh didn't surprise him at all. But her tone was milder than he expected. "I'm trying really hard not to start in with her, Dad. She just makes it so damn hard. It's like she holds me to a higher standard than other people just because I'm her daughter. And yeah, I know people expect more from their kids, but she walked away from me, from us. She lost that right a long time ago, you know?"

Yeah, he did know. It had taken him a long time to come to terms with the fact that his parents had deserted him and his sister, and yet still wanted to dole out the parental advice when it suited them.

He leaned forward. "Look, Marina, I know she hurt you. But that was a long time ago."

Marina pulled her hand away from his and laughed bitterly. Her voice was sarcastic. "Yeah, her digging around in old files and humiliating me in front of everyone is just ancient history."

He shook his head, frustrated at her for being so stubborn about it, and upset with himself for never once suspecting what was going on under his nose. "Damn it, that's entirely different. She was just doing her job. If you'd been doing yours, she wouldn't have found anything wrong."

He wanted to kick himself when he saw Marina figuratively shrink down in her seat and curl in on herself, a hurt puppy dog look on her face. Hastily, he tried to make amends. "I didn't mean it like that, honey. It's just...she wasn't out to get you, specifically. You just happened to be the person she caught."

Marina didn't look up at him, her gaze focused instead on the table top. "It's just that none of this was supposed to be this way. It all got so messed up. I was supposed to be following in your footsteps as a cop; you and Natalia were supposed to be married and raising Francesca; Mallet and I were supposed to be married and raising Henry. She – my mother – was supposed to stay out of our lives for good. We were all supposed to have a happy ending."

Frank reached out and covered a fidgeting hand with his own. "Life rarely turns out the way we expect it to, but that doesn't make it all bad. The stress of the stuff with Edmund aside...I'm happier now than I have been in a long time, and I wouldn't want to change a thing."

She didn't look up at him, and he wanted to say more, but didn't know what. This kind of touchy-feely stuff wasn't exactly his forte. So he just sat there, one hand still covering hers, watching her as he drank the rest of his coffee.

At long last, she looked up at him, her eyes sad. "I wish I could believe I'd have my happy ending."

He squeezed her hand. "You will, Kiddo." Then, wanting to cheer her up and not knowing what else to do, he broke out into a falsetto. "Somewhere, over the rainbow, waaayyy uuupppp hiiigh..."

A burst of laughter greeted his attempt, and he smiled at his daughter, who smacked his hand and rolled her eyes. "Please. Stop before you scare away the other customers."

He put on his best mock-offended face. "I think I've been insulted."

Marina simply stuck out her tongue in response.

He laughed. Then his cell phone beeped, and he pulled it out of his pocket, glancing down at a text message reminding him that he was due to meet with Remy in ten minutes.

"Sorry, Kiddo," he said, sliding out of the seat. "A policeman's work is never done."

She slipped out from the other side of the table to stand beside him. "I know." There was a slight pause, and then she added, "You know I love you, right?"

He smiled fondly at her and reached out to ruffle her hair. "I know. Anyhow, give Henry a kiss for me, and I'll see you later."

For just a second, he thought he saw a flash of hurt and some other, unnamable, emotion in her eyes. But before he could puzzle over it, she smiled at him and said, "I'll bring some coffee over for you in a little while. I know how awful the sludge at the department is."

He chuckled and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Thanks. This is why you're my favorite oldest daughter."

He wasn't too surprised when she just rolled her eyes in response, waving at him before turning back to her waitress duties. He headed out the door, humming under his breath. Just great. Now he was going to have that damn song stuck in his head...

Olivia leaned forward to grab her coffee mug from the table in front of the couch, and then sat back carefully, shifting her position slightly so that she wouldn't squash Francesca. Her back finally against the couch cushions, she looked to her right, smiling at the sight of the toddler next to her, the little hands busy with a ridiculously long string of beads and a puzzle book.

Satisfied that her youngest daughter was content, she took a long sip of coffee before glancing towards her middle daughter. Emma sat on her left, a sketch pad laid across her lap, bending over the paper and staring intently at it. Olivia's heart ached for the girl and she wanted to reach out and pull her into a hug and tell her everything would be okay.

Instead, she took another sip of coffee.

She'd already learned that her daughter was in no mood to be pushed.

Emma had come home yesterday, and while things had seemed normal at first, it hadn't taken Olivia long to realize that Natalia's absence was coloring every aspect of her daughter's day. Her attempts to get Emma to talk, to reassure her, or to do anything at all to help had been met with pained silences and forced smiles. If it wasn't so obvious that Emma wanted to be home, she would have packed up the girl's belongings and taken her back to the Spaulding mansion, just to get her away from the reminders of her missing ma. She'd ended up calling their family therapist, Brooke Tremaine, with a desperate plea for a home visit, but even that hadn't done anything to help Emma's mood. They'd had dinner and watched a movie, and then Olivia had gone up to read her daughter a bedtime story, hoping that she'd want to talk. But Jellybean had cuddled up against her side with Shadow and asked for a second story, falling asleep before it was over.

There hadn't been anything at all that Olivia could say or do to reach her.

All she could do was be a tangible presence and hope to God it would be enough. Forcing a Spencer woman to do something she wasn't ready for...well, Olivia knew better than anyone how badly that would backfire.

She watched as Emma canted her head to the side, and then fiddled with her box of crayons to find a slightly different shade of brown for whatever she was drawing. Olivia couldn't see the paper clearly, her daughter's slight form hunched over it.

Emma had wanted to draw for a while after breakfast, but had been adamant that she wasn't going to do it at the kitchen table. Olivia had seen the flash of panic in her daughter's eyes. She knew just how much of their life as a family was spent in the kitchen, around that table, and how much her daughter didn't want to be reminded of how bad things were. She'd tucked a lock of hair behind the girl's ear and suggested they sit on the couch, not missing the relief Emma couldn't quite contain.

Olivia took another drink of her coffee, glad that a late school start allowed for this quiet time with her girls, sad that the quiet was laced with somberness. Emma's mood was affecting them all; even Francesca, who was normally a little chatterbox, was subdued. She glanced over at the toddler, who was still sitting quietly, totally absorbed with pushing the beads along the string that held them. Then she looked back at Emma, watching her daughter's hand move steadily across the paper in her lap.

She didn't know how long they sat there like that, silent except for the scratch of crayons on paper and Francesca's occasional murmur of not-quite-words. It was long enough for

the dregs of her coffee to grow cold. She leaned forward, setting her mug down carefully on the table, and frowned when Emma seemed to jump at the sudden movement. Olivia reached out and tucked a lock of errant hair behind the girl's ear, mustering up a tiny smile when her daughter didn't flinch away, though her attention remained focused on the paper in her lap.

"Is Ma...Natalia really going to come home?"

Though the words were but a whisper, they echoed loudly in the quiet space. Olivia felt her heart clench at the naked pain in Emma's voice and wished she could take the burden from her daughter's shoulders. But she couldn't, any more than she could offer up meaningless platitudes.

Though Emma didn't look up from her drawing, Olivia focused all her attention on her daughter, seeing the way the girl's knuckles were white from how tightly she held the crayon.

"I don't know, Emma."

She could almost feel the surprise radiating off her child at that answer, so different than anything any of the adults had said to her up until now. Olivia sighed softly. "I wish I could say 'yes'; I wish I could promise you that she'll be found, safe and sound, and that everything will be okay. But I can't. What I can say is that Natalia loves us all very much, and she'll do everything in her power to come back home to us."

"She ran away before. What if..."

Olivia winced at the reminder of that fateful Bauer barbecue, that day that she herself had flashed to when Natalia first failed to show up at their commitment ceremony. She knew her scars from that ran deep; she just had hoped Emma's had healed by now.

Her fingers itched to reach out and squeeze Emma's shoulders, but the tension radiating from her daughter told her the touch would not be welcome, not now. She kept her voice soft. "Yes, she did. But this time is different, sweetie."

Emma looked up then, and Olivia gasped slightly at the flare of anger in her eyes. "How do you know that? How do you know someone took her and that she didn't run away?"

And there it was. The elephant in the room, finally revealed in all its wrinkled glory.

How did she know, really?

The words rushed out of Olivia's mouth. "Natalia was scared before. We weren't a family yet, not really. She loved us, but she didn't trust that we'd still love her even when she made a mistake. She didn't trust that God wanted us to be a family. Now, she knows better. She'd never leave us without a word like that, not again. She knows how much it hurt me... and you...and she loves us too much for that."

She paused then, feeling the truth of those words in her bones in a way she hadn't let herself feel them before. Even if Natalia had had second thoughts about the ceremony, she would simply have called it off, not run away. Olivia felt the burn of shame that she'd even entertained such thoughts, no matter how fleetingly.

She looked at her daughter, her precious child, seeing the war of hope and fear in Emma's eyes. Olivia said softly, "We've had all sorts of scary things happen in the past couple years, Jellybean, and Natalia didn't run away from any of them. Do you know why? It's because she knows we're a family, and families stick together. We deal with the things that scare us together."

Emma bit her lip. "Like we did when the bad man killed Jane."

Olivia nodded. "Like we did after what happened at Rick and Mindy's wedding."

Though her heart ached to hold her little girl, she simply sat watching Emma, letting her daughter wrestle with things in her own time and own way. A soft gurgle and a faint murmur of nonsense reassured her that Francesca was still amusing herself, so she could concentrate on Emma.

Emma's nose wrinkled, the way it sometimes did before she cried. "Uncle Frank and Eleni and Anna...they found stuff that made them think a bad man kidnep...kigna...took Ma away."

"Yes, honey, they did. Natalia didn't leave by her own choice, and she'll fight to come back to us."

Olivia couldn't hold herself back any longer; she reached out and ran her fingers across her daughter's cheek. She kept her voice quiet, soft. "I want to help you through this, Jellybean, but I don't know what you're thinking or feeling. I really wish that we could talk, like we used to. I know I'm not as good a listener as Natalia, sometimes, but I'll try really hard."

Expecting continued resistance, Olivia was caught off-guard when Emma burst into tears and shoved her paper and crayons on the floor. A heartbeat later, her lap was full of a sobbing child, clinging to her for dear life. Tears stung Olivia's eyes and she didn't bother to hide them, just let them fall as she held her precious Jellybean close.

For several minutes, no words were spoken. The only sound was that of Emma sobbing and Olivia crying. Then the girl began to speak in broken sentences, pouring out her anger at how life wasn't fair, at the bad men who took her ma, at the people who talked to her like she was too young to understand things, at the kids who thought it was okay to pick on other kids. When the anger drained from her, she was sad – wanting everything to go back to normal, but not even knowing what normal was anymore.

Olivia dropped a kiss on her daughter's head and murmured, "Oh, Jellybean." She knew she should say more, but wanted to let Emma speak freely, to get her feelings off her chest so they didn't suffocate her.

She felt a tiny hand on her thigh and looked to her right to see Francesca balancing precariously on the couch cushion, reaching out to wipe a tear from Emma's face. Olivia moved one of her arms quickly, wrapping it around the toddler's back for support, and felt Emma shift in her lap as well, reaching for her sister, pulling her close. Within moments, the three of them were locked in a tight embrace, Emma sniffing and Francesca babbling softly.

A long moment later, Emma whispered, "Most of the time, I'm not so angry. Doing the martial arts with Anna helps a lot. More than anything, I'm sad right now. People always leave me. Grandpa Alan died. Jane died. You almost died when you were so sick. Daddy was gone for a long time, and then when he came back he was really sick and almost died. Ava was gone for a long time, too. Ma ran away once, and now she's gone again. Rafe keeps going back to war."

Olivia kissed the top of her daughter's head again. "It makes you scared that you'll be left all alone, doesn't it?"

Emma didn't answer in words, but Olivia felt the girl nod against her shoulder.

She tightened her embrace, feeling Emma snuggle closer, watching Francesca pat her sister's leg in what she imagined was supposed to be a comforting gesture. Olivia kept her voice quiet, even. "I know what that feels like, Jellybean, how scary it is and how sad it makes you. I spent a lot of my life feeling like I was alone."

She could almost feel the surprise radiating off her daughter. She continued gently, "Bad things happen, and the people we love aren't here forever. I've learned that what we have to do is keep on loving. We can't shut people out, hoping to make it hurt less when they're gone. I've tried that, and it doesn't work. All we can do is love them and enjoy as much time together as we have."

Olivia took a deep breath, steadying herself so she could finish what she needed to say. “I know you’ve had to worry more than any little girl should about losing your family. But even if something bad happened to all of us, you’d still have people around who love you and care about you – Aunt Leyla, Beth, James, Jonathan, Grandpa Buzz and Lillian, Frank, and Anna. And you’d still have Sweet Pea, Sarah, Peyton, and Clarissa. It wouldn’t be the same as having your whole family here...but you wouldn’t be all alone.”

There was a long silence then, save for Francesca’s soft, nonsensical babble as she continued to pat her sister’s leg. Olivia pressed gentle kisses against Emma’s head, trying to offer comfort while giving the girl space to think about what she’d said. She could only hope she hadn’t said the wrong thing...hadn’t negated her daughter’s feelings in the rush to provide an insight it had taken her 40-odd years to learn.

Emma’s voice was thoughtful. “I’d still have Uncle Sam, Doris and Blake, Remy, and Josh, too, wouldn’t I?”

Olivia smiled against honey-colored hair. “Yes, you would.”

“I don’t want to lose you or Daddy or Nat...Ma.”

Olivia felt the threat of tears again at the sadness in Emma’s voice. She said gently, “I know you don’t. I can’t promise that nothing bad will happen. But I can tell you that I’m not sick anymore, so I should live a long time. Daddy’s not sick either, and he plans to stay in Springfield. I know Natalia will fight to come home and see her Jellybean again. I don’t want to lose her either, Emma. We just have to hope and pray that she is able to come home to us again.”

She felt Emma sigh against her, and then small arms tightened around her. “I’m glad you understand why I’m scared and sad...that you aren’t mad at me because I feel like that.”

“I’d never be mad at you for how you feel, Em.”

She felt her daughter shift in her arms and then felt a kiss pressed to her cheek. Emma’s voice was full of both relief and surprise. “I feel better for talking about this. I love you, Mommy.”

“I love you, too, Emma.”

A third voice chimed in with “Wub do.”

Emma laughed, and Olivia couldn’t help but chime in as they both stared down at Francesca, who was looking from one to the other with a confused look on her face, like

she couldn't figure out what was so funny. Then, she clapped her tiny hands together and repeated, "Wub do, wub do, wub do."

Olivia thought it was the cutest thing in the world when Emma leaned down and kissed her little sister, then reached out her arms and pulled Francesca into a hug. "I love you, too."

Olivia sighed happily as her two daughters snuggled against her, silence reigning after the intense conversation. She knew there was still a long road ahead, that Emma still needed support and help and understanding to deal with all the things going on around her. But this was still a significant breakthrough, and she was thankful for it. It helped her believe that no matter how things turned out with Natalia being kidnapped, their family would get through it, together.

None of them would have to deal with it alone.

Dinah twirled a piece of hair around her finger and tuned out the drone of voices around her. She wasn't sure if she'd ever been so bored in her entire life. Given that she was in the middle of a murder trial, that was saying something.

She slumped down in her seat, watching out of the corner of her eye as Beth cross-examined some expert on...something or other. She probably should have paid more attention to what was going on, but really, what was the point? This was all the technical mumbo-jumbo where her lawyers poked holes in the prosecution's case. Things wouldn't get interesting until it was their turn to start introducing evidence and witnesses. She especially looked forward to taking the stand and getting to finally say something. Having to sit quietly and listen was grating on her last nerve.

She watched the elegant Spaulding woman glide across the courtroom to face the jury even though her question was directed to the milquetoast on the stand. Something about smudges and whorls and God knew what else. At least Beth seemed to get more comfortable in her role with each passing day. In the beginning, Dinah had been tempted to fire her lawyers and represent herself. Come to think of it, if she'd done that, at least she wouldn't be so damn bored.

A tap on her shoulder pulled her gaze to the side, where Mel was scowling at her. She rolled her eyes in response. Then she pressed the palms of her hands together and pillowed her hands against her head, closing her eyes and pretending to snore.

"Does the defendant have something to add?"

Dinah jumped at the bass tone of the judge's voice. Apparently she had just made that snoring sound out loud. Oops. She half-rose from her seat. "No, it's all good. My bad. Carry on."

As she sat back down, she saw Mel shaking her head and then glanced over to see Beth staring at her, mouth hanging open. Dinah rolled her eyes; the woman was looking at her like she'd just farted in church or something. "What?"

A hand clamped down on her forearm – hard – and she suddenly realized she'd actually said that out loud. Whoops.

She jerked her arm away from Mel's iron grip just as the judge cleared his throat. "Counsel, I've already warned you about this, and I expect you to control your client or be held in contempt of court. Ms. Marler – if you can't remain quiet, I'll have you removed from the courtroom."

"Okay, I'll be quiet."

This time she heard audible groans from both Mel and Beth. Now what? Oh..."I'm sorry, Judge, but I couldn't answer you and remain quiet, too. I'll be quiet now. I mean, after I'm done talking. And when I'm not on the witness stand..."

"You've made your point, Ms. Marler."

What point? She had no point. She started to stand up and explain it to him, when she felt a hard hand on her shoulder, holding her in place. Mere seconds later, she felt another hand on her other shoulder. Mel flanked her on one side, Beth on the other. Sheesh. What did they think she was going to do? Get up and hit the judge or something?

She froze when she heard a hiss near her ear. "Do you want to get us thrown in jail with you?"

Oh right, that contempt of court thing. She looked at Mel and answered her question with an exaggerated head shake. As much fun as it might be to see a Spaulding behind bars with her, it wouldn't help her case any. She really didn't want to stay in jail any longer than she had to. Yeah, she probably deserved to be in prison, but she also figured that she'd already suffered enough because of Edmund Winslow.

"Now that we're done being interrupted, let's get back to the matter at hand. Counsel, you may resume your questioning of the witness."

There was no mistaking the condescension in the judge's tone, and she bristled to hear it. Beth moved back towards the witness stand, but cast a worried glance over her shoulder. Dinah wanted to roll her eyes in response, but she also wanted to get away from Mel's grip on her shoulder. There was no way that would happen as long as the lawyer thought she'd do anything...untoward. She took a deep breath and sat back in her chair, folding her hands tightly in her lap, listening to Beth babble on about lines and swirls and gobbledygook.

It took a few minutes, but finally Mel moved her hand away and went back to filling up a legal pad with fragmented notes. Dinah had tried to read them earlier to amuse herself, but the chicken-scratch writing gave her a headache and the random words and sentences could have been in Chinese for all the sense they made to her.

She heard the clearing of a throat behind her, a sound as familiar to her as her own name. She turned slightly in her seat to see Shayne sitting two rows back, a smirk on his face and a twinkle in his eyes. She smiled at him, and he rolled his eyes in response.

Turning back to the trial before the judge decided to reprimand her for absolutely no reason, she realized she felt a little better. It was really sweet of Shayne to be here, supporting her. He hadn't missed a single day of the trial, even when he couldn't stay the whole time because he had to get home to Henry. Not that Mallet had missed it by choice – he did have that whole kidnapping case to work on. Still, it was nice to know there was someone in the world who was there for her when she needed him.

Why exactly had she walked away from Shayne again?

She shook herself before she could get too twisted up in that chain of thought. With her luck, she'd start talking to herself about it and have the judge lecture her on her chaotic love life. That was the last thing she needed. Still, at least she wasn't the only one bored out of her skull; she could tell Shayne was, too.

Hell, the prosecution had to be wrapping up its case sometime this century. Lord knew she wasn't even sure any more if she'd really killed someone, let alone left any actual evidence of it. She had no doubt that any savvy lawyer could make mincemeat out of her confession, make the jury think it had been coerced even though it hadn't been.

Hopefully, by the time they got to her side of the trial, things would get more interesting. Or at least keep her awake.

Anna swore under her breath as her coat got caught on yet another thorn, snagging the material. Not for the first time she had her doubts about poking her nose around in this

remote section of the woods. The path through the underbrush was more of a suggestion than an actual trail, and was so overgrown that the idea of anyone using it on a regular basis was laughable. Still, she'd come this far; she wasn't going to give up now.

Nearly bending double, she inched her way under a sagging tree limb. Even if it turned out to be a wild goose chase, at least she was doing something.

She swatted a dangling twig out of her way, struggling through a slushy snowdrift, hoping she didn't twist her ankle in the process. No wonder Jeffrey hadn't wanted to come back here and check out the place himself. Leave the dirty work to his underlings.

She blew a stray piece of hair out of her eyes and chided herself. That wasn't exactly true. She was damn lucky that he was even in Springfield right now, let alone was willing to help in the investigation into Natalia's disappearance. He had his own clandestine assignments to carry out, which was why he couldn't come out here himself. It was sheer luck that his pilot had flown him over this patch of woods yesterday when he returned from a meeting with an informant. It was nothing short of a miracle that he'd been scanning the terrain below and spotted the hint of a building in the trees where no building should be.

They'd run out of other leads and she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Too bad she couldn't have told the chief about it and had him send someone else here to help her scout around. But she didn't want to explain why Jeffrey was helping in the background without his permission, and she knew Frank was already prickly enough about his department, trying to prove that the Springfield police were competent. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. She'd wanted Jonathan to come with her, since she could trust him to keep his mouth shut, but he'd been tied up with some other things, and she couldn't exactly explain why she needed him with Frank and Remy standing right there.

She pushed through one last tangle of thorny branches and felt her heart start beating faster as she came into a tiny clearing with a little wooden shack in the center of it. Quickly, she ducked back behind a tree. Pulling her gun from its holster, she eased the safety off and took stock of the cabin. There were tiny windows with no hint of light shining behind them. No smoke rose from the chimney. The roof drooped as if the beams were starting to rot, thick moss grew in patches on the wooden walls, and massively overgrown shrubs made the house seem like it was being swallowed by the woods.

Following the line of the shrub branches upwards, she frowned slightly as she realized the sky was growing dark, with heavy clouds swallowing the sun. The forecast hadn't mentioned any chance of a storm, but there was definitely one brewing. No matter; she could worry about the weather later.

Refocusing on her mission, she glanced at the area in front of the door. A snowdrift, presumably from the storm they'd had several days ago, blanketed the small front porch, and it looked completely undisturbed. There was no hint of footprints there or on any of the patches of snow on the ground around the cabin.

Still, she wasn't about to assume the place was as abandoned as it looked and just charge in recklessly. That might be a good way to get herself killed. Not to mention getting Natalia killed, if she was being held in this place.

Anna ducked down, out of the line of sight of the windows, and ran as fast as she could while hunched over to get to the side of the cabin. Listening hard, she couldn't hear anything other than the slight whine of the wind in the trees and the faint rustle of animals in the woods beyond. Still, she moved slowly, edging around the corner of the house towards the door. She inched up on to the porch, wading through the drifted snow, treading carefully so as not to lose her footing, and leaned sideways towards the door, her ear nearly pressed against the wood, listening.

Silence.

Reaching out cautiously, she slowly twisted the doorknob. Not surprisingly, it didn't move. She took a deep breath, mentally weighing her options, and then took a step back. One well-placed kick later, the door flew open. She burst through the threshold, gun at the ready, and scanned the dark room quickly for threats.

There was no one there.

Years of experience made her cautious, so she inched her way along the wall to the bathroom, moving slowly in the dimly lit space, checking every possible hiding place. The shack itself was nothing more than an open room with a kitchen space at one end and a fireplace at the other, a small bathroom being the only other room in the place.

Satisfied that there was no one there and that the shack was as deserted as it looked, she breathed a sigh of relief. Then, she started looking around in more depth, thankful that she'd brought a flashlight since there was no electricity in the place. A generator sat in a corner of the kitchen, but wasn't running. The light coming in through the windows had been fine for checking for hostiles, but wouldn't be much help in actually finding tidbits that might end up being clues.

The kitchen held little of interest – there were only cans of soda and bottles of water in the non-functioning refrigerator, only a handful of plates and cups graced the shelf over the sink, and there were just a few assorted canned goods in the cupboards. The bathroom

was equally mundane and boring, containing only a toilet, two rolls of toilet paper, a small sink, and a holding tank for well water.

There was a table against the wall to the left of the fireplace, and as she shone her flashlight over it, she saw that there was a bulletin board tacked up behind it. Various pictures and papers were pinned to the board in stark contrast to the Spartan nature of the rest of the shack. Moving closer, she shone the light over the table, taking in the things littered across the top – pens and paper, folded maps, a coiled rope, a roll of adhesive tape, an empty coffee mug, a container of thumb tacks, a stapler, an unopened pack of AA batteries, and other odds and ends. Frowning, she shone the light across the bulletin board.

There were several articles cut out of the *Springfield Journal*, some recent, some yellowed with age. The old ones referenced various kidnappings – Lizzie Spaulding; Marah Lewis; Rocky, Marina, and Henry "Coop" Cooper; Zach, James, and Emma Spaulding, and Jude Bauer; Susan Lemay. There were more, proving that kidnapping did seem to be a sport in Springfield, but those were the first ones that caught Anna's eyes. A quick glance at the new ones showed that they were exclusively focused on Natalia Rivera, with various phrases underlined and mocking comments like "serves her right" and "they'll never find her" added in the margins.

A chill went down Anna's spine as she realized just what she was looking at. The place wasn't nearly as abandoned as it looked. The kidnapper had been here, and recently.

She glanced around the desk again, searching for any tell-tale sign of just who it was who'd been here. Damn it; if only she'd brought a fingerprint kit with her. She was careful not to touch anything, but carefully looked over the assorted items, searching for a clue. But there was nothing at all distinctive in the clutter, nothing that would point to any particular person. Just like all the other clues they'd found.

She turned her gaze back to the bulletin board, scanning the pictures and flyers and papers posted there. Again, there was nothing at all distinctive about the clippings, nothing to give a hint as to the poster's identity.

It was maddening to know she was standing here, in the kidnapper's lair, and still have no clue who she was tracking or what he'd done with Natalia. She smacked herself in the forehead, frustrated, mentally going over whether it would be feasible to put surveillance on the shack or whether she just needed to haul Eleni's team out here in the hopes that they'd find a print or a fiber or something distinctive. This evidence was useless if no one was able to see it and analyze it. Suddenly, she remembered her cell phone had a camera and fished it out of her pants pocket. The photos wouldn't be as high-quality as a regular camera, but they'd do. She quickly began snapping pictures of the items on the desk and bulletin board.

When she was satisfied that she'd recorded everything of interest, she put her phone away and sighed. Maybe someone would spot something in this mess of commonplace minutia and identify it as belonging to a specific person. Hell, maybe the handwriting on the news articles would be recognizable to someone. She shone the flashlight over the newsprint pages again. It didn't look familiar to her, but that didn't mean anything. She hadn't seen her father's handwriting in years, and Edmund's was equally unknown to her.

Frowning, she realized there was one article that didn't have a kidnapping theme, and leaned in to study it more closely. She shook her head, not seeing what it had to do with anything, and her gaze landed on a picture.

She stared at it for a moment, then back at the article, and then back at the picture, her eyes widening. She glanced over the other pictures and miscellaneous items on the board, their relevance suddenly clicking into place.

Abruptly, she turned on her heel and raced out of the shack, pausing only long enough to pull the splintered door shut behind her. She shivered as she got fully outside; the temperature had dropped noticeably in the short time she'd been in the cabin, and snow was beginning to fall. She ignored the weather, focusing instead on not breaking an ankle as she ran back along the tangled path to where she'd left her car.

She had to get back to the police station, had to report this in person. There was no way in hell she was taking a chance that the phone lines were tapped and that she'd tip off the kidnapper. Even if she'd had cell phone service in this remote area.

A black-clad figure stood shrouded in shadows, watching the silent, scared woman in the room beyond. Seeing Natalia Rivera like this – hurt, horrified, and hopeless – was exhilarating. It was like the rush from the best cocaine or the smoothest liquor.

The namby-pamby naysayers who turned up their noses at torture simply didn't know what they were talking about. Watching someone else suffer – whether physically or mentally – was pure pleasure. Almost poetic, in a way.

Especially when that someone was the so-called Saint of Springfield.

The dark figure smiled.

Everyone thought Natalia was so sweet, so kind. They all loved her like she could do no wrong. But she was all show. She was just another pretty face standing on a pedestal, and she needed to be knocked off. She wasn't even royalty or a celebrity or a politician – she

wasn't important enough to deserve the kind of fear and respect given to those who were higher up in life. She was just some little nobody, a pretty little whore, who'd wrecked relationships and destroyed hearts and subtly undermined the people around her – just like every other citizen of Springfield.

She was no saint; that was for sure. If she hadn't lucked out and ended up marrying a Spaulding son and then gotten her claws into the powerful Olivia Spencer, no one would have ever noticed her or given a fat damn about her.

The figure chuckled grimly. If Natalia really was so sweet, she never would have wound up with such a devious and conniving bitch like Olivia. That alone was proof that she wasn't so nice; that alone was reason to make her pay for her sins. Making the powerful Olivia Spencer suffer by proxy was almost more delicious than making her suffer directly. Watching her fall apart, even from a distance, was incredibly intoxicating, almost addicting. It was almost as much fun as hurting Natalia. But not quite.

The dark figure stepped back into the shadows, laughing softly, almost maniacally. This game was much more exciting than expected. But more play time with the powerless little captive would have to wait. There were other plans and schemes that required attention.

Olivia walked into Company, pausing just inside the door to let her eyes adjust to the dim interior. Even though the sky outside was an endless expanse of grey, storm clouds moving quickly across the horizon, it was still lighter than the entrance of the restaurant.

She moved towards the counter, glad to see Doris perched on a stool, drinking a cup of coffee. Good; that would save her a stop. She plopped down on the stool next to her friend, setting her purse on the floor between them and settling her elbows on the counter.

Before they could even greet each other, Blake appeared as if by magic, smiling warmly, but with concern in her eyes. "How are you doing today, Olivia?"

Olivia mustered up a tiny smile at the matter-of-fact tone in the woman's voice. When other people asked her the same question these days, too often it came across as either pitying or salacious. Her reply was simple and to the point. "I'm tired and sad, but hanging in there."

She stared up at the redhead for a long moment, wondering why Blake was studying her so intently. She didn't have to look to the side to know Doris was equally confused and on the verge of just coming out and asking. But then Blake sighed, apparently satisfied with whatever she'd seen or heard, saying softly, "I'm glad."

Olivia did glance at Doris then, sharing a shrug with her, before Blake broke in once more. "So, what can I get for you, Olivia?"

She ordered a cup of coffee and a Chef's salad. Within moments, a steaming cup of java sat in front of her, and Blake had disappeared into the kitchen. Olivia picked up the mug to take a sip.

"Why are you going for the rabbit food, Spencer?"

"Because I'm hungry."

She glanced to the side, just in time to see Doris roll her eyes. Not that she could blame her friend for that reaction; after all, an order of French fries was more along the lines of her usual late-morning snack order. Olivia wanted to roll her eyes in return, particularly when Doris raised an eyebrow so high that it nearly disappeared into her hairline. But she settled for taking a long, deliberate sip of her coffee.

By the time she put the mug down, Blake had wandered back over and stood near them, drying glasses with a bar towel. Olivia turned slightly on the stool to face Doris. While she knew her friend was just teasing, striving for an air of normalcy amidst all the chaos, she felt the need to answer more seriously.

"Since Natalia isn't here to look after my health, I need to be more conscious of it on my own. If and when she does come home, I want to be able to tell her that I made an effort to survive on more than coffee and doughnuts."

She saw the way Doris' eyes widened, the mayor's mouth hanging open, and attributed it to her use of the semi-fatalistic word "if." Her friend had been trying hard to keep her hopes up about finding and rescuing Natalia, trying to keep her from sinking into the depths of despair. God knew she'd been there lately, but this was not the same thing. She couldn't define it, exactly, but like Josh had pointed out, there was that fine line between pessimism and realism.

Olivia glanced to the side to see if Blake was having the same reaction as her girlfriend. It actually took her aback to realize that the redhead was smiling encouragingly at her and to see a hint of relief in blue eyes.

Confused by that reaction, Olivia turned her attention back to Doris. Picking up where she'd left off, she said, "But I also don't want to eat something heavy that will put me in a food coma. I'm heading over to the police station to take a look at their evidence summary, to offer a fresh pair of eyes and maybe make some sense out of what they've found. I was actually going to stop by your office and see if you wanted to come with me."

She saw Doris frown and knew exactly what that expression meant, even before the mayor spoke. “Do you seriously think Frank will let you anywhere near his precious case files, particularly since he’s still smarting about the whole evidence tampering fiasco?”

Olivia smiled. “He might not like it, but I’ve already made arrangements with Remy. His logic is that if Cyrus can be helping out on all sorts of cases when he’s not actually a cop, there’s no reason I can’t at least take a look at things.” She felt her smile slide away. “After all, while I don’t remember Anna’s father at all, I do know Edmund. There may be something I recognize as having come from San Cristobel that would help identify which of the two is responsible.”

She watched as Doris cocked her head to the side. “If Anna hasn’t ID’d any of the stuff as being from the island, what makes you think you can?”

Olivia shook her head. “I don’t know if I’ll have any better luck than she did. But a long shot is better than nothing at this point. Even if I don’t manage to connect any dots, I won’t be kicking myself later for not trying.”

She saw Doris nod. “Okay, that makes sense.” There was a pause, and then her friend laughed. “Sure, I’ll come with you. Two heads are better than one, and all that nonsense.”

Olivia chuckled in response and picked up her coffee mug again, taking another long sip. She was still bone-tired and needed the burst of caffeine, but things weren’t as overwhelming as they had been in recent days. The realization surprised her a bit.

She put her mug back down, staring into the dark pool of liquid as if it held answers. On the surface, nothing had changed. The love of her life was still missing, she was still tremendously worried about Emma, and she was still struggling to hold everything together. She was still sad and scared and more than a little stressed. But she wasn’t held tight in the grip of despair; she wasn’t burning up with the fire of rage; she wasn’t feeling lost and at sea, helplessly tossed about by waves. She wasn’t sure what, exactly, had changed. How could she feel better when things were still in the “from bad to worse” category?

She wasn’t aware she’d said that last sentence out loud, until she heard a strangled cough. Glancing towards Doris, she saw the hint of red in her friend’s cheeks, and the flustered hand gestures that told her the woman had no idea what to say or do. Then she heard the soft clearing of a throat, and she swung her head around to see Blake standing in front of her.

Bracing herself for Blake’s usual breathless and bubbly babble, she was surprised by the quiet, serious tone. “You feel better not because things have changed, but because you’ve

changed your approach. You're determined...ready to do what you can, no matter how small. If you just lie there when a bear is after you, you'll probably be eaten. But if you run and fight back, you might get away with just being bitten. Doesn't make it any less scary, doesn't mean you aren't scarred for life. But it does mean the bear didn't win."

Olivia felt like her eyes were bulging out of her head as she stared at Blake. It was probably the strangest analogy she'd ever heard in her life, and yet it made so much sense. That was exactly it – she'd decided to fight back and a calm determination had chased away the heavier, more incapacitating emotions. At least for now. But it still rattled her a bit to have someone else see that clearly into her – someone other than Natalia, that was.

To cover her shock, she blurted out, "So when did you turn into an armchair psychologist?"

Blake didn't rise to the bait, simply smiled gently at her, the understanding in her eyes both welcome and disconcerting. Olivia heard Doris' voice. "She's actually pretty good at figuring out what's going on with people and knowing how to help them."

There was no mistaking the note of pride in the mayor's voice, and Olivia broke away from Blake's gaze to glance at Doris. "Oh my God, Wolfe. You sound like a lovesick teenager."

Doris turned beet red and glared at her, and Olivia chuckled. She wasn't sure she could have taken any more soul searching or touchy-feely stuff. It was nice to have something back on vaguely normal ground – and teasing her friend definitely fell into that category. Besides, she owed the other woman for all the cracks Doris had made when she and Natalia started dating.

Before things could go any further, Buzz pushed through the kitchen doors and lumbered over to the counter, a plate of salad in hand. He smiled at the three women, looking quizzically between them for a moment, and then shrugging. Olivia smiled at him as he set the plate down in front of her and said, "Bon Appétit."

She watched as he did a mock bow, then turned and went back towards the kitchen. For a moment, there was silence as the three women glanced at each other. Olivia wondered if the other two felt the same way she did – like there was a lot more serious stuff they could say and yet like it was a weight hanging over their heads. It was as if they were frozen in time for a moment, and she wanted to break the spell, but didn't dare.

And then Blake reached out and patted Olivia's hand, leaned over and kissed Doris quickly, and turned without a word to follow Buzz into the kitchen.

Olivia sighed softly, as much in relief as anything, and picked up her fork. Now that the food was sitting in front of her, she realized just how hungry she was. She took a big bite, and then turned her attention back to Doris, who was staring dreamily into space.

Olivia laughed. "You've got a hell of a girlfriend there, Doris."

She watched as Doris turned to face her, a huge smile on the mayor's lips. "Yes, I do." There was a slight pause. "So do you. And when we get her back and you see her again, you can tell her I said that."

Olivia felt a sudden lump in her throat, not at the assurance, but at the display of support. "Thanks, Doris. I...it means a lot. You're a good friend."

She didn't miss the discomfort on her friend's face at the praise. "Yeah...you are, too."

If it hadn't been such a touching display, she might have laughed at the way Doris squirmed on the stool. Taking pity on the stoic mayor, she turned back towards the plate in front of her, attacking the salad with a vengeance.

Mulling over what Blake had said, she smiled grimly to herself. She was going to make damn sure that no matter what happened, the bear didn't win.

"You fucking bitch."

Those three words echoed in Natalia's ears as she huddled in the corner of her cell, one hand obsessively rubbing her aching thigh. Her tormentor had left some time ago, but the hate-filled words lingered in the air and raced around inside her head on an endless loop.

She'd tried to fight back again today, to stand up to her captor, to face down the demons that came along whenever that masked, hooded figure appeared. All it had gotten her was a newly split lip and a nasty bruise on her thigh from a well-placed boot. She'd learned the hard way that she didn't have the physical strength to escape from her tormentor – not after days of little water, less food, and the after-effects of whatever she'd been drugged with. The cold and damp of her cell was also starting to affect her; she felt a dull ache in her chest, like she was coming down with a cold.

Too weak to fight back physically, she'd simply curled in on herself and let the hooded figure scream abusive words at her. She'd tuned them out as best she could, but couldn't entirely escape them. It scared her how easily her captor got angry at her, and she couldn't help but wonder whether she should continue to hold on to whatever thin shred of hope

she could. It was only a matter of time before her tormentor got angry enough to kill her; she'd seen the menace in those cold eyes and it had chilled her to the bone.

She wanted to defend against her captor, to find a way to fight back, to stay strong for her lover and her family. But she didn't know how to confront such insanity.

The insulting echo in her ears faded as she mulled over that last word. Insanity. That's what she was dealing with. Whoever held her had clearly gone around the bend, clearly wasn't operating from any rational motives that could be understood or reasoned with.

For a moment, that realization left her feeling even more helpless, if that was possible, than she had before. A madman was unpredictable; that was what made him so dangerous. There was no way to defend against an unpredictable opponent, no strategy that could be used to fight him.

She took a deliberate breath, and then another, trying to calm herself so that she could think. Maybe fighting back was the wrong way to look at it. She wasn't a "strike first, ask questions later" kind of person. She never had been. She mulled things over – usually too long – before she acted. Her way of standing up for herself and her beliefs wasn't usually confrontational or abrasive; it was quieter and came from her belief in her feelings and her trust in God.

The only way she'd be defeated by her captor would be if she gave up hope, if she stopped believing in Olivia, in her family, in her friends, in God. She could be beaten down physically, verbally, emotionally – but as long as she stayed true to her faith in the people and principles she held dear, she'd be resisting in her own way.

The thought strengthened her. She could do that. As scared as she was, as weak and hurt as she was, she still had her love for her family, her belief in God, her trust in Olivia. Her tormentor hadn't managed to take any of that away, despite the drug-induced hallucinations, despite digging up her darkest demons, despite the hateful accusations that were like a slap to her soul. Even though she'd felt emptiness when she'd tried to pray, she still believed in the good, loving God who'd been her rock throughout her life.

Natalia sat up a little straighter in the corner of her cell. She said a quick prayer of thanks for all the people she cared about. She thought about her friends, like Blake and Frank and Buzz, and how lucky she was to know such good people. She thought about Leyla and what a blessing it had been to have her sister enter their lives. She thought about how proud she was of the man Rafe had grown to be. She thought about how fierce and proud Ava was, and how much she regretted hurting the young woman as she struggled to deal with her feelings towards Jeffrey. She thought about Francesca, her beautiful baby and her ray of sunshine. She thought about Emma, the child of her heart, and a wonderful gift to her.

Then, she closed her eyes and thought about Olivia – the woman who'd shown her what love really was, the person with whom she could be her truest self. Memories flooded her mind.



She remembered her lover being with her when Francesca was born, her strength and support making the pain of the delivery easier to bear. She remembered sitting next to Olivia, wrapped in a half-embrace as they watched Rafe and Emma together. She remembered her partner's comforting, steadying presence in the hospital chapel as she lit candles after seeing her abuela one last time. She thanked God for her partner's presence in her life, for giving her such a precious gift. Her love for Olivia washed over in a warm wave, chasing away the chill in her soul.

She opened her eyes again and managed a small smile. Her love for her family and friends would sustain her, no matter what happened, no matter how this ended. She just hoped that in some small way, they all knew how important they were to her, how much she loved them.

For the joy of human love; Brother, sister, parent, child; Friends on earth and friends above; For all gentle thoughts and mild.

Natalia blinked as the words popped into her head unexpectedly. It took her a minute to figure out where they'd come from. She finally placed them as a verse in the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth." In a flash of memory, she was once again a child, snuggled up against her abuela at bedtime, listening to her sing her favorite hymns instead of reading a bedtime story.

She hummed the tune under her breath, and then closed her eyes again to draw the words out from her memory. As she concentrated, focusing again on the verse about love, she felt the same sense of Presence that she usually had when she prayed, that sense that God was with her. For a long moment, she was overwhelmed by the feeling of finally having His light in the darkness. Then, she took as deep a breath as she could with her chest aching, concentrating again on the lyrics, humbled by the reminder that prayer came in many different forms.

Her voice was shaky and breathless, but she sang softly anyhow. "For the beauty of the earth; For the glory of the skies; For the love which from our birth; Over and around us lies; Lord of all to Thee we raise; This our hymn of grateful praise..."

She drew strength from the words, from the focus on beauty, from the focus on love. It was the antidote to the ugliness and hate surrounding her.

Anna fought to keep her balance as she raced through the door of the police station and rounded the desk, heading for the hallway towards the meeting room. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the desk clerk gaping at her in shock, his mouth moving as he said something that she didn't hear. She ignored it, intent on her mission.

Her boots clacking on the tile floor, she burst into the meeting room, stopping just inside the door to catch her breath and to take stock of who was there. She'd expected Frank, Remy, and Mallet to be there; they all stared up at her with nearly identical looks of "where's the fire?" She'd hoped Jonathan would be there; he was half out of his seat already, clearly ready for whatever action was needed, and she took a moment to be thankful for his steady presence. She hadn't expected to see Doris or Olivia, but she found herself glad that they were there; it would save time and headaches in the long run.

She gulped in a deep breath and straightened, squaring her shoulders, absently brushing snow off her coat. She regarded them all solemnly.

"I know where Natalia is..."

The End

Darkness Reigns at the Foot of the Light

by Ceridwyn

ACT 1

14th January 2011

The crunch of snow under his boots made the hooded figure pause, checking to see if his movements had been heard. He'd followed the detective for the last twenty minutes up to the old cabin. Once the woman had gone into the cabin, he moved as quietly as he could around the other side to check the windows. For a moment, he was afraid that he'd been spotted, but he noticed the woman had returned to examining the interior.

He waited until he saw her close the door behind her, and made her way back through the wooded path before he took out his cell phone and dialed his boss as he moved up the wooden steps.

"Report," the voice on the other end snapped in his ear.

"The detective has been at the cabin. She just left," the man responded.

"Did she remove anything?"

He looked around the cabin, not seeing anything that had been disturbed since he'd left the night before. "I don't think so. Everything looks the same."

"Good," the voice responded.

The man began to fidget. "Do you want me to do anything more, sir?" He was uncomfortable with the task of monitoring a property for a boss he'd never met. He learned early on in his life that asking too many questions usually had ended up with him in detention, jail or beaten. He didn't know how or why he'd been chosen for this job; his rap sheet consisted of breaking and entering and drug possession and trafficking, nothing like this. But the pay-off was good and that's what he cared about.

"No. Return to town. It will be better for you."

Well, that was cryptic, the young man decided as he closed his cell phone and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. He wondered briefly if he should torch the place and get rid of any

evidence, but he had enough self-preservation skills to realize that if one cop had been here to check out the cabin, more would probably soon follow and he didn't want to get stuck out in the sticks in a winter storm when they arrived.

"I know where Natalia is," Anna said, looking around the full room. In the moment that it took for everyone to take in that bit of information, she swallowed audibly before the inevitable deluge of questions.

"Where?" Mallet asked.

Turning his attention to the newly arrived detective, Frank started, "How did you –?"

"Tell me, NOW!" Olivia said, her body was tense with anxiety, fear and hope all rolled into one.

"Hang on a second," Anna started. She understood Olivia's desperate need to find Natalia, but it wouldn't do anyone any good if they rushed head in head first without knowing the score. "I need to tell you what I found. I was following up a lead from a source who spotted a cabin in the middle of nowhere during an overhead flyby. There are overgrown trees and bushes; we wouldn't have been able to find the place otherwise." Anna stopped for a moment to recall the specific details of her search. "The cabin looked pretty run down and the first walk around didn't reveal much at first; it looked long abandoned, until I got to the living area. There were supplies around: tape, ropes, batteries, maps, and a coffee cup. But that wasn't what caught my eye. On a bulletin board on the wall were news clippings of kidnappings of kids in the town over the years. And then Natalia's picture was there."

Anna continued briefly telling them about the other articles that were on the wall. "I took some pictures with my phone just in case. I've already sent them to print. They should be here in a minute."

"Are you sure it's not a trap or another false lead?" Mallet asked.

Anna bristled at the questioning, but realized that there was a possibility. "There's no way to be certain." Anna stopped for a second and shivered. "Maybe it's just my imagination, but I had a feeling that I was being watched. I checked around the perimeter but didn't see anyone, and the snow drifting was covering any tracks. But my instincts say that this lead is legitimate."

“We need more than a hunch,” Frank responded. “Someone’s life is at risk.” His hand shook as he ran it through his hair; he was furious that she hadn’t given that information to him earlier before she went off on her own to investigate.

“You don’t think I know that?” Anna turned and glared at her chief.

“What’s the location of the cabin?” Frank demanded. “I’ll need to send Eleni and her team out there.”

“You might need a helicopter unit. Maybe an ATV or snowmobile to get in there quickly – it’s pretty remote,” Anna said as she quickly wrote down the co-ordinates and directions on a slip of paper and handed it over to him.

“How did you know about this place?” Mallet asked. They’d all been working diligently and were nearly at the point of exhausting all their resources.

“I got a tip off,” Anna responded. She was reluctant to say anything regarding the fact that Jeffrey was the source behind the information.

“A tip off?” Frank asked as he paced the small area. “And you didn’t call it in?”

“Chief, I didn’t know whether it would be any more productive than any of our other efforts.” Anna stopped and ran a hand through her still damp hair. She’d been just as frustrated with the lack of progress in the case as the rest of the team. “We’re working as hard as we can on this. You did direct us to go on our own to follow up some leads. This one got us some results.”

Frank was persistent about getting all the information he could. “Who tipped you off?”

“A source I’ve trusted in the past,” Anna hedged.

“Really? A source? This isn’t the damned media. If I ask you to tell me who your source is, you tell me!”

“Chief, I don’t –” Mallet was about to respond when there was a knock on the door which startled everyone.

“Detective Li, these are the pictures you asked for,” Officer Hodgins said as she handed over the prints.

“Thank you,” Anna said and dismissed the young officer.

“Okay, here are the pictures from inside the cabin,” Anna said as she pinned them to the boardroom evidence board. She hoped that the distraction of the pictures would redirect Frank’s focus to more important things. “If you look here, you can see the newspaper clippings I was telling you about.”

Frank looked closer, seeing pictures of the kids, including Marina, Daisy, Dylan and the others and his face went ashen. Memories of his daughter and Harley’s kids being kidnapped flooded his thoughts. But then his eyes scanned each of the photos of the clippings as he got to Natalia’s.

Frustrated, Olivia interrupted, “You said you knew where Natalia was. Out with it!”

“I believe she’s being held out at the old Springfield lighthouse,” Anna said as calmly as she could.

“That makes sense,” Jonathan said, nodding his head in Anna’s direction. “The lighthouse is run automatically; it hasn’t been manned in probably ten years or more, so it could easily serve as a hiding spot.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for?” Olivia asked determinedly, even as she wrapped her jacket tighter around her.

Frank turned towards the anxious woman. “Olivia, you can’t go out there. Let the police handle it.”

Olivia turned and leveled a furious glare at the police chief. Lowering her voice, she all but growled, “You try and stop me.”

Seriously tempted to lock the woman in an interrogation room, Frank realized it would be a futile effort, not to mention an illegal act on his part since she hadn’t done anything wrong. He sighed. “What about the kids? What happens if you get hurt trying to play hero?”

Olivia shook her head in disbelief. Raising her head to lock eyes with the older man, she raised an eyebrow. “Do you really want to go there, Frank?” She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “What if you weren’t a cop and the kidnappers had Eleni or Marina, Daisy or Francesca? What would you do – sit back and wait for someone else to go in?”

“That’s not the point,” Frank interjected, knowing if he were in Olivia’s position he’d feel the same.

“God forbid anything happens to Natalia or me, but all our children know we love them and they’ll be well taken care of. If you’re really interested, Natalia and I redid our wills after

Francesca was born. We made sure that everything was clearly spelled out. Mel, Doris and Beth have our documents on file.” Olivia ran a tired hand through her hair. “Now, can we please get going?”

Looking over at her friend’s anxious form, Doris put her hand on the other woman’s arm. “Olivia, let me drive.”

“I can drive,” Olivia protested as she pushed Doris’s hand off, but there wasn’t much effort in it.

“I’m sure that you can, but right now you need to focus on being there for Natalia, whatever the outcome. So you do that, and let me take care of this,” Doris paused as she waited for Olivia to concede. “Okay.” She guided Olivia out of the police department to her car and sighed. Even though it wasn’t even noon yet but she felt the day was just going to get a whole lot more crazy.

“Look, I can’t stop you from going out there, but stay out of the way,” Frank huffed as he warned Doris and Olivia. “All right, let’s get moving.”

Since school had been cancelled that morning due to the anticipated snowstorm, Emma had gone to the Beacon daycare center to stay with her sisters. As she sat at Leyla’s desk, Emma tried to focus on her homework as her sisters were on the floor playing with building blocks. With everything going on with her Ma gone, Leyla leaving for Chicago to tell her family about Natalia’s kidnapping, and her Mom being so worried, Emma wanted to stay close to her family; she didn’t want them to go away, too.

It scared her. She knew she was too young to do anything to help find her Ma but she wanted to do something. Looking down at her math homework, all she saw were blurred words and numbers through tears that had gathered in her eyes.

Rubbing at the tears with the back of her hand, she took out her diary that Anna had given her. It had helped her to write down what she was feeling about what happened to Jane and at the wedding. While the martial arts had focused her anger in a positive way, writing in the journal helped focus her thoughts and feelings. She’d been trying to be more open with her Mom; they’d both been working on not shutting each other out, but it was hard.

Emma was working on her journal so intently that she didn’t realized Sarah had asked her something until she felt the younger girl tug on her shirt.

“Emma, can you help me? The zipper is stuck,” Sarah said as she tried to pull up the toggle on her sweater.

Emma looked down at the younger girl and then over at her older sister; seeing that Ava was busy she smiled down at Sarah. “Sure,” Emma said, looking down at the problem zipper. She wiggled it a few times and when it wouldn’t budge, she noticed the toggle had caught on the fabric of the girl’s shirt. Pulling it gently apart like Natalia had shown her, she managed to get Sarah’s zipper fixed.

“Thank you,” Sarah said with a smile. She was so happy that she gave Emma a hug before heading back to play with her toys.

“You’re welcome.” Emma smiled to herself. She may not be able to help her Mom as much, but she could help out in other ways. With that thought she returned to writing in her journal but in a slightly better mood.

To say that the atmosphere in the small conference room off the courtroom was tense was an understatement. Legal pads were strewn around the table and both Mel and Beth were at their wits end. The judge had once again threatened them with contempt of court because their client couldn’t seem to stop herself from making comments. They’d already been fined, which as far as Beth was concerned was being added to Dinah’s legal bill. Never mind that Dinah’s comments didn’t have some merit; it just wasn’t the time or place to make them. The judge had given them a twenty minute recess to get their ‘client under control.’

Dinah took a sip of her water as she looked sheepishly over at her lawyers.

After looking over her notes on the pad in front of her, Beth looked over at Mel and then to Dinah. “I don’t think we should put you up on the stand.”

“What? Why not?” Dinah asked, curious and not a little annoyed at the change in plans. She wanted to tell her side of things.

“Right now, I think it might be more of a detriment to your case if we put you up there,” Mel said bluntly.

“You don’t think I can keep to what I rehearsed already?” Dinah said as she tapped her fingers rapidly on the wooden table.

Scratching some notes on her pad, Mel looked up at her. "I think you can answer our questions the way you have, but when we went over the questions the prosecution is likely to ask you...well, you went off on tangents."

"Well, the prosecution questions were a little annoying. I could have written better questions as a reporter at WSPR."

"I'll be sure to mention that to Doris," Beth said under her breath.

Mel snorted softly at the comment. "We're trying to get you exonerated on the merits – or lack thereof – of the prosecution's case and the mishandling of evidence. We're also going to try to get your confession as it stands thrown out or at least mitigate the weight of it against your case. If we put you up on that stand, you're likely to throw all that effort out the window."

"There's no way you can argue that it was done for the good of the town...kind of like a town self defense?" Dinah started to fidget with a piece of paper in front of her and then looked up to Mel. "Besides, won't it make me look guiltier if I don't get up on the stand?"

"Sometimes it can."

"Also, how can you verify that the confession was made under duress if you don't put me on the stand?"

"There are ways to get around it," Mel said with a wry grin. "I've done it several times and we've won the case."

"I'll behave myself," Dinah said. When she noticed the rise of Beth's eyebrow, she frowned. "Come on, I can be good when I need to be. And I really need to be. It's not that I don't think that I shouldn't be punished for killing David Andrews; it was wrong," she said exasperatedly. "I should have gotten the real bastard, then all the crap in the past two years would not have happened."

Beth sighed as she spoke, "See, it's comments like that that will get you in trouble on the stand."

There was a quick knock on the door before one of the bailiffs opened the door. "You are required to return to court."

"Thank you, officer," Mel responded, filing her legal pads into her briefcase before lifting the strap onto her shoulder. Turning to Beth and at then Dinah curiously, she asked, "Well?"

"I'll behave."

"Come on. Let's try and get this trial over with," Beth said.

"Counsel, are you ready to continue?" the judge asked both representatives on either side of the court. Upon confirmation from both prosecution and defense attorneys, he directed the defense to proceed.

Standing, Mel said, "Defense calls the defendant, Dinah Marler, to the stand."

After Dinah took her place, the court officer swore her in.

"Ms. Marler, can you tell the court about what happened the day David Andrews died."

"I'd returned to Springfield with Detective Mallet from Bosnia with a baby for adoption. The child was to be adopted by Mallet and his then wife, Marina Cooper. We discovered that Shayne Lewis was the baby's biological father, and the mother was Lara Winslow." Dinah looked down at her hands where she was fidgeting with her skirt. "Edmund Winslow, her father, grieved by the news of her death, came to Springfield to presumably vow revenge on Shayne and anyone he saw that threatened him or his family. He was also threatening Jonathan Randall and his daughter; Jonathan and Shayne are brothers."

Mel nodded. "What happened then?"

"I had seen what I thought was Edmund Winslow down by the river. I wanted to go down and warn him to stay away from Henry and Shayne and the rest of his family."

"Why did you do that?" Mel asked.

"At the time, I was in love with Shayne. It was important to me that he and his family were safe. And Edmund Winslow was anything but safe," Dinah said as she looked over at her attorneys and then at the judge. "So, I went down to the river to talk to him; get him to see reason."

"How did you come to hit him with the piece of plastic from Henry's stroller?" Mel continued her line of questioning.

"I was taking the stroller over to the Cooper's house."

Nodding that all the questions were going as planned, she asked, "That wouldn't have been odd, taking a walk in the park with an empty stroller?"

Dinah raised her eyebrows. "Yeah, it probably would be." She cleared her throat before looking over at the judge and then back to her lawyers. "Anyway, I went up to him and was about to give him a piece of my mind and he just laughed. He said that Springfield would pay for all the hell he thought people had put him through. I lost it. It was the last straw – I couldn't let him hurt any more people. I picked up the stroller and I swung. He just went down. I thought I just knocked him out at first, and I panicked; I didn't really want him dead, I just wanted him to leave town."

"You were aware that the police were initially looking at Shayne's mother, Reva O'Neill, for the murder of Edmund Winslow?" Mel asked.

"Yes. And she had confessed to murdering Edmund, even though I told her not to confess to a crime she didn't do." Dinah was nervous even though the proceedings seemed to be going well enough. She looked down and realized that her fidgeting fingers had almost resulted in her skirt being indecently short. Quickly she smoothed it down.

"Why was that?"

"For one, she didn't do it, as much as she wanted to have been the reason he died. But she also had a new baby, Colin – who Edmund had tried to kidnap. She had also just gotten through cancer treatment."

The rest of the questions Mel had fired at her had gone according to plan and soon the prosecutor got up to address her.

"Good morning, Ms. Marler. I'm going to touch on a few things you mentioned, however, I did want to address the facts immediately following the death of David Andrews. Why did you not initially come forward when you learned that the man you thought was Edmund Winslow had died?"

"Like I said, I panicked. Then I learned that there were several other suspects in the case."

"So you thought you'd get away with it?" the prosecutor pressed.

"That's not what I said," Dinah responded, frowning. She blew out an aggrieved sigh. "Jeffrey O'Neill had overheard a conversation I had had with his wife telling her not to confess to a murder she hadn't committed; he thought I was trying to frame her. Then he learned that the real Edmund wasn't dead after all. Jeffrey then tried to take the blame for 'Edmund's' death, before fleeing the country to go look for him." Dinah ran her hand through her hair,

and swallowed. "I found out what he was doing, and wanted to help him draw the real Edmund out – pretending to be his late daughter, Lara. He and I ended up getting split up and when I returned to Springfield, I'd learned of the death of Jeffrey O'Neill in a plane crash as he was searching for Edmund."

"So you immediately went to the police department upon your return?" the prosecutor asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I just couldn't right away." Dinah sighed. "I did go to see Frank Cooper to talk him into closing the case on the murder of the Edmund imposter. A friend of mine had overheard me telling Henry, Shayne's son, that the reason I'd killed the imposter was because I was afraid that Edmund was going to take the infant. When I learned that Mallet was going to arrest his wife, Marina, for the murder, I confessed to Mallet that I'd killed the man to protect Henry."

"Why weren't you arrested at that time?"

"I nearly was. I was at the police station, demanding to be arrested for the murder. A friend urged that I leave town, start over." Dinah looked up and seeing Shayne, they locked eyes. Tears began streaming down her cheeks. With regret, Dinah said softly, "So, on the day after I got married to Shayne Lewis, I left for Europe and didn't look back. I will regret that as long as I live."

The prosecutor looked from Dinah to the judge and then back at the woman on the stand. "But you stayed away for eighteen months, didn't you?"

"Yes. I returned a couple of months ago, in November," Dinah said.

"Why return now? Surely you knew that as soon as you returned you would be placed under arrest?"

Dinah nodded. "Yes, I knew that would happen. But it was time. I needed to come home. My step-father had just had a massive heart attack while attending the wedding that Edmund Winslow attacked." She looked over at the judge before she continued with sincerity, "I just wanted to make sure my family and my friends were safe."

The lunchtime rush was well underway when Phillip entered Company to grab some take-out sandwiches for Beth, Mel and Dinah for their lunch break at the courthouse. He hadn't been able to get to the courthouse that morning as he'd been in meetings all morning. Shaking some of the snow off the shoulders of his jacket, he looked around the restaurant and he noticed some familiar faces.

"Hi, Phillip," Shayne said as he came in behind the other man. Spotting Henry quietly playing over in the corner, he turned in his direction. "Hey Henry, how's my little man?"

"Good, Daddy." Henry grinned up at his father. Holding up a little monster truck for his dad to see, the boy exclaimed, "Look what Grandpa gave me!"

Shayne grinned at his son's enthusiasm. "That was very nice of him. Did you tell him 'thank you'?"

Henry nodded, and then went back to playing with his new toy.

Pulling himself up onto a stool at the bar, Phillip looked over at him. "Shayne, how's Dinah's trial going this morning?"

"Pretty good. Mel and Beth are pulling apart holes in the prosecution's case. If Dinah could keep her thoughts to herself, they might be going faster."

Phillip snorted. "That ought to be fun to watch anyway."

Shayne nodded his head, well used to Dinah's mannerisms. "I think Beth might string her up though, since the judge has already threatened them with contempt of court."

"That sounds about right." Phillip turned back to the front of the restaurant where Blake had just come out from the kitchen.

"Oh hey, Phillip," Blake said cheerily. "What can I get you?"

"Some sandwiches to take over to the courthouse," Phillip said and then he gave Blake his order. "Thanks, Blake."

As Buzz came out with an order, he noticed Shayne at the bar. "Hey there, are you looking for Marina?" Buzz continued over to the bar, placing the plates of some customers.

Looking over at the older man, Shayne smiled. "Yeah. I told her I'd come by and take Henry for a little while this afternoon. See if I can keep him busy for a while."

"I sent her out over to Oakdale this morning to get some things from one of our suppliers." Buzz frowned, realizing that it had been some time since his granddaughter had left the restaurant. "If the weather continues like this, maybe she'll decide to wait it out and come back once it's cleared."

Shayne moved up to the bar and said, "Okay, thanks, Buzz. I think I might take him over to the school gym to bounce some balls after lunch."

"He had some macaroni and cheese a little while ago, so he's all good to go whenever you're ready," Buzz said, as he dusted his hands off on his pants.

"Thanks." Shayne placed an order for his own lunch and then sat with his son in one of the back booths.

The darkness of the room combined with the cold of the cement floor had made Natalia even more numb than the drugs were making her. The drugs at least gave her some distraction, even if they were hallucinations. However, the drugs that flowed through her system were wearing off. While that brought about some periods of lucidity, it also made her stomach nauseous. Shivering, she brought her knees closer to her chest and she pulled the scratchy woolen blanket tighter around her to ward off the cold drafts of air that came in through the vents. She was pretty sure she was developing pneumonia. Her nose was runny; she'd been heavily coughing off and on to the point where it was difficult to breathe the past couple of days, though her perception of time was certainly distorted.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten or drunk anything. Looking over towards the door, she noted a metal cup that still held some water and an empty plate. She debated the merits of using up the little energy and warmth she'd managed to create to go get the water, but her parched lips and dry throat made her make that decision rather quickly. Crawling over to the wall near the door she reached out and brought the mug towards her. She wanted to drink as much as she could to alleviate the desperate thirst that seemed to pervade her system, but she knew that if she didn't slow down and conserve whatever fluids she had she'd have nothing left - especially since she didn't know when her kidnapper would provide her with more.

Crawling her way back against one of the wooden crates, she bundled herself back up and tried to pass away the time. It was sad that she looked forward to the next dosage of drugs because it would put her in a drug-induced oblivion. Sometimes, if she was lucky, she dreamed of her family, of Olivia, and their future together, and that could get her through the next day. She'd almost managed to get herself into a state of calm when the door was abruptly swung open.

The masked, hooded individual entered the room, and without saying anything placed a plate of food on top of the crate. When Natalia hadn't immediately moved to get the food, the figure moved closer, nudging her to get up.

Natalia tried to conserve most of her reserves by staying still, refusing to budge.

"Eat or don't. It doesn't make any difference to me, Rivera. I'll be back soon," the figure's gravelly voice spoke.

Waiting until the figure had left the room, Natalia sighed, and then slowly crawled over to get the sandwich and cup of black tea. Never before had Natalia been so grateful to get a ham and cheese. It wasn't her favorite but at the moment, she didn't care. She nearly wolfed it down then wrapped her hands around the warm mug. Shaking her head, she thought the voice seemed familiar but she couldn't place it, and she realized too late that the sandwich had to have been drugged. She shook her head; whatever recognition she might be able to come up with was lost again. She relished the heat of the tea; the mug warmed her hands even as the liquid warmed her insides. Finishing the tea not long after, she scooted back towards the crate. The wooden surface provided some additional warmth. Combined with the food, tea, drugs and woolen blanket, she was lulled back into an uneasy sleep.

ACT 2

After securing some snowmobiles, Eleni and her forensics team headed out to the coordinates of the cabin. Given the terrain and the snow, they couldn't bring all their usual on-site equipment. Loading much of what they needed into backpacks, they headed into the brush. Coming up to the cabin, Eleni noted that it was exactly as Anna had described in her notes. Checking around the perimeter, verifying there had been no further tampering of the scene, Eleni unstrapped her camera from its case and took some pictures of the exterior before venturing up the stairs and into the cabin. The only other footprints noted in the snow had been Anna's; other than that, it looked like the snowfall they'd had earlier in the week had covered any sort of external evidence there may have been.

Turning the knob of the door, Eleni pushed it open, taking a moment for her eyes to adjust from the snowy brightness outside to the dark interior. She briefly went through and laid out evidence markers next to various items on the desk in the main area of the cabin. Then she laid specific markers on the bulletin board, letting out a gasp as she scanned over the pictures of Marina, Daisy and Harley's children. She let out an audible sigh before reinforcing her professional mask, in order to get the evidence to help nail Natalia's

kidnapper. Since she'd returned to Springfield, she'd gotten to know the younger woman because of Francesca, and she'd gotten to like her.

A couple of the forensics team were dusting for any sort of fingerprints they could lift, while Eleni took some detailed pictures of the bulletin board intact before they removed the board from the wall. They had to cut the board in half and wrap it in order to transport it out; it would be reassembled at the police station. It took them an hour or so to gather and bag all the items that possibly were evidence in the kidnapping of Natalia Rivera. They packed what they could into their kits and backpacks, and then tied down the board to the back of one of the ATVs. Closing up the cabin, they left to return back to the precinct.

Doris looked over to the passenger seat where Olivia was alternately checking her cell for the time or messages and bouncing one of her knees up and down repeatedly. Doris knew the other woman was not a patient sort of person; neither was she. She knew the other woman was beyond panicked. Thinking back to the last time she'd gone on a road trip with Olivia searching for Natalia, she remembered how desperately broken the other woman had been. She also recalled the self-destructive path her friend had gone through following that trip. Right now though, even through the panic, she could sense some hopeful optimism out of Olivia. She knew the other woman was realistic enough to know the outcome of finding Natalia could go many ways, but she couldn't help but hope that things would work out well for her friends.

"Are you going to call Ava to let her know what's going on?" Doris asked gently.

It took a moment for Olivia to catch on that her friend had asked her a question, and when she did respond, it was followed by a heavy sigh. "I don't know what to say just yet. We don't even know if Anna's assessment is accurate. Natalia could still be anywhere."

"No, but I still trust her instincts. She's thorough and if she believes the lighthouse is where Natalia is, then I'm inclined to believe her."

"I can't tell Em. I can't get her hopes up and have it all be for nothing," Olivia said tightly as she began rubbing her hands together, partially to generate some heat, and partially to keep her hands from fidgeting.

The tremor in her friend's voice told Doris that Olivia still feared the absolute worst. Reaching out a gloved hand, she covered Olivia's hands. "Then don't tell her just yet. But I think you probably should call Ava." Stopping for a moment at a traffic light, she came up with an idea. Pulling out her cell phone, she dialed Blake's cell phone. It took a moment for the other woman to answer.

"Hey, Blake, I need to ask you a big favor," Doris asked her girlfriend.

"Oh?" Blake asked curiously.

"Nothing like that – well, at least not yet. We have a strong lead on where Natalia is." Doris pulled the phone away from her ear when Blake's exclaimed 'what?' came through the line. "Blake, calm down a minute. I don't have long to talk and I need to give you some information."

"Okay. Let me get a pen and paper....all right, shoot."

"Not funny." There was a very real possibility guns would play a role in today's events, and she wasn't up for any play on words. "Okay, who's there in the restaurant with you?"

Curious as to her girlfriend's questions, she responded, "Right now? Buzz, Phillip, and the usual lunch crowd. Why do you ask?"

"Okay. I need you to discreetly tell Buzz and Phillip this information after we're done," Doris breathed out a sigh and looked over at Olivia. A honk from a car behind her jostled her attention back to the road and she noticed that the light had turned color. Moving through the intersection, Doris pulled over once she'd found a free spot. It had earned her an anxious glare from Olivia, but she put the car into park as she tried to balance her cell between her ear and her shoulder. "We have a solid lead that Natalia is being held up at the old lighthouse on Fairbridge Road. The police are headed there now and Olivia and I are following behind. I was wondering if you could ask Buzz if he can keep Company as a base for information so that the police can focus on getting Natalia home safe and sound."

"Sure thing. That won't be a problem," Blake responded, knowing the older man the way she did and his adoration for Natalia. We'll keep things running here. Let us know what's happening. Stay safe, you and Olivia. Bring Natalia home safely. Love you."

"Love you, too. We'll do our best," Doris said, smiling as she closed her phone. She turned to Olivia. "Okay, Blake is going to let Buzz and Phillip know what's going on and update them when she hears from us." She sighed. "I really think you need to at least give Ava a heads up. She deserves to hear it from you before the media gets wind of it."

Deflated, Olivia replied, "I know. Okay. I'll call, you drive."

Doris nodded, pulling back into traffic, and headed towards the lighthouse.

Though it took only a few seconds for the connection to be made, to Olivia it seemed to take forever before Ava picked up the phone. "Hey, Ava, baby. I need to tell you something important. Where are you?"

"In the daycare with Emma and Francesca." Ava paused. "Mom, are you okay? You don't sound so good."

"Ava, I need you to page Greg and get him to come down and watch the girls. I can't tell you this with Emma listening in."

"Mom, you're starting to scare me."

"Ava, look, just do it and then call me back, okay?" Olivia's voice was nearly an octave higher with her nervous energy.

"Okay, just give me a minute." Ava hung up the phone and then called back after a minute. "Where are you?"

"On the way to the old lighthouse. The police have a very strong indication that Natalia is being held there." Olivia was rapidly bouncing her knee up and down.

"Hang on, let me go out in the hallway to continue this; I can still see the girls until Greg arrives." After a moment, Ava continued, "Wait, what's this about Natalia and the lighthouse? And how did you find out about all of this?"

"Doris and I went over to the police station. I was about to give them hell for not getting anywhere with the investigation when Anna comes in blazing saying that she knows where Natalia is." Olivia took a deep shuddering breath and tapped her chest in rhythm to her near erratic heart rate. "She gives this long winded explanation and I don't remember all the details, but she found some evidence that highly suggested that the lighthouse was where Natalia was being held."

"How's this any different from any of the other leads they've come up with?" Ava asked pointedly. She knew that a lot of the information the police had been working on hadn't led anywhere so far.

"It's the best information they've come up with. And Doris trusts Anna's instincts on this," Olivia responded, though she conceded the point her daughter was trying to make. She sighed. "Look, I don't want Emma to know about this until we know for sure what's going on. Blake and Buzz are setting up a sort of informal information gathering place at Company for news of the kidnapping."

"Do you want us to head over there?" Ava asked.

"I don't want to worry her or get her hopes up."

"Okay, I'll keep her here for now, but we might just go over after we know more."

"Fine. Just keep the girls safe. Listen, will you call Phillip and get him to text you regularly with updates when he gets them?"

"Always. Sure. Bye, Mom. Love you. Be careful for both of you. And tell Doris I'll kick her ass if she lets anything happen to you."

Olivia chuckled. "Will do." She hung up the phone and turned to Doris. "Okay, Thelma, let's go!"

Pacing the small office of the warehouse, Edmund smiled. The fact that Detective Li had located the small cabin in the woods hadn't actually surprised him. Having kept tabs on her over the years meant learning exactly what she was capable of, and though he would have preferred the younger woman stay in the family business, sometimes it was useful to know what she was doing as a law enforcement officer. It was amazing what information on the internet could provide him with. "I thought you were reining her in," Edmund said gruffly as he took a sip of his coffee. Detective Li could be a problem, but so far, he'd anticipated her movements. Trusting the younger woman's intelligence, the well-placed clues he'd posted to the bulletin board in the cabin would lead the police towards Ms. Rivera's final resting place. He grinned fiercely. Looking around the office, he glanced through the large windows at the storage containers being filled beneath them.

Hung Li growled, unaccustomed to his threats being ignored. He had left several warnings that he knew his daughter would understand, to try to get her to back off investigating Edmund Winslow. Under other circumstances, he might find her protectiveness, determination and focus admirable; he himself possessed those same traits. However, his daughter spent a lifetime defying him, especially when her sense of legal justice contravened his own sense of retributive and pre-emptive justice. Turning his attention to the automatic and machine gun supplies being loaded, he ignored Winslow's jab. He generally preferred using his own hands to apply brute force, especially when the subject had no idea their life was about to end, but he did understand that sometimes firepower was required for strategic targets. "When is the scheduled departure?"

"The containers will be loaded on the container ships this evening. Ships should reach international waters by tomorrow night. As for us? All in good time, my friend," Edmund

said as he placed the mug of lukewarm coffee on the desk. He picked up his coat and headed towards the door. "But first, there are a few loose ends to tie up."

"I hope for everyone's sake that you're right about this information; Natalia doesn't deserve this kind of hell," Frank said.

"Olivia and her family have also been suffering throughout this ordeal, Chief," Anna said pointedly as she looked over at her boss. "You seem to forget to acknowledge how much this has been hurting Olivia."

Under his breath, Frank mumbled, "How can I forget? She's always there when there's trouble; she's usually the cause of it."

"Frank, I get that you have issues with Olivia, but it's getting old. Nobody deserves the pain that family is going through right now." Anna sighed audibly as she looked out at the swirling snow and freezing rain as it blew around. The skies were looking more ominous, darkening even though it was only just past mid-day. "Let's just focus on getting Natalia back to her family."

"Frank, how do you want to approach the situation when we get there?" Mallet asked from the back seat. Anna was right; they needed to focus their efforts on rescuing Natalia.

"Do we know if there's still an active phone line at the lighthouse?" Frank asked.

"I think so; maybe just an emergency line, but it should still be active," Mallet responded. "There are two buildings – the actual lighthouse and a supply house that used to house a keeper before the lighthouse went all automated. There may be a working phone in that building."

"Well, I think this situation counts as an emergency. Can you call the station and get the number?"

"No need," Anna said as she flicked her fingers over her phone quickly and brought up the information they needed. "Got it." She touched the connect button and it dialed through to the lighthouse. She shook her head with a wry, annoyed expression. "Automated message."

"Call the operator," Frank responded. "Tell them there's a hostage situation going on at the lighthouse and that the police need the message removed as we need access to contact."

"What are the exit points at the lighthouse itself?" Mallet asked as Anna made the call.

"There's a main door on one side, and an emergency hatch on the other. There's also a hatch up on the light deck," Frank said.

"Was there ever a ransom demand?" Mallet asked, though ransom demands weren't always necessary with kidnappings, depending on the purpose behind it. Also, this kidnapping seems to have stayed local.

"No, nothing," Frank said. "It's made getting leads extremely difficult to follow up on." Running a hand through his hair, he sighed, grudgingly admitting, "This break that Anna found today is the most we've had since the kidnapping started.

"Frank, I think we need to call in the regional FBI field office," Mallet said calmly, though he knew it would sting his friend's pride to have someone take over the investigation. Normally the FBI would be all over this investigation, though they had been informed of the situation. Mallet wondered if it wouldn't have been better to have the Feds running it from the beginning.

Indeed, Frank bristled at the mention. "There's no need. We can handle things here."

"Frank, this isn't about a pissing contest between agencies," Mallet said. "Nor is it about your abilities. They are trained much more extensively. And you're right, until today we haven't gotten much information. We're still going to be right there, no matter what happens."

"She's going to come home safely. She has to," Frank said, his voice sounded strong, but there was definitely a hint of hopeless desperation in his tone. "The nearest FBI field office is an hour away. They probably won't be able to get here in time in this weather anyway. We need to move now," Frank said as he continued driving.

Looking back and forth between the two men, reading the tension in their faces and their voices, Anna interrupted, "Okay, the operator has cleared the line. We need to formulate this plan and then let Remy and the officers know what the plan is."

"First off, we need to keep Olivia, Doris and Jonathan as far back as we can; we don't need any more civilian casualties," Frank said.

Anna acknowledged his comment, but looked at him uncertainly. "That's probably going to be harder than you think, Frank. Do you really think Olivia's going to sit back once she knows where Natalia is?"

"If she makes a go for the lighthouse, handcuff her to the car," Frank said, annoyed at the woman's propensity to be in the middle of trouble.

She knew she should get Doris to convince Olivia to stay in her car, but it would likely be a futile effort. If it had been someone she loved that had been kidnapped, she wouldn't want to be standing on the sidelines.

"Okay, Mallet," Frank started, "I want you to tell Remy and the other officers to get a perimeter set up around the lighthouse when we get there. We'll get another couple cruisers out to block off road entry out to the lighthouse." He tapped his hands against the steering wheel before turning to Anna. "I want you to inform Olivia and Doris about what is going on. They deserve to at least know that. Try to convince the two of them to stay put. I'm going to give the lighthouse a call, see if I can get a response."

As they pulled onto the snow and ice-covered road leading to the lighthouse, Frank breathed a sigh of relief that his car had studded tires as the vehicle threatened to slide on the slippery ground. Looking forward, the white building was partially obscured by the snow and fog. A shiver ran through him.

Ava looked through the glass of the daycare center door to see Emma playing with Sarah and Francesca. She worried about her mother and Natalia, and what would happen to her mother if Natalia ended up being gone forever. It would devastate her mother even more than Olivia had been when Natalia had left nearly two years earlier. Just as she was about to turn into the center, Greg came around the corner. Ava breathed a sigh of relief. There were few people Olivia entrusted with her children; her eldest, their fathers, and a few close friends, and Greg.

"Good, you're here," Ava said anxiously.

"Ms. Peralta?" Greg questioned.

A quick glance back through the window and back to Greg, Ava said, "I need you to look after the girls for a bit."

"What's going on?" Greg wondered. He didn't often see the younger Spencer woman rattled.

"You can't tell Emma." Ava waited until the banquet manager nodded. "The police have a lead on where Natalia is being held. They're on their way. There's no guarantee the information is correct or even if it is, if everything will turn out okay."

Greg blanched at the thought of the consequences. Ms. Rivera was someone he quite liked and respected highly. She got things done around the hotel with such ease and he admired

that tremendously. Not that he didn't appreciate his boss, but Olivia Spencer was not ever one to be messed around with when it came to her hotel.

"Look, I've got to go try and call Leyla and let her know what's going on. She won't be able to get back from Chicago in time, but she should know what's going on with her sister."

"Okay. I'll stay with them until you get back."

"Thanks, Greg," Ava said before turning down the hall to the elevator.

When Greg entered the room, he was nearly bowled over by Emma; he had to balance himself before he lost his footing. "Hey, Emma; how are you?"

Emma looked down at the floor and then towards the door. "Where did Ava go?"

"She just needed to check on something up at your Mom's office. She should be back shortly." He hoped his steady voice was enough to reassure the girl.

Tilting her head slightly in thought, she asked, "Why didn't she just say that?" Something wasn't right; she could tell from the way the banquet manager fidgeted when he was nervous. Right about now, she noticed that he was tapping his fingers against the leather folder at his side.

Worried, Emma's voice was not much more than a whisper when she asked, "Did something bad happen again?"

"I don't know, Emma," Greg said, and truly he didn't know very much more. From what Ava said, the police were on their way and they would all have to wait for more information.

"I'm scared," Emma said.

"I know. But hopefully everything will be okay." It was his fervent hope at the moment; that and that Ava would return soon from the office. He didn't know how much longer he'd be able to hold off under Emma's questioning.

With the prosecution and defense summaries given, the judge dismissed the jury to determine their verdict. Beth and Mel had taken Dinah to the conference room to get some

coffee, though how much Dinah needed some more caffeine was debatable; Mel was almost ready to handcuff the younger woman to the chair.

"So, what do you think the jury is going to decide?" Dinah asked the two of them. She was nervous that some of her commentary throughout the trial would have been detrimental to the judge's verdict.

"I think Mel's summation went very well," Beth said brightly. "All the key points were hit. The prosecution seems to realize that the case wasn't very strong, especially as evidence was handled so badly. And the original investigation was all over the map with regards to suspects."

"We're just going to have to wait and see. I've been in Judge Grayson's court many times. He's tough on crime but he is fair."

Tapping her fingers against the Formica table, Dinah said frustratingly, "I hate waiting."

"I've noticed," Beth said under her breath which earned a snicker from Mel.

"Anyone got a deck of cards?" Dinah said with a bright smile.

"No," Mel responded, though at the moment, she seriously wished she did.

Deflated, Dinah sighed. "Darn. I guess strip poker is out then." She thought for a moment. "Ya got a pen and paper?"

"Why do you ask?" Beth asked hesitantly.

"I just want to write a note, for my mother," Dinah said. "Just in case." She knew she'd been a disappointment to her mother over and over through the years. Since she'd come back to Springfield, she had begun mending fences with Vanessa again, but there was still the chance that she could face some jail time for the death of David Andrews. She hated how she had left things before she left, even though she had a heartfelt talk with her mother at the time, realizing yet again how she'd screwed up things while trying to help her friends.

Taking a legal pad out of her briefcase, Beth lifted the cover and tore out a couple sheets of paper and handed it over to Dinah along with a pen. At least, Beth thought, it would keep her busy for a little while.

It seemed like a long time, but by the time the bailiff had come to request their presence back in the courtroom, not much more than an hour had passed. Dinah folded her letter

and placed it in the pocket of her blazer. With a little bit of trepidation, she followed Beth and Mel as they took their places at the front of the court and sat at the long table.

"Please rise for the Honorable David Grayson," the bailiff called out as the judge entered the room.

As Dinah rose from her chair, she tried to read the judge's expression, trying to glean any sort of hint about the outcome but it was no use.

"Mr. Foreman, has the jury reached a verdict?" Judge Grayson asked.

"Yes, your Honor," the foreman responded. "On the count of second degree murder, we, the jury, find the defendant not guilty. On the charge of evading arrest, we find the defendant guilty."

"Thank you. The jury is dismissed." Turning his attention to the defendant, he continued, "Ms. Marler, you've been charged with the second degree murder of David Andrews and evading arrest." The judge paused as he looked down at his notes. "By your own admission, you acknowledged that you were responsible for the death of the man. Though it was not your intention to kill this man, who was by all intent and purpose an imposter of a man who'd been tormenting your friends, the fact remains that he is dead. However, there is insufficient evidence, that hasn't been tainted or tampered with, to support the charges. There are as many pieces of evidence and police statements to tie others to the crime as you." Judge Grayson pressed the glasses higher up on his nose as he glanced down at the notes again. Looking back up, he continued, "However, on the charge of evading arrest by leaving the country. On that charge, you are to surrender your passport forthwith and will be prohibited from applying for or receiving a passport to leave the country for a period of two years, and you will be under probation for a period not exceeding twelve months."



Finally releasing the breath she'd been holding for it seemed most of his deliberation, Dinah nodded. "Thank you, Your Honor."

"Just don't show up in this courtroom again, Ms. Marler," the judge responded, "Or that sentence will be revoked and you will be spending the rest of your probation in a jail cell."

"Yes, your Honor."

"This session is now concluded," the bailiff spoke.

Dinah turned to both Beth and Mel and gave them each a hug. Looking back into the gallery, she noticed tears rolling down her mother's cheeks. She touched her pocket where she'd earlier placed the letter and raised her head in a little prayer that she would at least be able to talk with her mother in person and tell her what she'd written.

Now that the court had been dismissed, Mel pulled out her Blackberry and turned it on. A priority notification email from Doris had popped up in her inbox. Scrolling through to the email, she clicked on it and began to read. "Oh, God."

Just as Mel was reading her email, there was a text message on Beth's phone from Phillip.
"Oh, no."

"What? Will somebody please tell me what's going on?" Dinah asked, looking back and forth at the anxious faces of both women.

"Natalia," Mel and Beth responded.

"They've found her," Beth added.

"How is she?" Vanessa asked, after overhearing the conversation.

Looking back at her cell, she reread the message to see if Phillip mentioned it. "Sorry, they haven't seen her yet. But they know where she is. The police are headed out to the old lighthouse on Fairbridge Road."

"Olivia and Doris are following them out there," Mel added. "Doris said the weather is deteriorating considerably, but that Buzz will be keeping Company open if people want to gather there to wait for more information."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Dinah said anxiously.

Looking over at Dinah, Mel said, "First we need to get the papers signed for your release, and to arrange to have your passport transferred from the police evidence locker to the courthouse."

"Okay, let's get going," Dinah responded.

"Get up!" When Natalia struggled to move, the hooded form prodded her with a long wooden stick. "I said, get up!"

Groaning from the ache in one side and near numbness on her other, Natalia attempted to get herself into a sitting position. A wave of vertigo passed over her and Natalia nearly toppled forward. The dizziness and the accompanying nausea threatened to overwhelm her. If that wasn't bad enough, she was wracked by another round of a deep, near barking cough. She was weak and she felt feverish even as she shivered. The medication her captor had given her was adding to her distorted reality, and though she thought at times she recognized the voice she now couldn't tell if it belonged to a male or female. Another wave of dizziness came, and Natalia violently retched onto the floor.

"Move!" the figure moved closer, prepared to grab the woman's arm but was a little reluctant that Natalia wouldn't throw up again. The captor was ready to carry Natalia out but preferred if she could walk on her own.

"Why are we moving?" Natalia coarsely asked.

"Do you really want to stay in that stench?" the captor asked derisively.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Stop asking so many questions!" the figure demanded. "Just move!" When Natalia had a hard time standing and remaining upright, the captor went behind her and pushed her ahead with one hand while trying to keep her steady with the other. They shoved a blanket at her. "Wrap this around you; it's cold out there." When the captor opened the door, a gust of wind and snow blew through the opening and the whiteness was near blinding.

As they approached the steps leading up to the lighthouse proper, the captor continued to prod her. "Up!"

Only a few short steps into their ascent, Natalia's weakened balance wavered and she grazed her shin. "Please, let me stop for a moment." Natalia's breathing sounded wet and crackly. "Hard to breathe."

The captor waited a few minutes before growing restless again. One way or another, Natalia Rivera had to pay, did it really matter how? "Come on, that's enough time. Once we're inside, then you can rest."

"Okay," Natalia spoke quietly. Not particularly caring about her own dignity at the moment, she crawled up the remaining steps on her hands and knees, needing the extra support of having her hands on the surface of the stairs to help guide her. Keeping her eyes closed kept some of the nausea at bay. She felt her captor pass by her as she reached the top and then return after a moment.

"The door on the right, go in," the captor demanded.

Wishing that everything would just come to a stop until she could get her bearings, Natalia did as she was told, crawling over against the wall. She felt around and came on a thin, plastic-covered mat on the floor. Pathetically grateful, she moved over to it and collapsed down, willing her body to stop moving until the dizziness passed.

The captor placed a cup of water on the floor near Natalia, telling the woman of its placement before backing up to the door. "I'll be back soon."

Despite the increasing bad weather outside, people had begun to arrive at Company, waiting for any kind of news about Natalia's rescue. Buzz and Blake had put on a big pot of chili and heated up loaves of bread and rolls.

Phillip had made himself useful pulling some of the tables together and set places for people to sit together. Thus far there hadn't been any media coverage, and for that he had to be grateful. It meant that the television and radio reporters were kept away from the scene, potentially putting the operation in jeopardy, but it also meant that it was less likely that Emma would accidentally hear about it on the radio or TV before he or Olivia had a chance to talk with her. He realized he probably needed to do that sooner than later. Emma was an intelligent girl; she had to know something was wrong. However, right now, he knew she and Francesca were in the safe care of Ava at the Beacon. He'd been in contact with Ava once already and informed her he would be updating her by text message when he heard anything.

When Beth arrived with Mel, Dinah and Vanessa, he waited for them to remove their coats and then he stepped forward and hugged his wife first and then Dinah. "I assume this means the charges were dropped?"

"For the second degree murder charge, yes. On probation for leaving the country, evading arrest."

"All things considered, it could have been much worse. Edmund is still a menace to society and should be dead. If I ever get my hands on him, he will be," Phillip said sternly.

Turning towards her husband, Beth leaned into him after the exhausting day of the trial. "Phillip, I'd prefer if you were nowhere near that bastard when he gets his due." She shivered as if the cold wetness from the snow and freezing rain had seeped through her. "I need some nice hot tea. God, it's getting bad out there. If it weren't for the fact that we were waiting for information on Olivia and Natalia and it's easier to do it with everyone in one spot, I'd rather everyone be home and safe."

"If you're looking for something hot, the chili is ready," Blake said as she started to bring out bowls.

"Do you need any help, Blake?" Beth asked.

"There's more bowls to come out and the bread rolls are also ready." Setting bowls and cutlery on the long counter, she turned just as Buzz was coming out with the large crockpot.

Narrowly missing the entire contents being sent to the floor, Phillip stepped in and steadied the pot.

"Thank you!" Buzz said.

"No problem," Phillip responded just as the door chimed. Looking over, he noted Josh Lewis entering with Reva and Colin.

"Ugh, what a day," Josh said. "Any news?"

"No, nothing more yet," Phillip said. "They should be getting there about now. It will probably take some time for the police to get things set up out there in this weather. The plus side is that there shouldn't be anyone else out there besides the police and Olivia and Doris."

"Hey," Buzz called out as he came out with an old transistor radio. "This thing picks up the police scanner. Just let me get it set up on the counter and we should be able to get information as it comes in."

"Good idea," Josh said. "Here, Buzz, I'll give you a hand in the kitchen. See if we can get all this food going."

"Buzz, whatever expenses you have for tonight, I'll reimburse you. Thank you for doing this," Phillip said.

"There's no need, but thank you for the offer. Olivia and Natalia are family and we all care about them. Thank you for coming." Buzz nodded and then went into the kitchen with Josh close behind.

ACT 3

Tucked in next to a dumpster in an alley behind a row of businesses, a young man tried to keep the cold and snow from blasting him as he waited payment for a job done. Really, it hadn't been all that difficult to just watch an abandoned cabin, but he was expecting five hundred dollars, which could go a long way for him if he was careful. Shivering, he huddled tightly to keep warm, and thus he didn't see the non-descript white van pull up on the other side of the building.

The last thing he remembered was being hit with something and then he collapsed to the ground, feeling the life slip from his body.

Slipping past the door to his daughter's apartment after disengaging the security code, Hung Li moved through the rooms, looking at the personalization that his daughter had placed throughout. He nodded sadly at the slightly worn photograph in an old silver frame of Anna and her mother. He remembered taking that photo the year before his wife passed away of cancer when Anna was just a child. He missed his belated wife. He remembered being happy at one point in his life, when life was much simpler.

After Jing-Mei died, he turned his focus to working for the Winslow family, keeping an eye on his young daughter through school, but not really engaging with her. He wondered if he had placed closer attention and more discipline on her that Xing Lung may not have gone the route she has. His daughter was an independent spirit, and she was fiercely protective of those she loved. He sighed, noting that he had not fallen in that category for many, many years.

Taking a knife out, he pierced the glass, shattering it, and then slicing his wife's image out, pocketing the partial picture. Placing the remainder of the photo and frame back on the mantle, he turned and glanced at another photograph, one of his daughter and the Spencer middle child. He could see the affectionate glance Xing shared with the girl as she was teaching her the motions of Tai-Chi. Grabbing his boot-knife, he etched into the glass. "Who's next?" Quickly, he left the apartment and headed back to meet up with Edmund. There was still much to do before they left Springfield.

"Time to move!" the masked hooded figure shouted as they came into the room and forcefully grabbed Natalia by the upper arm. "You've had your rest."

Shaking her head, trying to throw off the drug-induced fog in her brain, Natalia asked, "Where are we going?"

"Out." The figure tried to move Natalia again but was surprised that even in the other woman's weakened state she was still difficult to maneuver. "Now get up!"

Trying to stand up, she was once again overcome with a coughing fit, which rendered her already labored breathing worse. Natalia tried to focus what reserves she had to bring her breathing back under control. "Why are we moving again?"

"Shut up! Do you have to ask so many damned questions?"

Due to the darkened room, the large hoodie, mask, and the drugs still running through her system, Natalia still couldn't figure out the sex of her captor. But she could tell by the tone that the person was getting more frustrated and anxious and that made her even further terrified for her own outcome. She had just managed to get standing again when she felt a hand close around her arm again. She tried to shrug away but couldn't manage; the captor was too strong.

"Just move. I'll tell you when you can stop."

The captor had come around behind her, keeping a firm grasp on her arm while the other pushed at her lower back. Licking her lips against the cold dryness, Natalia asked, "Where are we?" She could feel the draft seeping through her as they ascended the stairs and she shivered. Despite the cold hardness of the floor where she was earlier, she would rather be down there right now. She tried to summon up prayers she knew by rote and started reciting them in her head. As she moved from one prayer to the next she hadn't realized that she'd started to verbalize them.

"Prayer isn't going to help you now," the captor spoke with contempt. As the door was thrown open, the figure pushed Natalia through the entrance.



Turning the ignition off, Frank looked out at the obscured lighthouse; the beacon at the top rotated its beam of light through the heavy fog and snow. He looked for places his team could set up and then ordered his team out. Two cruisers were set up at the entrance to the driveway behind them.

The Search and Rescue truck and an ambulance pulled up alongside the police vehicles, then the Search and Rescue officers quickly set up a heavy tent for the mobile unit to confer and get further prepared with bulletproof vests, radios, and flashlights.

Frank directed Remy first up to the lighthouse storage building to check the doors to see if they were locked or otherwise blocked from entrance, however, when the detective reached the door to pull it open a gunshot rang out loudly, startling everyone.

"Shit!" Remy yelled. He hadn't been hit but he had jumped significantly back and he fell into the snow. When he got up and looked closer, he could see where the bullet had exited the partially closed door. He took several deep breaths to calm himself before double checking the door. Standing slightly back and to the left of the door he waited a moment before turning and shining a light into the darkened interior. Not finding anyone in the immediate vicinity, he took a deep breath and a cautious step around the door, shining the light around to find a rigged mechanism connected to a 12-gauge rifle. A further examination of the room showed no further booby-traps.

He went over to the rigged device and disarmed it to prevent anyone else from being a potential or actual victim.

"What's going on?" Frank's voice came over the radio.

"I'm not hurt," Remy responded reassuringly. "The door was booby-trapped with a rifle."

"Get back to base, Remy," Frank ordered, not wanting any of his officers to be hurt.

"I'm okay, Frank. I've disarmed the gun and rigging. There don't seem to be any more traps." Remy was determined to be there to help Natalia. She'd been there as a friend to him when he needed it. "Let me stay and keep looking."

Frank sighed. He knew it was futile to stop Remy, but he wanted to have someone with the younger detective. Noting that Anna had finished zipping up her coat, he nodded. "Okay, but I'm sending Anna in with you. Mallet, hold off going into the lighthouse until we know if Natalia's in there. We don't want anyone else hurt if that's rigged up as well."

"Alright. I'll keep looking," Remy replied.

The gunshot had startled Olivia out of her thoughts and sent her heart racing; her first thought immediately going to Natalia. She tapped her fingers against her chest as she tried to bring her heart rate back under control. Looking over at Doris she could tell from the other woman's expression that her friend's thoughts likely paralleled her own. It only took a moment though and Olivia had pulled her coat together, fumbling over the buttons in an effort to get them done up before she flung the car door open.

Despite the increasing amount of snow on the ground, Olivia's pure determination got her to the lighthouse before any of the police could get there to restrain her from entering the lighthouse. She had no way of knowing what had caused the gun to go off, but at the moment she didn't care. She put her hand into her pocket, cursing the fact that she hadn't thought to take her gun, but there hadn't been any time to retrieve it from the farmhouse. So singularly focused on getting Natalia back, she hadn't even looked back to see if Doris had followed her.

If the captor or captors hadn't known they were here when the vehicles were pulling up to the lighthouse, Olivia was certain the gunshot would have alerted them, and she knew that Natalia's life was even further at risk. She'd kill the bastard with her own hands if she had to. Her stomach churned at the thought of losing Natalia permanently.

"What are you doing here, Olivia?" Anna yelled above the heavy winds that were battering the lighthouse buildings. Thinking back to the police perimeter, she looked over at the other woman who was out of breath. "How did you get here?"

"Do you really have to ask that question?" Olivia asked, raising an eyebrow. "As for how I managed to get to the lighthouse, Frank's officers out there must be on the donut diet, because I got here faster than they could get me."

Anna snickered slightly. She knew Olivia's desperation and panic was fueling her adrenaline. And the other woman's attempt at humor only barely masked her fear. Turning to Remy, she asked, "What have you found so far?"

"Aside from disarming the gun, just some supplies that you would expect to find: marine and road maps of the area, ropes, tools, padlocks, emergency flashlights," Remy replied. Just as he was headed into another section of the front counter, he noted a garbage bucket behind it that held several food containers; several of them, and empty water bottles. "Anna, I think you should take a look at this," he said, pulling the garbage bucket out for them to see.

Reaching in to pick up one of the containers, Anna opened it and sniffed at the remnants of a salad with dressing. "This hasn't been here very long; it's not spoiled." Picking at another, she could see some slightly congealed tomato soup, but this as well was recently eaten and discarded. She looked up as Remy headed down a small hall to what she thought might be a storage area.

The other man backed up from the area, coughing. "Whoa. Someone was sick in here." The small area smelled more, but he could tell from the blankets on the floor and the positioning of crates that this most likely where Natalia had been held. Looking further into the room with the flashlight, he could see a thin foam mat on the floor near the cement wall. So intent on his search of the room he barely heard the uneasy expelled gasp behind him. He looked back to see Anna place a supporting arm around Olivia's waist as the hotelier's face went ashen. "Get her back in the front," Remy told Anna quickly.

"Oh God," Olivia said between sucking in deep lung-fulls of air. What she saw of that small enclosed area was worse than what she'd ever imagined of Natalia's holding place. But what was worse was that she feared every time she closed her eyes from now on this would be the scene she faced. "Where is she?" She asked to no one in particular. There hadn't been any signs of tire tracks leading from the lighthouse, though she realized the drifting snow would have obscured some of the tracks.

Looking at her friend, Anna turned and uncapped a bottle of water she had in her pack and handed it to Olivia. "Drink," she ordered the other woman. Waiting until Olivia had taken several good swallows of water, Anna reached out and placed a hand on Olivia's arm. Gently, she said, "We'll find her."

Olivia nodded, still partially in a state of shock. As Frank showed up at the door, she acknowledged his presence.

Looking over at Olivia first, he then turned to Anna. "What happened to her?" he asked, looking concerned.

"We found an area where the captor or captors have been hiding Natalia," Anna responded softly as she took another look over at Olivia.

Remy left the storage area and moved further back through the narrow hallway. After further investigation through the rooms, Remy was disheartened to not find Natalia. However, he realized that the captor may have taken Natalia over to the lighthouse. Getting back to the main room he informed the others of his findings. They opened up the door and headed over to the main structure.

"Stay to the side when you open the door. I don't want to take a chance that this one isn't rigged as well," Frank said as they approached it.

Apprehensively he checked Olivia's position, to see that Anna had pulled the other woman back to the side of the lighthouse. It was one thing to have one of his officer's injured in the line of duty, but if Olivia was injured or killed, he knew there would be a lot more problems to deal with. But he did understand the desire and the drive to protect one's family no matter what the personal cost.

Shining his flashlight against the cement stairs Remy noticed some dark spots against the snow. He leaned closer with the light to get a better look. Blood. It wasn't a lot, but it led up the stairs. "Chief, Anna, you need to see this," Remy spoke quickly. Looking up, he wasn't surprised to see Olivia arrive there first.

When Doris stepped out of the car, she frowned at how much snow she'd have to wade through and the fact that her designer coat was trailing in the white shit. She never used to care what she wore – at least until she started dating Blake – as long as it fit properly and was good enough to add to her attitude in order to get things done. However, after finding out one day that Blake had burned her red, black and white jacket, she decided perhaps change wasn't always so bad.

For the time being, a little power outfit would come in handy as she headed directly into the emergency responder's tent. She grinned at the fact that there were no senior officers in the tent and she headed for the closest officer there. "What is going on out there? I heard a gunshot."

"Excuse me, Mayor Wolfe, you shouldn't be in here," one of the younger officers told her.

Doris leveled a glare at the young man, figuring that he wasn't long out of the police academy. "Officer...what's your name?" Doris asked as she looked for his name tag.

"Morris, Ma'am," the officer said nervously.

"Well, Officer Morris, my friends are in that lighthouse. I need information."

"I know ma'am. But they're Chief Cooper's orders."

"Bloody hell, I'm not going up there myself, I just want to know what is going on!" Doris was frustrated and annoyed.

The officer backed up a step, nervous at what the mayor might do to him. "I know. But I have my orders."

"Do I have to remind you that Chief Cooper answers to me, so in effect, I am a higher authority? Which means you tell me what is going on," Doris continued to glare at the man until his stance changed. Even though he did stand half a foot taller than her, there was something to be said for an authoritative glare.

Officer Morris sighed. "I don't really know that much right now. Chief Cooper just went up there. The door was rigged with a shot-gun but no one was hurt. Nothing more has been relayed back to us. When I get more information I will let you know. Until then, we just have to wait."

"Eejit!" Doris muttered leaving the tent. She shook her head. Apparently she'd picked up more colloquialisms watching some DVDs of "Bad Girls" that Blake had...um...acquired from someone she'd been talking to online. She didn't think she really wanted to know how Blake had gotten the discs, but watching the Scottish wing governor definitely had its merits...and perhaps more than a few fantasies.

Speaking of Blake, Doris figured she owed her girlfriend a call, at least so that everyone's not in the dark about what was happening. Hitting the short-key connection to Blake's phone, she raised her cell to her ear. She could hear quite a noise going on in the background at Company as the call was answered. "Hey, Blake, sounds noisy. Are there a lot of people there?"

"Probably about twenty or so, which isn't too bad when you consider the weather out there." Blake paused a moment. "How is everything out there? Buzz has the police scanner tuned into the radio but it's still not saying very much."

"I know, they don't really have much to say at the moment," Doris growled. "There was a gunshot but no one was hurt. Apparently the door was rigged with a rifle. They still haven't found Natalia, yet."

"Oh, no," Blake said worriedly. "I'm glad no one was injured. Where are people located?"

"Police have barricades up at the end of the road to prevent curious onlookers and media from approaching." Doris fidgeted with a pen she found in her pocket. She'd been trying to quit smoking and so far it had been working, but in tense moments like this she needed something to play with. "Remy, Anna, Olivia and Frank are up at the lighthouse. There are other officers around the property as well." A motion caught Doris's attention and she turned in its direction. The police officer she'd been talking with was trying to call her over. "Sorry, Blake. Something just came up. I'll let you know what's going on as soon as I

can." She pressed the disconnect button and put the phone into her pocket as she followed the officer back in the tent to find Jonathan also there.

"What's going on?" Doris asked, as she noticed Jonathan dusting the snow off his hat. He was more covered in snow than his police counterpart.

"There's a dark green van about a hundred yards to the northeast. It looks like it might be on an unused utility road. I had to trek up the road a minute before I spotted it. With the snow cover in the trees, you can't see it from here," Jonathan said calmly. "I suspect that whoever the kidnapper is has been here since at least mid-morning as there are no fresh tire tracks. There looks to be some snowshoe prints out there, but nothing that would determine the size, especially with the drift. The door was unlocked so I checked inside. You'll need to get a forensics team out there."

As there were no senior police officers present, Doris gave Officer Morris the direction to place the call to the dispatch for the forensics team to respond. After a moment, they were informed that Eleni's team was still out; they hadn't returned from their last call, but should return soon. The message would be passed along. She wished there was a large pot of coffee handy; her nerves felt raw and she needed a fix of caffeine.

Picking up one of the two-way radios, Doris checked the channel. "Chief Cooper, come in, this is Mayor Wolfe."

"Chief Cooper here."

Doris could almost hear him roll his eyes by the tone in his voice. "Jonathan Randall just returned to base. Found an abandoned van just up an old utility road. Looks like the transport vehicle to get Natalia here." She looked over to Jonathan who was getting the officer to call in the vehicle license number and VIN. "They're calling the information to dispatch."

"Good," Frank said, sounding a little relieved. At least something seemed to be going right. "Get Eleni on it."

"She's not back yet, but they'll give her the message when she gets in."

"Have her call for a tow truck to get the van back to the station." Frank paused. "Oh, and since you're the mayor, see if you can commandeer someone to bring a plow out here. This is insane."

"I'll get right on that," Doris quipped in return, scrunching her face up in annoyance, though it wasn't a bad idea. "Wolfe out." She returned the radio to its holder and sighed, wondering if the day would ever end.

Eleni stomped the snow off the bottom of her boots as she entered the front door of the police station. Lowering one of the evidence bags off her shoulder, she pulled off her coat before the dispatch officer called over to her.

"Lt. Andros?"

"Yes?" Eleni responded.

"There's a message for you from the Emergency Response Team out at the lighthouse. Forensics has been requested out there. You need to contact Chief Cooper as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Officer Mendez." Eleni reloaded her pack over her shoulder and headed down to her office, needing to get the evidence logged and in the security safe in her office until she could properly catalogue it and examine it. After getting everything organized and settled, she picked up her cell and dialed Frank's number. It took several moments, but the line was eventually answered.

"Cooper," Frank responded.

"Hey, it's Eleni. You need me out there?" she turned to head towards the coffee maker in the hallway and touched it, finding the half empty pot cold. "Ugh."

"Sorry, what was that?" Frank asked.

"Cold coffee."

"Oh. Yeah, anyway, Jonathan Randall found an abandoned van that looks like it could be the vehicle that transported Natalia from the farmhouse. He only took a brief look through." Frank sighed. "I got Doris to contact the town's road works department to have a plow brought out to clear the roads out here. You'll need to have a tow truck come take the van back."

"Alright. I'll get the truck loaded up and I'll see you soon. What's the news on Natalia?"

"She's here; we're still looking for -" Frank's voice was cut off by a loud bang.

"Frank!" Eleni called out through the line. No response. "Frank, what's going on?"

"Gotta go!" Frank replied then the line went dead.

ACT 4

The catch door to the upper deck was flung open, banging heavily against the deck plating and Natalia was pushed out through the opening. With the lingering drugs in her system, her balance was off and she felt her back hit the railing hard. Without a coat on, the icy winds chilled her to the bone.

"Why are you doing this?" Natalia asked, trying to figure out some semblance of reason as to why she had been taken. The hallucinations she'd been experiencing had terrified her and she was still trying to figure out what was real and what was in her head. Visions of her family, of Edmund, of Jeffrey, of her father all swarmed her thoughts and nightmares.

"You've ruined everything, bitch!" her captor yelled.

"I don't understand," Natalia said as she shook her head. "What did I ever do to you?"

"Just shut up and move!" The captor pushed Natalia forward.

Frustrated with Frank's posturing, Olivia pushed her way past the police to head up the narrow steps to the upper deck of the lighthouse. Slipping through the hatch, Olivia's eyes widened when she saw a hooded figure pressing Natalia against the railing. As the heavy winds battered the side of the lighthouse, her approach behind the kidnapper went unheard. She looked at Natalia's frightened eyes and shook her head, not wanting her partner to acknowledge her presence. She watched as the younger woman shivered and it took everything in her not to throw the captor over the side so she could just wrap Natalia in her arms and keep her safe. Taking a moment to bring her scattered emotions under control and into focus, Olivia moved closer to Natalia's captor even as the hooded figure pushed forward trying to unbalance her partner. In a clear but strong tone, Olivia spoke, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Not expecting anyone to have come up so quickly behind, the kidnapper spun around, suddenly aware that the situation was spinning out of control rapidly. Angrily the masked figure spoke, "Well, you're not me."

"No, I'm not," Olivia glowered. "You drugged my partner, kidnapped her on our wedding day and put me through hell. Not to mention what you probably did to her. And when I do find out exactly what you did, I will gladly return the favor. With interest." Inwardly, Olivia was actually praying that Frank or Anna would make it up the stairs quickly enough to take care of the kidnapper so that she could look after Natalia. "Do you really think you'd get away with this? That we wouldn't keep searching for her?"

"She ran away before. It was only a matter of time before she would do it again," the captor spoke, taunting Olivia. "She's a coward."

"True," Olivia responded, her tone of voice icy. "She did run away once before." Shrewdly, Olivia looked at the captor. Although the voice was distorted by the mask, it sparked some recognition. "You will not ever call her a coward again."

"Why didn't you just take your little bitch and get your perverted family out of Springfield?"

"Wrong thing to say," Olivia said as she glared at the captor.

The hooded figure turned from Olivia and back to Natalia, hesitating slightly, unsure of which course of action to take. Realizing the better bet was trying to use the lingering effect of Natalia's weakened state, the captor rushed at her trying to unbalance her enough so that she would fall over the railing.

Natalia panicked as the blanket that she'd wrapped around herself to keep warm might end up hastening her death as it caught around her legs, further unbalancing her. She crashed against the railing again and her foot slipped over the side of the deck. She felt herself fall and grabbed hold of the rail as tightly as she could.

"Natalia!" Olivia yelled. Shoving the kidnapper out of the way against the glass enclosure of the lighthouse beacon, she ran to Natalia's aid. She nearly lost her footing on the icy promenade as she reached her partner and leaned over.

As the captor was busy watching, hoping to see Natalia meet her death, she neglected to notice another figure on the promenade.

"Springfield Police. Put your hands over your head and get on the ground," Frank yelled loudly enough to be heard above the winds. Raising his service weapon, he pulled a pair of handcuffs from his jacket pocket. He glared at the hooded figure in front of him when there was no movement. "Get down!"

Detective Li had just come through the upper hatch and noticed how fast everything had spun out of control. She sprinted to Olivia, got a grasp on Natalia's other upper arm, and with Olivia's help, they pulled the younger woman back onto the surface of the promenade.

With nothing left to lose, the captor made a run at the three women. If death was inevitable, taking Natalia or Olivia along for the ride would make it all worth it.

A shot was fired, and the noise echoed off the building.

Remy briefly contemplated going up onto the small promenade, but with five people up there already, it would be too crowded. Having gone through the watch room beneath the lantern room enclosure, Remy quickly bagged and catalogued the evidence he'd collected. It wasn't much as the quarters were small and he shivered at the thought of what Natalia must have gone through. Moving towards the steps heading up to the deck, ready to be called if needed, he picked up his two-way radio and called out to the base tent asking if Lt. Andros had arrived.

As he stood and waited as there was nothing more he could do until they were able to bag the mat to take it back to the lab for testing.

"No, she hasn't yet," the base officer called back.

There was a brief pause, and then he heard the gunshot through the opening above.

Doris Wolfe paced back and forth in the command and control tent; a mix of fear, anxiety and worry crossed her features. The longer this situation continued, the worse it could end up. The fact that she hadn't heard much about where Natalia had been held or what the police had found only further fueled her panic. Very little information had come over the radios after they'd found where Natalia had been held. What she did know was that Olivia had gotten past Frank to get into the lighthouse. Doris smiled at her friend's absolute protectiveness of Natalia. Not that she'd particularly believed in some superior being out there, but she sent out a prayer for the safe rescue of Natalia, whom she'd come to think of as a good friend.

She'd been sorely tempted to just grab a two-way radio and head out to the site, but she took one look at the armed police officers and Mallet told her she wouldn't get far and she fumed. She wasn't used to not getting her way. She understood they had a job to do, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

Taking her cell phone from her pocket, she quickly dialed Company.

"Company, Blake speaking."

"Hey, you," Doris said gently. "How are things on your end?" For just a couple of moments, Doris wanted to believe in some normalcy, but the present situation didn't allow for that.

"Nervous, scared," Blake responded. "You?"

"I don't know if I know much more than you do at the moment. I'm here at the Emergency Responders tent, but there's such chaos with everything going on." Doris had started pacing again. She hated waiting, but that was all she could do for the time being.

Getting to the heart of the matter, Blake asked, "Where's Olivia? Has she gotten to Natalia yet?"

"I don't know. Maybe," Doris responded, her frustrated tone seemed to increase an octave. "Hang on, there's something coming over the radio," Doris said. There was a flurry of movement as the EMTs and Search and Rescue teams gathered supplies and rushed out of the tent.

"I've got to go, Blake," Doris said quickly. Hitting the disconnect button on her phone, she shoved it into her pocket as she moved toward the entrance of the tent. One of the officers shifted to block her exit and she leveled a glare at him. "If you ever want a promotion, you'll get out of my way, now."

The officer stood his ground.

When they heard the shot of a gun, both fled the tent.

As the sound of a gun being fired was heard over the police radio, the noise at Company suddenly ground to a halt. People looked at each other in complete disbelief. They weren't quite sure what to say or do as they waited for more information. All of a sudden there was movement as Shayne entered the restaurant with Henry in tow. Everyone looked to the new entrants, as they collectively drew in nervous breaths.

When Shayne spotted his parents, he made a beeline for them, placing Henry on the floor. Seeing everyone's anxious faces, he asked, "What's going on?"

"A shot was fired at the lighthouse. Frank, Olivia, Natalia and Anna are all up on the top. No word yet as to who's been shot," Josh said, the worry in his tone audible.

"Damn," Shayne said and then turned and caught Dinah's glance. He looked back at his parents then back at his friend. "Be back in a minute," he said, smiling as his mother rubbed his arm. Approaching Dinah, he enveloped her in a hug. "Hey, glad to see you free. How did it go?"

"Second-degree murder charges dropped, probation for skipping the country." Dinah smiled wryly at him before sighing sadly. Tilting her head toward the police radio, she said quietly, "It could have been much worse. I swear if I find out who did this to Olivia and Natalia, it will be more than second-degree murder; I'll kill the bastard myself – and it will be for real this time."

Turning to face his friend, he asked. "You're sure Edmund's behind this?"

"He has to be. Who else would have the motive to hurt them like this?" Dinah asked. "I mean, Natalia did try to kill him. She just happened to be a bad shot. Besides, it's not like Edmund doesn't have bad history with Olivia."

"True," Shayne acknowledged.

"If it were me up there, I'd have the sonofabitch strung up by the balls, naked over the rails," Dinah said angrily. She clenched her fists at her side, wanting to strike out at something. "Arrrrgh!"

She was frustrated as she looked around the restaurant. Not seeing an appropriate outlet, she turned back to Shayne, pinned him against the wall and kissed him soundly. It only lasted a moment before both of them pulled out of the kiss, but they were stunned.

"Sorry?" Dinah finally responded.

"Ah, okay." Shayne looked around the restaurant and noted that several pairs of eyes had turned in their direction. "Don't worry about it."

"I need to go see Ava," Phillip said quietly to his wife as he turned to grab his jacket. "She needs to know what's going on."

"Phillip, we don't know much about what's happening," Beth responded, though she knew his motivation was less about seeing Ava and more to do with seeing his daughter and

trying to protect her in case anything happened to either Olivia or Natalia. She knew that he wanted, or rather needed, to be with his daughter when the news finally came.

"I know. I just...I've got to do something," Phillip said.

Beth nodded. She knew very well about her husband's protective nature when it came to his family well. "Go on, I'll stay here and get a ride home later. Just...be careful. The roads were getting worse."

"The Beacon's just up the road a little. I'll walk," Phillip said. In fact, he hoped that the blustering winter walk would clear his mind from the sheer panic he had felt when he heard the gunshot on the radio. "Call me as soon as you hear anything." He leaned to kiss his wife as he pulled his jacket around him and then he left.

When the sound of the gunshot ricocheted off the building there was a flurry of movement as the kidnapper fell facedown on the deck. Frank ran over to the kidnapper to check for vital signs. Not finding a pulse, Frank shook his head.

There was blood pooling along the back of the hooded sweatshirt and as Anna moved her hand down to the deck plating she noticed that blood was also seeping from underneath the deceased figure. Turning the body over onto its front, she noted there was an exit wound.

Olivia held onto Natalia as the woman collapsed against her. She looked down and saw blood starting to seep down her partner's front. "No!" Olivia said loudly and panicked. "You can't leave me now!" The weakened form of her partner's body now sagged against her chest and she pulled her tighter to her pressing in to stop the flow of blood.

Hearing the shot, Remy quickly climbed the stairs with a med-kit and checked the situation. Quickly noting his boss and Anna attending to the captor, he went to Olivia and Natalia. Rapidly assessing the young woman's vitals as best he could, he grabbed some abdominal pads from the kit and quickly pressed them to Natalia's chest to try to stave the flow of blood.

As Anna updated the other officers over the radio, Frank focused on watching Olivia and Remy care for Natalia. He felt like he should be helping, somehow, but there was nothing he could do. The sight of so much blood, combined with seeing the bruises on Natalia's face, left him shaken and he fought to take a deep breath, to gather his wits.

Olivia held Natalia as close as she could, while letting Remy put pressure on the wound. She petted Natalia's hair and told her over and over to hang in there, that it would be okay.

Angrily, Anna lifted the mask covering the kidnapper's face, wanting to see who was responsible for causing her friends so much pain. "Oh, God."

See you all for Season 3!